

# A Study of Mind Style in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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**Abstract:** While the general emphasis of literary linguistics called stylistics is on the interpretation of the writer's style, the study of mind style involves an explication of textual meaning from the reader's perspective. The former is more writer-based while the later is more reader-biased. Interestingly, the two find their data primarily from the writer's deft creation of text, narrator and characters. This paper examines mind style in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel, *Purple Hibiscus* with particular focus on Kambili, the teenage narrator. Extracts from the novel are analyzed based on linguistic and cognitive analytical parameters of persistent lexical patterns, syntactic structures, and resonating figurative language that carve a peculiar world view which characterizes the text fictional universe. The paper demonstrates that the narrator exhibits unusual mind style which projects a striking contrast of her real self through mutational narration characterized by ellipsis, predilection for syntactical pattern that makes part of her body agent instead of herself, passivisation, first person singular pronoun plus static or still verbs, and peculiar figures of speech. Through these devices, the paper shows that the narrator's mental state is fraught with fear, muteness, frustration and intimidation in the cognitive plane, thus foregrounding her conceptualization of the suffocating reality of her household. It concludes that analysis of mind style is productive for effective reading of fiction.

**Keywords:** Literary Linguistics, Cognitive Psychology, Mind Style, *Purple Hibiscus*

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## 1. Introduction

The mind, though relatively abstract and hardly physically observable has interestingly been the focus of interdisciplinary studies. It is core to the study of psychology, psycholinguistics, psychiatrics, affective stylistics and cognitive stylistics. The mind is the fountain of thought and therefore, the remote agent of every action. It has attracted a number of polar descriptive adjectives such as weak versus strong, clean versus dirty, free or plain versus biased, rich versus poor among others which invariably point to personality traits in the real world or character delineation in literary discourse. The mind is accessed through the owner's speech. Thus, every endeavor at analyzing the mind begins primarily with explication of the owner's text.

The concern of stylistics in written text analysis is to mediate between the author and the reader by providing a reading of the text informed by rigorous explanation of the

role of the component words, structures and patterns in meaning coding, consolidation or shift. This linguistic application to literary text interpretation may require a cognitive support when expressions in a given text are hallmarks of characters' mental functioning which predicate both the meaning and the message of the text producer.

Mind style presents a cognitive turn or shift to complement the linguistic orientation of stylistics to reveal both the meaning and psychological effects of characters' experience in a fiction. It is a handy tool for identifying how a fictional character's world is presented in a narrative. Adichie's [1] *Purple Hibiscus* presents a narrator whose mental functioning requires a careful study to provide insightful analysis of the fictional world presented and how the reader gets to decipher the writer's message. This paper therefore attempts a study of Adichie's narrator-character's world depiction from the perspective of mind style to unravel the cognitive state coded through both linguistic and cognitive stylistic resources deployed by the author.

## 2. Review of Literature

### 2.1. Style and Stylistics

Style refers to the artist's choice of words and expressions for communicative exigency. The realm of style is the manner of the composed text; the *how* of a text that informs its *what*. It is characterized by selection from and arrangement of linguistic features in the language of communication. Style sometimes reveals or helps the reader predict the writer's identity through the textual details reflecting similar or habitual patterns of expression and or thought. Thus, a writer's idiosyncratic way of expression is an offshoot of their personality. The habit is a product of consistency and in this regards, Traugott and Prat [15] note that 'style results from a tendency of a speaker or writer to consistently choose certain structure over others available in the language. Similarly, Hough [6] characterizes style as 'the choice between varied lexical and stylistic resources of a particular language'. Thus, in the identification or establishment of the style of a text, creativity is unraveled and appreciated. This partly justifies style study.

Stylistics employs linguistics resources to explicate texts in order to objectively establish the author's creative ingenuity. The analysis of style, Leech and Short [7] explain is 'an attempt to find the artistic principle underlying a writer's choice of language'. Stylistics is, thus, a form of literary linguistics intended to provide an objective reading of a text. Fowler [4] describes the practice of stylistics as involving a 'description of patterns found by the arrangement of linguistic variables'. Thus, Murana [9] suggests that stylistics is essentially linguistic and it is directed at exposing the artistic decisions leading to the production of a piece of text, literary or otherwise.

### 2.2. Mind Style

The study of mind style is intended to facilitate the comprehension of fiction. The mind is central to the thought process and associated actions and reactions. Writers therefore represent characters minds as part of their conscious attempt to achieve comprehensive narration and engender comprehension. This representation deserves preeminence in the study of most fictions. Palmer [10] provides a broad view of the notion of mind as 'all aspects of our inner life' which transcend thinking and perceiving to include 'disposition, feeling, belief and emotion.'

Fowler [5] coins the term *mind style* to mean 'any distinctive linguistic representation of individual mental self'. According to him, mind style owes its creation to 'cumulatively consistent structural options' and these options collectively present one pattern of the world or another that suggests 'a world view'. Fowler [4] stresses further that mind style amounts to 'a perspective on the topic treated' which reveals 'the set of values, or belief system communicated by language of the text' being examined.

Leech and Short [7] employ the term to capture the manner the fictional world is perceived or conceptualized in

preference to the more common term, 'world view'. Like Fowler, [4, 5] Leech and Short [7] believe in the general application of mind style to all fictions. Semino and Swindlerhurst [12], however, argue for limited applicability of mind style to texts on the basis that only texts whose views are perceived by the readers as deviant are actually appropriate for the theory. Pilliere 's [11] position on these conflicting stands is that critics who limit mind style to clearly deviant texts focus mainly on the 'relationship between mind style and an individual cognitive state 'without taking into account the factors of' socio-cultural context and the addressees.' This clarification provides support for the comprehensive view of the application of the theory though most critics provide analysis showing a trajectory of the limited application view.

Although the readers are aware of the fabrication involved in the fictional text, the tendency to temporarily dismiss this knowledge drives the reading. Writers' provision of access to characters' minds aid this consensus suspension of disbelief. Margolin [8] posits that access to the minds of characters is 'a convention' in literary narrative and the essence is 'to enrich the readers' understanding of human condition'. The readers, like the writers are guided by their reliance on 'folk psychology', the shared benchmark for determining normality or deviation.

### 2.3. Cognitive Psychology

Stylistics or literary linguistics embodies linguistics and literary study. Cognitive stylistics is a more hybrid discipline that combines constructs from linguistics, literary studies and cognitive science to achieve explicit text interpretation. As Semino and Culpeper [13] note, it combines the explicit and rigorous analysis of literary text with a systematic as well as theory-based analysis of the cognitive process of language use. Simpson [14] argues that the essence of cognitive stylistics is to 'supplement rather than supplant' traditional stylistics while its aims is to 'shift the focus away from model of text and composition towards model that makes explicit the links between human mind and process of reading'. Ali [2] similarly adds that the focus of cognitive stylistic analysis should be on 'language and mind and how readers respond the way they do'.

According to Ali [2], Cognitive stylistics is triggered by four main theories: schema theory, text world theory, conceptual theory and mental space theory. Cook [3] expatiates that the schema theory applies processing of sensory data and processing of language, and it is premised on the argument that 'all human experiences are stored in the memory and the human mind activates and draws upon this memory' for the purpose of data interpretation. Werth [16] adds that the text world theory conceives of all text as marked by 'construction of a set of a richly defined conceptualized spaces or worlds'. Conceptual metaphor theory forms a subworld in the text world and involves mapping of the source domain to the target domain. Metaphor, Ali [2] posits, is used as 'a scheme by which people conceptualize their experience to transfer, modify or

blend mental constructs'. The mental space theory posits that mental spaces exit for the understanding of counterfactual statements, artifacts or local context of discourses. The four theories are interrelated and complementary and consequently handy for fictional interpretation.

### 3. Synopsis of Purple Hibiscus

*Purple Hibiscus* is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's first novel. It is set in the post-colonial Nigeria, an era beset by political instability and economic difficulties. The central character is Kambili Achike, aged fifteen for much of the period covered by the book, a member of a wealthy family dominated by her devoutly catholic father, Eugene. Eugene is both a religious zealot and a violent figure in the Achike's household, who subjects his wife Beatrice, the narrator, Kambili and her brother Jaja to beatings and psychological cruelty.

The story is told through Kambili's eyes and it is essentially about the disintegration of her family and her struggle to grow to maturity. A key period is the time Kambili and Jaja spend at the house of their Aunt, Ifeoma, and her children. This household operates a lifestyle that markedly contrasts what Kambili and Jaja experience at home. Though Catholic, Ifeoma's household practices a completely different form of Catholicism, creating a happy and liberal place that encourages people to speak their minds. In this nurturing environment both Kambili and her brother become more open and free to express their opinions. Importantly, also, while at Aunt Ifeoma's house, Kambili falls in love with a young priest, Father Amadi, who awakens her sense of passion. At the peak of the story, other members of the family are unable to cope with the head's continual violence. Consequently, Beatrice poisons him. Jaja takes the blame for the crime and he is incarcerated. The novel ends almost three years after these events, on a cautiously optimistic note. Kambili has become a young woman of eighteen, more confident than before, while her brother Jaja is about to be released from prison, hardened but not broken by his experiences in prison. Their mother, Beatrice is deteriorated psychologically to a great degree.

### 4. Data Analysis

#### 4.1. Lexico-Syntactic Choice and Mind Style in Purple Hibiscus

Consistency of peculiar linguistic choices in a fictional text enhances the projection of mind style of a character or implied author. By implication, the reader is able to fathom, via the writer's linguistic selections, the reality conceptualized in the fictional world of the text and the 'mind' represented. In this study, the major circumstance which projects the mind style of the narrator, Kambili and others is the account of the oppressive atmosphere created by the family head, which is responsible for the unusual silence and nervousness that pervade the entire household. This

seemingly unbearable household orchestrates the 'unusual linguistic patterns' that represent the narrator's mental self. Kambili's regimented father, Eugene Achike demands that his strict rules are obeyed unequivocally and so, flares up at any slightest provocation engineered by any member of his household. This is the case with Jaja who refuses to attend the Communion:

*Things started to fall apart* at home when my brother Jaja, did not go communion and papa *flung* his heavy missal across the room and *broke* the figurine on the étagère (p. 1).

One can see from the first page of the novel that the atmosphere in the household is oppressive in the literal and figurative sense of it. The narrator's choices: *fall*, *flung*, *broke* are not only phonologically indicative of fury but the words also portray the cognitive disposition of the narrator, revealing a mind beclouded by fear, and emotional instability. Kambili is utterly in palpable fear that Eugene would do the worse if any one proves recalcitrant to his stringent orders. The worldview conceptualized here reflects not only physical abuse but also leads the reader to unearth the oppressive working of the mind of the actor of the violence, Eugene. Cognitively, the narrator's father is hot tempered and inhumane, and so, Kambili's persistent stylistic discourse is inherently laden with fear and silence brought to bear on the household by Eugene's domestic violence.

Kambili's distorted mind, thoughts and feelings, and how these affect her attitude towards others, are discernible in her account of the family life to her cousin, Amaka, whose expectation of a vibrant interaction is broken by somewhat tepid and laconic narration. Amaka's reaction shows the only reason she can muster for Kambili's family's incongruity.

"We *don't* watch a lot of TV," I said.

"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. (p. 79)

Obvious from the above is Kambili's consistent negative or aborted volition which is prevalent in the text. She is rather too discreet for her age and in the context of her culture where children talk freely when not in the midst of elders. Her choice of the quantifier *a lot of* to modify the truth of the family's denial grammaticalised by the negation in *don't* is arguably beyond her age. Again, her consistent resort to the pattern *I wanted to* reveals a cognitively handicap mind style. Being caged and living in persistent fear has incapacitated and rendered her inactive.

The teenager's inability to speak or act as expected is expressed throughout the novel, thus foregrounding the cognitive state of incapacity that beclouds the narrator's world. For instance, *my lips held stubbornly together* (p. 141) and *my legs did not do what I wanted them to do* (p. 165) involve syntactic arrangement that identifies her body parts

(lips and legs) as grammatical actors and suggests a timid and odd mind style associated with a weakling as opposed to a vibrant teenager. Kambili's inactivity underscores the prevailing fear that hinders her normal thought process.

Further linguistic choices that foreground Kambili's lack of requisite agility for her age are found in her combination of the first person singular pronoun *I* with 'static' verbs pointing to a non dynamic mind style. Thus, *I wish, I watched, I looked, I stared* are conspicuously iterated in the text to depict Kambili's subjugated mental functioning. Her mental functioning is inundated with overwhelming fear of displeasing her interlocutors. Moreover, such lexical choices represent a monotonous semi-conscious repetition that reflects her tiredness and despair. Kambili's constrained linguistic patterns call the reader's attention to her physical state, thoughts, visions and imaginations against the backdrop of the common knowledge of human personality and the context of the text.

Further exposition of Kambili's mind style is found in her attempts to comfort her mother after her father has thrown his missal and broke her mother's ballet dancing figurine. Readers are plunged into a pretentious and bias mind style.

I meant to say I am sorry Papa broke your figurine, but the words that came to my mind were 'I am sorry your figurine broke, Mama' (p. 18).

At the discourse world level of the text world, the immediate context of *Purple Hibiscus* that we share with the author, the mind presented above is quite deviant. Children are closer to their mother and female children especially largely share the feelings of their mother even when the father is not a brute. Against this background, Kambili's strange exoneration of her father through passivisation, *your figurine broke*, further communicates her strange mental self. As a victim of physical violence, the narrator is programmed to knowingly hide the fact. By implication, Kambili's refusal to pronounce Eugene's culpability in her expression of sympathy addressed to her mother is reflective of the height of her caution against displeasing her father, even though her father is apparently absent from the context of this discourse. The oppressive presence of Papa (Eugene) in the house, even when silent, is capable of suffocating his daughter, Kambili.

Again, Kambili's attempt to find out her mother's plan for the broken statuette crystallizes her deviant mind style and reveals also the normal mind style of Mama, her mother.

Kambili: will you replace the figurine?

Mama: kpa, I will not replace them. (p. 18)

The discourse particle *kpa* which means never reveals that Mama is frustrated with the persistent violence of her husband and vows not to replace the figurine to which she attaches much importance and which she polishes every morning. Her decision is a product of logic as the husband may still break a newly replaced one anytime out of anger. Notably, Kambili's question- *will you replace the figurine?* is elliptical. Her lack of rhetorical strength to include *which Papa broke* is a lack of cognitive balance and mental justice within the context. This expression leads the reader to deciphering the author's characterization of Eugene as a

monster in human guise. Kambili does not explicitly apportion the role of a participant of the process to Eugene and this points the reader to her psychological imbalance resulting from the suffocating atmosphere of their home.

Similarly, the punishment that left Jaja with a deformed little finger is recounted by Kambili by means of ellipsis:

When he was ten, he had missed two questions on his catechism test and was not named the best in his first Holy Communion; papa took him upstairs and locked the door. Jaja, in tears, came out supporting his left hand with the right hand...(p. 145)

Kambili narration in this text is measly due to habitual reduction of the natural sequence of event through amputation or ellipsis. This consolidates a hollow mind style as she reports the consequences of her father's action on the ten-year old Jaja without mentioning the action. The emotive lexeme, *tears*, implies an abuse of the lad whose left hand is brutally severed for not being named the best in his first holy communion. The mind style conceptualizes above is that of ideological slant and hollowness. Kambili consistently abhors relating clearly her father's brutality so as not to speak against his suppression. This reveals the extent of her internalization and normalization of the abnormality that characterizes her world view.

More brutal incidents are perceived and conceptualized by the narrator in far less evasive term. It is unusual to describe the heavy beating of Beatrice as mere 'sound' which the narrator tries to ignore in this narration:

I was in my room after lunch, reading James chapter five because I would talk about the biblical roots of anointing of the sick during family time, when I heard *the sound. Swift, heavy thuds* on my parents hand carved bedroom door. I imagined the door had got stuck and papa was trying to open it. If I imagine it hard enough, then it would be true. I *sat down, close my eyes*, and started to count (p. 41).

Kambili's perception of the beating of her mother as mere *sound* shows that she is driven by trauma and exhaustion. The situation naturally requires that she knocks on the door continually in tears until the beating stops. Contrariwise, she resorts to imagining her father trying to open the door regardless of the stark reality, sits down, closes her eyes and begins to count the sounds of the beating her mother receives. Her inactivity is a product of the deviant cognitive habit or sensory processing while her strange world is signaled physically by the closing of eyes to see the reality through darkness.

In the excerpt below, Kambili's choice of *crushed* further exposes her mind style to the reader for its oddity in the context of love expression:

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 (p. 102).

Kambili views Eugene's sense of love as a chaotic mixture

of emotions: pains and affection. Her predilection for the word *crushed* in place of 'cuddled' or 'held' shows a mind that is both used to coercion and anticipates it always. Within the real world of the production of the text, children are reproached when necessary and thereafter cuddled passionately following their remorse to show that they are loved notwithstanding the scolding. Kambili's negative answer to her father's question about the effect of the belt on her consolidates her construal of the father's atypical attempt to show care as an extension of Eugene's brutal instinct toward them. Kambili's mind style is overtly revealed through her denial of her true state. The cognitive verb *felt* in her revelation: *I felt a throbbing on my back* leads the reader into a mind solely shattered by the excruciating agony of Eugene's bizarre understanding of affection in parenting.

#### 4.2. Figurative Language

Figurative language is another cognitive tool that makes Kambili's mind style accessible to the reader. The choice of figurative language is not only for aesthetic effects; it is also a linguistic device that reveals the cognitive process of its chooser and therefore an important clue to mind style exposition. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Adiche craftily and masterly uses metaphor, simile, and imagery in her conceptualism of Kambili's psychological state and her own mind style thereby revealing the entire semiotic universe of the text. Kambili's mind style is projected through her metaphor in the first excerpt quoted in this work where her family's entire life, *things*, is portrayed as an erection or building that *started to fall apart*. The narrator's conception delineates her life in a dilapidated family structure. By mapping the target model, *building*, onto the source model, *life*, Kambili's mind style reveals the imminent danger of her existence in a crumbling rather than thriving household. This metaphor is reinforced by Eugene's flinging of the prayer book, *missal* across the room and the breaking of *figurine*.

Significant deployment of simile consolidates the malevolent atmosphere that pervades the household as well as Kambili's conception of her father as the next excerpt on another scenario of bullying reveals:

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 louse. 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)

In this excerpt, the reader is exposed to a cluster of images which Adiche harnesses through Kambili's narrative. Kambili's inner self is unfolded as she compares her father's beating of the family members to the Fulani herdsman's hitting of their cattle with a stick designed for controlling the beast. Kambili's simile *Papa was like a Fulani nomad*, which is used to compare Eugene with the itinerant cattle keeper shows the family members under the inhuman control of Papa as mere cows. Unfortunately, unlike cows receiving beating from the nomad, these members do not run away to escape the thrashing. This completely shows that they are all unusually cowed. This atypical behavior prepares the reader for the violence exhibited later by Beatrice. Kambili characteristically distances Papa from his violent action by making his belt responsible for the cruelty. In this long narration, Papa only does two things: *He unbuckled his belt slowly* and... *stared at the leather in his hand*. Kambili mind style reveals her deviant perception of Eugene, a ruthless nomad whose cows all got beaten at the same time by the *heavy belt*.

Another incident of Eugene's beating of the narrator is recounted with a somewhat peculiar simile below:

He started to kick me. The metal buckle on his slippers stung like bites of mosquitoes (p. 210).

Kambili receives the treatment above for laying her hands on her grandfather's painting. Cognitively, Kambili is portraying a shift in mind, gradually distancing herself from her father and embracing her grandfather. Significantly, Kambili's reference is beginning to be allocated more toward papa Nnukwu and less toward papa, Eugene. The excerpt above shows a progressive beating causing excruciating pains. However, Kambili's simile seems to under represent this experience as she compares the pain inflicted by the metal buckle to mosquito bites. A more stable mind is likely to see the metal buckle's sting in terms of termite or snake bites. Still the two instances of simile serve to suggest a positive shift towards the normal mind. In spite of this, the reader decodes Eugene's conceptualization as a monster that exhibits no mercy and desires abnormal relationship between Kambili and his own father.

## 5. Conclusion

This study investigates Kambili's mind style, in *Purple Hibiscus*, as represented by her speech and thought patterns. This is achieved through an examination of Kambili's lexico-syntactic choices and figurative language which resonantly reveal a mind fraught with fear, silence, frustration and resignation. The paper demonstrates that Kambili's mind style is abnormal due to the violence and rigidity that characterize her father's life style. This reading presents Papa Eugene as the cause of the deviant mind style with which the author characterizes her narrator. It thus reveals an attempt by the narrator to religiously satisfy an insatiable father as well as the unholy fraternity of a family living in consistent chaos. This kind of reading is helpful in broadening the reader's interpretative faculty towards achieving effective reading.

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