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THE POWER OF NARRATIVES: PURPLE HIBISCUS AND NIGERIAN CULTURE

Danielle Cifonie, North Central College
Narrative Theory

In order to understand a narrative such as Purple Hibiscus to its full capacity, the relationship it has to the culture it comes from must be recognized. Culture, although not easily characterized, should basically be thought of in line with Dreama Moon’s (2002, p. 16) definition for the purpose of analyzing this association. It is a “contested zone in which different groups struggle to define issues in their own interests” without necessarily having equal opportunities or perspectives. Furthermore, Moon infers that culture is a historically changing and evolving system whereby diverse values and norms are seen under similar worldview tendencies and groups understand and interpret symbols and interactions similarly. It is also influenced by whoever has the power, this typically being the person or group with the most access to communication.

The above definition is important in regards to the manners in which people within a culture interact and are connected to one another. Shared worldview tendencies, values, and norms typically generate people noticing, interpreting, and evaluating many aspects of their culture in a common way; therefore individuals are allowed to naturally live within their society’s set of “unspoken rules.” Accordingly, one must consider the question of who has the most access to communication; because based on systematic norms and values, this communicative power is more easily available to certain people or groups, compared to the general public. Through this interpretation, it becomes obvious that communication is very important within a culture. This is because communication, or “the symbolic process by which we create meaning with others” (Moon, 2002, p. 16), is a key part of defining, understanding, and living in any culture. Furthermore, it is ever-changing, therefore promoting culture to be just as fluid and constantly shifting as well. It is consequentially imperative to consider the many forms of communication that are seen everyday.
within a culture. These include daily conversations between members of a culture, but also extend to contain all forms of expression including music, film, art, law, and, as specifically focused on in this paper, narratives. Also, note that various forms of communication can be more or less recognized (or significant) in a culture depending on their context, who acts out the communication, and what the communicative styles are revealing.

Moon borrows a useful concept from Carey that builds upon the definition of culture, stating that "communication is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed" (Carey, 1989, p. 23). This is a significant definition that has within it many implications regarding how communication affects a culture. For example, if reality itself has the capability of being produced through communication, various cultures can therefore embrace completely distinct norms, values, and worldview tendencies; yet members of these different cultures are still able to successfully function and understand how to behave and react to situations and others within each culture. The ability to use communication in order to maintain, repair, and transform reality again reveals that culture and the acceptable symbols, thoughts, and behaviors, are not stagnant and, although not in an immediate manner, do have the capability to change meanings.

It is important to understand that there is no way for a narrator to fully detach themselves from their dominant culture, including their values, norms, and worldview tendencies.

As narrators, we evaluate specific events in terms of communal norms, expectations, and potentialities; communal ideas of what is rational and moral; communal senses of the appropriate and the aesthetic...We come to understand, reaffirm, and revise a philosophy of life (Ochs and Capps, 1996, p. 30).
This philosophy of life can be compared to the heart of the narrator’s culture, and is, therefore, manifested within the narrator’s story, regardless of what that story is about.

Narratives have the capacity to reflect the culture from which they are derived, as well as repair and transform that culture. The ability to reflect culture is possible because of the perspective and point of view an author brings to her narration, through both the opinions that are asserted and ways in which the narrator analyzes the surrounding world. Fisher (1987) states that “narration is the foundational, conceptual configuration of ideas for our species...narration is the context for interpreting and assessing all communication” (p. 193). This reveals that narrative provides the groundwork for every other piece of communication found within a culture, giving the narrated stories a great amount of importance to the culture itself. This theory provides the link to how narratives are able to reflect culture so accurately. The narrative, as a text, can be used as the tool of communication through which culture is discussed and understood. As Ochs and Capps (1996) state, “through narrative we come to know what it means to be a human being” (p. 31). In Purple Hibiscus specifically, the reader learns more than just what it looks like to live within the culture, but also how a person of that culture thinks and the perspective she has on her surroundings.

Narratives are also important to a culture because of the messages they communicate to their reader. According to Hall (2005), “a narrative in its most basic sense refers to a recounting of a sequence of events that is told from a particular point of view” (p. 73). Much more can be revealed through a narrative, however. Hall exposes this, stating that narratives function to teach “the way the world works, our place in the world, how to act in the world, and how to evaluate what goes on in the world” (p. 74-5). Each of these roles also can fit into and be used to explain Carey’s theory about the relationship between communication and
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culture. A narrative can produce new norms and values in a culture by distinctly establishing some set of standards not present in the past. It can maintain values and norms that are already accepted within a culture by holding them as a standard and keeping the characters and situations within it from straying, as well as showing disdain or discomfort in those situations where the culture is not being regarded "correctly." Finally, narratives have the capability to transform a culture through their inclusion of something unacceptable written in a positive way, or by bringing light to a subject that not many people know about. Narratives furthermore reveal to their culture’s members the ways in which they should behave and understand the world (Hall, 2005, p. 77). Looking more closely at this concept, narrative “interfaces self and society, constituting a crucial resource for socializing emotions, attitudes, and identities, developing interpersonal relationships, and constituting membership in a community” (Ochs and Capps, 1996, p. 19). So, through understanding narratives, people are socialized within their own specific culture. Going back to Carey’s (1998) theory, this is a common example of maintenance of culture occurring through the communication of a narrative.

Ochs and Capps (1996) argue that “narrative activity attempts to resolve the discrepancy between what is expected and what has transpired” (p. 27). Once more, Moon’s theory of culture as a contested zone fits within this context. Simply because a narrator takes an opinion regarding a value or worldview tendency does not mean that it is necessarily true for every person within a shared culture, for that opinion could be changing or interpersonally contested. Narratives endeavor to analyze, though subtly at times, the overwhelming views of a culture in the past, and furthermore where these views have the potential of moving in the future. “It is the landscape of consciousness that socializes narrators and audiences into local understandings
of events...pieced together over time, narrative plots attempt to illustrate a life” (Ochs and Capps, 1996, p. 26). This attempt is what allows a narrative to indefinitely reflect culture.

It is important to note that narratives are very commonly used as tools to maintain and repair culture. Consider, for example, that typically narrators employ the language and rhetoric used in their culture within their narration. This again exemplifies the perspective an author has within their writing. “Narrative point of view is realized through a community’s linguistic repertoire, including its set of languages, dialects, and registers” (Ochs and Capps, 1996, p. 27-8). Simply by being exposed to the way an author employs language and goes about telling a story will perpetuate the audience’s maintenance of culture regarding what is considered an appropriate way to speak and regard one’s world.

The audience has a large role in the maintenance and repair of culture through narratives. “Common experience tells us that we do arrive at conclusions based on ‘dwelling in’ dramatic and literary works. We come to new beliefs, reaffirmations of old ones, reorient our values, and may even be led to action” (Fisher, 1987, p. 158). These are all effects narratives can have on an audience’s perception of their own culture and examples of maintaining, repairing and, at times, transforming culture. Fisher goes on to demonstrate this theory, stating,

*Rhetorical* interpretation of a work arises *whenever* the work is considered relative to an audience’s response. Responses are the ways in which people are led to feel or to think or to act in reference to a symbolic experience (p. 161).

The fact that individuals are led to feel, think, or act in a certain way reveals the capability of the narrative to maintain the norms and values established within a culture. Following suit, it is therefore crucial to understand how narra-
tives have the ability to create such a transformative impact.

“Rhetoric generates truth and values and serves as an instrument with which to test public truths” (Bitzer, 1978, p. 68). This exemplifies that the culture revealed in narratives can be accepted or denied based on the reader’s interpretation of it. “People are reflective and from such reflection they make the stories of their lives and have the basis for judging narratives for and about them” (Fisher, 1987, p. 75). Culture has the opportunity to be maintained, repaired, and transformed through narratives consequentially because the audience develops an opinion and applies it to their own lives. When this is done, a reflexive relationship is formed between communication and culture, which ultimately alludes back to Moon’s definition of culture as a “contested zone.” Because of the author’s perspective as story-teller and the incapacity to remove oneself from a culture’s tendencies, reality is made, portrayed, and preserved until it is altered once more: “As narratives reach out to tap a preexisting identity, they construct a fluid, evolving identity-in-the-making” (Ochs and Capps 1996, pg. 20). Such is culture, ever-changing under the guidance of communication.

**Nigeria**

Now that it is understood how communication affects culture, it is necessary to focus on the specific culture from which the novel, Purple Hibiscus, is derived. As a narrative, Purple Hibiscus critiques and attempts to transform the hierarchical tendencies of modern Nigeria. The most populated country in Africa; Nigeria is a very eclectic region that has been home to over 250 different ethnic groups, all of which have inhabited the land for hundreds of years. Each group maintains many unique traditions, rituals, and languages, providing Nigeria with richly diverse perspectives. Around the year 1900, however, the British
took over and colonized much of the country, unfortunately revoking and changing many traditions of the Nigerian people. This includes the Igbo people who reside in Southern Nigeria. British rule for 60 years, as well as an introduction to Christianity, has led the worldview tendency of hierarchy within the family, and particularly between genders, to be favored. Igbo culture has a background of egalitarian tendencies, but the colonial presence of Britain produced an overarching national system that perpetuated even stronger hierarchies, particularly in the aforementioned area of gender. It is important to understand these trends - what exists now and what has been replaced - as well as how they affect Nigeria’s culture and the interactions people have with one another.

Despite the above, Nigeria has not always been so hierarchical. Igbo, one of Nigeria’s more predominant ethnic groups, “has fostered a highly competitive society with a political culture that is conciliar and democratic” (Uchendu, 2007, p. 199). A democracy is set up, in theory, to give equal opportunity and voice to every person under its command, therefore perpetuating egalitarian tendencies. A tendency towards equality regarding men and women’s roles was also seen until colonialism in this country, and it was at that time when women suffered the greatest loss of power (Smith, 2005, p. 339). This loss of power for females in turn granted men more authority, thus moving towards a more hierarchical way of thinking and ultimately giving men dominance over women. This was drastically different than what these people had experienced prior to colonialism. For example, in the Igbo tradition, a dual-sex political system was used and there were also other outlets for women in the church, education system, and economically (p. 340). Furthermore, work was always extremely valued in Nigeria and the country’s constitution once recognized “equal pay for equal work,” disregarding whether a male or female completed the labor (Smith, 2005, p. 341).
Also, prior to colonialism, gender roles specifically looked very different, and sex and gender were not even considered to coincide. "Gender was socially constructed as fluid and flexible, allowing women to have male gender roles and vice versa...examples include female husbands and female kings" (p. 341). Because sex and gender roles were considered separately, and were forgiving of one another, equality among men and women was prevalent and widely accepted in Nigeria prior to the British taking over. Worldview tendencies, values, and norms were forced to change in Nigeria as Nigerians began attempting to incorporate aspects of British culture into their own.

Many changes occurred in the country during colonialism, especially when Christianity was introduced. Worldview tendencies of many ethnic groups, as well as values and norms, were challenged and were forced to change under British power. As Heaton and Hirschl (1999) point out, there continues to be a problem in Nigeria because now it seems to "reflect the commercial and military interests of colonial powers to the neglect of pre-existing tribal and regional experiences of the African people" (p. 35). This presents a problem because as ethnic groups were pushed to lose their personal identities, they struggled with the new ideas and values to which they were forced to adhere, and this caused much controversy between groups. There are now overarching attitudes held by a large part of Nigeria, with little to no differences among particular ethnic groups as was in the past. Only since colonization have these broad values been present within this culture.

Changes have occurred, for example, within the indigenous Igbo culture as a whole, and although it still holds some historical traditions, its people now also lean towards a more hierarchical standing. Specifically, there is a status system in place where the "special, low-status group," (Uchende, 2007, p. 193) referred to as Ohu, are slaves to Diala, or "free born, full citizens," (p. 200) of the Igbo cul-
ture. A person’s status is determined by seven factors, including “kinship, political, associational, wealth and poverty, ritual, and residence statuses” (p. 200). This status system alone reveals there are rankings in place, determining who has the authority over others within interactions. Additionally, Uchende (2007) says, “The Igbo recognize and make further social distinctions among members of each status category depending on their political, economic, and religious achievements” (p. 200) again revealing that although status has the potential to be based on achievements a person has made, categorizing to determine ranking within society still exists.

Furthermore, the ways in which Nigerians use language is even taken into consideration in order to determine a person’s status.

The linguistic dominance of, and the dependence of Nigeria on, English continues as the language is generally viewed as a prestige code which not only guarantees upward social mobility, but is also seen as fulfilling fundamental instrumental, regulative, communicative, occupational, and creative functions (Bamiro, 2006, p. 24). Those who speak English are regarded as more “cultured” and intelligent while those who speak traditional languages are perceived as having less status and dominance within society. Even this distinction reveals certain preferred esteem towards a group, and therefore insinuates a hierarchy is present. People who know English probably know the language well because they are educated, and in turn are expected to be intelligent. They are favored over those who cannot speak English well – those who are assumed to have achieved a low level of schooling. This illustrates that it is not just speaking English that equates to higher status, but also simply having the means to be formally educated. It is important to note that this again ties back to the presence of colonialism within Nigeria. People who live there
have come to know that English, or the language of colonialism, is the supposedly right language to speak, and therefore consider it “dignified.” Also, it is common knowledge that those who attend school, more than likely one established or run the way the British instructed them to be, are more highly valued. Again this is an example of values and norms that have been changed over time because of colonialism.

Interestingly, when Igbo speakers were surveyed in 2004, 85 percent of them were in favor of using only English in many of their daily transactions (Bamiro, 2006, p. 25). Determining a person’s status and using language to establish hierarchy stems, again, from colonialism’s influence on the culture. When the distinction is made that speaking English should be used over speaking a native language, there is a reason behind this preference, and in this case that reason is to sound more dignified and, thus, to have higher status in society.

The tendency towards hierarchy in Nigeria is additionally obvious when it comes to the roles of men and women within the home, school, and society in general. Inside a home, a man is expected to be the head of the household and command the main role in making decisions. “Women may even be seen as property which can therefore be acquired, changed, or given to someone else” (Kwashi, 2002, p. 20). This demonstrates that women and men are seen in society on completely different levels, with men having the power over women and the ability to do with women what they desire. Furthermore, when children are involved, they, like the wife, are seen as property of the man, not property of the parents as a couple. This means that should a divorce happen, which is also acceptable for a Nigerian man to decide at his will, the children remain with their father (p. 20). Therefore the amount of power given to men allows them to treat women inhumanely, placing
men higher in society than women, and therefore again establish- ing hierarchy.

In true definition of hierarchy (in regards to Nigeria’s worldview tendency), most people do not question whether the differences between opportunities and status between men and women are right or wrong: they simply accept that these imbalances exist. This is portrayed in the answers given by a focus group of university students in Nigeria conducted by Kwashi (2002), “Female participants...agreed with their male counterparts that male dominance in public life and leadership was the ‘divine’ or ‘natural’ order of things” (p. 414). In their minds, it is typical for a woman to be less valued and to be given less power within society than a man. This notion furthermore transcends to life in the home, where a woman’s ability to communicate is seriously restricted because of the status a man has over his wife.

Direct communication from a woman to her husband is only allowed if permitted by the husband and then only in a private place (Kwashi, 2002, p. 20). Taking away a woman’s voice again places her below the husband and ultimately puts her agency of communication under his jurisdiction, only allowed when he says that it is acceptable. Another example of when a woman’s voice is overshadowed includes the decision of whether she will have children. Although Hollander (1996) found that both the man and woman in a relationship equally share this decision, he says “early in marriage, a woman is expected to justify her acceptance into her husband’s family and may therefore subordinate her own preferences to those of her spouse” (p. 83). This shows that even though the woman may have different opinions than her husband, it is an unstated fact that the woman in a relationship must support her husband’s inclinations and therefore assume them as her own, putting more weight with what he believes and therefore establishing that he is of a higher status than she.
Within Nigeria's societal system there is a dichotomy between how men and women are treated regarding both education and the workplace, revealing one again that hierarchy does in fact exist. To illustrate, female children are less likely to receive an expensive education when compared to their male counterparts, and women who are married are not expected to get any more education. Men, however, are given every possible opportunity at education (Kwashi, 2002, p. 20). This puts men in a place to have power over women not only because of their sex, but also because they will presumably be more intellectually advanced, another sign of status within Nigerian culture.

In addition to having less opportunities regarding education, there have been many instances where women are mistreated when in pursuit of their degree. Nwadigwe (2007) conducted research focused on female students who are pressured to engage in sexual relations with male professors in order to get better grades. He found that “there is a relatively high prevalence of sexual harassment in Nigerian universities and this affects female students adversely” (p. 1). Again, the dominance men have over women intellectually and within society is shown in this example: women are expected to fulfill favors in order to earn their grade and are therefore not expected to use education and intelligence to achieve that grade, as their male peers are.

Finally, within the workplace women are regarded as less desired as well.

Evidence for widespread feminization of income or consumption poverty appears strong, with women working longer hours than men do to achieve the same level of living, as well as facing discrimination in employment (Mberu, 2007, p. 516). A woman cannot escape the fact that she is considered less valuable than a man wherever she goes within her culture, including at home and in the workplace. This emphasizes the hierarchical tendency of Nigeria, with women having
less power and opportunities, both in communication and achievement.

**Purple Hibiscus**

Nigeria’s culture along with its worldview tendencies, values, and norms is revealed in the narratives produced within it. Family, politics, religion, and the change that occurs within all three are topics explored by Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her book entitled Purple Hibiscus. Published in October 2003, this book has caused quite a stir in Nigeria, throughout Africa, and around the globe because of the issues Adichie tackles. Purple Hibiscus is even said to be currently one of the “most popular works of fiction from Africa...shortlisted for the Orange Fiction Prize, awarded the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize for the Best First Book in Africa, and won the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award 2004 in the Best Debut Fiction Category” (“Nigeria; Artist of the Year,” 2008, p. 1). Adichie’s work is still being recognized, as she recently was awarded the 2008 MacArthur Foundation ‘genius grant.’ She is regarded in Nigerian newspapers as one of “Nigeria’s brightest young writers” (Odeh, 2008, para. 1) whose “wonderful writings have helped advance, for so many of us [Nigerians], the healing and reclamation process” and provides “a good role model” (Nzegwu, 2007, para. 5).

The above background is quite a feat for a Nigerian woman to accomplish by age 30, and probably not one Adichie would have predicted 10 years prior to her success. As the bright, studious child of academics, she was expected to work toward a ‘useful’ career, and at the University of Nigeria, where both of her parents worked, she followed their advice and became a medical student (“Teller of Tales,” 2007, p. BW11). Adichie dropped out after a year and a half, though, when she moved to the United States to live with her sister and
study communication. She found her niche in writing, not because she ever consciously decided to pursue it as a career, but because writing made her feel “incredibly fulfilled” (Artist of the Year, 2008, p. 1).

As one of Adichie’s works, Purple Hibiscus is particularly communicative of Nigeria’s culture because it is realistic fiction written for young readers and set in the actual cities and towns of Nigeria. The novel explores the life of a 15-year-old Nigerian and her family, and the ways in which a young woman eventually finds her voice. As critic Dennis Matanda (2006) stated, it is “simple and revealing—like you are reading someone’s diary” (p. 1). It is precisely this style of writing and perspective that initially makes Purple Hibiscus stand out: the narrator is a young female. According to Hewett (2004), “Adichie’s most powerful revision [of the traditional Nigerian novel] occurs in an act of displacement. She recenters the story by giving it to a different narrator: to the daughter rather than the father” (p. 2). This is important because it highlights that Nigerian culture, along with the literature that is being produced, is progressively being transformed because it allows a young woman to tell her story and still be deemed acceptable.

The novel is broken up into four different sections in this order: “Breaking Gods” which takes place on Palm Sunday, “Speaking with our Spirits” set before Palm Sunday, “The Pieces of Gods,” which describes the events immediately following Palm Sunday, and “A Different Silence,” taking place in the present. Placing the sections in this order takes the reader on a journey separated from time, as clues to the overall story are revealed before fully understanding them in context. The narrator and primary character in Purple Hibiscus is Kambili. She is introduced as a shy girl of few words, and continues to be this way until visiting her Aunt Ifeoma. Even during her visit, she has difficulty speaking her mind, saying “I wanted to say I was sorry that I did not smile or laugh, but my words would not
come, and for a while even my ears could hear nothing” (Adichie, 2004, p. 139). Her peers did not understand Kambili and she “remained a backyard snob to most of my class girls until the end of the term” (p. 52). Throughout the book, though, Kambili begins to speak out more and conclusively better understands herself and the world around her after living with her aunt and cousins.

Jaja, Kambili’s 17-year-old brother, is another major character in the novel and is Kimbali’s personal hero. The two have a very close bond, to the point where Kambili feels she can be herself around Jaja in ways that she cannot around anyone else. This is revealed when Kambili says, “It was only when I was alone with Jaja that the bubbles in my throat let my words come out” (Adichie, 2004, p. 154). Kambili’s family, which includes Jaja, Papa, and Mama, is very wealthy. Papa, or Eugene, is a very well-known man within their town: an owner of a large factory and a newspaper, the Standard, which stands up for the people of Nigeria against the government. He is very involved in their church and is an extremely devout evangelistic Catholic. Eugene takes his faith to an extreme, though, and has excessive control over his family, to the point of forming his family members’ daily schedules and physically abusing them if he feels they have sinned. “Papa liked order. It showed even in the schedules themselves, the way his meticulously drawn lines, in black ink, cut across each day, separating study from siesta, siesta from family time…prayer from sleep. He revised them often” (Adichie, 2004, p. 25).

The irony of Papa/Eugene is that he is fighting against a regime causing injustice to his people, yet he uses the same type of power and control over his family, and even abuses them on a daily basis. His abuse is brutal and not something unexpected for even minor mistakes in his strict household.
He unbuckled his belt...a heavy belt made of layers of brown leather...It landed on Jaja first, across his shoulder. Then Mama raised her hands as it landed on her upper arm...I put the bowl down just as the belt landed on my back...as he swung his belt at Mama, Jaja, and me, muttering that the devil would not win. We did not move more than two steps away from the leather belt that swished through the air (Adichie, 2004, p. 102).

He always seemed to hate that he “had to” punish his family, saying things like, “Why do you walk into sin? Why do you like sin?” followed by, “Did the belt hurt you? Did it break your skin?” (p. 102) This reveals that Kambili’s father felt he was not wrong for abusing his family so badly, that his abuse was something that must be done in order to maintain his status as both a good father and head of the household.

The other important characters involved in this story are Aunt Ifeoma and her three children. As a family, they have very different relationships than Kambili’s family. Aunt Ifeoma is a professor at a university in Nsukka and encourages singing, open conversation, and even laughter in her household. Kambili comments that she “was bewildered that Aunty Ifeoma and her family prayed for, of all things, laughter” (Adichie, 2004, pg. 127). Ifeoma also endorses very loving relationships among her family and friends. The juxtaposition between Eugene and Ifeoma’s house rules are seen when Jaja and Kambili are told to give up their schedules for the week. “If you do not tell Eugene, eh, then how will he know that you did not follow the schedule, gbo? You are on holiday here and it is my house, so you will follow my rules” (p. 124). While Kambili is staying at her aunt’s house, there are many times when she points out the differences in wealth compared to what she is used to back home, including the fact that portion sizes are less, she has to do chores, and the lights are frequently
turned off. Kambili realizes that just because her aunt and cousins live less comfortably, they are no less happy and may even enjoy life more because they must truly appreciate what they have.

Each section of Adichie’s novel contains at least one major event that is particularly important. In the first, “Breaking God’s,” the reader sees a few interactions that provide a basis for understanding Kambili’s background. For example, her families’ wealth and her father’s importance in society are constantly displayed. “He (Father Benedict) used Papa to illustrate the gospel...he talked about things everybody already knew, about Papa making the biggest donations...Amnesty World gave him a human rights award” (Adichie, 2004, p. 4-5). This section partially reveals Eugene’s familial abuse, as he throws a missal across the room, nearly missing his son and breaking some of his wife’s most prized possessions.

The next section, “Speaking with our Spirits,” is actually Kambili’s voice describing what happened in time before the first section. As discussed a bit earlier, she and Jaja were able to stay with their Aunt Ifeoma and cousins in a town called Nsukka. There were many aspects of living in her household that were very different than home for the two of them. For example, construction of communication was different in Ifeoma’s house, as Igbo, the traditional language in Nigeria, was used along with English. It was new for Kambili and Jaja to hear this because their father had always told them that speaking Igbo, as well as any other traditional practices, were for heathens. “He hardly ever spoke Igbo...We had to sound civilized in public, he told us; we had to speak English” (Adichie, 2004, p. 13). However, at Ifeoma’s dinner table, “Words spurted from everyone...my cousins seemed to simply speak and speak and speak. ‘Mom, biko, give me the neck’... ‘Didn’t you talk me out of the neck the last time, gbo?’” (p. 120) Igbo
was used in a friendly, casual context without second thought.

There were definite differences in class between what home and Aunt Ifeoma’s offered Jaja and Kambili. At Ifeoma’s house they were expected to help with chores such as peeling yams. Kambili had never learned how partake in chores within her wealthy household. Her cousin muttered, “Maybe I should enter it in your schedule, how to peel a yam” (Adichie, 2004, p. 134), commenting on the fact that it was strange that Kambili would have never previously done this. Even the dinner table revealed she and Jaja were from a wealthy home, as this was the typical scene before dinner in their own home: “Sisi (their housekeeper) had set eight places at the dining table, with wide plates the color of caramel and matching napkins ironed into crisp triangles” (p. 92). At Aunt Ifeoma’s, however, “the plates, too, were mismatched…they used plastic ones while the rest of us had plain glass plates, bereft of dainty flowers or silver lines” (p. 120).

Aunt Ifeoma encourages her children to speak their mind, ask questions, and laugh as much as possible. “Laughter always rang out in Aunty Ifeoma’s house, and no matter where the laughter comes from, it bounced around all the walls, all the rooms” (Adichie, 2004, p. 140). She wants Jaja and Kambili to participate as well, and also pushes them to stand up for what they believe in, saying, “‘Being defiant can be a good thing sometimes’” (p. 144). Because of this, Jaja and Kambili begin to find their voices, which is a very important aspect of the story and a major turning point for both of their characters.

During Kambili and Jaja’s stay, it also becomes apparent that Ifeoma and her children have a love for Ifeoma’s father while Eugene regards Papa-Nnukwu as a heathen because the old man refuses to give up his own tradition and practice Catholic ways. During the visit, Papa-Nnukwu falls very ill and comes to live at Aunt Ifeoma’s
household until he passes away. Once Eugene finds out that a “heathen” was living there while his children were, he gets very angry and comes to get them up immediately. Once home, the abuse continues and actually gets worse as a result of the visit, and both Jaja and Kambili get scathing water poured on their feet as a consequence of “seeing sin and walking right into it” (Adichie, 2004, p. 194).

It is right around this time that Eugene begins going further than he ever has before, and he ends up injuring Kambili and her Mama on two separate occasions. Both times he hurts them so badly that they must be taken to the hospital. Mama goes to Aunt Ifeoma very upset. “I had never seen Mama like that, never seen that look in her eyes, never heard her say so much in such a short time” (Adichie, 2004, p. 251). She was looking for help on the matter. Ifeoma suggests that Mama, Kambili, and Jaja stay at her house for awhile, and that Mama should consider leaving Papa. Mama ends up calling Eugene, however, and returning home that same evening.

The third section, “The Pieces of Gods,” is a shorter part of the text, but reveals that Aunt Ifeoma and her family are going to apply for a visa to the United States because Ifeoma lost her job as a professor at the university. Upon hearing this news, Jaja and Kambili are heartbroken and go back to Nsukka to visit before Ifeoma and her children leave. When Ifeoma receives the visa, “finality hung in the air, heavy and hollow” (Adichie, 2004, p. 279). As this section is near its end and it is the family’s last day in Nigeria, Kambili and Jaja receive a call from their Mama stating that Papa has died. When Kambili and Jaja return home, they make the shocking discovery that Mama is the one who killed Papa. “I started putting the poison in his tea before I came to Nsukka” (Adichie, 2004, p. 290). When the policeman came, however, “Jaja did not wait for their questions; he told them he had used rat poison, that he put it in
Papa's tea” (p. 291). This lie saved Mama from going to prison, but put Jaja there for over three years.

The last section, “A Different Silence” is the shortest section of the book and describes the present state of Kambili's family. She and Mama visit Jaja often and bring him things from home. Kambili hears from Aunt Ifeoma and her cousins from America through letters, and she, Mama, and Jaja plan to visit. They work together and use their wealth and connections Papa had made throughout their community to get Jaja out of jail earlier than expected. For the first time we see Kambili and her mother laughing together (Adichie, 2004, p. 307). The reader can conclude that Kambili has found her voice and has helped her Mama to do so as well.

The overwhelming themes are obvious throughout and within the conclusion of the book. Kambili is originally from an abusive home situation under the power of her father. She and her brother are introduced to a very different household culture when visiting her Aunt Ifeoma and cousins; however, Kambili learns about herself and finds her voice while living there. Through his death, her father is the character removed from the story. This is a story of Kambili's coming of age and release from the strict rules she has endured to this point. The next section will analyze how this book maintains and transforms the culture of modern Nigeria.

**Purple Hibiscus and Nigerian Culture**

This paper explains how narratives affect culture through the focus on *Purple Hibiscus*, a novel derived from and based in Nigeria. It analyzes how *Purple Hibiscus*, as a narrative, goes about repairing modern Nigerian culture, as well as the language that the novel uses to communicate specific messages to the people of this culture.

Within the framework of Nigerian culture, it is quite ambitious for Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie to use a young
woman as her narrator because of the hierarchy seen within society and the belief that men have power over, and the responsibility for, women. It is out of the ordinary for a woman to even be asked her opinion in this specific culture, and Adichie challenges this dynamic through her use of Kambili as the primary source through which the story is told and situations are perceived. This simple choice allows for the repair of the culture’s negative or conflicted view over the fact that young women do not and should not have these opinions because that is not their role or place in the world. Hearing from a young woman’s perspective also allows the reader to reconsider what they have always thought to be “true” or “accepted” within this culture, repairing their thoughts regarding expectations of narrators in general, even if only slightly.

Kambili is not a character who has a strong voice from the start, and she is actually introduced as someone who has a hard time coming up with the right words to say, or sometimes even any words at all. Her Aunt Ifeoma at one point justifies why Kambili is not answering someone’s question by saying, “She is shy” (Adichie, 2004, p. 139). This shows that other characters in the book are aware of, and identify Kambili with, the fact that she is a person of few words; but they do not question the reasoning behind it. The juxtaposition of Kambili’s personality with her role as the primary narrator for this novel solidifies the understanding that culture is indeed being repaired through allowing a woman to tell her story, even if she is not “qualified” by this culture’s standards. This opens up the idea that it can be “allowed” to give women the chance to speak and give their opinion, even those who do not necessarily know what they have to say. The position of woman as story-teller thus slightly repairs and begins to change people’s minds in a culture that absolutely does not allow this at the moment.
The use of language is another noteworthy way this narrative attempts to repair culture. In Aunt Ifeoma’s home, Igbo, or the traditional language of the area, is used and even encouraged, whereas in Eugene’s home it is never used and not even tolerated. Kambili points out that her father does not like when she uses the Igbo language because they “had to sound civilized in public...had to speak English” (Adichie, 2004, p. 13). This has a lot to do with the Nigerian value introduced earlier regarding how the English language denotes one’s status: using English means one is educated and dignified; using Igbo indicates that a person is of less status and therefore deserves less respect and power. Understanding the uses of the two different languages within Nigerian culture allows the reader to ultimately recognize that the ways in which one uses language, and furthermore the language in which one speaks, is deeply valued within this specific culture.

Adichie comments on these values and uses Aunt Ifeoma to repair the negative view of the Igbo language within the culture: she is a professor at a university, well-educated and intelligent. However, Ifeoma uses Igbo in her home and encourages her children to do the same, even in formal settings such as at the dinner table and amongst guests. This repairs the negative connotation of using Igbo in everyday language in the Nigerian culture because it allows the reader to see the juxtaposition of a language: Kambili and her family have come to believe that Igbo is not used by the well educated, yet Ifeoma is very educated and still proudly encourages the use of Igbo within her family. The repair is made through understanding that a person can use her traditional language in Nigeria and not necessarily be of a lesser class or weak educational standing.

The novel especially reveals Nigeria’s hierarchical leaning in its description of Kambili’s father, Eugene, and the brutally-abusive relationship he has with his family. The norm of a man as the head of the household and com-
pletely in charge of his wife and children is portrayed here. His abuse is accepted by the society he is living in, as Nigerian culture largely believes that men have the right to do what is necessary in order to maintain their status and demonstrate their power and control. Eugene even goes as far as planning out his family’s schedules to the minute, revealing the control he maintains over them. Furthermore, there are many scenes where he is seen violently abusing Kambili, Jaja, and their mother, even sending both Kambili and her mother to the hospital on separate occasions. These scenes demonstrate that brutal physical abuse is something Eugene feels he must do in order to maintain power and order, and that this is not a personal choice. The abuse is primarily understood as being widespread within and outside of the family, but it is accepted because, for this culture, it is simply the natural order of a man holding control over his household. Again, the focus upon abuse is significant because it exposes the abuse that occurs as a result of the tendency of hierarchy among gender in Nigerian society.

The narrative attempts to repair this hierarchical tendency of culture through the unexpected occurrence of Eugene’s death by poison (instigated by his wife). This fatality attempts to demonstrate to its readers that the cultural practice of hierarchy, especially regarding gender and power within families, is a negative value and should be deconstructed within society. The character in the book who perpetuates hierarchy the most (Eugene) is completely removed, notably without much mourning from even his immediate family. Furthermore, the cause of Eugene’s death and actual murderer are finally hidden to the general public. These tactics are used to illustrate that terrible consequences result for those who continue following the negative value of hierarchical tendencies. Also, it is not until after Eugene’s death, and the subsequent removal of hierarchy within Kambili’s family, that Kambili and her
mother are seen laughing together for the first time. It is then revealed that life for Kambili is better without the extreme control of her father, demonstrating that hierarchical structures can be transformed for the reader; consequently the worldview tendency of Nigerian able to be repaired. Despite the narrative's abilities to illuminate important historical realities of Nigeria, Purple Hibiscus remains contradictory: it attempts to repair the hierarchical culture Nigeria has taken on since its colonization while at the same time idolizing a different Western culture, the United States, which inhibits the same hierarchical tendencies in many ways. Narratives typically use some form of reward and punishment in order to comment on the positive and negative norms of the culture, at least from the perspective of the narrator. Punishment was seen in Eugene’s death, for example. In the conclusion of the novel, Aunt Ifeoma decides to move to the United States in order to make more money and escape the hardships of Nigeria. This can be considered a reward because throughout the novel it is revealed that Ifeoma is the character who lives a happy and fulfilling life (through laughter and freedom of communication), without complete constriction due to hierarchy. The reward of moving to the United States reveals the idealization of United States culture. It is necessary to consider, though, that this is yet another Western nation that tends to favor hierarchy and, although it looks a bit different from this leaning in Nigeria, inequalities in the United States still are prominent. This is problematic because American culture inhibits many of the very same qualities Adichie is looking to repair in Nigerian culture, yet the United States is glorified. Due to this glorification, the reader may receive a false conception of what life in America is really like, establishing unrealistic expectations of the lifestyle Aunt Ifeoma will encounter once she reaches the United States.
In the future, more research should focus on the other tendencies that are seen within Nigerian culture in order to analytically apply them to *Purple Hibiscus*, as well as continued examination on the book's effect on maintaining, transforming, and repairing aspects of this culture. Specifically, it would be interesting to look at the relationship between Kambili and her brother, Jaja, while analyzing the Nigerian culture's effects on their relationship, especially as the two are exposed to different values at both Ifeoma's and their father's home. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to analyze whether colonization shifted any other worldview tendencies of Nigeria and, if so, how the culture – and specifically Adichie – confronts them. Finally, a provoking aspect of the novel that could be investigated in more detail is whether the theme of idolizing United States culture is woven throughout Nigeria, and if so, how it can be reconciled with the culture seen in Nigeria as a result of colonization.
Resources


