

**Divine's Subjugation: The Violence of Religious Orthodoxy and  
Colonialism in *Purple Hibiscus***

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**Abstract**

Religion is defined as a system of belief in something which man considers to be beyond himself and which binds people together so as to organize his life into some kind of socio-religious community. Therefore religion is known to an important factor in a society. This paper aims to discuss how the relation between Christianity and colonialism is constructed by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. Religion, as a subjecting act, authorizes the colonizer to colonize and infuse their religion, politics, ideology, and education on the land. The Colonizers processed their culture at the expense of the African culture. This article explores the relation between the colonialism and Christianity through the characters and their respective analysis with the help of post-colonial concepts. Christianity becomes the philosophical tool to construct a myths of colonial, perspective, or doctrine. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie demonstrates how religiosity can be traumatic for the characters in the novel, and how the family context has been shaped an individual's religious beliefs and actions. It is further to state that the myriad exasperating issues of the Nigerian society like religion, identity crisis, hybridity, multiculturalism etc., in *Purple Hibiscus*, in turn considers a model which is relevant for any developing society.

**Keywords:** Religion, Christianity, Colonialism, Oppression, Trauma, Domestic violence, etc.,

**Introduction:**

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a Nigerian novelist, essayist, and short story writer who has been vocal about her views on religion and its impact on society. In her works, she often critiques the ways in which religion can be used as a tool of

oppression, particularly against women and marginalized communities. In her novel *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie explores the complexities of religious identity and the ways in which it can be used to control and dominate individuals. The novel is set in post-colonial Nigeria and follows the story of a young girl named Kambili, who is raised in a devoutly Catholic household. Through Kambili's story, Adichie critiques the ways in which religion can be used to perpetuate patriarchal values and reinforce the subjugation of women.

Adichie has also spoken publicly about her own experiences with religion and its impact on her life. In a 2013 interview with *The Guardian*, she stated: "I grew up in a very religious household, and I think that's one of the things that made me question religion. I saw how it was used to control people, to make them feel guilty, to make them feel ashamed. And I think that's one of the things that I'm trying to critique in my work."

Adichie has also spoken about the ways in which religion can be used to erase cultural heritage and impose foreign values. In a 2017 interview with *The New York Times*, she stated:

"I think that one of the things that colonialism did was to erase our cultural heritage, to make us feel that our own cultures were inferior. And I think that religion was a part of that. The idea that our traditional religions were 'heathen' and 'uncivilized' was a way of erasing our cultural heritage."

Adichie's views on religion as an oppressive force are not limited to her fiction. In her non-fiction work, "*Dear Ijeawele, or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*," she writes about the ways in which religion can be used to perpetuate patriarchal values and reinforce the subjugation of women. She argues that religion can be used to justify the oppression of women and to limit their autonomy and agency.

The religion as an oppressive colonizing force is a complex and multifaceted issue that has been explored in various historical and sociopolitical contexts. In many instances, religious institutions and ideologies have been intertwined with colonial ambitions, often serving as tools for justifying the subjugation of indigenous populations and the appropriation of their lands and resources. Historically, the spread of certain religions, particularly during the age of European colonialism, was often accompanied by a narrative of civilizing missions. Colonizers frequently viewed their religious beliefs as superior and sought to convert indigenous peoples, which not only aimed to change their spiritual practices but also to undermine their cultural identities. This process often involved the imposition of foreign values, languages, and social structures, leading to significant disruptions in traditional ways of life.

In *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, religion plays a significant role in the dynamics of the Achike family, particularly through the character of Papa Eugene. Eugene (Papa), who is a colonial product, and is obsessed with the life and mannerism of the English people. He uses his devout Catholicism as a means of control and oppression over his family. His strict adherence to religious practices and his interpretation of faith serve to justify his authoritarian behavior and abusive tendencies. He is described as a “man of God” who “had a way of making you feel like you were the only person in the world” (12). However, this façade of religiosity masks a deeper desire for control and domination. Although Eugene is an Igbo, he identifies himself with the white British colonisers. He believes that white people are superior to the blacks and blacks should learn the mannerism of the whites.

Papa Eugene's religious fervor creates an environment of fear and submission, where his family members feel compelled to adhere to his rigid beliefs and expectations. This oppressive use of religion contrasts with the more liberating aspects of faith that other characters, like Mama and the children, seek. The novel explores themes of power, control, and the complexities of faith, highlighting how religion can be manipulated for both good and ill.

Eugene Achike is a successful businessman and a renowned personality in Enugu. The colonisers have left a deep impact on his character. His catholic beliefs do not allow him to mingle with the religion and traditions of his own people. He is an authoritarian and has made strict rules for his family, although he is a supporter of democracy and a critic of the corrupt government. Kambili, his daughter and the narrator, describes his views on the corrupt ministers of the military government of Nigeria:

Papa told us, the politicians were corrupt, and the Standard had written many stories about the cabinet ministers who stashed money in foreign bank accounts, money meant for paying teachers' salaries and building roads. But what we Nigerians needed was not soldiers ruling us, what we needed was a renewed democracy. Renewed Democracy! (24-25)

While at home Papa suppresses the voices of his children and his wife, at workplace, his English language newspaper the Standard, supports justice and raises voice against dictatorship in Nigeria. His large donations at church and monetary help to his friends and relatives have earned him a great respect, love, and admiration. Being a prominent wealthy man and owner of many factories, he secured a respectful position in the society. But he is estranged from his own father, who is a follower of traditional Igbo culture, and whom he does not even allow to enter into his own big house. His traditionalist father has to live alone with meagre earnings. Eugene is such an ungrateful son and a religious zealot that he doesn't

performs his father's last rites. Similarly, he is estranged from the traditional Nigerian culture also, which holds no importance in his life. He shuns himself from speaking Igbo or singing Igbo songs. He never wants to make his confessions in Igbo. If finally, Papa speaks Igbo, it is considered a bad sign. Kambili remembers an incident when shouting at Jaja in anger, Igbo words come out from his mouth –

Jaja, have you not shared a drink with us, gbo? Have you no words in your mouth? He asked entirely in Igbo. A bad sign. He hardly spoke Igbo, and although Jaja and I spoke it with Mama at home, he did not like us to speak it in public. We had to sound civilized in public, he told us we had to speak English. (13)

The consequences of Eugene's beliefs on Beatrice are equally devastating. She is forced to conform to traditional gender roles, sacrificing her own autonomy and agency. Her attempts to assert her independence are met with resistance and violence from Eugene, who uses his religious beliefs to justify his actions. Beatrice's silence and submission are a testament to the ways in which religion can be used to perpetuate patriarchal values and reinforce the subjugation of women. "A good wife is a submissive wife," Papa said, his voice low and even. "A good wife does not question her husband's authority" (23). Papa uses his religious beliefs to justify his patriarchal values. He expects Beatrice to be submissive and obedient, suppressing her own desires and aspirations. This expectation is a direct result of the oppressive colonizing force of religion, which seeks to erase individuality and autonomy.

Papa's religiosity also affects Beatrice's relationship with her children. He is a strict disciplinarian who uses physical punishment to enforce his rules. "Papa's hands were always heavy with the weight of his faith," Kambili said. "He would hit us for the smallest things, for not saying our prayers on time, for not going to church" (45). His use of physical punishment is a symbol of the oppressive nature of his beliefs, which seek to suppress individuality and creativity. Furthermore, Papa's religiosity affects Beatrice's sense of identity and self-worth. She is forced to conform to traditional gender roles, suppressing her own desires and aspirations. Mama's eyes were always cast down, as if she was afraid to look up, to look at the world around her," Kambili said. "She was always so quiet, so still, as if she was waiting for something to happen (67).

Papa's religiosity has affected Beatrice's sense of identity and self-worth. She is forced to suppress her own desires and aspirations, conforming to traditional gender roles. Her silence and stillness are a symbol of the oppressive nature of Papa's beliefs, which seek to erase individuality and autonomy. Papa's affiliation with the English people and English language illustrates the impact of colonial concepts on him. For this reason, it is appropriate to call Papa a colonial product.

Papa's sister, Auntie Ifeoma said once that Papa was too much of a colonial product. She had said this about Papa in a mild, forgiving way, as if it were not Papa's fault, as one would talk about a person who was shouting gibberish from a severe case of malaria. (13)

Nigeria, in its colonial and postcolonial period, has witnessed the flawed religious identities. It has seen the conversion of the natives to Catholicism, under the influence of the European missionaries. As a result, many people left their indigenous religion and got converted to Christianity. Like many other Nigerians, Papa Eugene and his sister Ifeoma have adopted Christianity. Eugene becomes a staunch Roman Catholic, who cannot bear any kind of liberality or a breach while performing the Christian religious duties. Through Auntie Ifeoma's character, Adichie suggests that religion can be a source of empowerment and liberation, rather than oppression. Auntie Ifeoma's faith is not used to control or dominate others, but rather to promote understanding, compassion, and inclusivity.

Kambili explicates the religious conflicts through her grandfather Papa Nnukwu, a representative of indigenous Igbo culture of Igbo-land. Being a follower of traditional Igbo religion, he is in conflict with his son, Papa Eugene, who has left his own Igbo religion and has been converted to an Anglo Catholic. Papa Nnukwu disregards Anglo-Catholic culture, and fears that this culture is overthrowing and replacing his indigenous culture. He denounces Christianity with incredulity, and describes the advent of Christianity in their place:

I remember the first one that came to Abba, the one they called Fada John. His face was red like palm oil; they say our type of sun does not shine in the white man's land. He had a helper, a man from Nimo called Jude. In the afternoon they gathered the children under the ukwa tree in the mission and taught them their religion. I did not join them, kpa, but I went sometimes to see what they were doing. (84).

Papa Nnukwu's disbelief in Christianity is expressed when he remembers the question, he asked the missionaries in his village and the inference he made about their religion: —

Who is the person that was killed, the person that hangs on the wood outside the mission? They said he was the son, but that the son and the father are equal. It was then that I knew that the white man was mad. (84).

On the other hand, Papa Eugene, a staunch Catholic, holds the role of a patriarch, and behaves like a coloniser. He dethrones and relegates Papa Nnukwu with having no authority, like the colonisers have relegated their country and their religion. Just as Nigerians fail to sustain their indigenous religion in their own country, Papa Nnukwu also fails to assert his authority in his own family. Eugene forgets all his love and concern for his old father, whom he calls a pagan. Eugene

snaps all the talking terms with Papa Nnukwu and deprives him from enjoying the luxuries in his big mansion. He disdains his sickly father, who lives in a dilapidated house without even a bathroom and is devoid of proper food and clothes. After being ridiculed by some of his relatives, he allows his children to visit Papa Nnukwu just once in a year and that also not for more than fifteen minutes, forbidding them to eat or drink anything at his place. Eugene hates the thought of his children living with his pagan father whom he considers a heathen. He punishes both Kambili and Jaja when he comes to know that they have lived with his Papa - Nnukwu at Ifeoma's house. It is a sin, worth punishment for him, to be in the company of a pagan. He washed this sin by pouring boiling water on the feet of Kambili and Jaja.

*Purple Hibiscus* strongly expresses religious conflicts among the masses. In this novel, religion is at the forefront especially in the life of Eugene. His religious fanaticism and his cruel temperament explicate the shattered religious identity of Nigeria in the postcolonial period. Adichie exhibits the religious identities of different people through their opinions, dispositions, and their religious practices. The main conflict is displayed between the characters of Eugene and his sister Ifeoma. Under the impact of colonialist British missionaries, both are converted to Christianity, but both in different ways. For Eugene, this conversion means breaking off from his traditions and his identity. Papa takes pride to become a model catholic by adhering to the strict rules of Catholicism. Papa's colonial mind praises white priests and dislikes the traditional priests who mix traditions with the church by reciting Igbo prayers in their St. Agnes Church. Papa's deep faith in Christianity and white British Christian priest makes him depreciate his beliefs in the traditional Igbo God and Igbo religion.

Ultimately, *Purple Hibiscus* invites readers to reflect on the complexities of faith and its potential for both nurturing and destruction. It challenges us to consider how religious narratives can be reinterpreted and reclaimed in ways that promote healing and empowerment rather than oppression. Through Kambili and Jaja's journey, Adichie emphasizes the importance of finding one's voice and the possibility of breaking free from the chains of oppressive ideologies, suggesting that true spirituality should foster love, compassion, and understanding rather than fear and control. In this way, the novel not only critiques the oppressive aspects of religion but also offers a vision of hope and resilience in the quest for personal and collective freedom.

Furthermore, the novel critiques the ways in which religion can be used to erase cultural heritage and impose foreign values. Eugene's adoption of Catholicism is seen as a rejection of his Igbo heritage, which is viewed as "heathen" and "uncivilized." This erasure of cultural identity is a direct result of colonialism, which imposed Western values and beliefs on African societies.

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