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Representation of Chauvinistic Model of Religion and Individualistic Nature of Faith in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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Abstract: Religion always exerts a reflective influence on every individual and society. Throughout history, we have witnessed that religion is considered as a major force for societal growth, inspiring people to enhance spiritual qualities, and motivating people to contribute to the betterment of the communities. But at the same time, it is also acknowledged that religion has been the foundation for prejudice, social degeneration, tyranny, hatred and chauvinism. This paper, therefore, re-examines the issues of faith in the personal and social domain in the colonial time and study the conflict between Catholic and traditional Igbo practice through the novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) written by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Colonialism is one of the major reasons for the religious intolerance and bigotry. This article focuses on the corruption and religious fundamentalism that grips the people of Nigerian country in colonial epoch. Through the different characters Eugene, Kambili and Ifeoma my paper explores the concept of religious chauvinism as cultural hostility and explains how the individualistic nature of faith surpasses all. In this paper, I argue how a traditional way of life of Nigerian people is struggling with a newer westernized lifestyle and also highlight the dangers inherent in religious zeal.

Keywords: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Colonialism, Religious chauvinism, Igbo practice, Cultural hostility

Introduction

Religion always considered as a set of beliefs, principles and feelings which constitute the relation between human being to divinity. Religion shapes the life of the individual and provides wisdom to

understand the worldly things. It always exercises a profound control over all individuals and communities. Throughout history, religion always regarded as something that bestows humanity, meaning and purpose as well as morality for people to choose their path of life. It brings significance to individual lives and acts as a form of motivating force. As Jesus rightly said: “Man shall not live by bread alone” (Deuteronomy 8: 2-3), religion can provide communal rationality and can convey a sense of hope and inspiration to the society. Over the centuries religion has brought mankind together and enthused the world's greatest art, writing and architecture to flourish and direct humanity.

Though religion exerts a sense of purpose and belonging, it also divides mankind and becomes a source of conflict between a group of people and community. In today's time, religion is considered as one of the utmost intimidation to the right of human being and national developments especially in the third world countries like the groups in Nigeria and other parts of Africa. Religious fundamentalism has grown excessively in these countries which worsen the economic fortunes, corrupt management and increase the ethnic tensions due to which external influences from extremist groups subdue the nation and spreads its own ideologies. Therefore catastrophic effect occurs in postcolonial Nigeria due to religious conflicts and ethnic tension which leads to oppression of people by dominant powers.

The renowned and celebrated African author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is born in Nigeria in 1977 and represents the issue of faith in personal and social sphere by emphasizing the degenerating effect of patriarchal authority, religious fundamentalism, the Nigerian government, and effects of education in her works. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* is one such novel based on religious fundamentalism that grips Eugene Achike who is a stern follower of Catholicism in postcolonial Nigeria – a country tormented from economic difficulties and political irrationality and focuses on the degeneration of 15-years old Kambili's family. Eugene Achike is the head of the family who is quite wealthy but a religious fanatic and staunch Catholic who mercilessly punishes his family whenever they break any rules or miss any schedule set by Eugene. His wife Beatrice had miscarriage twice due to the cruel behaviour of Eugene and his children Kambili and Jaja (Chukwuka Achike) have to face their father's

cruelty whose rigorous ill-treatment will leave a long-lasting wound in their physical and emotional life.

The individualistic nature of faith occurs when both Kambili and Jaja start spending their time with their aunt Ifeoma who is Eugene's sister, and with their cousins who were more frank and liberated. They experience a family life which is totally different to their own family, instead of a small packed house with little food Kambili and Jaja feel more comfortable and free in such environment rather than their big furnished house. Ifeoma plays an important role in shaping Kambili and Jaja's life. She is also Catholic like Eugene but her beliefs and practices are completely different and flexible to that of her brother, she supports Nigerian Pro-democracy movement and still preserves the Igbo faith in herself. She gives confidence to Kambili and Jaja to realize their own sense of individuality which they afraid to give voice. The spiritual, submissive fifteen-year-old protagonist gradually comes to recognize her father's duplicity, fanaticism and exploitation, which reflect similar practices in the cathedral and in the Nigerian government. In novel therefore also reflects how women persistently fight from orthodox tradition, from male domination and from socio-economically forbidding of women to accomplish their most wanted freedom. Michael in his review admires the narrative for its captivating characters especially Kambili whose strength towards religious oppression is amazing and her thoughts are so eloquent which makes the book more stunning to read. He asserts that "You feel as if you stumbled upon someone's thoughts in a room and know their deepest darkest secrets. You want to leave the room and respect their privacy but you are so intrigued by them that you stay and dine with them and before you know it you and the thoughts are having dinner together and wondering what will happen next" (Wamathai, 2011).

The conflict between Catholic and Traditional Igbo Practice

In order to grasp the theme of the novel, it is important to understand the background setting in *Purple Hibiscus*. The political setting of the novel takes place when Nigeria was a colony of British Imperial system since the last 160 years. After the independence lot of areas in Africa especially Nigerian social order was profoundly influenced by the western social culture. The whole socio-political, economic, educational and religious bodies were under the sway of British colonizers. The

Western missionaries had a great role in transforming the native people of Africa whom they regarded as “heathen”, “savages” or “under-class citizens”. They want to civilize and enlighten the black natives through their religious beliefs, education and moral principles, and make them convert into Christianity to follow civilize Christian way of life. They got successful in their mission by educating and influencing the young mind of Africans and start repudiating the natives’ traditions of idolatry, witchcraft and spirituality which leads to the conflict between Christianity and traditional Igbo religion. They compel and force the natives to change according to the western view of religiousness which includes prayer, purity and fasting and considered it an important part of Christian rituals. Thus the main ideology of colonizers is to dominate and exploit the colonized nation and extract the maximum benefits from them. The white missionaries intention was not only to convert the native African people into Christianity but also to transform their custom, beliefs, culture even their language and every bit of part in their selves and their native land. Nigerians and other parts of Africans get fused with the western culture and tradition and start rejecting their own religion and practices.

The novel *Purple Hibiscus* takes place at the time of civil war and multiple military coups in Nigeria where people were inherently disturbed and terribly affected by the system of the Nigerian government. It portrays the dynamics of the Achike family who also adheres to the western culture and strictly follows the principles of it. Eugene Achike, a stern and unsympathetic catholic, is the head of the family who regularly blows up on his pitiable family members and punishes anyone who disrespects his rules and principles. His wife Beatrice and children Kambili and Jaja lead a life full of domination and constant fear of him. The beginning of the novel which conveys, “Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his missal across the room and broke the figurines on the *étagère*” (Adichie 3).

The opening scene of *Purple Hibiscus* title, “Breaking Gods, Palm Sunday” is metaphoric and shows how Achike split the figurines which console his wife whenever he bodily ill-treated her with his missal, which he considered as an emblem of his Catholic faith. By breaking the figurines and devastating his missal represents the increased domination

by Catholic convictions and missionaries and also shows that the things start falling apart in Eugene life and his family. The reference of the line "Things Fall Apart" has been taken from one of the famous novels by Chinua Achebe who writes about the domination of colonialism to a village and coming of missionaries in Nigeria. Achebe was one of Adichie's important inspirations which show in her novel that begins years after the independence of Nigeria from colonialism but still, the influences of missionaries and Britishers were still alive. The new military power has taken place which was one of the most corrupted regimes in Nigerian history where there were constant coups and civil wars. In the middle of all this, the wealthy Achike family is devoted to the Catholic religion and found Igbo traditional practices as inferior. Being a result of colonial education Eugene considered Traditional Igbo practice as ridiculous and always abhors the Nigerian aboriginal culture. He is a faithful attendant to British colonizers who teach him in British Universities and instruct him for whites' mission. He makes sure that his family strictly follows the Catholic tradition and does his best to guard his children against the brutality and primitiveness of African natives. The cultural and educational ideology of the whites brainwashes the young Nigerian natives who think turning into catholic will rescue them from backwardness and leads to a successful life. Eugene holds the same ideology against Nigerian culture and believes in the eradication of all the native doctrines to save his family from being called "heathen" which he considered his own father Papa Nnukwu, who believes in paganism and hold the ancestral beliefs in himself. Though Eugene blindly chases the western culture, his children Kambili and Jaja realize the true nature of western colonization and revolt against the domination of western cultural hegemony. In *Black Skin White Masks*, Frantz Fanon explain the exact situation which corresponds to Eugene, according to Fanon,

The Negro's behaviour makes him akin to an obsessive neurotic type, or, if one prefers, he puts himself into a complete situational neurosis. In the man of colour, there is a constant effort to run away from his own individuality, to annihilate his own presence. (Fanon 43)

The problem of race, culture and religion is not individual but communal which affects the African natives psychologically and they start longing to be white because whiteness for them is everything which makes their

life authoritative socially and the black person at the same time have to struggle hard to prove his identity. All this makes the black people neurotic as they are inhibiting their own self and at the end, they never attain the whiteness. Eugene behaviour also reflect the same tendency when he shows the discrimination between his own father Nnukwu whom he always neglects and criticize for practising Igbo tradition and on the other hand he is respectful and friendly towards his father-in-law because he is devout Catholic, light skinned and speaks English fluently. Eugene actions are comparable to Fanon's theoretical arguments because it reflects the psychological consequences of western cultural imperialism, as he put efforts to imitate the whites in every manner to accelerate his development and promote himself to the rank of a nobleman.

Although Eugene is a colonial product but his children Kambili and Jaja does not have the colonial mindset and always recognize the cruelty of his father. They have a special language of glances which is mentioned in the second section of the book "Speaking with Our Spirits, Before Palm Sunday". It describes that they speak in special kind of words by using their eyes and never converse openly about Papa's violent behaviour. They also share their language of the eyes whenever they break Papa's set of laws and have a sense of guilt. They love and idolize their father very much and always continue their schedule set by their father even without Papa there to impose it. While Eugene follows the ideas on sin, violence and punishment, his children suppress the memory of whipping and seeks Papa's attention and love all time. The transformation occurred in children when they start spending their time with their Grandfather and cousins and when they went to their aunt Ifeoma's house on vacation. Aunty Ifeoma emerges as an important character to enlighten Jaja and Kambili and shows them a different kind of self-determination and interpersonal connection. She is a tall, frank, fearless, well-educated and liberal woman who is intelligent and forceful as his brother Eugene, but open-minded and flexible catholic. She introduces traditional Igbo culture for the first time to Jaja and Kambili in Igbo Festival at Ezi Icheke which Eugene always tried to stay away from their children. Ifeoma's children are more casual and frank as she teaches them with free will while Eugene teaches by imposing a strict rule which hamper their children's intellectual growth. Ifeoma's powerful

talk and confidence act as an awakening for Jaja and Kambili who later become more poised and determined. Apart from making them free-minded, she also teaches them to sing rosary which announces their sincerity that Igbo is as good as English and not superior. Thus Adichie represents the conflict between two religions, one that is dominant and stern while the other is more flexible and bearing and reveals her own flexibility towards religion. She is perceived as a progressive writer who conveys the challenge between the revival of Igbo tradition and the domination of western Catholic religion in her text. She had never witnessed western colonization personally but her family had been badly affected as she lost her grandfathers in the Biafran War in Nigeria.

Impact of Religion

Religious dogmatism is one of the main themes in the novel which hovers in every section of the book. It is interesting and captivating the way Adichie exhibits an extreme despotic impact of religious obstinacy in her novel *Purple Hibiscus*. According to Jaco Beyers in his article "What is Religion? An African understanding" (2010), he states that religion has many perspectives and theories which overshadow the real meaning of religion and due to the dominance of Western background the whole existence of religion has become Eurocentric in Africa. Thus religion is socially constructed by the way human makes choices and selections which later define their cultural system, therefore different people have a different idea about divinity.

Ifeoma and Eugene's ideology of religion is the result of western colonialism which compels them to make their choices according to the social system. Ifeoma's sociability, mesmerizing personality, frank attitude, and fearless speeches and personality provoke Eugene's authoritarian Eurocentric beliefs. Being a fierce Catholic, he considers the candid and casual attitude of women as a sin, this is the reason he never supports his sister Ifeoma even if she is a widow having three children. Eugene's uncompromising attitude reveals when Kambili says, "Although I tried to concentrate on Mass, I kept thinking of Amaka's lipstick, wondering what it felt like to run colour over your lips" (Adichie 89).

Kambili was not allowed to do anything which is against the conduct of Christianity and the rules set by his father. Eugene has a

certain declaration for the women of his house in which Amaka and Ifeoma are not included and those avowals need to follow blindly without question. Even a small thing like lipstick Kambili cannot wear according to her own will which has a symbolic representation of life and freedom. Eugene firm Catholicism embraces disparaging of women's bodies; women are not permitted to show their legs or hairs, Beatrice is also crushed for feeling sick from her pregnancy and there is no space for Kambili's menstrual cramps on the morning mass – she need to have breakfast before taking pill for menstrual pain but having breakfast results in punishment thus Eugene belts all of them for this sin.

Although Eugene thinks himself as a fervent Christian but in reality he is a hypocrite who does not follow Christianity at home and this proves when he throws missal which is a sacred book of God just to show his fury to his family, all this reflect his insincerity towards God and towards his religion. He believed that Christianity is all about being spiritual and philanthropic and doesn't bother with materialistic approach but in reality Christian colonization was based on exploiting African resources – in novel also there are many shreds of evidence which show that the cathedral and priest are only concerned with the money and lavish lifestyle and least concerned about the tribulations of the people, “After all, how many of you give to this church, *Igbo*? How can we build the house if you don't give?” (Adichie 90) Being a wealthy factory owner, Eugene always makes people happy by throwing money on them and ardently follows Father Benedict who is the epitome of the long History of British Colonialism in Nigeria. He even tried to bribe her own sister and father and offer them money as long as they started to pursue Roman Catholic religion, but Ifeoma and Papa Nukwu are so adamant that they reject Eugene offer and chose independence over wealth. Instead of being a product of missionary school Ifeoma has an absolutely different impact of religion, she believes in Catholicism but also retains her native Igbo Tradition practices in the same way as Adichie holds her belief in ancestral culture. Though Eugene is wealthier and ifeoma has a scarcity of money but her family was much happier and contented than Eugene's. Ifeoma has financial crises but still, she supports her father and provides him medicines and she has no fear of taking her children to non-Christian carnival because she is respectful towards her father's tradition. Eugene's Pro-Western beliefs make his family see God as

White like Father Benedict because whiteness signifies as purity, divinity and holiness to them. Ifeoma always teaches her children to speak confidently in public as well as in private and encourages others also to speak with their mind. Amaka, Ifeoma's eldest daughter already thinks herself as an activist and this reveals when she openly criticizes Eugene's factory juice "It's a little too sweet. It would be nicer if you reduced the sugar in it." (Adichie 98) She never hesitates to speak about things, she always rebuffs Eurocentric approach that whiteness is superior, she listens to her native Igbo song, even painted Jesus as "dark-skinned" and always assert her pride being a Nigerian. Hence, Adichie represents two siblings who are totally different from their religious approach despite their similar upbringing and learning. Eugene prefers English with stern Catholicism whereas Ifeoma chooses Igbo with supple Christianity that permits her for non-Catholic tradition. He perceives religion only in black and white or sinful or not whereas Ifeoma ponders on interpersonal relations. Enugu is always voiceless and frightening for Kambili and Jaja while Nsukka becomes a source of enlightenment for them. It is the place where they find purple hibiscus, a unique flower which symbolizes intellectual freedom, independence and friendship. The flower inspires Jaja and Kambili to seek for their independence and asserts their individuality, thus purple hibiscus also gives the title to the novel.

Dangers inherent in religious zeal

In her literary work, *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie mentions the dangers of religious dogmatism and bring it into the limelight through the character of Eugene. Eugene is following a hypocritical, dictatorial and depraved kind of life which is an accurate example of patriarchal dominance that found mostly in Nigerian house. The living standard of his wife and children might be very aristocratic and upper-class but they have a constant fear of punishment and rage of Papa who left no space for their idleness or free time. Eugene is so much absorbed with the Roman Catholic tradition that he starts behaving like a maniac and even for the minor things he punishes severely until they hospitalize; this is evident when Kambili narrates

When I opened my eyes, I knew at once that I was not in my bed. The mattress was firmer than mine. I made to get up, but pain shot through my whole body in exquisite little packets. I collapsed back. (Adichie 211)

Kambili was burned by boiling water for hiding the fact from her father that Papa Nnukwu was coming and also that she is sharing a room with her grandfather whom Papa considered as “heathen”. She did all this intentionally because she has affection for her grandfather and wanted to spend more time with him. Eugene has become a puzzled side-effect of post-colonialism, who is completely lost between Igbo culture that he discarded, and harsh outlook of Roman Catholicism which he followed under the supervision of Father Benedict and become entirely a hallow person. Kambili recognizes that her father is abusiveness and realizes that her grandfather was innocent and not a heathen. Though Eugene always criticizes at the new military government in his newspaper Standard, he never realizes that he himself is the figure of military dictatorship in his home who unnecessarily whipping his family, confining their relations with members of his extended family and set a perfunctory lifestyle for his children. The reason behind this cruelty and brutality is that Eugene's own past background was full of violence and punishment. He was punished, in the same ways as he penalizes his family, by the missionary priests at his school time and believed that punishment is the only ultimate rescue from sin and hell. In similar ways, he wants to help his children and wife to get rid of wrongdoings and misery and save their soul from hell.

Patriarchal domination and suppression of women are very common in Nigeria and even in African continent during colonial times. The traditional precedence of masculinity is revealed in the novel when Papa Nnukwu is imploring that his dowager daughter will find a good husband who can look after her and her children. On the other hand, her daughter Ifeoma instead of marriage hope for a promotion in her career and livelihood and all this shows a modification in contemporary outlook on gender issues. Women were believed to be very submissive and compliant towards men and not supposed to involve in any social matter. Their personhood ends in the kitchen and they need to surrender their life towards domestic servitude. In purple hibiscus, Adichie represents women whose silences are used as a weapon against patriarchy and they overcome their domination with their voice and sense of freedom. In Eugene Achike’s family, members of the household live in a boisterous silence which reveals when Kambili narrates in the following lines thus

The silence was broken only by the whirl of the ailing fan as it sliced through the still air. Although our spacious dining room gave way to an even wider living room, I felt suffocated. (Adichie 15)

The ambience of Eugene's home is so domineering that his family can only speak in the words of silence and are not permitted to be expressive, thus, Eugene violence has made them voiceless. This voiceless-ness and silence are so deep and eccentric that his family feels 'suffocated' by it. Out of suffocation and harassment, Beatrice takes a huge step – killing Eugene by making him consume rat poison and setting herself and her children free from the clutches of violence, abuse and cruelty. In order to liberate herself and her children from the years of physical torture and psychological enslavement, Beatrice needs to destroy Eugene's life, thus it reveals that severe religious dogmatism always leads to the threatening of life. The killing of Eugene by Beatrice is the symbolic representation of the hidden rage of colonized people against British colonizers who have stolen their freedom and liberty. Nevertheless, it is the Jaja who has to compensate for a huge price for this new-born liberty as he has taken all the allegations of murder of his father and saves his mother's life. Due to the charge of murder by poisoning his father, he was imprisoned for three years. Even after the death of Eugene, Beatrice would not be able to gain her consciousness because her torture was so profound that she is unable to recover from it. Jaja also escaped from the dictatorship of Papa's rule but situates to another tyranny in a prison which runs by a crooked regime thus Jaja has withdrawn into silence once again. It's only Kambili who alone has retained the sense of liberty and speech and sings Igbo songs and laugh effortlessly. Though Eugene's domination and cruelty end, still there is "different silence" prevails in the life of Beatrice and her children, but this silence is less repressive and exploitive than the previous one.

Aunty Ifeoma who is a figure of divine inspiration is totally different from her brother Eugene who is a symbol of despotic colonialism. Her upbringing of children allows them to have their own beliefs and sustain their own aspiration which is a symbolic representation of purple hibiscus whereas Eugene children were in constant fear of punishment and wrongdoings. Amaka, Ifeoma elder daughter started calling herself as an activist and more moderate than

Kambili, Obiora who is three years younger than Jaja has taken a role of the man in the house and have the sense of responsibilities. Ifeoma who is a polar opposite from Eugene's authority, she is so liberal and flexible towards her religion, fights with the corrupt institution and starts her new life in America. She never believes in the stiffness of religious conviction and stands against Eugene's dogmatism. She also encourages people to speak with their mind and never scared to disparage her brother's religious fundamentalism, the university biasness or the cruelty of the Nigerian government.

The Issues of Faith and Quest for Identity

Since there was a British Empire rule in Nigeria, lots of issues regarding faith and identity occurred and had serious consequences for its native population. The severely affected groups by colonialism are women who were made imperceptible in the African Society, and suffer both the sides by colonizers and by the conventional society. They have experienced the loss of absolute faith and love and always quest for psychological autonomy. The novel *Purple Hibiscus* also located in Nigeria where Achike's family is represented as "small world" of a homeland and cathedral that requires transformation. Frantz Fanon in his influential book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, says that "the colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards (Fanon 18).

Due to the arrival of the missionaries, the native Igbo people of Nigeria lose their indigenous faith and the succeeding generation was converted into Catholicism as a result came in conflict with their ancestors and family who carry their old sacraments. Though Papa Nnukwu lives in the nearby house to his son Eugene's house in the hometown, still he is not permitted to meet with his own son's family because his son considers him as 'heathen' who did not convert into Christianity. Eugene did not even bother to attend his father's funeral when his father dies, as the cremation would not follow according to Catholic customs. His sense of supremacy for his western religion makes him a hypocrite and makes him proud of being a product of missionary. Earlier it was shown that Eugene was a prop of the community who is a 'man to watch' and enthusiast Roman Catholic and above all a valiant publisher of a Standard paper which denounces the inequitable practices of the government, however in private he is an autocratic patriarch who

compels his family members to follow his faith and carry the identity of Roman Catholic. He seeks salvation by renouncing his traditional religious faith because according to Catholic beliefs Igbo convictions considered as the superstition of pagans which leads to hell. So, he prohibits his family to follow Igbo culture practices and also to speak the Igbo language at home and counsel them not to come in contact with the heathen. Maddened by the limitations, Kambili, Jaja and Beatrice decided to surmount their silence and from being submissive bystander and sufferer, now awakened to find their identity and stimulate their voices and recognize themselves as Nigeria's potential in a postcolonial disorder with the corrupt military government. They release their spiritual dogmatism and liberate themselves from the predicament of Catholic extremism and native Igbo belief.

Kambili is one of the characters in the novel who finally preserve her Catholic devotion in a more liberal way that is based on Father Amadi's love and Auntie Ifeoma's enlightening thought which left her with a strong heart and a conscious mind. Her culture, identity and individual growth are affected by different approaches of instruction – at home, she studies to emulate the code of conduct set by her father and at auntie Ifeoma's house she comes across different intercultural learning that welcomes critical thinking and inquiring.

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