



## **Narrating The Self In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Purple Hibiscus Akinwumi Olutola Olafisayo**

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***Abstract:***

*This paper is to review the main characteristics of first-person narrative. It is evident that Adichie successfully use this as a technique in the novel. First-person narrative is indicative of an emerging psychological individuation for it gains direct access into the mind of the narrator – her feelings, experiences and thoughts. The narrator is engaged in a form of extensive monologue which the reader overhears and has the initial advantage of gaining sympathy. Temporally, the time of the story is always in the present for the reader’s growing knowledge of the narrator is simultaneous with her own growing self-knowledge, both of which happen as the story unfolds. Also, whether the first-person narrator is just an observer or a major participant, we have to take the narrative tone, neutral or involved, she has adopted into consideration. In conclusion, first-person narrative affords the author the rhetoric of ironic distance, between the real author and the narrator, between that narrator and the other characters, and between them and the reader.*

### **1.Introduction**

Purple Hibiscus is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's first novel published in 2003. The novel immediately received positive reviews and now has the status of a classic among the writings of a new generation of male and female writers in Nigeria. Reviewers were particularly struck by the novel's artistic qualities which this paper is on. Her prose is not only simple and transparent which is so evident in all aspects of Purple Hibiscus. She did not only tells a good story but tells it so well that one wants to study how she did it that is why this paper is on the realistic mode she adopted. The novel is detailed with the descriptions of people, events and scenes which are so vivid that they make you think the story is factual in its entire entirety. The story is located in real places like Enugu and the university campus at Nsukka. There are also references and allusions to events in Nigeria's political experiences of the 1980s and 1990s. All the major characters are Igbo and interject their English with Igbo words and phrases; we are also told when any of the characters speak only in Igbo. The author definitely wants us to locate them ethnically, just as the spatial settings are definite places in Igbo country. The narrator gives us detailed descriptions of houses, churches, highways and market-scenes that are recognizably Nigerian. There are also the detailed physical descriptions of characters such that, again, we feel they must have been inspired by or modeled after – real people. The first-person narrative point of view adopted in the novel is not very common in Nigerian fiction, and is made more so by the fact that that first-person narrator is a young girl. The narrator herself is also so vividly realized that the naïve reader may begin to think that some of her experiences actually happened to the author herself. So, the paper examined in close detail, the first-person narrative act in the novel. All the strategies involved and the intricacies of first-person narrative as self-narration in the novel.

### **2.First-person Narrative Technique In The Novel**

Purple Hibiscus is in many ways a unique Nigerian novel in English. It is not only about a girl in her adolescence, she is fifteen when the story opens, it is also narrated by that girl. These two facts about the narrator establish an ab initio sympathetic relationship between the narrator and the reader. First, because of their (presumed) innocence, naivety and vulnerability, adults normally respond more positively to children and adolescents than to fellow adults. Second, ever since gender issues became prominent as both social and cultural causes in our societies, we have tended to listen more kindly and sensitively to the female voice than before. When the issues involved are those of

violence on women and/or child abuse – and more so when the child abused is a girlchild – our sympathetic identification with the victims becomes heightened. Adichie reinforces all of these by making the narrator the one who directly suffers the abuse, and also vicariously suffers the violence on her mother. The choice of a first-person point of view in *Purple Hibiscus* is therefore a very skillful and strategic move on the part of the author for engaging the reader's total emotional as well as intellectual sympathy.

*Purple Hibiscus* starts in a rather dramatic manner, with the narrator, whose identity we do not know yet, telling us that “Things started falling apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the étagère” (p.3). But although there is a hint of rebelliousness here on the part of that brother, and of violence on the part of Papa, whom we also have not yet seen, the event is narrated in an even tone. Furthermore, no sooner is it mentioned than passed over to a rather extended portrait of the father (Papa). By the time we get to the end of the portrait of that father and his great deeds of generosity to the church (pp. 3-6), although the narrator still has not disclose his or her own identity, we already have the feeling that it is a young person who is very proud of that father, as all young people usually are. The narrator also informs us that the father, after taking his own communion, always reported those who had missed communion on two Sundays to the priest, because he believes that only “mortal sin” could keep such people away (p.6). This is reported in a tone of admiration and as part of the father's great deeds, but the matured reader begins to suspect some streak of religious extremism in the father, something, which is lost on the admiring narrator. Finally, the note that it is the family story we about to read is also struck by the many repetitions of ‘home’, ‘brother’, ‘Mama’ and ‘Papa’. Indeed, that the narrator calls her parents Papa and Mama throughout is indicative of two things: children and young people generally know their parents only as Papa and Mama (Daddy and Mummy), thereby maintaining the child-father/mother relationship, and its emotional associations, throughout.

There is also a lack of self-consciousness about the narrator, which is indirectly conveyed to us through the descriptions of Papa and Mama. Thus, although the narrator has painted a glowing picture of Papa as a great man and even greater church philanthropist, the close-up picture of his person that we get is not that of an attractive man at all: “His face”, the narrator tells us, “looked swollen already, with pus-tipped rashes spread across every inch, but it seemed to be swollen even more” (p.6). This unattractive face is described at even greater length a few pages later (p.15). In other

words, the narrator is repulsed by her father's face: although she faithfully reports it, she is not aware of that repulsion. This is a repulsion that will gain in intensity as the novel progresses. Furthermore, by saying that "perhaps he was running ... away from something." The narrator is also disclosing more than he or she is conscious of. Even Mama is not spared this rather unattractive detailed description. She is described as having sagging breasts (p. 7), small, limping, and with a "recent jagged scar on her forehead" (p. 15). These are things children notice about their parents, but which they do not talk about, especially to outsiders. In other words, in this opening chapter, we have a narrator who is more or less talking to – or communing with – himself or herself, who is unaware of another audience except herself.

This narrative of self-disclosure without self-awareness is further reinforced by what he or she says about himself or herself, things which give us the impression that the narrator is quite young. When Jaja's rebellion becomes open defiance, the narrator more or less internalizes it by responding in terror (p. 14). Even the disclosure of the narrator identity more or less comes in an unself-conscious manner: the narrator is referred to as *nne* which is in the process of being addressed and, if one does not know the meaning of that Igbo word, we get to know that it is a girl only because the breaking of the figurines has so disturbed the mother that she will be unable to plait the narrator's hair till after lunch (p. 11).

The first chapter of *Purple Hibiscus* indeed sets up a narrative pattern that continues throughout the novel: the constant alternations between an internal, subjective narrative and an external, objective one. By this, I mean that Kambili the narrator continually alternates between what she feels and thinks and giving objective reports and descriptions of external objects and events around her, as well as what other characters do or say. In the main, the two narratives run parallel, though they often merge (as in the 'love story' in the novel); also the internal narrative oftentimes comments on the external one, and sometimes even contradicts it.

The first type, the internal narrative, is mostly a narrative of the development of Kambili's mind. Four distinct stages can be isolated in this internal narrative. The first is what I may call a narrative of the father. In this stage, the father looms very large in her world- he indeed occupies that world, with Kambili herself, her mother and brother coming in only at the margins and more or less only as extensions of Papa. The second stage is the gradual freeing of her from the father. This stage starts during the first visit to Auntie Ifeoma's family in Nsukka. Her horizon begins to expand and totally different –

and at first disconcerting – world of Nsukka leads her to unconsciously beginning to compare and contrast, and to inevitably question the wisdom of her father. This process accelerates and becomes a conscious one during the second visit, culminating in her defiance and rejection of all that the father had stood for and ‘burnt’ into her.

The third stage, which runs parallel with the second and reinforces it, is her falling in love with Father Amadi. Although unrealized and frustrated in the end, it helps her know her own mind on one hand, falling in love for the first time is a crucial stage in a young person’s life and on the other hand to see plainly the things that are wrong with her father and his brand of Catholicism. The fourth and the last stage is of course after the ‘sudden’ death of her father and the new personality that her mother assumes. In this stage, which also coincides with the end of the novel, Kambili attains full maturity, appreciates her mother fully, and becomes free.

Purple Hibiscus is divided into three parts: ‘Breaking Gods’, ‘Speaking with Our Spirits’ and ‘The Pieces of Gods’. ‘Speaking with Our Spirits’, the middle section, is by far the longest and it is in that the internal narrative is most pronounced. Indeed, in this section, what Kambili does mostly is to remember, rather than directly narrate: she goes over the recent events that led to Jaja’s rebellion on Palm Sunday in her mind, trying to understand them and see the links. In all these remembrances and reminiscences, she is not conscious of an audience because there is none or rather, she is her own audience. The main title of the section, ‘Speaking with Our Spirits’, is therefore very appropriate, for she is indeed speaking with her own spirit. Since this section also includes the visit to see the mmuo (masquerades), and the watching of Papa -Nnukwu pray to his gods at dawn at Nsukka, it means that ‘spirits’ here include those of the ancestors. In addition to remembering, also means that the narrative is composed, entirely, of impressions registering on the mind of the narrator: impressions of people, events, objects, colours, odours, scenes, and so on. Her young and very alert mind is like a huge absorbent, soaking in every little detail of life around her: things, people, animals, flowers, everything. In much of this, she is a kind of transparent, objective narrator in the manner of a tape recorder and mirror combined. This impression is strengthened by the fact that she is not only young and for the most part of the novel yet to have a mind of her own, but also by the fact that she is tongue-tied and often stutters, not a sign of speech deficiency, but of shyness, and lack of interaction with the outside world, leading to undeveloped articulacy. She is, however, saved from being a mere passive recorder of these things by the fact that she has a very vivid and sympathetic imagination.

One major characteristic of the first-person narrative is that it affords us direct access into the mind of the narrator, and we find this aplenty in the novel. One early instance of this direct access into Kambili's mind occurs when her classmate and friend, Ezinne, 'accuses' her of always running off immediately after school. The short reply and lie she tells in reply contradicts what is actually going on in her mind (p. 51). However, as said earlier, Kambili in the early part of the novel is merely an extension of her father, and so we only gain access into her mind in an indirect manner: through her descriptions of things, events and objects, but most especially through what her mind 'records' of her father. When the family goes to Abba for Christmas, Jaja and Kambili are permitted to visit their grandfather, Papa-Nnukwu, for fifteen minutes because he is a heathen. The first time they visited the old man, Kambili 'inspected' her grandfather through the eye of her father. After giving a detailed description of the poor dwelling, in comparison with their mansion in the village, Kambili tells us in (p. 61). That is at once a young, naïve girl registering her impressions as objectively as a camera would, but who at the same time has been so conditioned by her father that she believes that what she does not see must be there, somehow. Thus, even while hearing the father's voice, we also have direct access to the child's mind. This is reinforced a few pages later, through the vivid imagination that is rather characteristic of children, when she discloses that in (p. 66).

Soon after (during the same Christmas holiday spent at Abba), Auntie Ifeoma and her children come. Kambili and Jaja had never really known them, and the way the aunt and her children behave and carry themselves is so different from the way they had been brought up that the encounter is a rude shock. What is important, however, is that the contrasts between them and their cousins are so stark that Kambili and Jaja are completely fascinated. Throughout this holiday period, however, Kambili continues to be an extension of her father, unconsciously seeing with his eyes, judging with his mind, and consciously seeking his approval of her behaviour. For instance, when the Igwe visits, whereas Auntie Ifeoma and her children pay their respects in the traditional manner, Kambili "stood at the door a little longer, to make sure that Papa saw that I did not go close enough to the Igwe to bow to him" (p. 94). All because Pap had said that it was an "ungodly tradition" bowing to an Igwe. The same thing happens when they go to see the mmuo.

In addition to our having direct access to her mind, Kambili as innocent narrator also gains our sympathy without asking for it. In the first serious beating of her mother, it is not the victim's reactions that we have, but how the beating registers on Kambili's (and

Jaja's) mind. The beating is all the more horrible because undeserved, and its effects on the children all the more unspeakable because anticipated. Here is the climax (pp. 32-33). When it is all over, Papa slings Mama over his shoulder "like the jute sacks of rice", and with blood trailing on the floor, carries her to the hospital. The dreadfulness of it is increased for the children by the fact that they have to clean the floor of the blood of their own mother. Such is the terrible humiliation they feel that they cannot bear to talk about it later at dinner, even though they are alone in the house; instead, they talk of distant things (p. 33).

This long and painful episode is given to us in a very reticent manner and neutral tone, but our sympathy goes all the more to the person remembering it (and of course also to the victim) all the more for that studied neutrality. The reticence, which characterizes the reports of all the beatings of either the mother or the children throughout the novel, makes Kambili a very credible character and also very psychologically real: any child witnessing violence at home, especially on the mother, is normally too ashamed to talk consciously or acknowledge it even to herself, let alone talk about it to others. Another instance makes the point about the reticence. Because of her menstruation, Kambili has cramps and is made to break the Eucharist fast. Papa comes in unexpectedly and, not listening to the excuse, flogs all of them with his belt. The description of the indiscriminate and compulsive flogging reveals much about Kambili and Papa (p. 102).

Two points are worth making here. The first is the neutral tone with which Kambili narrates the episode even while reducing herself, Jaja and Mama to beasts. The second is that, although it is the ones being flogged that are so specifically reduced, the implication is that a father who can visit such wanton violence on his own wife and children is not better than the beasts he has reduced them to. Papa is further damned by what follows. He crushes the children to him and asks if the belt hurt them. He even asks if it broke their skin (p. 102). Kambili lies to save him from further spiritual agony: "It was the way Papa shook his head when he talked about liking sin, as if something weighed him down, something he could not throw off" (p. 102). Here is the child's generosity of spirit contrasted sharply with the father's terrible intolerance and obsession with sin, all resulting in compulsive violence. The final damnation is made by the silence that ends the episode: "We went to the later Mass. But first we changed our clothes, even Papa, and washed our faces" (p. 103). The silence that speaks louder than words is part of Kambili's reticence, one that has the effect of understatement. Together with the neutral tone that characterizes the entire narrative, it is part of the novel's narrating the self.

While still in Abba, Auntie Ifeoma insists that Jaja and Kambili come and spend the rest of the Christmas holidays with their cousins at Nsukka, and with that visit, the education of Kambili, together with the growth of her mind begins. From now on, she will begin to be less and less an extension of her father, and more and more her own person. In terms of narrating the self, we also begin to have that direct access into her mind without encountering Papa there.

Three things define Auntie Ifeoma's household at Nsukka: poverty; democratic egalitarianism; and laughter. Since all three are either non-existent or banished in Kambili's family, their prevalence in Nsukka makes a critical impact on Kambili and Jaja. Again, in registering her initial impressions of all three when they arrive Nsukka, Kambili makes no personal judgments; rather her mind and very observant eyes simply register all of them. After noticing the building in passing, "a tall building with peeling blue paint" (p. 112), almost the first thing that forcefully registers in Kambili's mind is the garden (p. 112). This is then followed by Auntie Ifeoma's casualness and informality (in contrast to Papa's rigid formality of dress even at home). Then we have a continuously interrupted but extensive description of the inside of the flat in (p. 114) and again in (p. 115). The point is not just that the smallness, shabbiness and poverty of Auntie Ifeoma's house register powerfully on Kambili's mind or that the stark contrasts with the 'palatial mansions' and open spaces that her family has in Enugu and Abba cannot but strike her, it is also that she makes no explicit comparisons. Even the difference in the food and the plates used to serve it registers too (pp. 119-120). She makes an explicit comparison at night, however, but immediately feels guilty for making it (p. 123).

Furthermore, since the explicit comparison occurs only this once, we may say that perhaps it was occasioned by Papa's call earlier in the evening. The call in fact establishes the fact that she is still an extension of him even over the distance, for when she greets him on the phone, she immediately wonders "if he could tell that I had eaten after saying a too short prayer" (p. 122). But if the contrast in circumstances between Nsukka and home makes such a big impression on her, the contrast in human relations even strikes her more. Home is ruled by silence: Kambili and Jaja only reply to Papa in monosyllables and in the shortest possible sentences and talk to each other only with their eyes: even when alone in their rooms or with Mama, they talk in whispers. They do not watch television or play music. It is also ruled by fear of Papa and fear for Mama, by rigid rules and routine, and by strict religious observances. Home is where Mama and the



children have, or should have, no minds of their own because Papa does all the thinking for them. There is a servant to do all the domestic chores of cooking, cleaning and washing. Kambili's home is, in short, an oppressive place where Papa is a Yahweh figure who, in return for providing abundantly for them and for shielding them from the outside world, expects absolute obedience and never overlooks or forgives even the smallest infractions, Kambili coming second in her examinations is a major infraction, for example.

Nsukka, on the other hand is governed by what I may call an egalitarian-democratic order. The children, Kambili's cousins, argue robustly among themselves and with their mum. Everybody participates equally in cooking and cleaning (p. 140). They all engage in debates before arriving at decisions which may in fact overturn the mother's initial idea. The thematic importance of these contrasts in the education of, and in the development of Kambili's (and Jaja's) characters and personalities cannot be over-exaggerated, for their contribution to the novel's narrative point of view is stressed.

Up to the point of coming to Nsukka, Kambili is a naïve and innocent narrator. Though she has a very lively imagination and keen intelligence, Papa's repressive rule has left her without a mind of her own. At Nsukka, the atmosphere is so different that she has to begin to reassess herself and all her assumptions. She also begins to see her own deficiencies. This self-perception colours the way she thinks about, observes, and comments on other people and events. This is immediately clear in her relationship with Amaka. Kambili and Amaka are of the same age (15), but the difference in self-confidence is clear to Kambili right from the start (pp. 78-79). Amaka comes to Abba during Christmas already prepared with sneers and jibes at Kambili's family wealth. No sooner does she come in than she wants to watch CNN. When Kambili says the family does not watch "a lot of TV", her reply is even more wounding (p. 79). But instead of being offended, Kambili wants to apologize (p. 79). Later at Nsukka, the relationship between Kambili and Amaka is characterized by such attacks and retreats, until they become close friends and soul mates, united by the death of Papa-Nnukwu and Amaka's painting of him. But even before that crucial trip, Kambili already has begun to imagine herself like Amaka (p. 89).

Given the worn-out state of Auntie Ifeoma's house, one might have expected a superior-feeling Kambili, with all the shiny wealth of her homes at both Enugu and Abba, either to be critical, or at least snobbish. Rather, it is the voice of an honest, humble Kambili that we hear. When Amaka comes in which is on the very first day, and begins to talk

superiorly about contemporary Nigerian musicians and her own “cultural consciousness” in contrast to Kambili’s own supposed teenager fascination with American pop, Kambili responds with silence, because she does not know any type of pop music? Again when, moments later, Amaka tells her that she paints, her response is a combination of her ignorance and inadequacy (p. 118). The freedom at Nsukka also strikes her most forcefully during lunch (in contrast to the silence that prevails at home during meals) (p. 120).

But perhaps the person who brings out this honest, spontaneous, humble and admiring voice most emphatically is Obiora (the intellectual of the family). When they all take a trip around the campus (to show Jaja and Kambili the campus), Amaka and Obiora are talking about how ugly the wall surrounding the V. C’s lodge is, Obiora’s- comment strikes Kambili as particularly mature and wise, for his age. She turns “to watch him, imagining myself at fourteen, imagining myself now” (p. 132). What her mind registers here is her own intellectual inadequacy. This ‘knowledge’ and confession of her own inadequacy is elaborated upon a little later (p. 138).

The direct access into Kambili’s mind becomes more regular, and fully unmediated with Father Amadi’s appearance. Love, after all, is an intensely private emotion and it is only the lover who knows how she or he feels. In the case of Kambili, she does not have to confess her love to anybody but herself. Even then, she is not quite conscious of it, but her body and mind register it, and, gradually, she begins to take conscious notice of it. Kambili’s response to Father Amadi is fully and totally sensuous right from the beginning: “Father Amadi arrived”. Kambili’s mind registers, “in a whiff of an earthy cologne” (p. 135). And then (p. 135).

A few points are worth making about this quotation. That Father Amadi’s voice throws her back into her childhood also reminds us that the priest, though young, is after all also a father-figure. But rather than the authoritarianism that all father-figures tend to represent, and that Papa definitely represents, it is her mother’s soothing hands on her hair that she is reminded of. In other words, this father-figure will represent for her nurture, care and love. Another is Kambili’s keen observation of every detail about people, their mannerisms, looks, and other physical qualities. Yet another is what I may call her aesthetic sensitivity: she immediately picks up the ‘musicality’, the sound, not the sense of Father Amadi’s voice. From now on, her relationship with Father Amadi will be defined by this sensuousness that is at once physical and aesthetic. This is perhaps why it is so completely unmediated.

The development of this combination of sensuous or physical and aesthetic response until it culminates in love is worth tracing in the novel. What will also be emphasized is that it is spontaneous and unmediated. In the course of the evening, Kambili knows that this is the same young priest who had visited their church at Enugu and scandalized the congregation by not only bursting into song in the middle of a sermon, but also by singing in Igbo. The difference between Kambili's first reporting of the event, and her present recollection of it is significant. When it actually happened, Papa's presence had made any thought of Jaja and Kambili joining the rest of the reluctant congregation in the singing impossible (p. 28). Now, Kambili's response and remembrance are different (p. 136). When the conversation turns to Papa's benevolent deeds, Kambili (who is of course silent) feels herself "go warm all over" less because of her pride in Papa, and more because of what the priest will think when he knows that she is the daughter of the benevolent man being talked about (p. 137).

At the end of the part, Kambili's mind registers again the musicality of Father Amadi's voice (p. 138) and it echoes in her ears until she falls asleep (p. 139). Repeated too is her physical response to both that voice and its owner. Indeed, music, especially singing in Igbo and a musical voice even when speaking characterize Father Amadi; it is also the magnet that always pulls her to him and that never fails to trigger off her physical responses that are at one and the same time also intensely emotional. The instances when Kambili's body (and heart) register this are too numerous to cite or discuss, but in one early instance, she actually confesses this irresistible 'magnetic pull' to herself. When Father Amadi promises to invite Obiora and Jaja to play football, clearly including Kambili, she records that "she could not help staring at him, because his voice pulled me ..." (p. 148).

With the return to Enugu, however, this physical and aesthetic response to Father Amadi is temporarily replaced by a consciously mental love. But even here, we are shown that love in action, not merely told. When Auntie Ifeoma calls, she informs Kambili that Father Amadi asks about her and Jaja "all the time" (p. 202). This throws Kambili into a spell of speculations about him that is typical of young love: Did Father Amadi really ask about her or did Auntie Ifeoma make it up? Did he ask about Jaja and her separately or in the same breath? This culminates in her inability to study, and doodling with his name for weeks (pp. 204-205).

The return home comes to an abrupt end: however, for Papa almost kills Kambili on account of bringing home Amaka's drawing of the 'pagan' Papa-Nnukwu. The narrative

of the period Kambili spends in the hospital comes closet to a stream-of-consciousness narrative, mainly because, thanks to the injuries and the drugs, she is suspended between being asleep and being awake on her hospital bed.

Up till this point, even Amaka has not talked about the ‘special’ relationship between Father Amadi and Kambili. But with Kambili’s return to Nsukka to convalesce, Amaka starts talking about it. In Kambili’s replies, however, the same reticence and neutral tone prevail. Thus, when Amaka opens the subject with “You have become Father Amadi’s sweetheart”, and goes on to talk about what he has said about her in her absence, Kambili’s only verbal responses are one-word syllables and non-committal, whereas the more physical responses are more elaborate: “She could not possibly know how painfully my heart lurched” and “I tightened my grip on the railings” (p. 219).

With the return to Nsukka, the love affair between Kambili and Father Amadi is also raised to a higher level of intensity. First, there is physical contact for the first time; two, they go out together to be alone with each other, both of which did not happen before. Kambili’s registering of the first physical contact points up all the characteristics of the first-person narrative that I have been analyzing in this paper (p. 221). Kambili has all along been registering her love for Father Amadi in merely sensual terms; now there are open suggestions of the sexual about it, further confirmed when they go out alone together to the stadium. When he caresses her hair, she responds as follows (p. 227). This is description from within, that is, the voice reporting here is that of a person actually feeling, experiencing all the sensations and not that of an observer or even an omniscient, third-person narrator. This flattering, direct and intimate language which is in sharp contrast to the reticence, neutrality and understatement characteristic of Kambili when reporting external events or talking about other people, as it generally is in all her descriptions of her feelings for Father Amadi. The effect of all this, and their going out together once more, is to bring Kambili out of her silent self. Thus, when returning from Ogige market where Father Amadi has taken her to plait her hair, she breaks into full-throated singing with him: “As he drove, we sang Igbo choruses; I lifted my voice until it was smooth and melodious like his” (p. 239).

This second visit to Nsukka is interrupted by Mama’s sudden arrival, she has been savagely beaten again, and lost her pregnancy, and Papa’s not long after. They all return to Enugu on the Saturday before Palm Sunday. However, on Good Friday, Auntie Ifeoma calls to say that she has been sacked from her university job, and that she has applied for an American visa for herself and her children. She also mentions that Father Amadi will

soon be departing for Germany. Jaja goes up to Papa and demands that Kambili and he be driven to Nsukka straightaway. During this third and last trip to Nsukka, Kambili and Father Amadi are more alone together. When she accompanies him on his goodbye rounds, they do not talk but again sing many Igbo choruses together until finally, she manages to say “I love you” (p. 276). Three short words that can never convey her intensely sensuous feelings for him. The love having been awakened and frustrated, it is no wonder that, on his last day, it is the physical response that re-asserts itself, this time as anger (p. 280).

Because for most of the time merely observing the doings of other people rather than actively participating in the actions, she maintains a more or less neutral tone throughout. Even in her intense emotional involvement with Father Amadi, she restricts herself to letting us know what her body (and heart) feels, rather than on whatever Father Amadi himself might be feeling. Likewise, she does not pretend to know what is going on in the minds of other characters: she only telling us what they do or say. The same extends to public events. Hers is essentially a family story, with public affairs only momentarily intruding. Even here, she restricts herself to narrating the effects that these affairs, such as the assassination of the journalist Ade Coker, have on her father. This is psychologically right, for how much of public affairs can a girl of 15 be expected to know? Hers is still, to a large extent, the close, sheltered world of family and school. All of these make her a very credible narrator.

One of the characteristics of first-person narrative is that temporally, it is always in the present. Although all but the last chapter of *Purple Hibiscus* is narrated in the past tense (the events actually occurred very recently), such is the narrator’s sense of immediacy that we feel that they are happening as she is narrating them. And in a way, they are actually in the present, for she is reliving them through introspection, and all are vividly present in her mind and memory. Apart from the use of past tense, all other grammatical and psychological markers of events that happened long ago and are now being recollected, with comments and judgments and ‘in tranquility’, are absent. Such is also the immediacy of the narrative that it is easy to miss the fact that the events actually happened almost three years back. It is also easy to mist the fact that the chapter, ‘A Different Silence: The Present’ is narrated in the present tense. This, no doubt, is helped by the circular structure of the novel, which makes all the events appear simultaneous. Thus, the opening line “Things started to fall apart ...” which anticipate future events, begin a narrative of the crucial event that happened on Palm Sunday. More than two

hundred and fifty pages (and several months) later, the words are re-echoed in the section 'The Pieces of Gods: After Palm Sunday': "Everything came tumbling down after Palm Sunday". The effect of this deliberate re-echoing is to collapse all the intervening period and its events into one single moment. The presentness and sense of immediacy are also helped by the kind of narrator we have in the novel. The memory of a fifteen year-old is not likely to go far very back into the past, while recent events, especially if vivid, and always seem to be still present.

Finally, the ironic distance is another characteristic in first-person narrative in the novel. This is whereby a writer or speaker impliedly distances herself from her own work. First-person narratives usually contain some kind of ironic distance either between author and narrator, or between narrator and reader, or even between the three. *Purple Hibiscus* does contain some kind of ironic distance, especially between narrator and reader. And if one can say that the reader is on the same side and level with the actual author, then between the narrator and author. Having said this, it must be quickly added, however, that the ironic distance between real author/reader and narrator is not so much to expose her moral or intellectual deficiencies, but to show that she knows by instinct more than she realizes. Her in-born intelligence, in other words, makes her intuit certain things that she is not consciously aware of. Just noticing them and registering them in her ever-observant mind and lively memory is enough, and the reader makes the necessary judgment. Most of these observations occur as the juxtaposition of inconsistencies and contrasts, and most of them have to do with Papa. Thus, in the opening pages, when Papa flings the missal at the étagère on account of Jaja not going to communion, Kambili describes Mama as wearing a white T-shirt with "GOD IS LOVE" on it. This contrasts sharply with what has just happened, especially with Papa's threat that God will kill Jaja for not going to communion (pp. 6-7).

It also extends to the ritual "love sip" of Papa's tea which, as Kambili describes it first time, is "always too hot, always burned my tongue". But she takes it because (p. 8). Later, when Mama reveals that she had poisoned Papa through his tea. Kambili will remember the tea as (p. 290). Through this repeated use of the word 'burning' and 'scalding', the reader cannot but link these love sips with the horrifying episode of Papa 'boiling' of Kambili's feet in the bathtub with hot water, all out of love. Kambili neither comments, nor links, these episodes, but the reader does, and cannot but prompt the reader to conclude that Papa's love is not only violent and destructive, but completely neurotic. This damning ironic distance is also there in the numerous beatings which are

not only inflicting of violence on either the wife or the children, but is irrational acts of torture. Again, the point is that Kambili is silent about all of them. Perhaps the loudest and most damning silence occurs when, after flogging Mama, Jaja and Kambili with his belt, Kambili merely mentions that they all still went to Mass, after washing their faces and changing their dresses (pp. 102-103). Furthermore, immediately after this episode, Kambili remembers that the gate man had told them how wonderful Papa had been to him and his family, ending with the observation that they (Jaja and Kambili) “were lucky to have such a pather” (p. 103). Again, Kambili merely records it, but reader cannot help but notice the irony. This contrast between Papa’s generosity to outsiders and his cruelty towards his family extends to his treatment of his own father, Papa-Nnukwu.

There is also irony in Kambili’s objective descriptions of external objects. There is, for instance, the insistence on the silence that prevails in their house in Enugu (p. 31). Again, Kambili makes no comment on this silence in their home, and it is left for the reader to read it as the description of a joyless home. Moreover, although we know that she means “Day of Rest” literally, interpreting ‘Rest’ as death, so the silence in the home becomes that of the graveyard, is not amiss. When Ade Coker comes in and observes that Jaja and Kambili are always so quiet. Kambili only records Papa’s pride in it; again her silence here is an ironic comment on Papa’s iron hand on his family.

When juxtaposed with the description of Auntie Ifeoma’s home in Nsukka, the contrast with Kambili’s home becomes a comment on its own (p. 140). Finally, Kambili’s objective description of their mansion at Abba also constitutes an ironic commentary on Papa’s ostentatious display of wealth in the village. The wide passages make the house feel like a hotel, most of the many bathrooms and toilets are unused, the rooms uninhabited. Even the smell of the doors is impersonal. Kambili here is saying more than she knows: the house is an image of the man who, even in his numerous acts of generosity, is rigidly impersonal: it is a house that, like its owner, is forbidden in spite of its luxuriousness.

This paper has analyzed in detail, the first-person narrative voice in the novel. This voice, I have stressed, affords us direct access into the narrator’s mind, making the narrative seem like an overheard extensive monologue in which she reveals her innermost thoughts and feelings to us. Because of this, the time of the story is in the present: the reader’s growing knowledge of the narrator is simultaneous with her own growing self-knowledge, both of which happen as the story unfolds. Thus, although the major events narrated in the story happened shortly before the novel opens (and is

narrated in the past tense), it all feels like everything is happening 'now'. This point is reinforced by the fact the last chapter, 'A Different Silence: The Present', is narrated in the present tense. All these give the story a sense of immediacy, as well as a sense that the story is 'real'. The sense of presentness of the story also makes Kambili very psychologically real, for after all, she is only fifteen, and one does not expect the memory of a fifteen-year-old to go very far back into the past.

## **2. Conclusion**

Although the author does not create an overt ironic distance between herself and Kambili, or between her and the reader, it is clear that most of the time, hers is a young mind with great intuition, a mind that knows without knowing that it knows.



**3.Reference**

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