

The power of setting
in "purple hibiscus"
by chimamanda
adichie



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The novel *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Adichie, set in post-colonial Nigeria during the Civil War in the late 1960s, is a bildungsroman that focuses greatly on family relationships as well as religious and cultural ideals. The passage describing Kambili and Jaja's first meal at their Aunt's house in Nsukka provides a stark contrast to the oppressive atmosphere in Enugu as a result of her father's abusive nature. The freedom and vibrancy of Auntie Ifeoma's household despite their financial limitations bewilders Kambili, while lifting the restrictions on her life and exposing her to radically diverse values and beliefs. Adichie foreshadows the development of Kambili's character through the immense contrast between her own home and the Nsukka household's open and loving environment.

Adichie emphasizes the symbolic setting in this passage to powerfully convey the disparity in attitudes of Kambili's and Auntie Ifeoma's families. The gap in wealth is dealt with frequently, highlighting that greater material satisfaction is not as beneficial as the spiritually nurturing environment of Nsukka. Adichie uses natural imagery while describing the dining table in the second paragraph of the extract, mentioning the "wood that cracked in dry weather" and the simile of "the outermost layer was shedding, like a molting cricket, brown slices curling up from the surface." The reference to natural cycles indicates that Auntie Ifeoma's progressive attitudes; her encouragement of natural expansion of outlook and social skills. This is in direct contrast with the naïve voice of Kambili, which is evident in the parallel syntax featured through most of her narrative. However, the image of the "molting cricket" suggests that in this setting, Kambili will undergo significant change, maturing and perhaps acquiring a different outlook on

her family relations and Christian zeal. This notion is reinforced by the image of "brown slices curling up" which implies nourishment and has somewhat of an aesthetic quality.

The vivid description of setting also juxtaposes the disorder and in Aunt Ifeoma's house with the tidiness of Kambili's home in Enugu, reflecting the differing values emphasized in the two families. Adichie repeats the word "mismatched" twice while describing the furniture, reflecting the slightly more chaotic atmosphere in her home. The resulting liberty and lightheartedness is overwhelming to Kambili to a certain extent, and Adichie also uses the adjective "mismatched" to imply that Kambili feels out of place and insecure with the concept of freedom from perfectionism and oppression. Adichie once again notes the lower income when she mentions "half a drumstick" on Kambili's plate, and suggests that the enthusiastic appreciation of the family, conveyed through the constant dialogue and exclamation marks such as in "Chicken and soft drinks!", compensates for their material limitations. Their apparent capacity to enjoy life in spite of its constant drawbacks and chaos is a major theme that spans the novel, and parallels the much more sinister duality of Kambili's life, where she continues to strive to satisfy the expectations of her father despite submitting to the lasting psychological effects of his abusive nature.

Kambili's emotional response to the startlingly different setting of Aunt Ifeoma's home that is conveyed by Adichie gives us insight into the change that begins to stir in her during her visit to Nsukka. At first, she is shown to be quite passive, for example when Adichie writes she "followed Amaka back into the kitchen and watched her slice and fry...", using active verbs

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only to describe Amaka. As the meal commences, Kambili feels more and more uncomfortable, mentioning she "tried to concentrate, tried to get the food down", the anadiplosis implying her intense insecurity while faced with the free speech of her cousins. This tumult signals the inner conflict that Kambili will face as she is exposed to the lifestyle in her Aunt's house, possibly resulting in a more independent and confident personality. Kambili is clearly astonished at the constant flow of conversation between her cousins and aunt; Adichie writes, "Laughter floated over my head", using the verb to indicate the uninhibited enjoyment that Kambili is not a part of, but longs for. The metaphor also suggests that simply by breathing this laughter, by existing in this setting, Kambili is gradually being imbued with the happiness around her. The noise seems almost tangible to her, creating a striking contrast to the motif of silence seems to enshroud her beforehand.

Adichie reiterates the freedom and spontaneity in the household, continuing the paragraph with "Words spurted from everyone", using the abrupt and unassuming connotations of the verb to underline once more the more disorderly yet more intimate surroundings in Aunt Ifeoma's home. The use of parallel syntax in "often not seeking and not getting any response" captures the cousins' contribution to the family dynamic through the simple act of sharing a stream of consciousness. They seem to maintain equilibrium, enhancing the family unity and intimacy. Kambili feels that the speech lacks purpose, as she mentions rather proudly, "we always spoke with a purpose back home"; this is very ironic, however, since we are familiar with the superficial compliments made to please Papa during mealtime. Her apprehension to this type of unrestrained dialogue exposes her severely

limited social interaction, which is clearly likely to be improved during her stay amongst her talkative relatives. In a sense, Kambili's inner conflict mirrors the beginning of the age of enlightenment, when the Western world emerged from a stagnant period in history due to the repression of Christianity. Adichie insinuates that with regards to Kambili and Jaja, the mere verbal engagement of the characters is an integral catalyst for Kambili's independence and perhaps firmer stance in the family conflict.

The characterization of Aunty Ifeoma and her children is an important element that influences Kambili's perceptions and aspirations. Aunty Ifeoma's assertion that " Today we'll treat Kambili and Jaja as guests, but from tomorrow they will be part of the family and join in the work..." incorporates a rapid change in time frame and reflects her straightforward, welcoming nature. Adichie suggests the possibility that due to the open and loving atmosphere at Nsukka, Kambili will experience more of a family spirit with her aunt than with her own family in Enugu. The sarcasm with which Aunty Ifeoma tells Kambili, " We do not say Mass in the name of grace like your father does" emphasizes her rejection of the rules Papa imposes on his family; Kambili is introduced for the first time to thoughts and values that distinctly oppose her father's. Her pronounced silence accentuates the impact of the constant use of dialogue by Amaka, Obiora and Chima, much of which is punctuated with exclamation marks. For example, when Chima says, " ' Mommy! I want the chicken leg' ", Adichie demonstrates the ease with which even the youngest child can express himself. Kambili's excruciating shyness and independence, illustrated by her lack of dialogue, is in stark relief, and the powerful presence of her cousins within the binary

opposition seems to foreshadow Kambili's gradually budding confidence. Amaka and Obiora's speech is paired with actions, such as in " Obiora pushed at his glasses as he spoke", emphasizing their comparative presence not only verbally but also through body language. Her discomfort and insecurity in this lively setting implies that she envies these qualities in her cousins, and her envious tone while stating, " but my cousins seemed to simply speak and speak and speak" shows her desire to be as courageous as her cousins. Adichie thus prepares Kambili for a process of self-realization and maturity. The lack of caesura in the last line of the extract implies that Kambili's cousins' speech is ongoing and fast paced, highlighting their continual energy and social competence. Kambili's admiration of this capability serves as a hopeful indication of her development as a character.

Adichie's juxtaposition of the different lifestyles and outlooks of Papa and Auntie Ifeoma's family in the bildungsroman *Purple Hibiscus* prepares for the gradual changes that take place in the main adolescent characters. The jarring difference in Auntie Ifeoma's perspectives and Kambili's own father's contribute to the inception of a desire to find her own voice and question the his destructive dominance over the family. Adichie highlights the painfulness of this process for Kambili, and thus expresses her disdain for the highly oppressive environment the religious fanatic Papa creates for his children, severely damaging their social and inquisitive capacities in spite of the generous support he provides to the overall community. The families' microcosms mirror the post-colonial situation of Nigeria, portraying the oppressive government and the spreading dissent of the population, leading to a critical conflict that may lead to significant change in the state of affairs.