

# Natural symbolism in purple hibiscus



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Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* explores the life of a wealthy Nigerian family with the protagonist Kambili, a young girl who tries to find her own voice in an oppressive society and home. Throughout the novel, the author uses a number of symbols to convey her ideas. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie uses symbolism through nature and pathetic fallacy to reflect the development of the story and character's growth.

During many occasions in the novel, the red and purple hibiscuses play an important role in the eyes of Kambili and Jaja, but also in the novel as a whole. The purple flowers have been described as "rare, fragrant with the undertones of freedom" (16), which also conveys their importance and uniqueness. Before "things started to fall apart" (3), the hibiscuses were still a vibrant red color, showing that they have not fully bloomed and that freedom has not yet settled in the family. Red, a color with a symbolism of anger and violence, haunts Kambili through her childhood as she has to clean her mother's blood after an abusive episode. Kambili cannot focus after a long period of time afterwards and can only read with "the black typed blurred, the letters swimming into one another, and then changed to a bright red, the red of fresh blood" (35). As for the red hibiscuses, they symbolize the family's oppression, since the only way Papa keeps his wife and children in control is through his violence. The children only see the purple hibiscuses when they visit Auntie Ifeoma in Nsukka, and they are surprised since "[they] didn't know there were [any]" (128). Not only did Kambili and Jaja discover a new flower when they arrive to Nsukka, they also find out what true freedom is. By seeing how Auntie Ifeoma lives with Amaka and Obiora, Jaja and Kambili notice that their lives are strict and controlled

unlike their cousins', who have the freedom to do whatever they like. To Jaja, the purple hibiscuses signify hope that something new can exist, such as a new life without Papa's rules. He takes a stalk of the flowers with him back home and plants them in the garden in hope that freedom will soon come through. Adichie foreshadows Jaja's rebellious decisions from the moment he notices the rare flowers to him refusing to go to communion, which leads to Papa throwing a "missal across the room" (3). From that point on, the flowers "started to push out sleepy buds," even though most were "still on the red ones" (9). As the purple hibiscuses start bloom, so does Jaja's rebellion towards Papa, which reveals the way the flowers symbolize Jaja's growth as a character.

Throughout the novel, Kambili's attitude towards nature changes as she matures, but it also reflects her inner turmoil and joy. Whilst staying in Nsukka, Kambili discovers an earthworm "slithering in the bathtub" (232). Before taking her bath, she picked it up, and "threw it in the toilet" (233) without flushing it, even though she knew Obiora was fascinated by worms. Instead of dealing with the crawling insect, she decides to remove it. The earthworm symbolizes Kambili's mood, in this case her turmoil, and demonstrates how she is uncertain of her feelings throughout the course of the novel and decides to put them aside instead of confronting them. Whilst getting her hair done, Kambili notices a snail in an open basket. She watched the creature as it was "crawling out, being thrown back in, and then crawling out [of the basket] again" (238), and realizes that she shares similarities to it. Kambili is also trapped inside her own type of basket – her father's home- and crawls towards freedom just like the snail, but keeps

getting pushed back in. She grows in strength and maturity with the love of Auntie Ifeoma and Father Amadi, who bring out the best of her. Later in the novel, she bathes once again, but this time leaves the earthworms alone. By coexisting with the worms and bathing with the “scent of the sky” (270), Kambili learns to love her surroundings and honor the natural world. Her joy gets revealed while she sings and bathes after being with Father Amadi, and it also reveals that she no longer depends on her haunting memories and has found her own voice despite her family’s oppression. Kambili grows into a more mature young girl, and this is demonstrated through symbolism of the snails and earthworms, and also how she finally finds her voice.

Adichie also plays with pathetic fallacy in *Purple Hibiscus* to symbolize different characters’ thoughts. After Palm Sunday, “howling winds came with an angry rain” (258) which uproot trees and make the satellite dish crash. The use of pathetic fallacy reflects the similarities between the weather and the atmosphere in the Achike’s household, right after the communion Jaja missed. Moreover, the “purple hibiscuses [were] about to bloom” (253) symbolize Jaja’s decisions on missing communion and becoming more free. The author also uses pathetic fallacy during Ade Cocker’s death, when “it rained heavily . . . [and there was] strange, furious rain” (206). The heavy rains symbolize the difficult and depressive state Papa goes through further in the novel due to his friend’s death. At the end of the novel, after Mama and Kambili visit Jaja in prison, the clouds are described “like dyed cotton wool [hanging] low” (307), which give them a sense of ambiguity, not knowing whether they are symbolized as hopeful or ominous. Furthermore, Adichie uses specific nature imagery to describe

Kambili's thoughts on her future. Kambili imagines that she will “ plant new orange trees . . . and Jaja will plant purple hibiscuses, too” (306). Kambili still finds hope within her that Jaja will be out of jail soon, and that they will all go to Abba. The hope that Jaja will do so conveys that he brought freedom into his home by planting the purple hibiscuses, even though his own freedom was taken away from him.

By using pathetic fallacy, imagery and symbolism throughout the novel, Adichie develops the plot and characters' growth. The red and purple hibiscuses symbolize the freedom versus oppression in the novel and how Jaja dealt with it. Kambili's maturity, which is symbolized through nature, reflects her inner confusion and happiness about her life. The use of pathetic fallacy reveals different characters' thoughts through the novel. Adichie reveals characters' inner thoughts and actions by symbolizing them through nature.