

Littérature et Culture : Case Study (Romans)

Purple Hibiscus by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Full Summary of the Novel

Fifteen-year-old Kambili lives in luxury in Enugu, Nigeria. Kambili, her seventeen-year-old brother Jaja, and their parents—Papa and Mama—inhabit a huge house inside a walled compound. A chauffeur drives Kambili and Jaja to and from their private schools. Papa, Eugene Achike, is a wealthy and famous factory owner, newspaper publisher, philanthropist, and champion of human rights. Papa and Mama are pillars of St. Agnes.

In the privacy of his own home, however, Papa is an abusive tyrant. He demands perfection from Jaja and Kambili, plans every moment of their lives, and punishes them physically if they don't follow his plan. Kevin, their chauffeur, takes them everywhere and reports their behavior to Papa. Papa also physically abuses Mama, who excuses and endures his abuse by taking refuge in her collection of miniature figurines of ballet dancers.

A military coup topples the government, and Papa gets caught up in pro-democracy work. At about the same time, Mama discovers she is pregnant again after several miscarriages. Early in her pregnancy, on Pentecost Sunday, Mama feels ill and asks to be excused from a social obligation. Papa beats her so badly for this that she miscarries again. Kambili and Jaja watch as Papa carries Mama out of the house.

Mama comes home from the hospital, and Kambili's life resumes its strict routine. But she struggles in school and comes in second, not her usual first, on her exams. When he hears of this, Papa becomes furious, but an emergency interrupts Kambili's punishment. The military government arrests Ade Coker, the editor of Papa's newspaper. After arranging Ade Coker's

release, Papa turns his attention back to Kambili and reminds her that god expects perfection.

As is the custom in Nigeria, the Achike family returns to their home village, Abba, for Christmas. At their country mansion in Abba, Papa receives an endless stream of villagers and bestows gifts on them, while Mama and the other women feed the visitors. Papa's father, Papa-Nnukwu, also lives in Abba. Papa allows Kambili and Jaja to visit Papa-Nnukwu, but only for fifteen minutes because he views their grandfather as a heathen.

Aunty Ifeoma, Papa's sister, arrives in Abba with her three children: Amaka, a fifteen-year-old girl; Obiora, a slightly younger boy; and Chima, a boy of seven. Against Papa's wishes and without his knowledge, Aunty Ifeoma takes Kambili and Jaja to a traditional festival. Even worse, she brings Papa-Nnukwu along. Papa-Nnukwu explains Igbo folklore to his grandchildren. Later, when Aunty Ifeoma also asks Papa to let Kambili and Jaja come with her on a pilgrimage to a Catholic shrine, Papa reluctantly agrees.

Kevin drives Kambili and Jaja to visit Aunt Ifeoma in Nsukka, where she lectures at the university. Her small flat lacks luxuries they are used to. The electricity and water are unreliable. Gas and food are scarce. But laughter and music fill Aunty Ifeoma's house. Aunty Ifeoma lets children speak their minds without fear of punishment. They listen to popular music and watch television. Jaja thrives in this new environment and takes up Aunty Ifeoma's enthusiasm for her rare purple hibiscus and the other flowers in her colorful garden. Kambili adjusts less easily. She must learn the simplest household tasks, and her cousin, Amaka, sneers at her for being rich. Kambili acts shy and nervous. Father Amadi, a handsome young priest, tries to bring Kambili out of her shell. He encourages her to run, sing, and smile.

Police once more arrest Ade Coker, so Papa asks Aunty Ifeoma to let Kambili and Jaja stay in Nsukka for a few days more. Then Papa-Nnukwu gets sick, and Aunty Ifeoma brings him to stay with her in Nsukka. While helping take care of Papa-Nnukwu, Kambili and Jaja get to know him and hear his stories. When Papa discovers that his "heathen" father is living under the same roof as his children, he travels to Aunty Ifeoma's to take them back home. However, Papa arrives in Nsukka right after Papa-Nnukwu dies, and Papa

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then berates Auntie Ifeoma for not calling a priest. Back home in Enugu, Kambili and Jaja see their Mama's swollen face and black eye. After dinner, Papa punishes them for not telling him about Papa-Nnukwu, and he forces Kambili to stand in boiling water.

Later, Kambili and Jaja show each other their secret souvenirs from Nsukka. Kambili has a watercolor portrait of Papa-Nnukwu, painted by Amaka. Jaja has cuttings from Auntie Ifeoma's purple hibiscus plants. They keep their secrets as the political situation worsens and Papa becomes ever more tense. Leaders of the pro-democracy movement warn Papa that he is in danger. A pipe bomb kills Ade Coker.

One day, Papa discovers the portrait of Papa-Nnukwu and erupts in rage. He kicks Kambili until she falls unconscious. After Kambili gets out of the hospital, she and Jaja go back to Nsukka to stay with Auntie Ifeoma. Kambili spends more time with Father Amadi, with whom she is now in love. Mama arrives unexpectedly in a taxi. Once again, Papa has beaten her and caused her to miscarry. In spite of Auntie Ifeoma's outrage, Mama goes back home, taking Kambili and Jaja with her.

The day after Mama, Jaja, and Kambili return home is Palm Sunday. Jaja refuses to take communion at Mass. After church, Papa explodes in rage and throws a heavy liturgical book at Jaja. Instead of hitting Jaja, however, the book hits Mama's precious figurines and shatters them into bits. From that moment on, everything changes. Papa seems to shrink as Jaja continues to defy him. Auntie Ifeoma loses her university job and applies for a visa so she can go to America. Father Amadi gets a new assignment in Germany.

Character List

Kambili Achike

The protagonist and narrator of the story. Kambili is a fifteen-year-old girl living in Enugu, Nigeria with her wealthy and devoutly religious family. Kambili is an excellent student, and she tries to do everything she can to make her parents, and especially her Papa, proud of her. Kambili's quests to please

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others often leave her tongue-tied and nervous, and she lives in fear of retribution for her small acts of rebellion against her unyielding restrictions.

In-depth characterization of Kambili

Before Palm Sunday, Kambili is singularly focused on conflict avoidance. Her strict religious upbringing and controlling, violent father have boiled her existence down to one basic necessity: to keep her father happy and avoid the physical abuse that follows her failures to please him. Because even a misstep in word choice can have dire consequences, Kambili often finds herself tongue-tied, and she tends to feign coughing or choking to avoid discourse. Though she appears to be shy, Kambili is actually filled with constant debilitating anxiety that prevents her from seeking or maintaining potential friendships. Her obsessive pursuits for academic excellence are also driven by her need to stay safe from her father's retribution. As a fifteen-year-old girl transitioning into adulthood, Kambili's personal desires remain undefined and unexplored as she navigates the world driven by the need to satiate her father.

Kambili's experiences during her visit with Auntie Ifeoma's family in Nsukka are transformative as she begins to enjoy the freedom of individual expression without her father's constant dominating presence. Though her cousin Amaka is rude and sometimes spiteful, her challenges allow Kambili to begin to find her voice and to exercise free will, and her ability to backtalk earns Amaka's camaraderie and respect. Their relationship allows Kambili to entertain romantic feelings for Father Amadi, which is both dangerous in its subversion of her father's rules but also safe in Father Amadi's vow of celibacy. As she follows her desire to know him, their relationship creates a space in which Kambili can begin to develop and discover who she is and what she likes. The free discourse in Auntie Ifeoma's home also gives her a better understanding of the tyranny that exists both within her own home and in the Nigerian government, as well as the stark differences between staunch Christian values and the simple but powerful paradigms of traditional Nigerian pantheism and ancestor worship. Through this new knowledge, Kambili develops a value system that becomes so precious she is instinctually compelled to stand up to her father and risk her life to protect it. With newfound freedom of thought, Kambili begins to develop as an individual and to make decisions about what's best for her.

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After Palm Sunday, Kambili grapples with the internal paradox of both loving her father and wishing to be free of him. As his health wanes and he grows weaker, Kambili still tries to appease Papa, but she also nurtures the development that blossomed on her first trip to Nsukka. Her secret longing to remain away from him forever is a signifier of her emerging understanding that his love is ultimately stifling and unhealthy. Papa's physical weakness creates space for Kambili's continued development as she learns to feel angry and to fantasize about a different life in which she follows her own desires. When Papa dies, Kambili's wishes to please her father as she mourns show that she is somewhat still under his spell, even in death. Her desire to dream about him indicates a fear-based resistance to the change she has longed for and must convince herself that she actually deserves. As time passes, however, the freedom and safety of Papa's absence allows Kambili to envision a hopeful future in which she can quietly honor her father's best intentions while embracing the unadulterated love around her.

Jaja Achike

Kambili's seventeen-year-old brother. Born Chukwuka, "Jaja" has spent his life following strict family and religious rules and being an excellent student to make his parents proud. However, he is skeptical of his family's religion and rigid power structure. Jaja is fiercely devoted to his sister and mother, and he often puts himself in harm's way to protect them. Jaja and Kambili are so close that they can communicate using only their eyes.

Eugene Achike (Papa)

The father of Kambili and Jaja. Papa owns several factories and is very wealthy. He is a devout Catholic and a firm believer that all Nigerians who do not convert to Catholicism are heathens. He is generous with his wealth, supporting many causes and giving money to those in need in the name of God. Papa runs a rigid household, demanding total excellence from his children and wife and doling out severe punishments when they disobey him. He is also the publisher of the *Standard*, a radical newspaper that publishes anti-government rhetoric after the country's coup.

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Beatrice Achike (Mama)

The mother of Kambili and Jaja. Mama is kind and loving toward her children, though she is quiet and tolerates domestic violence from Papa to keep her family together. Beatrice is known as a gracious host, and she is generous with her family and members of the religious community.

Aunty Ifeoma

Papa's sister and mother of Amaka, Obiora, and Chima. Ifeoma is a university professor and widow living in Nsukka, Nigeria. Although Ifeoma doesn't have much money, she approaches life with a positive attitude and takes good care of her children. She is smart and strong-willed, and she isn't afraid to stand up to her various oppressors. Though she follows the Catholic faith, she is far less fanatical than her brother. Her infectious, throaty laughter is a trait she shares with her children.

Amaka

Ifeoma's oldest child and Kambili and Jaja's cousin. Amaka is a fifteen-year-old girl living in Nsukka with her family. Amaka is thin with quizzical eyes and is a fast walker and talker. She is outspoken and she challenges Kambili to find her own voice. Amaka is critical of wealth and religion, and she denounces the idea of European superiority. Because of the freedoms her mother and life in Nsukka provide, Amaka is allowed to wear lipstick and pants, and she listens to culturally conscious indigenous music.

Father Amadi

A friend of Aunty Ifeoma's family and a clergyman at their church. Father Amadi is loyal to the Catholic religion, although he has good humor when he is challenged on religious issues. He is dedicated to the development of Nsukka's underprivileged youth, and he has a deep affection for Kambili that others often interpret as romantic interest.

Obiora

Ifeoma's middle child and Kambili and Jaja's cousin. Obiora is a fourteen-year-old boy living in Nsukka with his family. Obiora tries to be a leader for his family in the absence of his deceased father, and he challenges Father Amadi

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on notions of Christianity. He has light skin, honey-colored eyes, thick glasses, and an endearing crooked smile. Obiora represents what Jaja's life could have been like if he had been raised in Nsukka.

Papa-Nnukwu

Papa and Ifeoma's father, and Kambili and Jaja's grandfather. Papa-Nnukwu is an excellent storyteller. He is estranged from his son because he refuses to convert to Christianity and instead follows the pantheistic religion of his ancestors. Papa-Nnukwu is close to Ifeoma's family and finds joy in the simple offerings of life.

Father Benedict

A white priest at St. Agnes Catholic Church in Enugu, Nigeria. Father Benedict is close to Papa and praises him often. He insists that European traditions be followed in the church rather than Nigerian traditions.

Ade Coker

A father, husband, and Papa's editor at the *Standard*. Ade Coker is brave and dares to stand up to the government with critical editorials, even after he has been arrested and tortured. Papa views him as a member of the Achike family.

Yewande Coker

The wife of Ade Coker. Yewande is a mother who worries about what will happen to her family if Ade is killed.

Grandfather

Mama's deceased father, who he exists in the narrative as a memory. Grandfather is revered by Papa because he was Christian and spoke English.

Chima

Ifeoma's youngest child and Kambili and Jaja's cousin. Chima is a tall seven-year-old boy with very dark skin. He is curious and sensitive.

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Sisi

The Achike family's cook and housekeeper. Sisi is loyal to the family and travels with them when they go to Abba for Christmas. Though she is essentially a member of the family, Papa refers to her as "that girl."

Kevin

The Achike family's driver. Kevin is loyal to Papa, although he doesn't always follow Papa's rules.

Ifediora

Auntie Ifeoma's deceased husband. Ifediora quarreled with Eugene and didn't mind telling him what he really felt.

Chinwe Jideze

A wealthy and popular student at Kambili's school. Chinwe is a good student, and one semester she bests Kambili for first in her class, which puts Kambili in danger.

Ezinne

A classmate at Kambili's school who is kind to Kambili. Ezinne encourages Kambili to try to fit in with the other girls at school.

Igwe

The ruler of Abba. The Igwe is Christian but still allows some traditional Nigerian religious practices in his home.

Celestine

The Achike family's driver after Papa dies. Celestine is gentle and helpful to Mama.

Phillipa

Auntie Ifeoma's friend who moved from Nsukka to teach in America.

Mother Lucy

The principal at Daughters of the Immaculate Heart.

Reverend Sisters (Sister Clara, Sister Margaret, Sister Veronica)

The teachers at Daughters of the Immaculate Heart.

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Chief Umeadi

Chief of Abba and the only person in Abba with a larger house than Eugene.

Gabriella

A wealthy student at Kambili's school.

Sunday

The factory driver who serves as backup driver for the Achike family when Kevin is on leave.

Ogbuefi Olio

Papa-Nnukwu's father.

Adamu

The gate man for the Achike family.

Ogbunambala and Anikwenwa

Elders living in Abba that follow traditional religion.

Chinyelu

A child who cares for Papa-Nnukwu.

“Fada John”

The first white missionary in Abba.

Jude

An African missionary who helped “Fada John.”

Okafor

A university professor who will not speak out about the government taking over the school.

Chidifu

Okafor's son who stole his exam papers.

Nwankiti Ogechi

A Nigerian activist who was killed by the government.

Big Oga

The Nigerian head of state.

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Ugochukwu

A friend of Chima.

Mama Joe, Mama Bomboy, and Mama Caro

Hairstylists in Ogige Market.

Oladipupo

A fellow inmate of Jaja who has been waiting for trial for eight years.

Chiaku

Ifeoma's friend who does not support her move to America.

Okon

The Achike's cook and housekeeper after Papa dies.

Themes

Control as an Aspect of Domestic Violence

Papa exerts control over his family through religious demands, restriction of movement, and nearly unattainable educational standards, enforcing that control with violent punishments. A fervently religious person since his conversion to Christianity in childhood, Papa demands absolute adherence to religious rules, fearful that any misstep will damn his children to hell. When Kambili breaks the Eucharist fast to help ease the discomfort of her menstrual period, Papa beats the entire family with a belt, hopeful that his act will prevent the devil from causing disobedience in his home. Papa also enforces strict schedules that determine each moment of the family's day, and any detected deviance from the schedule results in punishment. Family members must gain Papa's permission to leave the house, and when they are allowed to leave, they are supervised by their driver, Kevin. Papa also uses Father Benedict as a tool for controlling his children. When Kambili and Jaja stay at Papa-Nnukwu's house for slightly longer than the prescribed fifteen minutes Papa has allotted, Kambili is later compelled to confess this sin to Father Benedict out of the fear that her father already knows and will be informed if she doesn't choose to repent. Even at school, Papa extends his controlling reach, insisting his children always place first in their classes. Coming in second is considered a failure and a direct choice to disobey him. Kambili

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describes the worry of making sure she comes in first in school as similar to balancing a sack of gravel on her head and not being allowed to steady it with her hand. When she comes in second after her first-term exams – an outcome many families would celebrate – Kambili is so frightened of the punishment to come that she can't speak or eat. As Kambili tries hard to please Papa, his control over her has serious negative effects on her mental health and development. Even in the times when he is not physically harming his wife and children, Papa abuses them through his complete control over their lives.

The Tension Between Traditional Ways and Colonialism

The theme of tension between traditional Nigerian ways and colonialism first emerges in Papa's round rejection of the Nigerian language, religion, and even objects in favor of their European parallels. His dismissive attitude toward anything traditionally African echoes the tendency of colonialism to assert superiority over the culture of the colonized under the guise of civilization. Much as he dominates his family with his religious zealotry, Papa campaigns for the obliteration of traditional African culture in large and small ways, such as his affirmation that church services be conducted in English and Latin, and his use of a traditional European china tea set in his home. Though many in his community follow his lead out of a desire to please him, others such as Papa-Nnukwu hold fast to African traditions and to the pantheistic religion of their ancestors. Papa-Nnukwu's beliefs in traditional ways are so strong that he is willing to compromise his relationship with his grandchildren in order to exercise traditional freedoms of worship and expression. Likewise, Papa is so deferent to colonialism that he has forsaken his own father. Though the community attempts to quell the tension and heal the familial rift, the division in the Achike family remains until both men have died, creating space for their successors to make personal decisions about how to live.

The Juxtaposition Between Pain and Affection

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Interactions in the Achike home highlight the forced juxtaposition between pain and affection that abusers inflict on their family members. This concept is first introduced when Papa offers Kambili and Jaja a “love sip” of tea. The tea is always too hot and burns their tongues, but the children don’t mind because they are happy to receive Papa’s affection, even if it hurts. When Papa beats Mama badly and carries her bleeding body from the house, he later rubs Kambili’s shoulders and hugs her close. Kambili feels the pain of knowing that her mother is seriously injured, but she feels the love of her father at the same time. Later Papa humiliates Kambili and tears her down for coming in second in her class, but he explains that he is only insisting on perfection because he wants the best for her. He follows this talk by hugging her. Kambili feels the pain of humiliation alongside the feeling that her father loves and cares about her. As Papa pours scalding water on Kambili’s feet, he tells her that she is precious, and he does it again after attacking her with such violence that she nearly dies in the hospital. As he keeps vigil at her bedside, he promises that nothing will happen to her and behaves as if he isn’t the cause of her hospitalization. When Papa hurts his children and wife, he often weeps, as if expressing his own pain at having to hurt his family is a form of affection for them. Papa cultivates an abusive dynamic in which he presents pain as both a path to love and also a necessary product of it.

Symbols

Purple Hibiscus

Aunty Ifeoma’s purple hibiscus represents the family’s freedom from Papa’s violence and oppression. The Achikes’ yard in Enugu is filled with red hibiscus, which are more common, yet their abundance is a sign of the family’s status. When Kambili first mentions the purple hibiscus, she explains that it lives in Aunty Ifeoma’s little garden in Nsukka, a place that represents independence and growth for the Achike children. As Kambili reflects on the events that will unfold later in the story, she describes the purple hibiscus as rare and fragrant with the undertones of freedom, in contrast to the plethora of red hibiscus that symbolize affluence and order. When things in the Achike household begin to change, Jaja brings cuttings of the purple hibiscus home to Enugu for the gardener to plant. His instinct to hide them away from Papa reveals his strong desire to protect the unique and precious gift Aunty Ifeoma

has given him: a symbol of growth and freedom. Just before Jaja defies Papa on Palm Sunday, he notes that the purple hibiscuses are about to bloom, setting the tone for his own quest for his own rebellion against Papa's oppression. At the end of the story, Kambili makes plans to plant purple hibiscus with Jaja in Abba once he is freed from prison. Throughout, the purple hibiscus serves as a reminder of joys that should be given space to grow.

Silence

Silence is a symbol of Papa's control over the family and the tension that keeps them anxious and obedient. His disdain for chatter prompts Kambili and Jaja to often speak with their eyes instead of out loud. The silence in the Achike household is so oppressive that Kambili struggles to produce words at times when she is prompted. Auntie Ifeoma stands in contrast to silence. She laughs freely and loudly, and she is not afraid of Papa. Ifeoma's introduction of laughter and direct speech foreshadows her role as catalyst to Kambili and Jaja's quests to find their voices. While spending time with their aunt and cousins, Jaja and Kambili are finally able to break their family code of silence and speak about Papa's abuse. By the end of the story, Kambili's relationship with silence has changed. After Papa dies, there are many things Kambili and Mama don't talk about, such as their financial situation or the many anonymous donations Papa made to charity. Kambili describes this silence as one that lets her breathe. However, that still has nightmares about the silence that was present when Papa was alive indicates that Papa still has an element of control over her even after his death.

Figurines

Mama's figurines represent her delicate nature and susceptibility to Papa's physical abuse. The figurines are first introduced in the scene on Palm Sunday, when Papa angrily throws a heavy religious book at Jaja and breaks them. They are described as finger-sized and depict ballerinas in various postures, both delicate and graceful. Prior to their destruction, Kambili is aware that Mama often polishes the figurines after Kambili has heard banging sounds from her parents' room, and once when her eye is swollen and black-purple. When Mama returns from the hospital after losing her pregnancy to one of Papa's beatings, she chooses to polish her figurines before she eats

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and bathes. The act of nurturing the figurines by making them shine is self-soothing. When Papa breaks the figurines on Palm Sunday, Mama tells Kambili that she will not replace them. Her decision reveals her private knowledge of a time soon to come in which Papa will not be able to hurt her anymore, and she will no longer need the figurine-polishing ritual for her personal survival.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Background

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was born on September 15, 1977, in Enugu, Nigeria, and grew up in Nsukka, where the University of Nigeria is located. Her parents worked for the university, her father as a professor, and her mother as the first female registrar in the university. Her family is Igbo, one of the three major ethnic groups of Nigeria, along with the Yoruba and Hausa. Although she began studying medicine at the University of Nigeria, Adichie longed to study the humanities, and later received a scholarship to Drexel University in Philadelphia to change her course of study. After two years, she transferred to Eastern Connecticut University, where she graduated *summa cum laude* with a BA in political science and communications. She then attended Johns Hopkins University for her MFA in creative writing, and later received an MA in African studies from Yale University. Since then she has won numerous fellowships and awards, including a MacArthur Genius Grant in 2008. She now teaches in Nigeria and the United States.

Adichie's first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, was published in 2003, and won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book in 2005. Following that, she wrote two novels, *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Americanah*, plus numerous essays and short stories. In addition to her fiction, Adichie is well known as a speaker and essayist. Her two extremely popular TED Talks highlight themes that she explores throughout her creative work, and quite clearly in *Americanah*. At 2009's TED Global Conference she presented, "The Danger of a Single Story," which discusses the consequences of stereotypes in both fiction and reality. Her 2012 TED Talk, "We Should All Be Feminists," addressed the importance of raising both daughters and sons to create a fairer world. It has been downloaded millions of times and republished in book

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form. In 2013, Beyoncé sampled the talk on her song “***Flawless,” bringing Adichie’s message to the wider public.