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## Purple Hibiscus by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: The Controversial Character of Papa

"Uncle Eugene is not a bad man, really. . . . People have problems, people make mistakes" (251). These words are spoken by Kambili, who is trying to explain that the violent Papa is not a "bad man," but instead a person who has good qualities as well as a lot of flaws. Papa's troubled past plays a role in why he acts the way that he does, yet does not justify his actions. In the novel *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Papa (Eugene) is perceived to be like a saint in the community, but in reality, to his family, he is abusive and cruel. This irony, as well as Papa's abuse, characterizes him as the antagonist of the novel.

In public, Eugene is perceived to be a man of great faith and generosity. He is kind to the community and very generous. As a well-off businessman, Papa is able to donate a lot of money and resources, such as food and guidance, to the community. With all of the money Papa has donated, he has never bragged about his contributions because he believes that it would be wrong in the eyes of the lord for him to do so. On page 90, Eugene donates enough money to the church to remodel the entire building. After giving the donation he very humbly left: "'Let's go,' Papa said, when the M.C. finally moved on to announce a new donation. He led the way out of the hall, smiling and waving at the many hands that reached out to grasp his white tunic as if touching him would heal them of an illness," (90-91). Papa donates all of this money and wants little to no acknowledgment for the contribution; this excerpt shows through the use of a metaphor that Papa does have some good qualities, such as his generosity and humility as a Catholic. This example also illustrates how he cares for the community to the point that they worship him and how he does not abuse that power. Indeed, the people look up to Eugene; they consider him to be their savior during the harsh times that face Nigeria, and he does not let them down. This quote shows Eugene's good qualities as a public figure and man of god, but even though he displays the traits of a good Catholic, Eugene is no saint.

Although Eugene appears to be a great man in public, in his private life he consistently destroys his family. Papa's private life with his family presents a sharp contrast to how he acts in his community. In fact, his kindness and generosity do not extend to his loved ones, and instead he is violent and abusive. In a flashback of Kambili's, she describes a time when Papa hit her for being a few minutes late after school: 'Papa slapped my left and right cheeks at the same time, so his huge palms left parallel marks on my face and ringing in my ears for days' (51). This behavior is ironic compared to the activity of the generous man that presents himself in public. The Papa that the community knows would never hurt his children. Outside his private life, he is referred to as the Omelora or The One Who Does for the Community because of his kindness

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towards everyone in the town and his willingness to help the families in times of hardship. However, to his own family he is the cause of all of their pain and suffering. Twice and in the book, on pages 33 and 248, Papa beats his wife so badly that she miscarries their baby. These examples of his abuse prove that Papa has a considerable number of flaws. His acts of generosity do not negate his appalling behavior towards his family, nor should they. His behavior is unacceptable, and it is outrageous that he treats strangers better than the people he loves. It is for this reason that Papa cannot be considered a good man, just as much as because of the service he gives to the community, he cannot be considered a bad one.

Papa's upbringing is responsible, in part, for the way that he acts towards his family. When Papa was a child he was taken in by the Catholic Church and conditioned by a Priest to become the way he is as an adult. When he was younger, Papa sinned and was punished by the priest: 'He asked me to boil water for tea. He poured the water in a bowl and soaked my hands in it' (196). This flashback spoken by Papa provides an understanding for why he has grown to become the abusive man that he is. What the Priest did to Papa as a child is an example of operant conditioning, or teaching a person to avoid a behavior by using either positive or negative reinforcement. In this case the negative reinforcement, which would be Papa's hands being dipped in the boiling water, was in the short term very effective in preventing Papa from wanting to sin but ultimately proved to have very serious and damaging long-term effects. His upbringing of punishment for every sin committed, in part, led him to grow up to punish others for all of the sins they commit. Examples of this pattern would be Papa whipping the family members when they helped Kambili eat before mass (101-102), Kambili being beaten by Papa for sneaking the painting of Papa-Nnukwu into the house (210-211), and Jaja's incident of Papa's breaking his finger (145). All of these incidents can be traced back to Papa's past, and although this history explains why Papa abuses his family it does not excuse his behavior. His actions are his own; he deserves the repercussions of those actions.

Even though his past can be considered a contributing factor, Papa is still in control of his actions and has bought and paid for all of the trouble he has caused. Papa is not a bad man. He is, instead, a person who has good qualities, as well as major flaws. His history with the church set the groundwork for his issues to emerge but, regardless, his actions are his responsibility. Papa's ironic divide between his public acts of generosity and humility and his actions as a terror to his family is significant because these traits make him the antagonist in *Purple Hibiscus*. Papa causes a lot of good as well as a lot of hurt in the novel, but ultimately he cannot be considered a bad man. Even though he is abusive and there is no excuse for such abuse, the good qualities that he possesses are his saving grace in the world.

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