


Purple Hibiscus

THEMES


Coming of Age

- ▶ Kambili and Jaja both come of age in Purple Hibiscus as a result of their experiences. The book opens with Jaja rebelling against his devout Catholic father by skipping communion on Palm Sunday, an important religious holiday. The following chapters detail the events that culminate in Jaja's defiance. The book is narrated by Kambili three years after this incident. Since she has been stunted by the severe punishments of her father, Kambili barely speaks. Her narration is striking because it can be concluded that she finds her own voice throughout this ordeal. Both Kambili and Jaja take steps towards adulthood by overcoming adversity and being exposed to new thoughts.

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- ▶ Part of growing up is building your own identity by choosing which paths to follow. In Enugu, the only path Kambili and Jaja are allowed to follow is Papa. He writes out schedules and severely punishes them when they stray. When Kambili and Jaja visit their Aunty Ifeoma in Nsukka, they are astonished by what they find. Though her home is small and devoid of luxuries, there is love and respect. Her children Amaka and Obiora are allowed to question authority and choose their own paths. Obiora, though he is three years younger than Jaja, is articulate and protective. He has been initiated into Igbo culture by performing a rite of manhood. Jaja was not allowed to participate and is ashamed that he is lagging behind his cousin. In Nsukka, Jaja is encouraged to rethink his allegiances and make his own decisions.
 - ▶ Aunty Ifeoma encourages Kambili to reconsider her stance on Papa-Nnukwu. As she has been taught by Papa, her grandfather is a heathen. But when she searches his face, she sees no signs of godliness. After witnessing his innocence ritual, Kambili questions the absolute rule of her father. Both Kambili and Jaja take major steps towards adulthood by claiming their individuality.


Religion

- ▶ There is a contrast between Father Benedict and Father Amadi. Priest at Papa's beloved St. Agnes, Father Benedict is a white man from England who conducts his masses according to European custom. Papa adheres to Father Benedict's style, banishing every trace of his own Nigerian heritage. Papa uses his faith to justify abusing his children. Religion alone is not to blame. Papa represents the wave of fundamentalism in Nigeria that corrupts faith.
- ▶ Father Amadi, on the other hand, is an African priest who blends Catholicism with Igbo traditions. He believes that faith is both simpler and more complex than what Father Benedict preaches. Father Amadi is a modern African man who is culturally-conscious but influenced by the colonial history of his country. He is not a moral absolutist like Papa and his God. Religion, when wielded by someone gentle, can be a positive force, as it is in Kambili's life.

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- ▶ Papa-Nnukwu is a traditionalist. He follows the rituals of his ancestors and believes in a pantheistic model of religion. Though both his son and daughter converted to Catholicism, Papa-Nnukwu held on to his roots. When Kambili witnesses his morning ritual, she realizes that their faiths are not as different as they appear. Kambili's faith extends beyond the boundaries of one religion. She revels in the beauty of nature, her family, her prayer, and the Bible. When she witnesses the miracle at Aokpe, Kambili's devotion is confirmed. Auntie Ifeoma agrees that God was present even though she did not see the apparition. God is all around Kambili and her family, and can take the form of a smile.
 - ▶ The individualistic nature of faith is explored in *Purple Hibiscus*. Kambili tempers her devotion with a reverence for her ancestors. Jaja and Amaka end up rejecting their faith because it is inexorably linked to Papa and colonialism, respectively.


Colonialism

- ▶ Colonialism is a complex topic in Nigeria. For Papa-Nnukwu, colonialism is an evil force that enslaved the Igbo people and eradicated his traditions. For Papa, colonialism is responsible for his access to higher education and grace. For Father Amadi, it has resulted in his faith but he sees no reason that the old and new ways can't coexist. Father Amadi represents modern Nigeria in the global world.
- ▶ Papa is a product of a colonialist education. He was schooled by missionaries and studied in English. The wisdom he takes back to Nigeria is largely informed by those who have colonized his country. He abandons the traditions of his ancestors and chooses to speak primarily in British-accented English in public. His large estate is filled with western luxuries like satellite TV and music. Amaka assumes that Kambili follows American pop stars while she listens to musicians who embrace their African heritage. But the trappings of Papa's success are hollow. The children are not allowed to watch television. His home, modernized up to Western standards, is for appearances only. There is emptiness in his home just as his accent is falsified in front of whites.

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- Over the course of the novel, both Kambili and Jaja must come to terms with the lingering after-effects of colonialism in their own lives. They both adjust to life outside their father's grasp by embracing or accepting traditional ways.


Nigerian Politics

- ▶ Both Kambili and the nation are on the cusp of dramatic changes. The political climate of Nigeria and the internal drama of the Achike family are intertwined. After Nigeria declared independence from Britain in 1960, a cycle of violent coups and military dictatorship led to civil war, which led to a new cycle of bloody unrest. Even democracy is hindered by the wide-spread corruption in the government.
- ▶ In *Purple Hibiscus*, there is a coup that culminates in military rule. Papa and his paper, the Standard, are critical of the corruption that is ushered in by a leader who is not elected by the people. Ironically, Papa is a self-righteous dictator in his own home. He is wrathful towards his children when they stray from his chosen path for them. In the wake of Ade Coker's death, Papa beats Kambili so severely she is hospitalized in critical condition. Both in Nigeria and in the home, violence begets violence.

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- Kambili and Jaja are kept away from the unrest at first. They witness protests, deadly roadblocks, and harassment from the safety of their car. But when they arrive in Nsukka, they are thrust into political debate. Obiora says the university is a microcosm for Nigeria – ruled by one man with all the power. Pay has been withheld from the professors and light and power are shut off frequently. Medical workers and technicians go on strike and food prices rise. There are rumors that the sole administrator is misdirecting funds intended for the university. This is a parallel to what is happening in the country at large. Kambili and Jaja now understand firsthand the struggle of their cousins. The personal becomes political, and vice versa.


Silence

- ▶ Several characters are gripped with silence throughout the novel. Kambili suffers the most, unable to speak more than rehearsed platitudes without stuttering or coughing. Her silence is a product of the abuse that she endures at the hands of her father. Kambili does not allow herself to tell the truth about her situation at home. When her classmates taunt her for being a backyard snob, she does not explain that she does not socialize out of fear. She is not allowed to dally after school lest she be late and beaten. She finally learns how to speak her mind when she is taunted continuously by her cousin Amaka. Auntie Ifeoma encourages her to defend herself and only then can Amaka and Kambili begin their friendship. Kambili begins to speak more confidently, laugh and even sing.

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- ▶ The titles of the second and fourth section are Speaking With Our Spirits and A Different Silence. Kambili and Jaja communicate through their eyes, not able to utter the ugly truth of their situation. Mama, like her daughter, cannot speak freely in her own home. Only with Auntie Ifeoma can she behave authentically. The silence that falls upon Enugu after Papa is murdered is, as the title suggests, different. There is hopelessness to this silence like the one that existed when Papa was alive. But it is an honest silence. Mama and Kambili know the truth and there is nothing more that can be said. Jaja's silence betrays a hardness that has taken hold of him in prison. There is nothing he can say that will end the torment he experiences. The tapes that Auntie Ifeoma sends with her children's voices are the only respite he has.
 - ▶ Silence is also used as punishment. When Kambili and Jaja arrive in Nsukka for Easter, Jaja refuses to speak to his father when he calls. After the years of silence that he has imposed upon his children, they use it as a weapon against him. The government also silences Ade Coker by murdering him after he prints a damning story in the Standard. When soldiers raid Auntie Ifeoma's flat, they are trying to silence her sympathies with the rioting students through intimidation. Silence is a type of violence.


Domestic Violence

- ▶ On several occasions, Papa beats his wife and children. Each time, he is provoked by an action that he deems immoral. When Mama does not want to visit with Father Benedict because she is ill, Papa beats her and she miscarries. When Kambili and Jaja share a home with a heathen, boiling water is poured on their feet because they have walked in sin. For owning a painting of Papa-Nnukwu, Kambili is kicked until she is hospitalized.
- ▶ Papa rationalizes the violence he inflicts on his family, saying it is for their own good. The beatings have rendered his children mute. Kambili and Jaja are both wise beyond their years and also not allowed to reach adulthood, as maturity often comes with questioning authority. When Ade Coker jokes that his children are too quiet, Papa does not laugh. They have a fear of God. Really, Kambili and Jaja are afraid of their father. Beating them has the opposite effect. They choose the right path because they are afraid of the repercussions. They are not encouraged to grow and to succeed, only threatened with failure when they do not. This takes a toll on Jaja especially, who is ashamed that he is so far behind Obiora in both intelligence and protecting his family. He ends up equating religion with punishment and rejects his faith.

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- There is an underlying sexism at work in the abuse. When Mama tells Kambili she is pregnant, she mentions that she miscarried several times after Kambili was born. Within the narrative of the novel, Mama loses two pregnancies at Papa's hands. The other miscarriages may have been caused by these beatings as well. When she miscarries, Papa makes the children say special novenas for their mother's forgiveness. Even though he is to blame, he insinuates it is Mama's fault. Mama believes that she cannot exist outside of her marriage. She dismisses Auntie Ifeoma's ideas that life begins after marriage as "university talk." Mama has not been liberated and withstands the abuse because she believes it is just. Ultimately, she poisons Papa because she can see no other way out. The abuse has repressed her to the point that she must resort to murder to escape.

Nature/Environment

- ▶ The book's namesake flower is a representation of freedom and hope. Jaja is drawn to the unusual purple hibiscus, bred by a botanist friend of Auntie Ifeoma. Auntie Ifeoma has created something new by bringing the natural world together with intelligence. For Jaja, the flower is hope that something new can be created. He longs to break free of his Papa's rule. He takes a stalk of the purple hibiscus home with him, and plants it in their garden. He also takes home the insight he learns from Nsukka. As both blossom, so too do Jaja and his rebellion.
- ▶ Kambili's shifting attitudes toward nature signify her stage of transformation. During one of the first times she showers at Nsukka, Kambili finds an earthworm in the tub. Rather than coexisting with it, she removes it to the toilet. When Father Amadi takes her to have her hair plaited, she watches a determined snail repeatedly crawl out of a basket. She identifies with the snail as she has tried to crawl out of Enugu and her fate. Later, when she bathes with water scented with the sky, she leaves the worm alone. She acknowledges that God can be found anywhere and she appreciates its determination.

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- ▶ In the opening of the book, Kambili daydreams while looking at the several fruit and flower trees in her yard. This same yard, a signifier of wealth, leaves her open for taunts of “snob” at school. But here she fixates on the beauty of the trees. When she returns from Nsukka after her mother has miscarried, Kambili is sickened by the rotting tree fruit. The rot symbolizes the sickness in the Achike household but also that Kambili is seeing her home with new eyes. Like the trees, she is trapped behind tall walls.
 - ▶ Weather also plays a role in the novel. When Ade Coker dies, there are heavy rains. After Palm Sunday, a violent wind uproots several trees and makes the satellite dish crash to the ground. Rain and wind reflect the drama that unfolds in the Achikes’ lives. Mama tells Kambili that a mixture of rain and sun is God’s indecision on what to bring. Just as there can be both rain and sun at the same time, there are good and evil intertwined. In nature, Kambili gleans that there are no absolutes. Papa is neither all good or all bad, her faith does not have to be either Catholic or traditionalist, and she can challenge her parents while still being a good child.