



Religious Bigotry In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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ABSTRACT

Africa has a wide range of religious beliefs and practices which are derived from the people's cherished cultural heritage and which connects the past with the present. Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* exhibits a technique of contrasting Christian characters with Traditional African ones in order to expose the contradictions of the Christian religion and its adherents in Africa. She also portrays Christianity as an extended arm of colonialism and neo-colonialism. This research employs textual or content analysis of the primary text, *Purple Hibiscus*, as well as other polemical works in evaluating and analyzing religious bigotry as a major theme in the novel. The researcher also consulted other critical works written by other critics on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novels as secondary sources. This research shows that Adichie perceives Traditional African religion as the same, if not very similar in many respects as the Christian religion which was introduced by the white missionaries. The only difference being largely in names, mode of worship and certain principles. She is not against Christianity but only frowns at the way Christianity is manipulated by some adherents, especially the educated elites, in order to exploit and subjugate others.

Keywords: Africa, Traditional Religion, Christianity, Adherents, Bigotry.

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INTRODUCTION

Yusuf Turaki, while quoting Steyne, P.M. in *Foundations of African Traditional Religion and Worldview* defines religion as: An awareness of and reaction to a living power: an ultimate concern which qualifies all other concerns which contains the answer to the questions of the meaning of life; a way of honouring oneself; a way to maintain courage;... a way of exploitation whereby deities bribe men and men in turn bribe deities; an impulse to discover what is right and what is wrong; and a search for security, success and happiness[1].

The above definition provides order and cohesion to societies through beliefs and practices of a people. This, Steyne in *God's power: A Study of the beliefs and Practice of Animists*, asserts among others that religion relates adherents to a source of power beyond themselves and thereby creates a sense of well-being. To all these, one can conclude that religion relates to belief and trust in something Supreme[2].

AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Africa has a wide range of religious beliefs and practices which are sometimes shared by many other societies. Such beliefs and practices are derived from the people's cherished cultural heritage that connect the past with the present. In Africa today, most of the people are adherents of Christianity or Islam, with just a few adherents of Traditional African religion. These three religious legacies have continued to influence the art, culture and philosophy of Africa. Africa has a history of colonialism that brought about the establishment of western civilization, commerce and Christianity by the colonialists and the Christian Missionaries. This literate culture in particular, made it possible for Africans to acquire the ability to read and write – tools that would later be used against the colonialists.

That Africa had a religion, her own history and culture is no more an issue in contest. The African concept of the Almighty God, worshipped in different ways through ritual ceremonies and divine intermediaries by various tribes and societies in Africa was given different names, but the universal God Figure happens to be the same as the colonial one. The Gikuyu people of Kenya call Him, "Murungu". The Tiv people of Benue state in Nigeria call Him, "Aondo u Baverjua" (God Almighty). He is "Chukwu" to the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria and at the same time, "Ubangiji" or "Allah" to the Hausa and Arabs. While He is called "Oluwa" by the Yoruba people, He is called "Atabuchi" by the Bekwara people of Cross River

state of Nigeria. Ngas, Tarok and other nationalities in Plateau state of Nigeria call Him either, “Nan”, Nen” or “Inan” as the case may be, just to mention but a few. All these groups of Africans believe in the existence of a Supreme Being in the ordering of African Worldview. The African Worldview has God, the Supreme Being at the top rung of the religious ladder. He is the same as the Missionary Christian God. He is only worshipped through different modes of worship and addressed by Africans in different ways.

PLOT SYNOPSIS

Purple Hibiscus opens with domestic tension in Mr. Eugene Achike’s house occasioned by Jaja’s absence from Communion. Mr. Eugene, a man of extremities with a puritanical and fanatical attachment to religious rituals, considers this as an anathema. This is unacceptable of a man who claims to be more Catholic than the Pope though with a warped and rather hypocritical sense of piety. The tension degenerates into a crisis and in the words Kambili, the protagonist of the novel and Jaja’s younger sister, “Things started to fall apart at home”[3].

Mr. Eugene is considered by his Catholic Church priest as a glaring example of a righteous man who stands for the truth and so he is held in high esteem in the Church. What the priest and others do not know is that Mr. Eugene is a high handed brute to his wife and children at home. He is an oppressor who abuses his family both verbally, physically, mentally and psychologically. He is someone who does not see or care about his father_ papa Nnukwu, because he (Papa Nnukwu) refused to convert to Catholicism. Papa, as he is fondly called by his children, is a person so completely sold on the superiority of Western culture, especially through religion as he stops at nothing to see it enforced in his own house. It is right to assert that this fixation on the western lifestyle is a resultant effect of being raised by a Catholic Missionary priest who trains him through school_ something his biological father could not do.

Eugene sees very little as being good in the African way of life. He rejects his father for being a ‘heathen’ and metes out very stiff penalties on his family, should they fail to live up to his religious expectations. Jaja, Kambili and his wife, Beatrice, live in awe of him. This is a clear example of a religious bigot who is blinded by the fanatical zeal of a hypocrite who practice religion the other way round. This trend however receives a jolt when his widowed sister, Aunty Ifeoma invites Jaja and Kambili to Nsuka to spend the holiday with her children. The reticent, timid and taciturn Kambili and Jaja breathe the fresh air of freedom for the first time in the home of their much liberated, open-minded and radical academic of an aunty.

Even though Aunty Ifeoma’s official quarters is nothing compared to the magnificence of their palatial homes, both in Enugu and their country home in Abba, it was a home where “laughter always rang out...and no matter where the laughter came from, it bounced around all the walls, all the rooms. Arguments rose quickly and fell just quickly”[3]. This new environment creates an awakening in both Kambili and Jaja as they interact with their aunt and children on one hand and Father Amadi and Papa Nnukwu, their grand- father who is despised by their father for his strong views about traditionalism, on the other. Mr. Eugene, the self-acclaimed saint negates the Biblical injunction to honour one’s parents and also forgets that even Jesus Christ dined with sinners who he came to save. Mr. Eugene on his part will not have anything to do with his father, his “heathen, pagan father”[3].

Amidst these family and religious differences, the wider Nigerian society around boils over with instability in government as a result of coups and counter coups. In a bid to reflect historical reality, Adichie graphically depict the gruesome murder and assassination of Ade Coker, the editor of Mr. Eugene’s paper, *The Standard*. There is a general air of insecurity, violence and demonstrations on the streets of cities across the country especially in Enugu. With the death of Ade Coker, like that of Dele Giwa, the founding editor in-chief of *News watch Magazine*, danger signals are sent to Mr. Eugene Achike to soft-pedal on his criticism of the Military government in power. Mr. Eugene dies after a brief illness as a result of food poison administered in his tea by his wife, Beatrice, who is driven to the wall by her husband’s heartlessness and violent abuses. She chooses to kill him in order to pave way for her survival and that of her children.

Jaja owns up to the crime of homicide and goes to jail on behalf of his mother. By the concerted efforts of Kambili and a team of solicitors, freedom is bought through bribes from the huge legacy left by their father. The novel closes with a plan by Kambili to take her brother, Jaja, after his release, first to Nsuka, then to Abba and to Americato visit Aunty Ifeoma who has relocated to America. On their return, “Jaja will plant a purple hibiscus”[3], thereby heralding the dawn of a new era.

RELIGIOUS BIGOTRY IN *PURPLE HIBISCUS*

Religion has become a tool of oppression and exploitation in the hands of adherents, especially the political elites, as a means of silencing dissenting voices. This has become a common phenomenon in modern society. Today, religion has continued to be a useful tool to educated African elites and the political class in their exploitation of the African masses. Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* satirizes the fanaticism that has become common place in modern society today. Mr. Eugene who thinks, sleeps and radiates Catholicism, holds very tenaciously to the tenets of his religious belief but lays much more

emphasis on dogma than doctrine. In his paranoid religious overzealousness, he expects everybody to think and behave like himself. This is an impossibility. For a man this pious, one expects a high degree of tolerance on his part. But no, there is no room for anybody's opinion in his "sanctimonious" home, not even his. In the words of Kambili, "Papa Nnukwu had never set his foot in it, because when papa had decreed that heathens were not allowed in his compound, he had not made an exception of his father"[3].

For a man who has chains of industries and a publishing house, his father ekes a living out of nothing because he has refused to sever relationship with his cultural values. Mr. Eugene's charity is only felt by the Church and outsiders, being the traditional title holder of "Omelora", the benefactor of his people. The big question is this: what charity it that does not begin at home? Again, Mr. Eugene does not see anything good in African tradition but he has accepted a traditional title which has no bearing with the Church and the religion he claims to profess. Hypocrisy. Papa Nnukwu wallows in poverty while other villagers and people bath in the affluence of his son. There is a great difference between Papa Nnukwu and Mr. Eugene's house:

The compound was barely a quarter of the size of our backyard in Enugu...The house that stood in the middle of the compound was small, compact like a dice, and it was hard to imagine Papa and Aunty Ifeoma growing up here... a small house with a square door at the centre and two square windows on each side[3].

Instead of patiently preaching to his father with acts of love and goodwill that would eventually win and converts his father to the Christian faith, Eugene resorts to cheap hypocritical blackmail of his father. The following quotation is an illustration of such in the novel

PapaNnukwu had told the "Umunna" how papa had offered to build him a house, buy him a car, and hire him a driver, as long as he converted and threw away the "Chi" in the thatched shrine in his yard[3].

Adichie portrays two uncompromising value systems which are equally represented by two powerful characters in *Purple Hibiscus*. While Papa Nnukwu represents the traditional African value system, Mr. Eugene, his son stands for the Pseudo-modern value system with Christianity as his guiding principle. However, Eugene's practice of Christianity is coated with extremity and fanaticism. In fact, Debpriya Das in "Domestic Violence Leading to Rising Feminism; Re-reading Purple Hibiscus" argues that the scenes in the novel are evident of how African communities and their families play hypocritical roles when culturally well-bred wise men like Eugene are applauded for their wisdom and how their barbaric nature is coated in a sense of havoc to their family members[4].

Papa Nnukwu is a traditionalist who worships God, "Chukwu" like his ancestors. He is kind, simple, plain-hearted and a tolerant father who prays daily for his children. His words as presented by Adichie in *Purple Hibiscus* are so touching: "Give me both wealth and a child, but if I must choose one, give me a child because when my child grows, so will my wealth" [3]. However, Adichie's portrayal immediately after this prayer is so disheartening of a father who prays and wishes the son well. When those prayers are answered, the father only experience regret:

Papa Nnukwu stopped, turned to look back towards out house. "Nekenem", look at me. My son owns that house that can fit in everyman in Abba, and yet many times I have nothing to put on my plate. I should not have let him follow those Missionaries"[3].

To Papa Nnukwu, Mr. Eugene's behaviour is the result of following the White Christian Missionaries. What he does not understand is that his son, Mr. Eugene only understands the Bible his own way. There are still good White Missionaries even today. Upon all these painful realities, Papa Nnukwu does not hold any grudges against his son for rejecting him. Rather, he keeps praying for his well-being. This is more the virtue of Christianity. It is unfortunate that converts like Eugene have a different and contrary ideology of Christianity. Papa Nnukwu feels that it is the Whiteman that misled his son, "I knew that the Whiteman was mad....That is why Eugene can disregard me, because he thinks we are equal"[3].

Mr. Eugene on the other hand does not see anything he has in common with his father. He denies his father both alive and in death because he (Eugene) is too "righteous" to participate in the funeral of a "heathen" yet he gives his money to Aunty Ifeoma to be spent for the father's burial. Sophia Ogwude in "History and Ideology in Chimamanda Adichie's Fiction" identifies religious intolerance as one of the multiple effects of Colonialism of cultural conflict. In her words, "Religious intolerance and its often disheartening disavowal of much of our African cultural beliefs and ways that it breed on the part of these converts, constitute an integral part of this conflict" [4]. One could be right to assert that Mr. Eugene believes that his success is predicted on his being a Catholic, hence, he dreads anything that could lead him to deviate from Catholicism and by extension, from God's special grace in his life. His attitude towards his family is therefore informed by this fear. In fact, Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* explores religious fanaticism as cultural hostility of Western Civilization against African values

which has been there since the colonial era to erase anything African from the African man and replace his psyche with western ideas as seen in Mr. Eugene, a bigot. Sophia Ogwude describes the likes of Joshua in Ngugiwa Thiong'o's *The River Between* and Mr. Eugene in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* as "heavily self-indoctrinated, self-righteous and religious ideologues" who are known for their "misrepresentation as well as misapplication, of Biblical teachings" [5].

Adichie presents Mr. Eugene's double-standard life-style as a study and a satire of religious hypocrisy. In religious circles, he is rated next only to God but at home, he is a high-handed oppressor of his wife and children.

Papa always sit in the front pew for mass, at the end beside the middle aisle, with Mama, Jaja and me sitting next to him. He is the first to receive Communion. Most people did not kneel to receive Communion...but Papa did...Father Benedict usually referred to the Pope, Papa and Jesus- in that order.... Look at Brother Eugene. He could have chosen to be like other big men in this country, he could have decided to sit at home and do nothing...Father Benedict talked about things everybody already knew, about Papa making the biggest donations to St. Peter's Pence and St. Vincent de Paul... [3].

He dehumanizes his family in the name of religion. It is little wonder that his children turn against him and his wife murders him as a measure that could ensure the survival of other members of the family. A man with a great sense of inhibition, he sees nothing good in the African culture_ the language, religion and even the system of government in the country. But according to Kambili, "Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja did not go to Communion"[3].

Jaja's absence from Communion is not an act Mr. Eugene can tolerate. Kambili observe these changes and wonders the sudden change in attitude of her brother. Apart from refusing to attend Communion, Jaja introduces other defiant behaviours that Kambili had never seen before. He replies his father without fear. At lunch, Jaja refuse to share his thoughts about the juice produced by the house help and remains silent even when the father asked if he had no compliments in his mouth. Jaja's reply is shocking, "Mba, there are no words in my mouth" [3]. Jaja also leave the dining table without waiting for Mr. Eugene to say the usual family prayer after meals, an act that Mr. Eugene interprets as rebellion. To Kambili:

Nsuka started it all...Jaja's defiance seemed to me now like Auntie Ifeoma's experimental purple hibiscus: rare, fragrant with the undertones of freedom, a different kind of freedom from the one the crowds waving green leaves chanted at government square after the coup. A freedom to be, to do[3].

Kayode Odumboni in "Chimamanda Adichie's Characters in the Eye of Freudian Complexes: A psychoanalytic Reading of *Purple Hibiscus*" argues that there is a pervading sense of imprisonment in Eugene Achike's home. He further argue that "All the characters in the novel are caught in a search for freedom. Along with their mother, Kambili and Jaja find themselves in a prison of a home"[6].

Mr. Eugene's household could be said to be a foil to Ifeoma's. Adichie uses Auntie Ifeoma and Amaka, Ifeoma's daughter, to represent the Feminist ideology that runs through the novel. In fact, Adichie uses Ifeoma and Amaka to challenge some norms and expresses her radical views about what should be in both political and religious circles. Mr. Eugene's children are caged at home in such a way that contact with the outside world is not allowed. This restriction is not just because of the tall fence around their home but so that they will remain uncorrupted. Because of this, Kambili cannot keep a conversation with her Cousins talk less of her mates in school. Everything of hers starts and ends with her Puritanical father. The exposure to Auntie Ifeoma's household sowed seeds of skepticism in Jaja's mind as he starts questioning religion as to why God had to murder his own son(Jesus) to save mankind. "Why didn't He (God) just go ahead and save us"[3]. These seeds of freedom to think, make decisions and act culminates into Jaja making important decisions of taking responsibility for his actions and those of the family. Taking responsibility of the father's murder is the climax of this decision. Charlotte Larson in "Surveillance and Rebellion: A Foucauldian Reading of Chimamanda NgoziAdichie's *Purple Hibiscus*" argue that "The encouragement and freedom Kambili and Jaja experienced during their visit to Nsuka is the starting point of their resistance and rebellion against their father"[7].

Auntie Ifeoma is disappointed in her brother's brutality to family members. Ifeoma advises Beatrice, Mr. Eugene's wife to divorce the husband and run away from the marriage because of his brutality against her.

This cannot go on... When a house is on fire, you run out before the roof collapse on your head... I will tell him our father is dead, so there will be no threatening heathen in my house. I want Kambili and Jaja to stay with us, at least at Easter. Park your own things and come to Nsuka. It will be easier for you to leave when they are not there[3].

One therefore imagines the kind of religious bigot and hypocrite that Mr. Eugene is and the kind of brutality and violence the family is subjected to that his own blood sister will plot the end of his marriage out of pity for the wife. In fact, Adichie states that Auntie Ifeoma is the only one who could confront and tell Mr. Eugene his fault in the face without fear. He is indirectly afraid of her than anyone else. Adichie's portrayal of Auntie Ifeoma's character in *Purple Hibiscus* conforms to Itang Ede Egbung's commendation of Akachi Ezeigbo's character portrayal in her literary oeuvres. In the article, "Re-inventing the African Woman: Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*" Egbung asserts that:

She (Ezeigbo) empowers and equips her female characters by making them the watchdogs of society. Their roles enable them to resist exploitation, oppression, marginalization and the violation of women's rights by men. Those who violate women's rights are made to suffer the consequences.^[8]

This conformity goes to justify TanureOjaide's assertion in "The Perils of a culture-less African Literature in the age of Globalization" that "An African writer needs to project Africanity to remain an identifiable personality in a world of many cultures despite claims of cosmopolitanism or globalism"[9].

Adichie portrays Beatrice as an archetype of the dehumanized, oppressed and downgraded African woman suffering in the hands of a heartless, chauvinistic bigot of a husband. Having suffered many miscarriages as a result of brutality from her husband, she is a symbol of the perseverance and long suffering qualities of the African woman who has finally acted. Her actions provides a catharsis that purges the sympathy of the audience for Mr. Eugene whose sudden death is least expected.

CONCLUSION

It is true that writers draw inspiration from the history of their societies as it is at the time of writing and they depict the various changes obtainable in their societies as they seek to express what they wish their societies to be. Adichie's power of observation, especially the milieu around her, places her above her contemporaries. She combines the technique of flashback and the first person narrative style to paint a rounded picture of her themes and the characters playing these roles. In the true tradition of female writers, she explores the journey motif in a most subtle and impressive manner. She has succeeded in making good judgment on sensitive human conditions. One can conveniently and emphatically conclude that it is Mr. Eugene's bigotry, extremism and dictatorial behaviour that makes his whole family turn against him. Individuals as well as government needs to be purged of such dictatorial tendencies for society to be free.

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