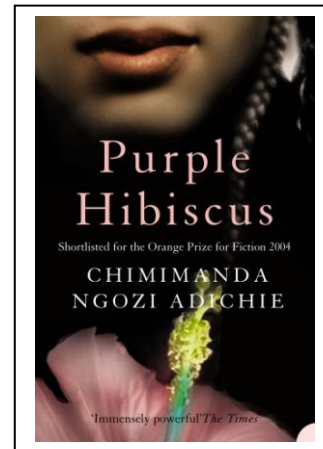




## Purple Hibiscus

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Harper Perennial  
9780007189885



Teaching Notes prepared by Kevin Densley  
**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was born in Nigeria in 1977. *Purple Hibiscus*, her first novel, has won the 2004 Hurston/Wright Legacy award, the 2005 Commonwealth Writers' Best First Book Prize and been nominated for the 2004 Orange Prize for Fiction. Other work by Adichie has appeared in various literary publications, including *The Iowa Review* and *Granta*. Her second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* was published in 2006 and is the winner of the 2007 Orange Prize for Fiction.

### **PLOT**

*Purple Hibiscus* is a novel set in postcolonial Nigeria, a country beset by political instability and economic difficulties. The central character is Kambili Achike, fifteen for much of the period covered by the book, a member of a wealthy family dominated by her devoutly Catholic father, Eugene. Eugene is both a religious zealot and a violent figure in the Achike household, subjecting his wife Beatrice, Kambili herself, and her brother Jaja to beatings and psychological cruelty.

Told through Kambili's eyes, the story is essentially about the disintegration of her family unit and her struggle to grow to maturity. A key period is the time Kambili and her brother spend at the house of her father's sister, Ifeoma, and her three children. This household offers a marked contrast to what Kambili and Jaja are used to. Though Catholic, it practices a completely different form of Catholicism, making for a happy, liberal place that encourages its members to speak their minds. In this nurturing environment both Kambili and Jaja become more open, more able to voice their own opinions. Importantly, also, while at Auntie Ifeoma's, Kambili falls in love with a young priest, Father Amadi, which awakens her sense of her own sexuality.

Ultimately, a critical mass is reached in terms of the lives of Kambili, Jaja and the existence of their family as it once was. Unable to cope with Eugene's continual violence, Beatrice poisons him. Jaja takes the blame for the crime and ends up in prison. In the meantime, Auntie Ifeoma and her family go to America to live after she is unfairly dismissed from her job as lecturer at the University of Nigeria. The novel ends almost three years after the events just described, on a cautiously optimistic note. Kambili has become a young woman of eighteen, more confident than before, while her brother Jaja is about to be released from prison, hardened but not broken by his experience there. Their mother, Beatrice, having deteriorated psychologically to a great degree, shows small signs of improvement. In essence, a better future is possible for them all, though exactly what it might involve is an open question.

## KEY CHARACTERS

### **Kambili Achike**

Kambili Achike is the central character in *Purple Hibiscus* and also the narrator of the story. She is an intelligent, observant, religious young woman, aged fifteen for much of the novel. At the same time, Kambili is shy and inhibited, at least until she has spent an extended amount of time away from her family home at the house of Aunty Ifeoma and her family.

Kambili is the younger of Eugene and Beatrice Achike's two children.

### **Eugene Achike**

Eugene Achike is Kambili's father. He is a wealthy businessman and very strict Catholic who dominates his family for much of the novel by imposing a harsh religious regime in the family home. Indeed, for much of *Purple Hibiscus* he controls almost every aspect of his family's life, including imposing a schedule upon the lives of Kambili and her brother Jaja so that every minute of the day is mapped out for them.

While on the one hand Eugene is an important man in his society and donates considerable amounts of money to needy individuals and worthy causes, he is prone to outbreaks of violence within the family house, subjecting his wife Beatrice and the two children to severe physical punishment.

### **Beatrice Achike**

Beatrice, mother and wife in the Achike family, is a quiet, maternal figure for much of the work, presenting a softer, warmer presence in the home in contrast to the often tyrannical presence of Eugene. Passive is another term applicable to her, at least for a great deal of the book. In this context, Kambili says, "there was so much that she did not mind (p. 19)."

Ultimately, however, Beatrice cannot cope with Eugene's behaviour and poisons him. Her son, Jaja, takes the blame for the crime and she is a shattered wreck after this point. At the conclusion of the novel, however, with Jaja's impending release from prison, there are some indications that her condition will improve.

### **Chukwuka "Jaja" Achike**

Chukwuka Achike, nicknamed "Jaja" by his family, is an intelligent young man about two years his sister's senior. For most of the novel, in the same way as the rest of his family, he is dominated by his father, although ultimately he displays more overt defiance than them, especially by not going to communion on Palm Sunday and causing a massive family scene as a consequence. He takes the blame for his mother's crime and spends almost three years in prison before obtaining an amnesty. Through this time, his personality has hardened but not been broken.

### **Aunty Ifeoma**

Aunty Ifeoma is Eugene's sister, a tall, striking, intelligent woman who works as a lecturer at the University of Nigeria. She is highly capable in many aspects of her life, displaying determination and resourcefulness in bringing up her children without a husband. Though financially struggling, she creates a much happier environment for her children than does her brother Eugene for his family.

### **Father Amadi**

Father Amadi is a young attractive priest in the circle of Aunty Ifeoma and her family. Being youthful, indigenous and well-versed in contemporary life, he could be described as a "new generation" priest, as opposed to white European priests in the country such as Eugene's pastor, Father Benedict.

When Kambili falls in love with Father Amadi, he shows considerable thoughtfulness and honour in the sensitive way he makes it clear to her that, because he is devoted to the church, he will never be able to become her partner.

### **Papa-Nnukwu**

Papa-Nnukwu is both father and grandfather in the Achike family, being Eugene and Ifeoma's father. He is a kind, loving man rooted in the traditional non-Christian beliefs of his indigenous culture, presenting a marked contrast, in particular, to his son Eugene's adherence to European religion and lifestyle.

### **Minor Characters**

There are also a number of minor characters in *Purple Hibiscus* worthy of detailed discussion, but space does not permit this here. These include: Father Benedict, Ade Coker and Amaka, Obiora and Chima, Aunty Ifeoma's three children.

### **THEMES**

Many strong themes emerge from a reading of *Purple Hibiscus*. These include:

- The dangers inherent in religious zeal
- Money and social position do not equal happiness
- Corruption in a society struggling for political stability
- The difficulties of everyday life in a country that is politically unstable
- Personal sacrifice and its various manifestations
- Traditional indigenous belief in relation to contemporary Western belief
- Youthful love, in particular Kambili's feelings for Father Amadi
- The relationship of the natural world (e.g. fauna and flora, climate and geography) to everyday life
- The consequences of silence (e.g. not communicating within a family, not speaking up about societal ills)
- The profound effects of various forms of violence
- The difficulties of adolescence.

All these themes are worthy of extended discussion.

### **STRUCTURE**

*Purple Hibiscus* is divided into four main sections, each containing a number of chapters that are not numbered or titled. Each section concerns an important phase in Kambili's story. (These sections are titled "Breaking Gods – Palm Sunday", "Speaking with Our Spirits – Before Palm Sunday", "The Pieces of Gods – After Palm Sunday" and "A Different Silence – The Present".) The novel is not a straightforward chronological narrative but commences in the past, at a key point in the story – the Palm Sunday family meal of the Achike family – then goes further back into the past to detail what led up to this point and, finally, concludes in the present.

## LANGUAGE

The language of the novel is basically that of its first person narrator, Kambili Achike. It reflects her sensitive, intelligent and observant nature and is rich with evocative detail. Some examples are:

“When Aunty Ifeoma woke me up, the room was dim and the shrills of the night crickets were dying away. A rooster’s crow drifted through the window above my bed.”(p. 166)

“It was as if these high walls locked in the scent of the ripening cashews and mangoes and avocados.” (p. 253)

“Above, clouds like dyed cotton wool hang low, so low I feel I can reach out and squeeze the moisture from them.” (p.307)

Also noteworthy is the use of the traditional Igbo language by many characters at various times.

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

1. Nigeria itself can be considered a character in the novel. Discuss.
2. Is Eugene a victim as much as an oppressor?
3. Was Beatrice foolish to keep her children in the same house as Eugene for so long?
4. Aunty Ifeoma and her family are extreme opposites of Eugene and his family. Discuss.
5. *Purple Hibiscus* is primarily a novel about religious intolerance. Discuss.
6. Could Kambili’s feelings for Father Amadi better be described as youthful infatuation rather than love?
7. A central concern in the novel is a traditional, indigenous way of life struggling with a newer Westernised lifestyle. Discuss.
8. To what extent is Eugene a hypocrite – espousing religious values on the one hand but, on the other, being violent and inflexible in his family home?
9. Has Kambili found inner peace by the end of the novel?
10. Compare Father Benedict and Father Amadi. What conclusions can be made here?
11. What is Papa-Nnukwu’s role within his family?
12. Kambili says: “Everything came tumbling down after Palm Sunday?” (p. 257) What does she mean?
13. *Purple Hibiscus* is rich in detail about the domestic lives of its characters, including such things as household chores and the preparation of food. What role does this focus serve in relation to the novel as a whole?
14. What is the significance of the novel’s title, *Purple Hibiscus*?