

Contrasted settings



The novel *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie describes the life of a teenage girl, Kambili, who is raised in Nigeria. In the novel, Adichie uses two main settings to effectively describe the themes of freedom, silence, and repression. The two settings that are used in the novel are Kambili's hometown in Enugu and another small town, Nsukka, where Kambili's aunt and cousins live. The contrasts between the settings are startling. In Enugu, Kambili, her brother, Jaja, and her mother all face oppression from Papa. Over there, the teenagers don't know what freedom is, and everything they do is determined by Papa. However, in Nsukka, both Kambili and her brother finally find out what freedom truly is, and because of that, they find themselves. The city of Enugu is a large cosmopolitan city devoted to government affairs and commerce. Kambili's father, Eugene, is an important figure in Nigeria and dominates his home using harsh punishments and rigid guidelines. The house is filled with an oppressive silence that symbolizes the inability of the family to communicate with one another or to express themselves. Even during dinner, the family sits down and they either eat in silence or speak briefly in intense short bursts. They worry constantly about their father's reaction. Also, Kambili and Jaja are ruled by routines. Eugene has drawn them up schedules for every day and even dictates what their free time should be spent doing. He also schedules in study time. Jaja and Kambili are expected to come out on top in their classes every term, and often they do "because we were afraid of what would happen if we didn't." Kambili's home in Enugu is a place of oppressive rules and fear, and Kambili has grown up without really speaking or thinking for herself. Even during school, Kambili is afraid to speak. She is afraid to speak to the girls and because of that, the girls think she is a snob. One girl said to her, "You

know, she started calling you backyard snob because you don't talk to anybody." When Kambili's aunt comes, she is able to talk Eugene into letting Kambili and Jaja come to her house. When they arrive, they are both a little timid and don't know what to expect. Also, the "clammy coldness" of the Achike home in Enugu is strongly contrasted with the warm and lively atmosphere of Aunty Ifeoma's flat in Nsukka. They tell their aunt that their father had given them schedules to follow during the day. Then Aunt Ifeoma told them, "I will keep them for you until you leave. If you do not tell Eugene, eh, then how will he know that you did not follow the schedule?" This is their first taste of freedom. Also during their visit, they are introduced to purple hibiscuses, which they had not seen before. This proves to be a huge symbol in the book. At home, they had only seen red hibiscuses, which would symbolize violence and anger. These purple hibiscuses would serve as a symbol of self-expression and a symbol of Kambili's and Jaja's growth and their journey to be free from their stifling lifestyle: "Jaja's defiance seemed to me now like Aunty Ifeoma's experimental purple hibiscuses: rare, fragrant with the undertones of freedom... A freedom to be, to do." Their time in Nsukka gives them the ability to let them expand their characters and learn what freedom truly is. The atmosphere in Aunty Ifeoma's house is very different to Enugu. In Nsukka, Ifeoma encourages her children to challenge each other and her. Everyone is free to have their own opinion. In contrast to Enugu, talking is relaxed and pleasurable, and something that Kambili's cousins are much more comfortable doing than she is: "my cousins simply seemed to speak and speak and speak." Kambili's cousins are free to do what they like most of the time — the whole environment is much more relaxed than in Enugu. Kambili and Jaja find this new freedom difficult to

adjust to, as seen in this passage: Aunty Ifeoma stood up... “ Of course, you can stay up as long as you want afterward to watch TV or whatever else.”

Jaja shifted on his chair before pulling his schedule out of his pocket.

However, Kambili and Jaja slowly learn from their cousins that their life does not need to be dictated by someone else. Near the end of the book, Kambili remembers: “ Jaja and Mama and I spoke more with our spirits than with our lips. Until Nsukka. Nsukka started it all.” Aunty Ifeoma’s flat in Nsukka “ began to lift the silence,” allowing Kambili and Jaja to grow and speak more freely. In her aunt’s democratic household, children are treated with respect. They are given responsibility and their views are taken seriously. The two main settings of the book, the main home in Enugu and Aunty’s house in Nsukka, convey the themes of the book. In Enugu, Kambili and Jaja were oppressed by Eugene and his rules and punishments. In Nsukka, the brother and sister were able to experience freedom and encouragement for the first time. Here, they were able to develop their characters and learn what it meant to be free.