

## Literature Unit 1B: *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

### Skills targeted:

**AO1** Respond to texts critically and imaginatively; select and evaluate relevant textual detail to illustrate and support interpretations.

**AO2** Explain how language, structure and form contribute to writers' presentation of ideas, themes and settings.

**AO4** Relate texts to their social, cultural and historical contexts; explain how texts have been influential and significant to self and other readers in different contexts and at different times.

### Why study this text?

A powerful evocation of a young woman's formative teenage years and her growing awareness of the complications and dilemmas of relationships set in the context of a politically oppressed country, this novel will offer young people a perspective of life in a very different culture. However, elements of Kambili's experience will be very familiar to pupils through either personal experience or awareness of others' lives in this country. She learns that family life can be very different when she visits her Aunt Ifeomi; realising that there can be an existence which promises love (with all its heartache) and freedom. Kambili's story, set in modern Nigeria, will allow pupils to see that it is often very difficult to see beyond the public face of family life. Kambili and her brother Jaja are effectively living under the totalitarian rule of their father, who, ironically, is seen by the public as a very religious and moral voice of the people as the proprietor of the *Standard* newspaper and general philanthropist to the community. He is a very demanding patriarch and resorts to physical violence on a number of occasions, which are graphically described in the novel; behaviour which gradually tears his own family apart and ultimately leads to his own death at the hand of his wife. The experiences of the character-constructs and key events in the novel will help pupils to reflect upon duty, honour and being true to yourself, knowing what is the 'right' thing to do and when to act, to stand up and be counted. This challenging novel will engage and perhaps shock pupils with its depiction of family life for Kambili, Jaja and their mother and its final unexpected twist. The purple hibiscus of the title is described early in the novel by Kambili as being 'rare' and 'fragrant with the undertones of freedom' – it represents a difference and a spark of new life and liberty.

### Background and context

The novel is set in the politically oppressive atmosphere of modern Nigeria, where it can be argued that democracy (literally government 'of the people') means something very different to the experience of people in modern Europe and North America. The whole continent of Africa has had a history of political upheaval since the colonial rulers, including Britain, left after either popular uprising or realising that the 'wind of change' could no longer be ignored. Africa was abused and plundered of its riches by colonialists who also supported puppet political regimes and dictators who in turn made personal fortunes at the expense of the suffering of the people. As a result of this abuse, the history of the modern politics of Africa has continued to be turbulent. Politics in Africa has the added complication of tribal affiliation and the influence of religion brought by the missionaries, who sought to 'civilise' a people with thousands of years of culture and a proud heritage. In the novel, we learn of Kambili's constrained family life within the wider context of a country under a dictatorial regime. Her father's newspaper calls the leader 'Big Oga' and strives for the truth while suffering threats and assassinations. Journalists and world-renowned authors such as Chinua Achebe have written what they see as the truth about the modern Nigeria and struggled against the power and corruption of successive governments. The novel reflects the author's

privileged upbringing in Nigeria and offers a clear insight into a country balancing the demands of tribal, religious and individual values while still learning to be democratic.

## Discussion points

### Politics and religion

Pupils who are accustomed to living in what is deemed to be a 'free' country will (hopefully!) be surprised at the open corruption of the police and officials who take bribes as a matter of course – for example, the road blocks on the way to Nsukka and the prison visits to Jaja at the end of the novel. Although the political regime is not the main focus of the novel, its power and influence are felt through the effect on Kambili's father and the assassination of Ade Coker. How can a country have a government that restricts the freedom and travel of the population? (Look at the Aunt Ifeoma's visa application scene – not all are successful.) How can Kambili's father take on the role of an oblate in the Catholic Church while habitually physically striking his wife and children, calling his own father a heathen, and not allowing his children to spend more than fifteen minutes in his presence? Who is the more religious – Papa or Father Amadi? How can their very different interpretations of Christianity be accepted/tolerated by the same church? Why is Papa so zealous to the point of treating his own family in what could be seen to an un-Christian way? There is a lot to discuss here about the doctrines and rules that govern people's lives and the misguided practice of those whose intentions were 'good'.

### Violence and oppression

The vast majority of the violence in the novel is witnessed by Kambili and Jaja at the hands of their father. Very early in the novel, Jaja tells his sister that they will protect their unborn sibling from Papa and the reader knows that the 'missal' earlier flung across the room at Jaja was not the first such violent act against a member of the family. The time scheme of the novel means that the first section happens after they have returned from Aunt Ifeoma (on page 254) – this allows the reader to be shown how events have developed into such intense conflict. The contrast between Papa's kindness to others and his harsh treatment of his family is recounted in the black eye and attack on Mama with the broken furniture and the scalding of Jaja and Kambili's feet in the bath. This complicated man, both cruel and kind could be seen as a representation of the country itself, with so much to praise and revere and yet whose flaw is enough to wipe away the positive. On a larger scale, the assassination of Ade Coker (apparently at the behest of the military government) portrays the ruthlessness of a regime determined to silence its critics. Pupils can compare the 'regime' of Papa with the country as a whole and reflect on the politics of Great Britain – can anyone claim to be truly oppressed here?

### Love and hope

The symbolic nature of the purple hibiscus flower as hope for the future and freedom derives from its home in the garden of Aunt Ifeomi, which is fitting as she embodies much of the love and hope in the novel. The love shown in her family for each other through her children Amaka, Obiero and Chima, forces Kambili to look at her own family and see the shortcomings in her Papa and the way he rules through fear. Although financially poorer (even though she is a respected academic), her aunt's household is far richer in love, togetherness and self-awareness. Education for Kambili is seen by Papa as a competition to be the one with the highest score (with punishment for 'failure'), whereas for Amaka, her mother's professorial role at the university has fostered in her a spirit of enquiry that makes her more politically and culturally aware (as seen through her statements about politics and music). The burgeoning feelings of love for Father Amadi allow Kambili's sexual awareness to develop, adding further complications to her life while learning to break away from the constraints of home. Pupils can consider the different characters' feelings for each other and their hopes and fears for the future – for instance, the particular sacrifice of Jaja in taking the blame for his father's poisoning and the different treatment of Papa-Nnukwu by Aunt Ifeomi.

## Example task

### Comparing Papa with Aunt Ifeomi

Pupils can work in pairs or larger groups to discuss the different influences of Papa and Aunt Ifeomi on the children and young people in the novel – most specifically Kambali and Jaja. Different groups could look at one character each, leading to a plenary where information is shared and discussed – or both can be dealt with in the group. Guided questions could be used to develop understanding of the relative importance of the characters and promote speculative thinking, e.g.:

- their different roles in Nigerian society (the respected publisher/community leader and the free thinking academic – how are they both viewed as a threat by the government?).
- how the characters have similarly principled approaches to life but very different effects on their families (particularly shown in the ‘public’ and ‘private’ faces of Papa).
- which character has the most influence on the narrator and her brother?

Clearly, there is much evidence in the novel to show that both characters have a great influence on the children. Dependent on ability and time available, pupils can be guided with specific moments in the novel or left to find their own evidence. The main skills to be developed are the pupils’ ability to justify their opinions based on evidence in the text, and exploratory thinking. Pupils achieving at the lower levels will be able to understand the basic influence of the characters in the novel and perhaps begin to think speculatively. Pupils demonstrating the highest level of performance will extensively explore the significance and complexity of the characters leading to a confident and convincing personal analysis with close reference to the text and perhaps to plot structure and stylistic devices.

## Analytical approaches/Creative approaches

### Analysis of events from the perspective of a different character

Pupils will understand that the novel is written from the perspective of Kambali, looking back on her life at home with Jaja and how events at home and outside shaped their lives. Pupils can be asked to consider how a different character may have viewed events at certain points in the novel (a task used in AQA ‘A’ AS English Literature coursework). Any character could be chosen but a choice may guide pupils to perhaps Amaka, Jaja or Aunt Ifeomi. This choice would allow discussion on the different characters’ points of view and the level of expression and language needed to reflect the ‘voice’ of the chosen character. Successful responses will need to show knowledge of events in the novel and an ability to persuade the reader that the character’s perspective can be believed. For instance, pupils would explore what they would see as the perspective of Amaka and her understanding of life in Nigeria. Her cultural and political awareness would clearly be a strong element of Amaka’s account, perhaps commenting on the relationship between Kambali and Father Amade. Pupils at the lower levels will show an understanding that the story can be told from a different character’s perspective and use a relevant style to express that view. Pupils achieving higher grades will create a plausible voice, allowing the reader to see the events in the novel from an alternative viewpoint while adopting a convincingly reflective written style.

### Interviewing characters

Pupils can show their understanding of characters and key events in the novel through role play and discussion. In groups, pupils can be asked to devise five key questions they would ask a chosen selection of characters – e.g. Kambali, Papa, Aunt Ifeomi, Amaka, Jaja, Father Amade, Ade Coker. The group should be able to consider how they believe the character would answer the question based on their knowledge of the plot and the way the character has been portrayed.

As a plenary, the class should then be prepared for exploring the characters’ views across groups. This could be achieved through the hot-seating of nominated pupils from each group prepared to

'play' particular characters. The resultant answers and comments from 'characters' will provoke further questions and debate where pupils can consider whether or not they agree, using their prior predicted answers as a guide. Pupils can be assessed across the entire range of assessment objectives on the 'Speaking and Listening' criteria for their ability to contribute effectively to the discussion, while listening to the views of others and developing their own views about the characters in the novel. Responses at the lower levels of achievement will range from the merely descriptive and largely narrative to the emergence of some analysis with justification from the text. Higher-level answers will explore thorough and complex perspectives of the different character-constructs leading to a confident and convincing personal 'voice'. The activity can be used for both role play and discussion, speaking and listening assessments.

### Key issues for improving grades

The specification states that answers should:

- be relevant – you don't need to write everything you know about the text, only the things that relate to the question
- be sufficiently detailed – it is better to give a lot of detail about a small part of the text than trying to cover lots of different points
- be well structured – with a clear introduction which addresses the question and a clear conclusion that returns to the question
- use effective vocabulary – including literary terms where relevant
- use well-chosen evidence/quotations to support points.

To gain a top grade, candidates should show an enthusiastic and critical personal response. The best candidates write about the author's methods and achievements, and will concentrate on comment, not content.

### Nelson Thornes resources to support this unit

Interactive resources to support a selection of the set texts will be available via Nelson Thornes' online learning space, *kerboodle!*. The resources will support text comprehension, exam practice and revision. The texts covered are:

*Mister Pip*

*Romeo and Juliet*

*Martyn Pig*

*Of Mice and Men*

*An Inspector Calls*

*Lord of the Flies*

Author: Adrian Cropper