

Purple Hibiscus



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE

Adichie was born as the fifth of sixth children and raised in Nsukka, Nigeria. Her father was a professor at the University of Nigeria and her mother was the university's first female registrar. Adichie studied medicine at the university and then moved to the United States at age 19. She received master's degrees from Johns Hopkins and Yale, and rapidly gained critical praise and numerous prizes for her writing. She was awarded the MacArthur Fellowship "Genius Grant" in 2008. She has published poems, short stories, a play, and three novels—*Purple Hibiscus* (2003), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2007), and *Americanah* (2013)—which have been awarded the Orange Prize among other honors. Adichie is currently married and divides her time between Nigeria and the United States.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Nigeria first gained its independence from British colonialism in 1960, but then faced a brutal civil war seven years later (described in Adichie's novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*). *Purple Hibiscus* takes place years after that, probably in the 1980s. The military leader in the novel is based on Ibrahim Babangida, who took power through a military coup in 1985. His regime was one of the most corrupt in Nigerian history, and included many human rights abuses present in the novel. The character of Ade Coker is based on real-life Nigerian journalist Dele Giwa, who was killed by a package bomb in 1986.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Adichie was first inspired to write by Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian fiction writer most popular in the West and author of *Things Fall Apart*. She was also inspired by Camara Laye, author of *Dark Child*. Both Achebe and Laye gave Adichie a "shock of recognition" that "people who looked like [her] could exist in books." Another influence is the Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina, who is Adichie's contemporary and friend.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Purple Hibiscus*
- **When Written:** 2001-2003
- **Where Written:** Eastern Connecticut State University and Johns Hopkins University
- **When Published:** 2003
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Nigerian Literature

- **Genre:** Fiction
- **Setting:** Nigeria
- **Climax:** Papa's death
- **Point of View:** First person limited, from Kambili's perspective

EXTRA CREDIT

Chinua Achebe. The great Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe was one of Adichie's most important inspirations and influences, and when she was a child Adichie's family even lived in Achebe's former house. The first line of *Purple Hibiscus* references Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*.

Flawless Feminism. In 2012 Adichie gave a TED talk titled "We Should All Be Feminists," discussing the problems with gender roles. Part of this talk was later sampled in Beyonce's song "Flawless."



PLOT SUMMARY

Kambili Achike, the narrator, is a fifteen-year-old girl living in Enugu, Nigeria with her father, Eugene (Papa), mother, Beatrice (Mama), and older brother, Chukwuku (Jaja). The novel begins on Palm Sunday. Jaja refuses to receive communion at church, and Papa throws his missal, breaking Mama's beloved **figurines**. Kambili then explains the events leading up to this scene.

Papa, a wealthy factory owner, is an active philanthropist in public and an upstanding Catholic, but at home is a strict and violent authoritarian. He publishes a newspaper, the *Standard*, which is the only paper willing to criticize the new Nigerian Head of State.

Mama gets pregnant. After Mass one day the family visits Father Benedict, their white priest. Mama feels sick and doesn't want to leave the car. When they return home Papa beats Mama until she has a miscarriage. Later Kambili takes her exams and comes second in her class, disappointing Papa.

At Christmas the family goes to their home village of Abba. Papa's father, Papa-Nnukwu, lives there, but Papa doesn't speak to him because his father sticks to his traditional religion and won't become Catholic. Kambili and Jaja visit Papa-Nnukwu briefly. Aunty Ifeoma, Papa's widowed sister and a university professor, arrives in Abba as well. She seems fearless and willing to criticize both Papa and the government. Her children—Amaka, Obiora, and Chima—are precocious and outspoken.

Ifeoma takes Jaja and Kambili to an Igbo festival. On Christmas Papa feeds the whole village. The next day Papa catches

Kambili breaking the “Eucharist fast” as she eats some food along with a painkiller she needs to take for menstrual cramps, and he beats her, Jaja, and Mama. Ifeoma convinces Papa to let Jaja and Kambili visit her in Nsukka.

Kambili and Jaja arrive and are surprised by Ifeoma’s poverty, but also the constant laughter in her house. Jaja is fascinated by the **purple hibiscuses** in Ifeoma’s garden. Father Amadi, a young, handsome Nigerian priest, comes to dinner.

As the days progress Jaja opens up, though Kambili remains silent and confused. Ifeoma hears that Papa-Nnukwu is sick, and she fetches him from Abba. Amaka starts painting a picture of him. Father Amadi visits often, and Kambili finds herself attracted to him. One morning Kambili observes Papa-Nnukwu’s morning ritual, which is similar to Catholic confession.

Father Amadi takes Kambili to the local stadium. He makes her chase after him and tries to get her to talk. Kambili is confused by her feelings and his “unpriestly” demeanor. Papa finds out that Papa-Nnukwu is staying in the house.

The next morning the family discover that Papa-Nnukwu has died in his sleep. Papa takes Jaja and Kambili back to Enugu, and Amaka gives Kambili her painting. Papa punishes Jaja and Kambili for not telling him they were staying in the same apartment as their grandfather, a pagan, by pouring boiling water on their feet. Papa and his editor, Ade Coker, decide to run a controversial story in the *Standard*. Soon after, Ade Coker is assassinated with a package bomb.

One day Kambili and Jaja are looking at the painting of Papa-Nnukwu when Papa comes in. He beats Kambili severely, and she wakes up in the hospital. Papa agrees to let Jaja and Kambili return to Nsukka.

Ifeoma worries about losing her job for speaking out against the “sole administrator” appointed by the government. The university closes after a student riot. Men ransack Ifeoma’s flat, trying to intimidate her. Kambili falls more deeply in love with Father Amadi, who seems attracted to her.

Mama arrives one day after being beaten into another miscarriage. Papa takes his family home, and the next day is the Palm Sunday on which the novel begins, when Jaja stands up to Papa.

After Palm Sunday there is less fear and silence in the house. Ifeoma calls to say that she has been fired and is moving to America. Jaja and Kambili return to Nsukka. Ifeoma takes them on a pilgrimage to Aokpe, where Kambili sees visions of the Virgin Mary and reaffirms her faith. Father Amadi leaves to do missionary work, and Kambili weeps and confesses her love to him. Ifeoma gets a visa and prepares to leave Nigeria.

Papa is found dead at his desk, and they all go to Enugu. When Papa’s autopsy is complete, Mama says that she poisoned him. The police arrive and Jaja takes responsibility for the crime.

Three years later, Kambili and Mama visit Jaja in prison to tell him he will be released soon. Mama has grown withdrawn and rarely speaks. After the visit, Kambili feels hopeful about the future.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Kambili Achike – The novel’s narrator, a fifteen-year-old girl who is quiet and withdrawn, but an excellent student. She idolizes her father, Papa, even as she fears his violent punishments, and her worldview is based on his strict Catholic rules. After visiting Nsukka she slowly starts to talk and open up more, and falls in love with the young priest Father Amadi. She ultimately retains her Catholic faith, though a more liberal one based on that of Father Amadi and her Auntie Ifeoma.

Jaja (Chukwuka Achike) – Kambili’s older brother, a seventeen-year-old who is also quiet but an excellent student. Jaja feels guilty about being unable to protect Kambili and Mama from Papa. In Nsukka he discovers a passion for gardening, and he quickly feels more at home with Auntie Ifeoma than with Papa. Jaja then acts more openly rebellious than Kambili, challenging Papa and abandoning his Catholic faith. At the same time he grows more distant from Kambili. He later takes responsibility for Mama’s crime and is imprisoned for three years.

Papa (Eugene Achike) – Kambili’s father, a wealthy factory owner and devout Catholic. Papa uses his vast wealth to support his friends and relatives, many charities, and his church, St. Agnes. He also publishes the newspaper the *Standard*, the only paper willing to criticize the corrupt government. At home, however, Papa is a strict authoritarian. He has rigid rules and impossibly high standards for his wife and children, and hurts them—for what he sees as their own benefit—whenever he perceives that they have sinned or failed. Papa breaks ties with his father, Papa-Nnukwu, when Papa-Nnukwu refuses to become a Catholic. Papa is a “colonial product” who believes that Western culture is superior to Nigerian culture, and as a result he affects a British accent and avoids speaking Igbo.

Mama (Beatrice Achike) – Kambili’s mother, a quiet, submissive woman who takes care of her children but does not speak out against Papa’s violence. After Kambili’s birth she suffers several miscarriages because of Papa’s beatings. Mama is friends with Auntie Ifeoma, but does not act on Ifeoma’s “university talk” of liberation and equality. She feels she cannot leave such a wealthy and socially important and even benevolent man. But as his abuse worsens and he causes yet another miscarriage for Mama, she does slowly poison Papa. After Papa’s death and Jaja’s arrest, Mama rarely speaks and seems constantly distracted.

Aunty Ifeoma – Papa’s sister, a tall, outspoken woman who is a professor at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka. Ifeoma is not afraid to criticize her brother, the university, or the Nigerian government. She is a Catholic, but a liberal and open-minded one who accepts Papa-Nnukwu’s traditionalist beliefs. She treats her children with respect, encouraging them to debate and speak their minds. Since her husband Ifediora’s death she has struggled for money, but she refuses to succumb to the demands that come with Papa’s money. Ifeoma ultimately helps both Jaja and Kambili find their voices and independence. She moves to America when the university fires her for speaking out against the “sole administrator.”

Papa-Nnukwu – The father of Papa and Aunty Ifeoma. He still lives in Abba and remains a traditionalist, following the beliefs of his ancestors. Papa-Nnukwu is close with Ifeoma and her children, but Papa cuts ties with him when he refuses to convert to Christianity. At first Kambili fears him as a “heathen,” but she comes to love him as she spends time with him and sees that his rituals are just as valid as Catholic ones.

Father Amadi – A young, handsome Nigerian priest who is friends with Aunty Ifeoma and her children. He is a Catholic who also respects his Nigerian roots, incorporating Igbo songs into his prayers and blending the old ways with the new. He plays soccer with local boys, jokes with Ifeoma’s children, and acts decidedly “unpriestly.” Kambili comes to fall in love with him. He leaves to do missionary work in Germany, but remains close with Kambili.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Amaka – Aunty Ifeoma’s oldest child, a fifteen-year-old artist who wants to be an activist. She is very outspoken, close with Papa-Nnukwu, and criticizes Kambili for her wealth and meekness. Ultimately the two cousins grow close and understand each other better.

Obiora – Aunty Ifeoma’s second child, a fourteen-year-old who seems mature beyond his years. Obiora questions everything and assumes the role of “man of the house” after his father’s death. He seems older than Jaja, despite being three years his junior, and inspires Jaja to take control of his life.

Chima – Aunty Ifeoma’s youngest child, a seven-year-old boy.

Ade Coker – Papa’s friend and the editor of the *Standard*, a round and kindly man who writes dangerous stories criticizing the government. He is assassinated with a package bomb.

Father Benedict – The white, British, conservative Catholic priest at St. Agnes. Father Benedict sees Catholicism as a rigid set of rules, like Papa does.

Yewande Coker – Ade Coker’s wife, who is distraught by his death. Papa helps her and her daughter by funding their care and buying them a new house after the explosion.

Sisi – The quiet servant in Papa’s house. She provides the

poison Mama uses to kill Papa.

Chinwe Jideze – A wealthy and popular girl in Kambili’s class. She takes the top spot from Kambili one term and is somewhat antagonistic toward Kambili, though eventually she becomes friendlier.

Ezinne – The only girl in Kambili’s class who treats her like a friend.

Kevin – Papa’s family driver, who takes them everywhere.

Celestine – The new driver who replaces Kevin after Papa’s death.

Chiaku – Aunty Ifeoma’s professor friend, who criticizes her move to America.

The Head of State (“Big Oga”) – A corrupt leader who takes over the Nigerian government through a military coup. Probably a stand-in for the real-life Nigerian ruler Ibrahim Babangida.

Grandfather – Mama’s father, a light-skinned Nigerian who was a devout Catholic.

Anikwenwe – An old man who tries to enter Papa’s compound in Abba, despite being a non-Christian.

The Igwe – A local ruler in Abba who visits Papa.

Ifediora – Aunty Ifeoma’s late husband.

Doctor Nduoma – A doctor in Nsukka who treats Papa-Nnukwu.

Nwankiti Ogechi – A pro-democracy activist who is murdered by the government.

Mama Joe – A woman in Nsukka who plaits Kambili’s hair.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



COLONIALISM AND NIGERIAN POLITICS

Though the plot of *Purple Hibiscus* unfolds mostly on a personal level, its characters’ lives are also affected by a larger political background. Nigeria has a long history of English colonialism and oppression—it was a colony of the British for over a hundred and fifty years, and its disparate groups only brought together as a single nation because of British control—and it only became its own independent nation in 1960. Papa is described as a “colonial product”: a man who has bought into the colonialist mindset. Though he is Nigerian, Papa believes that white people do everything better, and he wants everything in his life to be

Western and modern. He speaks in an affected British accent when talking to white people, and avoids speaking the native language of Igbo whenever possible. His sister Auntie Ifeoma, on the other hand, rejects the idea that whiteness-equals-superiority. She is frustrated by the corruption in Nigeria, but she still believes that the country should embrace its own resources and independence. She asserts that Nigeria is still a young nation learning to govern itself, so it should not be judged alongside much older countries that have already gone through growing pains.

While colonialism sets the background for the novel, *Purple Hibiscus* also takes place during a turbulent time for the Nigerian government. The plot probably coincides with the real, historical military coup and subsequent regime of Ibrahim Bangida, one of the country's most corrupt leaders—although in the novel he is only referred to as the Head of State, or “Big Oga.” Few details about the government are given, but politics still affect the daily lives of Adichie's characters: workers' strikes cut off power and water, police require bribes at random checkpoints, and Ade Coker, who is based on the real-life journalist Dele Giwa, is assassinated with a letter bomb. We see everything through a young adult's point of view, but Adichie still manages to make her novel a political one by showing the tragic personal results of the legacy of colonialism, dictatorship, and corruption.



RELIGION AND BELIEF

Religion and belief are central to the novel, particularly in the contrasts between Papa, Papa-Nnukwu, and Auntie Ifeoma/Father Amadi. The plot

begins with descriptions of Papa's religious belief, which were molded by Catholic missionaries and are incredibly strict. He prefers that Igbo not be spoken (or sung) in church, and believes that priests should be very traditional. He befriends and admires the white, conservative Father Benedict. Papa imposes his strict rules on his family, and when they commit what he perceives as a sin, he punishes them with violence, as he himself was as a boy and which he sees as being for their own benefit. Kambili and Mama aren't allowed to wear pants, prayers over meals are long-winded and formal, and non-Christians aren't even allowed onto Papa's land. These beliefs have led to a deep rift between Papa and his father, Papa-Nnukwu, who still follows traditional Igbo rituals. Papa-Nnukwu attends the festival of *mmuo* (spirits), offers food to the gods, and performs a morning declaration of innocence. This makes him a “Godless heathen” in Papa's eyes, yet Adichie portrays his rituals as equally valid to Catholic ones. Auntie Ifeoma practices a sort of blend between the two extremes, as she is a Catholic who includes Igbo songs in her prayers and doesn't judge her father for his traditional beliefs. Ifeoma's priest is the open-minded, lighthearted Nigerian Father Amadi. Adichie ultimately presents Ifeoma's and Papa-Nnukwu's

religion in a much kinder light than Papa's, as Adichie too rejects Western domination over Nigerian culture, and the suppression of joy and acceptance that comes with too strict a dogma. We see this stance through the character of Father Amadi—a young Nigerian priest embracing both the old ways and the new—and also in the positive changes to Jaja and Kambili as they are exposed to beliefs other than Papa's. Jaja and Kambili have grown up seeing their father as a godlike figure, awe-inspiring but also terrifying, and changing their strict Catholic faith also means struggling with losing their faith in Papa. But once they are both freed of this blind belief (Jaja more so than Kambili), they have the freedom to choose their own faith. Kambili finds herself reaffirming her Catholicism with her visions of the Virgin Mary, while Jaja loses his faith altogether. Though they choose different paths, the important thing is that with Auntie Ifeoma and Father Amadi they find a place of religious acceptance, and so have the freedom to choose without risking punishment.



FAMILY

Purple Hibiscus takes place mostly on the familial level, dealing with the relations between Papa, Mama, Jaja, and Kambili, and then their relations with Papa-Nnukwu, Auntie Ifeoma, and her children. First we see the family dynamic of Kambili's family, where they all live in silence and fear, following Papa's strict rules and schedules. This quiet order is based around the terror of Papa's sporadic violence for anything he sees as sinful or disobedient. Kambili and Jaja are very close, though they rarely speak. They also have very little contact with their grandfather, aunt, or cousins, and live secluded in their immediate family. In contrast, Auntie Ifeoma and her children—Amaka, Obiora, and Chima—all speak their minds, laugh often, and are encouraged to debate and question. They are also close with Papa-Nnukwu, as they don't see him as a “heathen” like Papa does.

These two families overlap when Kambili and Jaja go to stay with Auntie Ifeoma. They see how different they are from Ifeoma's family, and start to realize how unhealthy and rigid their own family dynamic is. Jaja and Kambili first discover freedom and joy there, and they don't want to leave. Through Auntie Ifeoma and her children, Adichie represents her idea of a healthy family—one that creates community and love, but also accepts differences and supports individuals as they grow and change.



FREEDOM VS. TYRANNY

Related to the strictness of Papa's beliefs and the corruption of the Nigerian government is an important theme of freedom, and its opposite, tyranny. Politically, Papa and Ade Coker represent a freedom of the press that protests against the censorship and corruption of the Head of State. Auntie Ifeoma, a university professor, also

speaks her mind and criticizes those in power. The political tyranny in the Nigerian government responds to this assertion of freedom with brutal action. Ade Coker is assassinated, the *Standard* and Papa's factories are shut down, and Ifeoma is fired from the university. Hope for political freedom only comes in the novel's last section, when the Head of State dies and democracy is tentatively restored.

Freedom and tyranny exists among Adichie's individual characters as well. Though Papa bravely stands up for political freedom, in the world of his own family—where he is the one in control—he acts like a tyrant. He allows no freedom or independence for Mama, Kambili, or Jaja. He schedules his children's every minute and even chooses the color of the drapes. When anyone acts out or tries to assert their freedom, he responds with violence. Kambili and Jaja thus get their first real taste of freedom at Auntie Ifeoma's house. After seeing this totally different family dynamic—one where all the children are encouraged to speak their minds and question everything—Kambili and Jaja start feeling more rebellious and independent. Kambili's assertion of freedom begins by keeping the painting of Papa-Nnukwu, while Jaja grows more openly rebellious, refusing to speak to his father and then refusing to go to church on Palm Sunday. Jaja's Palm Sunday actions signal a turning point for the family. The most surprising twist comes at the end, however, as Mama turns to her own kind of tyranny—murder—to assert her freedom from Papa. This leads to prison for Jaja, which ends up as just another version of the cycle of freedom and oppression. There is finally some hope with Jaja's impending release, which also coincides with the Head of State's death, as both Nigeria and Kambili's family hope to find true freedom at last.



SILENCE AND SPEECH

Silence and speech are important motifs throughout the novel, to the point that the contrast between the two becomes a recurring theme on

both the personal and political level. The titles of two of the novel's sections deal with this theme as well: "Speaking with our Spirits" and "A Different Silence." Silence is associated with the fear of Papa that Mama, Kambili, and Jaja experience at all times. Kambili, especially, rarely speaks, because she is afraid to stutter and also never wants to anger her father. She and Jaja have a "language of the eyes," speaking only with glances, as they are rarely left alone together and never mention Papa's abuse out loud. Kambili's silence then becomes more conspicuous in the presence of Auntie Ifeoma's family—who are always laughing, singing, and speaking their mind—and Father Amadi, who breaks into song during his prayers. With Ifeoma and Father Amadi's encouragement, however, Kambili starts to speak more, and even to sing. Jaja also grows more comfortable speaking, and he then turns his silence (which is no longer a fearful one) into a weapon against Papa by refusing to speak to

him.

On the political level, Papa and Ade Coker most strongly represent the power of free speech, as their newspaper is the only one to speak out against the corrupt government. Auntie Ifeoma too criticizes the corruption she sees, unlike most of the other professors. Ade Coker is silenced by a package bomb, and Auntie Ifeoma is silenced by losing her job—yet they are both powerful examples of the importance of free speech. Ultimately Adichie always portrays the freedom of speech and music as a positive change over frightened silence and censorship.



VIOLENCE

The forces of tyranny, oppression, and silence all use violence as their tool throughout *Purple Hibiscus*. As with many of Adichie's themes, the

cycle of violence starts at the top and works its way down. The first violence was the oppression of British colonialism, which then led to corruption and violence in the Nigerian governments set up in its wake. The Head of State's military regime uses violence as a tool for censorship and oppression, killing Ade Coker and the pro-democracy activist Nwanketi Ogechi, and ransacking Auntie Ifeoma's apartment. Papa uses violence to enforce his own kind of oppression on his family, as he beats them, whips them, and pours boiling water on them. This violence then leads to more violence in the very attempt to escape it. Just as colonialism resulted in a corrupt independent government, so Papa's violence compels Mama to poison and murder him. Thus Adichie shows that violence almost always begets more violence, as a method of oppression but also as a struggle for freedom.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE PURPLE HIBISCUS

The purple hibiscus, the symbol that gives the novel its title, is a flower growing in Auntie Ifeoma's garden. It was created by her botanist friend, as hibiscuses aren't usually purple. Jaja is struck by the appearance of the flower, and through them he discovers his love of gardening, which becomes a crucial part of his experience of opening up and finding his independence in Nsukka. He then takes some stalks of purple hibiscus back to Enugu and plants them there. Because of its role in Jaja and Kambili's mental awakening, the purple hibiscus comes to represent freedom and individuality—things they lack under Papa's rule, but find in Nsukka with Auntie Ifeoma. At the end of the novel, Kambili hopes that Jaja will plant purple hibiscus when he gets out of prison, showing her hope that freedom will blossom anew even

after so much tragedy.



MAMA'S FIGURINES

Mama has some beloved ceramic figurines of ballet dancers that she keeps on the *étagère*. She always polishes them meticulously after Papa beats her. Mama, Kambili, and Jaja never speak aloud of Papa's violence, but polishing the figurines become a kind of euphemism for his domestic abuse. On Palm Sunday, the turning point for the family, Papa gets angry at Jaja's open disobedience and throws his missal, breaking the figurines. As she cleans them up, Mama tells Kambili that she won't need to replace them. This shows that something has changed in the family dynamic, and Mama won't stand for violence anymore, just as Jaja asserts his independence by disobeying Papa. Thus the figurines symbolize the submissiveness and silence the family lives with under the fear of Papa's violence, and when the figurines are broken it means the beginning of freedom and free speech.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Algonquin Books edition of *Purple Hibiscus* published in 2012.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☝☝ I waited for him to ask Jaja and me to take a sip, as he always did. A love sip, he called it, because you shared the little things you loved with the people you loved. Have a love sip, he would say, and Jaja would go first. Then I would hold the cup with both hands and raise it to my lips. One sip. The tea was always too hot, always burned my tongue, and if lunch was something peppery, my raw tongue suffered. But it didn't matter, because I knew that when the tea burned my tongue, it burned Papa's love into me.

Related Characters: Kambili Achike (speaker), Jaja (Chukwuka Achike), Papa (Eugene Achike)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

In this symbolically loaded passage, we witness Kambili, the heroine of the novel, waiting to sip a cup of her Papa's hot tea with her brother, Jaja. Kambili and Jaja are used to these "love sips," and in fact they look forward to them, as they seem to prove their Papa's love for them. The ritual is so much a part of Kambili's life that she associates her father's

love itself with hot tea: they're both (supposedly) good for her, even if they hurt her in the short term.

We have yet to witness the full extent of Papa's violence to his family, but for now, the pain of hot tea foreshadows Papa's abusive behavior, and how closely connected this violence is with his children's persistent love for and worship of him. Perhaps subconsciously, he uses the hot tea ritual to teach his children that he beats them because he loves them.

☝☝ Papa was staring pointedly at Jaja. "Jaja, have you not shared a drink with us, *gbo*? Have you no words in your mouth?" he asked, entirely in Igbo. A bad sign. He hardly spoke Igbo, and although Jaja and I spoke it with Mama at home, he did not like us to speak it in public. We had to sound civilized in public, he told us; we had to speak English. Papa's sister, Auntie Ifeoma, said once that Papa was too much of a colonial product. She had said this about Papa in a mild, forgiving way, as if it were not Papa's fault...

"Mba, there are no words in my mouth," Jaja replied.

"What?" There was a shadow clouding Papa's eyes, a shadow that had been in Jaja's eyes. Fear. It had left Jaja's eyes and entered Papa's.

"I have nothing to say," Jaja said.

Related Characters: Papa (Eugene Achike) (speaker), Jaja (Chukwuka Achike), Kambili Achike

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Papa--who has just made his family members try his company's new batch of cashew juice--notices that his son, Jaja, is conspicuously silent. Jaja seems to finally be standing up to his abusive, tyrannical father by refusing to parrot the usual praise that is expected of him.

We will see that Kambili and Jaja are known for their silence and obedience, but here Jaja starts to turn that silence into a weapon against Papa--by refusing to even speak to Papa, Jaja robs his father of some of his power.

The ideas of speech and silence here are also heavily influenced by Nigeria's colonial history. Papa's sister Ifeoma (whom we have yet to meet) is the only one who really tells it like it is about Papa, and calls him a "colonial product"--he has internalized the colonialist mindset that whiteness and Westernness always equals superiority. Thus Papa always

speaks English, and wants his children to as well--he sees English as naturally superior to Igbo. Papa's slip into Igbo in this scene, then, is a sign of his sudden anger and desperation. He feels his son slipping away from him, and he simultaneously loses some of the tyrannical power of the English language over its Nigerian "subjects."

●● I lay in bed after Mama left and let my mind rake through the past, through the years when Jaja and Mama and I spoke more with our spirits than with our lips. Until Nsukka. Nsukka started it all; Auntie Ifeoma's little garden next to the verandah of her flat in Nsukka began to lift the silence. Jaja's defiance seemed to me now like Auntie Ifeoma's experimental purple hibiscus: rare, fragrant with the undertones of freedom, a different kind of freedom from the one the crowds waving green leaves chanted at Government Square after the coup. A freedom to be, to do.

Related Characters: Kambili Achike (speaker), Jaja (Chukwuka Achike), Mama (Beatrice Achike), Auntie Ifeoma

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 15-16

Explanation and Analysis

As the first chapter draws to a close, we're introduced to the basic structure of the novel, as well as its dominant motif. The novel will be narrated in flashback, so that by the end, we'll fully understand why Papa broke Mama's figurines, and how their family came to be so divided. Furthermore, Adichie introduces us to the purple hibiscus that will come to stand for the characters' sense of freedom and creativity--a freedom that can't be destroyed by repressive parents or governors, try as they might.

The purple hibiscus, Kambili tells us, is free and "experimental"--a sure sign of its symbolic meaning. It's worth noting that although Kambili is seemingly under her father's thumb--living in his house, ex--in her *mind* she's now free of his influence. By the same token, the hibiscus seems to be powerless and domestic, when in reality it's secretly wild and free.

Chapter 4 Quotes

●● Papa changed his accent when he spoke, sounding British, just as he did when he spoke to Father Benedict. He was gracious, in the eager-to-please way that he always assumed with the religious, especially with the white religious.

Related Characters: Kambili Achike (speaker), Papa (Eugene Achike), Father Benedict

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

Here, we see how submissive and toadying Papa is around representatives of the colonial order. Father Benedict is a powerful white priest, who was trained in European schools and embodies the European civilization (the Judeo-Christian values on which the Western world was built). Papa is so respectful of Western culture that he treats Father Benedict with exaggerated respect, speaking to him in a gracious "eager-to-please" way that Kambili can see through immediately (although she doesn't see anything wrong with it yet).

Papa is a mess of contradictions: he's politically brave, personally tyrannical, rigidly religious, and impressively philanthropic, and yet he ultimately accepts the dominant political order of the international stage--in other words, he supports the idea of the supremacy of Western civilization over the African world. At a time when other Nigerians were fighting for supremacy and independence from the West, Papa is satisfied to accept whiteness as superior, even in matters as supposedly universal as religion.

Chapter 5 Quotes

●● "They are always so quiet," he said, turning to Papa. "So quiet."

"They are not like those loud children people are raising these days, with no home training and no fear of God," Papa said, and I was certain that it was pride that stretched Papa's lips and tightened his eyes.

"Imagine what the *Standard* would be if we were all quiet." It was a joke. Ade Coker was laughing; so was his wife, Yewanda. But Papa did not laugh. Jaja and I turned and went back upstairs, silently.

Related Characters: Ade Coker, Kambili Achike, Papa (Eugene Achike) (speaker), Jaja (Chukwuka Achike), Yewande Coker

Related Themes:**Page Number:** 58**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Papa talks with his friend and business partner Ade Coker about child-rearing policies. Ade points out that Papa's children, including Kambili, are always very quiet--to the point where they never make a sound in public. Papa is clearly very proud of his children; he thinks that his violent parenting methods are justified, since by beating his children they'll be calm and well-behaved at all times (not like other children "these days"). Ade points out the strange contradiction in Papa's life: he's a political advocate who uses journalism and his voice (the *Standard*) to criticize the existing political leadership in Nigeria. And yet Papa tolerates no such criticism or debate at home: in short, he's a personal tyrant who challenges political tyrants. Papa's behavior suggests that in his home life, he's more interested in power and control than in doing the right thing: he's willing to use journalism to fight for political freedom, but he refuses to see that beating and silencing his children isn't a good or virtuous thing to do.

☞ “Ifeoma could not afford it.” Papa-Nnukwu shook his head. “Since the father of her children died, she has seen hard times. But she will bring them this year. You will see them. It is not right that you don’t know them well, your cousins. It is not right.”

Jaja and I said nothing. We did not know Auntie Ifeoma or her children very well because she and Papa had quarreled about Papa-Nnukwu. Mama told us. Auntie Ifeoma stopped speaking to Papa after he barred Papa-Nnukwu from coming to his house, and a few years passed before they finally started speaking to each other.

Related Characters: Papa-Nnukwu, Kambili Achike (speaker), Auntie Ifeoma, Mama (Beatrice Achike), Jaja (Chukwuka Achike), Papa (Eugene Achike)

Related Themes:**Page Number:** 65**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote reaffirms the schism within Kambili's family--a split that is based around Papa's pride and rigid adherence to his own brand of religious dogma. Kambili and Jaja are only allowed to visit their grandfather, Papa-Nnukwu, for fifteen minutes each Christmas, and never to accept food or

drink from him. Here Papa-Nnukwu's brief update highlights how different Papa is from his sister, Auntie Ifeoma. Papa is rich; Ifeoma is poor and widowed. Papa is dogmatic and strict; Ifeoma is openminded and independent. Papa places religion over family; Ifeoma does the opposite (she is a Christian too, but still loves and takes care of her "pagan" father). While Kambili and Jaja are still very much under their father's thumb at this point, every fact they learn about the outside world, and even about their own family, seems to go against Papa's narrow-minded worldview.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☞ “...But you know Eugene quarrels with the truths that he does not like. Our father is dying, do you hear me? Dying. He is an old man, how much longer does he have, *gbo*? Yet Eugene will not let him into this house, will not even greet him... Eugene has to stop doing God’s job. God is big enough to do his own job. If God will judge our father for choosing to follow the way of our ancestors, then let God do the judging, not Eugene.”

Related Characters: Auntie Ifeoma (speaker), Papa-Nnukwu, Mama (Beatrice Achike), Papa (Eugene Achike)

Related Themes:**Page Number:** 95-96**Explanation and Analysis**

Here Kambili overhears her mother talking with Papa's sister, Auntie Ifeoma. Ifeoma is immediately shown to be a strong, confident woman, in contrast with the (relatively) submissive Mama. Ifeoma is the only one willing to tell the truth about Papa--that his ideals and rigid obsession with rules are getting in the way of real familial love and basic human concerns. Papa-Nnukwu, Papa and Ifeoma's father, is dying, but Papa won't visit or help him because Papa-Nnukwu refuses to give up practicing traditional Igbo rituals. (Ifeoma, for her part, is still a Christian, but an openminded one willing to blend Western and Nigerian beliefs.) Here Ifeoma essentially lays it all on the line--Papa (Eugene) is trying to play God, instead of letting God take care of his own business. Ifeoma prefers a more humanistic approach to Christianity, while Papa clearly clings to order, control, and rigid dogma. And in perspective, Papa's refusal to visit his own dying father because of religious differences seems like a very un-Christian thing to do.

☝ Papa wanted Father Benedict to hear our confession. We had not gone in Abba because 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.

Related Characters: Kambili Achike (speaker), Father Benedict, Papa (Eugene Achike)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Papa takes his family to Father Benedict's house for confession instead of going to the Nigerian priest at their church. Papa notes that Father Benedict is more "spiritual," while the church in Abba, by contrast, is more concerned with worldly goods than heavenly ones. Outrageously, Papa notes that white people simply wouldn't be so materialistic.

Adichie is being bitterly ironic here, since 1) Western people are plenty materialistic, obviously, and 2) the religious colonization of Nigeria--i.e., the cultural movement that converted Papa to Christianity--was *itself* motivated by the materialistic desire to steal Nigeria's natural resources. Missionaries and priests came to Nigeria advocating frugality and moderation, and supposedly spreading God's message of love, and yet they cooperated with Western businessmen and politicians who used the opportunity to harvest Nigeria's fruit, oil, gold, etc. and oppress and kill the Nigerian people themselves.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☝ I did not say anything else until lunch was over, but I listened to every word spoken, followed every cackle of laughter and line of banter. Mostly, my cousins did the talking and Auntie Ifeoma sat back and watched them, eating slowly. She looked like a football coach who had done a good job with her team and was satisfied to stand next to the eighteen-yard box and watch.

Related Characters: Kambili Achike (speaker), Auntie Ifeoma

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 120-121

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Kambili has gone to visit Auntie Ifeoma in her home. There, Kambili is shocked to find a very different kind of household than the one she is used to. Unlike Papa, Auntie Ifeoma encourages noise and conversation--indeed, she seems to enjoy sitting back and listening to her children argue and bicker, as if she's done a "good job" raising them and teaching them to debate about issues freely. Papa, of course, acts like a god in his own home--a tyrant with moral authority in all things--and prefers his wife and children to remain silent at all times, unless they're praying or agreeing with him.

Ifeoma's behavior in this passage indicates that she values open discourse and freedom of speech; not only in Nigerian society but in her home (versus her brother, who values political freedom, but not personal or religious freedom in his house). Furthermore, Kambili's surprise with Ifeoma reminds us how severe her own upbringing is: Papa doesn't let her speak her mind, let alone talk at the dinner table. It is only through their interactions with Ifeoma and her family that Kambili and Jaja will start to escape their father's influence.

☝ "I hear he's very involved in the editorial decisions. The *Standard* is the only paper that dares to tell the truth these days."

"Yes," Auntie Ifeoma said. "And he has a brilliant editor, Ade Coker, although I wonder how much longer before they lock him up for good. Even Eugene's money will not buy everything." "I was reading somewhere that *Amnesty World* is giving your brother an award," Father Amadi said. He was nodding slowly, admiringly, and I felt myself go warm all over, with pride, with a desire to be associated with Papa.

Related Characters: Auntie Ifeoma, Kambili Achike, Father Amadi (speaker), Papa (Eugene Achike), Ade Coker

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 136-137

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Kambili meets Father Amadi, a young, handsome priest. Amadi is impressed to hear that Kambili's father is Eugene Achike, since he knows Eugene to be an important philanthropist and advocate for political

freedom: Eugene is regarded as something of a hero among the Nigerian people. Amadi tells Kambili about some of her father's most impressive achievements: as a writer and journalist, he's one of the only figures in the country who dares to criticize the Nigerian leadership, a decision that might eventually lead him into prison (along with his editor, Ade Coker).

The passage is notable because it reminds us of the paradoxes of Papa's behavior. He's an incredibly generous and noble-spirited man, who donates his time and money to fighting for other people. And yet he's also a severe, brutal dictator in his own house: he sincerely believes that children should be beaten and punished harshly when they do anything wrong. While Papa's behavior might be hard for readers to understand, Adichie uses his contradictions to make him a deeply human and fascinating character, both admirable and reprehensible at once.

☛ Father Amadi led the first decade, and at the end, he started an Igbo praise song. While they sang, I opened my eyes and stared at the wall... I pressed my lips together, biting my lower lip, so my mouth would not join in the singing on its own, so my mouth would not betray me.

Related Characters: Kambili Achike (speaker), Father Amadi

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 138

Explanation and Analysis

Kambili and Jaja have had their eyes opened during their brief time with Aunty Ifeoma and her family. Unlike Father Benedict, Ifeoma's priest Father Amadi is young, openminded, and, most importantly, is accepting of Nigerian and Igbo traditions as being equally valuable to Western Catholic doctrine. As we've already learned, Papa considers Igbo to be a language that is inferior to English, and is even "heathen" in its origins, but Father Amadi embraces Igbo as another language of praise for a universal, life-affirming God. This worldview is obviously more appealing than Papa's, but at this point Kambili is still very much under her father's influence. We see this fact especially in this scene, as she "silences" herself by biting her lip, instead of singing along with the rest of her family. According to Papa, Kambili would be doing the good Christian thing, but from an outside perspective this seems repressive and ridiculous--she is purposefully keeping herself from praising the very God she professes to love, as well as refusing to join in an

expression of communal love, joy, and celebration.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☛ Amaka and Papa-Nnukwu spoke sometimes, their voices low, twining together. They understood each other, using the sparest words. Watching them, I felt a longing for something I knew I would never have.

Related Characters: Kambili Achike (speaker), Papa-Nnukwu, Amaka

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 165

Explanation and Analysis

Amaka, Kambili's cousin, and Papa-Nnukwu, Kambili's grandfather, are very close: they clearly love each other deeply, and over the years have developed a close personal language, to the point where they can speak only a few words and understand each other completely. Kambili is jealous of her cousin's close relationship with her grandfather; she wishes that Papa had allowed her to spend more time with Papa-Nnukwu growing up. In short, Kambili is seeing the consequences of his own father's close-mindedness: because Papa didn't get along with his father, Kambili never got to visit her grandfather growing up. She feels that she's missed out on an intimate family connection. By contrast, Kambili's rapport with her own father is almost nonexistent, consisting mostly of her own silence and Papa's lecturing, praying, or moralizing.

☛ "How can Our Lady intercede on behalf of a heathen, Aunty?"

Aunty Ifeoma was silent as she ladled the thick cocoyam paste into the soup pot; then she looked up and said Papa-Nnukwu was not a heathen but a traditionalist, that sometimes what was different was just as good as what was familiar, that when Papa-Nnukwu did his *itu-nzu*, his declaration of innocence, in the morning, it was the same as our saying the rosary.

Related Characters: Kambili Achike (speaker), Papa-Nnukwu, Aunty Ifeoma

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

The divide within Kambili's family couldn't be clearer in this passage. Kambili has been raised by her Papa to believe in the strictest interpretation of Catholicism; she believes that God doesn't respond to heathens--i.e., those who haven't taken communion and who don't interpret Catholicism correctly. Thus, when Kambili hears Ifeoma praising the Virgin Mary for Papa-Nnukwu's improving health, she doubts that God will listen to prayers on the behalf of a "heathen." Aunt Ifeoma pauses, as if trying to keep from saying something too harsh, and then diplomatically tries to correct some of Kambili's beliefs without attacking Papa too directly: she claims that it's possible to worship God in many different ways. In short, Ifeoma subscribes to the belief that many religions have their good points; she's a pluralist who embraces many different points of view. Furthermore, she suggests, a truly loving God wouldn't entirely abandon his creation, no matter their beliefs. Kambili, on the other hand, has been raised on a stricter, narrower point of view.

●● I laughed. It sounded strange, as if I were listening to the recorded laughter of a stranger being played back. I was not sure I had ever heard myself laugh. "Why did you become a priest?" I blurted out, then wished I had not asked, that the bubbles in my throat had not let that through. Of course he had gotten the call, the same call that all the Reverend Sisters in school talked about when they asked us to always listen for the call when we prayed. Sometimes I imagined God calling me, his rumbling voice British-accented. He would not say my name right; like Father Benedict, he would place the emphasis on the second syllable rather than the first.

Related Characters: Kambili Achike (speaker), Father Amadi, Father Benedict

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 179-180

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Kambili begins to reluctantly shed some of her preconceptions about life and religion, while moving on to accept others. She's spending time with Father Amadi, who she seems to like a lot. Amadi gets Kambili to loosen up and stop being so silent, and before long, Kambili is laughing for the first time in the entire novel. Kambili asks Amadi why he became a priest, but then regrets this and tells us, the readers, that she knows the answer: God calls priests to the

profession.

Kambili's idea of God's "calling" shows us how Eurocentric her worldview is because of Papa's upbringing. She's been taught to embrace a Christian God who listens to all Catholics, but who doesn't really fit with her own culture and country. Kambili can't even imagine God pronouncing her name correctly, or speaking in any way other than with a white British accent--a clear symbol for the discord between Kambili's religion and her culture.

●● "Ifeoma, did you call a priest?" Papa asked.

"Is that all you can say, eh, Eugene? Have you nothing else to say, *gbo*? Our father has died! Has your head turned upside down? Will you not help me to bury our father?"

"I cannot participate in a pagan funeral, but we can discuss with the parish priest and arrange a Catholic funeral."

Aunt Ifeoma got up and started to shout. Her voice was unsteady. "I will put my dead husband's grave up for sale, Eugene, before I give our father a Catholic funeral. Do you hear me? I said I will sell Ifediora's grave first! Was our father a Catholic? I ask you, Eugene, was he a Catholic? *Uchu gba gi!*" Aunt Ifeoma snapped her fingers at Papa; she was throwing a curse at him. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

Related Characters: Aunt Ifeoma, Papa (Eugene Achike) (speaker), Papa-Nnukwu, Ifediora

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 188-189

Explanation and Analysis

Papa-Nnukwu has died, and Papa has also arrived to pick up his children. In the immediate aftermath of Papa-Nnukwu's death, we're reminded of the discord within his family: as soon as he hears the news, Papa argues with Aunt Ifeoma about how their father should be buried. Papa is so strict in his religious beliefs that he refuses to give his father a "pagan"--i.e., not totally Catholic--funeral, despite the fact that Papa-Nnukwu was a "pagan" for his entire life. Papa seems more upset that his father didn't convert to Catholicism before death than he is with his father's death itself. Ifeoma, by contrast, is willing to honor her father's religion by giving him the proper funeral he would have wanted. Furthermore, Ifeoma seems genuinely upset by her father's death, finally losing the confidence and control she has exhibited throughout the novel, and shouting at and cursing Eugene.

“Kambili, you are precious.” His voice quavered now, like someone speaking at a funeral, choked with emotion. “You should strive for perfection. You should not see sin and walk right into it.” He lowered the kettle into the tub, tilted it toward my feet. He poured the hot water on my feet, slowly, as if he were conducting an experiment and wanted to see what would happen. He was crying now, tears streaming down his face... I watched the water leave the kettle, flowing almost in slow motion in an arc to my feet. The pain of contact was so pure, so scalding, I felt nothing for a second. And then I screamed. “That is what you do to yourself when you walk into sin. You burn your feet,” he said.

Related Characters: Papa (Eugene Achike), Kambili Achike (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

In this chilling, emotional passage, Papa punishes Kambili for not telling him that she was spending time with her "heathen" grandfather, Papa-Nnukwu, and was even sharing a room with him. With tears in his eyes, Papa pours boiling water on Kambili's feet, telling her that she must avoid sin at all costs.

Papa is a tragic character--he seems to be motivated by his sincere love of religion, not just his sadistic need for control. Thus, he tells Kambili that she's precious *and* hurts her in the same instant: he's so concerned for her soul that he's willing to "condition" her to avoid sin (in the same way that he was conditioned, as we learn). One can recognize Papa's sincerity without agreeing with his methods: he's horribly violent, to the point where he's willing to torture his own family, thus undercutting the very religious ideals and freedom that he's otherwise trying to promote.

Chapter 11 Quotes

“Ade Coker was at breakfast with his family when a courier delivered a package to him. His daughter, in her primary school uniform, was sitting across the table from him. The baby was nearby, in a high chair. His wife was spooning Cerelac into the baby's mouth. Ade Coker was blown up when he opened the package—a package everybody would have known was from the Head of State even if his wife Yewande had not said that Ade Coker looked at the envelope and said “It has the State House seal” before he opened it.

Related Characters: Kambili Achike (speaker), The Head of

State (“Big Oga”), Ade Coker, Yewande Coker

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 206

Explanation and Analysis

Ade Coker, whose character was inspired by real-life Nigerian journalist Dele Giwa, is assassinated in his own home (just as Giwa was). Ade is a courageous editor and journalist who uses his influence to criticize the Nigerian leadership, like Papa himself. Here, the Nigerian Head of State (never named, but probably based on real-life dictator Ibrahim Babangida) sends Ade a package, marked with his official seal. Ade opens the package, not thinking that the head of state would try to murder him with so little subterfuge. But the package turns out to be a bomb, which ends Ade's life. The scene reminds us that the Head of State has almost unlimited power in his own country: he doesn't *have* to hide his assassination plots--instead, he can simply send a bomb in the mail, bearing his official seal. This assassination is also a major turning point in the plot, as it is a sign that Papa's political activities have real, deadly consequences, and it is also a symbol of "silencing" on a political level--Ade is literally killed for speaking out against tyranny.

Chapter 12 Quotes

“It was what Auntie Ifeoma did to my cousins, I realized then, setting higher and higher jumps for them in the way she talked to them, in what she expected of them. She did it all the time believing they would scale the rod. And they did. It was different for Jaja and me. We did not scale the rod because we believed we could, we scaled it because we were terrified that we couldn't.

Related Characters: Kambili Achike (speaker), Auntie Ifeoma, Jaja (Chukwuka Achike)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 226

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Kambili watches as Father Amadi teaches children how to exercise by literally "raising the bar"--i.e., putting up a rod and encouraging the children to jump over it, and then gradually raising it higher and higher. Kambili comes to see the rod as a metaphor for different methods

of upbringing. She's been raised by a strict, tyrannical parent, Papa, who tries to get her to succeed by hurting her and threatening to hit her. Kambili now understands and admires the strategy that Auntie Ifeoma uses instead: instead of beating or shaming her children, she gives them praise and encouragement--more effective motivators than fear. In the end, Kambili thinks, Ifeoma's method of child-rearing is more powerful, because it encourages children to become self-motivated--they *want* to jump higher, rather than just jumping out of fear of punishment.

“It is not about me, Chiaku.” Auntie Ifeoma paused. “Who will teach Amaka and Obiora in university?”
“The educated ones leave, the ones with the potential to right the wrongs. They leave the weak behind. The tyrants continue to reign because the weak cannot resist. Do you not see that it is a cycle? Who will break that cycle?”

Related Characters: Auntie Ifeoma, Chiaku (speaker), Amaka, Obiora

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 245

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we learnt that Auntie Ifeoma is considering moving to America, where she could get a job teaching at university. In America, Auntie Ifeoma's work would receive more praise--and she also wouldn't be risking her life to continue her academic projects. Furthermore, Ifeoma's children could receive a real education without fear of violence, strikes, or lack of utilities. And yet Auntie Ifeoma's friend Chiaku here resents her for contemplating leaving Nigeria. Chiaku points out that Nigeria has always had a problem with maintaining its own talent: whenever somebody is talented or successful, he or she goes to the West and never comes back. Chiaku characterizes the process as a cycle: the talented grow up in Nigeria, but then leave for American or European schools, and so Nigeria stays mostly the same--having driven out its best and brightest. Chiaku has a point on a global and political level--tyranny is only perpetuated through ignorance and stagnancy--but on a personal level, Ifeoma seems to have no positive option other than leaving the country she loves.

Chapter 15 Quotes

“When the missionaries first came, they didn't think Igbo names were good enough. They insisted that people take English names to be baptized. Shouldn't we be moving ahead?”
“It's different now, Amaka, don't make this what it's not,” Father Amadi said calmly...

“But what's the point, then?” Amaka said... “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?’”

Related Characters: Amaka (speaker), Father Amadi

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 272

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Amaka, the teenaged child of Auntie Ifeoma, is preparing for her confirmation. As Adichie explains it, in Nigeria the Catholic confirmation ritual usually involves the priest giving the young man or woman a “Christian name”--i.e., a Western name. Amaka, a budding political activist and Nigerian nationalist, argues that she shouldn't have to take a Christian name; names of Nigerian origin are just as holy and appropriate for the confirmation ritual. Amaka's argument reinforces the notion that a truly spiritual and political person sometimes must be a pluralist--i.e., must embrace many different cultures and ideologies. Amaka is willing to go through confirmation--a European transplant--and yet she also wants to hang on to her Nigerian identity during the process.

The sun turned white, the color and shape of the host. And then I saw her, the Blessed Virgin: an image in the pale sun, a red glow on the back of my hand, a smile on the face of the rosary-bedecked man whose arm rubbed against mine. She was everywhere.

Related Characters: Kambili Achike (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 274

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Kambili's faith in Catholicism is reconfirmed. She and her family have gone on a pilgrimage, and here she

seems to see the image of the Virgin Mary everywhere. Kambili has been questioning her Catholic faith at times, particularly as it connects to her father's rule--and yet here, she seems to be more of a Catholic than ever before. Unlike her brother, Jaja, Kambili embraces the concept of the Virgin Mary: she thinks that religion, and specifically Christianity, are crucial parts of life, no matter how Papa has misinterpreted them.

It's important to notice how greatly Kambili's concept of Catholicism has changed over the course of the book. At first, Kambili's vision of Catholicism was colored by her father's brutal, tyrannical parenting: Adichie's descriptions favored claustrophobic interiors, symbolizing Kambili's sheltered view of the world. Now, Kambili has synthesized Catholicism with her aunt's pluralistic worldview: as a result, she sees the glory of religion "everywhere." Kambili has found new freedom and independence from her father and her family. She doesn't turn her back on religion altogether; she just modifies it to fit with her own life (a good metaphor for the way Nigeria might want to alter Western culture to fit with its own).

“It's your father. They called me from the factory, they found him lying dead on his desk.” Mama sounded like a recording...

Jaja grabbed the phone. Auntie Ifeoma led me to the bed. I sat down and stared at the bag of rice that leaned against the bedroom wall... I had never considered the possibility that Papa would die, that Papa could die. He was different from Ade Coker, from all the other people they had killed. He had seemed immortal.

Related Characters: Mama (Beatrice Achike), Kambili Achike (speaker), Jaja (Chukwuka Achike), Ade Coker, Auntie Ifeoma, Papa (Eugene Achike)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 287

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Kambili receives word that her father has been found dead at his desk. Kambili is shocked by the news of her father's death: he'd always seemed like an immortal to her--a harsh, tyrannical god, but still a god.

It's not yet clear why Kambili's father has died so suddenly. And yet his death is a crucial turning-point in the novel. Kambili has been moving further and further from her father's worldview throughout the last couple chapters--as

if to reflect Kambili's growing independence, Papa dies, so that he can no longer control what Kambili does or thinks. Papa is a complex character, at once contemptible, admirable, and tragic: he's a brutal bully, but he also seems to love his children sincerely, and has undoubtedly done much good in the world outside his own home.

Chapter 16 Quotes

“I should have taken care of Mama. Look how Obiora balances Auntie Ifeoma's family on his head, and I am older than he is. I should have taken care of Mama.”
 “God knows best,” I said. “God works in mysterious ways.” And I thought how Papa would be proud that I had said that, how he would approve of my saying that.
 Jaja laughed. It sounded like a series of snorts strung together. “Of course God does. Look what He did to his faithful servant Job, even to His own son. But have you ever wondered why? Why did He have to murder his own son so we would be saved? Why didn't He just go ahead and save us?”

Related Characters: Kambili Achike, Jaja (Chukwuka Achike) (speaker), Mama (Beatrice Achike), Obiora, Papa (Eugene Achike)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 289

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Kambili and Jaja are still recovering from their father's sudden death. Kambili notes that with Papa dead, they'll have to take care of their mother more closely--indeed, they both feel guilty for not doing so sooner. Jaja in particular feels guilty that he didn't protect his mother from Papa's beatings--he could have saved her many times before, and he contrasts his own submissiveness to his cousin Obiora's maturity. Kambili offers up a cliched truism--God works in mysterious ways--showing that she continues to subconsciously worship her father and imitate his style of religious fervor. (He's dead, of course, but she still immediately thinks of how he would be proud of her for saying this.)

Jaja, by contrast, has entirely rejected Catholicism along with his father's authority. Instead, Jaja now believes that Christianity is just a system of domination, used to justify people's pain and suffering: there's no reason, for instance, why God *had* to punish Job (or even Christ himself) so harshly. Perhaps God, just like Papa, is a bully, hurting people for no particular reason. In all, the passage shows

the divide between Kambili and Jaja. Both have now been freed from Papa's literal control, but they react to this freedom in different ways.

“I started putting the poison in his tea before I came to Nsukka. Sisi got it for me; her uncle is a powerful witch doctor.”

For a long, silent moment I could think of nothing... Then I thought of taking sips of Papa's tea, love sips, the scalding liquid that burned his love onto my tongue. “Why did you put it in his tea?” I asked Mama, rising. My voice was loud. I was almost screaming. “Why in his tea?”

Related Characters: Mama (Beatrice Achike), Kambili Achike (speaker), Papa (Eugene Achike), Sisi

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 290

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the novel, it's revealed that Kambili's meek, submissive mother was the one who murdered Papa: she put poison in his tea, so that eventually he'd die. Kambili, who is by now deeply conflicted regarding her father--she still can't help loving and worshipping him, but she also recognizes how tyrannical and sadistic he was--is especially distraught by the fact that Papa was killed by his tea. In this moment of revelation, Adichie poignantly reminds us how Papa used to share his hot tea with his children, giving them "love sips"--and this same "love," which was both painful and alluring, is the method by which Papa himself was silently killed.

Mama's murder shows that tyranny and bullying have consequences. We can't entirely forgive Mama for her actions--any more than we can forgive Papa for his--and yet we can understand where she's coming from. After years of being beaten, she couldn't take it anymore. She never spoke out against Papa, but she did rebel against his tyranny in her own desperate way.

There are people, she once wrote, who think that we cannot rule ourselves because the few times we tried, we failed, as if all the others who rule themselves today got it right the first time. It is like telling a crawling baby who tries to walk, and then falls back on his buttocks, to stay there. As if the adults walking past him did not all crawl, once.

Related Characters: Auntie Ifeoma (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 301

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Auntie Ifeoma, who has moved to America to teach, writes about the history of Nigeria, and of colonialism. Ifeoma notes that there are "some" (i.e., mostly Western intellectuals) who believe that the Western world *needs* to control and direct Africa forever, since Africans don't know how to control their own people. Ifeoma finds such an argument illogical--African countries need to *learn* how to run themselves, rather than depending on Western military and economic control forever.

Ifeoma's statements bring the novel to a cautiously optimistic ending, and broaden the perspective of the story from the personal to the international. We've seen how the characters fight for control of their own minds and lives, sometimes resorting to violence to do so. Ifeoma seems to argue that the struggle for freedom is always worthwhile, because the end goal is freedom from tyrannical people--Papa, for example--or freedom from tyrannical countries--like Britain and the U.S. Essentially she's saying that it's unfair to judge Nigeria against much older, more prosperous nations like America or Western Europe, as Nigeria is still very young as a country, and still going through "growing pains." Ifeoma has gone against her friend's advice and moved to America--contributing to the cycle of Nigeria's best and brightest leaving the country--but here she is also fulfilling the tradition of the emigre who gains the best perspective and insight regarding her homeland only when she is away from it.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

The narrator, a 15-year-old girl named Kambili Achike, who lives in Enugu, Nigeria, says that “things started to fall apart” in her family after one specific day: her 17-year-old brother Jaja refused to go to communion on Palm Sunday, and her Papa, Eugene, a devout Catholic, threw his missal (a Catholic liturgical book) in anger, breaking the **ceramic figurines** on the étagère (a piece of furniture with a series of shelves).

Kambili explains what happened before this scene. She describes Papa’s fierce devotion to Catholic tradition and the priest at their church, St. Agnes, who is a white British man named Father Benedict. Father Benedict insists that prayers and recitations be done only in Latin, not in the native language of Igbo as they are at many Nigerian churches. In his sermons Father Benedict praises Papa extravagantly, describing his virtues as a righteous publisher of the newspaper the *Standard*. He says that Papa always prints the truth and speaks out for freedom even when it is difficult or dangerous. Papa is a wealthy business owner, but his money has not corrupted him like the other “Big Men.”

During this praise Papa’s face remains emotionless, and Kambili remembers his decree that modesty is important, so she also tries to hide her pride. On this Palm Sunday Papa notices that Jaja did not take the communion. When they arrive home Papa slams his missal down on the dining room table and interrogates Jaja about it. Jaja answers rebelliously, saying that he doesn’t like the wafer, and that if refusing to take communion means death, then he will die. Kambili pleads with her eyes for him to stop, but Jaja won’t look at her.

Papa then flings his missal at the étagère and breaks the small **ceramic figurines** of ballet dancers. Kambili’s mother, Beatrice (Mama), comes in and immediately starts picking up the pieces of the figurines. Kambili feels suffocated in the silence. Mama tells Papa to drink his tea and Jaja to help her clean up. Papa sits down. Usually he gives Kambili and Jaja a “love sip” of his tea before he drinks it—letting them share it, and Kambili likes this practice even though the tea always burns her tongue, because it proves Papa’s love for her—but today he does not, which disturbs Kambili.

The first line references “Things Fall Apart,” the famous novel about the coming of missionaries and colonialism to a village in Nigeria by Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, who was one of Adichie’s influences. The novel begins in the middle of a confusing scene, but we already see that the family is very religious, and that they are familiar with domestic violence.



Much of the novel focuses on the character of Eugene Achike, or “Papa.” We first learn about his public life: he is a wealthy factory owner who speaks out for freedom through his newspaper and supports many people and causes with his money. Father Benedict is an example of the long history of British colonialism in Nigeria—Nigeria has been an independent nation for at least a decade by now, but the worldview that Western-equals-superior still pervades daily life, like the idea that praying in Igbo is inferior to praying in Latin.



We immediately see the kind of duality present in Papa’s life. In public he is the picture of virtue, not even letting himself feel proud when he is praised, while back at home he has a violent temper—but this too involves the idea of virtue, and punishment for sins. Adichie opens with Jaja’s rebellion, and later shows just how important it is. Kambili hints at the “language of the eyes” that she and Jaja share.



Papa’s “love sip” is a good encapsulation of his relationship with his children: the tea burns their tongues and causes them pain, but it proves that Papa loves them. They idolize, obey, and love Papa despite his violent punishments. In fact, as Kambili’s narration indicates there is a sense in which she has been taught to love him for his violence, because he always explains his violent acts as being for the benefit of his children and wife, as teaching them the right way to act after they have done something wrong or sinful.



Jaja helps Mama pick up the pieces of the **figurines**, and Kambili feels like she is in a nightmare because everything is so different from how it usually is. She goes upstairs to change and looks out the window at Mama’s red hibiscuses, which she uses to decorate the church. Many visitors also pluck the flowers as they pass by. Kambili remembers two government agents who came to the house to try and bribe Papa, and even they couldn’t resist picking some hibiscus.

None of the usual Sunday routines take place: Mama doesn’t plait Kambili’s hair in the kitchen and Jaja doesn’t go upstairs to his room to read. Kambili tells Mama that she is sorry her **figurines** broke, but Mama just nods and shakes her head as if the figurines weren’t important to her. Kambili knows that they were, though—every time she heard Papa beating up Mama in their room, Mama would come downstairs and meticulously polish the figurines afterwards.

The family sits down to lunch and Papa says a prayer over the food that lasts twenty minutes. He likes to refer to the Virgin Mary as “Shield of the Nigerian People,” a title he invented. Sisi, the family’s servant, brings in the food and they eat, though Kambili cannot taste anything because she is so stressed. Sisi brings in the new batch of cashew juice (which Papa will sell from his factories) and they each try it. Mama and Kambili both compliment it nervously.

Jaja is conspicuously silent, and Papa asks him if he has any “words in his mouth.” Papa says this in Igbo, which is a bad sign—Papa prefers everyone in the family to speak English, so as to “sound civilized.” Kambili remembers Papa’s sister, Auntie Ifeoma, calling Papa a “colonial product.” Jaja responds that he has nothing to say, and he excuses himself from the table before Papa’s closing prayer. Kambili notices that the fear has left Jaja’s eyes and entered Papa’s. Papa calls for Jaja, starts to get up, and then slumps back into his chair. Kambili chokes on her cashew juice and has a coughing fit.

That evening Kambili stays in bed and doesn’t go to dinner. Papa sits with her a while, and she notices that his breathing is labored and his face has a rash on it. Mama brings her some soup, but after eating it Kambili throws it up. She asks about Jaja, and Mama says that he didn’t come down for dinner either. Kambili asks if Mama will replace the **figurines**, and Mama says that she won’t. Kambili starts to understand that everything has changed now, and Mama may not need the figurines anymore.

Adichie gives a few spare details to set the scene for later—Papa is an important enough man that the government tried to bribe him; Kambili finds some solace in natural beauty; and Jaja’s disobedience is new and unheard of in the house.



Adichie now reveals the importance of the figurines. Mama always polishes them after Papa beats her, and so they become a kind of euphemism for the domestic violence that Mama, Jaja, and Kambili never speak of. The breaking of the figurines, then, represents the beginning of the end of this violence.



Papa’s intense devotion to Catholicism is present in every aspect of life. Kambili narrates Papa’s twenty-minute prayer as if that were the usual custom before eating a meal—and in her family, it is. Everything Kambili and Mama do is done in silence and fear, trying to keep the peace.



Papa is a “colonial product” because he has adopted the mindset of his missionary teachers—that everything Western is always superior, and that he must cut himself off from his roots to be a true Catholic or “civilized” man. Thus Papa always prefers speaking and hearing English over Igbo, because he sees English as the more civilized language. Later we will see the irony of this scene—that Jaja now uses silence as a weapon against Papa.



Kambili has recognized the symbolism of the figurines, and she now sees that their destruction coincides with a change in the family dynamic. Mama is not as afraid of violence anymore, and Jaja is willing to speak out against his father. Papa’s rash is a sinister prediction of his death by slow poisoning.



Mama leaves, and Kambili remembers what started all this change. There were many years when she and Jaja and Mama “spoke more with our spirits than with our lips,” but the true changes began when they visited Aunty Ifeoma in Nsukka. Kambili remembers Ifeoma’s garden of **purple hibiscus**, and the scent of freedom they seemed to give off. This was a different kind of freedom from the one Kambili had heard angry crowds chanting for—this was “a freedom to be, to do.”

Adichie briefly introduces the purple hibiscus as a symbol of freedom and independence, while also referencing the theme of silence and speech and bringing up Nigerian politics. We see everything in the novel through the eyes of a fifteen-year-old, so there is no thorough description of the political situation, but in this way Adichie more poignantly shows how corruption and violence affect even children.



CHAPTER 2

Kambili’s narration now jumps months back in time to describe the events leading up to Palm Sunday. Mama brings Kambili’s school uniforms inside before it rains. Jaja and Kambili wash their own uniforms in the half hour Papa allocates for uniform-washing. It isn’t proper for an older person to do a younger person’s chores, but Mama doesn’t mind bringing in the clothes. Kambili thinks about her mother that “there was so much that she did not mind.”

Adichie structures the novel so that we see the turning point for the family, then life up to that point, and then life after it. Kambili now explains daily life in the house before Jaja dared rebel against Papa. We start to see how Papa controls every aspect of his children’s lives, even scheduling their time for washing clothes. Kambili already has a hint of bitterness at her mother for submitting to violence so docilely.



Mama tells Kambili that she is pregnant, and the baby is due in October. Mama is pleased with this, because after having Kambili she had several miscarriages. The people of their home village started to gossip, and even to suggest that Papa should marry another woman who could have more children. But Papa stayed, and Mama is grateful he did. She compares him to another man who took a second wife. Kambili agrees that Papa should be praised for this. Kambili doesn’t even like comparing Papa to other men, as she considers him so far above them.

Everything seems peaceful at this point, and again we see the virtue of Papa’s public actions. Adichie also shows just how much Kambili idolizes her father at this point—she resents him even being compared to another man because she thinks he is so much better than other men. Papa is almost a godlike figure for her, and right now her belief in God is tied up in her belief in Papa.



Mama and Sisi are cooking to host the members of the Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal prayer group, which consists of some women in Enugu. During the event, the sisters clap and sing in Igbo for half an hour and then Sisi brings in the feast she and Mama have prepared. The sisters chide Mama for going to so much trouble, but then thank her and eat.

The Achikes are an important family with a spotless public image to uphold, and so Mama is obligated to entertain her guests well. The prayer group practices Catholicism in a way that Papa would not approve of, as we later learn—both singing and speaking Igbo.



Jaja comes home from school, wearing his neatly ironed uniform. Last year he was voted “neatest junior boy” at school, which pleased Papa greatly. Jaja goes to Kambili’s room and the two talk about Mama’s pregnancy. They speak in a kind of special language using mostly their eyes. Jaja declares that they must protect the baby, and Kambili knows that he means protect the baby from Papa.

Before Palm Sunday there is a special kind of silence in the house, a silence associated with fear and repression. Jaja and Kambili have a special language of glances, and they never speak directly of Papa’s violence. This is what Adichie means by “speaking with our spirits,” this section’s title.



Jaja goes downstairs and Kambili looks at the written schedule posted on her wall. Papa makes a daily schedule for both Kambili and Jaja, allocating time for every activity, including studying, praying, eating, and “family time.” Kambili knows that “Papa liked order,” and she wonders when he will first start making a schedule for the new baby.

Papa’s tyranny over his family isn’t only violence—it also means that he controls every aspect of their lives, scheduling every activity every hour of Jaja and Kambili’s day.



During family time the next day, Papa and Jaja are playing chess and they are all listening to the radio. A general comes on the air and announces that there has been a coup, and that there will be a new government in Nigeria. Papa excuses himself and goes to call Ade Coker, the editor of Papa’s paper the *Standard*. Papa returns, looking sad, and says that coups always lead to other coups, as “military men would always overthrow one another.”

The world of politics now intrudes into the family’s isolated sphere. We never get a detailed explanation, as everything is presented through Kambili’s eyes, but this coup and ensuing military regime is probably based on Ibrahim Babangida, one of Nigeria’s most corrupt rulers.



The *Standard* had been critical of the past government, running stories about cabinet members stashing public money in foreign bank accounts. Papa declares that though the politicians are corrupt, Nigeria needs a “renewed democracy” instead of a military leader. The next day the *Standard* is the only paper to criticize the new Head of State and ask him to return the government to a democracy. The other papers all praise the new leader for saving the country from the corrupt politicians. Kambili says “God will deliver us,” hoping to please Papa, and he takes her hand.

The great irony of Papa’s character is that though he is a violent and controlling tyrant at home, in public he bravely stands up for free speech and uses his wealth to help others. He and his editor, Ade Coker, become the only ones willing to criticize the corrupt regime that has just taken power, even when it means endangering their own lives. When she speaks, Kambili always thinks of what would please Papa best, not what she actually wants to say.



CHAPTER 3

In the weeks after the coup Kambili notices some changes in the outside world. The *Standard* grows more critical, while the other papers seem more subdued. People are protesting in Government Square, chanting “Freedom” and blocking cars. The family’s driver, Kevin, puts green branches on the car to show solidarity with the pro-democracy protestors when he drives the children to school. Soldiers set up roadblocks and randomly search people at gunpoint.

*Nigeria is now ruled by a military regime, so its soldiers can essentially act with impunity, as we will see more of later. As the publisher of the *Standard*, Papa clearly takes a pro-democracy stance, and is critical of the new Head of State.*



Nothing changes inside the Achike household, however. Jaja and Kambili stick to their strict schedules, while Mama’s pregnancy progresses. At Mass on Pentecost Sunday there is a visiting priest at St. Agnes. He is young and sincere, and does not praise the church’s lavish altar like other visiting priests have done. During his sermon he starts singing a song in Igbo. This surprises the congregation at first, but then most of them start to sing along. Papa keeps his lips closed and checks his family to make sure their lips are closed as well.

Even though he is very politically active, Papa hardly ever tells his family about his work or his life outside the home. The young priest is contrasted with Father Benedict, who is the picture of colonialist Catholicism. Papa, as a “colonial product,” disapproves of the singing and use of Igbo, and makes sure that his family disapproves as well. Here silence is more directly enforced.



Papa always greets people after church, as people flock around him. Then the family goes to visit Father Benedict. Papa says that the young visiting priest was “Godless” to sing a song during the sermon, and that he will bring trouble to the church. They arrive at Father Benedict’s, but Mama says she feels sick and wants to stay in the car. Papa stares at her meaningfully and asks her again to come in. She insists that she doesn’t feel “right,” but Papa asks again and she agrees to come in.

Papa reinforces his ideas about the way Catholicism should be practiced, and his children accept it the way they must accept his control over the rest of their lives. Mama’s request to stay in the car seems perfectly reasonable given that she feels ill, but to Papa it is an example of selfishness and sin. But it also is becoming clear that Papa equates people not doing what he wants with them being selfish.



Papa talks to Father Benedict while the rest of the family waits in the living room. Father Benedict asks about Mama’s health, but she blames her sickly appearance on allergies. After the visit Papa grits his teeth on the drive home as they listen to “Ave Maria.” When they get home Mama offers to pour Papa’s tea, but he refuses. He gives Jaja and Kambili their “love sips” of the tea. Kambili is happy to “feel the love burn my tongue.”

Papa sustains his anger at Mama’s “sin” throughout the visit and the drive home. Kambili looks forward to the pain of the “love sip,” as it seems like proof that Papa loves her. We now start to realize why the lack of a “love sip” on Palm Sunday was an important part of the change in the family dynamic.



Mama, Jaja, and Kambili then go upstairs to change. The children are scheduled to quietly reflect on a Bible verse and pray. Even the “family time” on Sundays is silent. Mama runs into her room to vomit, and the children hear her. At lunch Papa prays over the food, asking God to forgive “those who had tried to thwart His will” by not wanting to visit “His servant after Mass.” Mama loudly says “Amen.”

We now see the silence that pervades the house. Everyone is afraid to speak out, lest they say something sinful and receive a violent punishment, or disappoint Papa in any way. Papa continues to cling to his anger against Mama because of what he has perceived as a wicked act.



After lunch Kambili is reading the Bible when she hears thumping sounds from her parents’ room. Kambili imagines that Papa is trying to get the door unstuck, thinking that if she imagines it hard enough it will be true. After 20 seconds Papa comes out of the room, carrying Mama slung over his shoulder. He carries her downstairs and takes her outside. There is blood on the floor, and Jaja and Kambili clean it up.

This kind of violence is horribly commonplace in the Achike household. Papa sees it as a necessary punishment for sin, not as anything wrong on his behalf. The children react calmly and never speak directly of what has happened.



Mama doesn’t come home that night, and Jaja and Kambili have dinner alone. They don’t talk about Mama, but instead talk about the three men who were publicly executed for drug trafficking the day before. The children go to their rooms after dinner. Papa comes home and goes into Kambili’s room. His eyes are red from crying. He says that Mama will be back tomorrow, and he hugs Kambili so that she can feel his heartbeat.

The children are so conditioned that they continue following their schedule even without Papa there to enforce it. Papa weeps whenever he is violent, showing the tragic complexity of his character. He does truly love his family, but has twisted ideas about violence, sin, and punishment. Kambili represses the memory of the beating and clings instead to Papa’s love and affection.



Mama comes home the next day, her eyes looking vacant. She says “there was an accident” and she has had a miscarriage. She stands there hugging herself for a while, and then starts polishing the **ceramic figurines** on the étagère. Kambili tries to help her, but Mama insists that she go up to her room and study, as it is her “study time.” Kambili looks at her textbook, but all the letters seem to blur into an image of Mama’s blood.

We now see the importance of the ceramic figurines for Mama. Polishing them is a way of calming herself and reorganizing her life after the disruption of Papa’s violence. The family members never even say what happened, or imply that Papa was involved—Mama’s miscarriage was just an “accident.”



The next Sunday Papa makes the family stay behind after Mass and recite extra prayers “for Mama’s forgiveness.” Father Benedict sprinkles holy water over them as they recite, trying hard to get the words right so Papa doesn’t make them start over. Kambili tries not to think about what Mama might need to be forgiven for.

Father Benedict may not know about the domestic violence, but he does support Papa’s worldview of strict rules regarding sin and punishment. Though she is still totally devoted to Papa, Kambili understands that Papa’s punishments far outweigh the perceived crime.



CHAPTER 4

It remains difficult for Kambili to read, even though her exams are approaching, as she keeps seeing Mama’s blood in the letters. One day she is studying in her room when Yewande Coker, the wife of Ade Coker (Papa’s editor at the *Standard*) comes to the door sobbing. She says that soldiers have taken Ade away. Papa comforts her, telling her to repeat a Bible verse. Kambili knows that Ade was arrested because the last *Standard* had printed a story claiming that the Head of State was drug trafficking, and questioning the earlier execution of the three men.

Even as Papa enforces a frightened silence within his own family, in his life outside the home he fights for freedom and justice. None of the other newspapers are willing to speak out against Nigeria’s new regime, as the Head of State uses violence to suppress and discourage free speech. And yet Papa and Ade Coker push on in telling the dangerous truth.



The next week Kambili takes her exams, and then is horrified to see that she has come second in her class, even though the teacher has written her a glowing review. Kambili knows that Papa will not be pleased, and will compare her to his own success, which he achieved despite his “Godless father” Papa-Nnukwu. Kambili feels “stained by failure.”

The teacher doesn’t realize the impossible standards that Papa has for his children. Papa-Nnukwu, Papa’s father who refused to convert to Christianity, appears for the first time—and for Papa, his father’s “Godlessness” was an obstacle Papa had to overcome to succeed.



Kambili gets home and goes to her room. She hears Papa come home and go into Jaja’s room. Jaja had come first in his class, so Kambili imagines Papa hugging him and praising him. Then Papa comes to Kambili’s room and she gives him the report card. He is silent, and then asks about the girl who came first. Kambili says it is Chinwe Jideze, the girl who came second last term when Kambili was first. Papa tells Kambili to come down for dinner.

Papa’s love and affection is inextricably connected to his expectations for his children. Kambili fears Papa’s violence when she does something less than perfect, but she fears losing his love and approval even more. She often seems to see Papa’s hug as a greater reward than Papa’s slap is a punishment.



Kambili is terrified to look at Papa as they eat, and she can hardly swallow her food. After dinner Papa tells her to follow him upstairs. She goes into Papa’s bedroom, where everything is cream-colored and soft looking. Papa starts to chide Kambili for her grades, but then the phone rings. Papa answers it and then motions for Kambili to leave. Papa seems to forget about Kambili’s punishment for a few days after that. He gets Ade Coker out of prison, but his family only finds out by reading it in the *Standard*. There Ade praises Papa as a brave “man of integrity.” Kambili feels a rush of pride as she reads this. Papa says that the paper will have to publish underground now.

Even Papa’s decorations and furniture fit the kind of order and Western-ness he values in life. For once, here, his political life intrudes enough to disrupt his control of his family. Papa says nothing about his outside life to his family, and they must read about it in the paper just as if he was a stranger to them. Kambili doesn’t find anything odd about this, and instead feels a surge of pride and love whenever Papa is praised by an outside source.



There is a two-week break from school, and on the last weekend Mama takes Jaja and Kambili to get new sandals and bags. Kambili notices the crowds of the poor at the market, and then sees a group of soldiers around a woman who is tearing her hair and crying in the dirt. Mama tries to shield the children from seeing. Kambili sees another woman spit on a soldier, and then sees the soldier whip her. Another soldier kicks down stalls selling fruits. As they drive home Kambili cannot stop thinking about the woman in the dirt.

On Monday Papa drives Kambili to school, instead of Kevin taking her as he usually does. They pass a beggar and Papa throws some money to him. Kambili's school, the Daughters of the Immaculate Heart Secondary School, is surrounded by high walls with broken glass on top. Papa had decided on this school because he liked the walls, which enforced discipline.

They go into the school grounds and Papa asks Kambili to take him to her class. One of the white nuns sees him and starts talking excitedly. Papa affects a British accent when he speaks to her, just as he does with Father Benedict. Papa tells the sister that he is just there to see Kambili's class. Papa and Kambili go on and come to the group of girls standing outside the door.

Papa asks Kambili to point out Chinwe Jideze for him. Papa says that Chinwe does not have any more heads than Kambili, so Kambili should not let her come in first. Papa then gives the lecture Kambili had expected, about his own hard childhood, how hard he worked, how he escaped his idol-worshipping father with the help of the Catholic missionaries. Then Papa leaves and tells Kambili that Kevin will pick her up.

The class begins with a hymn, a prayer, and then the Nigerian national anthem. Then a student always recites the pledge. Today the sister chooses Kambili to say it. Kambili knows the words, but she cannot make herself speak. She starts sweating as everyone stares at her. Finally she stutters and starts the pledge.

The students go into their classrooms and a girl named Ezinne asks Kambili about her holiday. She brings up the fact that Kambili came in second last term, but says that her parents must still be proud of her. Meanwhile Chinwe goes around the room asking for votes so that she will remain the class prefect. She noticeably skips Kambili. Chinwe comes from a rich family just like Kambili, but Chinwe is very popular and the other girls copy her style. Kambili, in contrast, spends all her free time studying.

We were first introduced to the isolated and wealthy world of the Achikes, but now Adichie starts to contrast their lives with those of most Nigerians. The corruption of the military regime means violence in everyday life for most people, but Kambili is still sheltered by her parents, and Papa's wealth means he can afford to keep his family isolated.



Papa practices charity at all times, and uses his wealth to help others. But this virtue is then immediately contrasted with his idea of what makes a good school—a high, unscalable wall to keep the students disciplined, and of course the school must be private and Catholic.



Adichie shows just how much of a “colonial product” Papa is—he sees white people as superior and more civilized, and so he flatters them and tries to prove his own civility by speaking English and affecting a British accent. Kambili, at this point, sees nothing wrong with this.



Papa has most harshly abandoned Nigerian ways for British ones by cutting all ties with his father, just because Papa-Nnukwu refused to be converted by the missionaries. Papa is indeed an incredibly successful man, but he holds his children to even higher standards of perfection.



Kambili's silence affects her life even when Papa is not around. She stutters, speaks softly, and finds it nearly impossible to find the right words for a situation without reciting some platitude that might please Papa.



Chinwe acts as a foil to Kambili, as she too has a wealthy and successful father, but she is sociable, confident, and unafraid of speaking her mind. Kambili, on the other hand, has trouble speaking and is afraid to spend her free time doing anything but studying, so as to always come in first and please Papa.



Ezinne tells Kambili that Chinwe started the rumor that Kambili is a “backyard snob” and that she thinks she is “too big” because she doesn’t ever talk to the other girls, or walk with them after school instead of running off. Kambili does this, though, because she knows that she must run to Kevin’s car and get home on time or else Papa will be angry. One time she was late and he slapped her face with both hands. Kambili doesn’t tell Ezinne this, though; she just says that she likes running.

Other than Ezinne, the only girl who is kind to Kambili, the other students interpret her silence and anti-social demeanor as snobbery. Amaka will later make this same mistake. We see that Kambili never mentions or even hints at Papa’s abuse, but always makes up her own excuses to explain her behavior.



CHAPTER 5

Kambili continues to see Mama’s blood when she tries to read, but she studies constantly and memorizes her teacher’s words, knowing she must come first this term. Finally she gets her report card and she is first in the class. Papa praises her and says how proud he is of her, and Kambili cherishes this memory as she falls asleep that night.

Adichie shows just how important Papa’s approval is to Kambili. Kambili feels that she must constantly be earning her father’s love, especially because she also idolizes him. She clings to the memory of Papa’s praise while avoiding memories of his punishment.



Christmas approaches, when the family makes their annual trip to their hometown of Abba. Many of the wealthy Igbo do this: they have huge houses in their home village, which they visit only once a year, and the rest of the time live in smaller houses in the city. Papa directs the packing of the cars, as they are bringing lots of food to the village. On the drive to Abba each family member takes turns reciting the rosary. They stop to buy some food, and Papa gives money to all the hawkers (people peddling goods for sale) who crowd around him.

Papa came from the small village of Abba, but now he only returns there once a year. The extended family he grew up with are still poor, and so he provides for them as a “Big Man.” He also follows what is expected of wealthy Igbo Nigerians and builds a huge house in the village, even though he hardly ever visits it. Papa continues to pass out money to everyone who seems to be in need. He is both generous, and made more powerful by his generosity.



They arrive in Abba and drive through the dirt roads of the village. It is mostly mud-and-thatch huts, but there are also extravagant three-story houses, including the Achikes’. Everyone is excited to see them arrive, and they call Papa *omelora*, which means “The One Who Does for the Community.” Papa drives through the gates of their “country home,” a magnificent mansion. Children chase after the family’s car and Papa gives them all money when he gets out. They unpack the cars with all the food and huge cooking appliances. They will cook enough for everyone in the village to eat—this is why Papa is the *omelora*.

The enormous divide between poor and wealthy is tragically obvious in Abba, where most people live in poverty while huge mansions sit empty. In his home village Papa’s philanthropy is made official, and everyone expects to come by his house on Christmas to eat their fill.



Ade Coker and his family arrive at the house, stopping by on the way to their own home in Lagos. Ade is small, round, and cheerful, and Kambili cannot imagine him defying soldiers. Ade jokes with Jaja and Kambili, but they only answer dutifully “yes” or “no.” Ade comments to Papa that his children are “always so quiet,” and Papa proudly says that they fear God, unlike most children. Ade jokes that the *Standard* would not exist if they were all quiet. Everyone laughs but Papa. Jaja and Kambili silently go upstairs.

Ade Coker sees the discrepancy between Papa’s life at the Standard and the way he treats his children, even if he doesn’t know about Papa’s domestic abuse. Speech is seen as a positive good in the political world, where censorship is a tool of tyranny. Papa doesn’t extend this to his family, however, and he then becomes the tyrant demanding silence and obedience.



The next morning Jaja and Kambili wake up early to the sounds of bleating goats and people calling greetings to each other in broken English. They decide to go downstairs and start their prayers before Papa calls them. The house has four stories, but the family only uses the bottom two. The upper two were last used for the party when Papa took the *omelora* title—but only after consulting with a priest and ensuring that there were no pagan undertones to his title-taking ceremony.

Mama and Papa come downstairs and start to pray with the children. Soon a visitor comes, asking for presents for his children. He speaks English, as Papa likes it when the villagers speak English to him—he says it shows “good sense.” Papa promises the man some presents when the prayers are done. After all the recitations each family member prays their own prayer. Papa ends with a twenty-minute prayer that includes a request that Papa-Nnukwu convert to Christianity and so be saved from hell. He follows this with a long description of hell’s torments.

Papa tells Jaja and Kambili that they will visit Papa-Nnukwu today, but only for fifteen minutes, and not to eat or drink anything there. Jaja and Kambili have only been allowed to visit their grandfather since he called a meeting of the *umunna* (large extended family) to complain that he never saw his grandchildren. Papa then agreed to allow the children to “greet” him every year. Papa himself never goes along, and he sends his father only a small amount of money. Papa-Nnukwu has never entered the family’s mansion, as Papa mandates that no heathens will set foot in it.

Even though Papa-Nnukwu lives nearby, Kevin drives the children so that he can keep an eye on them. They arrive at Papa-Nnukwu’s tiny house, which has no bathroom. They go in and Papa-Nnukwu greets them happily, half-jokingly offering them food even though he knows they are forbidden to eat there. Kambili examines him for “signs of Godlessness,” and though she cannot see any she is sure they must be there.

Jaja and Kambili ask about his health, and Papa-Nnukwu says that their Auntie Ifeoma brings him medicine when she can afford it. He says that Ifeoma and her children will come to Abba this year. They did not last year, as Ifeoma has been struggling for money ever since her husband died. Papa-Nnukwu declares that Kambili and Jaja should know their cousins better, and that their lack of contact is “not right.” They never see Ifeoma’s children because Ifeoma and Papa quarreled about Papa-Nnukwu, and whether he should be allowed into Papa’s house.

Papa fears to follow any ancestral traditions because they might be un-Christian or “uncivilized.” He consults with a Catholic priest before agreeing to take part in any explicitly Nigerian ceremony. Though he is very charitable, Papa also buys things he doesn’t need, just to prove his stature—like an extra two floors of his house.



Papa not only prefers to speak English, but also wants to hear it even in his home village. He parrots the colonial mindset by equating Western-ness with “good sense.” Papa has chosen religion over family, leading him to cut ties even with his own father. The importance of family bonds is an important theme in the novel, and one of Papa’s greatest mistakes is denying this familial love when it contradicts his idea of truth, of rigidly sticking to rules rather than more flexibly responding to love.



The umunna always supports Papa’s decision, as he provides them with money and food, but they still recognize the importance of family and insist that the children be allowed to see their grandfather. Papa always prefers walls, to cut off the outside world that he disagrees with, and so he bars any non-Christians from his land, even his own father. Jaja and Kambili continue in their isolated existence.



Papa has a mansion to spare, but he is so concerned with preserving his strict Catholic dogma that he lets his father continue to live in near poverty. Kambili believes Papa’s words literally, as usual, and searches Papa-Nnukwu for some sign that he is destined for hell.



Papa-Nnukwu brings up the importance of family, something Jaja and Kambili are entirely unfamiliar with outside of their own isolated house. Auntie Ifeoma will now begin to appear as a major character, and she is first presented as a contrast to Papa—she has no money to spare, but still tries to help her father, and brings her children to spend time with him.



Papa-Nnukwu eats, and Kambili watches him swallow with difficulty. He offers to buy them soft drinks, saying that they surely cannot be heathen. Jaja first declines, but then says that if he were thirsty, he would drink in Papa-Nnukwu's house. Papa-Nnukwu praises Jaja for speaking wisely. Jaja nudges Kambili, as it is time for them to go, but Kambili finds herself unable to leave, wanting to stay and help Papa-Nnukwu. Finally Jaja stands up and they go. Kevin gives Papa-Nnukwu some money from Papa, and Papa-Nnukwu thanks him, despite the coldness of sending money through a driver.

Kambili remembers how Papa used to treat Mama's father, their Grandfather, in an entirely different way. Grandfather was very light-skinned and always spoke English, and was a devout Catholic. Papa was always very respectful and friendly to him, treating him as if he were his own father. Papa still talks proudly about Grandfather, and how he converted most of the people of Abba itself. Papa keeps a photograph of him on the wall.

The children come home and Kambili asks Jaja if he will confess about offering to drink in Papa-Nnukwu's house. Jaja says he was just trying to make Papa-Nnukwu feel better. They eat lunch and then Papa returns. He is angry that they stayed 25 minutes at Papa-Nnukwu's house instead of 15. Kambili expects Papa to hit them, but he only sends them away to pray for forgiveness.

Kambili and Jaja then hear Papa yelling outside. He is angry that a "worshiper of idols," an old man named Anikwenwa, has entered the compound. Anikwenwa accuses Papa of being disrespectful to his elders. Some men lead him away at Papa's command, but as he leaves Anikwenwa says Papa is like a "fly blindly following a corpse into the grave."

CHAPTER 6

Aunty Ifeoma arrives the next day. She is as tall as Papa is, and walks and speaks quickly and with purpose. She hugs Kambili and teases her, but Kambili only knows to be polite and quiet. Ifeoma says that her children are visiting Papa-Nnukwu and listening to his stories. Mama comes in and brings Ifeoma some food and drinks. Ifeoma calls Mama *nwunye m*, which means "my wife," to show that she accepts her as the wife of the family—but it is part of an "ungodly tradition" according to Papa.

Jaja and Kambili feel a natural love for their grandfather. They adopt the strict rules Papa enforces in the house, but they have not yet taken the interpersonal love out of Christianity as Papa has. Papa chooses rules and order at the expense of affection and love for people. Through Aunty Ifeoma, Adichie will now begin to present an alternate form of Catholicism and the family unit—one that is more flexible and open-minded.



This contrast shows just how much Papa's colonial mindset affects his interactions with people. Papa "loves" Grandfather because he is light-skinned, Catholic, and speaks English, but rejects his own father. In this case, at least, Papa's love is based entirely on religious and cultural grounds.



Kambili tries to uphold Papa's sense of sin and order, but she and Jaja also can't help feeling a natural human affection for their grandfather, one that is difficult to reconcile with Papa's image of Papa-Nnukwu as a Godless heathen destined for hell.



In Abba the children get glimpses of their family and roots, but they also see how hard Papa works to isolate them from anything that he doesn't agree with. An important tradition is being respectful to one's elders, but Papa has chosen to forsake this virtue when it comes to religious difference.



Aunty Ifeoma now appears in the flesh, and she is just as powerful a force as Papa is. She will ultimately come to disrupt Kambili's ordered but frightened life, showing her a new kind of freedom and interpersonal connection. For now, however, Ifeoma's fearlessness is uncomfortable and scary to Kambili, as it implies that Papa is only mortal, not some infallible perfect man.



Aunty Ifeoma and Mama talk, and Ifeoma suggests that they go to the traditional Aro festival the next day. Mama says that Papa would never let the children go to a “heathen festival.” Ifeoma suggests just telling him that they’re going for a drive. Ifeoma is outspoken and confident, and she disparages the people of her late husband’s home *umunna*. Mama in turn expresses her gratitude that Papa did not do as his *umunna* suggested and take a new wife. Mama says that then she would be a woman without a husband, which is worthless. Ifeoma counters that “sometimes life begins when marriage ends,” and Mama smiles in response to Ifeoma’s “university talk.”

Aunty Ifeoma goes on to criticize the “military tyrant” ruling the country now. She says that they have not had fuel for months in Nsukka, where she lives. Ifeoma is a professor at the university there, and she says that many of her colleagues have been leaving to go to America, as the professors aren’t being paid. Ifeoma says she is cooking with a kerosene stove now, as there is no gas. Mama offers to give her gas cylinders from Papa’s factory, but Ifeoma declines. Kambili watches Aunty Ifeoma, mesmerized by the “fearlessness” of her speech and movements.

Papa comes in and Aunty Ifeoma tells him that Jaja and Kambili should spend time with her tomorrow. Kambili feels a strange fear when Ifeoma speaks to Papa—she is flippant about it, and doesn’t seem to realize that Papa is “different, special.” In the conversation Aunty Ifeoma speaks in Igbo, while Papa speaks in English. Ifeoma says that the cousins need to spend time together. Finally Papa agrees, as long as they stay away from anything “ungodly.”

Ifeoma’s children arrive at the house. The oldest is fifteen-year-old Amaka, then her fourteen-year-old brother Obiora, and then seven-year-old Chima. Papa greets them and gives them all money. Amaka immediately starts questioning Kambili about the expensive satellite TV, asking if they can watch CNN. Kambili nervously coughs an answer, thinking that Amaka seems much older than she is.

Kambili finally says that they don’t watch TV, and Amaka is shocked. She thinks that it’s because Kambili and Jaja are bored by it, and sarcastically says that wishes she had that problem. Kambili doesn’t say that there is no TV time on their schedules, even though they have a satellite dish on both houses. Ifeoma’s family then leaves to see Papa-Nnukwu again and then go to Ukpou, where Ifeoma’s late husband was from. Kambili watches them talking and laughing as they walk out.

Ifeoma is a liberal, well-educated woman who is just as intelligent and forceful as Papa is, but has chosen a completely different direction for her life. She first disrupts the order of Papa’s family simply by implying that Papa might be wrong or imperfect, and suggesting that Mama, Jaja, and Kambili should disobey or deceive him. Ifeoma is Catholic, but still in touch with and respectful of her father’s traditions, and she feels no qualms about taking her children to non-Christian festivals.



Though Papa also opposes the Head of State, he never talks about politics with his family. Aunty Ifeoma is outspoken in public and in private, and encourages others to speak their minds as well. Kambili, who often fears to speak at all, finds Ifeoma’s confidence totally foreign but also admirable. Ifeoma clearly lives a very different life from her brother, and does not share in his wealth.



When Papa and Ifeoma interact, Papa suddenly seems like a mere human, which is terrifying to Kambili. We see how different the two siblings view the world, despite their similar upbringing and education: Papa chooses English and strict Catholicism, while Ifeoma chooses Igbo and a flexible Christianity that allows for non-Western traditions.



The cousins hardly know each other at all, and the differences between them are immediately obvious. Amaka is Kambili’s age, but clearly outspoken, confident, and culturally conscious. Faced with someone expressing herself, Kambili finds herself again unable to speak properly.



Like Kambili’s classmates, Amaka takes Kambili’s silence and reserve for privilege and snobbishness. We now see that Papa has purchased all the technology and luxuries expected of a rich Western man—but he never allows his family to actually use or enjoy them.



The next morning Auntie Ifeoma drives in to pick up Jaja and Kambili. She suggests that Kambili wear trousers, and Kambili doesn't admit that she doesn't own any because they are "sinful" for women. They get into Ifeoma's rusty, rattling car and set off. Ifeoma says they are picking up Papa-Nnukwu on the way, and Kambili and Jaja feel a surge of fear and guilt.

They stop at Papa-Nnukwu's house and Ifeoma's children get out. Jaja and Kambili stay in the car. Ifeoma asks them why they won't go in, and Kambili says that it's because Papa-Nnukwu is a pagan. She thinks that Papa would be proud of her for saying that. Ifeoma says that Papa-Nnukwu is not a pagan, but a traditionalist. Kambili only knows that neither of those things means Catholic, so he is destined for hell either way.

Papa-Nnukwu gets in the car and jokes with Auntie Ifeoma and her children. They all laugh except for Jaja and Kambili. Kambili tries to smile, but stops when they drive past the gates of Papa's house. Papa-Nnukwu complains that the missionaries turned his son against him, but Ifeoma points out that she went to the missionary school too.

After a long pause Papa-Nnukwu repeats his claim that the missionaries misled his son, but then he turns the story of the first missionary in Abba into a joke. They arrive at Ezi Icheke, where the festival is taking place. It is very crowded, and people dressed as *mmuo*, or spirits, parade past while hawkers sell food and drinks. Kambili nervously thinks that it all seems like what Papa would call "devilish folklore."

Papa-Nnukwu explains the *mmuo* as they walk past, and he tells the women to look away as a particularly powerful one passes, wearing a skull, grass, and dead animals. Kambili looks away as told, but feels guilty about "deferring to a heathen masquerade." Jaja asks Papa-Nnukwu about the people inside the *mmuo* costumes, but Ifeoma tells him that everyone is supposed to pretend that they're really spirits. Ifeoma then realizes that Jaja didn't do the *ima mmuo*, a ceremony of entering manhood. Obiora, who is younger, has done it. Jaja looks ashamed.

They leave and drop off Papa-Nnukwu. When Auntie Ifeoma drops off Jaja and Kambili, Amaka loudly says she doesn't want to go inside. That night Kambili dreams of herself laughing. She doesn't know what her own laughter sounds like, so in her dream it sounds like Auntie Ifeoma's laughter.

Ifeoma thinks nothing of women wearing pants or of picking up her father on the way—something that is still confusing for Kambili, who holds Papa's rules to be infallible. Kambili's worries that Papa will find out that she and Jaja even saw Papa-Nnukwu again highlights just how rigid Papa's rules are.



Papa sees things only in black and white, as either sinful or not, while Ifeoma has a more flexible worldview, one that focuses on interpersonal relations more than strict rules. Papa has trained his children to dehumanize anyone who is not Catholic.



One of the most noticeable differences between the two families is simply the level of noise. Jaja and Kambili live in a frightened or respectful silence, while Ifeoma's children are always laughing and saying whatever comes into their heads.



While Papa sees Papa-Nnukwu as having chosen hell by refusing to convert, Papa-Nnukwu sees Papa as having been brainwashed by the British missionaries. Jaja and Kambili are finally introduced to some traditional Igbo culture, something Papa has always tried to keep from them.



Papa-Nnukwu doesn't actually believe that the costumed people are spirits, but he follows the traditions of the festival because it is part of his family and culture—as Ifeoma says, he is a traditionalist, not a pagan. Obiora is two years younger than Jaja, but there will soon be many instances where Obiora seems to be the older one, as he has embraced his independence, while Jaja still submits to Papa.



Amaka is clearly bitter about her cousins' wealth and perceived snobbishness, and she doesn't want to make friends with Kambili. Kambili's silence is so tragically pervasive that she can't even imagine the sound of her own laughter.



CHAPTER 7

On Christmas Papa takes the family to Mass, but beforehand they see Aunty Ifeoma and her children. Ifeoma and Amaka are both wearing bright red lipstick. During Mass Kambili thinks about that lipstick, and imagines wearing it herself. At Mass the priest doesn't discuss anything religious, but instead complains about the lack of money and building materials for the priest's new house. Kambili can tell that Papa is displeased. The family sits in the front with the other "important" people.

After Mass there is a fundraising event at the hall next to the church. Papa writes a single check and gives it to an usher. When the amount is read out, the priest starts to dance and Papa leaves with the family. As he walks out of the hall, people touch Papa's tunic as if it might heal them.

The family gets home and their house is full of people. The wives of their *umunna* (large extended family in the village) are cooking huge amounts of food in the backyard. Kambili goes upstairs, and while she is changing she hears her cousins and Aunty Ifeoma arrive. She can hear them all laughing. Kambili goes out, pacing her breathing so she won't stutter. Amaka asks her and Jaja about their stereo, wondering if they are bored with it like the TV. They don't admit that they never play it, but only listen to the news on Papa's radio during "family time."

Obiora puts on a record of choirs singing. Chima goes to the bathroom and exclaims about how nice it is. Sisi comes up to say that the Igwe (local royalty) has arrived to visit Papa, and so the family goes downstairs to greet him. Kambili remembers the last time they had visited the Igwe's palace, and Mama had greeted him in the traditional way for women, by bowing low to him. Later Papa told her it was sinful to bow to another ruler, and they did not visit the Igwe again. Hoping to impress Papa, Kambili had later refused to kiss a bishop's ring, but Papa pulled her ear for this and said the bishop was a man of God.

The family goes downstairs and greets the Igwe. Aunty Ifeoma bows to him, but Mama shakes his hand. Then they go back upstairs, leaving Papa with the Igwe. Amaka and Jaja go off to discuss a book, and Chima and Obiora play a card game, laughing. Kambili stands outside Mama's door, listening to her whisper to Aunty Ifeoma, trying to convince her to ask Papa for a gas tank. Ifeoma reminds her that Papa offered to buy her a car years ago, but only if she sent Amaka to convent school, stopped wearing makeup, and joined a Catholic society. Ifeoma says she wants the things Papa's money can buy, but she won't "lick his buttocks" to get them.

Ifeoma and Amaka go to the same church, but they don't abide by the rules Papa has decreed for the women of his house. Kambili's awakening as a young woman coincides with her experience of starting to doubt Papa for the first time. Even something as simple as lipstick becomes an important image she can cling to, a symbol of a life and freedom she has never known before.



Papa is clearly shown as a Christ-figure here, as he modestly funds the whole church and then leaves, with people touching his tunic just as they did to Jesus. In public he does indeed do much good, which adds to the complexity of his character.



Kambili and Jaja still don't admit that they never use their expensive gadgets, and so Amaka continues to think that they are spoiled and snobbish. Kambili admires her cousins' easy laughter, but for now she has to plan ahead and pace her breathing just so she won't stutter. The poor villagers take advantage of Papa's hospitality.



Papa's view of the Igwe versus the bishop shows his pro-Western worldview—the Igwe is a "heathen" ruler and not worthy of being bowed to, while the bishop is a civilized and Godly man, so it isn't sinful to kiss his ring. Papa is important enough that the Igwe will even come to visit him after Papa refused to return to the Igwe's palace. Here we also see more examples of Papa casually using violence as punishment for a perceived sin.



Mama only seems able to confide in Ifeoma, though always in whispers and behind closed doors. Mama keeps everything hushed up and respectable, while Ifeoma is willing to speak her mind and be rude—something that is confusing to Kambili's usual world of violence-enforced silence. We see that like Papa-Nnukwu, Ifeoma was offered money from Papa as long as she started to follow his strict rules. Ifeoma is proud and independent enough to stand up to Papa, though it means a harder life for her and her children. She chose independence over wealth.



Aunty Ifeoma goes on, saying that her husband, Ifediora, did not get along with Papa because Ifediora was willing to tell the truth to Papa's face, and Papa does not want to hear truths he doesn't like. Ifeoma says that Papa-Nnukwu is dying, and Papa still won't let him into the house. She says that Papa should stop trying to do God's job—he should let God do the judging. Ifeoma says that the *umunna* will tell Papa whatever he wants to hear, as long as he provides them with food and money.

Amaka catches Kambili eavesdropping but doesn't say anything. She tells her that Papa has come up to have lunch. They sit down and Papa prays for more than twenty minutes over the meal. Ifeoma mutters about the rice getting cold, but Papa ignores her. As they eat, Ifeoma insists that Papa let Jaja and Kambili visit her in Nsukka to get to know their cousins better. Papa tries to change the subject, but Ifeoma presses on, and asks Papa why he never picks up a phone and calls her.

Sisi brings more juice, the kind Papa's factories make. Amaka tries it and politely suggests that Papa make it less sweet. Kambili is so nervous that she knocks over her glass. Amaka keeps talking to Papa, asking him about the rumored appearances of the Virgin Mary at the tiny village of Aokpe. Aunty Ifeoma suggests that Jaja and Kambili should come visit her, so she can take them and her own children to Aokpe. Papa looks pleased, and offers to let Jaja and Kambili visit for a day or two. Ifeoma insists that they stay for a week.

The next day is Sunday, and the family plans to go to early Mass. Kambili wakes up and sees that her period has started. She showers and dresses, making sure to cover her hair properly as Papa and Father Benedict like. Kambili's cramps start to hurt, and she asks Mama for Panadol, a painkiller. She must eat food with the pill, but it is only twenty minutes before Mass, and the Eucharist fast demands an hour of fasting before communion. Mama whispers that Kambili should eat a few cornflakes quickly.

Jaja makes Kambili a bowl of cereal, saying that they will hear Papa before he comes upstairs. Kambili is almost finished eating when Papa enters. He quietly asks what is going on. Mama and Jaja both try to take the blame, and Papa asks if the devil has infected them all. He takes off his belt and beats all of them. Afterward he asks sadly why they like sin, and then he hugs Jaja and Kambili, asking if they are hurt. Everyone changes clothes, and they go to later Mass.

Ifeoma speaks the hard truths that no one is willing to say to Papa, and that Kambili has never even considered. Kambili still sees Papa as a godlike figure, whose violent punishments are frightening but not undeserved. To Ifeoma, however, Papa is just a man too obsessed with Western Catholic dogma and unwilling to hear views that contradict his own.



Kambili only has experience with twenty-minute prayers before meals, but to Ifeoma Papa's long prayers are ridiculous. In Papa's house, meals are usually silent or polite, but here Ifeoma immediately confronts Papa with a hard truth—that he never calls her, and that his children have never gotten to know hers.



The family dynamic at Ifeoma's house is clearly very different. Amaka sees no problem with speaking her mind and critiquing Papa's juice. The comment that the juice is too sweet can be taken as a metaphor for how Papa conducts his family life in general: making it artificial, controlled, isolating it from any bitter outside forces. We have already seen, from the Palm Sunday meal, that Mama, Kambili, and Jaja are supposed to politely compliment the juice when it is served. Ifeoma knows that Papa can only be convinced by something religious.



Part of Papa and Father Benedict's strict Catholicism involves demonizing of women's bodies. Women are not allowed to show their legs or their hair; Mama is beaten for feeling sick from her pregnancy; and there is no accommodation for Kambili's cramps on the morning of Mass. Mama sympathizes with Kambili, but knows they must be secretive.



Papa holds the purity of the ritual of Mass higher than the physical well being of his daughter. They all try to take the blame, but no one defends themselves or fights back against Papa. His sense of sin and punishment is so deeply instilled in his children that they almost feel they deserve his punishments. Papa himself always cries or is upset afterwards, but it doesn't stop him from being violent again.



The family leaves after New Year's. The wives of the *umunna* take all the leftover food, even what seems spoiled. As they drive away, the gate man waves at them, and Kambili remembers him telling them that Papa had paid for his children's school and helped get his wife a job. Papa recites the rosary as he drives. Soon they come to a checkpoint, where there has been an accident. A dead man is lying beside the road. Papa says that the police set up checkpoints in wooded areas so that they can hide the money they extort.

The family returns to Enugu, and two days later Papa takes the family to confession at Father Benedict's house. He hadn't wanted to go to confession in Abba, because the priest there wasn't "spiritual" enough, and was too concerned with building churches and statues. Papa says that white people would not be concerned with such things.

Papa, Mama, and then Jaja go in. Kambili asks Jaja with her eyes if he remembered his words to Papa-Nnukwu about offering to drink in his house, and Jaja nods. Kambili goes into the room. It is a more personal interaction than a confessional, as she and Father Benedict are face to face. Kambili confesses, but Father Benedict keeps asking her if she has something else. Kambili cannot think of anything, until Father Benedict leads her into saying that she enjoyed looking at the *mmuo*. Father Benedict says that it is wrong to "take joy in pagan rituals," and gives Kambili her penance.

As the family drives home, Papa happily declares that they are all "spotless" now, and that if they died they would go straight to heaven. When he gets home he is still in a good mood, and he calls Auntie Ifeoma. He says that Jaja and Kambili can go to Aokpe as long as they remember that the sightings of the Virgin have not been verified by the church. They will go to Nsukka the next day and stay for five days.

Jaja and Kambili pack their things, and Mama suggests that they bring food and gas cylinders from the factory. Papa is suspicious of this suggestion, but then agrees. Jaja and Kambili both nervously admit to each other that they want to go to Nsukka, but Kambili feels afraid of spending time away from Papa's presence.

Once again Adichie juxtaposes Papa's domestic violence with his public philanthropy, as he goes out of his way to support his workers and their families. Kambili is still mostly sheltered from the government's corruption, but she gets glimpses of the violence and oppression that come with a military regime.



Adichie is biting ironic here, as Papa thinks of white people as being more spiritual and never concerned with material things, when the very "Christian" colonizing of Nigeria was based on material gain of exploiting African resources—not to mention Europe's long history of building extravagant churches instead of feeding the poor.



Jaja and Kambili still share their "language of the eyes," and also a sense of guilt whenever they break one of Papa's rules. In this interaction with Father Benedict, we see that the British priest supports Papa in his strict set of rules about sin and punishment. Father Benedict believes that any traditional Nigerian ceremony is "heathen" and therefore sinful.



While Papa enforces his religion on his family with violence and control, he still seems to take some joy in Christianity on occasion—or at least after confession, when there is a moment without guilt or fear of punishment.



Mama remains meek and submissive, but she still manages to assert a small amount of control in persuading, or tricking, Papa into give Ifeoma some gas cylinders. Despite his violence, Papa is still the center and foundation of his children's' lives, and it's scary for them to leave him.



The next morning Kevin puts two gas cylinders in the car, along with lots of food. Papa gives Jaja and Kambili schedules for their time in Nsukka. They include two hours each day for “time with your cousins.” He hugs them, his hands shaking, and says that he has never been without them for more than a day. As they drive away Kambili sees that Papa is crying.

Papa tries to control his children from afar via their schedules, but he also weeps when they leave—they are the center of his life too, even though he mistreats them. Jaja and Kambili leave Papa for the first time, and are about to experience a new kind of freedom and independence.



CHAPTER 8

As Kevin drives them Kambili notices all the burned and broken cars on the side of the road. At the town of Opi they come to a police checkpoint. Kevin throws the policeman some money and he waves them on, saluting mockingly. Kambili knows that if Papa were in the car, Kevin would have let the officers painstakingly search the car and his papers. Papa won’t bribe anyone because, he says, “we cannot be a part of what we fight.”

We see the casual and pervasive corruption among the police and soldiers, where everyone takes bribes. Papa, who stands up against this kind of immorality in the government, refuses to bribe them, even though it wastes time for him and he has plenty of money to spare. Part of the tragedy of Papa is that in many ways he is an admirable character.



They reach Nsukka and drive down a road riddled with potholes. They come to the University of Nigeria, where Kevin asks for directions. Kambili and Jaja notice a statue of a lion on the university lawn, with the motto “To restore the dignity of man.” They drive into Auntie Ifeoma’s neighborhood and find her apartment, which is one of many in a large apartment building.

Ifeoma is a professor at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka, where Adichie herself also first studied. Papa has two houses, while Auntie Ifeoma can only afford a small flat in an apartment building. The lion’s motto seems ironic after the casual bribery in the previous scene.



Auntie Ifeoma comes out and hugs Jaja and Kambili, and is delighted to see the food and gas cylinders, which she knows came because of Mama. She does a little dance and hugs Kambili again, and Kambili notices that she smells of nutmeg. Ifeoma leads them inside and Kambili is struck by how small and dense the flat is. The air smells like curry, nutmeg, and kerosene. The bookshelves are packed full of books. Ifeoma says that she sleeps in a room with Chima. Kambili will sleep in Amaka’s room, and Jaja will sleep with Obiora in the living room.

Their arrival at Ifeoma’s flat is overwhelming to Kambili and Jaja. They are used to silence, a huge house, and a servant to keep things clean. Ifeoma’s flat then seems especially loud and crowded. Kambili and Jaja only ever seem to read the Bible and their schoolbooks, while Ifeoma is very well-read. There aren’t even enough bedrooms for Ifeoma’s children, so everyone must share.



Kevin comes inside to say he is leaving. Kambili has a sudden urge to run after him and ask him to take her back, but she doesn’t. Auntie Ifeoma speaks casually, as if this visit were a usual occurrence. She is cooking in the kitchen, and talks and laughs as she chops and stirs. A few minutes later her children arrive—they had been visiting a family friend, a priest named Father Amadi. The cousins all hug, though Amaka hardly acknowledges Kambili. Obiora invites Jaja along with him to get soft drinks. Amaka goes into her room, and Ifeoma tells Kambili to go with her.

Kambili is excited to temporarily escape Papa and experience freedom, but she is also afraid of the unknown—Papa is violent but he is also familiar and protective. In Kambili’s family everyone is always quiet and polite, while Ifeoma’s family greets them familiarly. Kambili is immediately left alone with her cousin, though she is constantly afraid of Amaka’s confident scorn.



Amaka starts to change and talks to Kambili, who sits nervously on her bed. Amaka says that Nsukka is boring compared to Enugu, though Kambili has hardly ever been to the “happening places” in Enugu that Amaka names. Amaka asks Kambili why she speaks so quietly, but Kambili has no answer. Amaka takes off her dress and Kambili averts her eyes, panicked about sinning.

Amaka turns on some music, saying that her sound system must be nothing compared to Kambili’s. Amaka says that she likes “culturally conscious” indigenous musicians like Fela, not American pop like most other teenagers. Kambili doesn’t say that she has no sound system and doesn’t know any pop music. Instead she asks about a painting on the wall: a Virgin and Child, with both Mary and Jesus as dark-skinned. Amaka says that she painted it.

Amaka and Kambili return to the kitchen and then they all sit down on the mismatched chairs at the peeling dining room table for lunch. Auntie Ifeoma says a brief prayer and then eats, joking that she doesn’t say Mass over every meal like Papa does. They eat, and Ifeoma’s children are excited about having both chicken and soft drinks at one meal.

Everyone talks and laughs loudly as they eat, and Auntie Ifeoma jokes with her children. Kambili stays quiet and stares at her plate, confused by the foreign atmosphere of freedom. Auntie Ifeoma mostly sits back and watches her children banter and laugh, looking pleased with them. After lunch Kambili goes to the bathroom and is confused when there is no water to flush the toilet. She asks Ifeoma about it, and Ifeoma says that the water runs only in the morning.

The phone rings, and it is Papa. Kambili speaks to him, and he says that the house feels empty without them, and he reminds them to study and pray. That evening at dinner Kambili imagines Papa and Mama eating alone, and the full crates of soft drinks always in their house. Auntie Ifeoma and her children watch TV as they eat, and they invite Jaja and Kambili to join. They are forbidden to watch TV, but they don’t decline the offer.

Auntie Ifeoma says that Jaja and Kambili can stay up as long as they want watching TV. Jaja pulls out his schedule and says that Papa wants them to study in the evenings. Ifeoma looks at the schedule and then starts laughing. She tells them to give her their schedules. Jaja protests, but Ifeoma says that Papa won’t know if they don’t tell him. She says it is her house, so she will make the rules. Ifeoma goes to her room with the schedules, and Kambili feels shocked.

Again Amaka assumes that Kambili is being snobby and looking down on Nsukka, when actually Kambili is never allowed to do anything fun. Ifeoma and her children are more casual and confident with their bodies, as they don’t have the guilt Papa has instilled in his children.



Amaka is young but already considers herself an activist. Unlike Papa, she rejects the Eurocentric colonial mindset that whiteness is superior, and she wants to assert her pride as a Nigerian. She doesn’t listen to Western music, and even paints Jesus (whom Kambili has always imagined as being white) as dark-skinned.



Kambili’s first impressions often center around the fact that Ifeoma’s family is much poorer than her own. Nothing in the flat matches or is new, there isn’t enough room for everyone, and there is never extra food.



Kambili is confused by how different this family dynamic is. Instead of politeness and frightened silence, Ifeoma’s children laugh and say whatever comes into their heads, and Ifeoma looks on approvingly. She teaches her children by giving them freedom, while Papa teaches his by giving them rules.



The two most obvious contrasts between the families are that Kambili’s is much wealthier, but Ifeoma’s is much happier. Papa checks in, reminding his children of his controlling presence even when they are away. Kambili and Jaja loosen up very slightly in agreeing to watch TV.



Ifeoma does not yet know just how controlling and violent Papa is, and how deeply this has affected Jaja and Kambili. The idea of scheduled activities is indeed laughable for her, as she values independence and self-education over strict rules. Kambili is shocked over and over by this more flexible family dynamic.



Amaka asks if Jaja and Kambili have schedules at home as well. When they say yes, she says it's interesting that rich people are so bored that they need schedules to tell them what to do. Auntie Ifeoma emerges with a rosary and crucifix, and they all kneel and start to recite the rosary. Soon Amaka starts singing a song in Igbo, and Ifeoma and Obiora join in. Jaja and Kambili look at each other and decide not to sing, because it's "not right."

Afterwards Auntie Ifeoma goes to bed and the cousins keep watching TV. Kambili feels like her "real self" is still studying in Enugu, while her "shadow" is here in Nsukka. Kambili remembers what time her schedule said for bed, and so she goes to sleep. She dreams about Amaka flushing her down the toilet.

The next morning Amaka wakes up Kambili to fill up their containers of water while the water is still running. Jaja is there too, and he tells Kambili about his night sleeping in the living room. He seems surprised and happy. After getting water the family recites some prayers and sings more Igbo songs. Auntie Ifeoma prays for the university, for Nigeria, and that they might find "peace and laughter today." Kambili is mystified by this last request.

They each take turns bathing and then Auntie Ifeoma makes a breakfast that seems paltry compared to Kambili's usual one. Ifeoma wants to show Jaja and Kambili the university and be back for dinner, as she has invited Father Amadi to eat with them. Ifeoma hopes that she will have enough fuel to drive around the university. As they walk out Jaja admires Ifeoma's **purple hibiscuses**. Ifeoma says that a botanist friend of hers created them. Hibiscuses aren't usually purple. Jaja touches a petal and seems entranced.

Jaja lingers by the **purple hibiscus**, but then they all get in the car. To save fuel, Auntie Ifeoma switches off the ignition when going downhill. She shows them the different university buildings, and suggests that Kambili might go there one day. Kambili realizes that she has never thought about university, and she knows Papa will decide when the time comes.

Amaka has chosen to see Kambili and Jaja as spoiled and apathetic, and so she continues feeding her own perceptions. We now start to see Ifeoma's brand of Catholicism, one that is much less rigid, more joyful, and doesn't deny Igbo culture. Jaja and Kambili enforce Papa's silence on themselves.



The sudden change in atmosphere feels unreal to Kambili, and part of her longs for the strict order and silence of home. She clings to Papa's schedule even without the physical paper.



Jaja opens up more quickly than Kambili does, and he almost immediately starts embracing the sense of freedom and independence he finds in Nsukka. Papa's Catholicism has no place for joy or laughter, so Ifeoma's prayer is confusing to Kambili. Religion is not a source of joy for her, but of fear.



Money is a constant concern for Ifeoma, and many of her decisions are based around frugality, something that is foreign to Kambili. The purple hibiscus, which gives the novel its title, finally appears. It is a unique flower, a result of experimentation, intellectual freedom, and friendship. It will come to symbolize the freedom and independence Jaja and Kambili find in Nsukka.



Jaja is most entranced by the purple hibiscuses, just as he is the first to seek his independence from Papa after the experiences in Nsukka. The flowers also inspire a love for gardening in him, and the joy Jaja finds in working in the garden adds to his strength and ability to assert his individuality.



They drive past a hill and Auntie Ifeoma says that from the top you can see how God laid out the hills of Nsukka. Kambili imagines God laying out the hills with his white hands, which look like Father Benedict's. Auntie Ifeoma points out the vice chancellor's compound, which was vandalized by students rioting over the lack of electricity and water one month. Amaka and Obiora debate about the justification for the riots, and Auntie Ifeoma laughs in her "proud-coach-watching-the-team way."

Outside the university gates the car seems to run out of fuel. The car behind her stops and a woman gets out. She sympathizes with Auntie Ifeoma about the lack of fuel. Obiora wants to push the car, but Ifeoma turns the key again and it starts. On the way home they stop by a hawker selling fruits. Ifeoma gives Amaka some money and Amaka bargains for the fruits she wants. Kambili watches her, wondering what it would feel like to do such a thing.

Back at home Jaja and Obiora go off to play soccer, and Kambili stays with Auntie Ifeoma and Amaka to cook. Kambili offers to peel the yam slices, but soon Amaka stops her, exasperated, saying that she is wasting too much yam. Father Amadi arrives later, and Ifeoma and her family greet him warmly. Kambili feels strange calling him "father," as he is young and dressed only in a t-shirt and jeans. Father Amadi asks what Jaja and Kambili think of Nsukka, and Amaka immediately says that they hate it.

At dinner Kambili is entranced by Father Amadi's melodious voice. He seems totally at home in Auntie Ifeoma's house, and her children talk familiarly and joke with him. He asks Jaja and Kambili questions about themselves, and Kambili is grateful that Jaja gives all the answers. When he hears that they attend St. Agnes church, Father Amadi says that he said Mass there once. Kambili then realizes that the visiting priest whom Papa had disparaged was actually Father Amadi.

Auntie Ifeoma tells Father Amadi that her brother almost single-handedly finances St. Agnes, and Father Amadi is shocked to hear that her brother is Eugene Achike. He compliments the *Standard* for telling the truth, and says that he heard that *Amnesty World* is giving Eugene an award. Kambili feels a rush of pride, and wants Father Amadi ("this handsome priest") to associate her with Papa.

Kambili's idea of God is totally dependent on Papa's pro-Western beliefs—she basically imagines God as white and looking like Father Benedict. The corruption in the government has led to a lack of utilities and money, which has led to many strikes. Kambili was unaffected by this at home, but it is a major part of Ifeoma's life. Ifeoma is pleased to hear her children disagree and form their own opinions, such a contrast to Papa.



Kambili longs for the kind of freedom that Ifeoma's children have always known—the freedom just to choose the thing they want, even if it is something as simple as a fruit. Papa has always made every decision for his family, from the color of the curtains to the schools that Jaja and Kambili attend.



Kambili continues to show her privileged lifestyle in her inability to live as frugally as Ifeoma and her children. Father Amadi now appears as a very important character. He is a direct contrast to Father Benedict—he is young, Nigerian, liberal, openminded, and fun to be around. He doesn't fit Kambili's idea of a priest at all.



Kambili's silence becomes even more noticeable in the company of Ifeoma's family, and Jaja seems better able to find his voice. Kambili also feels nervous in Father Amadi's presence, though she doesn't yet understand why. Just like Papa-Nnukwu, Father Amadi can now become a real, friendly presence instead of just Papa's idea of sinfulness.



Kambili still idolizes Papa and wants to be associated with him. Once again Papa's family learns about his life from an outside source, as he doesn't tell them anything of note. Kambili's narration, meanwhile, starts subtly lingering on Father Amadi's appearance.



Aunty Ifeoma says that she hadn't even heard of the award, but she isn't surprised she didn't know anything about it as her brother never calls her. She says that she had to use the pilgrimage to Aokpe to convince him to let Kambili and Jaja visit. She says she hadn't planned on going to Aokpe, but that she might as well now. Obiora and Amaka argue about the validity of the Virgin sightings at Aokpe, and Amaka says "it's about time Our Lady came to Africa." Father Amadi neither confirms nor denies the apparition, saying that we don't need to go anywhere to find the Virgin and her Son.

Amaka half-jokingly asks Father Amadi about the "doubting Thomas" inside everyone as well, but in response Father Amadi only makes a face and Amaka laughs. After dinner they say the rosary, and Father Amadi sings an Igbo praise song. Kambili wants to sing along, but she determinedly keeps her mouth shut. Afterward they watch TV, and Kambili notices Father Amadi watching her. He remarks that she hasn't smiled or laughed all day. Kambili wants to apologize, but no words will come. She gets up and goes to the bedroom, and hears Father Amadi's voice as she falls asleep.

CHAPTER 9

At Aunty Ifeoma's house there is always laughter, and brief arguments, and random Igbo praise songs. There is little meat in the food, and everyone takes a part in keeping the flat very clean. When plate washing one day, Amaka mocks Kambili's way of washing dishes, and again brings up her "fancy schedule." The two don't speak again until later that day, when two of Amaka's friends from school come over. They are dressed fashionably and laugh together over an American magazine. One of them asks Kambili about her hair, but she finds she cannot speak, and so she starts coughing and runs out.

That evening as Kambili sets the table, she hears Amaka asking Aunty Ifeoma if Kambili and Jaja are "abnormal." Ifeoma rebukes her and tells her to respect her cousins, but Amaka repeats that "something is not right with them." Kambili looks over to see if Jaja heard, but he is watching TV with Obiora, now looking comfortable in this new environment. The next morning he also seems to fit right in as he helps Ifeoma in the garden.

Ifeoma reveals that she had to basically lie to Papa to get him to allow Jaja and Kambili to visit. This kind of debate about spiritual things would never occur at Papa's table or be approved by Father Benedict. Father Amadi takes a more openminded approach to his faith—one that is more about love and joy and less about rules and dogma. Amaka continues to push against Eurocentrism.



Amaka's questions and criticisms are actually very perceptive, but Father Amadi and Aunty Ifeoma rarely actually debate with her. Kambili's silence becomes almost a palpable thing, and the more she admires Ifeoma's family and Father Amadi, the more the words seem stuck in her throat. She must force herself to be silent during the singing, but then cannot speak or laugh when spoken to.



After the overwhelming first day, Kambili can now assess all the differences between her family and Ifeoma's. Her silence becomes even more powerful as she tries to overcome it. They are the same age and closely related, but Amaka's life is incredibly different from Kambili's. Amaka continues to see Kambili's schedule not as a tool of Papa's control, but as a luxury for the rich.



Jaja starts adjusting better than Kambili, and he finds a source of joy in working in the garden. Thus the purple hibiscuses are especially symbolic of his journey towards freedom and independence. Kambili's silence is now keeping her from even the most normal human interaction.



Aunty Ifeoma asks Kambili to join them in the garden, and she talks to Kambili about the beauty of the plants. Kambili is only able to answer “yes” without any enthusiasm. Some children from the flat upstairs try to talk to Kambili, but she can only stutter in response. Ifeoma says she can go inside if she wants, and she gives Kambili a book to read about the historical figure Olaudah Equiano.

Kambili sits on the veranda with the book and watches a little girl chase a butterfly. Obiora and Jaja are on the verandah as well, but on the other side of the shade. Obiora asks Jaja about his name, and Jaja says that “Jaja” is just a nickname that stuck—his real name is Chukwuka. Aunty Ifeoma says that Jaja might take after the “defiant” king Jaja of Opobo, who refused to let the British control his people’s trade, and so was exiled to the West Indies. Ifeoma looks at Jaja and says that defiance, like marijuana, is “not a bad thing when used right.” Kambili is struck by both her solemnity and her sacrilege.

Jaja makes a comment about the British losing many battles before their overall victory, and Kambili is amazed that he speaks so easily. She wonders why he doesn’t stutter and stay silent like she does. Jaja looks comfortable and alive, with a light in his eyes she has not seen before, but which appeared when he was in the garden of **purple hibiscuses**.

Chima notices that Jaja’s little finger is gnarled and deformed, and he asks him about it. Aunty Ifeoma quickly says that Jaja had an “accident,” and she sends Chima away. Kambili meets Ifeoma’s eyes and realizes that she knows what happened to Jaja’s finger. When he was ten, Jaja had not come in first in his First Holy Communion class. Papa locked himself in a room with Jaja and when they emerged he took Jaja to the hospital. Papa had purposefully avoided damaging Jaja’s writing hand.

The phone rings. Kambili answers, and it is Mama calling to say that soldiers found the offices of the *Standard* and destroyed the presses and furniture, locked the offices, and took the keys. Ade Coker had been arrested again. Mama says she is worried about Papa. After she talks to Mama, Aunty Ifeoma buys a newspaper even though she hardly ever does, and sees a tiny article about the closing of the *Standard*. That night Papa calls and says that everything is fine. He doesn’t mention the *Standard*. Ifeoma says that Jaja and Kambili are to stay a few extra days, and Jaja smiles joyfully.

Ifeoma has also noticed how “abnormal” Kambili and Jaja are because of their upbringing, but she isn’t rude about it like Amaka. Amaka, too, has things to learn about interacting with other people and being generous. Ifeoma tries to slowly draw Kambili out of her shell, but Kambili’s silence is still impenetrable.



Aunty Ifeoma praises the virtues of being defiant and resisting the British, hinting that this is what Jaja must do with Papa. By now Ifeoma knows that Papa has a tyrannical hold over his children, and so she starts to try and teach them to be independent. Jaja is a more willing student than Kambili. Kambili is still stuck on Papa’s rules and his idea of “sacrilege.”



Adichie now fully portrays the purple hibiscuses as a symbol of freedom and awakening individuality. We cannot see Jaja’s point of view, as he starts to pull away from Kambili as he relishes his newfound freedom and she remains more under Papa’s control.



Jaja has opened up enough that he has even told Ifeoma about Papa’s abuse—something Jaja and Kambili never spoke of before, even amongst themselves. Jaja’s silence is less pervasive than Kambili’s, and he finds his voice sooner, which ultimately leads to the Palm Sunday scene.



*Even as Jaja and Kambili try and escape the frightened silence of Papa’s control, the Nigerian Head of State tries to silence Papa and Ade Coker by physically shutting down their presses. As usual, Papa says nothing about his political or public life to his family, but the events allow Jaja and Kambili to stay in Nsukka longer. Now that the *Standard* is shut down, there is no newspaper willing to support free speech and criticize the government.*



The phone rings early the next morning, and Kambili is worried that it is bad news about Papa being killed. Aunty Ifeoma answers, but she doesn't say who it was. She is irritable and quiet for the rest of the day. Father Amadi stops by during dinner. He says he was playing soccer with some boys earlier, and that next time he will bring Jaja and Obiora along. Kambili is amazed at the thought of a priest playing soccer. Father Amadi invites Kambili along as well.

Father Amadi notices that Aunty Ifeoma is upset and he asks her about it. She says that she got news that Papa-Nnukwu is sick. She wants to bring him to Nsukka. Amaka is upset that her mother didn't tell her earlier, but Obiora remains calm and collected. Kambili notices (as she has many times by now) that he seems older than Jaja. Ifeoma says she doesn't have enough fuel to get to Abba. Father Amadi offers her some emergency fuel from the church.

That night prayers are more subdued, and Kambili wonders where Papa-Nnukwu will sleep when he arrives. She prays that Papa won't find out if she has to share a room with a "heathen." After the rosary Aunty Ifeoma prays for Papa-Nnukwu's health. Kambili is surprised, as Papa only ever prays that Papa-Nnukwu be converted.

The next morning Father Amadi arrives unshaven and wearing shorts, bringing the fuel to Aunty Ifeoma. Obiora offers to suck the fuel from the can to the car's tank with the garden hose. He does it, and Father Amadi praises him, saying that it is a useful skill. Kambili admires Father Amadi's smile. Aunty Ifeoma emerges wearing black. She thanks Father Amadi and then leaves for Abba with Obiora.

Father Amadi leaves, Chima visits a neighbor, and Amaka goes into her room to listen to her "culturally conscious" musicians, which Kambili can recognize now. Jaja works in the garden. Kambili asks him, whispering, if he thinks that they're "abnormal." Jaja only says "What does abnormal mean?" and goes back to trimming the plants.

Aunty Ifeoma returns that afternoon with Papa-Nnukwu. He seems tired and greets Kambili weakly. Amaka and Obiora help Papa-Nnukwu into the flat and into Amaka's room. They offer him the bed but he says he prefers the floor. He lies down and immediately falls asleep. Kambili notices how tall he is when he is stretched out on the floor. Amaka offers to cook his favorite meal, but Ifeoma says he has hardly been eating or drinking.

Kambili worries about Papa, but deep down she still considers him a kind of immortal, godlike presence. Father Amadi continues to act "unpriestly." Like Aunty Ifeoma, he seeks out the joy in his religion instead of only dwelling on sin and punishment.



Obiora is two years younger than Jaja, but Obiora seems to have a maturity beyond his years. He is the "man of the house" after his father died, and though Ifeoma is still very much in charge, Obiora takes on more responsibility than he would otherwise. Jaja, on the other hand, is still under Papa's control even if he has begun to imagine what it might be like to not be.



Ifeoma sees Papa-Nnukwu as her beloved father, a member of her family, and a valuable human, while Papa has learned to only see him as a "heathen" who needs to adopt Papa's rules. Ifeoma's prayers continue to surprise Kambili in their sincere joy and love.



Kambili becomes more and more entranced by Father Amadi. She experiences her first sexual feelings at the same time as her first experience of independence, and so her growing affection for Father Amadi becomes closely linked to the freedom she finds in Nsukka.



As Jaja tries to pull away from Papa he also pulls away from Kambili. It may be that he sees her as part of the toxic home environment, or just that he gets carried away with his new rebelliousness, but the siblings' relationship only becomes less close from now on.



Ifeoma and her family don't even think about whether Papa-Nnukwu is a "heathen" or not—he is just a member of their family who needs help. When Papa-Nnukwu is actually present and looking so old and frail, it suddenly seems monstrous that Papa would cut all ties with him just because of his religion.



Aunty Ifeoma says that the doctors at the medical center are on strike, but that she knows a doctor, Doctor Nduoma, who will visit that evening. He has been running his own small clinic since the strike. Later the doctor arrives and examines Papa-Nnukwu. Jaja and Kambili sit on the verandah. Jaja is concerned with Papa-Nnukwu's health, while Kambili is concerned with Papa finding out that they are sharing a house with him.

Kambili is surprised at Jaja's tone, as if he doesn't care whether Papa finds out or not. She asks him if he told Aunty Ifeoma about his finger, and he says that he did. Kambili wonders if he has forgotten that "we never told, that there was so much that we never told." Jaja gets up and says he wants to clean off Ifeoma's car. As he walks off Kambili notices how much older and more broad-shouldered he seems than a week ago.

Doctor Nduoma leaves, and Aunty Ifeoma thanks Jaja for cleaning her car, calling him by the same title she uses for her sons. She says that she will take Papa-Nnukwu to get tests done, as at least the labs at the medical center are still open. The next day she takes him in, but returns and says that the lab staff are now on strike as well. She will have to find a private lab in town, which will be more expensive. She looks worried as she goes to get Papa-Nnukwu's medicine.

That night Papa-Nnukwu eats, and everyone is relieved. He takes his pills and jokes with the children. Amaka seems happy even when she complains. Suddenly the power goes off. Obiora asks Papa-Nnukwu to tell them a folk story. Papa-Nnukwu tells the story of why the tortoise has a cracked shell.

In Papa-Nnukwu's story, there was a famine and all the animals were starving except for the dog. The tortoise discovered that the dog was being taken up into the sky by his mother and getting food there. He blackmails the dog into inviting him along as well. One day the tortoise pretends to be the dog and calls for the dog's mother, wanting all the food for himself. He is halfway to the sky when the dog finds out, and the tortoise falls down, cracking his shell. Everyone laughs except for Kambili.

For someone poor like Aunty Ifeoma, the corruption and strikes throughout the country can have a devastating effect, as now she cannot find proper medical care for her father. Kambili continues to cling to her guilt at breaking Papa's rules, while Jaja has begun to move past them and see Papa-Nnukwu as a person.



Jaja seems to actively avoid Kambili now, as he tries to escape the silence she is still clinging to. In naming Papa's violence and talking about it to Aunty Ifeoma, Jaja helps rob it of its oppressive power. With his newfound freedom Jaja seems to reach a new maturity.



Jaja now prefers Ifeoma's family to his own, and starts to open up to Aunty Ifeoma as if she were his own mother. Ifeoma doesn't have the extra money to work around the medical center strikes and still find proper care for Papa-Nnukwu. Papa-Nnukwu's life is in danger, but Papa won't use his money to help him.



Ifeoma's children are close with Papa-Nnukwu, and they get along well. Jaja and Kambili, on the other hand, only see him for 15 minutes a year. They have never heard him tell a story before.



Kambili has heard all about the evils of Papa-Nnukwu's "paganism" but doesn't actually know anything about it. Papa-Nnukwu simply tells an old story to entertain his grandchildren and pass on a tradition—there is nothing frightening or wicked about, and so Kambili is confused about why it is so sinful. And yet she still can't bring herself to enjoy it.



CHAPTER 10

Papa-Nnukwu wakes up before everyone else, and they have breakfast with him on the verandah as he tells them stories about his village. He takes his medicine, and Auntie Ifeoma looks relieved. She thinks he will get better soon and start asking to return to Abba. Father Amadi drives up to visit Papa-Nnukwu, and Kambili's hands shake when she sees his car. He is wearing his priestly robes today, but he still seems comfortable and confident. Kambili runs inside and watches him from the window.

Father Amadi is delighted to hear that Papa-Nnukwu is improving, and he says he will take Jaja and Obiora to the stadium that evening to play soccer. He asks about Kambili, and she feels grateful to hear him say her name. He drives off. Kambili goes into the living room, where Amaka is tending to Papa-Nnukwu, who compliments Amaka's artistic skills. Amaka sits down and starts to paint him. They speak to each other occasionally, understanding each other without many words. Kambili watches and feels a longing for something she will "never have."

Kambili goes into the kitchen. Auntie Ifeoma notices that she is crying, but Kambili says that something must have flown into her eyes. Auntie Ifeoma shows Kambili how to prepare the coco-yams for her soup. Ifeoma praises Papa-Nnukwu's health, saying that the Virgin Mary has helped to heal him. Kambili asks how the Virgin could intercede for a heathen. Ifeoma is quiet for a while. Then she says that Papa-Nnukwu is a traditionalist, not a heathen, and that he practices what is familiar to him, and that his ceremonies are similar to Catholic ones. Kambili hears Amaka and Papa-Nnukwu laughing in the next room, and wonders if they would stop if she entered.

The next morning Auntie Ifeoma wakes Kambili up to watch Papa-Nnukwu perform his "declaration of innocence" rite. He is on the verandah, and Kambili observes him. Papa-Nnukwu sits next to a lamp and draws chalk lines on the floor as he thanks a god for his many blessings and declares his own innocence of crime. He prays for himself, for Ifeoma, and for Papa, asking that the "curse" on Papa be lifted. He prays for his grandchildren, and that good things come to all who do good. Then he stands up, totally naked, and Kambili does not look away. Papa-Nnukwu gets dressed, smiling. Kambili thinks that she and her family never smile after saying the rosary.

Kambili's feelings towards Father Amadi are definitely romantic now, but she remains just as shy and silent as before and is afraid to speak to him, even actively hiding from him. Her instinct is still toward silence, toward non-independence. It also seems "unpriestly" to Kambili that a Catholic priest would come to check up on a heathen's health.



Papa has basically denied Jaja and Kambili outside friendship and familial love, and so Kambili has never gotten to know her grandfather like Amaka has. Kambili finally starts to realize and regret this fact. Just as Kambili and Jaja share a language of the eyes, so Amaka and Papa-Nnukwu seem to understand each other without many words.



Even as Kambili cries and longs for a close relationship with her grandfather, the only thing she can say out loud is to repeat Papa's dogma. Auntie Ifeoma now clarifies her different approach to religion—she is still a Catholic, but she doesn't force her beliefs on others or consider other beliefs to be without value. In her explanation of Papa-Nnukwu she also emphasizes the importance of cultural tradition, of valuing where you come from as a source of strength. Kambili is starting to see how her silence negatively impacts her ability to engage with the world, to have fun in it.



Ifeoma understands that Kambili has only Papa's word that being non-Christian is evil, and so she makes Kambili see for herself. Papa-Nnukwu prays for Papa with a sincerity that Papa never returns in his own prayers. Papa-Nnukwu prays for Papa's health and well-being, while Papa only prays that Papa-Nnukwu become a Catholic. Once again there is an aspect of joy and love in religion that is totally foreign to Kambili, and she starts to long for it.



Later that morning Amaka washes Papa-Nnukwu's feet and then continues her painting of him. Auntie Ifeoma asks Kambili to help her with the cooking, and Kambili is again embarrassed at her own lack of knowledge. Ifeoma says that Amaka can do it instead, and Amaka angrily says that she shouldn't have to just because rich people don't know how to cook. Ifeoma looks at Kambili and tells her to talk back to her cousin. Kambili finally answers calmly, saying that Amaka can show her the right way. Amaka laughs and says "so your voice can be this loud."

Amaka shows Kambili how to prepare the *orah* leaves for the soup. Father Amadi arrives later, and Kambili nervously shakes his hand. Amaka talks to him the most, but his attention lingers on Kambili. Father Amadi discusses his future trip as a missionary. Papa-Nnukwu has been listening, and he tells Father Amadi to not lie to whomever he is trying to convert, or teach them to "disregard their fathers."

Obiora wonders aloud if there can ever be religion without oppression, or oppression without religion. Father Amadi banter with him and Amaka, but then points out Kambili, saying that she is quiet but there is a lot going on in her head. Kambili locks eyes with him and feels panicked. Father Amadi says that he will take her to the stadium today, just the two of them. Amaka remarks that Kambili looks terrified, but her voice sounds kinder than usual. Kambili looks around at everyone and wonders how they can all be so calm in Father Amadi's presence.

Father Amadi leaves, and Auntie Ifeoma tells Kambili to change into shorts before he comes back to pick her up. Kambili says she doesn't own shorts, and Amaka lends her a pair without sneering or commenting. Kambili puts them on but avoids looking at herself in the mirror, wanting to avoid the sin of vanity. She puts on Amaka's lipstick, but then wipes it off in a panic when Father Amadi arrives.

Father Amadi picks up Kambili and as they drive she is overwhelmed by his presence. She randomly admits that she sleeps in the same room as Papa-Nnukwu, a heathen. Father Amadi asks why that is a sin, but Kambili can't answer. Father Amadi says that Papa must have told her that. He says that Jaja has told him some about Papa. Kambili looks away, wondering why Jaja would do such a thing.

Amaka is irritated not just by Kambili's privilege but also by her meek submissiveness. Auntie Ifeoma again tries to draw Kambili out of her shell—when Amaka is rude to Kambili, Ifeoma rebukes Kambili for her silence more than Amaka for her rudeness. And this succeeds, as Kambili finally finds her voice and is able to speak without stuttering or whispering.



Papa-Nnukwu does not hate Christianity, but only the kind that Papa and his white missionary teachers practice—one that rejects everything about Nigerian culture as sinful and paganistic. Father Amadi, fortunately, believes in a more inclusive faith.



Obiora, like Amaka, brings up real issues about colonialism and Eurocentrism in religion, although Ifeoma and Father Amadi never engage his arguments for real. Father Amadi has now joined Auntie Ifeoma in trying to get Kambili to open up, even if he has to practically force her. Kambili is very much infatuated with him by now, and is terrified by her foreign new feelings.



Amaka now starts to act more sympathetically towards Kambili, as if she realizes that the true source of Kambili's meekness. Kambili had admired Amaka and Ifeoma's lipstick at Christmas, and now she has a chance to wear it herself, but she still can't rid herself of guilt about vanity.



Kambili again finds herself only able to repeat Papa's platitudes when she is nervous. She is still very confused by the new environment in Nsukka, and to her, Jaja breaking their silence and telling the truth about Papa is almost a betrayal.



They arrive at the stadium, and Father Amadi suggests they play before the boys arrive. Kambili admits that she doesn't know any sports. Father Amadi stands up and tells Kambili to prove her love for Jesus by catching him. He sprints off, and Kambili runs after him. This happens four times, but Kambili can never catch up with him. They sit down on the grass, panting, and Father Amadi says that Kambili has "good legs for running." Kambili is nervous to think of him looking at her legs.

Father Amadi asks Kambili if she knows how to smile, and he reaches over and tugs at her lips. She tries to smile but cannot. He notices the stain on her hand where she wiped the lipstick off, and guesses what it is. Kambili feels embarrassed, but then starts to smile. Just then the boys arrive to play soccer. Father Amadi takes off his shirt and drops it on Kambili's lap as he runs off to play. Kambili watches him and very slowly reaches out to touch the shirt. She holds on to it for the whole game.

On the drive home Father Amadi plays a tape of Igbo worship songs. He says that enjoys playing with the boys, as he sees "Christ in their faces." Kambili can only imagine the face of the blond Christ at St. Agnes. Father Amadi sings along with the tape and his voice is rich and melodious. Kambili feels like she is at home, or where she is meant to be.

Father Amadi points out that Kambili hasn't asked a single question. He says she should have learned how from Amaka, and Kambili laughs. She feels strange and wonders if she has ever heard herself laugh. Suddenly she asks Father Amadi why he became a priest, but then she regrets asking. She knows the right answer: he would have been "called." Kambili has imagined God calling her before, in a British-accented voice that pronounces her name wrong.

Father Amadi gives a clichéd answer at first, but when Kambili accepts it he tells her he was joking. He says that he had many questions when growing up, and that "the priesthood came closest to answering them." Kambili suddenly feels sad that Father Amadi's handsome features will never be passed on to a child. Father Amadi says he is late for a meeting, so he must drop Kambili off and leave. He says he wants to do this again, and Kambili feels a lightness and sweetness in her chest.

When Kambili gets home, Auntie Ifeoma says that Papa called. He had learned from someone in Abba that Papa-Nnukwu was staying at the house. He was angry about a heathen living with his children, and he wants them to come home the day after tomorrow. Ifeoma sounds casual as she says this, but Kambili is terrified, knowing how angry Papa will be.

Here Father Amadi tries to show Kambili the joy that he finds in Christianity—that it doesn't always have to be about guilt and punishment, but can be about laughter and love. Kambili is confused by this idea, while also still confused by her feelings for Father Amadi. Yet she slowly starts emerging from her shell.



Father Amadi is clearly flirting with Kambili and recognizes her feelings for him. He finally manages to draw a smile out of her. Sprinting after Father Amadi and this smile finally begin to break up the silence in Kambili. Her sexual feelings for Father Amadi continue to grow as well.



Once again Father Amadi's Catholicism is contrasted with Papa's. Papa (and therefore Kambili) sees God as white, and Western culture as superior, while Father Amadi sees God as just as present in poor Nigerian boys as white Catholic priests.



Kambili now laughs for the first time, possibly ever. We see just how tragically pervasive the silence has been all her life. She manages to ask a spontaneous question as well. Yet still she imagines God as white and British—so much so that God himself won't be able to pronounce her name correctly.



Father Amadi's approach to the priesthood is much more natural and heartfelt than Father Benedict's, and so his faith seems that much more alive. Kambili is truly falling in love with Father Amadi by now. There also seems to be a suggestion that Father Amadi may have feelings for Kambili, which creates tension about the relationship through much of the rest of the novel.



As usual, Papa has no concern for Papa-Nnukwu's health or his children's relationship with their grandfather, but only dwells on the fact that they have committed a sin. After Kambili's moment of joy and freedom, Papa reasserts himself.



The next morning Amaka wakes up Kambili and they go to wake Papa-Nnukwu. They shake him but he doesn't stir. Amaka panics and calls for her mother. Auntie Ifeoma runs in, confirms that Papa-Nnukwu is dead, and starts to wail, clutching at her father's body. Obiora enters and pulls Ifeoma off. He says he will call Doctor Nduoma, and there is a new authority in his voice. Jaja covers Papa-Nnukwu's body, and Kambili wants to help him but knows it will be sinful to touch a heathen's body. She closes her eyes to avoid watching Jaja.

Obiora cries quietly to himself, knowing that he is now the "man of the house." Kambili tries to go into the bathroom, but Amaka is locked inside, crying. Her crying is loud; Kambili notes that she hasn't had to learn "the art of silent crying." Kambili tells her cousin she needs the toilet, and Amaka comes out, waiting for Kambili to finish so she can go back in and sob.

Two men come with Doctor Nduoma to carry Papa-Nnukwu's body. They couldn't get a stretcher because the administrative staff was on strike as well. The ambulance drives off with Papa-Nnukwu's body and Kambili helps Auntie Ifeoma clean off his mattress. Ifeoma asks if Kambili saw her grandfather's face in death, and Kambili shakes her head. Ifeoma says that Papa-Nnukwu was smiling.

The rest of the day everyone is subdued. Amaka laments that she didn't finish painting Papa-Nnukwu. He had said that they would finish today. Amaka angrily says that he would be alive now if everyone at the medical center was not on strike. Kambili wants to be angry and tearful with her, but she knows that Papa-Nnukwu was not close to her like he was to Amaka.

Obiora then says that "Uncle Eugene" has just parked outside the flat. Kambili suddenly freezes. Papa comes inside and Kambili and Jaja greet him mechanically. Auntie Ifeoma says that he should not have come, but Papa says that he could not let his children stay any longer. He looks around for Papa-Nnukwu.

Auntie Ifeoma tells Papa that Papa-Nnukwu has died. Papa sits down and puts his head in his hands. Then he asks if Ifeoma called a priest to give him "extreme unction" before he died. Ifeoma gets angry, asking why that is all Papa has to say about his own father's death. Papa says he cannot participate in a pagan funeral, but he will help arrange a Catholic funeral. Ifeoma starts to shout, declaring that she will never allow Papa-Nnukwu to have a Catholic funeral. She snaps her fingers at Papa, cursing him and weeping.

Adichie continues to juxtapose scenes poignantly—now Papa's cold and angry call about Papa-Nnukwu's "paganism" is contrasted with Ifeoma and her children's' intense and loving grief over his loss. Kambili has been so recently reminded of Papa's anger and rules, and so she can't help thinking of sinning even as she mourns her grandfather.



Even in her grief, Amaka still has the freedom to cry as loudly as she wants. Kambili, Mama, and Jaja have always had to cry in silence, to avoid stirring Papa's anger up further. Obiora continues to take on more maturity and responsibility.



The workers' strikes are so ubiquitous that they can't even find a stretcher for a dead body. Papa-Nnukwu took joy in his family and in his traditions, unlike Papa and his family, and Papa-Nnukwu's joy followed him into death.



Amaka sees the corruption in Nigeria and their own lack of money as partly responsible for Papa-Nnukwu's death, which may be true. Kambili wants to mourn loudly and angrily, but feels that she doesn't deserve to. Part of her growing up will be to escape her sense of not being deserving.



This scene of loving grief is once again juxtaposed with Papa's cold anger and overwhelming presence. Even Jaja, who has been finding his voice and sense of freedom, immediately seems to slip back under Papa's control.



Here Papa truly shows just how much he has sacrificed familial love and affection for the sake of his religion and Eurocentric worldview. He does not grieve over the death of Papa-Nnukwu the person, but only over the fact that Papa-Nnukwu never converted before he died. In her intense grief Ifeoma loses her usual calm and confidence and breaks down at Papa's coldness.



Papa gathers Kambili and Jaja to him, kissing their heads, and he tells them to get their things. Aunty Ifeoma comes in as Kambili is packing. She gives Kambili back her schedule. Kambili asks her to tell Father Amadi goodbye for her. Ifeoma has wiped away her tears and looks fearless once more. She holds Kambili's hand as they walk out of the house.

The time of blossoming freedom and joy is over for now, and Kambili and Jaja seem unable to escape Papa's tyrannical world. But they have been changed by their experience in Nsukka, and Ifeoma now fully understands their plight.



Chima starts to cry as Kevin packs up the car. Aunty Ifeoma says that he will see Jaja soon, but Papa doesn't confirm this. Instead he gives Ifeoma some money to buy Chima a present. Amaka presses something wrapped in black cellophane into Kambili's hands, and Kambili sees that it is the unfinished painting of Papa-Nnukwu. She hides it in her bag and gets into the car.

Amaka's scorn for Kambili seems to have dissolved, and she gives her this precious reminder of Papa-Nnukwu and her time in Nsukka. Papa, as usual, responds to problems by throwing money at them.



Mama answers the door when they arrive. She has a black eye and her face is swollen. Jaja delivers the news about Papa-Nnukwu when Papa doesn't mention it. Papa says that his father has gone to face judgment, as Ifeoma didn't call a priest to let him convert before he died. Jaja says "maybe he didn't want to convert." Papa stares at him in wonder and then tells him to go upstairs and get ready for dinner.

Jaja does still carry the rebellious sense of freedom and new voice he found in Nsukka, and he talks back once to Papa, though he immediately falls silent afterward. Papa's violence towards Mama has not abated in the children's' absence.



At dinner Papa prays longer than usual, asking God to forgive his children for their "sin of omission" of not telling him about Papa-Nnukwu. As they eat Kambili notices how much meat they all have compared to at Aunty Ifeoma's house. Jaja asks Papa for the key to his room, as he wants some privacy—Papa always keeps the keys to both his children's rooms. Papa asks if he wants to masturbate, and Jaja says no. Papa laments aloud how living with a heathen has corrupted his children.

Now that she is back at home, Kambili once again notices the differences between her family and Aunty Ifeoma's, notably the wealthy abundance and the lack of joy. Jaja tries to press on and assert his individuality, pushing against Papa for the first time. Papa, of course, blames this new independence on Papa-Nnukwu's unGodly influence.



Everyone is silent for the rest of dinner, and afterward Jaja follows Papa upstairs. Mama looks through fabric samples for the new curtains, which they have changed every year. Papa makes the final decision, but he usually chooses Mama's favorite shade of beige. Kambili comments that Mama has polished the **figurines on the étagère**. Mama says that she did it yesterday, and Kambili looks closer at her swollen eye.

For Kambili, however, the silence of life returns. In this almost comic example of the curtains we see just how much control Papa keeps over his family. Kambili and Mama still never speak of Papa's violence, but only of the figurines, the symbol of Mama's quiet submissiveness.



Papa calls for Kambili to come upstairs. She hesitates, but Mama tells her to go. Papa is in the bathroom, and he tells Kambili to climb into the tub. She looks around for a stick, confused about what he will hurt her with. Then she sees a tea kettle on the floor. Papa asks her if she knew that Papa-Nnukwu was coming to Nsukka, and that she would be sharing a room with a heathen, and if she purposefully didn't tell him on the phone. She affirms it all. Papa starts to cry and says that Kambili is precious, and so she should not "walk into sin."

This horrifying scene is Papa's worst punishment yet. He still cries and calls Kambili "precious," and actually thinks that the violent punishment is good for her and will help save her soul from hell. Kambili is still helpless against Papa, and doesn't deny any of the supposed sins she has committed.



Papa starts to pour boiling water on Kambili's feet. Kambili screams, and Papa tells her that when she walks into sin, she burns her feet. When the water is gone Papa makes to lift Kambili out of the tub, but Mama comes into the bathroom, also crying. She puts wet salt on Kambili's feet and then gently carries her to her room and gives her Panadol. She nods when Kambili asks if she had to go to Jaja's room as well. Mama assures her that her feet will be healed in time to go to school tomorrow.

After Mama leaves, Kambili thinks about Father Amadi and her family in Nsukka. She takes Amaka's painting of Papa-Nnukwu out of her bag, but is still afraid to unwrap it. Just as she puts it away Papa enters the room. Kambili feels a new "flavor" of fear as she worries that Papa knows about the painting. Papa sits on the bed and reminds Kambili that everything he does is for her own good. He said that once he "sinned against his own body" while at missionary school. A priest there made him soak his hands in boiling water, and Papa never committed that sin again. Kambili has never imagined Papa committing any sins.

The next day Kambili tells Jaja about the painting. Neither of them mention their feet. Jaja says that he also has a secret present from Nsukka. In the refrigerator he has some stalks of **purple hibiscus**, wrapped in black cellophane like the painting. Jaja plans to give them to the gardener to plant. His eyes shine when he talks about the hibiscuses.

At lunch that day Papa complains about the cost of pagan funerals. He says that he has given Ifeoma money for Papa-Nnukwu's funeral. Just then, Ade Coker arrives with another man and Papa leaves the table. Jaja and Kambili try to hear what they are talking about. Ade says that the head of state (whom Ade calls "Big Oga") has decided to give him an exclusive interview, as long as Ade won't run a story about Nwankiti Ogechi, a pro-democracy advocate who has gone missing. The man with Ade suggests that they hold the story about Nwankiti, but Ade angrily refuses. They go into Papa's study. That evening the government agents come to try and bribe Papa.

The next issue of the *Standard* has Nwankiti Ogechi on the cover. The story claims that soldiers shot him and then poured acid on his body. During "family time" that day they hear on the radio that Nigeria has been suspended from the Commonwealth Nations because of the murder, and that Canada and Holland are withdrawing their ambassadors from the country. Men from the "Democratic Coalition" come to visit Papa that night and the next few nights. They all warn him to be careful, and remind him of other assassinated activists.

Mama helps her children and tends to them, but does not try to stop Papa even as he hurts them so terribly. This punishment is not Papa lashing out in anger, but premeditating a punishment that seems to him to fit the crime his children have committed. Even the newly outspoken Jaja submitted to Papa's punishment.



We now learn some of the backstory behind Papa's violence. He was punished in similar ways by the missionary priests at his school, and he saw this punishment as ultimately saving him from sin and hell, and so he wants to "help" his children by teaching them in the same way. Kambili still idolizes Papa so much that even when he brutally hurts her she still cannot imagine him as ever doing anything wrong.



Jaja and Kambili still remain silent about Papa's violence, but they can at least speak about their reminders of Nsukka's freedom. The purple hibiscus follows Jaja home, as he carries his new freedom and individuality back to Enugu.



Papa seemed unmoved by Papa-Nnukwu's death, but he does at least pay for a lavish "heathen" funeral, perhaps feeling guilty and so breaking his own strict rules, but also perhaps realizing that not showing generosity toward his dead father would affect his public image. The political world intrudes into the family's sphere now. Ade and Papa want to publish a story accusing the government of murdering an activist, and the Head of State is trying to distract them with an interview, or bribe them with money (perhaps similar to how Papa whitewashes his lack of care for his father with the funeral). These are the first methods of censorship, and if they fail they will use violence.



Papa doesn't discuss any of this with his family, but it is now obvious that he has put himself in danger by publishing the story about Nwankiti Ogechi's alleged murder. It has embarrassed the Head of State on an international scale, and so Papa's allies fear that the government will respond with violence to silence Papa just as they did Nwankiti Ogechi.



At dinner the next few days Papa's hands seem to be shaking. Kambili wants to talk about the many people coming to the house, but Jaja looks away when she brings it up with her eyes, and changes the subject when she mentions it. One day Auntie Ifeoma calls to ask about Papa. Jaja talks to her about Papa in a way he won't with Kambili. He tells Ifeoma that the **purple hibiscus** stalks have been planted. He gives Kambili the phone, and she asks to give Father Amadi her greetings. Ifeoma says that Father Amadi asks about her and Jaja "all the time."

Amaka comes to the phone and talks to Kambili, sounding friendlier than usual. Kambili thanks her for the painting, and Amaka talks about Papa-Nnukwu's upcoming funeral. Amaka says that she hopes Kambili and Jaja can come for Easter, so they can be there for her confirmation and maybe see the apparitions at Aokpe. Kambili remembers her own confirmation the year before, and her confirmation name, which Papa had chosen: Ruth.

When she is back in her room, Kambili thinks about Father Amadi and wonders if he really had been asking about her. She doodles the name "Father Amadi" over and over on a piece of paper, but rips it up when she hears Papa come home. She keeps thinking more and more about Father Amadi in the following weeks, even after school starts up again. She decides to play volleyball with the other girls, even though they make fun of her, as she remembers Father Amadi saying that she has "good legs for running."

CHAPTER 11

One rainy day Ade Coker is assassinated in his home. He receives a package from the Head of State, and when he opens it at the breakfast table with his family he is blown up. Kambili and Jaja come home that day to find Papa sobbing on the sofa, looking small and broken. Mama and Jaja comfort him. Later Papa funds Ade's funeral, buys a new house for Ade's family, and gives the *Standard* staff bonuses and a long leave. Kambili starts having nightmares about Ade getting blown up, but sometimes in her dreams it is Papa dying in an explosion at a meal, and she is the daughter at the table with him.

In the following weeks Papa looks more weary and unwell. He prays more, and Father Benedict often visits the house. Soldiers go to one of Papa's factories, plant dead rats there, and then shut down the factory, claiming unsanitary conditions. Papa doesn't check very often that Jaja and Kambili are following their schedules, so they spend more time together.

Jaja continues to pull away from Kambili, as if she were part of Papa's toxic control. Jaja instead draws closer to Auntie Ifeoma, speaking with her in a way that he has never spoken to Kambili. Ifeoma seems to understand the symbolism of the purple hibiscus, and so Jaja's news means that he is trying to assert his new independence at home.



Amaka's scorn and coldness has dissolved, and she now treats Kambili as a friend. Kambili likes this new familial love, but is surprised by it. In the Catholic tradition in Nigeria at this time, children had to choose English names to be confirmed as officially Catholic. Papa, of course, chose Kambili's name for her.



Kambili tentatively reaches for her own kind of freedom after her experience at Nsukka. She doesn't rebel against Papa, but she does overcome her own shyness and play sports with the other girls, and embraces her strong feelings for Father Amadi, not worrying about whether they might be "sinful" or not.



The threat against Papa for daring to speak out is very real, as this horrible assassination proves. Ade Coker is loosely based on the real-life Nigerian journalist Dele Giwa, who was killed by a package bomb in 1986. With this murder the Head of State proves his potential for brutality and his fear of anything other than censorship and obedience. Again, though, the Head of State's violence, which Papa stands against, mirrors Papa's own violence meant to enforce obedience within his own household.



The government is afraid to kill Papa because of his powerful connections, but they do at least send him a message and try to discredit him. Papa's usually calm demeanor starts to crack, and he turns to his intense faith for relief.



One day when Papa is with Father Benedict, Jaja comes into Kambili's room and asks to see the painting of Papa-Nnukwu. Kambili nervously takes it out. Jaja runs his deformed little finger over the painting, entranced. Kambili joins him in staring at it. They stay there for a long time, longer than they know they should, as if secretly wanting to confront Papa that day.

Jaja has talked back to Papa, but this is the first real moment of defiance for the children. They don't even do anything active against Papa, but only refuse to hide their love for their grandfather. Yet this too is a kind of speaking out for freedom.



Papa comes in and sees the painting. Jaja and Kambili both claim that the painting is theirs, and Papa starts to sway back and forth in rage. He takes the painting and rips it up. Kambili screams and tries to pick up the pieces. Papa yells at her and then starts to kick her as she curls up on the floor on top of the pieces of paper. He kicks her with his metal-buckled shoes, yelling about heathens and Hell, and then strikes her with his belt. Kambili smells Amaka's paint on the paper and eventually passes out.

This small act of defiance, followed by Jaja and Kambili's refusal to feel ashamed of the "sin," drives Papa into a rage. All his stress and fear about Ade's death and his factories seems to break in as well, and he loses control. Kambili turns inward, trying to avoid the realization that the man she loves and idolizes is beating her almost to death.



Kambili wakes up in the hospital. Mama is there, crying gratefully that Kambili is awake. Kambili's whole body is in terrible pain. She hears the doctor saying that she has a broken rib and internal bleeding. Later she sees Papa crying and calling her his "precious daughter," and then Papa and Father Benedict praying and giving her extreme unction. Kambili tells Mama to call Aunty Ifeoma. Mama's face is puffy from crying, and Kambili suddenly wants to both hug her and shove her down.

Papa again responds to his own violence with tears and tender care. At the same time, religion still drives him: in case Kambili is about to die, he makes sure that she receives the last rites from a "spiritual" priest like Father Benedict. Kambili suddenly feels an anger at Mama for submitting to Papa's abuse and not protecting her children better.



Kambili later wakes up to see Father Amadi leaning over her. She wonders if she is dreaming. She hears Aunty Ifeoma's voice, saying that her children could not come because of school. Ifeoma tells Mama that "this cannot go on"—she must escape before things get worse. Mama protests that Papa has never done something like this before. Ifeoma firmly declares that Kambili and Jaja will go to Nsukka, at least until Easter, once Kambili is healed. Eventually their voices fade away. Later Kambili wakes up again, and Mama tells her that Papa has been at her bedside all night, every night. Kambili looks away.

Mama continues to defend Papa and refuse to see the reality of the situation. Ifeoma, on the other hand, now understands the full extent of her brother's abusiveness, and tries to take control. Mama even defends Papa to Kambili, telling her how he stayed at her bedside, but Kambili doesn't want to hear this anymore. Something has been irreparably broken in her relationship with Papa. She can see that for him religious purity is more important than love for his daughter.



Papa picks out a private tutor for Kambili, and she comes to the hospital the following week. She is a young white nun, but she speaks fluent Igbo, which surprises Kambili. Kambili pretends to recover more slowly than she actually is, as she doesn't want to go home. She can tell that her tutor realizes this but doesn't say anything. Kambili takes her exams from her hospital bed, and she comes in first in the class.

The tutor never gets a name or becomes an important character, but she is a surprisingly understanding presence in Kambili's hospital room, and a hopeful example of a more flexible, caring young, white Catholic in Nigeria. Kambili is no longer obsessed with getting first in her class to please Papa.



Kambili's class comes to visit her. Chinwe Jideze gives her a card and talks to her as if they were close friends. Ezinne says that Kambili should stop running off after school when she comes back. That night Mama tells Kambili that she will be going to Nsukka with Jaja when she is discharged in two days. Somehow Auntie Ifeoma had convinced Papa.

Kambili's classmates don't know what happened to her, but as she has started to engage more with them they do at least start to talk to her now and accept her as one of their own. Kambili takes her small freedoms as she can find them, like deciding to stop running away after school.



CHAPTER 12

Kambili arrives at Auntie Ifeoma's house and everyone treats her gingerly, as if she was still weak and sick. Jaja goes out to work in the garden. The *aku*, a seasonal flying termite that some people fry as a snack, start flying, and some of the children in the building run out to catch them. Obiora goes out to observe the "children." Chima goes too, to catch some and give them to his friend, as Auntie Ifeoma does not eat them.

Obiora now sees himself as an adult, and watches the other "children" with an almost scientific manner. Jaja returns to the garden, his first source of freedom and joy. Everything seems idyllic now that they are back in Nsukka.



Auntie Ifeoma goes upstairs and Kambili is left alone with Amaka. Amaka tells Kambili that she is Father Amadi's "sweetheart" now, and he has been asking about her constantly. Amaka asks if Kambili has a crush on him. Kambili says yes, though "crush" seems too mild for her feelings. Amaka says that all the girls in church have crushes on him. She says it's exciting to compete with God for a man's heart. But she says that Father Amadi has never talked about anyone the way he talks about Kambili.

As usual, Amaka is not afraid to speak her mind, and she helps put Kambili's feelings into words. She doesn't understand the depth of Kambili's love, however. It seems that Father Amadi reciprocates some of Kambili's feelings as well, though Catholic priests are supposed to remain celibate.



Amaka then asks if Papa was the one who hurt Kambili. Amaka says her mother didn't tell her, but she could guess. Kambili says yes, it was him, and she immediately leaves for the bathroom, avoiding Amaka's reaction.

Kambili is no longer afraid to speak about Papa's violence. This is a huge step in overcoming her silence and oppression, and also brings the two cousins closer. Yet at the same time Kambili is not quite ready to see Amaka's reaction—she's not ready to see Father condemned in the eyes of another person.



The power goes off that evening, and Father Amadi comes over with some food. He hugs Kambili, and Kambili suddenly wishes that everyone else would disappear for a while. A neighbor brings over some fried *aku* and Obiora eats some. Father Amadi reminisces about chasing *aku* when he was a child. Kambili closes her eyes and listens to his voice.

The novel now dwells on Kambili's growing relationship with Father Amadi, as her sexual and emotional awakening coincides with her newfound voice and freedom. The fact that he is a priest also ties into her struggle with faith in both Papa and Papa's religion (and likely Amadi's own struggle, though that is not portrayed in the novel).



The next day Kambili wakes up late to see Auntie Ifeoma on the verandah with another female professor. They are discussing the government-appointed “sole administrator” who is going to run the university. The woman says that Ifeoma’s name is on a list of professors who are “disloyal to the university,” and that she might be fired. Ifeoma says that she will speak the truth, even if it gets her fired. The woman counters that the truth will not feed her children. Ifeoma angrily asks when is the right time to speak out, if not now. Then they leave together for the university, both looking weary and sad.

Amaka and Obiora tell Kambili more about the sole administrator. Obiora says the university is now a “microcosm of the country.” Amaka says that Auntie Ifeoma has been considering moving to America, where she will at least be paid and have her work recognized. Obiora wants to go to America but Amaka doesn’t, and they argue about it. Kambili is stunned by the thought of life without Auntie Ifeoma and her family. She goes outside, where Jaja is working in the garden, and breathes deeply.

That evening Father Amadi stops by, wanting to take them all to the stadium. The boys are busy playing a video game, however, and Amaka jokes that Father Amadi wants to be alone with his “sweetheart,” so Kambili is the only one who goes. They get to the stadium and Father Amadi coaches some local boys, raising a bar higher and higher for them to jump over. Kambili realizes that this is how Auntie Ifeoma treats her children—treating them like adults, expecting more of them until they can jump over the bar. Kambili and Jaja, on the other hand, only jump because they are terrified of the alternative.

Father Amadi sits down next to Kambili and she comments on how much he believes in the boys he coaches. Father Amadi drinks water and Kambili watches him, wishing she was the water. Father Amadi tells her that her hair should be plaited, and he will take her to the woman who plaits Auntie Ifeoma’s hair. Father Amadi reaches out and touches Kambili’s hair, and then he gets up and runs back onto the field.

The corruption and tyranny in Nigeria continue to spread. The university is now becoming a “microcosm of the country,” as Obiora says, in that a single unelected leader will be given power over everyone. Ifeoma doesn’t publish a newspaper, but in her own sphere she does speak out for freedom just as fiercely as Papa does. Ifeoma won’t be killed like Ade Coker, but they might silence her by firing her.



Obiora proves his maturity again in his knowledge of politics. The university hasn’t been paying its professors and workers, and so Auntie Ifeoma might be forced to leave for her children’s sake, even though she wants to stay and speak out against oppression. Obiora is the more practical, pessimistic one, while Amaka is idealistic and indignant. Kambili, though becoming more independent, still needs Auntie Ifeoma to help her to stand up, and so the thought of Ifeoma leaving is frightening.



Kambili is now starting to see things clearly, and the simile she develops about Father Amadi’s coaching does aptly describe Papa and Ifeoma’s different methods of parenting. Kambili had noticed how Ifeoma encouraged her children to debate and discuss topics that might be beyond their reach, and that this seemed to work very well. Papa, on the other hand, only used rules, punishment, and his rare moments of approval as motivations for learning and growth, and he wanted that learning and growth to be only in directions he allowed.



Along with the theme of religious belief, there is also Jaja and Kambili’s intense belief in Papa’s rightness (before they come to Nsukka). The contrast to this is Auntie Ifeoma’s belief in her children and Father Amadi’s belief in the boys. They believe in their potential to improve and grow, instead of hanging their faith on a strict idea of perfection.



The next morning Kambili and Amaka wake up early, sensing that something is wrong. Auntie Ifeoma is on the verandah, and they can hear singing. Ifeoma says that the students are rioting. She makes them turn off the lights so no one throws stones at their flat. They can hear the students singing, saying that the sole administrator must go. Then a single voice rises up and mocks the Head of State. Some students run past the apartment, carrying torches. Eventually the family comes inside and goes back to sleep.

That afternoon Auntie Ifeoma brings news of the riot. The students burned the sole administrator's house and six university cars. The university is closed until further notice. During her nap that day Kambili dreams that the sole administrator is pouring boiling water on Auntie Ifeoma's feet. Then Ifeoma jumps out of the tub and into America.

That evening they are all watching TV when four men come to the door. They burst in and say they are searching the flat for documents to prove that Ifeoma helped incite the riot. Ifeoma asks for papers to prove this, but the men push her aside. Obiora tries to confront them, but Ifeoma tells him to sit down. The men then go through all the rooms and break things and scatter everything about, without even bothering to search. Finally they leave, warning Ifeoma to "be very careful."

Obiora says that they should go to the police, but Auntie Ifeoma says that the police are part of this too. She says that they are just trying to scare her. Obiora and Amaka start to argue about whether they should go to America or not, with Amaka saying that running away won't solve anything. Ifeoma finally snaps at them to help clean, and Kambili notices that it's the first time she hasn't looked on proudly as they debate.

Kambili goes to take a bath but there is an earthworm in the tub. She throws it into the toilet and then bathes. When she comes out Auntie Ifeoma gives her some soybean milk, saying that she can't afford dairy milk anymore. One of Auntie Ifeoma's students stops by then, bringing a live chicken to announce that she is engaged. She says that she is leaving the university to get married, and isn't sure that she'll return if it reopens. After she leaves Ifeoma feels sad, even though, she says, the student wasn't very bright.

The students riot because the university rarely has power and water, and they cannot study properly. There is clearly a lot of anger in Nigeria against the tyranny of the Head of State (and the sole administrator at the university), and the response to violence is then often violent itself—like this riot.



In her dream Kambili explicitly connects Papa's tyranny over his children with the government's tyranny over Nigeria. Kambili could only escape by going to Nsukka, and Ifeoma may only be able to escape by going to America.



Just as with Ade Coker's murder and the shutdown of Papa's factories, here the corrupt government tries to silence and frighten Auntie Ifeoma through a show of violence. Obiora is willing to take responsibility for the family, but he still always defers to his mother.



Ifeoma knows that there is no hope for real justice in the current corrupt state of the government, so she now has the difficult decision of supporting her children or supporting freedom. Obiora prefers one side and Amaka prefers the other. Ifeoma's snapping seems to have more to do with the fact that these debates are not just theoretical but actually impact their lives, and so they make her tense.



Everything keeps going downhill as supplies dwindle and the university shuts down, so Ifeoma has no way to make money. The student is an example of young people leaving their education behind to pursue something surer, especially during all this corruption and unrest. This saddens Ifeoma, who obviously supports education. The student decision to marry also involves giving up her independence in exchange for security.



Aunty Ifeoma tells Obiora to kill the chicken, but Jaja offers to do it instead. Kambili is shocked, as Jaja has never killed a chicken before. She follows him into the backyard and looks away as he cuts the chicken's throat. Then he dunks it in boiling water and plucks its feathers. Jaja tells Kambili that if Aunty Ifeoma goes to America, he wants to go with her. Kambili does not know how to respond. Jaja throws a stone at the vultures that start to circle overhead.

Father Amadi picks up Kambili and takes her to get her hair plaited. Mama Joe, the woman who does Aunty Ifeoma's hair, welcomes her and talks familiarly to Kambili. She is surprised to hear that Father Amadi is a priest, and laments "all that maleness wasted." Kambili notices a basket of live snails on the floor. Mama Joe sells them at the market. One snail keeps crawling out, and Kambili wishes she could buy the basket just to set that one snail free.

Mama Joe finishes Kambili's hair and she admires it in the mirror. Mama Joe assures her that a man doesn't take a girl to get her hair done unless he is in love. Kambili doesn't know how to respond. Father Amadi picks her up and she thanks him. As they drive home Father Amadi suggests that Kambili should play the part of the Virgin Mary in the church play, as the prettiest girl always plays Mary. Kambili says she has never acted, but Father Amadi says she can do whatever she puts her mind to. Kambili joins him in singing the Igbo praise songs as they drive.

CHAPTER 13

Amaka and Kambili go to Mass at their local church. It is much plainer than St. Agnes. The women don't always cover their hair "properly," and sometimes they even wear jeans. Father Amadi delivers the Eucharist and breaks into an Igbo song after the Lord's prayer. The congregation greets and hugs each other, and Kambili watches Father Amadi smile at her from the altar.

Father Amadi drives them home afterward, and he reminds Amaka that she needs to choose a confirmation name. The confirmation name has to be English, however, and Amaka says she doesn't want an English name. They return home, where Aunty Ifeoma is telling a friend about the security agents ransacking her flat.

Jaja keeps asserting himself even in this decision to kill the chicken. It is also a small violent act in response to Papa's violence, and part of Adichie's theme of the cycle of abuse. Jaja now identifies with Ifeoma's family more than his own, affirming how much his bond with Kambili has deteriorated.



Kambili is seeing things more clearly now, and she sees the quest for freedom even in a basket of snails. Father Amadi follows through on his promise, as he clearly wants to spend more time alone with Kambili.



Father Amadi keeps flirting, but along with this is a belief in Kambili's potential—he seems romantically interested in her, but he is also an older priest trying to help her do her best. Once again Father Amadi's presence helps Kambili open up more, as she finally joins in singing along with the Igbo praise songs—breaking both her silence and her idea of their sinfulness.



Earlier Kambili had always admired St. Agnes for its extravagance and beauty, and how proper everyone is. But now she can appreciate this more casual atmosphere, as it comes with a greater expression of joy and love. This is Adichie's hopeful vision for Catholicism in Nigeria, a fusion of traditions rather than a domination of one over the other.



Amaka remains firmly Afrocentric in her ideals, and makes a valid decision to not choose an English name for confirmation—as that would imply that English names are better or more holy than Igbo names. Yet Amaka's choice is also one of choosing Africa over her religion; it is an equal and opposite response to Western domination.



When Auntie Ifeoma's story is over, her friend, whose name is Chiaku, relays the news that a professor's young son stole his father's exam papers and was selling them to students. When the professor found out, he beat his son. Chiaku points out the hypocrisy of this, as the professor is one who won't speak out about the corruption in the government and the university. She says that when you "sit back and do nothing about tyranny," your children will learn from your example.

Auntie Ifeoma tells Chiaku that she is thinking about moving to America, and she has sent her resume to a relative there. Chiaku is disappointed, and comments that Nigerians will always be "second-class citizens" in America. Chiaku laments that all the strong people are leaving Nigeria, while the weak stay behind to be ruled by tyrants. Obiora interrupts to say that that is "pep-rally nonsense." Ifeoma sends him away, and she apologizes to Chiaku, but his insult lingers between them. When Chiaku leaves, Ifeoma yells at Obiora and slaps him for being disrespectful.

Amaka tells Kambili about the times Auntie Ifeoma has slapped them for misbehaving. She says that afterwards Ifeoma always gives a long talk about what they did wrong and how to avoid it in the future. Amaka takes Kambili's hand, and they both think about how different this is from how Papa treats Kambili and Jaja.

Auntie Ifeoma cleans out the freezer, as meat has started to go bad because of all the power outages. Kambili and Amaka go through a bag of rice, picking out stones and dirt, and Kambili now feels an easy companionship with Amaka. A car drives up and they are all surprised to see that it is Mama, wearing her slippers and looking unkempt. Auntie Ifeoma helps her into the house.

Mama sits down and looks around distractedly. She says that she got back from the hospital today, and then took a taxi here. Papa had broken a small table over her belly. She had been pregnant again, and she lost the baby. Papa hadn't known about the pregnancy. Mama slides onto the floor and starts to cry. She cries until she falls asleep.

This is another lesson about the cycle of oppression and violence. It may start with tyranny at the top, but it works its way down to personal tragedies like Papa's abuse or this boy stealing his father's exams. The challenge then is to break the cycle at any level by speaking out against what is wrong, even when it might be dangerous.



Chiaku comments on this cycle, where people flee or ignore tyranny instead of fighting against it, but Ifeoma has no choice if she wants to provide for her children. Ifeoma gets angry at Obiora not for disagreeing, but for disagreeing in such an insulting way. For the first time we see Ifeoma angrily disciplining her children. She prizes their independence; but she combines that with an insistence on basic respect.



The two cousins are close friends now, as Amaka truly understands Kambili's situation and no longer thinks she is snobbish. Once again Ifeoma's family dynamic is portrayed as far superior to Papa's.



Even though they are now dangerously low on food and money, Kambili enjoys spending time with her cousins more than living in frightened luxury at home. Mama's arrival disrupts this peaceful moment with another reminder of Papa's abuse.



Papa's violence seems to be getting worse as he deals with more stress in his public life, to the point that even Mama is acknowledging it and fleeing him. After this second instance, we can now surmise the tragic reason behind Mama's other miscarriages.



Papa calls that evening. Auntie Ifeoma answers, but doesn't let Mama come to the phone. After she hangs up Mama gets the phone from a bedroom and calls Papa. When she emerges she says that she and the children are leaving tomorrow; Papa is coming to get them. Auntie Ifeoma is shocked and angry, and asks if Mama has gone crazy. Mama's eyes seem glazed over, and she talks about how much stress Papa is under, and all the people he supports. Ifeoma counters that she and her late husband faced dire poverty, but he never once struck her.

Mama says that there is nowhere she could go if she left Papa's house, and that he has so many other willing women to choose from. She then sits back down on the floor and says that Ifeoma has come with her "university talk" again. Kambili has never seen her mother say so much or so candidly.

After Mama and Auntie Ifeoma go to bed, Kambili plays cards with Amaka and Obiora. Amaka says that Papa isn't a bad man, he just can't handle stress. She is still grateful to him for paying for Papa-Nnukwu's funeral. Obiora is silent on the subject.

Papa arrives the next day to pick up Mama, Jaja, and Kambili. He hugs them all, and Kambili notices that he has a strange rash on his face, but he says that it is an allergic reaction. Amaka hugs Kambili and calls her *nwanne m nwanyi*—"my sister." As they drive Papa starts the rosary, but his voice sounds tired and different. Kambili wants to meet eyes with Jaja and tell him how much she wishes they had stayed in Nsukka, but Jaja stays turned towards the window.

When they reach their home, Jaja comments that the **purple hibiscuses** are about to bloom. The next day is Palm Sunday, when Jaja refuses to go to communion and Papa throws his missal, breaking Mama's **figurines**.

CHAPTER 14

After Palm Sunday, everything comes "tumbling down." A storm rages and high winds break things in the yard and the house. Even after the storm is over, the "old silence" of the house seems broken. Mama doesn't bother to lower her voice when she tells Sisi to sweep up the rest of the **figurines**. Mama doesn't sneak extra food to Jaja's room as usual, but brings it on a tray. The day after Palm Sunday, Jaja pushes his desk against his door so Papa can't come in. At dinner that night Papa doesn't mention Jaja, and he eats little and drinks lots of water.

After her moment of clarity, Mama seems to submit once more to Papa's control. Later we will learn that she was taking her own violent stand for freedom all this while. She brings up the ironic contrast between Papa's saintlike public life and his abusive domestic one. Ifeoma tries to convince Mama to speak out—not knowing what Mama is really up to.



Ifeoma's talk of freedom and equality doesn't seem helpful to Mama, who feels trapped by silence and respectability. Yet she is beginning her own disastrous fight against Papa's tyranny.



Everything is out in the open now, and Papa's control seems less powerful when it can be spoken about. Amaka too is confused by the complexity of Papa's character.



Ifeoma's family has always been about inclusivity, and now Jaja and Kambili are truly like their aunt's children, and brother and sister to their cousins. This is Adichie's vision of an ideal family—one that is flexible, nurturing, and joyful. Yet outside that world Jaja has cut himself off from Kambili and their language of the eyes.



The purple hibiscus from Nsukka are now about to bloom in Enugu, just as Jaja is about to finally break free from Papa and assert his independence.



We now see, in retrospect, the importance of the Palm Sunday scene. Jaja finally speaks out against his father and Papa does not have the strength or will to punish him. Papa does react violently, but only in throwing something, not in hurting someone. Mama takes on this new feeling of freedom as well, and she too is fighting against Papa in her own way. The old silence of fear and politeness has finally broken down. Papa's behavior at dinner suggests that he does not have the strength to fight against Jaja's revolt, but later it will be revealed that there is even more to it.



Yewande Coker and her daughter visit that night. Yewande is dressed all in black, still mourning Ade, but she is pleased that her daughter, who had not said a word since the explosion, spoke that morning. Yewande thanks Papa for sending them to a foreign hospital to get the best care, and she kneels before him. Papa makes her get up, and says that all the healing comes from God.

Later Kambili goes to Jaja's room, and he moves his desk to let her in. They discuss Yewande Coker's daughter, and Kambili says "thanks be to God" about her healing. Jaja looks at her almost pityingly. He says that the girl may have spoken, but she will never truly heal. Kambili leaves, and as she pushes the desk to let herself pass by, she realizes that it isn't very heavy and wonders why Papa couldn't move it.

On Good Friday Papa seems sicker, and he spills his tea because his hands are shaking. He decides to go to the evening Mass instead of the usual morning one. Kambili remembers one Good Friday when she kissed the cross and wept, and how Papa was so pleased by her tears. Aunty Ifeoma calls, interrupting her memories. No one answers, so Kambili gets the phone. Ifeoma says that she has been fired, and that she has a month left at the university. She has applied for an American visa. She also says that Father Amadi is leaving to do missionary work in Germany at the end of the month.

Kambili is horrified by this news. She calls for Jaja, who talks to Aunty Ifeoma. When he hangs up he declares that they are going to Nsukka. Kambili wonders how he will convince Papa to allow this. Jaja knocks on Papa's door and says that he and Kambili are going to Nsukka, even if they have to walk. Kambili goes into her room and looks out the window.

Jaja comes in with a hastily packed bag and says that Papa has agreed to let Kevin drive them. Kambili goes into Papa's room and hugs him goodbye. He kisses her forehead and promises to see her soon. Kevin is wary about the sudden trip to Nsukka, but eventually he agrees, although he watches Jaja in the rearview mirror throughout the drive.

Back in Nsukka, it is incredibly hot as the family bleaches palm oil for cooking. Obiora and Amaka argue about whether their mother will get the visa or not, and whether they should splurge on commodities in their last few weeks. Kambili starts to cough from the smoke of the oil, and Amaka sends her out to the verandah—but without any resentment about the fact that Kambili is clearly rich enough to always have vegetable oil instead of having to bleach palm oil.

Yet again Papa proves himself a hero to many, as he pays for all the care Ade's family needs. He becomes a Christ-figure once more as Yewande kneels before him. In Yewande's daughter we see another incarnation of powerful silence left in the wake of fear and violence.



Kambili still recites Papa's platitudes and looks for his approval in everything, even as she also discovers new freedom and love. This may be why Jaja keeps pulling away from Kambili. Jaja references their own abusive childhood with his statement, implying that they will "never heal."



As Papa seems to grow weaker and less in control, Kambili's fear diminishes and her love for him grows. Jaja, on the other hand, presses his advantage. Aunty Ifeoma calls with two terrible pieces of news for Kambili. The university and the sole administrator have finally decided to silence Ifeoma's criticism by taking away her job.



Even after the shift in power on Palm Sunday, Kambili cannot imagine the family without Papa in total control. Now Jaja suddenly asserts his power, and Papa doesn't, or is unable to, resist. Kambili seems to be trying to deny that anything fundamental has changed.



Kambili has not turned against Papa yet like Jaja has. Even as she "runs away," she hugs him goodbye. This is a strange and poignant parting, particularly because she will never see him again. Kevin can guess that Jaja is rebelling against Papa.



Amaka no longer makes fun of Kambili for her privileged lifestyle, as it is clear that Kambili's wealth comes with a great cost. Ifeoma has definitely decided to go to America if she can get a visa. The regime has forced her into a kind of silence within Nigeria. Until then, though, Nsukka seems more like home than Enugu now for Jaja and Kambili.



Kambili feels sad as they stand and eat on the verandah, thinking about Auntie Ifeoma's family leaving. Amaka says that at least they won't have to bar their doors in America—Ifeoma had to put metal bars across her door to keep students from stealing her exams. Amaka says that she won't be happy in America though. Kambili reminds her that she will drink fresh milk there instead of soybean milk or canned condensed milk. Amaka laughs and says that Kambili is funny, which makes Kambili feel both mystified and happy.

Father Amadi comes to visit later, and Obiora points out that he visits more often when Kambili is there. He comes inside and greets them all. Amaka starts to joke with him about bringing the white missionaries' god back to them. The phone rings and Amaka leaves to answer it. Father Amadi sits down next to Kambili. He suddenly slaps a mosquito on her leg, and says that "it looked so happy feeding on you."

Father Amadi asks Kambili what she is thinking about. She walks out to the garden, plucks some small yellow flowers, and puts one on each of her fingers. She says that she is thinking about Papa. She says that he called, but neither she nor Jaja would go to the phone. Father Amadi asks if she had wanted to talk to him. Kambili whispers "yes," remembering how she had wanted to tell Papa about her prayers and what she had been eating, and to hear his approval. But at the same time she wants to leave with Father Amadi or Auntie Ifeoma and never go back to Enugu.

Father Amadi walks over to Kambili and takes her hand, slipping a flower from her finger and putting it on his own. He says that Ifeoma wants her and Jaja to go to boarding school. He is going to Enugu to talk to Father Benedict about this, so Father Benedict can hopefully convince Papa. Father Amadi tells Kambili to look into his eyes. She is afraid to but she does. He talks to her about the flower on his finger, and she laughs happily. When she bathes that night, Kambili doesn't wash the hand that Father Amadi had held briefly. She sings as she bathes, and doesn't bother throwing away the earthworms in the tub.

Just as the family grows closer together than ever before, Auntie Ifeoma and her children are about to move thousands of miles away. Kambili has only recently learned to laugh herself, and has never even considered the idea of herself as funny, but her new world of freedom and speech offers many possibilities and allows her to discover new things about herself. The shift from being unable to laugh to being funny is profound.



It is ironic that Catholicism was brought to Nigeria as a part of colonialism and oppression, but now priests like Father Amadi have made the religion their own enough to bring it back to Europe as something new. Again there is a vision here of Africa as an equal player in the world, as being on even terms with it, as opposed to being a colonized or dominated "backwater."



Jaja has chosen to rebel against Papa, but Kambili is still torn between the two sides of her life. She truly loves Papa still, and finds comfort in the order and familiarity of her life with him, but she also has fallen in love with Father Amadi, as well as with the freedom and happiness she has found with Auntie Ifeoma and her children.



Father Amadi clearly has romantic feelings for Kambili, but at the same time he is also trying to be "priestly" and looking out for her future by helping her move away to boarding school. Kambili finds true joy for the first time in her love for Father Amadi, and she now sings with happiness, when not so long ago she kept her lips shut tight to avoid displeasing Papa.



CHAPTER 15

One day Father Amadi visits with a list of English names for Amaka to choose from for confirmation. He assures her that she will never have to use the name again after the bishops says it. Amaka still refuses to take an English name. She says that they should be moving forward and asserting that Igbo names are just as valuable and godly as English names. Auntie Ifeoma gets irritated and snaps at her, and Amaka goes into her room to listen to music. The next day Amaka does not join the other young people being confirmed, with English names pinned to their white clothes.

Auntie Ifeoma decides that they should finally make the pilgrimage to Aokpe. Jaja says he does not want to go, and Obiora agrees to stay with him and Chima. Amaka is sure that Father Amadi won't want to join, but he does. She says that it must be because of Kambili. Ifeoma drives the two hours to the village, and Father Amadi and Amaka sing in the car. Sometimes Kambili joins them.

They reach Aokpe, and it is crowded with cars and Catholic pilgrims. Everyone is packed together, praying and shouting and seeing visions of the Virgin Mary everywhere. The family stands under a huge tree with orange flowers. The young girl who first saw the visions emerges from the crowd, and as she walks past the tree seems to shake. Suddenly Kambili sees the Virgin everywhere: in the sun, on her hand, in a stranger's smile.

Kambili wants to linger, but Auntie Ifeoma says they should leave before the crowd. Amaka and Father Amadi tease each other, but neither will admit whether they thought the apparition was real or not. Kambili suddenly says that she felt the Blessed Virgin there. She wonders how no one else felt what she did. Father Amadi looks at her, and then says that he agrees; "something from God was happening there."

Later Kambili goes with Father Amadi as he says his goodbyes to some families. After one visit, as they are getting into the car, Kambili suddenly says "I love you." Father Amadi presses his face against hers but doesn't kiss her. He tells her that she is beautiful, and that she will find all the love she needs. Kambili thinks that he is wrong. As they drive home Kambili looks out the window and cries.

Amaka makes a good argument, and sticks by her point by refusing to be confirmed. Auntie Ifeoma seems irritated by the complication, but she doesn't stop Amaka from her decision. The colonialist mindset is slowly being changed through aware young people like Amaka, even in something as traditionally Western as the Catholic church.



Along with rebelling against Papa, Jaja also starts rejecting Christianity in general. As Papa loses his tyrannical control over his children, they then have more freedom to choose whether to remain Catholic or not, without always being forced into it.



Unlike Jaja, Kambili finds her faith reaffirmed. She does not reject Catholicism, but does now feel more drawn to the joyful, openminded religion of Auntie Ifeoma and Father Amadi instead of the strict and judgmental dogma of Papa and Father Benedict.



Even Father Amadi, the priest, did not see the Virgin like Kambili did, although he too recognized God's presence in Aokpe. On this brief trip Kambili finds a renewed strength in her religious faith, which can now be a separate part of her life, distinct from Papa's rules.



Kambili has truly found her voice now that she is able to say this most difficult thing. Her love for Father Amadi seemed doomed from the start, and now she experiences her first romantic heartbreak. Father Amadi still seems to share her feelings, though he is unwilling to act on them. He too chooses religion over love, but his choice is made with kindness.



When Kambili gets home, Auntie Ifeoma asks her what is wrong, but Kambili won't say. Auntie Ifeoma asks Kambili to pray that she gets her visa, as her interview is tomorrow. Kambili agrees, though she knows that she won't actually pray, as she cannot pray for what she does not want. In the bedroom Amaka is listening to one of her favorite musicians, Fela, and she is surprised when Kambili starts singing along. Amaka complains that she won't be able to find Fela tapes in America.

The next day they are all nervous about Auntie Ifeoma's interview. She drives up and says that she got the visa. Obiora and Chima are ecstatic. Ifeoma explains how arbitrary the whole process was, and how lucky she was to get the visa. Amaka sadly asks when they must leave, and Ifeoma says in two weeks. She will have to ask Papa to help buy the plane tickets, so they will go to Enugu with Jaja and Kambili soon and stay there until they leave. Ifeoma tells Jaja and Kambili that she will convince Papa to send them to boarding school no matter what.

Father Amadi visits on his last day in Nigeria. Obiora comments about the missionaries now coming from "darkest Africa" to reconvert Europe. Father Amadi asks Kambili to spend a last hour with him, but she refuses, suddenly angry that he is leaving. She asks if Auntie Ifeoma had asked him to take her to the stadium that first day. Father Amadi says she did not, and every time since then he took her because he wanted to. Kambili looks away, trying not to cry. Father Amadi says he will come back in the evening, and he drives off.

Amaka comes out and laughs that Kambili must be having sex with Father Amadi, as he seems so "bright-eyed." Kambili says that he will never leave the priesthood, but Amaka says it is possible. That evening Father Amadi comes back. He and Kambili promise to write each other. Kambili cries, and he wipes her tears and then holds her. Later he has dinner with the family, but Kambili doesn't join the laughter, and instead works at "locking up" parts of herself. She sleeps fitfully that night and Amaka comforts her.

Auntie Ifeoma finishes packing and they decide to go for a last ride in Nsukka. They stop the car at the foot of a hill, and Ifeoma suggests that they climb to the top. They buy some snacks to have a picnic and then start to climb. Suddenly Amaka starts running, and Jaja and Chima run after her. Kambili joins them, and she sprints past the boys, reaching the top at the same time as Amaka. Amaka says that Kambili should be a sprinter. Kambili laughs, and notices how easy it is to laugh now. As they eat, Kambili watches a car below that looks like Father Amadi's.

Just after finding a new life of freedom, love, and a happy family, Kambili feels like she is about to lose all of it at once. Kambili is now learning to become "culturally conscious" just like Amaka. She has overcome her silence so well that she can now start singing without even realizing it. Fela Kuti was a real Nigerian musician and political activist.



Nigeria's government is clearly corrupt and ineffective, but in going to America Auntie Ifeoma and her family will face new struggles against racism and prejudice, and just the general struggle involved in starting over. Ifeoma too is concerned with Kambili and Jaja's future after she leaves. She doesn't want to leave them alone under Papa's constant control anymore.



Father Amadi has been a huge force in awakening Kambili's voice, independence, and sexuality, but he has also often "led her on," which results in this heartbreaking farewell. Obiora again brings up how ironic Father Amadi's missionary trip is, considering the history of racism that often accompanies colonialism and the spreading of religion.



As usual, Amaka deals lightheartedly with Kambili's melodramatic feelings. Nothing is conclusively decided as Father Amadi and Kambili part. They are clearly in love with each other, and yet unable to be together for now, and possibly ever. In her heartbreak Kambili draws back from some of the openness she expressed with Father Amadi.



This scene, just before everything falls apart again, is a kind of joyful climax for Kambili's growth in Nsukka. She now runs ahead of everyone else, thinking of Father Amadi, and laughs as easily as her cousins. She has truly overcome her frightened silence and shy isolation.



That evening they are playing cards when the phone rings. Auntie Ifeoma answers it and screams. Kambili takes the phone, and Mama mechanically tells her that Papa was found dead at his desk at the factory. Jaja then grabs the phone, and Ifeoma leads Kambili to the bed. Kambili studies the bag of rice leaning on the wall. She had never even considered that Papa could die, as he always seemed immortal.

The freedom and joy all comes crashing down with the news of Papa's death. Kambili had escaped Papa's control in many ways, but she is still devoted to him, and still clings to her idea of him as a godlike figure, a presence that can never disappear. This then becomes the final step in breaking her "faith" in him—he was never immortal.



CHAPTER 16

They all go to Enugu. Kambili and Jaja sit in the living room, staring at the spot where the *étagère* and the **ballet-dancer figurines** used to be. Mama is upstairs, packing up Papa's things. She had told the gate man to turn away the throngs of sympathizers who tried to enter the compound, even the members of the extended family. Kambili looks at Jaja, trying to speak with her eyes, but there seem to be shutters drawn across Jaja's eyes.

Papa helped hundreds of people with his money and support, and so the public grief over his death is great. Jaja seems totally closed off to Kambili now, and their "language of the eyes" is just a memory. The figurines represented a time of abuse, but also a time when Papa was still alive.



Jaja says that he should have taken better care of Mama, like Obiora takes care of Auntie Ifeoma. Kambili says "God works in mysterious ways," and thinks that Papa would have been proud to hear her say that. Jaja laughs at this, and says that God even murdered his own son.

Jaja learned to find his independence in Nsukka, but he also became guilty for not standing up to Papa earlier. He has rejected Christianity altogether now, even when it is separated from Papa's rules—he has rejected his father completely in a way similar to how Papa rejected Papa-Nnukwu. Kambili, in contrast, still can't help seeking his approval.



The phone rings and Mama answers it. When she hangs up she says that they did an autopsy and found poison in Papa's body. Then she calmly says that she had been putting poison in his tea since before she came to Nsukka. Sisi helped her get the poison. Kambili's mind goes blank, and then she thinks of Papa's tea and his "love sips." She starts to scream, asking Mama why she chose his tea. She grabs Mama and shakes her. Jaja pulls Kambili off and hugs her. He tries to hug Mama but she moves away.

This is the surprise twist that throws everything off—the meek, submissive Mama decided, like Jaja, to escape Papa's abusive control, but Mama could not stand up to Papa directly, and so she fought violence with sly violence by slowly killing him. This is another example of how violent tyranny usually breeds more violence, even in the quest for freedom. Looking back from the end of the novel, the "love sips" that Papa had started to refuse to give his children become not just symbolically but physically important—Mama has been poisoning Papa's tea, and so by refusing to lovingly share his tea he is unwittingly protecting his children.



A few hours later the police arrive. Before they can even ask any questions Jaja confesses that he used rat poison to kill his father. The police let him change his shirt and then take him away.

Jaja's guilt about not protecting Mama earlier leads him to make this sudden confession, as he tries to take all the suffering and blame of Papa's abuse and subsequent murder onto himself. And it also suggests the ways that violence, even in defensive response to other violence, often has tragic consequences that spin out of control.



CHAPTER 17

It is three years later, and Kambili is familiar with the route to the prison, where she and Mama go to visit Jaja. They have a new driver now named Celestine, and he is taking them both today. Mama's scarf slips off, and she looks distracted and unkempt. She has been different since Jaja's arrest. She tried to claim responsibility for the crime but no one believed her. They thought it was just grief and denial.

The Head of State recently died, and pro-democracy groups have been calling for an investigation of Papa's death, claiming that the old regime assassinated him. The family's lawyers recently informed Kambili and Mama that Jaja will be released next week. Kambili and Mama don't talk about it, but they each carry a new hope and peace with this news.

Kambili and Mama don't talk about anything anymore, including the bribes they've written on Jaja's behalf, the distribution of Papa's will, and the discovery that he had anonymously donated to many hospitals and charities. As they drive Kambili tells Celestine to put in a Fela tape. Kambili looks to see if Mama minds the music, but as usual Mama seems lost in her own world, not responding to anything.

A month earlier, Kambili had gone to Nsukka, even though she doesn't know anyone there anymore. She visited Auntie Ifeoma's old flat, and the family living there offered her a glass of water. On the drive back Kambili had laughed and listened to Fela, feeling that Nsukka could still inspire a "freedom song" in her.

They reach the prison compound. Jaja is back in his old cell, in much worse conditions than a month before. He was recently whipped for some unknown infraction. Jaja has been in prison for almost three years now, still officially "Awaiting Trial." Amaka has written letters to him from America, and letters to Nigerian government members about the justice system. Jaja doesn't write her back, but Amaka says she understands.

Papa's abuse created an atmosphere of silence, but now his murder and Jaja's imprisonment have led to a "different silence," as the section is titled. Mama has started to lose her sanity in the trauma of all that has happened.



Many tragedies have occurred, but the novel closes at a time of tentative hope for both the Achikes and Nigeria. The corrupt Head of State has died, and so there is a chance for a renewed democracy, and now Jaja is about to be released, so the family will be reunited at last after three years.



The new silence that has enfolded the family means that Mama and Kambili hardly speak at all, and Jaja remains withdrawn and isolated in prison. There is more evidence of Papa's great philanthropy, further complicating Papa's character and the justice of Mama's violent assertion of freedom.



Kambili alone seems to have retained the sense of freedom and voice she discovered before Papa's death, as she still sings and laughs easily. Adichie explicitly relates joyful speech and laughter with freedom here.



Jaja escaped the tyranny of Papa's rule only to find a new tyranny in a prison run by a corrupt government. Kambili now starts to update us on Ifeoma's family. Amaka remains an idealist and activist. Jaja has withdrawn into silence once more, hardened by prison and weighed down with guilt.



Aunty Ifeoma sends cassette tapes of her family's voices to Jaja. Sometimes he plays them when Kambili visits. Ifeoma writes to Kambili and Mama, and talks about her two jobs at a community college and a pharmacy. She writes about the things she misses. She writes about Nigeria: how people think it cannot govern itself, but it has had so little time to learn compared to other, much older countries. Amaka writes to Kambili too, and says that they don't have time to laugh anymore, because they are all so busy. Obiora writes about the private school he got a scholarship to.

It is telling that the only thing that seems to reach Jaja are the recordings of Ifeoma's family's voices—speech equals freedom in the world of the novel, and words from his Nsukka family mean memories of joy and independence for Jaja. Adichie speaks through Ifeoma in this final comment on the state of the Nigerian government. Meanwhile, as she expected, Ifeoma has found herself placed lower on the social ladder in America. Yet at the same time Obiora's scholarship suggests that there is opportunity for the family in the United States in a way there might not have been in Nigeria. Ifeoma sacrificed her own position for the future of her children.



Celestine helps carry food from the car to the prison. They all enter, and the guard takes the bribe of money they've hidden in the bag of food. He leads Mama and Kambili inside and gives them an hour to visit. They sit and wait for Jaja, and Kambili thinks about her letters from Father Amadi, which she always carries with her. She and Father Amadi don't talk about Papa, but he has told her to not always question why some things happen, as sometimes there is no why. Kambili still loves Father Amadi, but not in a sentimental or jealous way: she just loves him.

The Head of State is dead, but corruption and bribery are still rampant in institutions like the prison. Kambili's love for Father Amadi has not diminished in the last three years. They still have a very close relationship, and nothing has been concluded about their future, though Kambili has clearly matured greatly.



Mama sets up a meal for Jaja, and then he comes into the room. They don't hug Jaja because he doesn't like them to. He greets them and starts to eat. Kambili tells him that he will be getting out next week. Jaja stares at her. His eyes are totally hard by now, and Kambili wonders if they ever really had a language of the eyes. Kambili knows that Jaja feels constantly guilty for not having done enough, but she wants him to know that she didn't expect him to do more.

Jaja has withdrawn from the family he sacrificed himself for, and no longer even wants to hug them. His guilt about the past seems to have coalesced into a self-hatred that keeps him from connecting with Kambili or Mama, and has contributed to this new silence.



A silence hangs over them, but it is a "different kind of silence" now, and Kambili can breathe comfortably. She still has nightmares about the old silence of the house when Papa was alive. Kambili still prays for Papa every Sunday, but she has not told Mama or Jaja this. She still dreams about Papa, and wants to see him in her dreams. There is still a silence between her and Jaja, but she hopes that they will talk more in time.

Kambili has not yet let go of her devotion to Papa, as she still idolizes him as a saintlike figure, loves him as her father, and accepts that he was also a tyrannical and abusive force. This "different silence" is less oppressive than the last one—it is not one of fear, but of waiting. Kambili is hopeful that speech and laughter will someday return to fill it.



Jaja points out that Mama's scarf has come undone. Kambili is amazed, as usually he doesn't notice anything about them. The guard comes in and says their time is up. Jaja is led away. Kambili walks out with Mama and feels like talking about the future. She wants to go to Nsukka when Jaja gets out. Mama suddenly stops and says "thank you," one of the first times in the last three years she has spoken without first being spoken to. Kambili goes on: after Nsukka, she wants to visit Auntie Ifeoma in America. And then they will go back to Abba, and Jaja will plant **purple hibiscus**. Kambili laughs and puts her arm around Mama's shoulder. Mama smiles. The clouds overhead mean that the new rains are coming soon.

The novel ends on this fragile note of hope, as Jaja briefly lets himself connect with Mama and Kambili even in the simplest observation, and Mama breaks her silence with a simple "thank you," which seems to thank him both for his sacrifice in taking responsibility for Papa's death and for not holding that sacrifice against Mama. For Kambili, these two small scenes signify hope for the future, and she thinks again of the purple hibiscus and the joy and freedom it once brought to Jaja. Kambili has not lost her ability to laugh, and she even draws a smile out of Mama. The final image of the rainclouds relates to the hibiscus and other flowers of the novel as well, as the new rains mean new plants have the potential to grow, just as the Achikes and Nigeria are given new potential for freedom.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Cosby, Matt. "Purple Hibiscus." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 17 Jun 2015. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Cosby, Matt. "Purple Hibiscus." LitCharts LLC, June 17, 2015. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/purple-hibiscus>.

To cite any of the quotes from *Purple Hibiscus* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Purple Hibiscus*. Algonquin Books. 2012.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Purple Hibiscus*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books. 2012.