

An Ambiguous “Freedom Song”: Mind-Style in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*

Daria Tunca
University of Liege, Belgium

Purple Hibiscus, the first novel by Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, has received considerable critical attention since its publication in 2003. The book has been extensively reviewed in both newspapers and academic journals and, recently, detailed scholarly readings have provided illuminating insight into some of the narrative’s prominent themes and motifs. For instance, critics have highlighted the connections that Adichie establishes between the violent atmosphere that pervades the home of the novel’s fifteen-year-old narrator, Kambili Achike, and the climate of fear maintained by the ruthless Nigerian military regimes of the late twentieth century, when the events of *Purple Hibiscus* unfold (Beilke; Hewett; Okuyade). Other commentators, writing from a feminist perspective, have examined the alternatives to patriarchal oppression found in the narrative (Bryce 58; Lopez 89-92). Some articles have also focused on the metaphor of food, which is linked with abuse and emancipation in Adichie’s story (Highfield, “Refusing”) or on the symbol of the purple hibiscus which, appropriately enough, represents the heroine’s and her brother’s blossoming and embodies the sense of serenity that the two adolescents acquire away from the paternal home (Highfield, “Blood”; Cooper 124-29).

Despite their divergent concerns, all these essays acknowledge—even if only implicitly—that one of *Purple Hibiscus*’s most compelling features lies in its nuanced treatment of the notions of freedom and tyranny. The entanglement of the two concepts is epitomized by the young narrator’s father, Eugene: a wealthy Igbo businessman, he fights the yoke of military dictatorship in Nigeria by publishing a pro-democracy newspaper, but he brutally imposes his fanatical religious views on his wife Beatrice and his children, Kambili and her brother Jaja, all of whom he regularly beats. The narrator’s response to her father’s authoritarian attitude also illustrates the complexities underlying physical and intellectual freedom. Indeed, despite Eugene’s abusive conduct, Kambili’s admiration for him initially knows no bounds. She only progressively learns to question his extremist values, mainly under the influence of her Aunt Ifeoma, and that of Father Amadi, a young Catholic priest with whom the teenager falls in love.

The fact that Kambili matures in the course of the novel has prompted critics to describe Adichie’s book as a *Bildungsroman* (Bryce 58; Hron 30). While not all scholars have chosen to adopt this

designation, there has been little controversy over the actuality of the main character's metamorphosis from a shy, obedient child into a more outspoken young woman. A similar unanimity seems to have been reached in the appraisal of Kambili's narrative voice, for her account has consistently been described using terms such as "emotionless" (Okorafor-Mbachu) and "dispassionate" (Ekwe-Ekwe); she has further been deemed to have a "flat, unreflective voice" that recounts traumatic events "without judgment" (Washburn). Considering the central role played by Kambili's personality in the unfolding of the story, such assessments may affect one's evaluation of the novel's poetic qualities and, consequently, one's entire interpretation of the book.¹

In this essay, I would like to question the critical consensus regarding the narrative voice of *Purple Hibiscus*. More precisely, I wish to reconsider the description of Kambili's account as detached and unemotional, and argue that a re-examination of the narrator's discourse is needed to acquire a deeper understanding of how the notions of freedom and oppression are woven into the novel. To buttress my claim, I shall adopt a theoretical approach different to those privileged in previous analyses of *Purple Hibiscus*, and favour a methodology centred on Kambili's use of language.²

I believe that the linguistic makeup of the narrator's account can be productively examined with recourse to "mind-style," a theory introduced and developed by Roger Fowler in his *Linguistics and the Novel* and *Linguistic Criticism*. This concept, which denotes a person's or a character's idiolect, rests on the assumption that language has an ideational—that is, a representational—function. The idea is inspired by the linguist M.A.K. Halliday, according to whom any

speaker or writer embodies in language his experience of the phenomena of the real world; and this includes his experience of the internal world of his own consciousness: his reactions, cognitions, and perceptions, and also his linguistic acts of speaking and understanding. (Halliday 332, cited in Fowler, *Criticism* 211)

Experience is thus partly "cod[ed] in language" (211), but the way in which this occurs varies according to at least two factors: the complex network of socio-economic relations that have shaped an individual's background, and his or her personal trajectory (211). This linguistic diversity not only distinguishes one individual from the next, but also one text from another, since even a single speaker has "a repertoire of ideational perspectives" (212). In other words, a person may, for example, adopt different registers depending on the context of language use. Despite these situational variations, however, it is crucial to note that the "regular and consistent linguistic choices" made in a text "build up a continuous, pervasive, representation of the world"

¹ "Poetic" is to be understood here in a general sense, as relating to the "creative principles informing any literary . . . construction" (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

² This article concentrates on the linguistic structures privileged by the narrator within the boundaries of Standard English. For an analysis of the use and influence of the Igbo language in *Purple Hibiscus*, see Cooper (120-24) and Tunca ("Style" 155-76).

(212). Applying these findings to fiction, one may argue that “the world-view of an author, or a narrator, or a character” is “constituted by the ideational structure of the text” (212).

Considering that my analysis of *Purple Hibiscus* will rely on the above perception of language, an important methodological clarification is needed here. Indeed, while mind-style takes as its premise the idea that an individual’s linguistic choices may provide insight into his or her worldview, the theory does not consider language as an unproblematic mediator of reality or a container of ontological truth. On the contrary, the concept finds its relevance precisely in the fact that “[l]inguistic codes do not reflect reality neutrally” (Fowler, *Criticism* 40), and that any attempt at expressing one’s experience through linguistic enunciation is an act of ideologically-slanted representation. Language is, in other words, regarded as a prism through which one’s understanding of reality is conveyed. As this metaphor suggests, the linguistic medium is not to be considered a transparent referent that provides direct access to the human mind either; rather, language is presented as a complex and slippery code which, if consistently deciphered, can offer us a glimpse into an author’s or character’s subjective conception of reality.³

Crucially, the analysis of mind-style rests on the evaluation of the impact of semantic nuances and syntactic arrangements on the interpretation of texts. In view of this focus, examinations of idiolects—whether fictional or not—are most efficiently performed using linguistic models that foreground the stylistic importance of the aforementioned formal features of vocabulary and syntax. Thus, it is no coincidence that mind-style has most often been explored using functional grammar, an approach that seeks to explore “why . . . particular linguistic patterns” (Fowler, *Criticism* 11) occur in individual texts.⁴ More recently, cognitive models have also been used with similar purposes (Semino). Such theories tend to provide more fertile ground for analyses of mind-style than, for example, generative-transformational models, which focus on language universals and offer a more mechanistic view of linguistic variation.

Regardless of whether examinations of literary idiolects have used a functional or cognitive apparatus, they have predominantly dissected the linguistic particularities present in the speech of mentally disabled, cognitively deviant or psychologically unbalanced characters. But this need not be the case (for example, see Leech and Short 154-58).⁵

³ The link between language and worldview (outside of fiction) has been explored not only with a social or political emphasis (Halliday; Fowler; Fairclough), but also from a cognitive perspective (see, for instance, Lakoff’s thought-provoking study of categorization, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, or the following groundbreaking analyses of conventional or poetic metaphor: Lakoff and Johnson; Lakoff and Turner; Fauconnier).

⁴ Such functional analyses of mind-style in fiction include Halliday, Fowler (*Criticism* 210-32) and, in the field of African literature, Akekue.

⁵ Notice, however, that one critic has fallen just short of describing Kambili’s emotional vulnerability in *Purple Hibiscus* as intellectual disability: indeed, Simoes da Silva is of the opinion that “[a]t times [Kambili’s] devotion to Papa almost makes her appear intellectually stunted.”

Using a functional framework as a basis for linguistic analysis, I argue that mind-style is a useful methodological tool that can help to shape some of the linguistic structures frequently used by Adichie's narrator into a coherent interpretative model. Because, as explained above, a character's idiolect reflects his or her worldview, I shall also attempt to show that the linguistic changes in Kambili's description of her experiences follow her psychological evolution.

A fitting point of departure for this demonstration may be a short consideration of the heroine's struggle to articulate her feelings and opinions to those around her. During most of the novel, there is a marked discrepancy between the words Kambili addresses to her family—or rather, those she does not—and the feelings she expresses in narrative passages. Indeed, the heroine repeatedly finds herself in situations where she remains silent or utters words she did not intend to, often out of fear of displeasing her interlocutors or because she is unable to articulate her response. Thus, Kambili is initially misjudged by her cousin Amaka, who interprets her laconic comment as a sign of world-weariness:

“We don't watch a lot of TV,” I [Kambili] said.

[Amaka:] “Why? . . . Because you're bored with it? If only we all had satellite so everybody could be bored with it.”

I wanted to say I was sorry, that I did not want her to dislike us for not watching satellite. I wanted to tell her that although huge satellite dishes lounged on top of the houses in Enugu and here, we did not watch TV. Papa did not pencil in TV time in our schedules. (79)

Kambili never watches television because her father strictly organizes his children's time, but she never voices aloud the explanations she so desperately wants to add. However, it is significant that, despite her shyness, “there's a lot going on in [her] head” (220), as Father Amadi astutely observes.

Kambili's thoughts and feelings, and how they sometimes clash with her attitude towards others, are minutely rendered in her narrative account and follow consistent linguistic patterns. For instance, formulas such as “I wanted” (found in the passage above) or “I wished,” iterated by Kambili when evoking actions she would like to perform or wishes she had (not) carried out, are linguistic mannerisms used throughout the novel. Similarly, the teenager's inability to speak or act is expressed through structures such as “my lips held stubbornly together” (141) and “my legs . . . did not do what I wanted them to” (165). That these clauses identify her body parts as grammatical actors perhaps suggests that, in spite of her efforts, her mind is unable to take control of her body. While the latter linguistic arrangements may not be considered significant in isolation, they nonetheless highlight the centrality of agency in the narrator's discourse—a concept that will feature prominently in my analysis.

The heroine's muteness in the passage previously cited illustrates the pervasive presence of silence in the novel. Kambili's tongue-tied responses have left some reviewers frustrated (Kaplan; Lalami), but it seems to me that, as Karen Bruce has extensively demonstrated, silence is not merely a “form of oppression” in *Purple Hibiscus*—in

the sense that Kambili’s speechlessness can be attributed to “her father’s abuse”—but it also becomes “a mode of resistance.” The crux of the matter probably lies in the simultaneous presence of these opposite functions in single instances where words are left unspoken. For example, Kambili and her brother Jaja dare not say some things aloud, but their “asusu anya,” or “language of the eyes” (Adichie, *Hibiscus* 305), allows them to “speak about subjects [of] which [their] father might disapprove” (Bruce). Bruce foregrounds another passage revealing this double quality: after Eugene, furious at Jaja’s disobedience, has thrown his missal across the room and broken Beatrice’s ballet-dancing figurines, the narrator attempts to comfort her mother. The girl reports: “I meant to say I am sorry Papa broke your figurines, but the words that came out were, ‘I’m sorry your figurines broke, Mama’” (Adichie, *Hibiscus* 10). Bruce, echoing Mantel and Hewett, observes that Kambili “avoids implicating her father” in his own act of violence. At the same time, however, the critic notices that “through this indirect and veiled manner of speech, [Kambili] is able to broach the subject of Eugene’s abusive behaviour” and “acknowledge her mother’s status as innocent victim.” Kambili’s refusal to overtly recognize Eugene’s responsibility in the words of sympathy she addresses to her mother is even more outright than Bruce suggests. The differences between the clause that Kambili considers saying but does not (“Papa broke your figurines”) and the one she actually articulates (“your figurines broke”) can be clearly highlighted using functional grammar, and more precisely Halliday and Matthiessen’s ergative model of transitivity (284-95).⁶

The two clauses referring to the breaking of the figurines are material clauses, that is, clauses that “constru[e] a quantum of change in the flow of events as taking place through some input of energy” (Halliday and Matthiessen 179).⁷ Using Halliday and Matthiessen’s method, the clause patterns can be represented in a table as follows:

	Agent	Process	Medium	
--	-------	---------	--------	--

⁶ It is important to clarify here that Halliday and Matthiessen’s use of the term “ergative” in functional grammar is different from the one used in formal linguistics. In its traditional sense, an “ergative” is a verb that can be used transitively or intransitively, so that the “object of the verb in its transitive function becomes the subject of the verb in its intransitive function” (Aitchison 100). Examples illustrating this point would be “Gunfire scattered the crowd” and “The crowd scattered” (Aitchison 100). Halliday and Matthiessen’s ergative model is unrelated to this definition, as their theory concerns itself with the identification of the “Medium” through which a “Process” is actualized (note that capital letters are used at the beginning of functions by convention). By way of example, the authors analyze an extract from *Noah’s Ark* in which “‘the great flood’ serves the same ergative role in *I am going to send a great flood* and *the great flood spread*” (284). In practise, however, the traditional notion of ergativity and Halliday and Matthiessen’s theory sometimes overlap, as will indeed be the case here.

⁷ These clauses differ from mental clauses, which express “processes of sensing” and are “concerned with our experience of the world of our own consciousness” (197) and relational clauses, which express “processes of being and having” and “serve to characterize and to identify” (210). Other process types include behavioural clauses (248-52), verbal clauses (252-56) and existential clauses (256-59).

Doing	Papa	broke	your figurines	
Happening			your figurines	broke
			Medium	Process

In both clauses, the verbal group “broke” realizes the function of Process, and the nominal group “your figurines” that of Medium, a concept which refers to the role “through which the process is actualized” (284).⁸ However, the clauses display a crucial difference in pattern. While “Papa broke your figurines” is a clause of “doing,” which is to say that “the actualization of the process is represented as being caused by a participant [the Agent] that is external to the combination of Process + Medium” (285), “your figurines broke” is a clause of “happening,” meaning that “the process is represented as being self-engendered” (285).⁹ The latter structure corresponds to a particular way of representing “reality”: “In the real world, there may well have been some external agency involved in [the Process]; but in the semantics of English it is represented as having been *self-caused*” (290, my emphasis). In other words, Kambili’s formulation “the figurines broke” not only avoids implicating her father, but also refrains from including any form of agency. By presenting the Process as self-engendered, she even staves off the question “by whom or by what?” that might have been raised had she used the receptive “the figurines got broken” (Halliday and Matthiessen 290).¹⁰

Kambili masks the brutality of Eugene’s abuse with her words, and her mother engages in a similar act.¹¹ When a pregnant Mama is beaten so heavily by her husband that she suffers a miscarriage, on her return from hospital she reports to her children: “There was an accident, the baby is gone” (34). The existential clause “there is” indicates that “something exists or happens” (Halliday and Matthiessen 256)—here the use of a material clause, a type of clause that could, in its “doing” form, integrate an Agent, is avoided altogether. In addition to this, the noun “accident” denotes an absence of deliberate agency. The second part of the sentence, “The baby is gone,” follows the same pattern as “the figurines broke” in Halliday and Matthiessen’s ergative model, and does not leave any room for an Agent in the Process + Medium structure, either.¹² As Debra Beilke has observed, the silence around

⁸ A nominal group in functional grammar corresponds to a noun phrase in formal grammar.

⁹ In traditional terminology, clauses of “doing” are called “transitive” and clauses of “happening” are called “intransitive” (180).

¹⁰ Halliday and Matthiessen prefer the term “receptive” to the traditional “passive,” and the word “operative” to “active” (181-82).

¹¹ An analogous point is made by Cooper when she argues that “Words . . . do not say what Kambili means and are instruments of concealment of the reality of Papa’s crimes” (116). However, the critic relates this to the character’s lack of control over her utterances: words “involuntar[il]y” come out of Kambili’s mouth (116).

¹² That Mama’s unborn baby is labelled the “Medium” is independent of the ethical debate around the conception of a foetus as an “unborn person” or a mere “organism.” The examples of Medium + Process structures provided by Halliday and Matthiessen include “the glass broke,” “the baby sat up” and “the boy ran” (290), which clearly indicate that the term “Medium” can be applied to both objects and people.

Eugene's implication in these traumatic events suggests that his abuse "not only maims [his family members'] bodies but it also serves to control their tongues" (2).

Kambili repeatedly deploys indirect, euphemistic tactics to describe her father's acts of violence in the course of the novel. The thrashings Eugene gives his wife are either described as "sounds" which the narrator attempts to ignore (10, 32), or the beatings can be inferred from their consequences—Beatrice's swollen eye or face (10, 190, 193), her blood on the floor (33), or her ritual of polishing the figurines on the *étagère* (10, 192). Similarly, the punishment that has left Kambili's brother with a deformed little finger is recounted by means of a narrative ellipsis: "Papa took him upstairs and locked the door. Jaja, in tears, came out supporting his left hand with his right, and Papa drove him to St. Agnes hospital" (145).

More benign incidents are described in far less evasive terms. Kambili, for instance, reports in straightforward material, operative clauses that "Papa slapped my left and right cheeks at the same time" (51) and that "Papa yanked my ear in the car" (94). In Halliday and Matthiessen's transitive model of transitivity, "Papa" can unambiguously be identified as a "volitional" Actor (282), while Kambili's body parts ("my left and right cheeks," "my ear") are the unequivocal Goals.¹³ Contrast these structures with those employed by the narrator in her first extensive description of one of Eugene's furious outbursts of violence:

He unbuckled his belt slowly. It was a heavy belt made of layers of brown leather with a sedate leather-covered buckle. It landed on Jaja first, across his shoulder. Then Mama raised her hands as it landed on her upper arm, which was covered by the puffy sequined sleeve of her church blouse. I put the bowl down just as the belt landed on my back. Sometimes I watched the Fulani nomads, white jellabas flapping against their legs in the wind, making clucking sounds as they herded their cows across the roads in Enugu with a switch, each smack of the switch swift and precise. Papa was like a Fulani nomad—although he did not have their spare, tall body—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.

Then the belt stopped, and Papa stared at the leather in his hand. (102)

The striking, almost romantic comparison between Eugene and a Fulani nomad, whipping cattle with a rod, illustrates the different interpretations which the passage may invite. In Hewett's opinion,

The juxtaposition of peaceful, rural nomads with Eugene's violent rage startles, but the image does more. By slowing down the moment, it increases the tension, enabling us to see through the eyes of a young narrator who possesses acute powers of observation.

¹³ The transitive model differs from the ergative model of transitivity in that the former "differentiates the different process types" (material, mental, relational, behavioural, existential) while the latter "generalizes across these different process types" (282). See Halliday and Matthiessen (282-83) for more detailed explanations of the differences between the two models of transitivity.

While I agree with this comment, I also believe that the image patently relates Papa's violent treatment of his own family to the way Fulani nomads handle animals. The evocation of a switch and the ruthlessness of Eugene's actions further summon associations with the scene witnessed by Kambili while at the market with her mother and Jaja:

As we hurried past, I saw a woman spit at a soldier. I saw the soldier raise a whip in the air. The whip was long. It curled in the air before it landed on the woman's shoulder. Another soldier was kicking down trays of fruits, squashing papayas with his boots and laughing. (44)

The descriptions of the soldiers' thoughtless brutality and Eugene's assaults on his family suggest a parallel between national and domestic violence that is made explicit in several passages in the novel.¹⁴ In addition to the similarity in the bullies' acts and the likeness between their weapons, the comparison is amplified by the use of identical wording: "it landed" followed by a prepositional phrase functioning as a circumstantial Adjunct of location.

This structure is foregrounded through repetition in the passage describing Eugene's flogging of Mama, Jaja and Kambili. Examining this clause from an ideational perspective will reveal that this construction and those around it carry significant undertones. One may indeed be struck by the fact that Eugene, the perpetrator of the aggression, is assigned the role of Grammatical Subject on only five occasions during the beating: he is the Subject of "unbuckled," "was," "swung," "muttering" and "stared."¹⁵ Even more surprisingly, Papa is the Actor of a material Process in only two cases, "unbuckled" and "swung," since he is the Carrier of the Attribute in the attributive relational clause "Papa was like a Fulani nomad" (Halliday and Matthiessen 219, 249), the Sayer in the non-finite verbal clause headed by "muttering" (252) and the Behavior in the behavioural clause "Papa stared at the leather in his hand" (248-50). Of the two material Processes of which he functions as Actor—"unbuckled" and "swung"—the former is merely suggestive of the act of brutality he is about to engage in, and the latter, while it evokes a movement of aggression, does not necessarily denote physical contact with his victims.¹⁶ Significantly, Eugene is the Actor in a clause headed by a verb denotative of destruction only after the beating has ended:

¹⁴ This point, mentioned in the introduction to this article, has been noted by many reviewers. More extensive textual evidence is provided by e.g. Lopez, who writes that "Aunty Ifeoma . . . compares the marriages into which her young female students rush with 'what this military tyrant is doing to our country' [Adichie 75]" (89).

¹⁵ "Muttering" is part of a non-finite dependent clause without a Subject, but since the clause is to be "interpreted by reference to the Subject of the dominant clause" (Halliday and Matthiessen 421), I shall consider Eugene the Subject of this clause.

¹⁶ This is most explicitly stated in the *Collins Cobuild Advanced Learner's English Dictionary*: "If you swing at a person or thing, you *try* to hit them with your arm or with something that you are holding" (my emphasis). One of the examples provided as an illustration is "Blanche swung at her but she moved her head back and Blanche missed" (1466).

Papa crushed Jaja and me to his body. “Did the belt hurt you? Did it break your skin?” he asked, examining our faces. I felt a throbbing on my back, but I said no, that I was not hurt. It was the way Papa shook his head when he talked about liking sin, as if something weighed him down, something he could not throw off. (102)

The only action performed by Eugene in which violence is semantically rendered—“crushed”—is, paradoxically, a gesture of love. This confirms that his conception of affection is inseparable from pain, like when he offers Kambili “love sip[s]” (8) from his hot tea that burn her tongue, or when he hugs Jaja so tight that the boy thinks that “his back ha[s] snapped” (22). As Bruce argues, love translates into pain just as violence is justified by love:

Eugene has made it clear that he views his actions as an unpleasant duty that he undertakes out of love. He tells Kambili: “Everything I do for you, I do for your own good” (196). His choice of preposition is significant, as it reveals how he conceives of his abuse as something he does *for* his family, not *to* them. (emphasis in original)

As if to substantiate Bruce’s remark, the brief functional analysis I have conducted demonstrates that Papa does nothing “to” his family in one of the novel’s most brutal passages. Instead, the linguistic arrangement of Kambili’s report identifies an object, namely Eugene’s belt, as the true culprit. In the structure “it [the belt] landed,” which appears three times in the extract describing the beating, the pronoun “it” has the function of Actor in a material clause according to the transitive model—meaning that the belt, not Eugene, is repeatedly presented as “the one that does the deed,” “the source of energy bringing about the change” (Halliday and Matthiessen 179). In similar fashion, “the leather belt swished” and “the belt stopped” present the object as a potent Actor rather than a Medium through which Eugene inflicts injuries upon his family. Kambili’s construal of the situation reflects her father’s own abdication of responsibility, illustrated in his questions following the assault: “Did the belt hurt you? Did it break your skin?” Eugene characteristically prefers these formulations to the more accurate “Did *I* hurt you (with the belt)?”

The arresting features contained in the description of the beating extend to the textual metafunction, at and beyond the level of the clause.¹⁷ According to Halliday and Matthiessen, clauses and clause nexuses are divided into Theme and Rheme (64-67).¹⁸ The Theme, placed in initial position in the clause or nexus, is the “element which serves as the point of departure of the message” (64). As such, it is the “prominent element” (105), the one that “provides the environment for the remainder of the message, the Rheme” (105). Since the narrator’s attention is directed towards her father when he unbuckles his belt, it comes as no surprise that “He” is placed in thematic position in the

¹⁷ Halliday and Matthiessen define this metafunction as the one that “build[s] up sequences of discourse, organizing the discursive flow and creating cohesion and continuity as it moves along” (30).

¹⁸ They borrow this idea and terminology from the Prague school of linguists (Halliday and Matthiessen 64).

opening sentence of the paragraph. When Kambili turns her gaze to the ominous belt, the object becomes the Theme in the next sentence. The belt keeps this initial place in the following sentence, which is consistent with its central role in the passage, as the discussion of the structure “it landed” revealed. But in the next two sentences, a major shift occurs: not only does the belt move away from the thematic position—both in the clause and in the clause nexus—but the clauses describing its movements, “it landed on her upper arm” and “the belt landed on my back,” are relegated to hypotactic, that is, dependent, status. Meanwhile, two of the victims of the assault, Mama and Kambili, are assigned the functions of Actors of the material Processes “raised” and “put” in dominant thematic clauses. In other words, the belt’s violent strokes, despite their fundamental contribution to the action, are assigned rhematic and hypotactic statuses, none of which are dominant in the clause nexus. They are thereby twice removed from the prominent syntactical position they would have been most likely to occupy. A somewhat similar pattern is repeated in the last two sentences of the paragraph, once with Eugene (“he”) as Actor and once with “the leather belt” in this function: “Papa was like a Fulani nomad . . . as he swung his belt at Mama, Jaja and me,” and “We did not move more than two steps away from the leather belt that swished through the air” (102). Since the hypotactic clauses describing the belt’s movements hardly contain any new information (the last two clauses quoted, I would argue, do not contain any at all), the principle of “end-focus,” according to which new items are placed at the end of a sentence to achieve communicative saliency (Leech and Short 172), is skilfully bypassed. As the reader’s expectation of encountering new, semantically significant items is not met, the anti-climactic character of the scene is emphasized.

In sum, syntactic arrangements inside clauses seem to shift the blame away from Eugene and onto his weapon, while those above the level of the clause appear to minimize the impact of the aggression. These stylistic choices can give rise to a dual interpretation. Since Kambili almost systematically avoids assigning her father the function of Actor in her description of the beating, she portrays him as a passive victim instead of an aggressor. In the aftermath of his outburst of rage, she appears to excuse his behaviour by attributing it to “something [that] weighed him down, something he could not throw off” (102). The notion of inability captured in the negative modal “could not” relieves him of any accountability for his actions. At the same time, Papa is presented as not needing to make any direct intervention to endow his belt with an amount of kinetic energy so forceful that the object seems to come to life. Paradoxically, he thereby comes across as a god-like figure in control of the physical elements around him.

This seeming contradiction admirably captures the complexity of Eugene’s personality, in addition to giving a glimpse of his daughter’s perception of it. On the one hand, he is presented as an omnipotent god, one who believes that everything can be controlled and who projects this conviction on to his family. For instance, he tells his daughter, who has come in second position in her class at the end of the school

term, that she “*let* other children come first” (39, my emphasis) and that she “came second because [she] *chose* to” (42, my emphasis). Both of these formulations denote volition, whereas Kambili has in this case not deliberately tried to come “only” second and displease her father as a result. Similarly, Eugene refuses to admit that Mama’s nausea may prevent her from visiting the local priest, Father Benedict, and he accuses her of not “*want[ing]* to visit His servant after Mass” (32, my emphasis). By anointing himself as moral judge of his family, Papa effectively “do[es] God’s job” (95), as Auntie Ifeoma remarks. On the other hand, however, Eugene falls prey to his own obsession with perfection. So fixated is he on his family’s compliance with his religious ideals that he loses control of his emotions and inflicts torture upon his wife and children at the slightest sign of disobedience.

These two divergent images—Eugene as a god-like judge and Eugene as a victim of his feelings—are reunited in a single passage, when he pours boiling water on Kambili’s feet for staying in the same house as her “heathen” grandfather, Papa-Nnukwu:

“Kambili, you are precious.” His [Eugene’s] voice quavered now . . . choked with emotion. “You should strive for perfection. You should not see sin and walk right into it.” He lowered the kettle into the tub, tilted it toward my feet. He poured the hot water on my feet, slowly . . . He was crying now, tears streaming down his face. I saw the moist steam before I saw the water. I watched the water leave the kettle . . . I felt nothing for a second. And then I screamed.

“That is what you do to yourself when you walk into sin. You burn your feet,” he said.

I wanted to say “Yes, Papa,” because he was right, but the burning on my feet was climbing up, in swift courses of excruciating pain, to my head and lips and eyes. (194-95)

Eugene maintains that “modesty [i]s very important” (5), but he assigns himself priestly authority by performing this perverse re-enactment of the Christian ritual of baptism, synonymous with purification, the cleansing of sins, and ultimately salvation.¹⁹ Unlike the previous passage in which Eugene attacked his family with a belt, Kambili’s father is here presented as the Actor in several material clauses. While this may signal a progressive evolution in the narrator’s construal of the situation, traces of her earlier state of mind are still present in clauses such as “the water stopped” (195), which may be viewed as an echo of “the belt stopped” (102). Moreover, the material Processes of which Eugene is the Actor (“lowered,” “tilted,” “poured”) evoke the precision of his gestures rather than the cruelty of the corporal punishment he is administering. Finally, passages such as “His voice quavered,” “choked with emotion,” “He was crying” and “tears streaming down his face” are all linked to the physiological

¹⁹ Hartl and Obaze think that the boiling water rather prefigures the fires of hell. The images of baptism and hell may well be blended in Eugene’s act. In any case, I believe the notion of cleansing to be central to his gesture, since, as a boy, Eugene had had his hands soaked in hot water by a priest because he had masturbated (196). This means that, on both occasions, the incriminated body parts are viewed as being in need of purification. Bruce also insists on the importance of ritual cleansing in *Purple Hibiscus*, although she does not refer to this particular incident in the context of her argument.

expression of emotion—reactions typical of victims rather than torturers. In this passage, Eugene passes a moral judgement on God's behalf, yet his emotional fragility does not suggest the power and control that come with this function.

At this stage in the novel, the elusiveness of Eugene's personality is matched by the ambivalence of his daughter's response. While she is still a stunned onlooker ("I saw," "I watched") and espouses the belief that walking into sin means burning one's feet (as suggested by the line "I wanted to say 'Yes, Papa,' because he was right" [194]), Kambili concurrently overlooks her father's commands by concealing her cousin Amaka's painting of Papa-Nnukwu, although she is fully aware that Eugene will disapprove of her doing so because the old man is not a Catholic. This act of resistance is probably her most overt challenge to her father in the entire novel. Even its climax is mostly conducted in silence on Kambili's part, interrupted only by two monosyllabic, yet powerful, words of protest:

[Eugene:] "Who brought that painting into this house?"

"Me," I said.

"Me," Jaja said.

Papa snatched the painting from Jaja. His hands moved swiftly, working together. The painting was gone. It already represented something lost, something I had never had, would never have. Now even that reminder was gone

"No!" I shrieked. I dashed to the pieces on the floor as if to save them, as if saving them would mean saving Papa-Nnukwu. I sank to the floor, lay on the pieces of paper.

"What has gotten into you?" Papa asked. "What is wrong with you?"

I lay on the floor curled tight like the picture of a child in the uterus in my *Integrated Science for Junior Secondary Schools*.

"Get up! Get away from that painting!"

I lay there, did nothing.

"Get up!" Papa said again. I still did not move. (210)

Kambili's defiance, unprecedented in its intensity, is as much a product of her actions as of her immobility and silence, as the succession of "dashed" and "sank" on the one hand, and "lay" (which occurs three times), "did nothing" and "still did not move" on the other, indicates. The verbal group "did not move" alone encapsulates the different functions that stillness performs in the narrative, as it can be found in the descriptions of Eugene's first and third outbursts of rage (102, 210) but with very different implications: a sign of fearful paralysis in the former case, it metamorphoses into an act of confrontation in the latter. In line with this change in attitude, Kambili's account of the beating which her father then inflicts upon her is initiated by a sentence rid of grammatical artifice:

He started to kick me. The metal buckles on his slippers stung like bites from giant mosquitoes. He talked non-stop, out of control, in a mix of Igbo and English, like soft meat and thorny bones. Godlessness. Heathen worship. Hellfire. The kicking increased in tempo, and I thought of Amaka's music, her culturally conscious music that sometimes started off with a calm saxophone and then whirled into lusty singing. I curled around myself tighter, around the pieces of the painting; they were soft, feathery. They still had the metallic smell of Amaka's paint palette. The stinging was raw now, even more like bites, because the metal landed on open skin on my side, my back, my legs. Kicking. Kicking. Kicking.

Perhaps it was a belt now because the metal buckle seemed too heavy. Because I would hear a swoosh in the air. A low voice was saying, "Please, *biko*, please." More stings. More slaps. A salty wetness warmed my mouth. I closed my eyes and slipped away into quiet. (210-11)

This extract depicts the culmination of Eugene's brutality towards his daughter. Even Mama admits that Papa "has never punished her like this before" (214)—although, once again, the more direct "beaten" would have been more appropriate than the morally justifiable "punished." As already suggested above, Eugene's responsibility as the initiator of the attack is no longer dissimulated by syntactical façades: the participants in the action and the act of aggression itself are unmistakably identified in the Actor + Process + Goal structure "He started to kick me." If Kambili has torn off the mask of victim with which she had previously covered her father's face, Eugene still possesses the God-like power to bring elements to life. The buckles on his slippers are said to "st[i]ng like bites from *giant mosquitoes*" (210, my emphasis), with the metal "land[ing] on open skin" (211), just as the dynamic belt did. Eugene, in turn, seems to attribute such elusive supernatural powers to Amaka's drawing, for he orders Kambili to "[g]et away from that painting" even in its shredded state, as if the representation of Papa-Nnukwu were the indestructible incarnation of evil.

Retreating into her mind, Kambili thinks of Amaka's "culturally conscious music" (211)—"itself a symbol of resistance," as Hewett rightly observes—and she relates the increasing force of the blows to the music's intensifying beat. As the experiences amalgamate in Kambili's head, so they mimetically do in the text, which acquires the rhythmical qualities of a song (see also Cooper 118). The three elliptical sentences "Godlessness. Heathen worship. Hellfire." (Adichie, *Hibiscus* 211), snatches of Eugene's speech that render Kambili's immediate consciousness of the experience, set the initial pace, before "The kicking increase[s] in tempo." The gerund "kicking" provides the song's main motif. It is first presented in variation under the assonantal, alliterative, and grammatically equivalent "singing" and "stinging," a phonological proximity and morphological correspondence perhaps suggestive of their semantic association in the narrator's mind.²⁰ "Kicking" is then reiterated thrice in the rhythmic progression "my side, my back, my legs. Kicking. Kicking. Kicking." (211)—a sequence which, in literary terms, may be considered a hexameter made up of three iambs and three trochees, interrupted by a medial caesura. While the accumulation of nouns referring to body parts and the replication of "kicking" suggests an iconic representation of the beating's repetitive and intensifying quality, the rhythmic chiasmus may be evocative of Eugene's erratic behaviour. The coda is provided by two iambs found in the elliptical "More stings. More slaps." (211). In these sentences, accumulation is again suggested by the determinant "more" (denotative of an increase in level or amount) and its repetition.

²⁰ I am aware that the gerunds "singing" and "stinging," assonantal and alliterative in my sentence, may not be close enough in the narrative to be technically qualified as such.

If this paragraph of *Purple Hibiscus* indeed bears resemblance to a musical piece, then it takes the form of a “freedom song” (299). Kambili does not physically escape her father’s blows, but she nevertheless manages a metaphorical flight. She first excludes him by “curl[ing] around [her]self tighter” (210), a position she associates with that of “a child in the uterus” (210) found in one of her science books. Her retreat to the maternal womb may be perceived as a break away from patriarchal authority, even perhaps as an act of identification with the foetuses that her mother has lost at the hands of Eugene. This position also acquires high symbolic significance because Kambili’s temporary withdrawal may prefigure her own rebirth, a plea for life contained in her first name, which means “let me live” in Igbo (Ene). An additional interpretation of the heroine’s desire to return to the womb may be suggested by adopting a psychoanalytical perspective. Recalling that Sigmund Freud described “the act of birth” as “the individual’s first experience of anxiety” (12), one could indeed argue that Kambili’s identification with a foetus is indicative of her willingness to escape not only patriarchal violence, but trauma at large.

While Kambili’s silent protest “increases her vulnerability,” as the image of the unborn child suggests, it also “becomes a source of strength” (Hewett). Significantly, the last sentence of the paragraph features her as an Actor deliberately leaving the scene: “I closed my eyes and slipped away into quiet” (211). That her loss of consciousness is rendered with a material clause evoking movement (“slipped away into quiet”), rather than a behavioural process such as “fainted,” seems to emphasize Kambili’s voluntary, albeit inconspicuous, retreat to a space where her father cannot reach her.

If Kambili has indisputably developed a form of resistance against Eugene, her quest for independence nevertheless remains an ambiguous one. Indeed, in the final section of the novel, set thirty-one months after Eugene’s death, she expresses a sense of liberation when she reports that “a different kind of silence, one that lets [her] breathe” (305) has replaced “the silence of when Papa was alive” (305), about which she still has nightmares. Yet, despite her disturbing visions, in a paradox that perfectly captures the contradictory sentiments she has developed towards her father, she “want[s] to see him in [her] dreams,” to the point that she “sometimes make[s] [her] own dreams, when [she] [is] neither asleep nor awake” (306). Thus, many of the responses surrounding his memory are the same as those his presence produced when he was alive—a mixture of love, silence and fear.

Adichie’s skilful handling of style undoubtedly accounts for the way some critics have described her narrator’s rendering of events. If one considers again the positions mentioned in the opening paragraphs of this article, Kambili may indeed appear to be a “flat, unreflective voice” that recounts facts “without judgement” (Washburn) if one takes her seeming lack of involvement in certain passages at face value. For instance, the repeated attention given to the inanimate belt’s movements—rather than the protagonists’ emotional states—in her first extensive description of the beatings inflicted by her father might

be viewed, without further investigation, as being “objective” by virtue of its factuality. I have suggested that, on the contrary, these structures reflect the narrator’s bias, and more specifically mirror her justification of Eugene’s behaviour. Thus, the “mind-style” Adichie creates for her character is a deceptively simple one, since the accessible vocabulary and plain syntactic structures it contains inconspicuously conceal Kambili’s prejudices. The subsequent maturation of this idiolect into a far more straightforward type of language shows that the narrator’s questioning of her father’s narrow-minded principles translates into discursive freedom.²¹ Nevertheless, while Kambili develops into her own voice by denouncing Eugene’s behaviour in her account, her eagerness to please and be loved by him never completely vanishes. The presence of such a rift in the narrator’s mind serves to highlight the intricacy of the character’s negotiation of freedom and love.

In light of the parallels repeatedly drawn between the domestic world of *Purple Hibiscus* and the condition of Nigeria at large, it may be interesting to note that Kambili’s psychological conflict finds echoes in Adichie’s non-fictional prose. Indeed, just as her character rejects her father’s fundamentalism but cannot help adoring him, the writer directs scathing criticism against her country but professes her deep attachment to it: “Buildings fall down, pensions aren’t paid, politicians are murdered, riots are in the air . . . and yet I love Nigeria” (Adichie, “Buildings”). Ultimately, the split of the narrator’s intellectual and emotional allegiances in *Purple Hibiscus* may well mirror the author’s awareness of the complexities of her own relationship to postcolonial Nigeria—a bond whose intricacies need to be explored and probed into, but which cannot, at present, be simplistically resolved.

Works Cited

- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Purple Hibiscus*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2003.
- . “Buildings Fall Down, Pensions Aren’t Paid, Politicians Are Murdered, Riots Are in the Air . . . and Yet I Love Nigeria.” *Guardian*. 8 Aug. 2006. 30 July 2008. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2006/aug/08/comment.features11>
- Aitchison, James. *Cassell’s Dictionary of English Grammar*. London: Cassell, 1996.
- Akekue, Doris. “Mind-Style in *Sozaboy*: A Functional Approach to Language.” *Critical Essays on Ken Saro-Wiwa’s Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English*. Ed. Charles Nnolim. London: Saros. 16-29.
- Beilke, Debra. “‘Blue Tongues of Fire’: Suppressing the Mother(’s) Tongue in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*.”

²¹ I have attempted to show elsewhere that Kambili’s resistance to her father can be seen not only in her evolving descriptions of his acts of violence, but also in her decreasing use of negatively connoted words such as “heathen” and “pagan.” The “discursive freedom” that I have mentioned here is therefore located on the ideological level too (Tunca, “Ideology”).

- Conference of the African Literature Association “Pan-Africanism in the 21st Century: Generations in Creative Dialogue.” Accra, Ghana, 17-21 May 2006.
- Bruce, Karen. “Listening to the Silences: Women’s Silence as a Form of Oppression and a Mode of Resistance in Chimamanda [sic] Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*.” Unpublished essay, n.d.
- Bryce, Jane. “‘Half and Half Children’: Third-Generation Women Writers and the New Nigerian Novel.” *Research in African Literatures* 39.2 (2008): 49-67.
- Cooper, Brenda. “Breaking Gods and Petals of Purple in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*.” *A New Generation of African Writers: Migration, Material Culture and Language*. London: Currey, 2008. 110-32.
- Ekwe-Ekwe, Herbert. “Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.” *Literary Encyclopedia*. 1 Sep. 2005. 30 July 2008.
<<http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=6014>>
- Ene, M.O. “Afamefune: From Ada to Zikora. A Comprehensive Compilation of Igbo Names (in Progress).” *Kwenu*. 2000. 30 July 2008. <<http://www.kwenu.com/afamefune/afamefune.htm>>
- Fairclough, Norman. *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. Harlow: Pearson, 1995.
- Fauconnier, Gilles. *Mental Spaces: Aspects of Meaning Construction in Natural Language*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.
- Fowler, Roger. *Linguistics and the Novel*. London: Methuen, 1977.
- . *Linguistic Criticism*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*. Trans. James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1990. Trans. of *Hemmung, Symptom und Angst*. 1926.
- Halliday, M.A.K. “Linguistic Function and Literary Style: An Inquiry into the Language of William Golding’s *The Inheritors*.” *Literary Style: A Symposium*. Ed. Seymour Chatman. London: Oxford UP, 1971. 330-65.
- Halliday, M.A.K., and Christian M.I.M. Matthiessen. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. 3rd ed. London: Hodder Arnold, 2004.
- Hartl, John. Rev. of *Purple Hibiscus*, by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. *New York Times* 23 Nov. 2003. 30 July 2008.
<<http://www.nytimes.com>> Keywords: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.
- Hewett, Heather. “Coming of Age: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and the Voice of the Third Generation.” *English in Africa* 32.1 (2005). 30 July 2008. *Highbeam*. <<http://www.highbeam.com>>
- Highfield, Jonathan. “Blood and Blossom: Violence and Restoration in Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* and Vera’s *The Stone Virgins*.” *International Journal of Environmental, Cultural, Economic and Social Sustainability* 1.2 (2005/2006): 161-68.
- . “Refusing to Be Fat Llamas: Resisting Violence through Food in *Sozaboy* and *Purple Hibiscus*.” *Kunapipi* 28.2 (2006): 43-52.
- Hron, Madelaine. “Ora Na-azu Nwa: The Figure of the Child in Third-Generation Nigerian Novels.” *Research in African Literatures* 39.2 (2008): 27-48.

- Kaplan, Erin Aubrey. "Cry, Freedom." Rev. of *Purple Hibiscus*, by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. *LA Weekly* 27 Apr. 2004. 30 July 2008. <<http://www.laweekly.com/art+books/wls/cry-freedom/13671/>>
- Lakoff, George. *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987.
- Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980.
- Lakoff, George, and Mark Turner. *More Than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989.
- Lalami, Laila. "Chimamanda Ngozi-Adichie's [sic] *Purple Hibiscus*." *Laila Lalami*. 12 Oct. 2003. 30 July 2008. <<http://www.lailalalami.com/blog/archives/000674.html#000674>>
- Leech, Geoffrey, and Mick Short. *Style in Fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose*. 2nd ed. Harlow: Pearson, 2007.
- Lopez, Marta Sofia. "Creating Daughterlands: Dangarembga, Adichie, and Vera." *JALA: Journal of the African Literature Association* 2.1 (2008): 83-97.
- Mantel, Hilary. "I Have Washed My Feet Out of It." Rev. of *Purple Hibiscus*, by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. *London Review of Books* 26.20. 21 Oct. 2004. 30 July 2008. <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v26/n20/mant01_.html>
- Obaze, Oseloka. Rev. of *Purple Hibiscus*, by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. *Kwenu*. 4 Dec. 2003. 30 July 2008. <http://www.kwenu.com/bookreview/obaze/chimamanda_adichie.htm>
- Okorafor-Mbachu, Nnedi. Rev. of *Purple Hibiscus*, by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. *Other Voices* 40 (2004). 30 July 2008. <http://www.webdelsol.com/Other_Voices/Reviews40.htm>
- Okuyade, Ogaga. "Changing Borders and Creating Voices: Silence as Character in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*." *Journal of Pan African Studies* 2.9 (2009): 245-59. 9 Dec. 2009. <http://www.jpanafrican.com/docs/vol2no9/2.9_Changing_Borders_and_Creating_Voices.pdf>
- "Poetic." Def. B.1.b. *OED Online*. June 2008. Oxford UP. 30 July 2008. <<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50182439>>
- Semino, Elena. "A Cognitive Stylistic Approach to Mind Style in Narrative Fiction." *Cognitive Stylistics: Language and Cognition in Text Analysis*. Ed. Elena Semino and Jonathan Culpeper. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2002. 95-122.
- Simoès da Silva, Tony. "Family Life in Shades of Purple." *African Review of Books*. N.d. 30 July 2008. <http://www.africanreviewofbooks.com/Review.asp?offset=30&book_id=112>
- "Swing." Def. 5. *Collins Cobuild Advanced Learner's English Dictionary*. 4th ed. Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2003. 1466.
- Tunca, Daria. "Style beyond Borders: Language in Recent Nigerian Fiction." Diss. U of Liège, 2008.

- . “Ideology in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* (2003).” *English Text Construction* 2.1 (2009): 121-31.
- Washburn, Lindy. “Out of Africa, a Coming-of-Age Story.” *Record* 31 Oct. 2004. 30 July 2008. *Highbeam*. <<http://www.highbeam.com>>