

## Issues of Personal and National Identity in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

**W**hen I was a high school English student, we read two novels by authors who were not white Westerners: Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth* and the seminal *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. This was unfortunate, as several of my classmates were not white (and seldom saw themselves represented in our assigned readings), and all of us were interested in life outside our bucolic, insular Appalachian town. Increasingly, high school teachers find themselves seeking a more diverse offering for their students. Fortunately, *Purple Hibiscus* (Adichie, 2003) is a novel that brings with it a wealth of opportunity for teachers and students alike.

*Purple Hibiscus*, by third-generation Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie, is (at its most basic level) a coming-of-age tale. This novel follows the paths of a pair of Nigerian siblings. Fifteen-year-old Kambili and her older brother Jaja must face political unrest, uncaring classmates, and a strict home life. They also must deal with a father whose severe abuse will leave lasting scars—both physical and emotional. When the siblings visit their aunt, a woman who is the polar opposite of their authority figure at home, they begin to ask hard questions about the correctness of how they have been raised; they avoid becoming small mirrors of their father, instead blossoming into their own individuality. Through political turmoil and their father's murder, Kambili and Jaja Achike leave childhood behind.

Adichie, born in Nigeria in 1977, has won several awards for her fiction, including the 2007 Orange Broadband Prize for Fiction and a MacArthur Founda-

tion Fellowship in 2008. As a third-generation Nigerian writer, Adichie was shaped by events she was not alive to witness. Ogaga Okuyade (2011) refers to such authors (Okey Ndibe, David Odhiambo, and Unoma Azuah among them) as “new wine in antiquated kegs . . . bequeath[ing] the badge of newness and ‘nowness’ to their arts,” before going on to assert that “it becomes glaring that literature cannot escape contemporary history which furnishes it with raw materials” (p. 138). Although the historical events (namely the Biafran conflict) explored in the novel have passed, their repercussions are still felt by Nigerians, both in Nigeria and abroad.

*Purple Hibiscus* explores the issues of ethnic tensions and political unrest in Nigeria as parallels for coming of age and issues of identity definition. The story, although set in Nigeria, is common to adolescents from other times and places—a perspective supported by the fact that it has been translated into languages as disparate as Lithuanian, Polish, Castilian, Turkish, and Malayalam. It is the story of discovering oneself amidst cruel peers and crueler parents in a seemingly brutal and uncaring world. The allegory between personal and national identity elevates this story from a typical narrative of adolescent angst into a thoughtful analysis of the formation of self; further, it does so in a way that dissipates some of the isolation that typically marks adolescence, allowing a reader to belong to a larger world.

Susan Z. Andrade (2011) refers to both of Adichie's novels (2003's *Purple Hibiscus* and 2006's *Half of a Yellow Sun*) as representing “a politics of the family

while quietly but clearly telling stories of the nation” (p. 91). Sophia O. Ogwude (2011) claims *Purple Hibiscus* follows the “well-worn theme” of “the colonial invasion of Africa in the late nineteenth century and the consequent cultural conflict between the colonising power and the colonised other” (p. 110), firmly locating it alongside works by Chinua Achebe, Christopher Okigbo, and John Munonye in which “religious fanaticism has been explored as ‘cultural hostility’ in the African novel” (p. 111). Onyemaechi Udumukwu (2011) considers Adichie to be a feminist writer whose works “are animated by attempts to engage traditional constructs of the woman”; in *Purple Hibiscus* particularly, “self-knowledge and self-expression [especially of women] become *sine qua non* for action” (p. 184).

While it is easy to read this tale as essentially feminist and the novel demands a post-colonial interpretation due to its post-colonial setting, it is important not to ignore the aspect of *bildungsroman* and the presence of Jaja. The nature of identity-seeking requires a somewhat psychoanalytic approach, at least insofar as the *bildungsroman* is concerned, and it is through this lens that adolescent readers will be able to gain the greatest appreciation for and dialogue with this book. Furthermore, the novel’s authority figures are usually looked at in the literature as either aids or impediments to Kambili. (Andrade [2011], for example, focuses on Eugene as an oppressor, while Okuyade [2011] looks to Ifeoma as the foundation for Kambili’s burgeoning “voice.”) However, they are also role models in the most real of senses, as their identities might become Kambili’s own (even as their allegorical identities might become Nigeria’s). This article seeks not to traverse the well-worn ground of post-colonialism for its own sake, but rather to use that aspect of the novel as a framework for the discussion of identity creation.

## Nigeria’s Past

While Adichie’s second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, has the Nigerian Civil War (also known as the Nigeria-Biafra War) as its direct setting, *Purple Hibiscus* addresses the situation in more indirect ways. Adichie uses the war as the allegorical, rather than the literal, antecedent for her novel. The war, a political coup aimed at altering the balance of power among several ethnic groups, is also a result of the British coloniza-

tion of Nigeria, for this colonization attempted to unite the disparate tribes into one nation.

The earliest Nigerian civilization is traced to the fifth century. The next several centuries saw the rise of several powerful kingdoms, each with separate governments and languages. British colonial rule began in Lagos in 1861. However, colonial Nigeria had been rife with problems, and “the fundamental cause had been the tribal hostility embedded in this enormous and artificial nation. For Nigeria had never been more than an amalgam of peoples welded together in the interests and for the benefit of a European power” (Forsyth, 1969, p. 11). After a century fraught with administrative difficulties, England granted full independence to Nigeria in 1960. In essence, England pulled out colonizing forces without leaving any real infrastructure behind; the administrative issues were left to be dealt with by ethnic groups as many and varied as the problems themselves. This created a perfect storm of conditions for political unrest and identity crises.

Most of the population of Nigeria following the departure of British forces was located in the Hausa and Fulani communities of the northern part of the country. However, the southern and eastern parts of the country were more industrialized and educated (having, in fact, one of the highest literacy rates in Africa at the time). However, the increasing political and economic power of the Igbo people threatened the other ethnic groups: “[A]s the power and influence of the Igbo grew, it seemed that they became more and more the objects of hate and distrust” (Schwab, 1971, p. 4). A political coup on January 15, 1966, led by several Igbo (including Major General Johnson T. U. Aguiyi), was intended to stem this tide of hate by forcing Nigerian nationalism; Aguiyi suspended the 1960 constitution and dissolved the federation of separate states. This action sparked three months of anti-Igbo riots, the assassination of Aguiyi on July 29, 1966, and the deaths of some 5000 Igbo in the north by late September of that year (p. 5). This, in turn, sparked the secession of Biafra as untold numbers of Igbo returned to the east. However, Nigeria feared losing control of lucrative oil fields in the Biafra region, leading to the Nigeria-Biafra War. After many deaths on both sides, Biafra forces surrendered. Biafra suffered more heavily than the other Nigerian forces, shrinking “to an estimated 1/10 of its original size and to a population of 3.2 million [from an estimated 14 million] during the

fighting” (p. 115). The end of the war was not the end of the problems, however. Post-Biafra Nigeria has also been riddled with difficulties, varying from extreme violence between religious groups to government corruption and an unstable economy.

Post-colonial Nigeria, emerging into its future, is like an adolescent child—navigating both the past and the possibilities of the future, attempting to choose its own path and determine the best course toward its national goals. Like adolescence, however, the path is unsteady, pitted with peril, and fraught with unseen contingencies. This is particularly difficult given that adolescence is a time marked by internal struggles of identity. The citizens of Nigeria are attempting to navigate through an abundance of history, ranging from the histories of individual tribes and religions to struggles suffered on a national level. In order to move forward, the citizenship must be able to forge a new identity. They must work together to build a new, postcolonial nation, uniting their disparate individual histories. The necessarily varied hopes of each of these groups create a multitude of potential futures; *Purple Hibiscus*’s authority figures represent the strongest or most likely of these, and the future that Kambili and Jaja will eventually choose must echo the eventual future of Nigeria.

## The Construction of Identity

The children of *Purple Hibiscus*, Jaja and Kambili Achike, seek to carve out their own identities. This is also true of Nigeria, “a young country in several striking ways, and the most telling is the age of its people: well over half are less than thirty; an amazing forty-four percent are under fifteen years of age” (Hawley, 2009, p. 16). The youth of Nigeria are tasked with rebuilding the nation, depopulated after a destructive war. Similarly, as Kambili and Jaja’s family disintegrates, they must come into their own, a task metaphorically equal to the struggle of Nigeria to form its own identity in its post-colonial society; according to Madelaine Hron (2009), “the child’s quest for a sociocultural identity is inextricably linked to issues arising from postcolonialism and globalization” (p. 27). The many authority figures who provide models for the children represent the many facets of Nigeria’s identities—present, past, and possible futures.

Kambili and Jaja are allegories for burgeoning post-colonial Nigeria, which must also face an adolescent-like emergence into an identity separate from its colonial roots. The fact that both children are ethnically Igbo, a culture and ethnicity ripped apart by violence, indicates that the identity of Nigeria rests in how well its people can overcome the pain of their past. Children and adolescents do not have the ability to fully integrate all of their personality characteristics and influences into a cohesive whole; this is a skill inherent in the adult brain:

Cognitive-developmental advances promoting greater differentiation conspire with socialization pressures to develop different selves in different relational contexts. Cognitive advances also allow the adolescent to construct self-attributes that represent *abstractions* about the self, based upon the ability to integrate trait labels into higher-order generalizations. However, these abstract representations are highly compartmentalized or overdifferentiated, and therefore the adolescent can only think about each as isolated characteristics of the self.” (Harter, 1999, p. 66)

In each of the authority figures, in each of the potential futures for Nigeria, Kambili and Jaja are faced with aspects of themselves that are fragmentary and in conflict with one another. Discovering their selfhoods will require navigation through all of the pieces of their identities, including familial, cultural, and political influences. Emerging Nigeria faces the same difficult task. Realizing a cohesive sense of self is by no means certain for the children or for Nigeria.

Kambili and Jaja are bombarded by opposing forces: indigenous and colonial, Pagan and Christian, Nigerian and English, familial loyalty and individual identity. They, like “many groups effectively inhabit two worlds simultaneously, navigating between indigenous and dominant Western systems” (Meskell, 2005, p. 76). They also are trapped in that liminal space between child and adult, and their successful navigation of their models for adulthood—the authority figures—will determine how well the children are able to grow into their futures and, by extension, how Nigeria will do the same.

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## Personal and Cultural Past

Any individual or nation attempting to navigate a new identity must first come to terms with its past. For nations, this means recognizing the roles that all cultural groups (as well as colonizing groups) have played

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in developing a national culture. For children, this means evaluating experiences and attempting to make sense of situations that may be beyond their understanding. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Papa-Nnukwu (Kambili and Jaja's paternal grandfather) represents indigenous culture, specifically that of Igboland. Papa-Nnukwu, as all of the Achikes, is ethnically Igbo; however, he is the only one who practices Igbo cultural traditions. It is this culture, combined with the colonizing culture, that has created the sibling futures of Nigeria that Eugene and Ifeoma, Papa-Nnukwu's children, represent: autocracy and democracy. Like indigenous culture giving way in the face of a colonizer, he is a father that must let his children become their own individuals—informed by, but not clones of, Papa-Nnukwu himself.

As a representative of colonization and autocracy, Eugene feels threatened by Papa-Nnukwu. For this reason, Kambili and Jaja are forbidden from visiting their grandfather without the express permission of Eugene, and then for only 15 minutes at a time. When they do visit, they are forbidden from eating or drinking in his home, lest they ingest something “unholy” or “idolatrous”—in other words, lest they imbibe thoughts or ideas contradictory to Eugene's own. Kambili and Jaja are left to grow up with a terribly imbalanced worldview, informed only by the limited and somewhat tyrannical way of life represented by their father; they have no comprehension of cultural heritage.

As the grandfather, Papa-Nnukwu should hold the role of the ultimate patriarch, but like Cronus dethroned by Zeus, Papa-Nnukwu is usurped by Eugene and relegated to having no authority. This is the fate of indigenous cultures under a colonizing power. Papa-Nnukwu is metonymic for a pure cultural past. This past cannot remain pure when colonizing forces

invade its sphere. Similarly, Nigeria and its representatives—Kambili and Jaja—must adapt and change, finding identity in the new world; the old world, the world of these children's parents and grandparents, is no more, and its rules cannot indiscriminately apply.

Papa-Nnukwu's death is a pivotal event, allowing both Kambili and Jaja to approach adulthood with a greater understanding of themselves and a wider appreciation for familial and cultural context. The clearest image of Papa-Nnukwu comes only after his death. As he lays stretched on his mat in Ifeoma's living room, Kambili “imagined [her] forebears a century ago, the ancestors Papa-Nnukwu prayed to, charging in to defend their hamlet, coming back with lolling heads on long sticks” (Adichie, p. 183). This culture clearly has no place in a modern world, where the violence between groups is not for mere tribal dominance or for defense but is state-sponsored.

Papa-Nnukwu is as much a product of this idea of primal justice as he is a product of ancestor worship. While Kambili was a child, she was bound only to the history and the culture that her father allowed her to see; she was the newly colonized land, the infant nation of emerging Nigeria, and her father shaped her entire outlook. However, as Kambili enters her adolescence and incipient womanhood, she begins to shape her own identity. She has begun to explore her history and that which has shaped her (Papa-Nnukwu and the Igbo culture, although indelibly changed by English colonization, have certainly shaped Kambili through their impact on Nigerian history)—yet, with Papa-Nnukwu's death, Kambili loses first-person contact with this history and must navigate only through her memory of it. This history, then, behaves toward futures in the same way that Papa-Nnukwu's grandfather behaves toward Kambili: they become frozen and static.

## The Dissolution of Imperial Nigeria

When an indigenous culture passes, there must be another culture to fill the vacuum. Fittingly, Eugene Achike takes over the role of defining Nigeria, replacing the indigenous culture with the colonial culture that usurped it. Eugene is the consummate colonizer, seeking to establish order as he sees it onto his family. He embraces Western values, European religion, and consumerism; he also seeks to impose these same

values onto his wife and children.

Like any colonizing country treats the people under colonial rule, Eugene assumes that the needs of his children are the same as his own. He does not consider that their needs may be unique and uniquely suited to their circumstances. At the very least, Eugene assumes that his needs are of more pressing importance than anyone else's, particularly his children. Eugene controls the smallest details of their lives, scheduling them for every minute of every day; it is presupposed that Eugene will determine his children's future. Kambili "had never thought about the university where [she] would go or what [she] would study. When the time came, Papa would decide" (Adichie, p. 7).

Kambili blithely accepts that her father will control her; she has not yet made her run for independence, nor does she understand that her future is hers to decide. Eugene even interferes with Kambili's social life by making her run to the car following her last class, rather than lingering to socialize with the other students. On the one occasion Kambili takes a bit longer to reach the vehicle, "Papa slapped [her] left and right cheeks at the same time, so his huge palms left parallel marks on [her] face and ringing in [her] ears for days" (Adichie, p. 51). It is typical of colonizers to force their own culture onto the indigenous group. When the indigenous group resists, or simply has trouble adopting to the new culture, the response is often violent.

Eugene does, however, truly love his children, and truly believes that he is acting in their best interests. According to Ernest Gellner (1997), "High Culture is so to speak normative; it considers itself to be the model of human comportment, and it spurns Low Culture as a miserable distortion or aberration. It may treat Low Culture with indifference as well as contempt, or alternatively it may feel that, in a perfect world, Low Culture should be transformed in its own image" (p. 39).

Of course, "High Culture" is self-defined, and usually indicates an imperialist force exerting control over an indigenous population, but the concept also indicates more than a simple desire for territory or resources. The term "High Culture" also indicates that the colonizers believe they are bringing the light of civilization to conquered peoples. Eugene's colonialism has a more missionary spirit than a spirit of

conquest—he seeks to convert and enlighten rather than simply conquer, and he truly believes in the righteousness of his actions. This, however, does not stop Eugene from being a force of violence in the lives of his children. His tea, for example, a symbol both of colonialism and of his love for his children "was always too hot, always burned [Kambili's] tongue . . . [Kambili] knew that when the tea burned [her] tongue, it burned Papa's love into [her]" (Adichie, p. 8). Kambili has accepted Eugene's ostensible motivation; she believes that he is acting in her best in-

terests, even when his actions clearly show otherwise. As long as both Kambili and Jaja maintain this belief, Eugene's colonizing forces (and those of English colonialism in Nigeria) will remain in control.

Eugene lives his life with the arrogance of a man whose power is certain, unchallenged, and unending. His selfish arrogance is so extreme that Ifeoma considers him to be challenging the highest power that exists: "Eugene has to stop doing God's job," says Ifeoma; "God is big enough to do his own job" (Adichie, p. 95). Jaja does not perceive his father as Godlike, openly defying his father by refusing to attend church and defending his sister against unjust punishment. Jaja's defiance of his father, therefore, is an assault not merely on the power of his father but also on the power of the ruling class. It is the defiance of the subjugated classes under the powers of colonialism. This defiance also challenges the underlying beliefs of the ruling class—that is, that they have a divine right or duty to be masters of other races. Therefore, Eugene has a difficult time accepting Jaja's incipient adulthood and its concomitant self-rule, for Jaja's independence (whether of thought or deed) questions Eugene's divine right to rule. This is why "when Papa threw the missal at Jaja, it was not just the figurines that came tumbling down, it was everything" (p. 15). It was Eugene's right to rule; it was Eugene's unquestioned autonomy; it was the assumed inferiority of the subjugated that came crashing to the Earth.

Eugene is not merely a colonizing figure, but also the ultimate figure of authority; rebelling against his

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rule is unthinkable for Kambili, who had never known her own autonomy. Eugene acts almost in the capacity of a feudal king, whose law is absolute and whose reign, at least in Kambili's eyes, is both immutable and eternal. Kambili never considers that a change in regime will come. She never considers "the possibility that Papa would die, that Papa could die . . . he had seemed immortal" (Adichie, p. 287). When Eugene is killed, Kambili finds herself without a guiding force, notwithstanding the minor rebellions she entertained concerning Papa-Nnukwu. Even these rebellions were an attempt to grasp at an external leadership, for

Papa-Nnukwu himself represents a regime, although one that been thwarted by the forces of colonization that Eugene himself personifies. These forces are quite European in nature; "most of the wars of European colonial expansion, from 1500 to 1950, can be seen as wars of coercive regime change" (Orend, 2006, p. 190). Eugene's authority and social standing repre-

sent the regime change of imperialism; Eugene's murder at the hands of his wife represents another sudden regime change, this one the overthrow of colonizing powers. Eugene's death is, at heart, militaristic: the old guard falls to the new guard in a violent coup. Jaja and Kambili (and by extension, ascending Nigeria) will clean up after the old regime for years to come, even as they work to determine their own identities.

### **Nigeria's Political Potential**

When discussing the potential identities of Nigeria, recognizing the cultural history and current regime are only part of the equation. Identities are also formed upon hopes and goals for the future and continue to be shaped as these potential futures come—or do not come—to pass. Two potential futures of Nigeria are embodied in Father Amadi and Aunt Ifeoma. Both of these characters are surrogate authority figures whose influence expands the farther Kambili and Jaja get from Eugene; however, both of these characters ultimately leave Nigeria, indicating that the futures they

represent cannot come to pass.

Father Amadi is a young pastor at the Catholic church in Nsukka, the university city where Kambili and Jaja visit extended family. Whereas Eugene is Nigeria—that is, representing the failed goals of colonizing Europe, Father Amadi is one of the imagined futures of Nigeria, representative of the ideal of Nigerian unification. More interested in people than power, he has successfully blended the colonizing culture with the indigenous one. The bulk of Nigerian Catholics reside in Igboland, and Father Amadi is the ideal Nigerian Catholic. His songs of praise are sung both in English and Igbo, and he is far less bound to European Catholic tradition than Eugene.

Although Kambili could sense that life with her father—symbolizing life in Nigeria under the current regime—was not the way life was supposed to be, devoid of both joy and spontaneity, she does not begin to understand this consciously until her stay in Nsukka, where Kambili meets Father Amadi. At first, Kambili is unable to socialize with Father Amadi; she has been raised in an environment that makes her place in the Church abundantly clear. But Father Amadi wishes to make Kambili a participant in her religion rather than a passive recipient. Through unceasing effort, Father Amadi is able to draw Kambili out of her shell.

Like the other church leaders, Father Amadi is a figure of authority, yet he is a figure that rules through love rather than coercion. In this respect, he represents the Nigeria that should exist—Nigeria as it would be if the leaders were more perfect and showed more humanitarianism to the people. Kambili, being a child (and perfectly representing the third-generation citizens of post-Biafra Nigeria who cannot conceive of different rule, having never known any other), has difficulty responding to Father Amadi; under his aegis at confession, she finds it difficult "to feel penitent now . . . [she felt] guilty instead because [she] could not focus on [her] sins, could not think of anything except how near he was" (Adichie, p. 175). Despite her confusion, Kambili senses that Father Amadi represents the way that life is supposed to be; true, she does not have conscious understanding of this, but instead is aware of a rather vague, unidentified dissatisfaction with her father's rule.

Kambili longs to find a place in Father Amadi's world. However, she finds herself unable to converse

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freely with him. Kambili is so indoctrinated in her father's brand of Christianity (and way of life) that she cannot mold herself to Father Amadi's way of living. However, she can sense the beauty and acceptance of Father Amadi, and can by extension sense the pure perfection of the life that he represents—a society that embraces the colonial culture and the indigenous culture equally. It is a culture that embraces all people, rather than casting off those who do not fit the stringent rules it has arbitrarily chosen. Kambili so longs to belong to this world that she “was grateful that he had said [her] name, that he remembered [her] name” (Adichie, p. 164). The simple act of recognizing Kambili includes her in Nigeria's perfect future.

However, Father Amadi knows that his perfect, inclusive future is something that can exist only in hopeful dreams. The road to peace is difficult at best, and post-Biafra Nigeria could hardly be considered ideal conditions. Though he will be forced to leave for Europe, he intends, while he can, to include Kambili as much as she wishes to be included. His behavior is so marked that those around him believe him to be in love with her; Amadi himself tells Kambili that he “wanted to take [her]. And after that first day, [he] wanted to take [her] with [him] everyday” (Adichie, p. 280). Father Amadi likes Kambili as much as she likes him. He sees her as the future of Nigeria. It is Kambili who represents the direction in which the country will go; naturally, Father Amadi desires that Nigeria follow the perfect imagined future that he himself symbolizes.

Rather than staying in Nigeria where he represents a bygone hope, Father Amadi is forced to move to Europe. Despite his good intentions, he remains informed by the same colonizing forces as Eugene, so he also fails. Ironically, the colonizer must return to the land of the colonizers. Although he does not return to England, the country that colonized Nigeria, he does go to Germany, which also maintained African colonies. This move takes place at the same time as the death of Eugene. Both colonizers are lost at the same moment in history. This moment allegorically represents the end of the Biafran conflict. It also represents the moment when Nigeria had to stand on its own, emerging into its own identity as an adolescent emerging into incipient adulthood. This transition does not take place overnight, and is imperfect; Nigeria maintains loose bonds with England, and Kambili

is still a child who needs a father figure.

Ifeoma, Eugene's sister, is his opposite in nearly every way. She allows her children a great deal of freedom, in contrast to the tight rule Eugene maintains. Respectful of cultural tradition but not bound to it, and educated in Western thoughtforms, Ifeoma is representative of the democratic option for Nigeria's imagined future. It is a future where all people, regardless of ethnic group, religion, or gender, are allowed to have a voice. Although Ifeoma and Eugene share the same blood, they represent wildly divergent styles of rulership: Eugene, the somewhat tyrannical imperialism; Ifeoma, the modern Western democracy.

To Kambili, Ifeoma is larger than life. In truth, she is a large woman, and “the wrapper that stopped above her calves would stop above the ankles of an average-size woman” (Adichie, p. 278). In opposition to the quiet life that draws into itself and leaves empty spaces (the life embodied by Eugene and his family), Ifeoma expands, life and energy filling all available space. Additionally, Ifeoma does not hold power within the church, as did Eugene; rather, Ifeoma is a teacher who is concerned not with forcing her viewpoints onto others but instead with teaching others to become actively engaged in forging their own viewpoints.

The way that Ifeoma raises her children is diametrically opposed to the way that Eugene raises his. Eugene raises his children on the principle of fear. They are able to achieve only what Eugene wants them to achieve, and then they only achieve because they are afraid of the consequences of failure. Kambili and Jaja do not nurse any ambitions of their own, but are simply being made into machines. Ifeoma, on the other hand, allows her children to nurse ambitions and to make mistakes, for she believes that this is the only way that the children will grow. Her parenting philosophy is about “setting higher and higher jumps for them in the way she talked to them, in what she expected of them. She did it all the time believing they would scale the rod. And they did.

“It was different for Jaja and [Kambili]. [They] did not scale the rod because [they] believed [they]

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could, [they] scaled it because [they] were terrified that [they] couldn't" (Adichie, p. 226). Kambili and Jaja's reactions are typical for children in the type of household in which they live; "in their efforts to attempt to avoid further abuse and to please punitive parents who set harsh and often unattainable standards, many child victims of abuse strive to do better, to be perfect. However, such a strategy may backfire

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## While in Nsukka, Jaja feels for the first time the savor of personal autonomy.

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as they develop over-idealized images that they cannot contain" (Harter, 1999, p. 275). Eugene forces a high level of performance from his children with threat and severe physical punishment. Ifeoma, however, simply encourages her children, allowing them to perform to the fullness of their particular abilities and to discover their specific strengths. Auntie Ifeoma represents the possible future of Nigerian democracy. In this future, no child is bound by socioeconomic measures or questions of race or religion, at least in theory. Ifeoma's is the future within which each Nigerian citizen has a voice as well as the freedoms that the polity of Western society considers a birthright.

Amaka, Ifeoma's daughter and Kambili's cousin, is an adolescent girl who embodies what Nigeria could become if it should follow a democratic path. Amaka listens to both Western and traditional Nigerian music, and she freely expresses her opinions. Sometimes this does lead to a sense of cruelty, as Amaka often ridicules Kambili for her reserve; Ifeoma does not ignore this behavior, but rather uses it as a teaching opportunity. On one such occasion, "Auntie Ifeoma's eyes hardened—she was not looking at Amaka, she was looking at [Kambili]. 'O *ginidi*, Kambili, have you no mouth? Talk back to her!" (Adichie, p. 170). Ifeoma, in keeping with democratic tradition, believes that a nation cannot be strong unless each member of the society fully embraces and uses his or her talents and skills. In order for this to happen, all members of the society must feel essential—they must feel as though their contributions are important. The way Ifeoma inspires and teaches her children embodies Western ideas of civic pride and civic participation.

Like the perfect post-colonial future that Father Amadi represents, Ifeoma's Western democracy has

no place in the emerging Nigeria. Democracy is an idea that is almost guaranteed to fail at this particular point in time. Kambili can sense this, and dreams "that the sole administrator was pouring hot water on Auntie Ifeoma's feet in the bathtub of [Kambili's] home in Enugu. Then Auntie Ifeoma jumped out of the bathtub and, in the manner of dreams, jumped into America. She did not look back as [Kambili] called her to stop" (Adichie, pp. 229–230). Ifeoma represents a future that is untenable. There remain too many power struggles and questions of identity for a truly democratic government to maintain political control; the populace is still deeply informed by militaristic tendencies—in other words, schoolyard politics. The emerging character of Nigeria remains too immature to handle the more adult role of democratic rule.

## Defining Identity

Kambili and Jaja must choose from among the potential futures available to them; by choosing, they will solidify their burgeoning identities. Jaja is perplexed and a bit impressed by life in Nsukka, life in a democratic household. Ifeoma's style of parenting (and thus type of rulership) is represented by the flowers in her yard, which are the namesake of the novel: the purple hibiscus. Upon first sighting the flowers, Jaja is strangely drawn to them:

"That's a hibiscus, isn't it, Auntie?" Jaja asked, staring at a plant close to the barbed wire fence. "I didn't know there were purple hibiscuses."

Auntie Ifeoma laughed and touched the flower, colored a deep shade of purple that was almost blue. "Everybody has that reaction the first time." (Adichie, p. 128)

While in Nsukka, Jaja feels for the first time the savor of personal autonomy. In what nearly becomes a rite of passage, Jaja is able to express his own thoughts and make his own choices. He takes to this role as if he had never been oppressed, his shoulders broadening, his back straightening with his newfound freedom and adulthood. Even Kambili notices this; she "listened to him and marveled at the wonder in his voice, at how much lighter the brown of his pupils was" (Adichie, p. 126). Jaja becomes the representative of a free people, a people at liberty to make their own rules and imperatives as demanded by their situation. For the first time in his life, Jaja is free from colonial rule.



After Jaja visits Ifeoma and her family in the university city of Nsukka, he returns changed; he is no longer willing to quietly accept Eugene's rule. Jaja has seen in Ifeoma's family a completely different future than any offered to him by his father. Ifeoma rules with love and laughter, characteristics completely unknown in Eugene's household, and she allows each child to flourish according to his or her own abilities. This is a more democratic version of Nigeria's future. Adichie's choice to locate Ifeoma's family in Nsukka has more meaning than the simple coincidence that Ifeoma is an instructor in the university. Nsukka was one of the first cities of Biafra to fall in the war. Had Nsukka not fallen, Biafra might have been able to win its independence. There is no way to determine what would have happened had Biafra been free. Adichie exploits this uncertainty by the metaphoric fall of Nsukka as the nation faces increasing political unrest. Jaja's transformation while visiting Ifeoma represents not only his burgeoning independence, but also the danger inherent therein.

When Jaja returns home, he refuses to partake in Holy Communion. Eugene is shocked, claiming, "You cannot stop receiving the body of our Lord. It is death, you know that." Jaja responds, "Then I will die" (Adichie, p. 6). Eugene is speaking of the death of the soul (true to his messianic colonialism), but Jaja is not speaking of his soul. Jaja is speaking of his desire to be free from the despotic rule of his father. Kambili finds his new defiance "fragrant with the undertones of freedom, a different kind of freedom from the one the crowds waving green leaves chanted at Government Square after the coup" (p. 16). Ultimately, Ifeoma and her family flee from Nigeria, even as Nsukka fell during the Nigerian-Biafran War; the democratic ideal cannot be maintained in Nigeria, where the ground is barren to such ideals. So, too, do Jaja's hopes for his own independence fall. When his independence comes, it is not complete.

Jaja's defiance does not come without a price. Jaja is imprisoned for almost three years without being formally charged (thus taking away even his ability to defend himself); for "almost three years . . . Jaja's official status, all this time, has been Awaiting Trial" (Adichie, p. 300). Interestingly, this is the exact length of time of the Biafra conflict, which raged for 31 months, from May 1967 to January 1970. This is not a coincidence: both Biafra and Jaja are experi-

ments in freedom that ultimately fail. Confined to a small, brutal cell, allowed only the small privileges that his family's money can buy, Jaja withdraws into himself. The shoulders that began to broaden in Ifeoma's backyard slump under the weight of his imprisonment, and like the British, who won in the end, Eugene claims his son.

Although British rule was overturned, the mark that the colonizers left on Nigeria was indelible; the land will never be as it once was. Neither will Jaja; he will never live up to the potential that once lived inside him. That part of him that heretofore proclaimed leadership, the same part that enabled him to step forward and lie to protect his mother and his sister, is sacrificed (or, at the very least, seriously limited) for that same protection. Nigeria, especially Igboland, is scarred with the memory of violence and dissolution. It, like Jaja, is like a child reaching adulthood after a lifetime of abuse.

According to James Garbarino (2008), this reaction of withdrawal is not surprising, for "on evolutionary grounds today's children (and to some degree women) are less likely to experience a fight-or-flight response to traumatic situations, and more likely to experience 'emotional dissociation and freezing'" (p. 18). The trauma facing Jaja is not merely that of his father's abuse, but also that of his father's death and his own imprisonment. He cannot escape, and fighting his captors will earn him nothing. Jaja is, perhaps permanently, crippled; he may never reclaim the fullness of future that he began to experience with his aunt and her family. He also remains bound to the identity that his imprisonment has given him—he will never develop a unified, whole identity.

To Kambili, Jaja is a hero; he has sacrificed his freedom and his future in order to liberate his family from a man who could surely be considered a tyrant. However, Jaja himself does not appear to feel the same:

His eyes are too full of guilt to really see me, to see his reflection in my eyes, the reflection of my hero, the brother who tried always to protect me the best he could. He will never

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**Jaja's transformation while visiting Ifeoma represents not only his burgeoning independence, but also the danger inherent therein.**

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think that he did enough, and he will never understand that I do not think he should have done more. (Adichie, p. 305)

The guilt that Jaja feels is not for his action, for his only transgression has been dishonesty, and that in the pursuit of protection for his family. The guilt that Jaja feels is the guilt of not being able to protect his family more, of not being able to prevent the events that forced his mother's hand in murdering her husband, of not being able to prevent Kambili's hospital stay for injuries sustained when her father beat her, of not being able to prevent the miscarriage of an unborn sibling that resulted from Eugene's violence. His guilt is the guilt of a Holocaust survivor or an individual who does not stop the spread of a totalitarian regime; it is survivor's guilt—the guilt of a person who could not have prevented circumstance, but wishes that he had tried harder to find some way, any way, to prevent the calamities that have befallen his family and/or society.

Kambili and Jaja emerge into adulthood together, at the time of Eugene's murder. Wounded, self-sacrificing, and struggling to find and keep his voice, Jaja's decision to protect his mother elevates him to the role of patriarch. He enters into the role of father figure, and therefore becomes an allegory for Nigeria-that-must-be. Like Nigeria, Jaja suffers from the coup (through incarceration), and will have to struggle to find himself in the future. Jaja will forever be marked by the psychological torment of having been incarcerated, as well as literally and permanently deformed through the actions of his father. Even as Jaja spent years "awaiting trial," the nation of Nigeria is also waiting, waiting for a time when it can heal its own scars and move forward as a unified whole. Although there were glorious options for the future, the reality of Nigeria's political situation has made them unreachable. The immediate future is one of struggle, and the outcome is uncertain.

### **Nigeria's Undecided Future**

Kambili loves the future version of Nigeria represented by Father Amadi, but this love is colored by her upbringing in a colonialist environment. Her love for him (in his role as a positive colonizer) is what enables Amadi to love Kambili back in a way that he cannot love anyone else. Kambili sees Father Amadi as a hopeful symbol of the union of imperialism and tradi-

tion, the utopist version of Nigeria that might have been possible had Biafra never seceded. However, this alone is not enough, because he is the colonized as well as the colonizer, and Nigeria is throwing off the yoke of colonization. He is a hope whose time has passed. Eugene and Father Amadi are locked into their roles and cannot adapt or change. Kambili is not locked into her role, however, and on the threshold of 18 and adulthood, her incipient future is still undecided. She is the undecided Nigeria, and the only father figure left to her—Jaja—becomes her model for the future.

Jaja is the last authority figure remaining to Kambili. Eugene is dead, Father Amadi is in Europe, and Auntie Ifeoma has moved to America. Although he is not responsible for the death of his father, Jaja has moved into the fatherhood role by taking responsibility for the act. He shoulders his burden with stoicism and without any false hopes for a utopian future. Similarly, Nigeria has to shoulder the burden of its future along with the pain of its bitter past. Although Jaja has achieved the independence he fought for, as Nigeria is finally united after the Nigeria-Biafran War, it is with a high price. His incarceration takes a toll on him, mentally and physically, and Nigeria must face a broken nation.

All of the father figures are essentially rendered null in the creation of Nigeria's future. The pure indigenous history is irrecoverable, and colonialism collapses under its own weight. Unification of the divergent Nigerian parties was a dream that died in the face of war. Democracy is equally unattainable, for the Nigerian soil is not hospitable to democratic ideals. The future is in the hands of the children, and squarely so. The fathers had their chance to create and change the world when they themselves were children. Now, Nigeria will emerge into a united concept of selfhood as the children do.

### ***Purple Hibiscus in the Classroom***

Although situated in a very specific place and time, to borrow Andrade's language, "all texts and especially, all works of literature, are involved in conversations with other texts—and that a productive analysis examines points of conversation as well as potential or visible differences" (p. 94). I would further argue that all texts are in dialogue with their readers, and those

readers do not need to maintain an Igbo, Nigerian, or even African pedigree in order to converse with *Purple Hibiscus*. In fact, the very differences between Western students and Adichie's characters allow for a lively discourse and multiple new learning opportunities.

Okuyade (2011) focuses discussion on *Purple Hibiscus* as a "female" *bildungsroman* (p. 145), but this is also Jaja's tale and Jaja's journey; he, too, grapples with identity and independence. The stylistic decision to tell of the journey through Kambili's eyes, far from isolating a male reader, actually helps draw him in; an adolescent male can see himself in Jaja from a comfortable distance without the unfamiliar emotional immediacy that Kambili presents. (While female students will find Kambili's intensity engaging, young male readers have a tendency to isolate themselves from this, at least in public.) Unlike *The Bell Jar* or *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Purple Hibiscus* is equally applicable and enjoyable for both genders, because adolescents of both genders are transitioning from a "need to be goaded to make decisions" to a "functional autonomy . . . capable of private thought" (Okuyade, p. 156), a journey experienced by both siblings.

Additionally, this novel reaches across national borders. It breaks down jingoistic national insularity by showing young readers a less caricaturized version of Africa, a version much more like them and their lives than they previously believed. Further, the novel can help adolescents understand much of the unrest in the world, from Libya to Egypt, and help them to imagine the experiences of people elsewhere in the world rather than relegating them to the status of "Other."

*Purple Hibiscus* is not a "Biafra" novel. It does not attempt to retell the horrors experienced during that conflict. Adichie, however, does not shy away from her identity as a Nigerian but rather uses the history of Biafra to describe a new Nigeria. She uses children—who, by definition, have yet to achieve a fully defined identity—to explore the options of a national identity for Nigeria. Jaja and Kambili negotiate their own fu-

tures, which, while certainly not free from problems, are allegorical to the current state of Nigerian politics even as they maintain hope for a better future.

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