Speaking With Our Spirits
A Character Analysis of Eugene Achike in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Purple Hibiscus

Att Prata Med Våra Själar
En karaktärsanalys av Eugene Achike i Chimamanda Ngozi Adichies Purple Hibiscus

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to conduct a character analysis on Eugene Achike from Chimamana Ngozi Adichie’s novel *Purple Hibiscus*, to see whether or not the character is used by Adichie as a portrayal of colonial Nigeria and its values. I have done this by looking at the themes of violence and hypocrisy in relation to Eugene’s language usage, religious attitude, and behaviour towards others, and comparing these aspects of his personality with the attitudes shown by colonialists in colonial Nigeria.

The more important issues that prove Eugene’s character is a portrayal of colonial Nigeria are: his utter disregard for his heritage and background, including the physical disregard of his father; his absolute control over his family members, both physically and mentally, which leads to violent outbursts if he is disobeyed; the fact that he is shown in the novel to be a direct product of the missionaries and colonial structure that was present in Nigeria when he grew up. These things, together with the subtle connections in Adichie’s writing that connect her novel to *Things Fall Apart*, firmly place *Purple Hibiscus* in the postcolonial category. Thus, I concluded that Eugene’s character is a portrayal of Colonial Nigeria.

**Key Words:** Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Chinua Achebe, African Literature, Postcolonialsim, Purple Hibiscus, Colonial Nigeria, Religion, Christianity, Language, Behaviour
Svensk Sammanfattning

Syftet med denna upsats är att genomföra en karaktärsanalys på karaktären Eugene Achike i Chimamanda Ngozi Adichis roman *Purple Hibiscus*, för att se ifall karaktären används av Adichie som en skildring av koloniala Nigeria och dess värderingar. Jag har gjort detta genom att undersöka två teman – våld och hyckleri – i samband med Eugenes användning av språk, religös attityd, och beteende mot andra, för att då jämföra dessa aspekter av hans personlighet med attityderna kolonisatörer hade i koloniala Nigeria.

De viktigaste sakerna som bevisar att Eugenes karaktär är en skildring av koloniala Nigeria är: hans fullständiga ignorening av sin bakgrund, inklusive den fysiska ignorant av hans pappa; hans absoluta kontroll över sin familj, både fysiskt och mentalt, vilket leder till våldsamma utbrott om han inte blir åtlydd; det faktum att han beskrivs som en produkt av missionärerna och koloniala samhället vid flera tillfällen i boken. Detta tillsammans med romanens subtila kopplingar till Achebes *Things Fall Apart*, placerar tveklöst *Purple Hibiscus* i den postkoloniala kategorin. Därmed drar jag slutsatsen att Eugene’s karaktär är en skildring av koloniala Nigeria.

**Nyckelord:** Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Chinua Achebe, Afrikansk Litteratur, Postkolonialism, Purple Hibiscus, Koloniala Nigeria, Religion, Kristendom, Språk, Beteende
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Introduction

The novel is an inherently European form of literature and storytelling. The fact that most people in Africa could not read or write meant that traditional African stories were passed down from generation to generation orally, as oral stories were something that everyone could understand regardless of literacy levels. During and following the period of colonization in the 1800’s, African writers adopted the form of the European novel over more traditional African storytelling models in order to explore and define the idea of identity, often through the personal development of their own identities (Van Zanten). Elliot Ziwira says in his opinion article "Religion and Culture in African Literature” in The Herald:

Religious extremism leads to violence, hypocrisy, obsession, alienation and fear. There seems to be no religious compromise or tolerance because, as posited by Chenjerai Hove (2002) thus;

“The religious sometimes have the audacity to think that everyone must see the world as they see it themselves.”

The themes that Ziwira talks about in this quote are some of the central themes explored in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Purple Hibiscus (2003). Purple Hibiscus is a novel set in postcolonial Nigeria – a country suffering from economic and political instability – that focuses on the disintegration of 15-year-old Kambili’s family. The wealthy Achike family is headed by Kambili’s father Eugene who is a religious zealot and devout Catholic who both beats his family – Kambili, Jaja and their mother Beatrice – and is cruel to them psychologically. Kambili and Jaja spend a chunk of time with their aunty Ifeoma, Eugene’s sister, and her children, where Kimbali and Jaja experience a family life that is in stark contrast to that of their life at home with their parents. Ifeoma is Catholic just like Eugene, but practices her religion in a vastly different way to that of her brother. Because of this, her home is welcoming and happy, and she encourages Kambili and Jaja to come out of their shells and say what they are thinking instead of being afraid to voice their opinions. Purple Hibiscus is a novel in which Adichie critiques Christianity by “aligning colonial whiteness, conservative Catholicism, and the rule of the father, and exposing their destructive power in the psyche (and body) of [Eugene’s family]” (Wallace), and the quote from Ziwira above perfectly indicates how two of the biggest aspects of his personality successfully marry – violence and hypocrisy – and ties them in with the third biggest, religion. Hove’s comment, as quoted by Ziwira, expresses exactly the way of thinking that Eugene follows in his life, believing that anyone who does not see life and religion as he does is inherently wrong: “Pagan, traditionalist, what does it matter? He was not Catholic, that was all; he was not of the faith. He was one of the people whose conversion we prayed for so that they did not end up in the everlasting torment of hellfire” (Adichie 81).
This essay will analyse Eugene’s character in relation to his language, religion, and behaviour in order to prove that his character is a reflection of colonial Nigeria and its values. This will be done by looking at the two main aspects of Eugene’s character – violence and hypocrisy – in connection with his use of language, attitude regarding religion, and behaviour towards the people who surround him, and comparing these with the attitudes of colonial Nigeria.

Historical Context
In order to understand the setting in *Purple Hibiscus* it is necessary to have a basic grasp of the political setting that the book takes place in. For the 160 years that lead up to its independence, the areas of land around the river Niger – that would later be called Nigeria – had been colonised by British forces. During this time, lots of areas of Nigerian society were heavily influenced by the culture of the colonisers, not least when it came to schooling and religion, and the influence of colonial policies stretched into and beyond the country’s independence in 1960 (Ikwuemesi 69). Caitlin McGill claims that when people impose Western traditions and practices on Africans, the native systems break down (qtd. in Ntarangwi 59). This may be one of the causes of the turmoil seen in Nigeria after it became independent from Britain – Frantz Fanon claims that colonialism was essentially the systematic contradiction of another person, denying them their humanity and forcing them to contemplate who they actually were, an idea which is also expressed by Walder (Fanon 200; Walder 117).

*Purple Hibiscus* documents the dynamics of the Acheke family during the 1970’s in an independent Nigeria. Independence had been hard for Nigeria up until the time frame of the novel. In the first 10 years after its independence on October 1st 1960, Nigeria saw a civil war and multiple military coups, the first of which started on January 14th 1966 (“Nigeria: The Men of Sandhurst.”). Major General Johnson Thomas Umunnakwe Aguiyi-Ironsi seized power two days later, only to be overthrown on July 29th 1966 by Yakubu Gowon who, in turn, was overthrown himself on July 30th 1975. On February 13th 1976 Olusegun Obasanjo became the last military leader before handing over power three years later to an elected leader who ended the military coup and installed the Second Nigerian Republic (Pike).

Although Adichie never explicitly states what year the novel’s events take place, it is relatively easy to see even from just this small passage chronicling the order of military leaders during this period of time, and the multiple references in the book to soldiers and bodies in the streets, that the novel is set close to this tumultuous time during Nigeria’s political history.

Connection to Achebe
You cannot talk about African literature without talking about Chinua Achebe, and a discussion of Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* would not be complete without discussing the connection between her work
and that of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. The connection is obviously important to Adichie, as she took the decision to make the first words of *Purple Hibiscus* a direct reference to Achebe’s novel: “Things started to fall apart” (Adichie 3). These two writers are linked through not only their nationality, but also in that they “share a nostalgia for something better [and they] wish [they] didn’t have the bitter history [they] have” (Walder 116). Traditional African storytelling tradition follows the general pattern of being orally transferred from one person to another, in African languages. As such, today’s African authors are essentially a product of colonial rule in that they make use of their colonial rulers’ language and writing form – novels – as the means of telling a story. As such, Achebe’s use of both English and untranslated Igbo makes his novels specifically modern *African* novels through the marrying of African culture and European modernity, in a way that African books written solely in English or French are not (Kamau-Goro). This is something we also see in *Purple Hibiscus* between almost all characters – Aunty Ifeoma frequently uses untranslated Igbo, as does Eugene when he is angry. The use of Igbo in the two novels is particularly poignant as Achebe was writing his novels from Nigeria, where a lot of people will understand the language, while Adichie is writing hers from America where the Igbo words will be all but alien to the average reader.

African authors who are seen as being the fathers of Modern African literature, such as Achebe, were not just users of the colonial style but also witnessed first-hand the trauma of growing up in colonial Nigeria (Kamau-Goro). Although Adichie never experienced colonial rule, she lost both her grandfathers in the Biafran War, which raged from 1967 to 1970, and as such can be included in the group of writers with experience of how wars and violence can affect the family unit. Because of the hardships Achebe faced, he took to contesting colonial representations of Africans through realism, something that Adichie mimics (Kamau-Goro). Achebe was alive and active when the British Empire’s African subjects began to find their voice, hence the title “father of African literature”, and was annoyed at the way Africa had been portrayed previously. Because of this, Achebe attempts to highlight the logic of precolonial African culture in his works and their place in the world – he does not think that Igbo culture is perfect, because no cultures are – and underline the fact that Africans should not be ashamed of their heritage (Kamau-Goro). It is important to note the connections between these two writers and their writing styles to show that Adichie has as solid starting point for writing about postcolonial issues in one of the forefathers of postcolonial African literature, and as such we can put *Purple Hibiscus* in context as a Nigerian postcolonial novel.
The colonial aspects of Eugene’s character are shown clearly throughout the novel in a variety of ways, both explicitly and subtly. Arguably one of the most important instance is when Kambili claims that “Papa’s sister, Aunty Ifeoma, said once that Papa was too much of a colonial product” (Adichie 13). This sentence explicitly states that Eugene is a symbol of postcolonialism, although there are other hints which support Aunty Ifeoma’s statement throughout the book, the first of which being the use of Igbo. It does not take more than 15 pages before it is obvious what Eugene’s preference is language-wise – English. When Jaja refuses to comment on the new drink that Eugene’s company has made, Kambili notes that:

“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 civilised in public, he told us; we had to speak English. (Adichie 13)

This quote is perfect when analysing Eugene’s use of language due to the amount of information given. In just a handful of sentences, Kambili paints a vivid picture of how Eugene treats the Igbo language – with disdain and only a thread of tolerance so long as no one else hears them speak it. The reader is also given the parallels with colonialism twice; once directly in the form of Aunty Ifeoma’s opinion of her brother, and once indirectly when Kambili infers that English is the civilised language and Igbo is the uncivilised language. Colonialism is defined in Postcolonial Nostalgias as being “a systematic negation of the person, denying their humanity, and forcing them to ask themselves ‘in reality, who am I?’” (Walder 117). Part of the colonial schooling in Africa was, according to Nicholas Kamau-Goro, that traditional languages and cultures were seen as unChristian and primitive, and people were “turned against [their] own language and culture” (Kamau-Goro). This is directly reflected in the quote through Kambili’s use of the word “civilised” when describing speaking English. This is also referred to by the acclaimed African anticolonizationist writer Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o, who has claimed both that “English is not an African language”, and that people in Africa were beaten by the colonialists for speaking their native languages, which “colonises the mind” (Wa Thiong’o HARDtalk). Kambili even notes that, not only does Eugene’s language change when talking to people outside the family, but that his accent does too: “Papa changed his accent when he spoke, sounding British, just as he did when he spoke to Father Benedict” (Adichie 46). The fact that he only appears to do this when talking to people with some sort of authority shows, based on his reverence for the English language and his religion, that he believes them to be above the masses status-wise.

Later in the book, Kambili says “Papa liked it when the villagers made an effort to talk English around him. He said it showed they had good sense.” (Adichie 60). Note the use of the word ‘around’, instead of
‘with’ – a native English speaker would immediately understand that using ‘around’ instead of ‘with’ implies the villagers speak English with each other in Eugene’s presence and that he does not have to be a part of the conversation for the language switch to happen. Taking into account the fact that Adichie has spent almost two decades in America and written numerous novels in English, it is highly unlikely that she has chosen this word without understanding what it implies. Another relevant example is a mass that the family attend where the priest begins to sing in Igbo instead of English, described by Kambili thusly:

Halfway through his sermon, he broke into an Igbo song: “Bunie ya enu…”. The congregation drew in a collective breath, some sighed, some had their mouths in a big O. They were used to Father Benedict’s sparse sermons, to Father Benedict’s pinch-your-nose monotone. Slowly they joined in. I watched Papa purse his lips. He looked sideways to see if Jaja and I were singing and nodded approvingly when he saw our sealed lips. (Adichie 28)

In this instance we get another clear insight through Kambili’s eyes into the way in which Eugene views the Igbo language – although he is a god fearing man, he still refuses to worship with the rest of the church because of the language the song is in, and once again asserts this over his family members. This scene in the book also reinforces Eugene’s negative attitude towards the people who speak Igbo, as he likens the priest to a “Godless leader of one of these Pentecostal churches that spring up everywhere like mushrooms” (Adichie 29). These examples collectively make it possible to describe Eugene as a portrayal of colonialist Nigeria through his use of language, as his attitude is not personal for him; instead he also imposes it on the people around him. Eugene’s attitude towards speaking English is at once both ironic and illogical, considering Igbo is his native language and the language of his ancestors and family. The reason for this attitude towards the Igbo language can be somewhat explained through Ngũgĩ’s words:

[A child was] exposed to images of his world as mirrored in the written languages of his coloniser, where his own native languages were associated in his impressionable mind with low status, humiliation, corporal punishment, slow- footed intelligence and ability or downright stupidity, non-intelligibility and barbarism, this was reinforced by the world he met in the works of such geniuses of racism. (Wa Thiong’o 392)

So where is Eugene’s opinion of the two languages is rooted? Could it just be a product of the fact that English is the administrative language of Nigeria? Kambili is also insightful in this sense, as she drops clues throughout the narrative as to where Eugene’s high regard of the English language comes from. The first time this happens is when Kambili is quoting her father, saying “Coup begat coups he said, telling us about the bloody coups of the sixties, which ended up in civil war just after he left Nigeria to study in England” (Adichie 24). This is the only time Eugene’s connections to Britain are explicitly stated in the book, and as such it is a very important quote. In Nigeria in the 1970’s, 80% of people were
below the poverty line and could not speak English or French. Contrast that with the fact that Eugene had enough money to go to school in England and it is obvious that he is part of the privileged few, something that he is evidently very proud of. His father, Papa-Nnukwu even says to Aunty Ifeoma that it is the missionaries’ fault that Eugene turned out the way he did: “‘Still, I say it was the missionaries that misled my son,’ he said” (Adichie 84). In addition to this, we also have Kambili’s description of Eugene’s utter reverence for Mama’s father, Grandfather:

Grandfather was very light-skinned, almost albino, and it was said to be one of the reasons the missionaries had liked him. He determinedly spoke English, always, in a heavy Igbo accent. [...] He insisted that we call him Grandfather, in English, rather than Papa-Nnukwu or Nna-Ochie. Papa still talked about him often, his eyes proud, as if Grandfather were his own father. He opened his eyes before many of our people did, Papa would say; he was one of the few who welcomed the missionaries. Do you know how quickly he learned English? When he became an interpreter, do you know how many converts he helped win? Why, he converted most of Abba himself! He did things the right way, the way white people did, not what our people do now! Papa had a photo of Grandfather [...] I did not need that photo to remember Grandfather though, I remembered [...] the way he seemed to use the word sinner in every sentence. (Adichie 67-68)

This passage has a lot to process, and in it we can see a very strong reflection of Eugene: both always spoke English, both are god fearing men, both proudly emulate the white colonialists in their actions, and both reject the Igbo language and culture (Stobie). The result of colonial missionaries’ activities in Nigeria was that the Nigerians that had close contact with them became “British” in their attitudes and in the eyes of other Nigerians (Ikwuemesi 72), so the fact that Grandfather acts in this way after being favoured by the missionaries he met is not particularly strange. This passage is direct evidence of Eugene’s ideology which revolves around the superiority of the colonialists in comparison to the general Nigerian masses – not only does he quite obviously prefer his colonial-inspired father-in-law to his traditional father, he explicitly says that what the white people did in Nigeria was the right way to do things in his opinion. This respect and honour he reserves for Grandfather is a level of respect and honour he never has for his own father, Papa-Nnukwu, at any point in the novel. From this and the description Ngũgũi gives, both Eugene and Grandfather’s minds are well and truly colonised on the basis of the language used.

Religion

As Nicholas Kamau-Goro puts it, faith is a language through which people express themselves, although it should be noted that the religious situation in Nigeria is a complex issue. Religion in particular is something that Adichie has expressed interest in during numerous interviews. In one such interview with Ike Anya, Adichie says:
I am fascinated by the power of religion. I grew up Catholic, still am although I am what may be called a Liberal Catholic, which is that I believe in Lourdes but also think that contraception is a good thing. Religion is such a huge force, so easily corruptible and yet so capable of doing incredible good. The streak of intolerance I see masquerading itself as faith and the way we create an image of God that suits us, are things I am interested in questioning. I am also interested in colonized religion, how people like me can profess and preach an aspect of their indigenous culture and yet cling so tenaciously to a religion that considers most of that indigenous culture evil. (Anya)

Mwenda Ntarangwi claims in *Jesus and Ubuntu* that “between 1970 and 1985 there were over 16,500 [Christian] conversions a day [in Africa] … [while] some 4,300 people were leaving the church on a daily basis in Europe and North America” (Ntarangwi 6). This change from the West to Africa leads us to question if Christianity really is a Western institution as opposed to a global one. Christianity has been seen as the “White man’s religion” for many decades, which is due to our traditions’ and cultures’ influence on the religion according to Caitlin McGill, who supports this with the fact that “we worship a White Christ in European style buildings with our Western music styles” (qtd. in Ntarangwi 50). This theory is agreed upon by Peter-Jazzy Ezeh, who says in *Astride Memory and Desire* that “the nature of religion [is] a social institution and cultural product” (qtd. in Ikwuemesi 92). By this measure it is possible to say that in its Western form with its rigid rules and white traditions, Catholicism is very much out of place in so called “Black Africa”, and yet globalization still encourages the worshiping of European Gods there (Ikwuemesi 90).

It only takes half a page in *Purple Hibiscus* before Eugene is implied as being intensely religious by his daughter Kambili, when she describes Eugene’s intense ashing of the church members’ foreheads during the Ash Wednesday celebrations. Kambili says that the line Eugene was in charge of moved slower than the others because he “pressed hard on each forehead to make a perfect cross with his ash-covered thumb and slowly, meaningfully enunciated every word of ‘dust and unto dust you shall return’” (Adichie 3). Kambili goes on to describe how Eugene sits in the front row during Mass each week and is the first to receive communion, kneeling at the altar and sticking his tongue out as far as he could (Adichie 4); how the church’s priest, Father Benedict, refers to “the pope, Papa, and Jesus – in that order”; and how he illustrates the gospel stories through Eugene. This is particularly interesting since pastors in Nigeria have considerable authority within their congregations (Ikwuemesi 73). Thus, the intensity of Eugene’s faith that can be inferred from these descriptions gives the reader an immediate impression of a God-fearing man, who is utterly devoted to his religion and his church in such a way as to make him a pivotal member of the congregation. This is further exemplified in a later episode where anger seems to build up inside Eugene when a pregnant Mama attempts to stay behind in the car after Mass:
We always dropped in to visit Father Benedict after Mass.

“Let me stay in the car and wait, biko,” Mama said, leaning against the Mercedes. “I feel vomit in my throat.”

Papa turned to stare at her. I held my breath. It seemed a long moment, but it might only have been seconds. “Are you sure you want to stay in the car?” Papa asked. Mama was looking down [...] “My body does not feel right,” she mumbled.

“I asked if you were sure you wanted to stay in the car.”

Mama looked up. “I’ll come with you. It’s really not that bad.”

Papa’s face did not change. (Adichie 29)

Eugene’s devotion to his religion continues throughout the novel, and is manifested even in such simple ways as giving money to some hawkers the family meet; something which is intended to show his willingness to be Christian in the same way as giving money to the church or to charities would, but can come across as something completely different when looking at the passage closer. Kambili says “Papa gave them each ten naira from a wad of notes he pulled out of his hold-all. ‘Greet your parents, make sure you show them this money’” (Adichie 54). The somewhat more innocent reading of this quote is to assume that Eugene’s insistence that the children show their parents the money is to make sure the money actually reaches the parents. Another believable interpretation, based on the rest of Eugene’s behaviour, is that this is actually meant to signal the fact that he’s not giving money for the joy of helping someone, but specifically so that other people know he is giving money. This is particularly hypocritical due to the fact that the Bible says not to give in order to show people you are giving:

1 “Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.
2 “So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.
3 But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,
4 so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (New International Version, Matthew 6:1-4)

It is, in effect, showing that the most important thing to Eugene that he be seen to be kind and religious by other people. This is further supported by the fact that even when he is angry at his family members he never shows it outwardly in a public setting, waiting instead until he is at home before he berates or attacks his wife and children. At one point Kambili says that she tries to not let her pride show on her face when Father Benedict mentions all the things Eugene has done for the parish or for other people because Eugene said “modesty was very important” (Adichie 5). It could be argued that Eugene is the least modest character in the entirety of the novel, specifically considering the fact that he lets Father
Benedict tells the congregation about how he makes big donations to the church and pays for the communion wine and new ovens at the local convent, in addition to the fact that he tells hawker children to make sure they tell their parents that he gave them so much money.

This behaviour in itself, while questionable, is almost acceptable in the context that the novel takes place, as African churches of that time often urged people to judge leaders based on a social checklist (Ntarangwi 41), removing focus from teaching the Gospel which should be its primary goal. These postcolonial leaders tended to imitate their colonial predecessors (Ntarangwi 39) who “saw themselves as privileged replacements of the colonialists … [who then] became loyal friends of Britain” even down to as far as seeking advice in order to continue to dominate the people as the colonialists had done (Ikwuemesi 99). While Eugene is not a leader per se, he definitely plays a leader-like roll within his congregation and community, and clearly sees himself as a “loyal friend of Britain”, who imitates his colonial predecessors to the best of his abilities and with a deep feeling of pride. The problem of African leaders inherently leaning more towards their colonial oppressors is something that Simon Ottenberg also sees as a problem on a local level, where missionaries attempted to style ordinary Nigerians into being more “British” (Ikwuemesi 72). This system of “rinse and repeat” as opposed to “remove and replace” when it comes to the leadership of African countries serves only to perpetuate colonialism under the guise of a group of new African republics, something which, along with differing religious views, only helps to create and perpetuate the tangible lack of religious harmony that prevails in Africa. Indeed, as Peter-Jazzy Ezeh claims, “[an] imposed ... belief system cannot serve as an effective normative system that strengthens cordial existence in the plural postcolonial society. [It was] designed to cause divisiveness among indigenous Africans” (Ikwuemesi 89). This is something that can definitely be seen in Eugene’s life, as his admiration for colonial traditions imitates and perpetuates the colonial system through the way he controls and dictates on a smaller scale over his family in the same way the British controlled Nigeria, and his adherence to the Catholic faith specifically rejects the idea of interfaith assimilation within the society he lives in and instead has divided his extended family in two.

This opposite, and somewhat bitter, aspect to Eugene’s religious views does show through his guise on occasion; in particular when he must interact with Papa-Nnkwu in some way – be it through his driver, his daughter Kambili, or face to face (Stobie). This is first shown when the family go to their second compound for Christmas, one of the only times when Kambili and Jaja are allowed see Papa-Nnukwu, if only for 15 minutes (Adichie 61). On the surface, knowing that Papa-Nnukwu is a practitioner of the traditional Igbo religion, it would be possible to say that the act of letting Kambili and Jaja go to see Papa-Nnukwu at all is that of an open-minded Christian, of a true follower of Jesus’ teachings; although in order to properly analyse Eugene his motives and feelings must be taken into account. When looking at the episode with this second layer, it becomes obvious that Eugene is, in fact, not open-minded at all.
when it comes to the religious beliefs of others. Kambili and Jaja are told explicitly to not accept any food or drink that Papa-Nnukwu offers them, and Kambili describes how Eugene was practically forced to let the children see their grandfather by the community – showing that if Eugene had had his own way, they would not have seen him at all, and that this whole episode is yet another example of Eugene preserving his reputation at any cost (Adichie 61). Eugene even calls his father a heathen, and it becomes apparent that despite Papa-Nnukwu being Eugene’s own father, he has never been allowed to step foot in the compound’s grounds because of this label; instead he has been banded with all the other so-called “heathens” (Adichie 62). This is not strange behaviour in the context of postcolonial Africa, as traditional cultures were not only shunned in favour of the colonising culture, but also regarded as sinful and demonic (Ikwuemesi 65). The seriousness that this label inherently carries becomes obvious a short while later in the novel, when Eugene becomes irate and starts shouting at an old man, Anikwenwa, who is standing within the compound’s boundaries. He openly calls the man a “heathen” and a “worshipper of idols” and demands he be removed from the premises, ignoring the old man’s informing Eugene that he is as old as Papa-Nnukwu, implying he should be treated with respect (Adichie 69-70). This is the second aspect where Eugene mirrors Grandfather’s habit of using the word sinner in almost every sentence (Adichie 68). Adichie has written the treatment of Papa-Nnukwu in this way in order to create a feeling of injustice in the reader, which is an attempt to demand respect for the traditional Igbo religion and culture through the portrayal of Eugene as a detestable colonial figure (Chennells 265).

**Behaviour**

All too often, the religious views and practices Eugene expresses are tied into his ‘politics’ at home – in this context meaning his actions and the intimidating and dictator-like fashion in which he dominates his family, both physically and mentally, in connection with his religious stance – often resulting in beatings (Walder 125; 128). Mercy Amba Oduyoye says that "Christianity reinforces the cultural conditioning of compliance and submission” (72), something that is clearly portrayed through Eugene’s attitude towards his family members. The physical aspect of Eugene’s maltreatment of his family is also shown very early on, with the first pages of the novel mentioning it explicitly: “Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room” (Adichie 3), and later on implicitly when Kambili hears “the sounds from their room, like something heavy being banged against the door” (Adichie 10). Eugene beats Mama again after the incident where she refuses to get out of the car to visit Father Benedict, this time being so brutal as to put her in hospital; leaving a trail of blood throughout the house as she is carried out, and causing her to miscarry (Adichie 32). The physical abuse culminates in a horrific scene after Kambili and Jaja have spent a week at Aunty Ifeoma’s house:

“Climb into the tub,” Papa said again.

[...]
He had never asked me to stand inside a tub. Then I noticed the kettle on the floor, close to Papa’s feet […] Papa picked it up. “You knew your grandfather was coming to Nsukka, did you not?” he asked in Igbo.

“Yes Papa.”

“Did you pick up the phone and inform me of this, gbo?”

“No.”

“You knew you would be sleeping in the same house as a heathen?”

“Yes, Papa.”

“So you saw the sin clearly and you walked right into it?”

I nodded. “Yes, Papa.”

[...]

He poured the hot water on my feet, slowly, as if he were conducting an experiment and wanted to see what would happen. [...] The pain of contact was so pure, so scalding, I felt nothing for a second. And then I screamed.

“This is what you do to yourself when you walk into sin. You burn your feet,” he said. (Adichie 193-194)

Here it is clear that the physical violence he is inflicting on his daughter is directly linked to his religious views, and opinion that anything not Catholic is heathen. To relate back to the quote from Oduyoye, in this passage Eugene is attempting to condition Kambili to comply with him and be submissive, and since she has not complied with what he wants he uses violence to teach her a lesson.

The psychological aspect of his manipulation is somewhat harder to see than the physical aspect, and Kambili’s narration often seems not to notice that it is manipulation, instead understanding it as just something Eugene does or dislikes. A good example of this is Kambili and Jaja’s use of language and religious utterances. When Kambili finds out Mama is pregnant she says “‘Thanks be to God.’ It was what Jaja and I said, what Papa expected us to say, when good things happened” (Adichie 20), and again not long after this episode, when news of the coup described in the book – which could be any of the coups that happened in Nigeria between 1960 and 1975 – reaches the family, “‘God will deliver us,’ I said, knowing Papa would like my saying that” (Adichie 26). It is clear through both these quotes that Kambili does not have the same level of faith as Eugene does – she does not say “Thanks be to God” or “God will deliver us” because she genuinely believes it, rather her foremost reason for uttering these phrases is because it is what Papa wants her to say, and what he would like to hear. Although this is not overt control over Kambili and Jaja, it is a subtle way of controlling the children in that they are in an unquestioning state of accepting whatever Eugene says to them, further shown when Kambili is looking for “signs of Godlessness” in Papa-Nnukwu simply because Eugene claims him to be a heathen (Adichie 63). It is also evident in Kambili’s explanation that she and Jaja must use the word “host” instead of
“wafer” when referring to communion (Adichie 6). The sacramental bread used in mass is representative of the body of Christ: “And he took the bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.’” (Luke 22:19). The name ‘host’ comes from the Latin word ‘hostia’ which means ‘sacrifice’, ‘offering’, or ‘sacrificial victim’. As such is a much more respectful name for the bread or wafer used during mass, as it is an acknowledgement of the sacrifice Jesus made. Eugene’s controlling attitude is an obvious detriment to the other family members – he is, in fact, the tyrannical patriarch of the family (Stobie). This sentiment is best described by Anthony Oha:

Like the proverbial child in a folktale, [Kambili] must not talk or else she would evoke the wrath of a wicked father whose main love is a sip of hot tea and peppery soup. What we see in Eugene Adichie’s family is bonded home without life, almost not a home, because singing a song to God is ungodly. Like a helpless child who admires the situation she can not change, Kambili accepts whatever she is told to accept and reject whatever is not acceptable by her father. (Oha 207)

The Sunday after Mama gets back from hospital is spent by Eugene and the family reciting sixteen different novenas for Mama’s forgiveness, making Kambili and Jaja start over from the beginning if he felt either of them were drifting off (Adichie 35-36). This episode once again shows Eugene’s manipulative tendencies through a simple quote from Kambili, “I did not think, I did not even think to think, what Mama needed to be forgiven for” (Adichie 36), although it can be interpreted in two different ways. In the first, this quote can be looked at as once again showing that she follows Eugene’s instructions not because she believes in his convictions as much as he does, but because she has been told to, in the same way as she does with the religious utterances or looking for Godlessness in Papa-Nnukwu. On the other hand, this quote can also be interpreted as Kambili being aware of Eugene’s controlling nature and the fact that he is not always as righteous as he would like his family and acquaintances to believe. The idea that Kambili is becoming increasingly aware of Eugene’s intimidating and controlling behaviour in the novel is not a hard conclusion to reach (Stobie). In fact, she and Jaja all but say that they are aware of it when they find out Mama is pregnant:

“She is due in October.”
Jaja closed his eyes for a while and then opened them. “We will take care of the baby; we will protect him.”
I knew that Jaja meant from Papa, but I did not say anything about protecting the baby. Instead, I asked, “How do you know it will be a he?” (Adichie 23)

This is further exemplified in an earlier quote from Kambili where she says: “I was only now realizing it, only just letting myself think it. 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 our lips” (Adichie 15-16).
When it comes to politics outside the family, Eugene appears to believe he is knowledgeable in justice and fairness, while being the exact opposite inside his four walls. Eugene claims that Nigeria’s politicians are corrupt and that his newspaper, the *Standard*, “had written many stories about the cabinet ministers who stashed away money in foreign banks accounts” (Adichie 24), and calls for “renewed democracy”. The irony that he is criticising Nigerian ministers who have money abroad, while being Nigerian who is emulating a foreign culture seems to be entirely lost on Eugene here. The *Standard* is the only newspaper in which a critical editorial appears, and as such Eugene holds it to higher regard than the other papers the family read, at one point exclaiming “The *Standard* would never write this nonsense” when he reads an article condoning the military rule of Nigeria. At one point, Eugene’s colleague Ade Coker is arrested after publishing an editorial on a large cover story about people being paid by the Head of State and his partner to ship heroin to other countries (Adichie 38). Eugene later manages to get Ade out of jail, an action which results in Ade expressing his gratitude to Eugene through a postscript in his next editorial which he calls Eugene “a man of integrity, the bravest man I know”. Kambili bursts with pride at reading this sentence, and then hears Eugene shakes his head and looks sad as he tells the family that Ade has had cigarettes put out on his back (Adichie 42). This mourning of Ade’s torture is one of the examples of irony in Eugene’s words and actions throughout the book, in that although he claims democracy is what Nigeria needs and disapproves of the military coup and his friend being subjected to physical torture, he is quite happy to beat his wife and children and be a dictator within his home unit (Walder 128). Eugene even prays for the men who he deems Godless who are in charge of Nigeria at the time, at the same time praying for the family to become more righteous (Adichie 43; 61). The nature of Christianity, particularly in this setting, is such that as a religion it is intertwined with both economics and politics even though “many African church leaders have been advised to stay away from politics” (Ntarangwi 8). 75% of Nigerians see a clear connection between Christianity and their political stance (Ntarangwi 6-7), and the way in which Eugene prays for the Nigerian leaders who he sees as Godless shows that he is ultimately part of this group of Nigerians, as he believes that leaders who don’t have Jesus shouldn’t be leaders. This connection between specifically religion and politics is a tricky one, and one that is essentially connected to colonialism when in relation to Africa due to the origins of Christianity on the continent, and the attitude that has resonated between it and the Traditional faiths in Africa as a whole.

The irony surrounding Eugene’s actions is extremely prominent both in these examples and in various others: he turns his nose up at the priest who sings in Igbo, and yet his wife sings Igbo songs on the last day of school when Kambili and Jaja arrive home (Adichie 39), something which would seem to be okay with Eugene as Mama neither tries to hide it nor is beaten for doing so; and he speaks Igbo only when he is angry at his family even though they are all, as the acquaintances of theirs that are in the novel, are Igbo. This continues when he tells Kambili that “[He] didn’t have a father who sent [him] to the best
schools. [His] father spent his time worshiping gods of wood and stone” and that he “would be nothing without the priests and sisters at the mission” (Adichie 47). Through this and his story of how he worked as a houseboy and gardener for the priest, he is automatically identifying with his Igbo roots while at the same time disowning it through his dismissal of Papa-Nnukwu’s treatment of him, almost implying he valued his gods higher than he did Eugene, which could be one of the factors that pushed Eugene to dismiss the Igbo culture in favour of the colonial one. Kambili even describes the difference in the way Eugene treats his father and his father-in law:

If Papa-Nnukwu minded that his son sent him impersonal, paltry amounts of money through a driver, he didn’t show it. … It was so different from the way Papa had treated my maternal grandfather until he died five years ago. When we arrived at Abba every Christmas, Papa would stop by Grandfather’s house … before we even drove to our own compound. (Adichie 67)

The identity imbalance that is presented here is also recurrent in other areas – Eugene accepts the ‘omelora’ title, making him chief of a traditional tribe, only after talking to the parish priest to insist all the pagan references within the ceremony had been removed (Adichie 59). Yet again this shows Eugene accepting his Igbo heritage by accepting the title, while at the same time disowning it by making the ceremony less Igbo and more colonial through the removal of pagan undertones.
Conclusion
Eugene has a lot of traits that easily lead to the conclusion that he is a product of and portrayal of colonialism in *Purple Hibiscus*. His total disregard for his Igbo heritage – specifically his culture and language – in a way that is not just dismissive, but actively works to eradicate it from all areas of his life and surroundings, is a direct mirroring of how colonialists treated native Africans when they ruled Nigeria. This, and the pride he felt for his father-in-law, have helped Eugene develop a sense of superiority over his peers, which permeates his attitude in all areas of his life. Eugene’s dominating nature seriously damages his family members, as he frequently becomes physically violent – beating his wife and scalding his daughter with hot water. He is also mentally controlling, always checking to make sure that the children are saying what he expects them to say, and not expressing anything that goes against his own opinions. This is reminiscent of the controlling nature of colonial rule, where people were beaten for following their traditional religions and cultures, while still being unaccepted as part of the ruling British society even if they did convert to Christianity. They were, in effect, a new culture of their own, one that was too colonial to be typically African, but too African to be included within Western society. In addition to this, Eugene’s choice of religion has been directly affected by the fact that he met and followed the missionaries that came to Nigeria in the 1960’s and 1970’s, and the connection he feels towards his religion massively affects how he treats the people around him. He is critical of anyone who is not Catholic, often calling them heathens and Godless men, and particularly despises the mixing of his own faith and the traditional Igbo religion that people in his society follow. This is once again similar to the situation in colonial Nigeria, where missionaries travelled overseas with the specific goal of converting people. Taking all of this into consideration, as well as the fact that Adichie has tied her novel to the father of modern African literature through her use of language and mirroring of the themes and styles presented in her novel, it is possible to conclude that Eugene’s behaviour is a direct portrayal of colonial Nigeria.
References


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