

The Nigerian Novelist, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Love in a time of 'TERROR'

Helen Fallon

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, was published to much acclaim in 2003. The book deftly interweaves family life and politics in a story of the breakdown of a family and the breakdown of a country.

Fifteen-year-old Kambili and her older brother, Jaja, live under a government dictatorship in their country and a more local dictatorship in their home. Their father, Eugene, a convert to Christianity, interprets his new faith in a fanatical way. He disdains his past and the customs of his ancestors. Kambili says, "We had to sound civilized in public, he told us we had to speak English."

CONTROL AND ORDER

Eugene gives generously of his substantial wealth to the poor and needy in his community and champions free speech by publishing a newspaper that is outspokenly critical of the country's repressive government. But he shuns his own father, Nnukwu, who continues to worship the old gods. His daughter tells how "when Papa had decreed that heathens were not allowed in his compound, he had not made an exception for his father." At home, obsessed with control and order, Eugene rules with an iron fist, imposing schedules that "in meticulously drawn lines, in black ink, cut across each day, separating study from siesta, siesta from family time, family time from eating, eating from prayer, prayer from sleep."

Beatrice, the children's mother, is terrified of her husband. Like her children she endures frequent beatings and abuse. Her husband beats her so badly that she miscarries the much longed for third

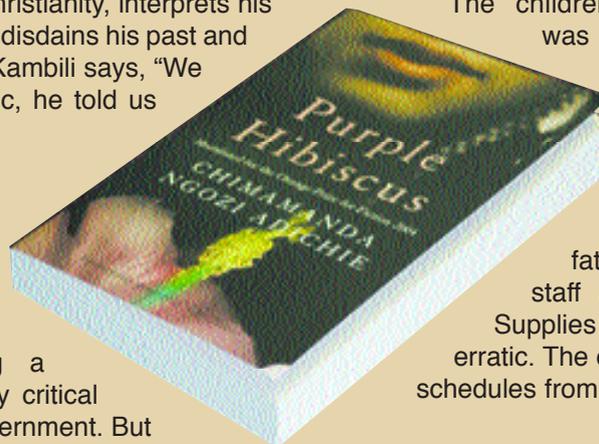
child she is expecting. Somehow Eugene always manages to convince his wife and children that they are deserving of his wrath: "Later at dinner, Papa said we would recite sixteen different novenas. For Mama's forgiveness. And on Sunday we stayed back after Mass and started the novenas. I did not think, I did not even think to think, what Mama needed to be forgiven for."

The children's world changes suddenly, "It was during family time that the coup happened." In the political unrest that follows, Kambili and Jaja are sent from the exclusive walled-compound where they live in material luxury to a university town where their Aunt Ifeoma, their father's sister, lives. She and the other staff at the university rarely get paid. Supplies of fuel, food and electricity are erratic. The children go fearfully, carrying written schedules from their father in their pockets.

LOVE AND LAUGHTER

Aunt Ifeoma quickly casts the schedules aside. A widow, she lives a relaxed life with her three children, having little money but lots of fun. Kambili finds her new home so strange that she is almost rendered mute in the presence of her lively cousins. The family pray together but this is different from the prayer Kambili and Jaja have known at home. "As we made the sign of the cross, I looked up to seek out Jaja's face, to see if he, too, was bewildered that Aunt Ifeoma and her family prayed for, of all things, laughter."

In this warm and loving environment, the children begin to open up. They marvel at the purple hibiscus tree growing in their aunt's yard which, for them, becomes



the symbol of everything both a tyrannical father and a violent regime would trample. Adichie describes the tree as “fragrant with the undertones of freedom, a different kind of freedom from the one that crowds waving green leaves chanted at Government Square after the cōup. A freedom to be, to do.”

Despite Eugene’s instructions that the children do not have contact with his father, when Nnukwu becomes ill, Aunt Ifeoma brings him to stay at her house where “his granddaughter examines him for signs of difference, of Godlessness.” Nnukwu, however, provides a nourishing portrait of a life lived in the presence of ancestral gods, through a simple but evocative spiritual life. Kambili is also befriended by her aunt’s friend, Father Amadi. Through him she encounters a humane and enriching Catholicism and learns to trust people, to question and to grow.

Purple Hibiscus presents a portrait of a country characterised by political unrest, bribery, censorship, oppression, riots, roadblocks and shortages of kerosene, petrol and food. It vividly evokes customs, culture and the ever-present tensions between the old and the new in writing that is lush with the smells of palm oil and jollof rice, the radiant colours and scents of frangipani and hibiscus and the heat and dust of the Harmattan winds.

Against this background Chimamanda explores how Christianity can co-exist with traditional values. Talking about her concerns regarding Christian fundamentalism, she has remarked, “It’s a more troubling version of Christianity than we had fifty years ago, and it’s also a very materialistic, inward-looking, intolerant Christianity. It’s not the sort of Christianity that asks you to go out and help the poor. It’s the sort of Christianity that tells you God wants you to have a Mercedes-Benz.”

YOUNG AND TALENTED

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was born in 1977. She grew up in the university town of Nsukka. Her father, a statistics professor, was deputy vice-chancellor at



By the time she was twenty-one, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie had already published a collection of poems, *Decisions* (1998), and a play, *For Love of Biafra* (1998). “I didn’t ever consciously decide to pursue writing, I just write. I have to write.” (photos: HarperCollins)

the university and her mother was the university’s first female registrar. Like Kambili in *Purple Hibiscus*, she is a Catholic. In Igbo her name, Chimamanda, means My God will never fail. Storytelling was very much part of the tradition of her people and Adichie loved to listen to her grandmother tell incredible stories of tortoises, elephants and other creatures.

On leaving school she studied medicine for a short time but realised this was not for her and, aged nineteen, went to the United States to study communication and political science at Connecticut State University. She was short-listed, in 2002, for the Caine Prize for African Writing and, in 2004, she was the first African writer to make the shortlist for Britain’s prestigious Orange Award for fiction.

Adichie now divides her time between the United States and her home country. She is working on a second novel. ■

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