Surveillance and Rebellion

A Foucauldian Reading of
Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s

Purple Hibiscus
Abstract

In *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie describes what happens in a family when one person, Papa Eugene, takes control and completely subjugates other family members to his wishes and demands. The author shows the dire consequences his actions have on his family but also how those actions ultimately lead to his own destruction.

This essay links the restrictions and abuse suffered by Kambili and her family to Michel Foucault’s theories on torture and surveillance as detailed in *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault’s theories are linked to Jeremy Bentham’s *Panopticon* in order to further introduce the concept of surveillance. The essay describes the physical and psychological abuse suffered by the family and also details the surveillance and torture techniques used by Papa Eugene to stay in control. Moreover, it argues that power can be lost through applying too much control and by metering out punishment that is too harsh and it shows how such actions ultimately lead to rebellion.

Keywords

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*, Surveillance, Power, Discipline, Punishment, Torture, Rebellion, Internalization
Table of Content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foucault and the Theory of Surveillance</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Abuse and Torture</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External Surveillance</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal Surveillance</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

Imagine what it would be like to be constantly under surveillance, to be controlled and monitored wherever you go and whatever you do. Envision a life where on a daily basis, you worry about acts of punishment and violence, not only directed towards yourself but also towards people you love and care for. Picture a life where you always live in fear of doing something wrong, of breaking an un-written rule. This is what life is like for teenager Kambili, the main character and narrator in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s novel *Purple Hibiscus*. In this essay I will analyse the different techniques used by Kambili’s father Papa Eugene, to help him control his family, and how that control is finally brought to an end by his family’s rebellion against him. The techniques, including torture and surveillance, will be analysed through the theories detailed by French philosopher Michel Foucault in his book *Discipline and Punish – The Birth of the Prison*.

Much has already been written on various subjects found in *Purple Hibiscus* and although it is impossible to ignore these areas when analysing the text, my intention is to stay within the Foucauldian perspective in my analyses. The political aspects of the novel have been dealt with by Ayo Kehinde in *Rulers Against Writers, Writers Against Rulers* and Christopher Ouma in *Childhood in Contemporary Nigerian Fiction* among others. Kambili’s family situation is compared to political events happening in Nigeria, with Papa Eugene symbolising the ruling dictator and the rest of the family members, the oppressed citizens. Kehinde likens Mama Beatrice’s poisoning of Papa Eugene to a revolution against a tyrant (19). In *Changing Borders and Creating Voices*, Ogaga Okuyade argues from a feminist perspective that Kambili’s calm narration of Papa Eugene’s violence towards her mother shows the reader that his actions are nothing out of the ordinary and that beating one’s wife is normal. According to Okuyade, Mama Beatrice is “an embodiment of the traditional African
woman . . . content with the economic security her husband guarantees” but that she, by poisoning her husband “fractures the patriarchal social structure” (255).

*Purple Hibiscus* is set in Nigeria in the mid-nineties during a time of great unrest and rebellion in the country. A dictator has taken control and there are great changes as a consequence. Kambili’s father is wealthy and the family lives a privileged life in a big house in the town of Enugu and are not greatly affected by the hardships facing the majority of the population. Papa Eugene is a highly respected man, a religious man who supports his community and who owns a newspaper which is critical of the new dictatorship introduced in the country. The family is both envied and admired by people on the outside. Inside their house life is completely different though.

Adichie describes how Kambili and the rest of her family are all controlled by Papa Eugene who rules his family like a dictator. Various methods are used by him to remain in control and make them follow his rules and wishes. Not only Kambili but also her mother Beatrice and her brother Jaja suffer mental as well as physical abuse. Yet, Adichie does not describe Papa Eugene as a wholly evil person. He is a man who gives vast amounts to charity, worries constantly about his employees and the situation in Nigeria, and in his own way wants what is best for his family but does not understand that he is far too dictatorial and unforgiving towards them. Time-tables drawn up by Papa Eugene are strictly followed by Kambili and her brother Jaja. They detail what is to be done, when it is to be done and for how long. They make meaningful communication between family members almost impossible and therefore help prevent them from rebelling against Papa Eugene’s rules.
Kambili does not realise that she is different from other girls her age until she and her brother go to stay with their aunt Ifeoma in the town of Nsukka. Aunt Ifeoma and her family practise a much more tolerant form of Catholicism than does Papa Eugene, and during her visit to Nsukka, Kambili slowly finds some self-confidence and the ability to speak up for herself. From not speaking much at all or speaking in a quiet stutter due to her father’s dominance, Kambili finally finds her voice and is able to question her father’s strict rule over the family. Jaja, who has also been shown that a different life is possible, rebels against his father and defies him by not going to church. Their mother also realises that Papa Eugene’s rule over the family is only bringing destruction and unhappiness to her children and to herself and she kills him by poisoning his tea.

As I have already stated, my main purpose with this essay is to link the restrictions and abuse suffered by Kambili to Foucault’s theories and the panoptic idea and to analyse how Papa Eugene uses these techniques and what the consequences of his actions are. I will start by describing Foucault’s theories in more detail, linking them to the theories of the nineteenth-century philosopher Jeremy Bentham, the author of *The Panopticon* (1791) in order to further introduce and explain the concept of surveillance. I will continue by detailing both physical and psychological restrictions that Kambili and the rest of her family suffer in her father’s house, starting with the physical abuse metered out by Papa Eugene whenever his children do something wrong or do not perform according to his high expectations. The psychological restrictions suffered by Kambili will be analysed through Foucault’s theories and the panoptic perspective. They will be divided into external surveillance, for example the high walls of the house and a chauffeur driven car which takes her where she needs to go, and the internal surveillance, for example how Kambili dresses and how she obeys her father’s instructions and rules even when he is not present. In the section on internal surveillance I will include the issue of Kambili’s lack of voice and how she is unable to express herself verbally.
until she gains self-confidence during her stay in Nsukka. I will try to show that by controlling and punishing his family too harshly, Papa Eugene is in fact responsible for his own downfall and death. Rebellion is only to be expected under such dictatorship.
Foucault and the Theory of Surveillance

Foucault’s book *Discipline and Punish – The Birth of the Prison*, first published in France in 1975, details the great changes that have taken place in the methods of punishment throughout history. Society quickly moved from a system of corporal punishment through different kinds of torture, to imprisonment which is considered to be a more gentle punishment; we have in other words, moved away from punishing the body to punishing the soul (16). According to Foucault, the prison house is not just to be a means of keeping criminals away from the innocent public, but also a place where they can be subjected to discipline and where they can be monitored. They are under constant supervision and their entire day is timetabled to keep them out of trouble. In Foucault’s opinion, the prison is “a machine for altering minds” (125) and the surveillance and the forced discipline the inmates are subjected to help turn them into “docile bodies,” (138) making them easier to control.

The idea of the Panopticon (the word is of Greek origin, meaning “all-seeing eye”) is central to Foucault’s theories about punishment and surveillance. The Panopticon idea was first introduced by Jeremy Bentham in his book *Panopticon; or, the Inspection-House* and is an architectural design enabling inspectors to view prisoners at all times whilst preventing the prisoners from seeing the inspectors. This is done through the placing of the prison cells around a central tower. All the prison cell doors face the tower, thus enabling the guards to see inside the cells. The windows of the tower are fitted with blinds making it impossible for the prisoners to see in but allowing the guards to have constant supervision of the inmates (3-4). This system means that the prisoners can never be sure whether they are being watched or not, but they follow the rules nevertheless since there is a possibility they might be observed. Bentham’s idea was that “persons to be inspected should always feel themselves as under inspection, at least as standing a great chance of being so” (13).
Foucault’s view is that the Panopticon “reverses the principles of the dungeon” (200). This means that a person held under surveillance in a prison is still enclosed in a small space like a dungeon, but instead of hiding the prisoner and depriving him of light, by using the panoptic architecture, the prisoner is in full view of the supervisor in a fully lit up area. Foucault states that “full lighting and the eye of the supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap” (200). The main purpose of prisons in our society is to punish criminals but also to act as a deterrent to others, thus keeping the crime rate low. According to Foucault, criminals placed within the prison system are neither improved nor transformed, but are actually made worse through incarceration. In his opinion, prisons do not deter criminals; quite the opposite is true as “prison cannot fail to produce delinquents. . . . The prison makes possible, even encourages, the organization of a milieu of delinquents, loyal to one another, hierarchized, ready to aid and abet any future criminal act” (266-67).

Physical Abuse and Torture

The physical violence suffered by Kambili, her brother and her mother are of two kinds; one is sudden and rage-filled, the other is planned and deliberate. Papa Eugene’s passionate violence is not a torture technique in the way this is detailed in Discipline and Punish, since to be classed as torture the punishment cannot, according to Foucault, “fall upon the body indiscriminately or equally; it is calculated according to detailed rules” (34). Although this kind of rage-filled violence is not particularized in Foucault’s work, it is nevertheless included in this essay as it is vital for the understanding of Papa Eugene’s character, the family’s
situation and because the unpredictable violence greatly contributes to Kambili’s lack of voice.

Adichie’s description of Kambili’s family is of a family under siege, where the home has been taken over and is completely dominated by one person – Papa Eugene. He rules his family like a king ruling his kingdom. Nothing is ever done that Papa Eugene does not approve of and his word is law to the other family members. His expectations of his family are excessive and difficult to live up to for the children. They are expected to be academically successful and always be the first in their class as well as always being on their best behaviour and obey their father’s commands. The consequences for misbehaving are dire as Papa Eugene is quick to fly into a rage and uses corporal punishment when he deems it necessary, later claiming that he does it for their own good, to prevent them from sinning (PH 194). At one time he almost kills Kambili by kicking her after he finds out that she has a picture of her grandfather, a man with whom Papa has no contact and who Kambili is not allowed to see either. Papa Eugene completely loses his temper and Kambili senses danger when she notices him swaying. “Papa did not sway often. His swaying was like shaking a bottle of Coke that burst into violent foam when you opened it” (PH 210). Papa Eugene’s behaviour is unpredictable and volatile and the family constantly has to be on the look-out for signs of his anger.

The violence towards his wife seems to be more habitual in nature and is never done in front of the children but mainly takes place in their bedroom. Adichie describes how Kambili can hear the thuds from the bedroom when her mother is beaten (PH 32) and several times he beats Beatrice so badly that she suffers miscarriages: “You know that small table where we keep the family bible, nne? Your father broke it on my belly. . . . My blood finished on the floor even before he took me to St Agnes. My doctor said there was nothing he could do to save it” (PH 248). This is one of the few times that Papa Eugene’s violence towards
Kambili’s mother is actually mentioned by her, but although nothing is normally said out loud, Kambili has come to understand that Mama uses a kind of quiet therapy after the beatings as she sits down to polish some of her precious French porcelain figurines to calm herself (PH 10). Another time when Papa has beaten Mama Beatrice for not wanting to visit their priest due to morning sickness, he tells his children to recite sixteen novenas so that Mama can be forgiven for her sin. Kambili’s reflects: “I did not think, I did not even think to think, what Mama needed to be forgiven for” (PH 35-36). This shows how conditioned Kambili is due to her upbringing. She does not question anything her father tells her and expects violence as if it were the norm.

At times Papa Eugene’s violence is more calculated and torture-like in its nature and quite different from his violent rages, for example when he punishes both Kambili and Jaja for having spent time with their grandfather in their Aunt Ifeoma’s house without telling their father. Foucault’s theory on torture is that it is a technique; “not an extreme expression of lawless rage” (33-34). According to him, to qualify as torture the punishment has to fill three criteria; it must produce pain, the pain must be regulated and the torture must leave a mark on the victim (34). These criteria are filled by Papa Eugene when he brutally punishes his children for spending time with their grandfather, by pouring boiling water onto their bare feet. The pain Kambili experiences is so extreme that at first she feels no pain at all as Papa Eugene slowly pours a kettle of boiling water over her feet thus regulating the pain level. The boiling water severely scolds her skin and she is left with lasting scars. When Papa Eugene has finished his punishment of Kambili, he tells her: “That is what you do to yourself when you walk into sin. You burn your feet” (PH 194-95).

Kambili’s father uses his religious beliefs as a justification for his actions and he metes out punishment as if he were God or a medieval all-powerful sovereign. Foucault states that “the citizen is presumed to have accepted . . . the very law by which he may be punished.
Thus the criminal appears as a juridically paradoxal being. He has broken the pact, he is therefore the enemy of society as a whole, but he participates in the punishment that is practised upon him” (89-90). Papa Eugene assumes that his children know his rules and if they are broken, he feels it is his duty to punish the culprit. In his eyes, the mutilation of Jaja is a punishment for having “broken the law,” but it is also another example of his calculated violence. When Jaja is only ten years old, Papa Eugene punishes him for missing two questions and therefore not coming first in his Holy Communion class. “Papa took him upstairs and locked the door. Jaja, in tears, came out supporting his left hand with his right and Papa drove him to St Agnes hospital. Papa was crying too . . . Later, Jaja told me that Papa had avoided his right hand because it is the hand he writes with” (PH 145). The fact that Papa Eugene cries over what he has done would indicate that what he did to Jaja was an act of rage. On the other hand, by deliberately avoiding Jaja’s right hand while beating him he makes the act appear more sinister – it makes it an act of torture.

No one in the family speaks of the abuse that goes on in the house and Kambili is quite shocked when she realises that Jaja has told their Aunt Ifeoma about how he lost part of his little finger (PH 145). When Kambili’s cousin Amaka asks Kambili, after the beating that almost killed her, if Papa Eugene was responsible for her terrible injuries, Kambili is unsure of how to respond. “Nobody had asked, not even the doctor at the hospital or Father Benedict. I did not know what Papa had told them. Or if he had told them anything. ‘Did Aunty Ifeoma tell you’? I asked. ‘No, but I guessed so’” (PH 220).

Papa Eugene uses his strong faith to do both evil and good. He uses it to control his family and as a reason to punish them. He will not see his own father because of his refusal to become a catholic and does not help his sister who struggles economically because she will not follow his rules (PH 95). At the same time he loves his family and does what he deems necessary to save them from sin. He sees it as his Christian duty to give generously to people
in need and he pays the school fees for many children from his home town as well as giving large sums to children’s hospitals and veteran charities (PH 297). In *Dethroning the Infallible Father*, Cheryl Stobie argues that Adichie, herself a practising catholic, advocates a tolerant and forgiving approach through her complex portrayal of Papa Eugene and the contrast drawn up between him and other characters in the novel (422). The dual personality of Papa Eugene’s character leads Ouma, the author of *Childhood in Contemporary Nigerian Fiction* to conclude that Kambili “is the only person in the household able to actually love and see beyond the image of the violent father” (202).

Regardless of Kambili’s strong love for her father she realises after her visit to her Aunt Ifeoma in Nsukka that another life is possible. Both she and her brother begin to realise that their existence up until the present has been an abnormal one. They only needed to be introduced to another way of life, to be introduced to freedom, to understand how imprisoned and repressed they were. So when Jaja refuses to go to Communion on Palm Sunday, thus rebelling against their father, everything falls apart and Papa loses his firm grip on the family (PH 3). According to Foucault, “no matter how terrifying a given system may be, there always remain the possibilities of resistance, disobedience, and oppositional groupings” (Crampton and Elden 10). Mama Beatrice, Jaja and Kambili become stronger in their togetherness against Papa Eugene’s unreasonable demands and Mama Beatrice kills her husband by poisoning his tea. Although that frees them from his abuse, Adichie does not portray the killing as anything but a “sad necessity” because as well as ridding them of one torment, the murder creates others; Jaja is imprisoned after confessing to a crime his mother committed, Mama Beatrice is overcome by guilt and suffers mental problems and Kambili misses her father and her brother and has to grow up quickly to take care of her mother (Stobie 427).
External Surveillance

When we think of abuse it is often physical violence that springs to mind but in Kambili’s case she suffers equally from psychological abuse. She is more or less a prisoner in her own home and she is under constant surveillance from her father and others who report to him. She lives in a large house in a very nice area but is hardly ever let outside on her own. She is not even able to see the street from her house because the high walls that surround the property prevent it. “The compound walls, topped by coiled electric wires, were so high I could not see the cars driving past on our street” (PH 9). The walls surrounding Kambili’s school are equally high but “instead of coiled electrified wires they were topped by pieces of green glass with sharp edges jutting out. Papa said the walls had swayed his decision when I finished elementary school. Discipline was important he said. You could not have youngsters scaling walls to go into town and go wild, the way that they did at the federal government colleges” (PH 45).

In order to implement his surveillance, Papa needs help and is assisted by his driver, Kevin, who spies on the rest of the family. He reports to his employer even minor irregularities in the children’s timetable, such as leaving the school building a few minutes late. Kevin waits with the car outside the school gates and every day Kambili runs to the car straight after her last class so that Kevin will not tell her father that she was late. This makes her unpopular with the other girls in school. “Maybe after school you should stop running off like that and walk with us to the gate. Why do you always run, anyway” (PH 51)? Her school friends do not realise that she leaves so quickly every day out of fear to be punished, they think she is snobbish and that she does not want their company.
Kambili and her brother are driven everywhere by Kevin and even when they want to walk, it always ends with them obeying their father’s orders; “we can walk there in five minutes, we don’t need Kevin to take us, Jaja said … He said that every year, but we always climbed into the car so that Kevin could take us, so that he could watch us” (PH 62). The fact that Kevin drives them everywhere means that they are cut off from the outside world and only know what is going on outside through what they hear from other people. The car is an extension of their home prison and their father’s surveillance.

Although the family has satellite television and a stereo system, television, radio and music are not included by Papa Eugene in the children’s timetables and, therefore, any information they obtain comes from secondary sources (PH 79). Jaja, for example finds out from his school friends about three men being executed for drug-trafficking. Jaja’s friends in their turn, had found out from watching television (PH 33). It is ironic that Papa Eugene owns a newspaper which is critical of the regime in the country and fights against censorship at the same time as he censures his children’s access to information in his quest only to allow them information he finds suitable and proper.

The visit to Nsukka and her aunt’s family is an eye-opener for Kambili. For the first time she has a glimpse of the world outside the compound walls and she learns of the country’s fuel and water shortages and the executions taking place in the country. She suddenly has access to the media she has previously been denied and the cultural and political music that her cousin Amaka listens to teaches her what is going on around her (PH 151). In addition, there is an ongoing conversation in Aunt Ifeoma’s house and opinions are freely expressed and encouraged (PH 121). In contrast to Papa Eugene, Ifeoma expects and encourages her children to be independent thinkers.
Foucault states that through discipline, “one may have a hold over others’ bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but as they may operate as one wishes” (138). He describes discipline as “small acts of cunning endowed with a great power of diffusion, subtle arrangements, apparently innocent but profoundly suspicious mechanisms that . . . pursued petty forms of coercion” (139). Papa Eugene keeps a firm control of his family because he wishes to achieve discipline in his household. The techniques he uses to obtain his wish for discipline are the same as the ones Foucault details in *Discipline and Punish*. According to Foucault, several techniques need to be used to achieve discipline and he states that one can do so partly through the “distribution of individuals in space” (141).

The first of these techniques is “enclosure” (141-42) which means a place “closed in upon itself,” for example monasteries, army barracks and schools, or what Foucault refers to as a “protected place of disciplinary monotony” (141). In Kambili’s case, the “enclosure” is her father’s house where she is a virtual prisoner. Although the house is large and luxurious, Kambili feels oppressed by the silence inside, especially after returning from Nsukka. In *Journeying Out of Silenced Familial Spaces in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Purple Hibiscus*, Ouma argues that the silence in the house is psychological as well as physical. “I felt suffocated. The off-white walls . . . were narrowing, bearing down on me” (PH 7). Although it is a big house with spacious rooms and high ceilings, Kambili feels closed in and claustrophobic.

The second requirement to achieve discipline is “partitioning” (143), which means that each individual has his own place. According to Foucault, dividing people into their own little units is a way to “eliminate . . . the uncontrolled disappearance of individuals, their diffuse circulation . . . and dangerous coagulation” (143). The aim of this technique is to “know where and how to locate individuals . . . to be able at each moment to supervise the conduct of each individual, to assess it, to judge it” (143). Bentham also promoted the usefulness of this
kind of division with regard to surveillance and stated that “cells are divided from another, and the prisoners by that means secluded from all communication with each other” (3). In Kambili’s house everyone has his or her own room so that group gatherings are avoided. In other words the different family members do not see too much of each other because they have their own designated spaces. Kambili and Jaja spend almost all their time in their separate rooms and really only see each other at meal times.

The third technique detailed by Foucault is “functional sites” (143-44). These are places where the individuals can group together but under supervision so that there will not be any communication between them. Foucault states that places where people congregate can be “a crossroads for dangerous mixtures, a meeting-place for forbidden circulation” (144). To prevent this situation, it is necessary for the functional site to be “a filter, a mechanism that pins down and partitions; it must provide a hold over this whole mobile, swarming mass, by dissipating the confusion of illegality and evil” (144). In Kambili’s case, the dining room is an example. The family meets there for meals but they eat in silence, constantly supervised and monitored by Papa Eugene, and then they immediately return to their rooms again.

The forth requirement is “rank” which, according to Foucault, “individualizes bodies by a location that does not give them a fixed position, but distributes them and circulates them in a network of relations” (145-46). In other words, it deals with how one fits into the community in relation to others. In Kambili’s family, Papa has the highest rank and Kambili the lowest because she is a girl and also the youngest. Ranks can change, however, so when Jaja has misbehaved, Kambili moves to a higher rank and Jaja to a lower one. Rank is one of the reasons why Kambili seems to compete with Jaja in saying things that will please Papa Eugene. “‘God will deliver us’ I said, knowing that Papa would like me saying that” (PH 26). By saying the right things and not disappointing her father, Kambili tries to keep her rank in the family.
Foucault states three reasons for these kinds of techniques and this sort of isolation: “to prevent collaboration … to promote reformatory practice, and to create a situation in which the words and power of the imprisoning and reforming power will take on even greater authority due to the relative silence of others” (236-37). The more isolated his children and his wife are from each other, the greater is Papa Eugene’s power because, according to Foucault, the prison has been: “from its beginnings in the 19th century, a means of both deprivation of liberty and the technical transformation of individuals” (233). However, as previously mentioned, Foucault also states that “prisons produce delinquents” and that “prisons brings together delinquents who then collaborate with one another” (266-67). This is exactly what happens in Kambili’s family – Mama Beatrice, Jaja and Kambili become delinquents and join together to overthrow the authority figure that is Papa Eugene.

Papa Eugene continuously uses timetables to control his children and to solidify his power over them. This is an approach described by Foucault as “control of activity” which, according to him, started in monasteries and later spread to schools and hospitals (149). Both Kambili and Jaja are given detailed timetables by Papa Eugene and every moment of their day is covered, even such things as washing their school uniforms (PH 24). When Kambili finds out that that Mama Beatrice is pregnant she speculates on when Papa will make a schedule for the baby; “if he would do it right after the baby was born or wait until he was a toddler. Papa liked order” (PH 23). When Kambili and Jaja go to Nsukka to visit their Aunt Ifeoma, Papa hands them their schedules which are very similar to the normal ones apart from the fact that “he had pencilled in two hours of ‘time with your cousins’ each day” (PH124). When they arrive in Nsukka, Aunt Ifeoma takes the timetables away and tells them that they are not to be followed while they are staying with her. Kambili, however, is so used to following her timetables that she goes to bed at the time that she knows had been pencilled in on her timetable by her father (PH 125-26).
Internal Surveillance

Kambili following her father’s timetable instructions although he is no longer present and the timetable has been taken away, is an example of the sort of internal surveillance that makes Papa Eugene so powerful. His children have “internalized” his wishes and rules and they perform them without him even asking them to so that “power relations shift from being externally imposed to being internally invoked” (Deacon 148). They have followed his orders and rules for so long and have continually been watched and spied on that they now adhere to Papa Eugene’s wishes without even thinking about it – and if they do think about it, they still follow his rules because he might find out anyway; “Papa would know somehow” (PH 196). Stobie describes Papa Eugene as Kambili’s “personal household God” (423) and if he is like a God then he must also be all-seeing and all-powerful in Kambili’s eyes and therefore she would not do things he would consider sinful. Papa Eugene has certainly succeeded in creating the perfect panoptic situation.

Kambili automatically behaves so as to please her father even when he is not there. When she is visiting in Nsukka, she averts her eyes when her cousin Amaka is undressing because, according to Papa, it is sinful to look at a naked person (PH 117). Similarly, she does not stand in front of the mirror for longer than necessary when she changes her clothes because she would feel guilty since Papa says that vanity is sinful (PH 174). Her clothes also mirror Papa’s opinions on what is decent as all her skirts finish far below the knee and she does not even have a pair of shorts nor a single pair of trousers since the wearing of trousers is sinful for a woman according to Papa Eugene (PH 80). She is tempted to try Amaka’s lipstick but immediately feels guilty: “I ran the lipstick over my lips again, and my hands shook” (PH 174). She knows that Papa Eugene would not approve.
Kambili tries hard to please her father, both through her actions and through what she says. When a song is sung in church that she thinks her father would disapprove of, she does not sing (PH 28). Similarly, she tries not to look pleased when her father is praised in church because Papa says that modesty is a virtue (PH 5). She even competes with Jaja to say things that will please their father (PH 25) and when sometimes she says the right thing, she is so pleased with Papa’s reaction that she feels as if her “mouth were full of melting sugar” (PH 26). Saying the right thing is not something that is easy for Kambili. When she tries to speak, she feels as if she has bubbles in her throat that prevent the words from coming out. It is only in Jaja’s company, when she is relaxed, that she is able to speak without difficulty (PH 154).

The physical and psychological abuse that she has endured all her life has affected her ability to express herself. It is as if the missing voice is a psycho-somatic symptom of her abuse. Bentham claims that by using surveillance, there are only two ways for a prisoner to express his rage; one is to beat his head against the walls of his cell – an action from which only the prisoner would suffer. The other would be to create trouble and disturbance through noise. Bentham’s solution for this is for the prisoner to be “subdued by gagging” (20). Kambili is gagged – not physically but mentally. She could create trouble by speaking out against Papa Eugene but her voice has been silenced and gagged through psychological abuse.

Although Kambili is able to speak to Jaja, they do not actually often do so. They have developed a quiet language between them and they do not need words. They speak with their spirits and with their eyes. Ouma argues that Kambili’s silence, and indeed the silence of the whole household, is due to the silent rituals performed in the family such as religious meditation and confession, as well as the strict schedules and the domestic violence (20). “Our steps on the stairs were as measured and silent as our Sundays . . . the silence of reflection time . . . the silence of evening rosary; the silence of driving to the church for benediction afterwards” (PH 202-203). Ordinary conversation never really takes place. The
family always eats in silence (apart from saying prayer) and the whole house is quiet and lifeless.

In complete contrast to the silence of Kambili’s home, Adichie shows the bustling, happy and loud home of Aunt Ifeoma. It is when Kambili and Jaja visit their aunt and cousins that things slowly begin to change. Aunt Ifeoma is the complete opposite to Mama Beatrice. She is lively, confident and highly opinionated and she encourages her children to speak their minds. Kambili is at first shocked by the amount of talk and laughter in Aunt Ifeoma’s house. “We always spoke with a purpose back home, especially at the table, but my cousins seemed to simply speak and speak and speak” (PH 120). What amazes her even more is the laughter in the house and when she herself laughs for the first time during her stay, she is amazed at the sound since she has never heard it before (PH 179).

Kambili’s silence makes her stay in Nsukka difficult at first because her inability to express herself makes her cousins believe she is abnormal (PH 141) and even her aunt becomes annoyed with her when she does not answer back when Amaka is being rude. When, after some prompting, she does answer back, both Amaka and her aunt seem surprised but happy (PH 170). Kambili slowly begins to speak more, knowing that she will not get into trouble for doing so, but she still envies Amaka her carefree way of speaking. She has “words flow easily out” (PH 99) when Kambili has to struggle for each word. Amaka questions her way of speaking: “Why do you lower your voice? . . . You lower your voice when you speak. You talk in whispers” (PH 101). Because she has never suffered abuse and never felt intimidated in her own home, Amaka is unable to understand how something that comes naturally to her is so difficult for her cousin.
The internalization of Papa Eugene’s rules and wishes does not only make it difficult for Kambili to speak, it also influences what she actually says. As mentioned before, Kambili tries only to say things that please her father, both to prevent him from being angry with her and to receive the praise for which she so craves (PH 39). It is, however, not only in Papa Eugene’s presence that Kambili says what is expected instead of what she intends to say; “I meant to say I am sorry Papa broke your figurines, but the words that came out were ‘I’m sorry your figurines broke, Mama’” (PH 10). Kambili cannot bring herself to say that the breaking of the figurines was her father’s fault, even when he is not there. Through her words she protects him and defends his violence.

The encouragement and freedom Kambili and Jaja experience during their visit to Nsukka is the starting point to their resistance and rebellion against their father. Through being allowed to express herself and voice opinions, Kambili has regained the voice that had gone unused for so long. Mama Beatrice can see the changes in her children and finally realises that things need to change but even before she poisons her husband, his power has started to crumble. Papa Eugene’s diminishing power is shown when he is unable to open Jaja’s door after he has shut himself in his room and placed his study desk in front of it. Papa Eugene cannot manage to push the door open but when Kambili tries a while later, it opens quite easily (PH 258-59). This shows that no matter how controlling and violent Papa Eugene is, the smallest rebellious action is enough to start diminishing his power and once his domination has been challenged, it does not take long for it all to fall apart.
Conclusion

What factors made it possible for Papa Eugene to keep such a rigid control of his wife and children for so long and why did he finally lose the firm grip in which he held his family? To begin with, the violence and torture meted out to his wife and children will have made them anxious to keep him happy so as to avoid further punishment and beatings. In addition, both Kambili and Jaja have been conditioned, one might even say brain-washed, by Papa Eugene from a very early age and since they have never experienced anything else, they do not realise that their childhood is abnormal and not like that of other children. Not only does Papa Eugene effectively imprison his children in their home, he also isolates them from each other and expects so much of them that most of their time at home is taken up with studies thus not allowing them time to think or reflect on their situation.

The children’s home is a prison to them, but as stated earlier, Foucault is of the opinion that prisons produce delinquents. He says it does so by “imposing violent constraints on its inmates; it is supposed to apply the law, and to teach respect for it; but all its functioning operates in the form of an abuse of power” (266). In Theorizing Surveillance: The Panopticon and Beyond, David Lyon is of a similar opinion stating that “the more stringent and rigorous the panoptic regime, the more it generates active resistance, whereas the more soft and subtle the panoptic strategies, the more it produces the desired docile bodies” (4). Papa Eugene is holding too firm a grip on his family which in the end turns them against him.

Papa Eugene’s hold on the family loosens when, through their trip to Nsukka, Kambili and Jaja realise that life does not have to be closed doors, beatings and silence. They realise that Papa Eugene’s punishments do not correspond to the nature of the “crimes” they have committed but that they are exaggerated. According to Foucault, “one must calculate a penalty in terms not of the crime, but of its possible repetition. One must take into account not
the past offence but the future disorder. Things must be so arranged that the malefactor can have neither any desire to repeat his offence, nor any possibility of having imitators” (93). Papa Eugene is so keen on preventing his children from making the same mistake twice that he uses excessive punishment to avoid a repetition of the offence thus alienating his children. Foucault also states that “one must punish exactly enough to prevent repetition”. It is clear to see that Papa Eugene, instead of punishing “enough,” punishes far too much. Scolding the feet of a child as punishment for seeing a person they are not supposed to see is typical of his disproportionality. Permanently disfiguring someone for having failed a few questions in an exam is excessive in the extreme.

I would like to argue that had Papa Eugene not been quite so strict or quite so violent, the rebellion against him would never have taken place. It is his extremism and dictatorial behaviour that makes his family turn away from him. Roger Deacon argues that “resistance is not an external struggle against power, but an internal and dyadic exercise of power relations, over others as much as over ourselves . . . In power as in war, action and reaction are always relational” (180). It would not have been necessary for Mama Beatrice to kill her husband had he only yielded a little bit in his children’s favour. He chose instead to stand firm and ignore what was happening in his family and as with many other rebellions and uprisings, the lack of humility and compromise eventually became his downfall.
Works Cited


