

Controversial cultural issues in purple hibiscus novel



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The monster under our bed, the boogey man in our closet, or the tough bully at school that everyone runs away from out of fear; psychological terrors experienced at a young age, whether we realize the fact early on or not, shape and define our mental progression. Kambili's abusive father prohibits her from rebelling, and as a result for most of her life she limits herself and what she believes she can or cannot do. Speaking, to Kambili at least, remains a privilege granted only to those who do not worry about disappointing those that they rely on. Surrounding her own self-doubt flows a sea of cultural influences, good and bad; some help Kambili find her way, and some curb her ability to grow into a young woman. Within Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, cultural characteristics of modern Nigeria play a role in the development of the central character, Kambili, and help to define societal norms and interactions, alongside revealing how outside pressures impact Kambili's mental growth.

Some may say that the end result of cultural stresses, individualistic expression, makes hard times worth their caused aches and pains, and in the novel *Purple Hibiscus* this remains a key concept. When Kambili and Jaja travel to Aunty Ifeoma's they discover a family with an abundance of opinions, such a stark difference from the silent and quite often reserved state of their own house most of the time. In fact, Kambili's comfortability within the situation at first could be characterized as shaky and awkward, yet as she spent more time with her extended family she realized "speaking seemed to define all that they did" (Hewett 10). In contrast under Eugene's strict hand and demanding fist, talking openly and voicing your opinions did not suffice. For this reason Kambili, (used to a household built around the

concept of silence), took advantage of opportunities to showcase herself individually and uniquely while at Auntie Ifeoma's. At one point Kambili and Amaka argue over a yam, and for the first time in her life Kambili stands up for herself. Of course one could deduce that the pent up anger from years of abuse led her to finally blow, and even by the mini meltdown she experienced Kambili grew. This one development actually acted as a catalyst for Kambili's future character growth, as the argument ended up encouraging her to take a stand in other areas of her life. From this one could note that a connection between the expression of individualism and oppression does indeed exist. After this occurred Kambili developed a sense of self more rapidly, and in a way her father's abusiveness also propelled her along the journey to discover the person buried deep within her. For example, Kambili forms a crush on Father Amadi, and soon falls in love with him. The very fact that she felt brave enough to do this speaks volumes about the level of personal and character growth she experienced in such a short time. " Father Amadi brings up past anxieties and fears for people such as Father Benedict and Eugene," as her represents a movement away from old colonial ways back into seemingly sinful tendencies. The last thing her father—Eugene—would want would be these two getting together in a relationship, and Kambili, who usually plays the role of the obedient and studious daughter, simply does not care.

Even though struggling through life does not guarantee that you will become a better person, knowing how adversity feels helps one to formulate better and stronger choices for their futures. Take Kambili again for instance: she at one point could not ever consider doing anything to defile the image of her

Papa, yet in the end, even though her love for Papa did not fade, she developed a more real view of her situation and refused to experience victimization at the hands of her father again. The issues of domestic violence within a post-colonial Nigeria remain a topic explored by third-generation Nigerian novelists, simply because of the magnitude of mistreatment within their present day society (Ojaide 45). Adichie did not break the chain, and her portrayal of Kambili strikes similar to the molding of an object from clay: first raw and formless, yet quick to take shape and dry.

The battle between Catholicism and Paganism played a strong, central role within the family life of Kambili and Jaja, and at times the harsh feelings Eugene felt about the matter threatened to end their family and oftentimes threatened their lives. The British colonization of Nigeria left more than just physical scars; the entire landscape lay ravaged by emotional discourse, as even with the removal of British power, many Nigerians disagreed about what the predominant culture should be. Most upper class individuals, such as Eugene, sided with Catholicism and typically avoided traditional pagan practices altogether. Adichie mirrored this wide-scale national conflict with the contrast and dichotomy between Aunty Ifeoma and Eugene; Aunty Ifeoma, with her care-free spirit and loose ways reflects the passions of Nigerians who want to release the influence European Catholicism possesses over Nigerian culture, while Eugene with his bold and strict nature reflects the ideas and ideals of the elite who desperately want to keep Catholicism in order to maintain some semblance of authority and power over their communities. This division can also be seen when the socio-economic factors and differences between these two characters are examined, as typically the

wealthy strongly supported British Catholicism, while the poor typically aimed their support towards traditional Igbo ways. As Hron points out, “Adichie uses Eugene’s fascination with western society to point a finger at the British mimicry that continues to define a major part of Nigerian society” (31). Whether or not Eugene’s reason for choosing to support the past stemmed from past horrors or just and general greed for wealth, he conveyed a sort of obsession with making sure that his life appeared immaculate and pristine. Eugene even copies the punishments of the white priests who scalded him for doing something sinful, choosing to scald and burn the hands and feet of his children when they disobeyed him or did something wrong. The very fact that he could do something like this to his own children emphasizes the fact that to most people within this society, choosing religious or political beliefs did not involve a personal decision, just one that led to one’s own prosperity. The surrounding political setting of Nigeria parallels the conflict inside of Eugene’s ‘perfect’ household, as violence due to conflicting beliefs happens within both settings (Dawes 84). The contrast between Nsukka and Kambili’s hometown also serves a purpose in identifying cultural tensions, as the two areas both represent two different states of mind currently residing within Nigeria. Nsukka remains a place of complex cultural and social aspects—this place held Aunty Ifeoma and her family—as most individuals living here were poor and firmly opposed the rich people who want to hold onto stringent British ways. Catholicism in this space remains negotiated into a more free-form role by religious innovators, such as Father Amadi, who deemphasize the practices of the religion and tend to focus more on the importance of living morally and in a true manner; this infuriates those back in Kambili’s home town, of course. Meanwhile back <https://assignbuster.com/controversial-cultural-issues-in-purple-hibiscus-novel/>

in Enugu, Kambili's home, Eugene and his mindless, drone-like followers preach about the evil of returning to old ways, as they believe that doing so will desecrate their society and the roles they currently hold. This mindset obviously ruins the relationship many families, such as Eugene and Aunty Ifeoma, once possessed. These two once lived in the same house, knew that same parents and shared a life together, yet this internal war of beliefs going on within Nigeria did not seem to struggle in its effort to tear them apart, and in the end the war won. Aunty Ifeoma and Eugene remained as broken as ever, and their opinions on the topic did not loosen in their fervor. Additionally, this internal war wreaked havoc within Kambili's house as well, as when she started to drift away from all of Papa's teachings, Papa became more violent and an even bigger chasm began to form, separating her from her father even more. Because the war devastated her family life, Kambili's decision to define herself with the true characteristics of Nigerian culture suddenly became an even bolder choice. Kambili did not let Catholicism bury her true personality in the end, instead she chose to let the best characteristics of both Catholicism and Paganism shine through her. Coming-of-age within the midst of internal cultural strife remains difficult, but could be rewarding if one chooses to make nonbiased, intelligent decisions.

The advent of body language in helping the audience understand the importance of common mannerisms within a culture truly remains relevant, and within Kambili's story we can see the importance of body language reflected throughout her understanding of life. As a result of their limited living environment, Kambili and her brother Jaja developed a wordless way to communicate through eye contact. The silence within their house oftentimes

represented an impenetrable wall, and so these small gestures usually conveyed the only way that they could 'say' what they really thought about certain things. This phenomenon does not get lost in the real world though, as young children, isolated from society and subjected to emotional and psychological abuse tend to choose other ways to communicate with the world at large. Even people with Autism, (in the cases where the individual experiences sensory overload), decide to talk with others in a way that does not involve speaking. Kambili leaves behind her dependence on communicating without speaking and gradually becomes more comfortable with talking for herself, something that surely developed while she and her brother Jaja visited their Aunty Ifeoma.

The actual language Kambili's voice or Adichie uses throughout the novel adds extra emphasis to the growth Kambili achieves, as her language and word choice seems to mature as she does. Kambili's childlike and sophomoric language ingeniously betrays the criticisms she feels for her father; for example, when Kambili described Eugene's piety at communion in a childish nature. The kid-like comedic descriptions downplays the father's seriousness, and yet at the same time his cruelty and meticulousness remains emphasized and very definitive. Also, Adichie constantly analyzes the opposing dichotomies by bringing attention to the varying points of view, (Kambili's different viewpoints before and after her maturation), and the child's perspective lies paired with that of the young adult perspective of the audience. Kambili remains obviously confused, as she idolizes her father, even though he beats her; this can be related to her childlike dependence upon him. Eugene not only provides Kambili with a house, but he literally

determines her life, and future, and to her, he does represent somewhat of a god—Kambili even mentions at some point that she refused to compare him to anyone because doing so soiled him. Going back to the importance of language though, upon arrival to Nsukka, Kambili can best be characterized as infantile-like, or incapable of speech. She seems to not be capable of physically allowing words to leave the recesses of her mouth, and this silence could be compared to the silence of her father's followers and congregation.

Kambili also possesses the ability to detect, with just the quiver of an eye, whether or not he will attack her or her brother. Her ability to determine the outcome of such situations can be paralleled to possessing some amount of influence over her growth at Aunty Ifeoma's—ironically enough, though, Eugene's story remains one of an accelerating deterioration. Eugene's openness and comfort in his own home remains obviously expressed in a brash and violent manner, showing that he hides himself from people who usually admire him. Those individuals do not question the decisions and statements made by Eugene—or omelora, as they call him—and as a result they portray the part of society that remains unwilling to communicate or take a stand. Whilst plenty of crises occur, there will remain a group of individuals who do not want to rise up against their oppressors. As long as this group continues to persist within societies, movements towards making the world a better place will remain stagnant, and Adichie combats this in her novel. Adichie portrays the concept of not speaking as a negative, which she does by giving the silent nature of Kambili's household a dark

connotation. Adichie hopes to encourage the bravery of young voices everywhere that remain shrouded behind oppressive figures and forces.

Within life, many factors such as love, obsessive behaviors, and violence impact how we turn out, and the future decisions that we as individuals will make. For Kambili, specifically, the abuse blocked her mentally and physically. She developed habits of distrust, and in a way the abuse from her father Eugene lowered her self-confidence as well, as even the concept of picking out what university she would attend seemed to scare her to no avail. However, despite all the damage done to Kambili by her horrible father, the trip to Nsukka and the visit with her Aunty Ifeoma put a positive influence on her life, and led Kambili to find an outlet out of her despair. Once Kambili acknowledged her grandfather—Papa Nnukwu—the tables turned, and she suddenly started becoming more accepting of other people and cultures outside of her own compound walls. Listening to Papa Nnukwu's storytelling helps her to understand different practices and values, and the importance of expanding her world, beyond the small enclosure of Enugu.

Kambili, in the process of discovering these universal truths, transformed from a nature characterized by shyness to one characterized by boldness and a newfound confidence. Additionally, Kambili's infatuation with Father Amadi provided Kambili with the tools to grow up. As soon as she arrived at Aunty Ifeoma's and saw Father Amadi, Kambili fell head-over-heels in love with him and his personality. In fact, everyone at Aunty Ifeoma's remained aware of the love Father Amadi possessed for her, and the fact that she meant the absolute world to him. The aspect of love, in this case, did sort of parallel that of a powerful drug for Kambili; the love blinded her to the <https://assignbuster.com/controversial-cultural-issues-in-purple-hibiscus-novel/>

criticisms that her father would usually make, and allowed her to finally deeply accept someone for who they were. This just goes to show that perhaps love plays a strong part in our development and maturation; most of us love ourselves—not in a selfish way—but when we find someone who we can love just as we love ourselves, our ability to treat others respectfully, and our confidence bursts.

Father Amadi's role remains justified as a rather complex character, and serves a more dynamic role than just helping her gain her confidence; he possessed some connections to father as well. Eugene relied on a blanket of silence to keep his violence from leaking out, and Father Amadi challenges this, as he transforms into Kambili's champion. The fact that Father Amadi supported paganism by singing songs in Eugene's church angered him extremely, and the incident goes to show that when one's own safe or familiar territory becomes threatened, we as people tend to lash out. Seeing as the story remains one about the growth of Kambili and the deterioration of her father, we can clearly see the contrast Adichie tried to express here, as she emphasized Eugene's increasingly erratic behavior unravel, and the spiraling out of his mental sanity. Father Amadi also represents a sort of Nigerian Gothic love as Kambili's father would never approve of him, and thus Father Amadi remains fated to experience separation from Kambili (Mabura 217). Doomed from the start, Father Amadi and Kambili's relationship served to flush Kambili's emotional senses; her whole life her father did not love her, and now she gained the capability to spend time with a strong male figure who cared about her in a way that she always wished her dad would. Kambili at this point realized what the actual role of a man

should be in her life: a kind, caring, and compassionate individual. Within upper class Nigeria family ties tend to be looser, as opposed to the stronger binds holding together some of the poorer families. Adichie's use of their love story pointed a light at the usually covered up tragedy of neglect in Nigerian households. The tragic end to the brief love affair may wear on the audience's heart, but the legacy of their love and the places the emotional growth led Kambili can be considered well worth the heartbreak.

Eugene's obsessive behavior led Kambili to realize the importance of taking advantage of better situations. For most of her childhood Kambili experienced bullying at the hands of the man who did not understand that he inhabited the human form of evil. To understand how and why the abuse helped her, in a way, first you must grasp the paradox of Eugene. Eugene can be clearly seen as a wealthy factory owner, Catholic, a philanthropist who gives to the needy so frequently that he earned the prestigious title of omelora. In addition to this Eugene also controls the newspaper, and subsequently the information put out to the masses, and somewhere along the way Eugene wins a human rights award for his political activism. Once back inside his humble abode a monster emerges, and the change in the level of comfort causes a change in his behavior. Eugene, in a way, can be paralleled to a werewolf, charismatically charming the villagers and townsfolk in the daytime and mercilessly slaying young, innocent lambs in the night. This sort of behavior, given by Adichie, belies a certain social insanity and emotional uncertainty wracking his brain. Kambili, subjected to this behavior from birth, would not only be de-sensitized to such horrible attributes, but would unconsciously shy away from situations that could lead

her down a dark path. When forced to combat terrible wrongs, humans push on, learning from situations. The concept remains simple: once that stove burns your little, innocent hand, you will never trust another heated stove again.

The concept and aspect of guilt plays with one's inner conscious, toying with our level of comfortability, and ultimately blinding us until truth no longer remains within our line of sight. Jaja taking the blame for the death of Eugene helped Kambili solidify why she should care about her family, even though due to his extreme guilt, (Jaja feels as though he should be the one to blame for the abuse of their father), Jaja will never truly understand the significance of what he did (Mabura 220). The ultimate sacrifice, Jaja personified Eugene's last ditch effort to destroy and conquer, as even in his death he felt the need to ruin the life of someone else; even in his death the father can be abusive. One could argue that Eugene's ability to push on and continue his reign of terror on Kambili, Beatrice and Jaja can be attributed to the fact that he did not ever feel guilt for the harsh and unreasonable things that he did to them.

The role of the wife in Nigerian culture remains one of no power—typically—and usually can be characterized by the general society as one of servitude to your husband. Kambili's mother, Beatrice, embodies the type of motherly figure that represents the issues that happen to coincide with the femininity that Kambili must one day face. Beatrice, in this way, can be seen as the ghost or shadow of what Kambili may experience in the future at the hands of a violent partner if she does not grow a backbone and change. Eugene's constant physical and emotional abuse of Beatrice, although while could be <https://assignbuster.com/controversial-cultural-issues-in-purple-hibiscus-novel/>

seen as the simple act of him taking advantage of his wife and her body, the abuse drives beyond that. Their violent relationship reveals a fear of sexuality within Eugene, and as a result he strives to isolate take over her femininity and role within society by controlling every aspect of their marriage (Mabura 219). Thus, the end of the novel, where Beatrice finally gets her comeuppance and poisons the tea of Eugene remains a way that she used to reclaim all the power and dignity that her husband spent nearly his life trying to strip away from her. Adichie, a female writer, did not randomly choose to create a female protagonist, or to center much of her story on domestic violence and the issues pertaining to such terrors. Nigeria, although relinquished from the shackles of British colonialism, still experiences the issues pertaining to equality for not just social classes, but Adichie chose to combat these patriarchal tendencies and as a result created a work that focused on the empowerment of women in many areas. Kambili, until she matures, remains a shy timid little girl, uneager to communicate, and desperately afraid of disappointing the male figures in her life. Papa, Father Amadi, and Jaja; all three of these men hold some sort of power, authority, and/or control over Kambili's life, and yet gradually her reliance on the emotions and words spoken by these men dwindles significantly, and when she finds her own voice, well, these men all knew that she changed somehow. Specifically pertaining to her father though, Kambili remains perplexed by the end of her childhood deity: Eugene. She could not even grasp the concept that a man such as Papa could die, and she increasingly drew upon old habits of doubt in this matter, refusing to mentally and emotionally accept that the psychological terrors and horrors of her younger years finally past.

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Opening with, “ things fell apart”, right away the audience feels a sense of dread, and a constant motif of falling uncontrollably, waiting for the end to arrive. The act of Eugene throwing the missal at Jaja and breaking the étagère represented the falling apart of the rigid system of Catholicism that Eugene set up in his dystopia. This étagère also represent the end of Eugene’s power, as even in his rage Eugene throws the holy book—and surely by his unreasonable standards that act enough contained enough sin to deport him to hell. Along with the degradation of Eugene’s harsh system comes the erosion and fading away of the colonialism that the system tries to emulate and maintain. Eugene and Catholicism possessed a strong and thriving relationship, as the religion carried the basis for which he justified his rules and control. Eugene remains extremely and devoutly Catholic, and this obsession with the religion amounts to a devotion with the remnants of the British colonial order; he uses his abuse in an attempt to deal with the cultural, emotional, and ideological demons of his past (Dawes 84).

The quality of Adichie’s prose helps emphasize this as well, as her diction at times conveys a certain confidence, and the body of the work carries a strong current of emotional intelligence running throughout the work, that serves to draw the audience into her story and allows them to comprehend the complexity of the mind of a man like Eugene. Kambili, and her role as the child helps with this as well, as even with her childlike diction she gives a strong, critical position. The space of childhood remains flexible, and a time of resistance. Moving from childhood to adulthood can be attributed to a hybrid state, where your understanding of your environment happens to possess a higher concept, but your point-of-view skews the madness. This

effect belies what happened to Kambili, as she could not perceive the concept of Eugene as a bad man even though he did bad things.

Adichie, a prominent third-generation Nigerian author, explored controversial cultural issues within her coming of age novel, and due to her ingenious diction, the audience could receive the information just as Kambili would: through the naiveté of a sheltered little girl in an immense, broad society. Eugene's choice to champion British Catholicism would eventually lead him to his demise, even though throughout the years he got away with a lot. His crazed obsession weirdly enough made him mad about tea—because of the cultural relevance of tea in British culture—yet little did Eugene know that the very drink which he associated with his own power, glory, and authority would bring him to his downfall, as Beatrice killed him by poisoning the tea. The complexity of the cultural issues dealing with class, confidence, religion, colonialism, and patriarchy define Nigerian society, but as Adichie hopes, these will never define the Nigerian experience.