

## *Creating New Meanings and Understanding with Postcolonial Texts: Teaching Purple Hibiscus in a Grade 10 Classroom*

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### *Abstract*

This article invites readers to share the experiences of a teacher and his Grade 10 students as they read and discussed Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Nigerian novel *Purple Hibiscus*. The novel was selected as part of a national action research study in which literacy researchers and teachers select postcolonial literature for the classroom and develop new pedagogical strategies for teaching the texts. The article suggests that contemporary international novels such as *Purple Hibiscus* have potential to raise complex questions of social justice in the classroom and to create new understandings of a changing world.

### *Introduction*

The opening line of the Nigerian coming-of-age novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) spoken by the teenage protagonist, Kambili, offers an evocative reminder to readers of the power of symbolic objects to provide insight into the fictional lives of characters: "Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines" (2003, p. 3).

With these few words, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie introduces readers to three themes of the novel: the ongoing power of Catholicism in postcolonial Nigerian society, the father's abusive nature, and the children's resistance to his domination. These opening lines of the novel also point to the intertextual nature of contemporary African writing. The words are a pointed allusion to the famous novel *Things Fall Apart* by Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe. As Kurtz (2011) explains, *Purple Hibiscus*

is noteworthy both for the way that it connects backwards in time to the literary generations that precede it and for the way that those very connections open up fresh perspectives and reveal a rich and complex panoply of intertextual possibilities that were not available in earlier generations, thus manifesting a new stage in the ongoing elaboration of Africa's literary imagination. (p. 26)

*Purple Hibiscus* opens up complex questions about the relationships among culture, religion, tradition, power, and social change. The novel follows Nigerian teenager Kambili Achike, the daughter of a highly respected, wealthy Catholic businessman. Kambili is painfully shy and craves the approval of her father, Eugene, who behind closed doors is extremely abusive to his family, causing his wife several miscarriages and punishing his children for the slightest infractions. Sent to spend time with her progressive aunt, Kambili falls in love with a young priest and learns to voice her own thoughts and opinions. At the

same time, her brother Jaja becomes more and more rebellious, threatening the superficial, familial perfection that their father craves. The novel ends with the death of Eugene, having been slowly poisoned by his wife, and the hope for a better future.

*Purple Hibiscus* has often been described as an African female *bildungsroman*, a coming-of-age novel in which the protagonist Kambili finds her own voice and identity. In addition, the novel can also be seen as an allegory of Nigeria's struggle against corrupt and oppressive rule. Audrey Peters (2012) suggests,

*Purple Hibiscus* explores the issues of ethnic tensions and political unrest in Nigeria as parallels for coming of age and issues of identity definition. The story, although set in Nigeria, is common to adolescents from other times and places . . . The allegory between personal and national identity elevates this story from a typical narrative of adolescent angst into a thoughtful analysis of the formation of self; further, it does so in a way that dissipates some of the isolation that typically marks adolescence, allowing a reader to belong to a larger world. (p.27)

According to Peters (2012), the novel reaches across national borders, breaking down national insularity and showing western readers a less caricatured version of Africa, and encourages them to imagine the experiences of people elsewhere in the world.

*Purple Hibiscus* was selected for a Grade 10 English Language Arts classroom in a large, culturally-diverse, urban high school as part of a national research project to teach postcolonial literature with potential to raise issues of social justice with students. In this four-year study, funded by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), literacy researchers in six Canadian provinces met with teachers in monthly inquiry groups. The research aimed to investigate teachers' perspectives on the role these literary texts might play in the development of curricula and pedagogies that address issues of individual equity and structural inequalities.

In this paper, we offer our perspectives, as a researcher and an English language arts teacher, on ways that Adichie's text addresses the aims of the research; we discuss pedagogical strategies designed to teach the text and share some of the Grade 10 students' responses to reading *Purple Hibiscus*.

#### *Ingrid: Overview of Our Research Study*

##### *Coming to the Study: Rationale and Aims*

While Canadian multiculturalism has increased awareness of cultural diversity, it has been slow to effect structural societal changes in the country and students continue to read literature that privileges Eurocentric perspectives. In a majority of Canadian secondary schools, English language arts teachers still select and teach canonized British and American literary texts (Johnston & Mangat, 2012; Johnston, 2003; Mackey, 2009). Teachers often base their literary selections on their own reading histories, on the availability of texts in their schools, and on provincial curriculum mandates and guidelines (Baird, 2002).

Our current study built upon a previous SSHRC-funded study in which researchers at six universities across Canada developed monthly inquiry groups with interested teachers to offer support and reinforcement for making curricular changes through selecting and teaching Canadian literature by authors from a wide range of ethnic, racial,

and cultural backgrounds. Funding from this grant provided classroom copies of the selected new texts, thereby addressing the challenge of accessing new literary resources, and the inquiry groups created opportunities to share ideas for new titles and to develop curriculum resources for teaching the texts.

Many of the selected books paid critical attention to such historical and political factors as colonialism, indigeneity, immigration, multiculturalism, gender, religious and cultural policies. For example, secondary teachers in my inquiry group selected books by Indigenous Canadian authors, such as Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach* (2000) and Richard Wagamese's *Keeper'n Me* (2006) that encouraged their students to reflect on the legacies of residential schools in Canada; others selected graphic novels such as David Lester's *The Listener* (2011) looking back to the injustices of World War II, and *Skim* by Mariko and Jillian Tamaki (2008) which considers issues of gender identity, religion, and suicide. More detailed stories of teaching contemporary Canadian literature from the various national research sites, together with an annotated bibliography of the selected texts in this study, are included in our book *Challenging Stories: Canadian Literature for Social Justice in the Classroom* (Burke, Johnston, & Ward, 2017).

Our present four-year study builds upon the recommendations of teachers involved in the previous action research study to broaden the selection of texts beyond Canada to include more international, postcolonial texts. Much of this literature aims to destabilize dominant discourses in the West, challenging inherent assumptions and critiquing the legacies of colonialism. In this study we have followed a similar pattern of inviting teachers to participate in inquiry groups, sharing ideas and resources for raising issues of social justice with our students.

We have recognized that teachers' understandings and approaches to promoting social justice in their teaching are equally as important as text selection and availability. A study by Bender-Slack (2010) in the United States explored secondary English language arts teachers' perspectives on teaching for social justice, and found that most had vague conceptions of social justice, believing it to be more about fairness than the need to address systemic inequalities. Our study recognizes the importance of involving teachers actively in the choice and discussion of texts and the development of pedagogical strategies that address the complexities of engaging students in questions of social justice.

Including more postcolonial texts into the classroom has encouraged us as researchers and teachers to look more broadly at texts written by international authors. In addition to Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, secondary teachers in my Edmonton group selected texts such as *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2008) and *Exit West* (2017), by Mohsin Hamid, two novels that play with genre and format to challenge our thinking about the current state of international terrorism and world tensions. Another teacher is exploring how the interaction of image and text in the graphic novel *Zahra's Paradise* by Amir, with illustrator Khalil (2011), offers powerful insight into human rights in Iran, and how the *March* series of books by authors John Lewis and Andrew Aydin, with illustrator Nate Powell (2013), creates a dramatic retelling of the civil rights movement in the United States.

#### *Theoretical Framework*

Our research study was underpinned by postcolonial theories of reading practices that emphasize the hybrid nature of negotiating cultural identities and citizenship in a "third space" of literary engagement (Bhabha, 1994; Bradford, 2007), and address the role of

literary texts in interrogating the colonial past (Gandhi, 1998; Jogie, 2015). Wisam Abdul-Jabbar (2014) suggests that in selecting a postcolonial text for the classroom,

a deciding factor is the extent to which a certain book can help the students to see the world from the perspective of the other. One of the most challenging aspects of teaching a postcolonial text is the teacher's burden to take his or her students over the barriers of language, culture and preconceived notions into a world of difference. (p. 5)

Deciding to teach more unfamiliar postcolonial texts may challenge teachers to move outside their comfort zones into a pedagogy of discomfort. Megan Boler (2014) explains that “a pedagogy of discomfort recognizes and problematizes the deeply embedded dimensions that frame and shape daily habits, routines, and unconscious complicity with hegemony” (p. 118). For teachers to make a commitment to growth and change requires experiencing the discomfort of new thinking and a willingness to engage in in-depth inquiry with students regarding systems of domination and the difficult work of reevaluating the relationship of one's privilege to others in the world. Including postcolonial texts in the classroom can empower teachers and students to reflect on their own cultural understanding and to see themselves within historical contexts and potentially to allow their worldviews to be altered.

#### *Methodology*

We conceptualized our inquiry groups with English language arts teachers as a form of action research, a “self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out” (Carr & Kemmis 1986, p. 162). Following ethics approval from each university and from participating school boards, researchers and teacher participants worked together, attempting to follow an action research model of understanding a research problem, planning, acting, observing, reflecting, and reviewing. In our monthly inquiry groups, we worked through the curricular and pedagogical possibilities of teaching for social justice through reading and discussing scholarly articles related to teaching postcolonial literature, and shared ideas about texts that might be relevant for the study and appropriate for the age and level of students in our classrooms. Teachers selected and taught particular texts, engaged with students' responses to the issues of social justice raised by the literature, and reflected upon the transformative potential of addressing these issues with students in these classrooms.

Researchers at each of the six provincial sites developed their own case studies. In each year of the study we have gathered data in the following ways:

- Audio recordings and field notes of inquiry group discussions prior to teaching selected literary texts and post-teaching discussions and reflections.
- Field notes of observations in participant teachers' classrooms as they teach the selected texts.
- Student-generated materials in response to the selected texts
- Audio recordings of focus group discussions with volunteer students in these classes.

- Audio recordings of individual interviews with teacher participants about their reflections on the inquiry group activities, their philosophical and pedagogical understandings of teaching postcolonial literature for social justice, and their experiences of teaching the texts.

Following analysis of our data at each site, we have shared our findings at conferences, workshops, and in collaborative publications. At my particular inquiry group, ten teachers from high schools and junior high schools in my city and surrounding areas have attended our meetings and are enthusiastic about discussing possible postcolonial texts that are suitable for their particular grades of students.

In the following pages, Kevin, one of the teacher participants in the study, shares his experiences of teaching *Purple Hibiscus* in a Grade 10 classroom.

*Kevin: Selecting the Novel, or There Must Be More Than Mockingbird*

Selecting a novel for a whole-class community read is always a challenging task. While participation in the action research study had freed me from one of the most common constraints of what to teach (availability in the book room and limited funds to purchase new texts), I still worried about picking the “right” novel. For many of my colleagues, both at my school and across the province, no Grade 10 English class is complete without studying *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It seems to be almost a rite of passage—a sign that students are ready to leave behind the YA novels of their junior high experience and enter into a new world of literary experiences. Indeed, surveys conducted within my district both in 1996 and again in 2006 showed that *To Kill a Mockingbird* continued to reign as the most widely taught novel in Grade 10 (Mackey, 2012). Little had changed, I believed, since 2006. When I suggested to one of my English 10 classes that we were likely not going to be reading Harper Lee’s novel, a student, visibly concerned, replied, “But we have to read that book! Aren’t we supposed to read it in Grade 10?” I assured her that while it was an enjoyable and worthwhile book that she could (and should) borrow from the library if she wanted, there were other novels which would be equally worth reading. I asked many of my fellow teachers why they continued to use *To Kill a Mockingbird* in the classroom. Responses typically fell into two categories: “I love it,” or, “I haven’t found anything else that works.” Certainly, I could identify with the former. I remember encountering and liking the novel when I was a high school student, and as a teacher I had taught it a couple times. However, the latter reason provided by my colleagues seemed to be self-perpetuating: since many teachers always chose *To Kill a Mockingbird*, they therefore never took an opportunity to see what else might work. My desire to break from tradition and try something new was crystallized in 2016 when Canadian Author Lawrence Hill published an editorial in the *Globe and Mail* calling for an update to the high school canon. Critiquing the novel’s focus on white characters at the expense of black characters, as well as the novel’s Alabama setting, which Hill saw as too removed from Canadian contexts, he wrote:

the rote and ongoing use of *To Kill a Mockingbird* in the classroom points to our very Canadian-ness, and to our collective disinclination in Canada to examine racism and black history in our own backyard. How utterly convenient it is for Canadian children and adults from Dawson City to St. John’s to read about racism

in the Deep South of the United States in the Great Depression, and to avoid discussions about slavery, segregation, other forms of racial injustice as well as the civil-rights movement in Canada itself.

I loved the novel, but I wanted a change for myself and for my students. There had to be something more than *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2003 novel *Purple Hibiscus* appealed to me for a number of reasons. According to a study by the Cooperative Children's Books Center (2013), young readers are more likely to encounter children's books with animals or trucks as protagonists than they are to find books about black characters. Although this particular study focused on picture books, I knew that this lack of diversity is endemic to YA and adult genres too. Knowing from experience which books are commonly taught in the junior high English language arts classrooms of our feeder schools, I was skeptical that my students would have encountered many racially diverse characters in their reading history. I wanted my students—many of whom were immigrants or the children of immigrants—to read books by and about people that looked like them, and to see themselves represented and reflected in literature. Following education scholar R.S. Bishop (1990), I believe that literature can be a mirror, as it “transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading then, becomes a means of self-affirmation” (p. ix). Given that the majority of literature studied in English classrooms continues to be drawn from a Eurocentric canon, many students may go through their entire formative education and never encounter characters that resemble them or their family. As Bishop notes,

when children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part. (p. 29)

The repeated privileging of these certain forms and ways of thinking while marginalizing other views and approaches represents Kumashiro's (2002) definition of oppression. When these repetitive forms are encountered over and over again in curricular material, they begin to be taken for granted, as if they are a self-evident and natural truth.

At the same time, I felt that it was important for all students to encounter texts about characters from cultures and backgrounds different than their own. It was important that they consider not only the ways in which these characters' lives were similar to their own, but also that they understand and learn to appreciate the ways that others are different. Bishop (1990) furthers her metaphor of the mirror by asserting that literature may also act as a window, a means to offer students—particularly those from a dominant social group—a view of another world. These students, accustomed to seeing their own reality reflected back to them, may have developed an exaggerated sense of self-importance coupled with an ignorance of others. For these individuals, literature can offer an opportunity to witness possibilities of other ways of being. Since I teach at a large, diverse urban high school, I wanted my students to have the opportunity to explore and learn from other cultures, to see the world from new perspectives. In doing so, I hoped that the novel would serve as a foundation to explore broader issues of social justice. I wanted my students to ask the same questions that I had: why do we need to read about more diverse characters? Whose

interests are being served by typical text selections? How can increasing our understanding of others whose lives are different from our own help us to create change? Such a move echoes Bishop's final consideration of how literature may function: as a sliding glass door, a way to access a different kind of future (1990). While she does not naively suggest that merely reading about the experiences of others will somehow help oppressed people, she does suggest that developing an empathetic understanding of others is an important starting point.

In addition to opening up new ways of seeing the world, *Purple Hibiscus* also presents a compelling story that I believed would resonate with my students. Like Kambili, many Grade 10 students are beginning to find their own voice. They are becoming increasingly aware of the ways that their own beliefs align with or diverge from those of their parents and are learning to articulate these beliefs in new ways. I believed that the themes of growing up, discovering identity, and family relationships would allow students to personally connect to the novel. Given that my students come from a variety of religious backgrounds and are generally curious about other faith traditions, I thought that *Purple Hibiscus* would allow them to not only explore the intersections of Catholicism and traditional Igbo practices, but also to examine the consequences of religious extremism and hypocrisy. Finally, as I intended to use the novel with a regular Grade 10 English Language Arts (ELA) class as well as a pre-International Baccalaureate (IB) ELA 10 class, I wanted a novel that offered an engaging plot and complex characters that was also rich in symbolism and lyrical language.

### *Teaching the Novel*

Having committed to teaching *Purple Hibiscus*, I was left with a couple of questions as I prepared my teaching plans. As the novel is set in Nigeria, I knew that there would be many cultural and historical references that students would not understand. Thus, I debated whether it would be better to pre-teach some background information first, so that students had a foundational understanding of the cultural context, or whether it would be better to begin reading the text and encourage students to explore these references themselves. On one hand, I did not want students to feel overwhelmed by references to places and events that were completely unfamiliar to them. On the other, I did not want to act as though I was an expert on Nigerian culture, when, in fact, I know very little. Moving into a literary and geographic territory with which I was much less familiar exemplified Boler's (2014) notion of pedagogy of discomfort. I would have to challenge my own beliefs and deeply held assumptions about the teacher-as-expert before I could encourage my students to challenge their understanding of their position and privilege in the world. Ultimately, I settled on presenting the novel without cultural context, but with strategies that I believed were important for comprehension. As students read, either on their own or as a class, they were asked to record questions that emerged about cultural and historical references. These questions would later form the basis of research presentations. The novel sparked many potential questions for inquiry, including:

- What impact did the British have on Nigerian society during and after Colonization?
- How did religion in Nigeria change with the arrival of Europeans?
- What status do traditional Nigerian languages have within present day Nigeria?

- What are women allowed or not allowed to do in Nigerian society?
- What kinds of hobbies (music and sports) are popular with young Nigerians?

Next, I wondered how I would use the novel to address issues of social justice. Although I recognized that such a term was difficult to define, given the range of possibilities that it might include, I considered the following as a working definition: social justice begins with the inclusion of a diverse range of voices and experiences, ones which have often been, or continue to be, marginalized in some way. It is about opening ourselves as readers to new ways of seeing the world, broadening our perceptions and understandings in such a way that creates a possibility for action (Lynch & Baker, 2005). It is asking ourselves difficult questions about who is making decisions and whose interests are being served (Young, 1990). Finally, social justice is about asking what we can do to begin making the world a better, more equitable place to be for all. In some ways, the mere inclusion of the book addressed inequalities of representation and the historical privileging of Eurocentric texts written by men. Beyond that, though, I wanted students to develop a more nuanced understanding of a different society—in this case, Nigeria—as well as an empathetic understanding of Kambili and those in situations like hers. I wanted them to explore issues of power and privilege, and how they interact with identities such as race and gender.

At the same time, I was conscious of how mere empathy-building projects can be problematic. As educational scholar Sharon Todd points out, the notion of community that becomes the chief aim of empathy is built on an “illusion of ‘social wholeness’ which risks submerging the very differences that social justice education seems so adamant to respect into a collective totality where singularity no longer holds any moral or political meaning” (2004, p. 338). In other words, the one who empathizes assimilates the Other into their own way of thinking and being, very often ignoring differences that matter to the Other. The impossibility of truly understanding the Other can be seen in the well-intended, but ultimately harmful, sentiments of people who assert that they “don’t see colour”. Whereas these speakers imagine that they are putting themselves in the position of the Other and reassuring them that everyone is really all the same, they are also expressing how they would not want to feel different themselves, ignoring the realities that these others *are* different and that they likely feel many of the effects of such difference on a routine basis. Furthermore, Todd argues that people ought to have a “responsibility to others even when understanding their experiences is not possible” (2004, p. 338). Despite the classic advice of literary hero Atticus Finch, it is not always possible to “climb into [someone’s] skin and walk around in it” (Lee, 1960, p. 36). Thus, I wanted my students to both recognize their similarities to Kambili while continuing to acknowledge the important differences as well.

In addition to developing some empathetic awareness, I wanted to push students further to consider their own responsibility in effecting positive change. Thus, I asked the class to consider as essential questions, “How is power divided in societies?”; “How do people with lots of power silence those with less power?”; and “How can those with less power respond?” With these three essential questions in mind, I chose to frame the novel through Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *TED Talk* “The Danger of a Single Story” (2009). In this lecture, Adichie draws on the Nigerian concept of *nkali*, which roughly translates as “being greater than another,” warning of the dangers of allowing only those with power to tell the stories of others, and in doing so, defining through totalizing narratives how others



are perceived. The result is an essentialized view of groups that are read as homogenous, incapable of acting outside of the preconceived stereotypes that have been established. Prior to viewing the *TED Talk*, students were asked to brainstorm what comes to mind when they consider Nigeria. Few students had any knowledge about the country at all. When I asked them instead to consider Africa as a whole, predictable answers included ideas related to poverty, famine, AIDS, and war, or notions of wild safaris and ancient Egypt. Very few students—even those with various African backgrounds—offered responses related to modern cities or vibrant cultures. The class was then asked to reflect on how it is that they came to possess such ideas about these other places. Most students suggested that images of Africa that they had seen on television or in movies tended to illustrate the same narrative, and that they had not, by and large, encountered any narratives—fictional or otherwise—that offered an alternative. After viewing Adichie’s *TED Talk*, students began making a number of insightful observations about the ways in which stereotypical depictions of groups make it difficult to appreciate differences and value the potential of others. Many of them commented on the “unfairness” of such situations, and connected Adichie’s ideas to issues ranging from Indigenous issues in Canada to Black Lives Matter in the United States.

In order to explore further the consequences of such stereotypical views of Africa, I asked students to read a short story called “Crocodile Tails,” by Zimbabwean writer Chiedza Musengezi (1999). In this story, Gill, a young British teacher, travels to Zimbabwe to teach school and to “experience hardship” (Musengezi, p.134). As she develops a friendship with the narrator, a local teacher, both women reveal the naive misconceptions they hold about each other’s culture. More specifically, Gill realizes that Western educational practices which she believes to be superior are out of place and ineffective in a different context. The story ends somewhat ambiguously when the narrator arrives in Britain to see her old friend and, expecting a “transformation for the better,” suggests that the West is not as paradisiacal as she imagined (Musengezi, p.135). Students were quick to connect the story to Adichie’s *TED Talk*, recognizing how each of the characters had a “Single Story” about the other’s culture. Furthermore, they raised interesting questions about the implications of North Americans going to volunteer or work in African countries with the express intent of “saving” others by introducing them to Western ideas or practices. As many of the students were studying the impacts of globalization in their social studies course, they were able to make several links to social and economic issues of “voluntourism.”

After examining the idea of the “Single Story” through Adichie’s *TED Talk* alongside Musengezi’s short story, students wrote personal responses in which they explored a “Single Story,” told about one group—cultural, religious, gender identity, sexual orientation, geographical, socioeconomic, age, etc.—to which they belonged. Common themes in these reflections included feelings of frustration and anger at the assumptions people often made based on the labels they assigned, a desire to prove these stereotypes wrong, and recognition that responsibility to move beyond this way of thinking belongs to those who hold the views. Students also considered this issue in light of the essential questions, and posited that by making assumptions about them, other people with more power were, in a way, silencing them by refusing to engage with them as individuals. Some students noted that they felt powerless to change this, though many pointed to the work that we had already done as a way to perhaps help others understand the damage of

stereotypes. After sharing their writing with others, students engaged in a discussion in which some revealed their surprise about the subtle and not-so-subtle forms of discrimination many of their classmates faced. They also brainstormed ideas about how to begin the work of counteracting these stereotypes. While many students were encouraged by the work being done in the classroom and expressed a sense of empowerment, others remarked that the task of overcoming forms of oppression such as racism was pointless, because “there would always be racists” and “this is just one class”. Nevertheless, throughout the class study of *Purple Hibiscus* (and beyond into the study of other texts), students continued to return to the ideas of Adichie’s “Single Story.”

With essential questions still in mind, the class began reading the novel. It became apparent to students quite quickly that Eugene is a character who possesses great power, based on his role as head of the family, his high status in the community, and his close connection to Catholicism, the privileged religion within the community. Organized into small groups, students tracked the circumstances that allotted some characters power while depriving it from others. Students identified dogmatic religious views, patriarchy, the military, corrupt governments, and the legacy of colonization as dominating forces. As I did not want students to reduce all relations in the novel to a binary of powerful/powerless, I also asked the groups to track ways that characters who seemed to have less power responded to or rebelled against those who had more. Students noticed that Kambili, as a young girl silenced by her father, is afraid to express herself and deprived of the agency to make her own decisions. At first, Kambili seems to deal with her father’s dominance by remaining quiet, while her mother Beatrice responds by acting subservient, and her brother Jaja by openly defying his father. As the novel continues, students pointed to other characters’ unique or changing response to oppressive power: Ade Coker, who uses his newspaper to publish scathing editorials on political corruption; Papa Nnukwu, who continues to honour the traditional Igbo ways, rather than convert to Catholicism and enjoy the economic benefits this would bring; Auntie Ifeoma who values education and speaks out against the subordination of women; Father Amadi, who recognizes that a syncretic religious system is likely to be more accessible to the people than a hardline, conservative Catholic ideology; Beatrice, who we learn has been secretly poisoning her husband for some time until his eventual death; and, finally, Kambili herself who ultimately acknowledges the complex relationship she has with her abusive father and learns to articulate her own independent identity. Students were then asked to choose one character to represent through a visual collage. In addition to focusing on character appearance, traits, and values, students were also asked to consider how the character had been silenced by those with more power as well as how they responded. In doing so, the class came to understand that their chosen character did not exist as just a passive victim, but as a person with agency to respond to injustice.

Within the novel, no character advocates more strongly for resistance to domination than Kambili’s aunt, Ifeoma. With her vibrant lipstick and progressive viewpoints, Ifeoma proved to be a character that fascinated many students. Curious to see where the discussion might lead, I introduced the class to another short Adichie text, “We Should All Be Feminists,” an essay in which Adichie outlines the negative effects of everyday sexism and argues the benefits to both men and women of embracing a feminist perspective. Many students were surprised to learn that they had already encountered an excerpt of this text in Beyoncé’s song “Flawless” (2013). I asked students to compare the arguments posited by

Adichie in her essay to Beyoncé's feminist views as articulated through her music, videos, and interviews, to Ifeoma, Beatrice, and Kambili in the novel. Aside from the instant engagement that Beyoncé brings to any high school lesson, students were actively invested in exploring the nuances between these women's viewpoints and with other ideas of feminism the students already held. The comparison exercise provided a foundation for students to engage in a moderated class discussion. Students made many insightful comments about the extent to which feminism was still needed, problems with "white" feminism, the relationship between feminism and queer and trans people, and the roles and perspectives of men within feminist perspectives. Finally, students wrote personal responses, many of which skillfully tied together the novel, the essential questions, and the smaller, supporting texts.

The final project the class completed during the course of their study was a context research presentation. Using the questions formulated throughout their reading of *Purple Hibiscus*, students organized and refined their research queries. Specifically, students were directed to examine the role of some cultural or historical factor in relation to the events of the novel. One group chose to examine the use of Igbo words and phrases. After providing a general overview of the structure of the language, the group shared their observations that while translations for the words were never provided, one could nevertheless determine the general meaning of the lines from their context. Linking the language back to the essential questions about power, the group convincingly argued that Adichie used traditional Igbo as a way to reclaim power over the dominant, colonial language. These students recognized that characters like Eugene were products of a colonial system that privileged English over Igbo, and that the use of Igbo without translation represented a particular response to a power that had historically silenced native languages. Another group chose to examine allusions to Nigerian musicians such as Fela. Like the first group, these students provided interesting background information and song lyrics before examining the ways that Kambili's cousin Amaka uses these artists to assert a strong Nigerian identity. They, too, recognized these choices as a response to colonial cultural imports. Other topics included the Biafran war, Catholicism in Nigeria, the Igbo religion, and traditional food. Regardless of the topic chosen, student presentations revealed a curiosity and willingness to explore another culture in relation to a novel in which they were already invested.

### *Moments of Discomfort*

Two issues raised throughout the study of *Purple Hibiscus* prompted moments of discomfort for some students, forcing them to reconsider deeply held beliefs. Some students (with European backgrounds) expressed frustration and annoyance that many of the problems in the novel were being continually linked back to colonialism. They remarked that they felt as though they were being attacked and were being asked to assume guilt for the colonial policies of the past. In response, I asked students to consider how the exploits of Europeans were typically described in their social studies courses. They acknowledged that representations were generally favourable, with examples including the discoveries of the Renaissance, the Industrial Revolution, and the Age of Exploration. Some mentioned learning about the negative impacts of Europeans, such as residential school policies in Canada, though this often came as a surprise in later grades, long after students had already established a particular narrative in their mind. I suggested that given

that most students had a favorable view of Europeans, it might be difficult to hear evidence that contradicted this; it might feel as though one were being personally attacked. Students then completed a free write, in which they explored their reactions to counter-narratives that challenged traditional beliefs.

A second issue which prompted discomfort for some students was the discussion of Eugene's religious identity. Students clearly resented his outward righteousness that hypocritically masked his inner brutality. When I framed this as religious extremism, and suggested that this was not unique to Catholicism but sometimes extended to other religions as well, some students were reluctant to acknowledge that people within their own religious communities could behave like this. While I wanted to push students to consider the ways that people of various faiths can sometimes use religious ideology to justify horrific acts, I was also aware from watching students' facial expressions and body language that many in the room were very uncomfortable. I too was feeling uncomfortable, wading into territory that I knew might provoke an emotional response that I was not feeling ready to handle. A number of my students come from homes where religion is central to daily life and is not to be critiqued or challenged. I could sense that I had hit a nerve in asking my students to consider what might be problematic about the ways that their own religion has been co-opted and deployed. At the same time, perhaps it was only my own discomfort that led me to withdraw from the conversation. Whether out of concern that the discussion might become too heated, or anxiety that I might inadvertently mischaracterize a particular religion and profoundly insult my students, or fear that the topic could lead to a parental complaint, I chose to change the direction of the class and focus on a different topic. Such moments of discomfort serve as a reminder that while shared reading experiences can open up spaces to challenge student thinking and be powerful sites for learning, teachers must be aware that the crisis invoked by difficult knowledge might be too much to bear.

### *Student Responses to the Novel*

After completing our class study of *Purple Hibiscus*, I was curious to gather feedback from students about how they enjoyed the novel, what they took from it, and how it affected their views of social justice issues. I asked students to fill out a survey, considering what themes they found interesting and what aspects of the novel they liked and did not like. Ingrid also organized a focus group with several students in the regular English 10 class. Students who participated in this discussion unanimously agreed that they found the novel interesting and worthwhile to read. Several students (again) commented that they had anticipated reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* in Grade 10 but they were pleased to have read a book related to contemporary life in a part of Africa and to think about the effects and legacies of colonization. Some specific remarks included:

- “I enjoyed how this novel wasn't typical like any other book we've read in school.”
- “I liked it because I got to learn about different perspectives in Nigeria.”
- “It made a strong comment on how religion can both be used in a positive manner, and as a means to oppress and control others.”
- “I enjoyed how the characters developed in the story and learned to have a voice for themselves.”

Even when asked about what they did not enjoy, most students responded with a negative reaction to a character, suggesting an emotional connection with the text.

Overall, the assignments and responses produced by students and their recorded comments about the novel illuminate the potential of a postcolonial text such as *Purple Hibiscus* to revisit and interrogate the colonial past in the context of the classroom. Students' responses to the novel suggest that the text is able to invoke ideas of social justice by challenging oppressive systems of discrimination and enabling students to engage with the legacies of colonizing practices and structures from a critical perspective.

### *Final Reflections*

In addition to providing valuable funds to purchase new texts, the research study provided an invaluable space to discuss and reflect upon the successes and challenges of teaching literature for social justice. Monthly meetings of the inquiry group allowed for the sharing of new texts and resources and the discussion of pedagogical practices that might be helpful as teachers worked through the complexities of teaching a novel for the first time. Kevin's story of teaching *Purple Hibiscus* in a Grade 10 English language arts class offers insight into the potential for such contemporary postcolonial texts to challenge students' inherent assumptions and to critique the material and discursive legacies of colonialism. His decision not to teach Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a text that has gained canonical status in many North American secondary schools, in favour of this lesser-known African novel with fewer developed curriculum resources, did create some initial unease. As Boler (2014) suggests,

A pedagogy of discomfort emphasizes the need for the educator and student to move out of their comfort zones . . . The 'comfort zones' we inhabit are inscribed cultural and emotional terrains that we occupy less by choice and more by virtue of dominant cultural values, which we internalize as naturally as the air we breathe. (p. 117)

Curricular changes do involve facing up to our investments and the discomfort of new thinking, but as Kevin's story illustrates, such changes can be the start of transformative shifts in how teachers and students experience the world.

### *Ethics*

The study discussed in this article was reviewed and approved by the University of Alberta Ethics Board and by participating school boards in the Edmonton area.

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