

Religion and Oppression: Analysing Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Purple Hibiscus*.

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Abstract

*This paper examines how Christianity creates individuals who shun their own traditional beliefs and at the same time oppress those close to them, by drawing analogies between Christianity and Traditional African Religion. Religion is a double edged sword in many ways. It has many positive impacts but has no shortage of negative ones either. Of the plethora of harmful effects it can have, some include rejection or repression of freedom of thought, a communal superiority complex, division within societies and families, loss and removal of critical thought and an opportunity for justification for evil actions. All of these involve oppression inflicted upon, or by the believer. Eugene who is the protagonist of Adichie's *The Purple Hibiscus* loggerheads with his father Papa- Nnukwu whom he calls a heathen because of his beliefs. The oppressive nature of the protagonist towards his fellow beings and the act of violence, strict discipline and aggression suppress the voices of his loved ones and their insurgency.*

#religion #oppression #adiche

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2004) is not only entertaining but apt, compelling and revealing as it questions the nature of love, oppression, imprisonment and suffering through religious and political phenomena. The book unravels the complex analogies that exist between religion and politics which expose individual foibles as they interact and intertwine with the national discourse. The writer explores the oppressive nature of religion on the individual psyche, the need for tolerance and compromise as well as hypocritical tendencies in religious circles.

In terms of plot structure, *Purple Hibiscus* is essentially a story that is entirely woven around Eugene Achike, father to Kambili and Jaja, and husband to Beatrice. Eugene

strikes us as the protagonist in the story, even though it is entirely told from the point of view of the fifteen-year old Kambili. *Purple Hibiscus* begins in a *medias res* (it starts in the middle of the action) when Jaja, having returned from their holiday at Auntie Ifeoma's at Enugu, de-mythifies Papa, by flagrantly absconding from holy communion. Kambili, the narrator states, in the opening sentence of the novel: "Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurine on the étagère" (Adiche 3).

This development later charts the course of action that the story will advance. In the subsequent chapters of the novel, Adichie gives an account of the choking atmosphere that has engulfed the household, a result of Papa's highhandedness and blind religious fanaticism. We are further led into all the actions that warrant Jaja's deviance to his father: the children's (both Jaja and Kambili) interaction with freedom at Auntie Ifeoma's house at Nsukka; how the children have gained self-confidence and self-belief after meeting their cousins. As a result of this interaction, a comparison of the condition of life in both homes – Achike's and Auntie Ifeoma's is brought to fore. Meanwhile, hitherto to the children's trip to Nsukka, Papa is associated with all forms of domestic violence in the house. Then later on in the novel, the story shifts to the present where Jaja has defied his father's dictatorial stance and drifts to the anti-climax where Papa is dead and Jaja is imprisoned and released and Auntie Ifeoma and her liberal-minded children have relocated abroad.

Interestingly, Chimamanda is able to weave meaning through a very subtle but powerful manipulation of language. Though simple and easy to understand, the language strikes us with much precision and intelligence so much that one might mistake Adichie for a native speaker of the English language. Of course there is more than a mere display of mastery of the language; Adichie has equally demonstrated her originality and true African nay Nigerian Identity through her manoeuvre of both English and Igbo, the latter being her mother tongue, since she is originally from the Eastern part of Nigeria. This, she handles so skilfully and meticulously that she has often been compared with the Nigerian's foremost and finest novelist, Chinua Achebe, for his blend of English and Igbo in most of his novels, especially his one of the world's most celebrated debuts, *Things fall Apart*. Indeed, Adichie's literary savoir faire in her premiere novel entitled *Purple Hibiscus* cannot be overemphasized.

In Traditional African Religion women are expected to submit to their husbands. Religion places a burden on the woman as she is expected to suffer in silence and men take advantage of this. Marriage as enshrined in the Bible is a good thing whose sanctity should be

respected, and in most cultures a woman who is not married or is divorced is usually frowned upon and if the marriage does not bear fruits, the burden is exacerbated.

Women suffer in silence as they usually have to rely on men for their upkeep. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explores the oppressive nature of religion on the individual psyche, the need for tolerance and compromise as well as hypocritical tendencies inherent in religious circles in *Purple Hibiscus* (2004), in the same way that Mongo Beti does, though satirically, in *Mission to Kala* (1957).

To the outside world, Eugene is a devout Catholic, pious and modest. “ Papa always sat in the front pew for mass, at the end beside the middle aisle, with Mama, Jaja and me sitting next to him. He was first to receive communion. Most people did not kneel to receive communion at the marble altar... but Papa did. He would hold his eyes shut so hard that his face tightened into a grimace.” (Adichie 4)

Eugene is held in high esteem by both priest and congregation of the church he attends regularly with his family – St. Agnes Catholic Church. He also features regularly in Father Benedict’s sermon, lauded as a role model to be emulated and revered. Kambili reveals: “Father Benedict usually referred to the Pope, Papa, and Jesus – in that order. He used Papa to illustrate the gospels...” (4).

As a philanthropist, Eugene disperses his largesse to both church and community, which earns him the title ‘The One Who Does for the Community’. As a human rights activist, Eugene uses his newspaper, ‘The Standard’, as a tool of his crusade to expose, challenge and criticize the ills of the government. This earns him an award from Amnesty World. In contrast, the Eugene Achike we meet at the homefront is a violent, abusive husband, father, brother and son, who holds his family hostage to his vicious attacks.

Eugene’s irrational bouts of violence which manifest in the beating of his pregnant wife until she miscarried; the scalding of his daughter’s feet; and the deformity of his son’s finger are, therefore, written off as ‘accidents’ to protect him from being exposed for the monster that he is. However, it is not by accident that Adichie highlights Eugene’s inherent violence and the resultant symbolic destruction at the opening of the novel: “Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the étagère.” (Adichie 3)

In the excerpt above, the two facets of Eugene’s life - the pious Christian, on the one hand, and the violent abuser, on the other, are encapsulated, presenting us with a vivid image of Eugene’s ‘Jekyll and Hyde’ personality. Psychoanalysts propose that spiritual damage is one of the most insidious effects of child abuse. This manifests in Jaja’s open defiance of his

father through his refusal to receive communion in church. His irreverent reference to the 'host' as 'wafer' and the touch of the priest as 'nauseating' is sacrilege to Eugene. However, this incident marks the beginning of Jaja's rebellion against his father and religion, which propels Eugene's violence, and offers him absolution after each atrocity. Jaja's rejection of communion strips it of its essence and spiritual significance, and shocks his father and sister, Kambili, who reminds him of its supposed significance: "It is the body of our Lord...you cannot stop receiving the body of our Lord. It is death, you know that... (Adichie 6). Although Jaja fears the implication of his action, death is evidently preferable to his father's brutality and hypocrisy, and so, he responds: "... Then I will die, Papa" (Adichie 7). This response marks the genesis of Jaja's resolve to protect his mother and sister from the atrocities of his father in spite of consequent reprisals. Jaja's spiritual psyche has been damaged by his father; anything else is bearable after that.

Eugene subjects his children to extreme physical violence in the guise of discipline: he slaps Kambili for getting to the car late when the driver picks her up from school; lashes her with a leather belt for breaking a Eucharist fast; mutilates Jaja's left hand and deforms his little finger for missing two questions in a catechism test; scalds Kambili's tender feet with boiling water for being in possession of her grandfather's picture and worse, for trying to prevent its destruction - a situation which earns her broken ribs and internal injury.

In addition to physical violence, Eugene subjects his family to various forms of psychological trauma: a strict study regimen which denies his children many of the little joys of childhood (such as wearing play clothes, watching television or listening to music); lack of regular contact with their aunt and cousins; disallowing them from developing a close relationship with their grandfather. Eugene does not only deny his family the joy of interacting with his father, he also denies his father the love, security and the financial assistance that should have been his by virtue of his position as the legitimate father of a wealthy son; a right, which, in the African society, is accorded great respect and reverence. However, this situation persists until his father's death. Eugene absolutely refuses to have any contact with his father unless he converts to Christianity.

When his father dies Eugene declares that he "cannot participate in a pagan funeral" unless they "can discuss with the parish priest and arrange a Catholic Funeral", to which his sister responds, "Was our father a Catholic?" (Adichie 189).

His wife and children are always at the brunt of his beliefs. Mama, his wife suffers silently as she is always caught in the crossfire. She suffers a miscarriage as a result of her husband's blind brutality. The suppression, violation or restrictions of religious freedom have

caused suffering and bitterness, moral and material hardship, and even today there are millions of people enduring these evils.

Adichie highlights a very important aspect of family life - parenthood - and points out, through *Purple Hibiscus*, that the decisions parents make about their roles in families will have a deep and lasting influence on the lives and personalities of their children. She draws attention to the fact that motherhood is an important role in the family on which the well-being of the family and the nation may be justifiably claimed to depend. Women, mothers especially, should, therefore, be appreciated, respected, loved and cared for, and these privileges should be allowed them from the home by the parents, husbands and all males of the clan or group who must ensure that their lives are peaceful, just and humane.

In the climactic conclusion of the novel, the characters split out of their shells and change in surprising, if not shocking ways. The entropy and rebellion that has been fueling throughout the book ignites in a fatal spark, and the rule of empire burns down. Adichie creates a masterful work with *Purple Hibiscus*, a work that is carefully planted, lovingly tended and brilliantly bloomed. She satisfies her readers with a messy ending, not one that is too tidy or conclusive, where at the end our characters must undoubtedly face a new set of hardships and hurdles, like life.

As Pope John Paul II stated: "True religious feeling cannot fail to promote true peace. The public authorities, by recognizing - as they should - religious liberty, favour the development of the spirit of peace at the deepest level of people's hearts and in the educational institutions fostered by believers"(Evangelium Vitae 18).

Works Cited

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