

2023-25 syllabus  
for exams in 2023, 2024, 2025

# ***Purple Hibiscus***

## Cambridge iGCSE Study Guide

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# Teacher's Introduction

This study supports the study of *Purple Hibiscus* as a set text for Cambridge iGCSE Literature in English (2023–2025 syllabus). This guide can be used as a general revision and study aid, or to support the whole class.

## How to Use this Study Guide

The guide begins with a focus on cultural and historical contexts, as well as examining some of the literary contexts which have influenced Adichie, such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

### Remember!

Always check the exam board website for new information, including changes to the specification and sample assessment material.

The guide provides: a plot overview; detailed analysis of the major characters with related activities; section-by-section analysis of the text; important quotations and extract analysis; discussion prompts; and a range of active learning tasks for students. Throughout, there are notes on cultural contexts including information on the writer, her influences, and the country of Nigeria, and the setting of *Purple Hibiscus* as AO2 is a key focus in Paper 1 Section, where *Purple Hibiscus* is examined. In addition to a detailed textual analysis, the study guide will explore how Adichie presents her themes, including religious intolerance, politics, violence, family relationships, and the link between nature and freedom. The resource also provides sections on Adichie's distinctive style and use of language, the importance of various settings in the novel, and other patterns of imagery and structure.

Activities are used to help students develop written responses that combine critical analysis with sensitive evaluation of the ways in which readers interpret texts, essential qualities of students pushing for the higher levels. Some creative response tasks have been included to support students in exploring the text and empathising with characters.

While *Purple Hibiscus* may present many challenges as a text, the guide includes differentiated assessment for learning tasks and support sheets to help learners of all abilities access the text. Several activities provide a quick check on students' comprehension of the non-linear narrative at the end of each study section. For the purpose of stretch and challenge, some activities require students' sensitive exploration of patterns of language and structure. These tasks will enable higher-ability candidates to access the higher grades. The use of a non-chronological narrative and parallels throughout the text provides opportunities for students to explore the novel in greater depth.

Some generic essay questions have been provided which can be used and adapted for individual and group needs. Some essay tips have been provided along with some indicative content for these questions.

Key Features	Section References
The key events	➤ Plot
Key characters and why they are important, their characteristics, characterisation techniques used by the author and relationships in the novel	➤ Characterisation
Detailed commentaries on key themes, literary techniques, interpretations, contextual influence and important quotations for every chapter	➤ Textual Summary and Analysis
The author's choices of language, structure and form across the novel as a whole and how these choices affect the reader	➤ Language ➤ Structure
Analyses of key ideas, themes and settings across the novel, and why they are important	➤ Symbolism ➤ Themes ➤ Setting
Key historical, cultural and social contextual points and how they influence the novel as a whole	➤ Contexts
Essay questions and tips on how to approach the essays	➤ Exam Practice

The edition of *Purple Hibiscus* used is: Adichie, C N, *Purple Hibiscus*, Harper Perennial: London, 2005

All illustrations are courtesy of Lewis Gilliard.

T Kenney, May 2022



## Specification Information

### Key Details

- *Purple Hibiscus* appears on the 2023–2025 Cambridge IGCSE syllabus as part of the English Language course.
- Paper 1 is 1 hour 30 minutes long
- It is made up of Poetry and Prose with two questions on two texts: one poem and one prose text.
- It is worth 50 marks
- It is externally assessed

Students will be examined on their ability to meet the following assessment objectives:

Assessment Objective	Description
AO1	Show detailed knowledge and understanding of the content of literary texts in the specified forms (drama, poetry and prose), supported by reference to the texts.
AO2	Understand and analyse meanings of literary texts and their contexts, and identify key messages and surface meanings to show deeper awareness of ideas and themes.
AO3	Recognise and appreciate ways in which writers use language, style and form to create and shape meanings and effects.
AO4	Communicate a sensitive and informed personal response to literary texts.

Note: *Purple Hibiscus* could also be used for Component 5 (Coursework) if not chosen for Component 4.

### Approaching the Text

- There will be elements of Kambili's experience which may be familiar to students, such as the experience or awareness of such lives in this country, particularly those strains of family relationships.
- The book presents how it can be difficult to see beyond the public face of a community to be a religious and moral man, bravely standing up against government and doing charitable works for others.
- However, in his home, Eugene is every bit as much of a dictator as the politician he is over the family is totalitarian and he turns to violence when his wife and children do not do his wishes.
- Violence begets violence, as Kambili's mother is driven to take drastic action to protect her children.
- Throughout reading, students will explore the constructs of duty and honour, and when speaking up or acting out when required.
- There are shocking elements in the novel which, nevertheless, holds the promise of change through the courage of trying new things, just as the purple hibiscus of the title is a symbol of nature.

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# Contexts

## About the Writer

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was born in Nigeria in 1977. She attended medical school in Nigeria for two years before emigrating to the United States. In 2002 and 2003, she published a range of short stories, accrued writing prizes and was shortlisted for the Orange Fiction Prize. She graduated with a MFA from John Hopkins' University. She spends time in both America and Nigeria. Many of her stories and novels are based in Nigeria.

Adichie grew up in a liberal and intellectual family who allowed her free expression. This is in stark contrast to the oppression experienced in Kambili's household.

Adichie drew on her experience and knowledge of Catholicism to provide the contrasting portrayals of Father Benedict and Father Amadi. She recalls her father sharing stories of the first missionaries arriving in Abba in the late 1930s. Until that point, traditionalist ways had influenced daily life but had never been explicitly taught. Afterwards, Catholicism became institutionalised through churches and schools.

Adichie's hometown of Enugu, her adopted town of Nsukka, where she grew up when her father worked at the university, and her ancestral town of Abba all serve as key settings in *Purple Hibiscus*.

While not directly affected by the violence, Adichie's values and ideas were shaped by a country embattled by tyranny and freedom, order and chaos.

Simultaneously, efforts were being made to reinvigorate national tradition and self-worth to combat years of colonial influence.

## Further Reading

- Adichie presents her views on women in Africa. Available at [www.bbc.com/news/11186-BBC](http://www.bbc.com/news/11186-BBC)
- Online activities to support study of *Purple Hibiscus*. [zzed.uk/11186-online-activities](http://www.zzed.uk/11186-online-activities)
- Postcolonial interpretations of *Purple Hibiscus*: 'Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: The Paradoxes of Postcolonial Indigenism'. Available at [zzed.uk/11186-postcolonial](http://www.zzed.uk/11186-postcolonial)

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## Social, Political and Historical Context

Nigeria has been beset with political and cultural upheavals for much of its modern history. Britain had control and administrative power in Nigeria from the late nineteenth century to 1960, when Nigeria gained independence. Through colonialism, English had been established as the language of administration and education. Its widespread use was also encouraged by the work of Christian missionaries, who converted a significant proportion of the population to Catholicism. Later, Nigerian communities embraced other forms of Christianity such as Pentecostal churches, but English remained the dominant language of worship. Today, 40% of the population are Christian.



Despite securing independence in 1960, the Nigerian government was lacking in stability. Coups took place as rival factions struggled to take power.

Nigeria is made up of 36 states and at least 250 ethnic groups, the largest being the Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa. The Igbo (pronounced 'i-bo') are in Nigeria, with a population concentrated in the south of the country. Following the Biafran war and a politically sanctioned massacre of northern Igbo, Ojukwu, Nigerian leader, declared the north the Republic of Biafra and a civil war tore the region apart until 1970. Problems still arose, mainly as a result of the fight for control of oil resources, which became endemic. For many Nigerians, unemployment and near

Violence has erupted at various points since 1970 as parties have struggled for power. In 1993, with a third unsuccessful coup in 1990 resulting in bloodshed. The election of General Sani Abacha from 1993 until his death in 1998. In 1993, former Defence Minister Abacha promptly dissolved all existing political institutions which had some semblance of democracy. *Purple Hibiscus* takes 'Big Oga' as a fictionalised representation of General Abacha.

In 1994/5, following a strike in the Nigerian oil industry, Abacha essentially 'closed' the country. Actions while in power did much to undermine Nigeria's infrastructure. Adichie reflects this in her novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, where she faced by the general population, such as the fuel and water shortages. Ifeoma's father was global condemnation of the Abacha regime following the execution of writers and human rights activists, leading to Nigeria's suspension from the Commonwealth. Nwankiti Ogechi draws parallels with Saro-Wiwa, while Ade Coker's brutal murder of who fought for democracy.

### Active Learning Tasks

1. When did Nigeria become independent?
2. Which ethnic group does Kambili belong to?
3. Why do most Nigerian writers write in English?
4. Why are there a large number of Christians in Nigeria today?
5. Why might the Igbo population be wary of a central government?
6. What evidence in the novel suggests that 'Big Oga' may be linked to General Abacha?

### Extension Task

In her semi-autobiographical novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie explores the contrasting experiences of those caught up in the Biafran conflict.

1. Find out what you can about Biafra and the civil war in the 1960s.

Eugene, Beatrice and Ifeoma would have grown up during the fight for Biafra.

2. How might this influence their views on government?

Think about:

- Eugene's refusal to be intimidated by a dictatorship
- Ifeoma's outspoken behaviour on campus and political openness with her father

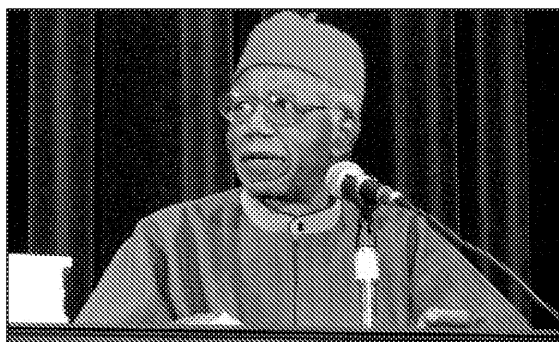
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## Literary Influences – Chinua Achebe



Chinua Achebe

Chinua Achebe was one of Nigeria's most famous novelists. His first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, is a story of a traditional culture and the break of that culture. Tradition becomes eroded when Western religion is introduced to the region.

Adichie frequently cites Achebe, comparing the two male protagonists, Okonkwo and Eugene:

Chief Okonkwo	
Well-known, honourable and favoured in his village	Wealthy factory owner Respected by the community
Physically strong (was a wrestler)	Morally strong – supports human rights
Ashamed of father – has done well despite father's 'lazy' attitude	Eugene has disowned his father
Killing of son of rival tribe shocks reader	Punishments of Jaja, Kambili and shocking
Dominates wives – beats one violently for not preparing a meal	Dominates a silent Beke miscarriages
Shows care for wife Ekwefi – follows her on search	Shows remorse after violence
Foolish and impulsive. Quick to anger and violence	Violent anger. Displaces responsibility for Ade's attack on Kambili
Okonkwo's response disappoints by joining missionaries	Jaja disappoints by turning to missionaries
Upholds standards of the tribe	Eugene feels responsible through <i>The Standard</i>

In Achebe's novel, the chief Okonkwo is the colonial influence, stating 'He has put a knife between us and our land' (p. 176).

### Other Parallels

In *Things Fall Apart*, Chief Okonkwo makes a pronouncement: 'No matter how proud I am, I am unable to rule my woman and my children... he was not really a man.'

Ironically, despite thinking he is modern and civilised, Eugene has retained patriarchal values entrenched in the past.

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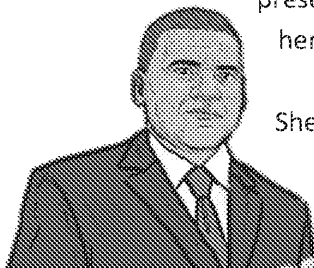




# Plot

## Overview of Narrative

The narrative charts the development of Kambili Achike. Kambili presents the breakdown of the illusion of peace within her household.



She describes her father Eugene as a wealthy man and of fervent belief manifested in violent and cruel ways and psychological punishments for the perceived sins of his wife and mother.

The novel begins *medias res*, at a dramatic turning point. Jaja rebels against her father by refusing to take Communion at Palm Sunday Mass, publicly shaming Eugene, who is seen as a pillar of the church and the community. Kambili is in a state of shock. Her brother compounds his transgression by openly defying his father and explaining his actions in terms his father finds blasphemous.

The reader is horrified to learn that Eugene takes out his anger on his passive wife Beatrice and shares in Kambili's shock as she comes to realise the beatings are regular and have contributed to her mother's miscarriages in the past.

The central section of the novel takes the reader back to a time when Kambili and her family stay with their Aunt Ifeoma and her children in Nsukka.



Here, Kambili experiences a markedly different version of Catholicism. Aunt Ifeoma's Catholicism is liberal and loving. Kambili's cousin can voice his opinions freely. It is here that Kambili has the opportunity to see her grandfather, Papa-Nnukwu, despite her father's prohibition. Kambili experiences love for the first time as she develops strong feelings for her cousin. She also meets a local priest who has encouraged her to value herself.

With each return to home, the cycle of violence continues and escalates. It reaches a point where Beatrice eventually poisons Eugene and succeeds. Jaja claims responsibility for the crime and is imprisoned, while Aunt Ifeoma takes her family to America following an unfair dismissal from Nnamdi University for voicing anti-government views.

The novel ends with some optimism, albeit voiced with caution. Jaja is due to be released, is embittered, has not been defeated by life in prison. Beatrice had descended into a complete breakdown but is showing some signs of improvement. Kambili at least has developed a belief that a better future awaits them all.

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## Timeline

While Adichie is vague about precise dates, it is still useful to attempt to organise chronologically, to gain a sense of the escalating tensions and violence, both in Kambili's wider community.

1994	Spring/Lent	p. 23 p. 24	Beatrice's (Mama's) Military dictatorship
	A few weeks later	p. 34	Beatrice has a miscarriage
	End of spring	p. 37 p. 39	Ade Coker arrested Kambili comes second in school
	Summer	p. 46	Papa visits Kambili's school
	Christmas	p. 52 pp. 53–102	Kambili comes first in school Visit to Abba (ancestors)
1995	New Year	pp. 103–104	Return to Enugu
	Epiphany (6 <sup>th</sup> January)	pp. 104–108	Attend confession at church
	7 <sup>th</sup> January	pp. 110–190	Kambili and Jaja go to school Papa-Nnukwu brought back
	14 <sup>th</sup> January	pp. 192–197	Return to Enugu Jaja asks for key to room Papa scolds their father and 'walking in sin'
	Spring	p. 206 pp. 209–216	Ade Coker killed by Eugene (Papa) beaten
	Lent (weeks before Easter)	pp. 216–253 lengthened p. 290	Kambili with Ifeoma due to political unrest Back in Enugu, Mama
	Friday before Palm Sunday	p. 247	Mama comes to Nsima She has suffered and hands of Papa
	Saturday before Palm Sunday	p. 252	Mama brings the children
	Palm Sunday	pp. 252–253	Jaja refuses to take children
	Good Friday	pp. 260–261	Ifeoma sacked from school Jaja insists that he
	2 weeks after Easter	p. 286 p. 288 p. 290 p. 291	Papa dies Return to Enugu Mama confesses to Jaja is arrested
Three years pass			
1998	Spring	pp. 296–297	Jaja is due to be released 'Big Oga' is dead and
Novel ends			

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# Characterisation

## Eugene Achike (Papa)

Papa is a dominant and aggressive presence in the household. His observance of religious and doctrines borders on fanatical. He dismisses his Igbo heritage as primitive and refuses to allow his children to speak the Igbo language in the house. He expects perfection and has a tight control over all activities, from servants' duties to timetables dictating how Kambili and Jaja should spend both study and 'leisure' time.

Punishments for disobeying Papa's rules are violent and physical, as well as traumatic for his victims. He routinely beats his wife and, on hearing Kambili has been spending time with her grandfather (Papa-Nnukwu), whose traditional beliefs he disapproves of, he beats her feet. A climactic point of the narrative is when Kambili defies her father in an attempt to protect the picture that is her only remaining memory of her deceased, estranged Papa-Nnukwu. Papa responds with ferocious beating that leaves her hospitalised and close to death.

Despite his cruelty, Adichie is careful not to present Papa as a simplistic monster. The same man, whose devotion to Western religion and ideas leads him to abuse his power, is also a pillar of the local church and community, lauded for his charity and generosity. He works tirelessly to promote the rights of those denied a voice by the military dictatorship through his position as proprietor of *The Standard*. It may be argued Papa himself has been a victim of colonialism.

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**Active Learning Task: First Impressions: Eugene (Papa)**

Reread pages 4–7. What do Eugene's first actions and words reveal about his character? Complete the table below.

**Eugene: First Impressions Reader Response Grid**

Textual Evidence	Reader Response
'Papa flung his heavy missal across the room' (p. 3)	
'Papa always sat in the front pew for Mass' (p. 4)	<i>wants to be seen as close to the altar This could be seen to contradict</i>
'He was the first to receive communion. He would hold his eyes shut so hard that his face tightened into a grimace, and then he would stick his tongue out as far as it would go' (p. 4)	
'Papa making the biggest donations... paying for the cartons of communion wine, for the new ovens... for the new wing of St. Agnes hospital' (p. 5)	
'Papa said modesty was very important' (p. 5)	<i>He believes in humility.</i>
'"Jaja, you did not go to communion," Papa said quietly, almost a question.' (p. 6)	
'...he banged his leather bound missal, with the red and green ribbons peeking out, down on the dining table...' (p. 6)	
'"It is the body of our Lord." Papa's voice was low, very low. His face looked swollen already...' (p. 6)	
'Papa looked around the room as if searching for proof that something had fallen from the ceiling, something he never thought would fall' (p. 7)	
'He picked up the missal and flung it across the room, towards Jaja' (p. 7)	<i>The violent energy of the word side of Papa.</i>
'Jaja did not move. Papa swayed from side to side.' (p. 7)	

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## Kambili Achike

Kambili is the 15-year-old narrator of the story. We see events through her eyes, and as she grows up, she develops a wider understanding of what is happening in her family and society.

At the start of the story, she is an obedient, religious girl who is in awe of her father. She is shy and somewhat withdrawn, as she struggles to find her own identity and voice. Although she is clearly an intelligent young woman, she has a limited awareness of Nigerian culture and politics.

After spending time with her aunt and cousins, Kambili learns there are other ways of living in faith and showing love which contrast with the extreme and punitive version of Catholicism practised by her father.

While Kambili does not demonstrate any outright defiance of her older brother Jaja, she nevertheless seems to quietly rebel against her father's regime.



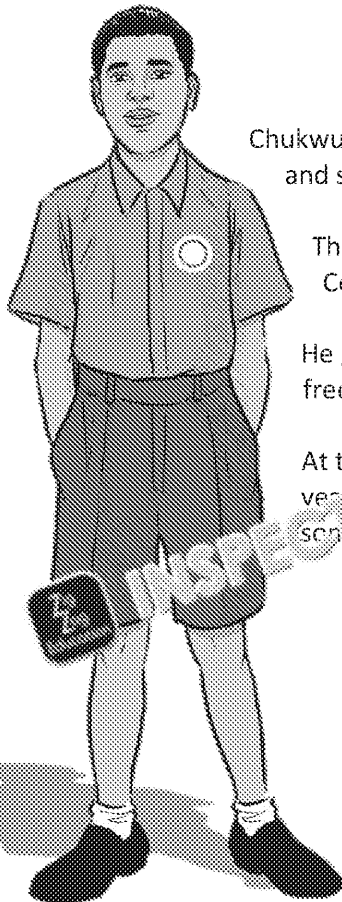
## Jaja (Chukwuka) Achike

Chukwuka, or Jaja as he is known by his family throughout the novel, is a strong and sensitive young man aged around 17 during the 1960s.

The novel begins with his open defiance of his father's religious beliefs by skipping Communion on Palm Sunday.

He grows independent during his time in Nsukka, where he gains the freedom to protect his mother, claiming responsibility for her actions.

At the end of the novel, Jaja's release from prison is a sign of his liberation. His time in jail has toughened him but he remains optimistic for the future.



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## Beatrice Achike (Mama)

Mother to Kambili and Jaja, and wife to Eugene, Beatrice is a quiet and somewhat figure in the household. Kambili notices that 'there was so much she did not mind'. Her emotional warmth provides a sharp contrast to Eugene's tyranny.

She depends on Eugene to support her, and it takes repeated abuse of her children, a series of miscarriages brought on by Eugene's violence before she acts. Eventually she is driven to poison Eugene. Jaja takes responsibility for the crime, and she descends into a depression and nervous breakdown, although there is some suggestion that she will improve with time.

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## Aunty Ifeoma

Eugene's sister Ifeoma stands in complete contrast to him. She is an academic lecturer at the University of Nigeria, where she speaks freely and fosters intellectual curiosity in her household.

Her faith combines Catholic rites with African traditions, and, unlike Eugene, she remains close to her father, who continues to perform traditional ceremonies in her household.

She is resourceful as she has had to raise her children following his death. Although Ifeoma and Eugene are often at odds, theirs is a more loving and happy relationship than Eugene's.

Despite Eugene's claims that she is too liberal, Ifeoma is a woman of moral integrity and strength.

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## Father Amadi

Father Amadi plays a pivotal role in Kambili's emotional development. Part of the reason he is the opposite of the oppressive Father Benedict Eugene so admires. Young, Nigerian, and a fan of the young people of Nsukka through football and athletics, he shows Kambili that God can be honoured through enjoying life and valuing yourself and others.

It is unsurprising that Kambili develops strong feelings for him, and, in his tactful love, he assures her that she will be loved in her life and that she is worthy.

### Active Learning Task: Independent Research

Look up the interactions between Kambili and Father Amadi listed below. For each, consider his actions and dialogue, and how he supports Kambili's growth.

Interaction	What is shown by Amadi's actions or words
First impressions p. 137	
Kambili's response to Father Amadi p. 38	
The outing pp. 175–180	
His feelings for Kambili p. 220	
His encouragement p. 239	
Kambili's development p. 270	
The pilgrimage to Aokpe pp. 274–276	
His legacy p. 308	

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## Papa-Nnukwu

Father of Eugene and Ifeoma, and grandfather to Kambili, Papa-Nnukwu is a loving man who has been denied a part in Kambili's and Jaja's lives because of Eugene's refusal to tolerate him. Eugene believes that Papa-Nnukwu's way of life has damned him and will taint all his children with indelible sin.

Papa-Nnukwu is a key part of the story. Kambili spends time with him at Auntie Ifeoma's house. His knowledge. Moved by his death, she treasures a picture of him. When Eugene disapproves of the brutal punishment which hospitalises her and precipitates her mother's decision to leave him.

### Active Learning Task: Language and Character

Read the extract below and consider how Adichie presents the character of Papa-Nnukwu. You should comment on:

- ~ physical description
- ~ Papa-Nnukwu's actions (consider the writer's choice of verbs)
- ~ use of dialogue

Papa-Nnukwu was sitting on a low stool on the verandah, bowls of food in front of him. He rose as we came in. A wrapper was slung across his body and a white singlet now browned by age and yellowed at the armpits.

'Neke! Neke! Neke! Kambili and Jaja have come to greet their old father!' he said. He stooped with age, it was easy to see how tall he once had been. He shook his head at me. I pressed myself to him just a moment longer, gently, holding my breath against the unpleasant smell of cassava that clung to him.

'Come and eat,' he said, gesturing to the raffia mat. The enamel bowls of soup and watery soup bereft of chunks of fish or meat. It was custom to ask, but I never learned to say no – his eyes twinkled with mischief.

'No, thank sir,' we said. We sat on the wood bench next to him. I leaned my head against the wooden window shutters which had parallel openings running across them.

'I hear that you came in yesterday,' he said. His lower lip quivered, as if he was crying. Sometimes I understood him a moment or two after he spoke because his speech had none of the anglicised intonations that ours had.

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## Minor Characters

### Father Benedict

Father Benedict represents the oppression of colonial power. He denigrates the Igbo by refusing to allow Igbo hymns in the main part of the Mass. It is clear that he has been indoctrinated and shows the damage of institutionalised religion.

### Ade Coker

Ade Coker is an example of a man who will bravely follow his convictions, regardless of what will place him in. Ultimately, he pays for his commitment to the truth with his life.

He also provides the reader with the opportunity to see another side of Eugene. He provides support for him as Editor, even in the face of government threats and intimidation. Ade is killed by the booby trap bomb.

### Amaka, Okorafor, and Ifeoma

Aunty Ifeoma and her children provide parallels and contrasts to the stifled lives of Kambili and Jaja. They speak freely, laugh and embrace their Nigerian heritage and Catholicism with energy and enthusiasm. Amaka, in particular, provides a role model for Kambili. She is streetwise, politically and culturally aware (she introduces Kambili to the music of Nigerian singer Fela Kuti, pictured right) and, although initially hostile to the arrival of her wealthy, spoilt cousins, helps Kambili learn to stand up for herself and become independent.

Amaka is reluctant to migrate to the United States as Aunty Ifeoma searches for work and shows a commitment to her country which echoes Eugene's moral codes: 'What do you mean, leave? Why do we have to run away from our own country? Why can't we fix it?' (p. 232). It is interesting that, while she abhors Uncle Eugene's abuse of his family, she does attempt to see him as a victim of stress and misguided loyalties to colonial powers.



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# Textual Summary and Analysis

## Significance of the Title: *Purple Hibiscus*

The colour purple can have a variety of meanings. In the Catholic Church, it links to Advent. It is a colour of sorrow and penitence, and suggests a time of reflection. It also has connotations of freedom and liberation. The symbolism of the 'purple hibiscus' is discussed in the 'Symbolism' section of the guide.

When examining the plot or narrative of a text, a few simple questions should be asked:

- What is happening?
- In what order are events presented (narrative structure)?
- How does the writer hold the reader's interest?

The short opening section of the novel can be discussed in detail, as it can be seen to encapsulate the book's themes.

## Breaking Gods – Palm Sunday

It is interesting that, in the section of the novel involving the destruction of faith, the pantheon of traditional Nigerian gods. It also indicates that the infallibility of Papa Ike can be demolished. Jaja's non-participation in the Holy Communion, which can be seen as a mortal sin, is not only a defiance of the Christian God and his Catholic beliefs, but also of the family as God and spiritual leader of their home.

Adichie makes specific reference to the liturgical calendar. Palm Sunday is the day when Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey. While a moment of celebration, it presages the torture and suffering ahead. There are some parallels as there is a cause for celebration as Jaja asserts his independence and suffering ahead.

The novel opens at a turning point for the family. Jaja defies Papa for the first time, as a microcosm of the breakdown of Nigerian society, the opening section of the novel is a condensed presentation of the issues of the book. With great economy, Adichie introduces narrative themes from the very first sentence.

*Things started to fall apart at home* when my brother, Jaja, did not go to church. He flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the shelf.

The opening sentence of the novel is an excellent narrative hook. The first thing we learn is why the family is falling apart.

The phrase 'things falling apart' is also an intertextual reference to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, which charts the disintegration of Nigerian traditions and culture. The main character of *Things Fall Apart* is Okonkwo, who is a powerful man who is also a victim of colonialism.

In contrast to Achebe's narrative, Adichie's text is based in the 'home'. This highlights the importance of domestic themes. The opening section of the novel is a microcosm of the breakdown of Nigerian society. Conversely, it could be argued that the importance of domestic themes is highlighted.

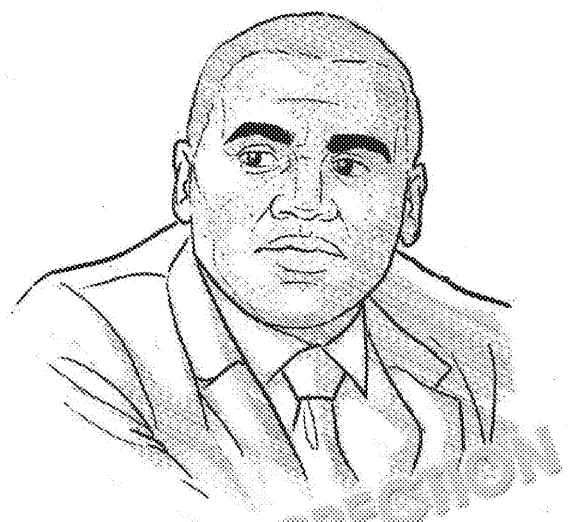
The references to 'missal' and 'communion' indicate the importance of religion in the novel. It suggests that a religious man would use his prayer book in a violent attack on his son. The fragile state of Beatrice, Kambili and Jaja who are repressed in their own home.

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Adichie chooses her words with care. 'étagère' indicates the high social status of the family, while also revealing the influence of European décor over traditional Nigerian aesthetics.

The opening section reveals the narrator's religious fervor. Kambili notes his religious fervor when making ash crosses on the wall during the Ash Wednesday mass to his 20th birthday meals.

The local priest holds him up as a model of a 'usually referred to the father' (p. 11). He is revealed to be a doctor and using his paper to write letters even in the face of lost advertisements.

### Discussion Prompts

1. What are your **first impressions** of Mama/Beatrice, Jaja and Kambili, the narrator? How do they interact with Papa/Eugene and what does that suggest about each of them?
2. What is a **love sip** and what does it reveal about Papa?
3. The book begins with this **flashback**. Is this an effective narrative device? What does it reveal about the narrator's grasp of the significance of events?

### Active Learning Tasks

1. Describe the **atmosphere** in the home created in this first chapter. Give quotes to support your answer.
2. What **motifs and symbols** are used in this chapter? How are they used?

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## Speaking with Our Spirits – Before Papa

### Life in Enugu and Military Coup (Pages 19–26)

Mama is noticeable in her passivity. Kambili notes her subservience when she observes 'there was so much that she did not mind' (p. 19). She seems almost to resent her mother's meekness and adopts many of her father's views. The reader is surprised to find her state 'Papa has deserved praise for not choosing to take a second wife. But then Papa was different. I wished Mama would not compare him... with anybody... lowered him, soiled him' (p. 20). This also indicates that women traditionally occupy an inferior position in Nigerian society.

Mama submits to Papa's will without the need for explicit demands; for example, she submits and visits the priest even when her mother's meekness occurs. Kambili notes 'her Igbo words were low and calm' (p. 18). Mama is governed by fear but makes some attempt to protect her children, as when she instructs Jaja to stay by her side after the military's defiance. For this, she is severely beaten.

The household is hierarchical. Papa rules from the top with his servants under him, much like the military dictatorship in Nigeria. With his children, Eugene enforces dining and family time. Their free time is spent reading papers or playing chess, as Papa demands.

One of the first references to violence, 'her swollen eye was so overripe avocado' (p. 11). While the violence is registered, the truth is repressed. There is a tendency to ask 'safe' questions – 'we would not ask the other questions, the ones we want to know' (p. 23). The family lives in fearful silence. They rarely acknowledge or communicate with a special 'eye language'.

Kambili blindly accepts the draconian routines that are imposed, explaining 'Papa's danger of falling into the same patterns of behaviour as her mother at the start of his approval, using stock religious phrases 'knowing Papa would like me saying this of this made her mouth feel 'full of melting sugar' (p. 26).

The daily lives of the Achike family are ruled by religion. Kambili details the various rosary, mass, and general prayer and reflection time. Papa displays icons of figures who favours Western depictions of religious figures, such as the blonde Mary statue. Papa and Eugene's prayers often concern judgement of those he deems as immoral, such as to bring the downfall of the Godless men ruling our country' (p. 43).

Papa strives for national democracy yet rules his home like a totalitarian regime. He is genuine, as in the extract below.

'It was during family time the next day, a Saturday, that the coup happened. It was to

'...It was the same way I felt when he smiled, his face breaking open like white meat inside.'

(pp. 24–25)

### Active Learning Task: Language Analysis

Referring to the extract from pages 24–25 indicated in the box above, comment on

- ≈ use of reported speech
- ≈ use of emphatic verbs and adjectives to highlight Papa's feelings
- ≈ similes or metaphors

**How do these details show Papa's fears about dictatorships?**

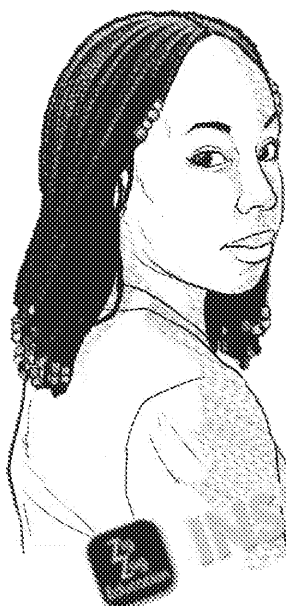
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## Kambili's Educational Experiences (Pages 27–36, Pages 37–51)



Papa's regime affects Kambili's life beyond the walls. The discrepancy is between the reality of situations and the image Kambili has built through her father's put-downs.

While her teachers regard her as 'intelligent beyond her years', with her principal considering her as 'responsible', her father berates her for wasting opportunities when she is in the top rankings. He tells her 'You came second because you were arrogant'. He laments 'I was stained by failure' (p. 39).

Papa's grievances are rooted in a sense of injustice. He evokes Kambili's guilt for her privileged lifestyle by reminding her that he 'used to send me to the best schools... I would have been a priestess and sisters of the mission' (p. 47). His gratitude for providing his education goes some way to ease the tension, but it also looks back to the colonial past with fondness.

### Active Learning Task: Language Analysis

Papa's strict regime of extended homeworks and insistence on Kambili leaving at the end of the school day serves to isolate Kambili from her peers, who read her as arrogant and criticise her as 'a backyard snob' (p. 49).

*How does Adichie use dialogue in this extract to present Ezinne's concern for Kambili?*

"Chinwe just wants you to talk to her first," Ezinne whispered. "You know she's a backyard snob because you don't talk to anybody. She said just because you read a newspaper and all those factories does not mean you have to feel too big and rich, too."

to

"Why?" Ezinne asked. "If you stay and talk to people, maybe it will make you really not a snob."

"I just like running," I said again.

(p. 51)

## Christmas at Abba (Pages 52–70)

When Papa takes his family back to the ancestral town of Abba, he is treated as a guest arriving in petition for help. Papa takes great pride in his social position and presents an ostentatious display of wealth in his provision of food, drink and celebrations.

While happy to continue the tradition of the 'Big Man' which closely aligns to the Western ideal, Papa seems ashamed of his own heritage and background. He finds his father's traditions shaming. He moulds himself to a Western ideal, praising Kambili's maternal grandfather: 'Grandfather was very light-skinned, almost albino. He determinedly spoke English'.

Eugene has become estranged from his father and restricts his children's contact with him to a controlled 15 minutes per year. It is during this visit that Kambili begins to have doubts. She tries and fails to find signs of 'godlessness' in her paternal grandfather and, in the end, an opportunity to share food with him, so if he did struggle to eat she 'could run away'.

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## Visit with Papa-Nnukwu (Pages 71–88)

Jaja makes the decision to prolong their stay with Papa-Nnukwu to 25 minutes the when Eugene threatens to discipline Kambili. This foreshadows his later decision to poisoning. Note how, in his anger, Papa repeats strong religious terms and threats.

'I wasted time, it was my fault,' Jaja said.

'What did you do there? Did you eat food sacrificed to idols? Did you do anything on a Christian tongue?'

I sat frozen; I did not know that tongues could be Christian, too.

'No,' Jaja said.

Papa was walking toward Jaja. He spoke entirely in Igbo now. I thought that he would tug and yank at the same place that he spoke, that he would palm would make that sound like a heavy book falling from a library shelf. But he would reach across and touch me on the face with the casualness of reaching for a glass. He would finish that food and go to your rooms and pray, turning to look back downstairs. The silence he left was heavy but comfortable, like a prickly cardigan on a bitter morning.

(p. 69)

It is around this time that Eugene's outspoken sister Ifeoma arrives at their home of care for Papa-Nnukwu. The reader is made aware of Auntie Ifeoma's strength as Kambili recounts: 'When she barged into the dining room upstairs, I imagined a person miles to fetch water in homemade clay pots, nursing babies until they walked and machetes sharpened on sun-warmed stone. She filled a room' (p. 89).



## First Stay with Auntie Ifeoma (Pages 89–109/110)

Auntie Ifeoma arranges for Jaja and Kambili to come and visit. Kambili is immediately struck by the stark contrast between her own home and the atmosphere in Ifeoma's home: 'Laughs spurted from everyone, often not seeking and not getting with a purpose at home, especially at the table, but my cousin and I would speak and speak.' (p. 120).

Ifeoma encourages Kambili to rebel, destroying the study. Kambili is also introduced to a new way of showing faith. Auntie Ifeoma does not pray for 'peace and laughter' (p. 127). She is initially confused by Amaka's dark-skinned, shocked that 'Morning and night prayers were always peppered with... Igbo praise songs' (p. 127).

Despite their material privations, Ifeoma's family seems happy and secure – in Nsukka. It bounced around all the time. The food had little meat... the flat sparkled' (p. 140). Kambili is so spiritually fulfilled that Eugene so desperately craves.

Auntie Ifeoma helps Kambili abandon her prejudices regarding 'pagan' beliefs. Kambili dreams of laughing. She recognises the power of speaking up – 'I was observing anything at any time to anyone, where the air was free for you to breathe as you develop your own voice when Ifeoma urges her to defend herself against Amaka's girls close together.

It is in Nsukka where she begins to develop her identity as a young woman. She is reacting to Amaka's initial frosty reception, she asks Jaja 'Do you think we're asking questions Papa's regime.

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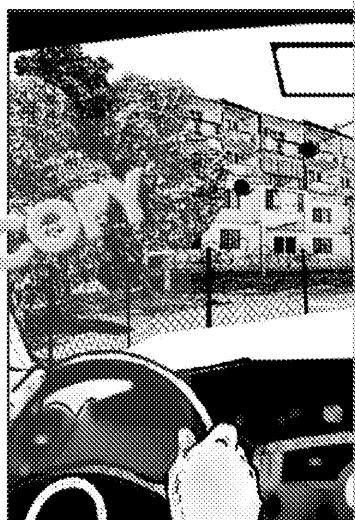




# Active Learning Task: Descriptive Detail

In the extract below, the description mirrors the car journey. Look at the text to identify those details which link to imagination and sensory detail, and those which are more objective, factual observations.

Marguerite Cartwright Avenue was bordered by tall gmelina trees. I imagined the trees bending during a rainy-season thunderstorm, reaching across to touch each other and turning the avenue into a dark tunnel. The duplexes with gravel-coloured driveways and BEWARE OF DOGS signs in the front yard soon gave way to bungalows with gravel-coloured driveways the length of a car and then blocks of flats with wide verandahs of space in front of them instead of driveways. Kevin drove slowly, muttering Auntie Ifeoma's house number as if that would make us find it



sooner. It was in the fourth block we came to, a tall, bland building with television aerials sticking out from verandahs. It had three flats on each side and a shop was on the ground floor on the left. In front was a circular burst of bright flowers fenced around with barbed wire. Roses and hibiscuses and lilies and ixoras were on the side like a hand-painted wreath. Auntie Ifeoma emerged from the flat in a white dress with her hands over the front of her T-shirt. The skin at her knees was very dark.

(p. 112)

Imaginative/descriptive detail	Factual

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### Papa-Nnukwu's Illness, Death and Aftermath (Pages 162–205)

Another turning point in the story is the death of Papa-Nnukwu. Papa had forbidden company, and they had been living with him at Auntie Ifeoma's without his knowledge. Kambili does not wish to deepen her 'sin' by touching the body. Jaja, in an act of defiance, defies his father's strict instructions and prepares the body for death.

Kambili's reaction to the death may seem cold to the reader. Initially, she does not behave, confined by Papa's rules. She fears inciting Papa's displeasure. Her spirit is aware of this when she notes Amaka's reaction to Papa-Nnukwu's death: 'Then I laughed, loud and throaty, she laughed the way she cried. She had not learned the art of silent grief' (p. 185).

## Death of Ade Coker and Grievous Wounding of Kambili (Pages 20)

On return to Enugu, Kambili hears the shocking news that Ade Coker has been murdered in an assassination attempt which is traced back to the government who wish to silence their regime by whatever means possible. Just as 'Big Oga' evokes General Sani Abacha's disappearance, a well-known figure recall the international outcry when writer Chinua Achebe expressed his views.

Coker's young daughter is sitting in shocked silence, and it is perhaps this moment for Kambili, as she finds the courage to stand up to her father when he destroys her grandfather.

Papa-Nnukwu's death precipitates one of the most shocking incidents in the novel, Kambili which proves close to fatal.

### Active Learning Task: Language Analysis: Depiction of Violence

*How does Adichie use description and dialogue to convey the violence in this*

“No!” I shrieked. I dashed to the pieces on the floor as if to save them, as  
mean saving Papa-Nnukwu. I sank to the floor, lay on the pieces of paper  
to

'Kicking. Kicking. Kicking. Perhaps it was a belt now because the metal b  
Because I could hear a swoosh in the air. A low voice was saying, "Please  
stings. More slaps. A salty wetness warmed my mouth. I closed my eyes  
(pp. 210–211)



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### Active Learning Task: Women in the Novel

Read the section from pages 217 to 253 before completing the comparison grid.

	Beatrice	
Their ideas 		
How they talk		
How they dress		
Lifestyle 		

Kambili's mother arrives at Nsukka. At first, it would seem as though she is leaving Ifeoma about yet another miscarriage brought on by his beatings. However, she is fearful when Eugene telephones. She prepares the children for a return to Enugu and asks a question to Ifeoma: 'Where would I go if I leave Eugene's house? Tell me, where have I been so reliant and co-dependent on Eugene throughout her life that she cannot

The reader learns later that it is at this point that she has been gradually poisoning her mind with his cruelty.

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## The Pieces of Gods – After Palm Sunday

Adichie makes use of pathetic fallacy in this section to prefigure the dismantling of that destruction could be seen both inside and outside the house: 'Everything came on Sunday. Howling winds came with an angry rain, uprooting frangipani trees in the garden, came crashing down. Sisi broke a full set of Mama's china' (p. 257).

### Third Stay with Auntie Ifeoma (Pages 257–270)

Kambili and Jaja are no longer able to live with the oppression of their home in Enugu. The silence that descended on the house was sudden, as though the old silence had been in pieces' (p. 257). While there is silence, it seems to be one of expectation as Mama no longer whispers.

The purple hibiscus has successfully been transplanted, and Jaja announces that he is going to Nsukka. While there, Kambili's feelings for Father Amadi intensify and, after the funeral, she confesses her feelings. He is angry with her but reassures her that she will be loved through his love.

### Papa Poisoned (Pages 271–287)

News reaches Nsukka that Papa has died. Kambili is surprised at her ambivalence towards her father. She feels herself that the main feeling she has is relief. Sisi is the only person who cries over her father's death. Kambili confesses to the poisoning. Kambili's first reaction is anger when she learns that Papa had which they often shared a 'love sip' from.

### Jaja Arrested and Imprisoned (Pages 288–291)

As the investigation begins, Jaja claims responsibility for the crime to save his mother. While he rebelled against his father, here he can be seen to fulfil the traditional role of the protector of the women.

### A Different Silence – The Present (Pages 293–307)

The tense of the novel abruptly shifts as Kambili brings the reader to the 'present' where she is accompanying her mother as they visit Jaja, hopeful as his release has been secured.

As we drove back to Enugu, I laughed loudly, above Fela's stringent singing, free something deep inside your belly that would rise up to your throat as a song. As laughter.

(p. 299)

Mama has deteriorated physically and emotionally, highlighting that, despite his cruelty, she has always relied upon Eugene. Kambili is very much aware of this and she sets the scene for a brave new world as she looks forward to the future: 'We'll take Jaja to Nsukka... then go to America to visit Auntie Ifeoma, plant new orange trees in Abba... and Jaja will plant purple hibiscuses, too' (p. 306). The narrative closes with Kambili's promise: 'The new rains will come down soon' (p. 306). Kambili is laughing and Mama is smiling, while the images of rain and regrowth suggest redemption and the promise of a new start.



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# Symbolism

## Colours and Flowers

The purple hibiscus of the title serves as a potent symbol of the burgeoning freedom of Kambili and Jaja.

The colours of red and purple are evoked throughout the novel. Red is generally linked to pain, anger and blood, while in the Catholic Church it is linked to action, fire and spiritual awakening. The two seemingly disparate associations merge in the figure of Papa, whose worship borders on fanaticism and relies on violent punishment to abolish 'sinful' behaviour. The violence and dominance of Papa is somewhat reflected in the aggressive growth of the traditional red hibiscus which seems to 'bloom so fast' (p. 9).

The more experimental purple hibiscus is a hybrid flower and requires trust, faith and patience, telling that its source in the novel is Auntie Ifeoma's garden, as her home represents both the flower and the prospect of liberation to his own home.

Kambili recognises this early in her narrative as she recollects 'Jaja's defiance seen through the experimental purple hibiscus: rare, fragrant with undertones of freedom' (p. 16).

At the end of the novel, it is evoked again as a symbol of hope and freedom, as Kambili's brother's release from prison and assures her Mama '...and Jaja will plant purple hibiscus. It will come down soon' (p. 307).

## Figurines

Mama's figurines represent herself and the fragility of the family, which lies in the figurines. She polishes them with care as a way of escaping the violence.

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# Setting

The settings in the novel reflect the antithesis of freedom and

Enugu	
<p>Kambili lives in a luxurious home. Despite their material wealth, it is lacking in love and feels repressive: <i>'The silence was broken only by the whir of the ceiling fan..., I felt suffocated. The off-white walls... were narrowing, bearing down on me.'</i></p> <p>It is spacious but stifles growth.</p>	<p>Although Ifeoma is not and lively. Ifeoma's home (p. 112). <i>'I noticed the pungent fumes of kerosene, the aroma of curry and nutmeg... there is a richness of life.'</i></p>
<p>The home is more of a prison for Kambili – keeping the evils of the world out. <i>'the compound walls, topped by electric wires, were so high I could not see the cars driving past on the street'</i> (p. 9). It also contributes to Kambili's naivety about the wider world.</p>	<p>The children sleep in cushions are 'frayed', and bookshelves. Ifeoma prunes the items that the family</p>
<p>Kambili's father's factory products (wafer biscuits, cashew juice) and her memories of <i>'full crates of Coke, Fanta, Sprite'</i> (p. 123), and <i>'creamy Peak milk'</i> (p. 127) suggest that they have luxuries when other Nigerians face poverty.</p>	<p>At Nsukka, fuel and gas are used sparingly. There is a car. On the way to Aunt Ifeoma's sparse shelves of goods (p. 111).</p>
<p>The garden is exotic but Kambili is barricaded from it: <i>'the bell shaped yellow fruits hung lazily, drawing buzzing bees that bumped against my window's netting.'</i></p>	<p>The toilet is very small instead of a flush. The morning (p. 121).</p>
<p>Eugene even tries to control nature <i>'purple bougainvillea, cut smooth and straight as a buffet table'</i> (p. 9).</p>	<p><i>'Aunt Ifeoma's little garden her flat in Nsukka began the home of the purple'</i></p>
<p>The description suggests corruption: <i>'the frangipani trees... filled the yard with the sickly sweet scent of their flowers'</i>.</p>	<p>Jaja takes cuttings from the trees and asks them to plant in the garden. <i>'Jaja's eyes shone as he said this is the hope and promise'</i></p>
<p>Kambili is in a room to grow – she is restricted.</p>	<p>Jaja loves being in Nsukka. He asserts: <i>'We are going to grow'</i> (p. 261). It has become Papa-Nnukwu is welcomed into the family.</p> <p>The freedom here and Kambili to grow.</p>

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## Structure

The novel is divided into four uneven sections. Each section presents an important narrative is not linear and chronological, and makes use of flashback narrative.

It begins recounting a significant moment in 'Breaking Gods – Palm Sunday', before to chart how this situation developed in 'Speaking with Our Spirits – Before Palm', considered in 'The Pieces of Gods – After Palm Sunday' before returning to the 'Present'. The novel seems enclosed by the titles.

The first and last sections are significantly shorter than the others and create the significance to the reader. They could be seen to serve as a prologue and epilogue to Kambili's growing consciousness.

The lack of conventional chapter headings and asymmetric divisions may reflect Kambili's feelings and the disfunction of the family.

### Discussion Prompts

1. What are the effects of giving each section titles rather than conventional chapters?
2. What is the effect of moving backwards and forwards in time compared to chronological order?

While dates are never explicitly mentioned, the reader may assume that 'Big Oga' General Sani Abacha who seized power through a military junta in 1993 and exercised an alleged heart attack in 1998. This would place the narrative between the spring of 1993 to the spring of 1998, when Jaja is offered the promise of release.

The novel could be termed a *Bildungsroman*. As Kambili develops and matures, her voice emerges. At the start she seems to parrot ideas propounded by her father, the priest or school. She evaluates her own views and reflects upon her own preconceptions. Later, Kambili's own reflections. By the end, she has found her own voice.

### Subplots

While the main narrative centres on Kambili and her journey to independence, there are other subplots that serve to provide parallels and contrasts, such as:

- the fate of Ade Coker – censorship and violence on a national scale
- Aunty Ifeoma's migration – hardship and intimidation for educators, difficulties in a new country
- Father Amadi – post-colonialism, in his ownership of his faith and job as a 'missionary'

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# Language

When looking at aspects of style and the writer's choice of language, the reader needs to consider:

## Key Questions

- How does Adichie present her story?
- Whose point of view is being presented?
- How does the language reveal the time and place?
- Is symbolism used?

The novel is presented from the first-person perspective of Kambili. She is 15 at the start of the novel. As a reflection of her intelligence and sensitivity, the language at the start is crammed with metaphors. However, it can lack maturity. The repeated use of possessive pronouns – 'I', 'me', 'mine' and 'my' – highlights the impact that events have upon the narrator.

English is Adichie's first language and she uses American English. It is important that you utilise the language from her text to recognise this. Most of the characters are Igbo but tellingly reverts to Igbo when he loses control of his temper. Papa-Nnukwu is monolingual, and various characters 'translate' into Igbo when they interact with him. Adichie uses unusual syntax for any sentence in English which would have been used in Igbo.

Kambili's first-person narration covers a period of four years. The difference between the past and present creates a sense of dual perspective.

Adichie also enables Kambili to include situations that she does not directly experience. Others tell her about the past. Other characters tell her about events she has witnessed, such as Papa's schooling and time at university, and the death of Ade's father. Ade's beating Mama, and Amaka calling her and Jaja 'abnormal'. Radio broadcasts, letters and newspapers are used as a source of information.

## Discussion Prompts

- Would the novel be as effective if it had been presented through third-person?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of having a first-person narrator?

## Use of Igbo in the Novel

Papa Eugene forbids his family from speaking Igbo in the house. The denigration of the local church's rules banning Igbo songs apart from during the Offertory. Papa-Nnukwu drops his social façade and lets his temper fly.

In Kambili's own narrative, Igbo initially appears as a reference to food or as terms of endearment.

Adichie subtly suggests the nature of the children when she presents conversations taken place in Igbo. For example, Jaja and Kambili's visit to Papa-Nnukwu, in stilted English: 'Is your body?' The unusual syntax and sprinkling of Igbo terms into English.

At Auntie Ifeoma's house, Igbo and English are effortlessly interlaced, reflecting her desire to forge a new national identity which marries English with traditional Igbo elements. Papa-Nnukwu uses Igbo-laced English and makes Igbo hymns central to his services. The use of Igbo in the novel does not exclude the reader. Rather, Adichie uses the comments following Igbo vocabulary to provide context and enable the reader to develop an understanding through an immersive narrative. The reader feels as though they are part of Kambili's world.

Adichie's use of figurative language and richly sensory description also help evoke the world of the novel.

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## Language and Identity

- How does Adichie use language to reveal attitudes and values in the passage?
- Here Papa has escorted Kambili to school after discovering that she has been

Sister Margaret saw him as we walked to my class. She waved gaily, from a few parents, then quickly waddled over to us. Her words flew generously. What was Papa doing, was he happy with my progress at Daughters of the Immaculate? Will he be at the reception for the bishop next week?

Papa changed his accent when he spoke, sounding British, just as he did Benedict. He was gracious, in the eager to please way that he always was. He was as gracious as when he presented the check for donating the Daughters of the Immaculate library. He said he had just come to my class, and Sister Margaret told me I needed anything.

p. 46

### Active Learning Task

Highlight the following in the extract above, noting what each reveals:

- the verbs used to describe the movements of Sister Margaret and Papa
- the complex sentence structures used to build a picture of Sister Margaret
- the use of reported speech
- Kambili's evaluation of her father's behaviour in the presence of nuns or parents

This passage relies on the reader's ability to infer and deduce information from Sister Margaret's speech. What her words would seem to be kind ('her words flew generously'), it is also talk'. She is not really interested in Papa's health; her later queries foreground how he is there to complain and whether he will be patronising an upcoming reception.

Likewise, Kambili's seemingly objective observation that Papa imitates a British accent as missionaries provides firm evidence for Auntie Ifeoma's claim that he is a colonialist. To seem more educated and his respect for the religious orders borders on servility. Emerging, as Kambili praises her father's charity in linking his meek behaviour to the reader begins to question Papa's motives, seeing both him and Sister Margaret as products of social conventions.

### Active Learning Task: Research/Glossary

Part of Adichie's skill as a writer is that she introduces Igbo and religious terms in a way that the reader can infer meaning through context. However, it will greatly help the text if the reader does research on these unfamiliar words referring to religion, culture, and environment.

Keep a glossary of the words you are unfamiliar with as you read the novel. You can categorise them into the following categories:

- religious terminology
- Igbo terms or phrases
- food
- natural environment

Check your research against the glossary provided on pp. 36–39, which covers the first 30 pages of the novel.

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# Themes

The overarching themes of freedom and oppression are reflected in setting, characterisation and the continued opposition of language and silence.

Freedom	Oppression
<b>Nsukka</b> Rural, place of learning, laughter, experimentation	<b>Enugu</b> Wealthy, place of business
<b>Ifeoma / Father Amadi</b> Loving, accepting, modelled on the New Testament God	<b>Eugene</b> Severe, puritanical, violent, a Punisher figure
<b>Purple Hibiscus</b> Experimentation, defiance, freedom	<b>Red Hibiscus</b> Bloodshed, pain, violence
<b>Language</b> Speaking = power to express self, challenge power	<b>Silence</b> Silence – victims who are afraid
<b>Amaka</b> Outspoken, brutally honest, questions, culturally and politically conscious	<b>Kambili</b> Oppressed, silent, culturally and politically unconscious

Over the page is a detailed 'quote quest' tracking the references to language and silence. This can be completed before tracking other examples of freedom and oppression.

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## Language and Silence

As you read the novel, complete the grid below with appropriate commentary. You can use any quotation that reveals about characters, themes or setting. Some examples have been provided.

Page	Quote	
7	After Jaja's rebellion and Papa flinging the missal: 'The silence was broken only by the whirl of the ceiling fan as it sliced through the still air.'	No one dares of fear.
5	'Eugene used <i>The Standard</i> to tell the truth even though it meant the paper lost advertising'	Papa speaks though he is
9	'The tea was always too hot, always burned my tongue.'	Love hurts a tongue (and
12	'We ate silently.'	They comply remaining sil
13	Father speaks to Jaja in Igbo after his defiance: 'A bad sign. <b>He hardly spoke Igbo</b> , and although Jaja and I spoke it with Mama at home, he did not like us to speak it in public. <b>We had to sound civilised in public, he told us; we had to speak English.</b> Papa's sister, Aunty Ifeoma, said once that <b>Papa was too much of a colonial product.</b> '	
16	'...through the years <b>when Jaja and Mama and I spoke more with our spirits than our lips.</b> Until Nsukka. Aunty Ifeoma's little garden next to the verandah of her flat in Nsukka began to lift the silence.'	
23	'...we did that often, asking each other questions whose answers we already knew. For Papa was so <b>that we would not ask the questions, the ones whose answers we did not want to know.</b> '	
31	Students are described as 'measured and silent': 'the silence of waiting until Papa was done with his siestas so we could have lunch; the <b>silence</b> of reflection time; the <b>silence</b> of evening rosary; the <b>silence</b> of driving to church for benediction afterward. Even our family time on Sundays was quiet...'	

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Page	Quote	
48	Kambili fails to complete the pledge for Mother Lucy: 'I cleared my throat but <b>the words would not come</b> . I knew them, thought them. But they would not come.'	<i>She is still trying to find her voice.</i>
60	'An outer silence enveloped us all, shrouding us.' As they pray: 'our voices sounded loud, discordant.'	
64	Kambili hears Papa-Nnukwu's accent: 'His dialect was ancient... [with] none of the polished inflections that ours had.'	
77	Aunty Ifeoma speaks Igbo. Eugene speaks English.	
99	'I wondered how Amaka did it, how she opened her mouth and had words flow easily out.'	
108	Kambili and Jaja: 'I could not find the words in our eye language to tell him how <b>my throat tightened at the thought of five days without Papa's voice</b> , without his footsteps on the stairs.'	
117	Amaka on Kambili: 'You lower your voice when you speak. <b>You talk in whispers.</b> '	
120	'Laughter floated over my head. Words spurted from everyone, often not seeking and not getting any response. We always spoke with a purpose and a purpose, especially at the table, but <b>my cousin seemed to simply speak and speak and speak</b> and I felt like I was the only one who was listening.'	<i>Nsukka is like a storm of voices and sounds.</i>
135	Faadi speaks in 'English-laced Igbo'.	<i>Amadi, like Kambili, is trying to find his identity.</i>
135	Kambili: 'my ears followed the sound and not the sense of his speech'	<i>Kambili is more interested in the sound of the words than their meaning.</i>

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Page	Quote	
138	She says of him: 'He spoke so effortlessly, as if his mouth were a musical instrument that just let out sound when touched, when opened.'	
139	Kambili is silent with Father Amadi 'but my words would not come, and for a while even my ears could hear nothing.'	
140	'Laughter always rang out in Auntie Ifeoma's house, and no matter where the laughter came from, it bounced around the walls of the house. Arguments rose quickly and fell just as quickly. Morning and night prayers were mixed with songs, Igbo praise songs that usually called for hand clapping.'	
170	Amaka criticises Kambili, and Auntie Ifeoma suddenly says 'O ginidi, Kambili, have you no mouth? Talk back to her!' After a pause, she says 'You don't have to shout, Amaka... I don't know how to do the orah leaves, but you can show me.' She speaks calmly and makes Amaka laugh. She says 'So your voice can be this loud, Kambili.'	Turning point defend herself
179	Kambili's first laugh is with Father Amadi – 'It sounded strange... I was not sure I had ever heard myself laugh.'	
185	When Papa-Nnukwu dies, Amaka grieves 'loud and throaty... she had not learnt the art of silent crying; she had not needed to...'	
222	Auntie Ifeoma knows her job is threatened. 'I am not paid to be loyal. When I speak the truth it becomes disloyalty.' 'When do we speak out, eh? When soldiers are appointed lecturers and students attend lectures with guns to their heads?'	Speaking is a
297	When Jaja goes to prison – Kambili says 'there is so much that Mama and I do not talk about. We do not talk about the huge checks we have written for bribes, how much money we have... about how Papa anonymously donated to children's hospitals and motherless babies homes and to help veterans from the civil war.'	
305	'Silence has been with us, but it is a different kind of silence that lets me breathe. I have nightmares about one other kind, the silence when Papa was alive. In my nightmares it mixes with shame and grief and so many other things... that I wake up screaming and sweating.'	
306	'There is still so much that is silent between Jaja and me. Perhaps we will talk more with time, or perhaps we never will be able to say it all, to clothe things in words, things that have long been naked.'	

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## Religion and Politics

### Discussion Prompts

- ≈ What is the role of religion in the novel?
- ≈ What is Kambili's relationship to Catholicism? How does it make her feel?
- ≈ What is the relationship of the religion brought by colonialism to the traditional worship?
- ≈ What is the significance of Kambili's pilgrimage to Aokpe?
- ≈ What does it reveal about her feelings towards religion?
- ≈ How does the political situation in Nigeria affect the plot?
- ≈ Does the theme of silence in the novel raise a larger question about the political situation?

## Love

### Active Learning Task

Note Kambili's love relationships in the text with a brief explanation and textual evidence.  
***How does Adichie show different types of love throughout the text?***

Write about:

- ≈ love between parents and their children
- ≈ love between siblings and cousins
- ≈ romantic love

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# Exam Practice

## Essay Questions

*From*

'Jaja bent down and covered Papa-Nnukwu's body with the wrapper, but even though the wrapper was long enough.'

*to*

'I went toward the bathroom, the word ozu ringing in my ears. Papa-Nnukwu's corpse.'

(pp. 184–185)\*

1. In what ways does Adichie show contrasting attitudes towards death and religion in this extract?
2. To what extent does Adichie present Jaja's attitude to religion in this extract?

### Tip!

Students will do well when they make links between the larger religious differences and family dynamics. Better responses will look at the various approaches to faith in the novel, from Western clergy, Auntie Ifeoma, Papa-Nnukwu and Father Amadi.

Strong candidates will try to explain Kambili's passivity and Jaja's courage, given the context of the text.

*From*

'If only Jaja would look at me, I would ask him not to blame himself. Papa-Nnukwu was from Jaja. His hands moved swiftly, working together. The painting was not of Papa-Nnukwu, it represented something lost, something I had never had, would never have.'

*to*

'...Kicking. Kicking. Kicking. Perhaps it was a belt now because the metal was heavy. Because I could hear a swoosh in the air. A low voice was saying, "Please stop. Please stop." More slaps. A salty wetness warmed my mouth. I closed my eyes and tried to breathe. I tried to breathe. I tried to breathe.'

(pp. 210–211) \*

3. How does Adichie use details to present the character of Papa-Nnukwu in this extract?
4. To what extent is violence presented in this extract?

\*In the examination, the full extract will be printed. For copyright purposes, page numbers are used here.

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# Glossary

## Part 1 – Breaking Gods

Page 3

<b>Communion</b>	A Christian ceremony based on Jesus Christ's last meal
<b>Missal</b>	A book containing all the prayers and responses necessary throughout the year. A prayer book.
<b>Étagère</b>	A piece of furniture designed to display objects
<b>Ash Wednesday</b>	Ash Wednesday is a Christian festival. It marks the beginning of repentance, fasting and abstinence in preparation for the festival of Easter. It is usually celebrated in February.
<b>Enunciated</b>	To speak clearly

Page 4

<b>Mass</b>	A ceremony in the Catholic Church. The mass is a celebration in which Christians believe that the Mass is the most important act of worship on Earth.
<b>Harmattan</b>	A dry and dusty West African trade wind
<b>Credo</b>	A statement of Christian belief meaning in Latin 'I believe'
<b>Kyrie</b>	A petition and response used in the liturgies of Christianity. It is composed of the words 'Lord, have mercy.'
<b>Offertory</b>	A part of the Christian Mass when bread and wine are brought to the altar and consecrated. In the Catholic Church, the bread and wine are believed to be the body and blood of Christ respectively.
<b>Palm Sunday</b>	A Christian feast that takes place on the Sunday before Easter, celebrating the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem.
<b>Triumphant Entry</b>	The journey of Jesus into Jerusalem witnessed by many people.
<b>Igbo</b>	Pronounced 'i-bo' – a large and important ethnic group in Nigeria
<b>Latin</b>	The language of the Roman Empire and used in Catholic liturgy. It forms a core root of the English language.

Page 5

<b>Big Man/Men</b>	Term for the elite and powerful of Nigeria
<b>Coup</b>	A <i>coup d'état</i> – the overthrow of the government by a military force, as is the case in <i>Purple Hibiscus</i>
<b>Pentecostal Churches</b>	A Christian Church that places special emphasis on personal experience through the baptism in the Holy Spirit. The term <i>Pentecost</i> is a term describing the Jewish <b>Feast of Weeks</b> . Pentecostal churches reflect the early church.
<b>Peter's pence</b>	A voluntary offering of money to the Church. In medieval times, it was a penny per household.
<b>Reverend Sisters</b>	Another term for nuns
<b>Extreme unction</b>	Also known as the Last Rites. Prayers and a ceremony for the dying
<b>Sermon</b>	A speech or service given by a priest or other member of the clergy

Page 6

<b>Host</b>	The host referred to here is the sacramental bread
<b>Essence</b>	The properties that make something what it is. In this context, it is the holy nature of the wafer that makes it the host

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Page 8

<b>biko</b>	Igbo word – ‘please’
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Page 9

<b>Frangipani tree</b>	A flowering plant
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<b>Bougainvillea</b>	A purple, flowering plant
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Page 10

<b>Siesta</b>	A short afternoon sleep common in hot countries
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<b>Egusi soup</b>	A thick, seeded soup or stew
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<b>Utazi curry</b>	A curry using Utazi spice – a bitter taste
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Page 11

<b>Ke kwanu?</b>	Igbo – ‘How are you?’
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<b>Fufu</b>	A thick paste made by boiling root vegetables
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<b>Onugbu soup</b>	A spicy soup
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Page 13

<b>Gbo</b>	Igbo – ‘all’ or ‘every’
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<b>Mba</b>	Igbo – ‘no’
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Page 15

<b>Ofe nsala</b>	A kind of aromatic soup made with fish
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## Part 2 – Speaking with Our Spirits

Page 20

<b>Umunna</b>	An important aspect of Igbo society – the Umunna is a clan group
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<b>Oracles</b>	In Igbo society, Oracles are often female priestesses or wise women
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<b>Witch doctor</b>	Shaman and priests
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Page 21

<b>Moi-moi</b>	A food dish of beans, crayfish and peppers
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<b>Anara</b>	A salad fruit
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Page 22

<b>Alleluia</b>	Also Hallelujah – a song of praise to God
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<b>Garri</b>	A food made from Cassava tubers
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Page 24

<b>Hausa</b>	An ethnic group of people who live in Nigeria
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Page 28

<b>Pentecost Sunday</b>	Celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit to the followers of Jesus
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<b>Altar</b>	An elevated table where Christian ceremonies are conducted
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<b>Bunie ya enu...</b>	Beginning of an Igbo song
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Page 30

<b>Blessed Sacrament</b>	This is a term used to refer to the Host and wine used in Christianity
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<b>Sacristy</b>	The room where the priest's vestments are kept
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<b>Vestments</b>	Clothing worn by the priest during the ceremony
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<b>Chalice</b>	A cup – usually silver – used in Christian ceremonies
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<b>Yam</b>	A major food crop in Nigeria
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Page 31

<b>Ave Maria</b>	A traditional Christian prayer asking for the assistance
<b>Scripture passage</b>	A passage in the Bible
<b>Rosary</b>	Prayer beads used by Catholics to help them pray
<b>Benediction</b>	A short prayer for help

Page 32

<b>Azu</b>	A fish
<b>Ngwo-ngwo</b>	Roasted plantain food

Page 35

<b>Novenas</b>	A succession of prayers
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Page 36

<b>Plea to St. Jude</b>	A prayer to St. Jude for assistance
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Page 41

<b>Akamu</b>	A boiled corn meal
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Page 44

<b>Naira</b>	Nigerian currency, approximately 240 naira equal 1 British pound 100 kobo equals 1 naira
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Page 45

<b>Ikuku</b>	Igbo – ‘wind’
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Page 48

<b>Habit</b>	Clothing worn by a nun
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Page 49

<b>O di egwu</b>	Igbo expression of exclamation – ‘Do husbands sing?’
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Page 54

<b>Okporoko</b>	Stockfish
<b>Okpa</b>	A meal made from peas, palm oil, pepper, salt, banana and water
<b>Agidi</b>	A maize porridge or gruel

Page 55

<b>Omelora</b>	Papa’s title in his village meaning ‘one who does for the people’
<b>Kedu nu?</b>	Igbo – ‘How are you?’

Page 56

<b>Maggi cut</b>	A type of food
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Page 60

<b>Deuterocanonical books</b>	A variety of books from the Old Testament
<b>Psalms</b>	Sacred poems from the Bible

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# Indicative Content for Essay Question 3/4

## Essay Question 1/2

### Demonstrating AO1

- Refer to characters linked with religion in the novel – Papa, Father Benedict
- Explore details about Jaja's life – seen to question the validity of Papa's strict Catholicism, enthusiasm for Auntie Ifeoma's more liberal Catholicism, respectful of Papa

### Demonstrating AO2

Explore the details about death and religious practice in Nigeria in this passage:

- emphasis on ritual of dressing the body and Kambili referring to Papa-Nnukwu
- Kambili's attempts to distance herself from the dressing of the corpse
- the indoctrination of Kambili vs the compassion shown by Jaja and her cousin

### Demonstrating AO3

In your response you should discuss:

- use of Papa-Nnukwu as first-person narrator to show level of indoctrination that Papa-Nnukwu has
- the descriptive passages contrast her fear with the compassion and sorrow of Papa-Nnukwu
- language used by Jaja shows his development as an independent and caring person
- language used by Kambili shows her immaturity

### Demonstrating AO4

In your response you should discuss:

- potential division created by religious fervour, as Kambili fails to respond to Papa-Nnukwu's grandfather
- how religion influences family life in Nigeria
- the differences between Papa's restrictions and Auntie Ifeoma's compassion

Sample Answers:

#### Student A:

Jaja and Kambili are both very religious as they are afraid to cover the body. 'Jaja bent down and covered Papa-Nnukwu's body with the wrapper, his face even though the wrapper was long enough.' This is because he is a religious man. Kambili is shocked by the death when she says 'Papa-Nnukwu was dead.'

#### Student B:

The reactions to the death of Papa-Nnukwu serve to further underline the positions of Jaja and Kambili. Papa's indoctrination of Kambili into a form of Christianity is shown to be more fervent as she distances herself from the body. 'I wanted to go over and see the body, but I would not touch it.' In contrast, Jaja is the first to touch the corpse and

## Essay Question 3/4

Make sure that you answer the question as fully as possible. One way of making sure is to carefully annotate the question before you begin.

- How does Adichie use details to show differences between Kambili's and Auntie Ifeoma's home life?
- How does this contrast in home life reflect the novel as a whole?

Make a note of the four keywords here are **Kambili**, **Amaka**, **upbringing** and **home life** as a question about family life. Candidates should link to themes of freedom and

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