

# Prologue: A First-Year Writing Journal

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Volume 2

Article 2

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2010

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### Recommended Citation

Grisham, Lilla (2010) "The Independence of Love: Leah and Kambili's Rise from Colonialism," *Prologue: A First-Year Writing Journal*: Vol. 2 , Article 2.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/prologue/vol2/iss1/2>

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*The Independence of Love: Leah and Kambili's Rise from Colonialism*

By Lilla Grisham

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*The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver and *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie are both postcolonial novels that follow the lives of two families in Africa. Kingsolver and Adichie use the Price and Achike families to illustrate microcosms of colonialism. Both families are led by dominant male figures at the beginning of the stories, but by the end of each book, two daughters, Leah and Kambili, have both defied their fathers and grown from their suppressed selves into independent beings. Kingsolver and Adichie show how the love found in new formed relationships opens the minds of Leah and Kambili to new perspectives, freeing them from their imperial fathers.

Both novels are set in a postcolonial time period. The Congo gains official independence in *The Poisonwood Bible*, and in *Purple Hibiscus*, Nigeria is a newly independent state. African countries struggled for years under western colonialism. White imperial powers controlled Africa's governments, trade and commerce, and the livelihoods of the natives. The lives of the African people were completely controlled by the white imperialist, even whole countries were divided and formed by white men with pens and a map. The basic civil right of living one's own life was stripped from the African people as the power hungry white leaders acted like puppeteers over Africa. Starting in the 1960s, African countries began to rebel against western imperial rule, and independence was slowly gained (Fletcher 196). African rebellion against colonialism serves as a backdrop for the stories told in *The Poisonwood Bible* and in *Purple Hibiscus*. Like colonized Africans, Leah and Kambili were under the complete control of imperial forces, their fathers. And, like colonized Africans, these two daughters stage a slow, steady rebellion to gain their freedom from the dominance of the oppressor.

Leah Price is a white preacher's daughter from Georgia. Leah along with her mother and sisters followed her father, Nathan, to a small village in the Congo called Kilanga. When they first arrive in the Congo, Leah is completely devoted to her father. Leah idolizes Nathan as a God like figure, and does everything she can to impress him. Leah's deepest desire is to be everything her father could want from her. As Leah shares with us at the beginning of the novel, "I know he must find me tiresome, yet still I like spending time with my father very much more than I like doing anything else" (Kingsolver 36).

Kambili Achike is a fifteen year old African girl who lives in Nigeria with her mother, brother, and father, Eugene. Kambili's father plays a dominant role in her life. He plans her schedule down to every last minute, and demands absolute adherence to his extreme rules of Catholicism such as never accepting food from someone who practiced the "traditional ways" (Adichie 62). Kambili can't even think for herself. Her thoughts are completely directed by her father's desires. Every part of Kambili's life is planned for her, even her future adult life. For example, when the topic of college comes up Kambili reveals that she "had never thought about the university, where I would go or what I would study. When the time came, Papa would decide" (Adichie 130).

Both fathers in the novel symbolize imperial powers. As Yael Simpson Fletcher writes, "*The Poisonwood Bible* tells the story of a white American missionary, Nathan Price, who arrives with his family in Congo on the eve of independence. Undoubtedly this figure of an evangelical fundamentalist symbolizes the willful ignorance and indifference that has abetted colonialism across the centuries." (Fletcher 197). Nathan Price is a loud boisterous man who pays no attention to the needs of his family, yet expects them to follow his every command and support him unconditionally. For example, when Leah's mother, Orleanna, falls ill and the girls are left to care for the house, Nathan never considered that he was leaving such a huge responsibility to a "cripple, a beauty queen, and a tomboy." Instead, Nathan becomes furious when he returns home to find that dinner is not yet prepared (Kingsolver 218). These were the expectations Nathan Price placed on his daughters- the same expectations that King Leopold placed on the Congo.

Nathan's daughters and the people of the Congo were forced to provide continuous support to a stronger power that gave no thought to the unfairness of the task, and punished their colonized people harshly when disappointed.

Similarly, Lilly G. N. Mabura describes Eugene Achike as "A fanatically religious patriarch, who overexerts his children academically, and his character generally reads like the proverbial oppressive Gothic patriarch" (Mabura 206). Eugene regulates every thought, movement, and word that comes from his family and absolutely will not tolerate any action of which he does not approve. He once whipped Kambili as well as her mother and brother simply because Kambili broke the Eucharist fast by eating a small amount of food (Adichie 101-103).

These men colonized their families into miniature controlled populations that live by adherence to imperial rule. Over the course of the stories, we see Leah and Kambili recognize the error of their fathers' rule and learn to defy their fathers' demands thus gaining independence. As Elani Ognibene says, "All [The whole Price family], even five year old Ruth, draw some parallel between the tyranny of politics in the Congo and the war in their private lives. And all expose the missionary tactics of the man Adah calls 'Our Father' as monolithic, abusive, and destructive" (Ognibene 21).

We first see signs of rebellion from Leah when she has a full conversation with Anatole for the first time. Anatole is a native school teacher in Kilanga who was western educated, and helps the Price family as they struggle with the foreign practices of the village. During the discussion, Leah shares her thoughts with us after she admits to Anatole that she does not recognize the name, Moise Tshombe: "I decided right then to stop pretending I knew more than I did. I would be myself... Watching my father, I've seen how you can't learn anything when you're trying to be the smartest person in the room" (Kingsolver 229). Leah realizes while talking with Anatole that her father is not always perfect, and that by emulating Nathan she can't be herself, a person who always seeks to learn. In at least one aspect of life, Leah does not want to mimic her father.

Kambili's first movement toward independence is when she sits down to dinner in her aunt's house for the first time. In her cousins and aunt's home, Kambili discovers a life far different from her own: "I had felt as if I were not there, that I was just observing a table where you could say anything at any time to anyone, where the air was free for you to breathe as you wished" (Adichie 120). Kambili had never experienced a family dynamic where a person was free to speak their mind, or laugh, or even just relax and breathe. This experience enlightened Kambili to a life she could be leading. Just by exposing her to new possibilities, her aunt and cousins helped Kambili make her first step toward independence.

Both girls, through the care of others, begin their journeys toward independence. Leah has always taken her father's word to be flawless, but now she sees that her imperial leader does have flaws. Kambili is so controlled by her father that she can't even speak unless it is to repeat one of his lessons. At her aunt's, Kambili sees a life where people can actually speak and think for themselves, which leads her to consider thoughts that are her own rather than her fathers.

Leah continues to grow more distant from her father as her relationship with Anatole grows stronger. Anatole begins to instruct Leah in French, and supports her in ventures such as helping out in the classroom and hunting that the people of Kilanga would normally disapprove of for a young woman. Anatole educates Leah about life in the Congo, and as he does, Leah's perspective on her father's role in the Congo begins to change. During one lesson Leah explains, "My father thinks the Congo is just lagging behind and he can help bring it up to snuff. Which is crazy. It's like he's trying to put rubber tires on a horse... I used to pray to God to make me just like him... Now I don't even know what to wish for" (Kingsolver 284-285). The more Leah learns about life in the Congo and about the move for independence in the Congo happening around her, the more her view of her father changes. She has gained a stronger, more independent frame of mind because of Anatole, and she doubts her once strong desire to be exactly like her father. Leah, like the Congolese, is finding a revolution of the spirit. She is beginning to

"break the order of 'Our Father' and join with 'the inhabitants of this land' that she is coming to love" (Ognibene 25).

Kambili's journey to independence continues when she has her first outing with Father Amadi. Father Amadi is a young priest who looks favorably on Kambili, and attempts to help her find her voice while she stays with her cousins. For Kambili, this outing is her first deliberate attempt at leading her life in a way her father wouldn't allow. She wears shorts, which her father wouldn't allow "because it was sinful for a woman to wear trousers" (Adichie 81), and tries on her cousins lipstick, which is also against her father's will because "vanity was a sin" (Adichie 175). After her outing, Kambili reveals that she had "Smiled, run laughed. My chest was filled with something like bath foam. Light. The lightness was so sweet I tasted it on my tongue" (Adichie 180). Kambili experienced a new freedom, and enjoyed it. She has done things her colonizer, Eugene, would not condone, yet she allowed herself to enjoy the moment. This moment signified the beginnings of independent thought for Kambili, which was key to her liberation from her father.

As both girls are exposed to new ideas, thanks to their new relationships, they begin to see the flaws in their imperial fathers. These flaws allow Leah and Kambili to question their fathers' control. Through their questioning, Leah and Kambili begin to understand that it is possible to think for themselves, speak for themselves, and fight for themselves instead of conforming to their fathers' wishes. Leah and Kambili begin to understand their own minds.

The greatest symbol of Leah's independence comes with the death of her youngest sister, Ruth May. Leah was struck with remorse for her little sister and is shocked by her father's response of "She wasn't baptized yet" (Kingsolver 398). Leah is stunned that her father, a man she used to idolize like God, can't explain the death of her little sister; he can't even show true remorse for the family's loss. Leah suddenly looks at her father in a completely different light, "Now he seemed narrow-witted and without particular dreams. I couldn't stand to look at him" (Kingsolver 369). Leah went from completely idolizing her father to despising

him. At this moment, she completely breaks free from her father's imperial influence.

Kambili's greatest stance of independence against her father was bringing her grandfather's painting home, "Ultimately, it is because of a painting of Papa-Nnukwu that Kambili finally stands up to her father in defiance" (Hron 33). Eugene banished his father from his life when Papa-Nnukwu refused to convert to Catholicism. Kambili spent her childhood believing her grandfather was a heathen because Eugene said he was, and avoided him as her father instructed. But, when Papa-Nnukwu comes to stay in Nsukka, Aunt Ifeoma and Father Amadi show Kambili an alternative interpretation of religion that allows her to accept Papa Nnukwu, and treasure a painting of him after he passes away. One day after Kambili returns home, she and her brother, Jaja, are looking at the painting. Kambili reveals that she wanted Eugene to catch her with the painting (Adichie 208). In the short time Kambili spent with her cousins and Father Amadi, she discovered an alternative life to the one her father dictated, and in her own way made a conscious decision to openly disobey him, which truly signified her separation from her father's imperial rule.

Both Leah and Kambili demonstrate significant divergences from their imperial fathers with the loss of a loved one. For Leah, her father's response to Ruth May's death shocked her. For Kambili, the loss of a grandfather she was just beginning to know, led her to openly disobey her father. Both girls felt a loss, but because of guidance from their new mentors, Anatole, Aunt Ifeoma, and Father Amadi, this moment of loss also created a moment of clarity concerning their relationships with their fathers.

Leah's freedom from her father's control places her in the Congo fighting alongside Anatole for social justice. Leah describes her search for something to pray for when Anatole is taken as a political prisoner, which highlights her liberation from her father's dominance, "I couldn't picture God at all. He just ended up looking like my father. . . I prayed to old black African stones unearthed from the old dark ground that has been here all along. One solid thing to believe in" (Kingsolver 423). Leah has completely turned from her father's control. She once likened her father with God and idolized him. She followed Nathan's every

word, every command, and allowed her will to be driven by his. Now, she likens Nathan with an image of God, and turns her back on him. Through Anatole and her experience in the Congo, Leah has become educated, and has gained a new perspective that allows her to judge for herself, and trust who she deems worthy of her trust, instead of blindly following her father. She now follows Anatole, and her newly educated sense of right.

"You want to buy oranges Kambili?" (Adichie 296).

Kambili's freedom from her father's imperial control leaves her to think for herself. Under her father's domain, Kambili never made decisions for herself. But, now that she is independent, decisions are hers to make. While her future was once left up to her father, Kambili now makes plans such as planting ixora (Adichie 307). She is free to laugh and think for herself thanks to her Aunt Ifeoma, cousins, and Father Amadi who taught her how with love. As Hewet wrote: "Like Nigeria itself, she now must find her way forward—slowly, resolutely, indefatigably-- into the future" (Hewet 9).

Freed from their fathers' control, Leah and Kambili face new futures, but the lingering presence of their fathers still exists in their souls just as the effect of the colonizers is still apparent in Africa. Leah has completely turned from her father, but his spirit follows her. She searches for something to believe in the way she once believed in him, but she can no longer find God because her father becomes the focus instead of God. So instead, "She listens to the people, trusts in a dynamic Creation which will not "suffer in translation," and remains with Anatole and their family in Africa, the land she chooses as her own" (Ognibene 27). Like her father who chose Jesus, Leah chooses a cause to believe in and fight for: Africa. Kambili also turns from her father, and his spirit also lingers with her. Kambili remains a Catholic and gives money to charities just as her father did, but she attends a church that reminds her of the values taught by Father Amadi and her aunt and cousins. Kambili becomes a hybrid just like the purple hibiscuses the novel was named after. She maintains her father's westernized religious beliefs and molds them with the free thinking feelings of love she learned of while in Nsukka. Both girls experienced the

tyranny of colonialism, and now they both are molding their new found independence into a positive future.

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