

Religion issues in purple hibiscus



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Focal points are important components of life. Just as the earth revolves on an axis around the sun, so too does the Church calendar revolve around significant events, of which Palm Sunday is one. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie draws on this focus in her novel, *Purple Hibiscus*. Commencing at a Palm Sunday family dinner, the novel details the events that led to this point in time and concludes with the present – Palm Sunday. In doing so, Adichie uses the symbology of color and conflict to dramatic effect. The richness and relevance of the purples and reds combined with the ever-present religious theme of conflict exhibited through the Old and New Testaments.

Papa is a Catholic caught in the Old Testament. His view of the world is unbending: He would hold his eyes shut so hard that his face tightened into a grimace (4). In the eyes of those who know him he is a perfect model of Christianity, as Father Benedict usually referred to the pope, Papa, and Jesus in that order. He used Papa to illustrate the gospels (4). Papa; however, is not a Christian nor has he made a successful transition into the teachings of the New Testament. His behavior and the manner in which he treats his family are inconsistent with Christian ideals and create a false impression that only those closest to him can see.

The symbology associated with this story being told on Palm Sunday amplifies this religious contradiction. Palm Sunday is a key event in the New Testament and represents the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, [where] he greeted the people crowded around him (29). Ironically, this entry represents the start of his decline and eventual suffering and death, known as the passion; when they took him away (291). In reality; however, it is not Jesus who is subjected to the suffering of the passion but rather Jaja, who is

the sacrificial lamb for this religious conflict. Just as Christ was without sin and paid for humanity's sins with his life, so too is Jaja's innocence similarly treated.

The tragic ending of the Passion is therefore lived out with Jaja's demise: an innocent person suffering for the actions of others. Unlike his father, Jaja has transitioned to the ideals and beliefs of the new testament and is therefore able to turn the other cheek in taking the blame for his father's death; a father who himself was never able to understand true Christian ideals.

Jaja's tragedy and suffering is further enhanced through the use of dramatic color. The title *Purple Hibiscus* is, in itself, significant. Purple is the traditional color of royalty. It is also the color within the church that denotes sadness and suffering at the time of lent. The uniqueness of a purple hibiscus is therefore symbolic of the particular suffering to which Jaja subjects himself.

At another level, purple is used to describe Beatrice's swollen eye [that] was still the black-purple color of an overripe avocado (10-11), symbolizing the needles of pain and suffering (211). Purple, in the Christian church, is the liturgical color for the Season of Lent: the time when Jesus suffers on the cross. These needles of pain can be associated with the nails on the cross. However, purple can also have a noble, royal meaning one that is powerful: the purple plants had started to push out sleepy buds (9), they had begun to evolve into a more powerful state. Although not mentioned directly, Jaja the one who sacrifices himself in the end can be seen as having this nobility: establishing this power.

Red is also a prominent color in Purple Hibiscus originally symbolizing the blood of martyrs of the Church: Red was the color of Pentecost (28), recognition of the coming of Christ through tongues of fire, following his resurrection. It is also the color exclusively worn by Cardinals of the Church to denote their power and authority in the context of Christian beliefs. The mixture of this royal color with the imagery of blood is combined on Palm Sunday to foretell what is about to happen to Jesus. He is beaten, ridiculed, and put to death for something he did not do, in the same way that Beatrice is continually beaten to the stage where she commits a sin; a sin for which Jaja accepts responsibility even though it is something he did not do. Jesus died for all mankind. Jaja sacrifices his life for his family. The vibrant bushes of hibiscus reached out and touched one another as if they were exchanging their petals (9), exchanging trust, exchanging a sign of peace.

Adichie uses both religion and color to parallel her story, Purple Hibiscus, and the journey that the characters take. Set on Palm Sunday, it draws upon one of the most significant Christian festivals to highlight Jajas sacrifice; an innocent person condemned for the sins of others. But it also highlights the struggle of traditional Catholics who cannot move beyond the Old Testament, as seen with Papa. A deeply religious man, his religion blinds him to the fundamentals of Christian behavior. To create a more dramatic effect, however, Adichie blends this conflict with the rich sacred colors of royalty and suffering, namely purple and red. By doing this, she highlights the reverence associated with these colors as well as the pain and suffering they can bring. In its imagery, the novel is rich, unique and innocent. It is, in truth, a purple hibiscus.