

“The word “silence” – whether verb, adjective, and adverb – appears 47 times in the novel *Purple Hibiscus*. The book begins with silence and ends in silence.” Chimamanda Adichie uses silence as a motif and clearly wants readers to understand that silence is a very significant and meaningful part of this story.

1. When in your life do you feel silenced? Who or what silences your voice or opinion?
2. Think about our ‘In World News’ stories and Current Events presentations. Which ones raise the idea of a person or group of people feeling silenced?
3. What are some of the reasons silence might appear in Kambili’s narrative so many times?
4. Review some of these references to silence. Make notes next to the page number if a particular passage strikes you or if you notice something significant.

7	72	251
16	79	252
22	89	257
30	97	259
31	117	260
51	120	262
57	125	273
60	139	292
65	141	299
69	239	301
		305

5. Based on your reading and review of some of the **silence** references, complete the following sentence:

In *Purple Hibiscus*, Chimamanda Adichie’s repeated allusion to silence informs the reader that

6. How does silence reflect Nigerian politics? You probably don’t know how to answer this question. To understand more, read the article on the reverse side of this page.



Changing Borders and Creating Voices: Silence as Character in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* {Excerpted}

Written by Ogaga Okuyade [English Dept, College of Education Warri Delta State, Nigeria]

The entire narrative is relayed through Kambili's eyes. Though a novel about coming-of-age, it also glaringly captures the socio-political evolution of Nigeria. The novel tells numerous stories that run simultaneously. Kambili's father owns a conglomerate of which one is a publishing house reputed for its astuteness and unbiased reportage of the Nigerian political situation and above all its stance towards the virulent political temperament of the military regime in Nigeria. He urges his editor, Ade Coker, to ensure that *The Standard* **speaks out**, yet he continues to **muzzle** his wife and children. **Silence** in Eugene's home is so magnified to the extent that it can be heard. The function of Kambili's tongue is so constricted so that her struggle to express herself usually terminates with a stutter, making her classmates observe her with familiarity laced with contempt. Because of her inability to make her tongue function in school she is labeled a "backyard snob" (53).

Papa's entire world is woven around self-assertion, power and material success. The items in his agenda are strict and tight, making him lack interest in ideals or ideas – except the idea of being the perfect definition of a self-made man. He is so mechanical to the extent that he regards his house help, Sisi as "that girl." All through the novel, he never addresses her by her name. He runs his home with a zero tolerance, and this in-turn reduces his family to a **resonating silence** in almost all their endeavors, outside and inside the home. As the narrative develops, one notices **varied forms of silence**. Kambili, Jaja and their mother speak with their spirit. Sometimes they converse with their eyes. **Kambili's mother hardly talks** and when she does, it is in monosyllables. Pauline Ada Uwakweh (1998) observes that:

Silencing comprises all imposed restrictions on women's social being, thinking and expressions that are religiously or culturally sanctioned. As a patriarchal weapon of control, it is used by the dominant male structure on the subordinate or muted female structure (75).

In *Purple Hibiscus*, **silencing** is not only a mechanism or weapon of patriarchal control but of domestic servitude. Kambili, Jaja and their mother device ways of survival within the utilitarian calculus Eugene has created for their minds. One of the strategies is the domineering **silence** with which they observe situations and the other is a filial bonding. Through bonding, mother and children are able to survive the domestic quagmire and the prescriptions of the religious zealotry of their father.

Just as Kambili continues to **search for her voice**, so also Nigeria continues her search for self- definition and nationhood. Chimamanda Adichie employs a rhetorical device through which she interrogates the Nigerian socio-political situation. Just like Kambili, Jaja and their mother, the Nigerian people continue to be subjected to **silent spaces**, - a phenomenon Wole Soyinka (2003) describes as the art of stealing a nation's "most precious asset – its voice"(8). The novel displays the imperceptibility of government to the plight of the people. The people are subjected to different forms of subjugation, ranging from poor supply of potable water, epileptic power supply, the paucity of petroleum products to the gradual appropriation of their dreams. They protest their deplorable plights through industrial actions and demonstrations of different forms. In the novel, **The Standard becomes the voice of the people**. With its vitriolic attack on the government, the people create their own voice in industrial actions and incessant demonstrations where they make statements about the depravity of government. In a bid to ensure the people's voices are drowned, the editor, of *The Standard*, Ade Coker, is intimidated with periodical abduction and incarceration.

By poisoning her husband, Kambili's mother realizes her voice through a **new kind of silence**. Kambili's metamorphosis becomes complete when she finally falls in love. It becomes glaring that Kambili has become mature and she is capable of independent thought and action. **Silence plays a vital role in the developmental process** of Kambili's life. After the death of her husband and the incarceration of Jaja, Kambili's mother cracks and retreats into **silence**. Jaja while in prison cloaks his worries and pains and **silently** observes his mother and sister. Kambili, on the other hand, retires into **silence** in order to liberate herself from the realities of the predicaments that have stormed her family. The death of Eugene no doubt, further irrigates the silence. On the whole, the last shade of **silence** that beclouds their sense of imagination could be said to be furtive, because it is **a silence characterized by hope and dreams**.