

**BOOK REVIEW: PURPLE HIBISCUS BY CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE**

Anna Kessel<sup>1</sup>

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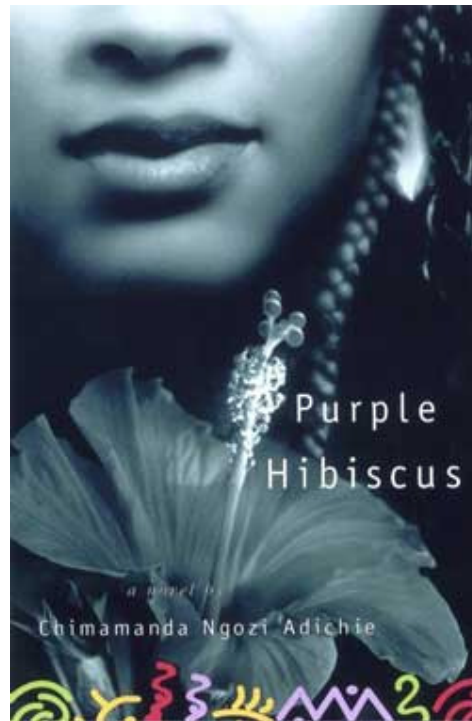
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Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie opens her debut novel with a reverent nod to the grandfather of African literature, Chinua Achebe, and his seminal novel, ‘Things Fall Apart’. Achebe inspired Adichie and gave her ‘permission’ to write about her own experience, she says. The resulting novel has met with critical acclaim; it has won the Commonwealth Writers’ First Book Prize, the Hurston/Wright Legacy award and was shortlisted for the Orange Prize for fiction in 2004.

Purple Hibiscus tells the story of Kambili, a 15 year old girl growing up in Nigeria. Her father is a rich and influential man in Nigerian society, and his strict patriarchal Catholic doctrine dictates – and oppresses – Kambili, her brother Jaja, and their mother. Outside the home political unrest and violence rages as a military coup unfurls; the repercussions shake the family home and exacerbate the creeping feeling of domestic violence and tension.

What marks Adichie’s novel as a sparkling and original debut is her ability to translate and rework her appreciation of Achebe’s interpretation of Nigerian society into her own experience. Adichie’s novel is distinctly female – a perspective often missing from the canon of African literature.



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'Things started to fall apart at home', she writes in the opening line of the novel, with the 'at home' staking out her axis.

Purple Hibiscus trembles with the threat of violence and humiliation, of the powerlessness of a mother in an abusive home, and the debilitating effect this has on her children. Glimpses of escape into the outside world tempt new freedoms, and Kambili teeters on the edge, unsure of where to go.

This is very much a novel about edginess. And here Adichie really shows her skill. She secretes us into the private thoughts of Kambili - herself perched on that difficult cusp of adolescence, where accepting obedience gives way to new questions and a more independent mind – while also showing us a wider view of new beginnings and transitions in contemporary Nigerian society.

Papa, for example, has no time for the old traditions. He has denounced his own father for living a 'heathen' lifestyle in which the old gods are worshipped alongside the 'new', and Kambili and Jaja are forbidden from spending time with their grandfather. At church, Igbo is a forbidden language and Latin and English are preferred.

But everyone is caught on the cusp, in transition. Whilst Papa refuses to take more than one wife – as traditional society dictates that he should – he cannot escape his patriarchal ways as he repeatedly lays down the law in the house and enforces it with intimidation and physical oppression. And Papa's sister, Kambili's aunt, is implicitly scorned by Papa for her independence as a single mother and university lecturer in Nsukka.

Like its title, however, Purple Hibiscus is also infused with beauty. Adichie's descriptions of the world around Kambili lend a gentle and wide eyed innocence to the narrative. Roads that carry police are lined with frangipani trees and the sweet scent they give off after the rains; the dining room that witnesses the domestic abuse is also the place where they eat warm yam porridge that soothes, and the communal spirit that surrounds food and feasting. Kambili – as a young woman ripening to adulthood - is inspired to notice these things around her and to love as much as she is traumatised by the turbulence in her life.

Adichie is a woman with things to say and the confidence and exquisite mastery of language with which to say them. The language of the novel itself is significant; peppered with Igbo phrases, aphorisms and songlines, it emphasizes Adichie's authority as a genuine African writer.

Read *Purple Hibiscus* and be challenged, and soothed. Its characters and its storyline have a universal appeal. It is a genuine page turner whose impact lasts long after the book has been put down.