

Selfhood Governed by Faith: Religion and Identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

Abstract

This paper will focus on uncovering the influence of religious background on identity and the contrasting beliefs which are represented through the characters in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Purple Hibiscus* and how thanks to these ideas, beliefs and their intersections or deficiencies, a new understanding of selfhood can emerge, with the application and help of border thinking. In this paper I will be reading *Purple Hibiscus* as a *Bildungsroman* and examine characters or groups of characters who represent different knowledge systems, which influence Kambili and her journey towards forging an identity and a new epistemology through which to understand this newfound selfhood.

Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2003 debut novel *Purple Hibiscus*, set in post-colonial Nigeria, explores numerous themes such as colonisation, race, class, gender, family, and religion. The novel has won Adichie multiple awards, and she is often seen as the literary successor of the great Nigerian novelist and poet, Chinua Achebe.

The novel is set in post-colonial Nigeria and revolves around fifteen-year-old Kambili Achike, who is the daughter of Eugene, a wealthy Catholic businessman. Throughout the novel Kambili spends a significant amount of time with her aunt's family and her paternal grandfather, together with her brother, Jaja. The time spent with them opens both their eyes to the differences in others' social and religious practices and starts a journey of character development.

This paper aims to examine religion and its effects on identity as seen in *Purple Hibiscus*. Through the characters of the novel, it becomes apparent that Catholicism functions as an enforcer of whiteness, particularly within the narrator, Kambili's close family. Every attempt to break away is met with punishment by her father, the head of the family and chief upholder of these strict religious practices. This repressed way of life results in an almost complete absence of individual identity in the children. Moreover, with this authoritarian insistence on remaining as close as possible to customs that white missionaries brought to Nigeria, Eugene not only rids his children of their cultural heritage but completely disengages with his own as well.

Aside from the strongly Catholic beliefs exhibited by Kambili's family, other forms of religious practices are also presented in the novel, especially through Kambili's paternal grandfather who stays loyal to Igbo traditions regardless of the strain it puts on his relationship with his Anglicized son and his family. Differing belief systems linked to these religious practices displayed by the aforementioned characters in the novel will also be further investigated using post-colonial theory, most importantly the concept of "border thinking" as discussed by Walter Mignolo. Mignolo is an Argentine semiotician and literary theorist who discussed the topic of border thinking at length in his book *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, where he primarily examines these concepts from a south American perspective, but the conclusions and ideas are applicable and useful in a broader post-colonial context.

Purple Hibiscus has been widely read as a *Bildungsroman*, and I will incorporate this reading into my approach as well. The term *Bildungsroman* will be familiar in literary studies as one that is generally associated with the 19th-century European novelistic tradition. Notably though, the *Bildung* Kambili goes through is one that is characteristically African in its nature. According to Austen, there are a few key ideas that make a *Bildung* distinctly African. Firstly, while the *Bildungsroman* tradition known to Western readership is one characterized by an individual's account of their "formative youth in the context of a "modernizing" world" (215), its African counterpart is rather collectivist in nature, much more concerned with the overall community the individual belongs to or represents. Though *Purple Hibiscus* is individualistic in the sense that the reader stays rooted in Kambili's account of the story due to her narration, it could also be argued that collectivism is shown through the variety of characters and their experiences represented. Secondly, the protagonist most often stays trapped somewhere between childhood and adulthood resulting in seemingly unresolved character journeys which are more ambiguous than what is commonly exhibited by the European *Bildungsroman* tradition. This is relevant in particular when looking at Kambili's journey and where that leaves her at the end of the novel, as it is rather vague, leaving Kambili's fate largely up to the reader's interpretation. Her arc's ending belongs to this tradition due to its ambiguous nature. Thirdly, Western education's role is also emphasized in the African *Bildungsroman* as it provides formal knowledge to the central character(s) but at the same time alienates them from their own cultural roots (Austen 215, 216). This African *Bildungsroman* framework is important to pinpoint here since it is vital in examining Kambili's journey towards individualization.

Another crucial point of this analysis is “border thinking” as coined and discussed by Walter Mignolo. Border thinking as a concept helps promote subaltern ways of knowledge as opposed to colonial epistemologies. It exists in an effort to dismantle the aforementioned dominant systems being viewed as the default knowledge and helps account for liminal identities like the one Kambili goes on to experience. My analysis is significantly aided by this theory, coupled with the *Bildungsroman* reading, as using these methods of analysis lead to the emergence of a new, alternate epistemology during Kambili’s own *Bildung*, one that is focused on questioning. As this is a character-focused analysis, I will show the significance of epistemologies and border thinking as represented by a character or groups of characters. In relation to border thinking, Occidentalism becomes quite important as well, since it is the “overarching geopolitical imaginary of the modern/colonial world system to which orientalism is appended to” (Mignolo 59). Thus, the Orient is henceforth always understood only in relation to the Occident. Understanding Occidentalism is of primal importance since, according to Mignolo, it later becomes a powerful tool of the subalternization of knowledge, as it sets up the epistemological standard (59). Understanding Occidentalism and Orientalism in opposition to one another will become crucial later when discussing colonial and native epistemologies. In *Purple Hibiscus*’s case the Occident is connected to Catholic/colonial frameworks and conversely the Orient with Igbo traditions.

Adichie uses religion as a means to show the lingering effects of colonialism on identity and its formation, particularly with regard to what happens to the narrator Kambili and how her personhood manages to finally flourish when she is removed from her previous context of religious repression facilitated by her heavily Anglicized father. Although Kambili comes into her own later in the novel, as her stay at her aunt’s house allows her to experience freedom of expression and a less confined form of practicing religion, she still appears unsure of how to frame her own existence and identity, especially in light of the religious environments and their contrast that she is presented with as she returns home. The main contrast here is between her father’s violent and domineeringly Catholic household and her aunt, Ifeoma’s Igbo-Catholic family. This is all part of Kambili’s *Bildung* which in its nature and conclusion is fundamentally African, as at the end Kambili is still somewhere between childhood and maturity without any clear indication of how her life and passage into adulthood will eventually play out (Austen 221).

The Anglicized Father Figure

The patriarch of Kambili's family, her father, Eugene, is a powerful and authoritative figure in every sense: he is a successful and wealthy businessman, a pillar of his own community, providing for not just his own family but for every other member of said community. Eugene also represents a strongly Anglicized identity, which can be seen through how heavily he aligns himself and therefore, his family too, with the white missionaries who colonized Nigeria. Despite the outwardly nurturing image, he is abusive towards his own family, his violent behaviour is most often triggered when he perceives a religious misstep. This duality of Eugene is further emphasized in Hewett's argument, according to which Eugene's oppression of his family is an extended political metaphor for the unrest experienced at the time in Nigeria. Hewett further argues that the true irony lies in Eugene oppressing his family and behaving in a tyrannical way while he struggles for freedom in the larger realm of politics (89). These ideas are echoed by Andrade when discussing Eugene's attitude towards the coup which he strangely dismisses despite his rule-enforcement at home mirroring that of the military's (94). Eugene's fight for freedom and justice outside of their home makes it even more difficult for Kambili to reconcile that image of her father with the one that he exhibits whenever they suffer various acts of violence at his hands, creating an immense inner conflict in Kambili that dislodges her sense of self even more than before.

Eugene's role in the family, his relationship with religion and his behaviour towards his loved ones makes him less a pious man and more the family's very own unforgiving, relentless God who is both feared and revered as he weaponizes religion against his family to keep them in order. It is her admiration and desire for approval despite the abuse, and the wish to keep the illusive picture of the loving family intact that causes most of Kambili's detachment.

Eugene's rage though, is not exclusive to religious missteps, he also demands nothing but excellence from his children and wife. When Kambili academically underperforms according to his standards, she is later reprimanded as he reminds her of the privileges they have, and that he made possible:

“Why do you think I work so hard to give you and Jaja the best? You have to do something with all these privileges. Because God has given you much, he expects much from you. He expects perfection. I didn't have a father who sent me to the best schools. My father spent his time worshiping gods of wood and

stone. I would be nothing today but for the priests and sisters at the mission. I was a houseboy for the parish priest for two years. Yes, a houseboy. Nobody dropped me off at school. I walked eight miles every day to Nimo until I finished elementary school. I was a gardener for the priests while I attended St. Gregory's Secondary School." (37)

Here it becomes apparent that the deep-seated anger and animosity Eugene exhibits toward his father stems from his conviction that the father's traditional beliefs were causing his son's education to be neglected. He essentially ended up being raised by the missionaries and by extension colonialism. This explains his overwhelming need to conform, which later on extends to his family, above all, his children. Consequently, Eugene tolerates nothing less than perfection academically, reflecting his belief that Western education is closely tied to religion and cultural expression. Eugene seems to strongly believe that were it not for his formal Western education he could have been resigned to the same fate as his father, which he now deems lowly and far below him, since he believes that Igbo religion is only practiced by those who are ignorant and uneducated. Therefore, his children, who he views as an outward reflection of his efforts of distancing himself from all that is synonymous with Igbo, must not only receive a Western education but also perform in an outstanding manner, showcasing that they are as far away from lowly "heathenism" as possible. Thus, he sees missionary education as a way to prevent his children from participating in the religious practices he deems inferior.

The previous passage does not only pertain to Eugene's strained relationship to his cultural background but also showcases how he implicitly positions himself as an indisputable authority figure through language. While speaking about God, Eugene defines the accomplishments Kambili should strive for based on his own standards. As discussed earlier, although Eugene frames his expectations as God's will, within the Achike household, Eugene himself assumes a godlike role, one that is even more important and powerful to the family than the one they constantly pray to. The fact that Eugene would be talking about himself here is further proven when right after God's expectations for Kambili and Jaja, Eugene shifts to comparing his childhood hardships to his children's privileges. He implies with his lecture to Kambili that by providing schooling and comfort for them, they owe him not only gratitude but success as well.

Furthermore, his use of the Igbo language is significant as well, Kambili and Jaja only ever hear him speaking it when he is angry and presumably about to become violent:

Papa did not like to make his confession in Igbo, and besides, Papa said that the parish priest in Abba was not spiritual enough. That was the problem with our people, Papa told us, our priorities were wrong; we cared too much about huge church buildings and mighty statues. You would never see white people doing that. (76)

This excerpt shows Eugene's general distaste towards speaking Igbo and seeing those who mix Catholicism and Igbo traditions as less than, for instance, the parish priest who presumably speaks predominantly Igbo which in turn renders him less spiritual. His preference for making confession in English as opposed to Igbo speaks to his idea of English being the language of God and god-fearing people. Furthermore, it could also be argued that since Eugene's idea of God comes from the white missionaries, he finds the form of Catholicism adopted by other Nigerians inherently irreconcilable with God and faith, as it involves parts of their own culture, originally not present in Western Catholicism. Though Eugene fosters a special hostility for Igbo traditions, and he seems particularly offended by the thought of mixing Igbo culture with Catholicism, he generally shuns other religions as well, as is shown through one instance where he speaks disparagingly about Pentecostalism, likening it to the spreading of mushrooms (Tunca 64).

In the following passage Kambili describes a dream vision of Eugene which further connects to his use of Igbo: "I had been teetering on that boundary that divides sleep and wakefulness, imagining Papa coming to get us himself, imagining the rage in his red-tinged eyes, the burst of Igbo from his mouth" (125). It becomes clear how religion is not the only tool that Eugene makes use of when creating the atmosphere of disconnectedness and fear of their own culture. Whether or not it is a deliberate choice on his part, Igbo also becomes something of a warning sign or intimidation tool to Jaja and Kambili, which may also negatively influence their perception of Igbo culture as they associate their father's anger and discontentment with the language.

Mabura theorizes that it is this intense refusal of the reclamation of Igbo traditions that causes Eugene to eventually fall victim to his wife Beatrice's poisoning made possible with bad dibia medicine, when she decides to put an end to his abuse. As a result of this rejection, he is blind to the potential danger of something that he turns away from completely. He deems any form of traditional Igbo practice undeserving of further investigation or attention, thus, leaving himself vulnerable to the consequences they might invite (213).

Other Colonial Figures

Throughout the novel Kambili describes people in her life, other than her father, who similarly represent upholding the colonial ways. Most significantly, she mentions Father Benedict, the local Catholic priest as well as her own maternal grandfather, whom Eugene worshipped, which is in stark contrast with the treatment of his own father. As Kambili recalls her maternal grandfather for the first time in the novel, she briefly remarks on some of the characteristics that made him a foreboding person: “I did not need that photo to remember Grandfather, though. I was only ten when he died, but I remembered his almost-green albino eyes, the way he seemed to use the word sinner in every sentence” (51). His albino appearance and frequent use of the word “sinner” already foreshadow his closer alignment with whiteness, which becomes even more apparent reading the following passage:

Grandfather was very light-skinned, almost albino, and it was said to be one of the reasons the missionaries had liked him. He determinedly spoke English, always, in a heavy Igbo accent. He knew Latin, too, often quoted the articles of Vatican I, and spent most of his time at St. Paul’s, where he had been the first catechist. He had insisted that we call him Grandfather, in English, rather than Papa-Nnukwu or Nna-Ochie. (51)

Although Kambili does not say it explicitly, it is clear that her maternal grandfather’s memory is a disturbing one, in such a way that she remembers it vividly despite the fact that he died long ago. His described appearance and demeanour explain why Eugene viewed him possibly as an honorary father and not just a father-in-law, since his proximity to whiteness appealed to him more than anything. This proximity lies not only in having studied with the missionaries and being one of the first to adapt to such an extent to their customs, but it applies to his physical appearance as well, since he is described as having such light-skin that he almost looks to be albino. Eugene is his spiritual successor in all aspects, even furthering this proximity with putting on an English accent whenever speaking with white people.

Aside from her maternal grandfather, Father Benedict proves to be a similarly, if not more menacing figure, as shown through this excerpt: “His eyes were the same green shade of a snake I had seen once, slithering across the yard near the hibiscus bushes. The gardener had said it was a harmless garden snake” (77). In this passage Kambili remarks on Father Benedict who is the local priest and whom her father is on good terms with. This also means for the rest of the family that Father Benedict is not nearly as neutral of a figure as a priest

should normally be when it comes to private affairs. This is exemplified by the instance when Jaja and Kambili stay more than fifteen minutes with their grandfather and Father Benedict forces Kambili to confess something that ideally, he should not even have known about. In the quotation above it is shown that despite the gardener's claim of the snake being harmless there is still an underlying fear and uncertainty. Its presence and its elusive nature, being able to slip through cracks unnoticed, much like the remnants of colonialism is a warning. This provides a subtle image about the insidious nature of colonialism and how it lingers even after the colonies were liberated. Additionally, the snake image lends a biblical reference as well. The allusion could speak to the fact that Father Benedict and by extension other missionaries, or rather colonization on the whole, is the snake itself in the Garden of Eden. Just as the biblical snake, the missionaries and colonization gave new knowledge and patterns to the people in Nigeria, more broadly Africa, which they have been struggling to forget and unlearn ever since.

As seen in the above passages, white people or people who align themselves with the white colonisers are portrayed as threatening presences in Kambili's life. They serve to reinforce Eugene's belief that close proximity to whiteness, or Anglicization, contributes to or sometimes even equals superiority. Despite this, all of these characters have a tinge of malice in Kambili's eyes.

The only white person who is exempt from this is the tutor, who teaches Kambili during her time in the hospital.

My private tutor came the following week. (...) She was a young Reverend Sister and had not yet made her final profession. The beads of the rosary, which were twisted around the waist of her sky-colored habit, rustled as she moved. Her wispy blond hair peeked from beneath her scarf. When she held my hand and said, "Kee ka ime?" I was stunned. I had never heard a white person speak Igbo, and so well. She spoke softly in English when we had lessons and in Igbo, although not often, when we didn't. She created her own silence, sitting in it and fingering her rosary while I read comprehension passages. But she knew a lot of things; I saw it in the pools of her hazel eyes. She knew, for example, that I could move more body parts than I told the doctor, although she said nothing. (144)

The sister is the only white person Kambili ever meets who speaks Igbo which shows that instead of expecting them to speak English in her presence, she is the one who conforms to Nigerian standards. The notion of border thinking could already become relevant here, as this indicates a definite liminality in the sister's standing since she obviously belongs to a reduced group of people that Kambili never encountered. A white missionary, who could speak Igbo is a definite oddity and rarity in Kambili's eyes. Since it is established that a white person fluent in Igbo is few and far between, the sister can be seen as someone who is willing and ready to conform to native standards and does not expect other people to adapt to her. The fact that the sister creates her own silence could be a reference not just to this but also the fact that Kambili and her family are living their life silently so as to not anger Eugene, which ultimately makes him the person who imposes silence upon others. As opposed to him, the sister, as Kambili observes, is the creator and master of her own silence. While Kambili and her family suffer in a silence that is involuntary, the sister has the power to choose when to remain silent and when to speak up, which strikes Kambili as a surprising new discovery. Silence, just as speaking up can become a powerful ability when mastered properly. Importantly though, the sister's silence is not a tool to help her stay ignorant to the happenings around her, as she is aware that Kambili can move more body parts than she admits to, only she chooses not to tell anyone about it, which is also an instance that shows Kambili that this silence is controlled fully by the sister herself and not some unseen higher power.

Papa-Nnukwu and Traditional Igbo Practices

Kambili's relationship with her grandfather, Papa-Nnukwu, who is representative of Igbo traditions and actively practicing them, is spoiled and estranged by her father's control. Kambili and Jaja only get to see their grandfather for fifteen minutes at a time so as to avoid being tainted by his "heathenism", which in turn creates a barrier between them, resulting in the pair being forced to behave like polite strangers with their grandfather.

Kambili, despite Eugene's barely concealed resentment towards his own father and his insistence that Papa-Nnukwu is a heathen, is open and curious about the traditional Igbo religious practices. As she observes him, Papa-Nnukwu's faith seems to ring truer, more authentic at times, which leads to a remark upon the similarity she finds between the grotto behind St. Agnes, which is a place of worship where usually a statue is placed in a naturally formed cave, and Papa-Nnukwu's shrine which was created by him. Papa-Nnukwu's religion may come across to her in this manner as she associates religion with the strict and controlling

notions of her father's ideas. She expects there to be a fault or inherent inferiority present with the Igbo religious practices, as that is what she hears over and over again. The idea that Papa-Nnukwu's religion seems more authentic to Kambili than their own is furthered when she sees Papa-Nnukwu praying and when he is shown praying for his son as well, despite the fact that Eugene looks down upon him. This shows a kind of compassion towards him that Eugene would never even attempt to return.

This already shows Kambili's difference from her father, as she is capable of seeing similarities instead of denouncing her grandfather as a heathen. She approaches him and his traditions from a place of empathy, just like Papa-Nnukwu compassionately prays for his son regardless of his treatment of him. This is in stark contrast with Eugene who is incapable of empathy because of the hurt his father's alleged neglect caused him and the moral superiority he thinks he possesses. Kambili examines her grandfather thoroughly to see the difference that her father deems so insurmountable: "I had examined him that day, too, looking away when his eyes met mine, for signs of difference, of Godlessness. I didn't see any, but I was sure they were there somewhere. They had to be" (49). Kambili tries to look for the wrong that her father claims is there, since at this point it would feel as wrong to deny her father's word as if she denied God's. No matter how hard she tries to believe her father's words though she already knows and admits to a certain extent that there is nothing inherently different between them and Papa-Nnukwu.

Later on, a new opportunity presents itself for Kambili and Jaja to spend time with their grandfather without the surveillance of Eugene when their aunt takes them along with their cousins to a festival where a *mmuo* takes place, which is a traditional Igbo performance where masked performers play the part of spirits. Though there is a chance here for Kambili to establish a relationship with her Igbo identity, she becomes isolated once more as they watch the festival, in which she cannot participate fully. She is forced to avert her eyes and is not supposed to see such entities on account of being a young girl. Kambili experiences a different part of her identity here, which was hitherto off-limits to her. However, despite her excitement to participate, she realizes, as she does at home, in her Anglicized sphere, that this does not account for the nuances of her identity either. According to Stobie, Papa-Nnukwu's traditional ways are sympathetic to the readers but ultimately appear as flawed when his sexism reveals itself in several situations, making it clear that he sees women as marginal, only important in the context of men and if men are absent, they are seen as in need of men to rely on (424). Ultimately, while Kambili is alienated at home due to the colonial dimension of

her Catholic upbringing, the same phenomenon takes place when she realizes that the heavily patriarchal nature of Igbo traditions does not provide her the belonging she wishes for either.

To account for Kambili not finding a satisfactory place in either epistemologies, border thinking would emerge as a response to predominant worldviews to challenge them as they neglect the experiences of those who do not happen to fit the original frameworks. Kambili is a good example here as her *Bildung* is stifled both by the heavily Anglicized identity which is forced upon her and the Igbo traditions that do not offer space for her either (Mignolo 67). Kambili is stuck in a certain liminality as on the one hand, the Igbo religion and traditions would not let her fully develop her identity due to sexism; on the other hand, the fanatic Catholicism displayed by her father also stifles her and prohibits any development. For development to take place, Kambili needs space to come to her own unique conclusions about her experiences, while also inevitably deliberating and questioning the teachings and rules of her father. This simply cannot take place in her home since everyone in Eugene's household is under strict supervision with a carefully planned out daily schedule, which plays an integral part in controlling their individualization.

Wallace proposes in her analysis the use of the term and concept "cultural hermeneutics" coined by Mercy Amba Oduyoye. Oduyoye's hermeneutics involve a "critique and embrace" (467) of oppressive traditions, recognizing that no culture is wholly good or entirely negative. Wallace's discussion of the concept parallels Mignolo's ideas of border thinking greatly as Wallace goes on to argue that affirmation and critique of both Igbo culture and Catholicism co-exist in a post-colonial context with the help of "cultural hermeneutics" that would challenge both systems (467). Similarly, Mignolo's border thinking emphasizes the epistemic spaces formed at the intersections of dominant and marginalized worldviews. Both of these interpretations leave space and allow for the critique and reconfiguration of hegemonic systems without wholly abandoning them. These concepts examined together help describe how *Purple Hibiscus* critiques both patriarchal Igbo culture and colonial Christianity while affirming their redemptive possibilities.

Questioning as a New Epistemology

Ifeoma, Kambili and Jaja's aunt, who is a university professor, and a widow represents something entirely different from what they experience at home, where their mother barely talks and they all have to praise Eugene or more importantly, behave as he expects them to, in order to preserve peace.

As opposed to this, all of Ifeoma's children are active members of the family with their own responsibilities but even more importantly, their own thoughts that they are allowed to express freely. Ifeoma's home is a great juxtaposition to Eugene's in multiple ways. Although their living conditions are poorer, they are a firm unit that can rely on one another for help and support, which is remarkably foreign to Kambili, who is used to the physically comfortable but emotionally volatile environment of her own home. The atmosphere Kambili finds here gives her the space and the freedom to develop that she does not have at home where she must carefully consider each of her words and actions constantly to garner approval, or worse, to avoid the potential violence of her father.

The freedom of expression Ifeoma's children exhibit can be seen best through Amaka, the eldest daughter, who is rebellious and desires a clean break from colonialist traditions that have become engrained in Nigerian society. She expresses this on multiple occasions, always advocating for more radical plans of action than what would be most feasible to others. This is clearly shown in the excerpt below that sees Amaka questioning the custom of picking English names for confirmation but never Nigerian ones. She is being pressed by her mother and Father Amadi to choose her own instead of arguing:

“But what's the point, then?” Amaka said to Father Amadi, as if she had not heard her mother. “What the church is saying is that only an English name will make your confirmation valid. ‘Chiamaka’ says God is beautiful. ‘Chima’ says God knows best, ‘Chiebuka’ says God is the greatest. Don't they all glorify God as much as ‘Paul’ and ‘Peter’ and ‘Simon’?” (177)

Amaka's initial attitude towards Kambili also reflects her more radical thinking, according to which she is more enlightened than her passive and, in her eyes, spoiled cousin. Amaka's beliefs and differences are shown through her hobbies as well. She primarily listens to indigenous musicians who are, in her own words, “culturally conscious” (141) and through her cousin's paintings and artwork, Kambili gets a glimpse of an idea which is completely new to her. Amaka turns her back on everything that is attributed to the Occident. While this may prove very similar to Eugene's attitude, who treats ideas viewed as Oriental in a similarly exclusionary manner, there is one key difference between the two. Amaka never ceases to question, not only what she views as limiting but everything that surrounds her. Eugene, however, eradicates questions as a whole. Though there are moments in the novel where Eugene could be seen trying to reconcile his actions and his morals, these episodes of self-interrogation all end with the same conclusion. This shows that although questioning can

begin to point at new ideas and help develop a new way of thinking, this is only made possible if it is coupled with openness and the inclination to change. Eugene could never reach a new conclusion because he firmly believes that the end justifies the means and he is also most probably too self-righteous and vain to admit, even to himself, that his morals and rules are flawed. As Kambili spends more time with Amaka she encounters one of her paintings that shows her a new interpretation of biblical figures: “The watercolor painting of a woman with a child was much like a copy of the Virgin and Child oil painting that hung in Papa’s bedroom, except the woman and the child in Amaka’s painting were dark-skinned” (85). Reading Kambili’s narration, multiple instances arise where she mentions the associated attributes of the God that she has been taught to believe in. She describes God to have “wide white hands” (93) and a “rumbling voice British-accented” (123). This way Christ immediately conjures up the image of a blond man in her mind. This speaks to Kambili’s experience of Catholicism and her family’s religion as dictated by her father, which inevitably has colonialist and white ideas attached to it. Therefore, it comes as a surprise to her that Amaka would portray the Virgin and her Child as dark-skinned, whereas Kambili never ventured as far as to think that God or any saints could look anything remotely like them. This image of God and other biblical figures later returns when Kambili spends time with Father Amadi: “I see Christ in their faces, in the boys’ faces.” I looked at him. I could not reconcile the blond Christ hanging on the burnished cross in St. Agnes and the sting-scarred legs of those boys” (123). In this excerpt the idea that Kambili has encountered before when looking at Amaka’s painting is reinforced, namely, that white people are not the only ones who can or should be seen as godly. Although here Kambili expresses more explicitly her difficulty to reconcile the coexisting images in her mind.

Amaka provides somewhat of a mirror to Kambili, who internally makes observations that would lead her to similar questions that her cousin poses with ease, confidence and a defiant spirit, but stays silent instead because in her experience, the price of questioning authority is generally too great. Amaka’s stance and behaviour points at a pattern that emerges further when looking at her family’s Igbo-Catholic beliefs and Father Amadi’s approach to his vocation as well.

Father Amadi is introduced as the local priest in Nsukka, with whom Ifeoma’s family is on good terms. In contrast with the other priest, Father Benedict, who appears earlier in the novel, he perfectly personifies the blend of Igbo culture and Catholicism. He is shown to be personable and caring towards his congregation members and ends up playing a key role in

encouraging Kambili's development by urging her to speak up and participate where otherwise she would not have done so.

Ifeoma's family represents the more relaxed religious stance that Father Amadi shares as well, which allows them to engage with Igbo culture within their faith. Father Amadi sees his calling mainly in helping and guiding the community rather than a chance at becoming an authority figure who would instill fear in those he is supposed to guide:

"Why did you become a priest?"(...)

"I wanted to be a doctor at first. Then I went to church once and heard this priest speak and I was changed forever," Father Amadi said.

"Oh."

"I was joking," Father Amadi glanced at me. He looked surprised I did not realize that it was a joke. "It's a lot more complicated than that, Kambili. I had many questions, growing up. The priesthood came closest to answering them." I wondered what questions they were and if Father Benedict, too, had those questions. (123)

In the above excerpt Kambili poses a question that is born out of natural curiosity, but she regrets it immediately as she supposes it was silly to even ask, when he too must have gotten the "same call" as everyone else she has met who is involved in the Catholic Church. Father Amadi plays into Kambili's expectations for a moment but then states that becoming a priest came closest to answering the many questions he had which highlights the same theme of questioning that could be seen previously through Amaka and her aversion to authority.

"You believe in those boys," I blurted out.

"Yes," he said, watching me. "And they don't need me to believe in them as much as I need it for myself."

"Why?"

"Because I need to believe in something that I never question." (150)

The idea of questioning is normalized through Father Amadi here. His statement about the children highlights that even as a priest God and faith are not totally indisputable forces. Questioning becomes something that is not sinful or abnormal but a natural process that even a priest who devoted his life to God can go through. Thus, not just through Father Amadi but also Amaka, the act of questioning, which Kambili learns and becomes comfortable with,

emerges as a new epistemology which can accommodate the nuances of Kambili's newfound identity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, though to the readership Kambili's journey may seem unfinished or unresolved in some respects, observed from the point of view of epistemological development and identity formation she makes definitive progress. By looking at her character growth through the lens of border thinking and while also understanding *Purple Hibiscus* to be an African *Bildungsroman*, a new perspective is gained.

Kambili starts out as a shy girl, stifled by her abusive home life. Her only wish is to please her authoritarian father, who carefully maps out his children's lives and daily routines in order for them to achieve greatness, and also less obviously, to keep them in order. This atmosphere of utter silence and obsession with Catholic perfection that the Achike family is enveloped in is what completely stunts Kambili's growth in the beginning of the novel.

As the story progresses, so does Kambili. She manages to establish a closer relationship with her estranged paternal grandfather, which leads her to discover more about her Igbo cultural roots which are strictly and consistently shunned by Eugene. Although she is open to Papa-Nnukwu's traditionalist ways, she becomes disillusioned with them as well, as the patriarchal nature of Igbo culture also turns out to exclude her. Left in a liminal space between her Catholic upbringing and Igbo heritage Kambili is even more isolated in her multi-layered identity than before.

The space for development is only provided when she is living with her aunt and her cousins, where Amaka's outlook and inquisitive demeanour coupled with Father Amadi's relaxed and open views on Catholicism mixed with Igbo religion show her, that there is room for the in-between nature of her slowly developing sense of self. This interpretation of identity is better understood using Mignolo's border thinking which helps account for these delicate nuances. Moreover, she learns that the questioning Amaka and Father Amadi exhibit, and practice is conducive to a continuous opportunity to change and grow as she encounters new and unknown experiences in life that leave her questioning but eventually answering those questions as well.

Ultimately, Kambili reaches a new epistemology in the form of questioning. It proves to be a fitting alternative knowledge system after her encounters with Catholic teachings and

colonial heritage imposed on her by her father, and the Igbo traditions as shown through Papa-Nnukwu. This epistemology provides Kambili with the opportunity of growing and changing. Questioning is not strict and set in stone as the other two epistemologies (Catholicism and Igbo traditions) are, since questioning itself is a never-ending, ever-changing cycle of certainty and uncertainty, forming an opinion but then allowing that to be changed when it seems to lose its value or relevance. Ultimately, Kambili manages to find her footing despite situating herself in a new epistemology that few others follow aside from her but which also gives her the power to adjust it to her constantly evolving selfhood.

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