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The Weight of Faith: Religious Symbols and Rituals as Tools of Oppression in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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Abstract: This article explores the use of religious symbols and rituals as tools of oppression in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. In the novel, Eugene, the central character, uses Christianity as a control mechanism, justifying both physical and psychological dominance within the family through religious authority. Through an analysis of key symbols such as the cross, the Bible, and Catholic rituals, this article argues that the rigid imposition of religious practices reinforces patriarchal power structures and suppresses individual autonomy. Adichie critiques the intersection of faith, colonial legacies, and power, showing how religious symbols, intended to foster faith and community, can be weaponized to enforce obedience and perpetuate suffering. The analysis further examines the contrast between Eugene's oppressive religious practice and the more liberating forms of spirituality embraced by other characters, like Aunty Ifeoma and Papa Nnukwu, revealing the complex dynamics between faith, culture, and freedom in postcolonial Nigeria. Ultimately, this article highlights the ambivalence of religious symbols, demonstrating how they can both sustain and challenge structures of oppression.

Keywords: Adichie, religious symbols, religious rituals, oppression

1. Preliminaries and methodology

According to Womack Mari (2005, 10), symbols carry meanings that depend upon one's cultural background. Symbols are fundamental to human comprehension and act as conceptualization vehicles for human knowledge. Moreover, Susanne Langer stated that 'symbols facilitate understanding of the world in which we live, thus serving as the grounds upon which we make judgements' (1953, n.p.). These perspectives underscore the crucial role that symbols play in shaping not only our personal understanding but also our collective social consciousness.

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Symbols in literature enable authors to communicate intricate concepts and emotions in a manner that defies literal interpretations. Authors can elicit deeper meanings and connect readers to universal themes such as power, freedom, identity, and oppression through the use of symbolism. Symbols function as both lenses and bridges, enabling readers to comprehend the complexities of the human condition. In her critically acclaimed novel *Purple Hibiscus*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie employs symbolism with outstanding nuance and precision to convey these profound themes and meanings. She investigates the multifaceted aspects of familial, political, and religious oppression in postcolonial Nigeria by employing symbolic elements.

This research intends to explore the symbolic components of *Purple Hibiscus*, emphasising how Adichie used symbols to convey oppression. Adichie's purpose in incorporating symbols throughout the narrative seems to enhance the emotional and intellectual involvement of her readers, highlighting the ubiquitous nature of various forms of oppression—whether it domestic, societal, or cultural. Analysing these symbols enhances our comprehension of Adichie's critique of authoritarianism, patriarchal systems, and religious extremism in postcolonial Nigeria.

The main aim of this study is to examine the significant symbols associated with religion and religious rites in *Purple Hibiscus* that signify different manifestations of oppression. The research seeks to elucidate how these symbols augment our comprehension of the themes of the novel, including silence and voice, submission and struggle, and the conflict between tradition and modernity. This analysis aims to demonstrate how Adichie uses symbols to not only depict the exterior reality of her characters but also to map their emotional and psychological terrains. This study aims to illuminate how Adichie's symbolic choices reflect broader discussions regarding power dynamics, identity formation, and resistance to authoritarianism in postcolonial African literature.

The methodology for this study has involved a close reading of the novel, focusing specifically on the symbolic elements that recur throughout the text. The close reading has been contextualised within the broader framework of literary symbolism and theories of oppression. This study analyses the manner in which symbols reflect and critique oppressive systems, using critical theories such as postcolonial and feminist theory. A review of secondary sources, including scholarly articles and literary criticism on Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, has also supported the analysis. These sources serve to establish the discussion within the existing corpus of scholarship and offer a deeper understanding of the cultural and historical context of the novel. In the subsequent discussion, I will concentrate on religious symbols and rituals as vehicles for conveying oppression.

2. Oppression through Religious Symbols and Rituals

The strategic placement of the most important events in *Purple Hibiscus* around significant Christian holidays is not a coincidence. The actions occurring in Papa Eugene's family revolve around the cycle of Christian events. The main chapters of the narrative, namely *Palm Sunday*, *Before Palm Sunday*, and *After Palm Sunday*,

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explicitly highlight this reality. Oddly enough, each chapter contains a second title that is unrelated to the monotheistic Christian realm. Conversely, it is likely that the second set of titles, *Breaking Gods, Speaking with Our Spirits*, and ultimately, *The Pieces of Gods* contain references to the ancient Igbo creed. From the very beginning, the narrative establishes the discord between African and Western values and principles at the level of titles. The final chapter: *A Different Silence The present* does not particularly refer to religion, but it is related to a period of time when the family is not terrorized by Papa Eugene, a time when 'the new rains will come down soon' (Adichie 2003, 307).

2.1. Religious symbols

Throughout the novel, there is ambiguity related to the symbols. Concealed behind the apparent primary meaning lies an interpretation that is its antithesis. Adichie does not deride the fundamental significances of the religious symbols but adeptly satirises them inside this specific household.

Eugene's residence can be defined by religious iconography—crucifixes, holy water, and various Christian symbols—that, instead of offering solace or spiritual sanctuary, fosters an environment of dread and oppression. These symbols, linked to the emotional, psychological, and physical violence he inflicts on his family, serve as tangible manifestations of the repressive nature of his religious convictions. The disparity between the nonviolent doctrines of Christianity and the brutality perpetrated in its name exemplifies the paradox of colonialism: a framework that seeks to „save" yet ultimately subjugates and dehumanises.

The cross serves as a significant symbol in the story, embodying both the Christian religion and the repressive characteristics of Eugene's stringent commitment to it. It exemplifies his authoritarian convictions and the demands he places on his family. The main protagonist, Kambili, delineates his father's demeanour during communion, underscoring the gravity and stringent adherence to religious doctrine: 'His line moved the slowest because he pressed hard on each forehead to make a perfect cross with his ash-covered thumb and slowly, meaningfully enunciated every word of „dust and unto dust you shall return „(Adichie 2003, 3). Another testament to the pervasive influence of the cross is the segment in which Kambili describes the decorations of their residence, which were performed by her mother; 'she would knot the palm fronds into sagging cross shapes and hang them on the wall beside our gold-framed family photo'(Adichie 2003, 3).

The symbol of holy water is also evident in several instances. It serves to safeguard the family against malevolence. Father Benedict, and in some cases Papa Eugene, sprinkle holy water on the members of the congregation and the family. Eugene employed holy water as a method of control, dispersing it throughout his home to deter malevolent intentions. This behaviour illustrates his aim to assert his religious authority and purity while also cultivating an environment of fear and intimidation. Adichie excels once more in illustrating the intricacies of the situation through irony, describing the day when everything changed. 'The fresh palm fronds

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were wet with holy water'(Adichie 2003, 3), but Papa flung his heavy missal and broke the figurines of Mama Beatrice due to the fact that Jaja did not participate at the communion.

The Holy Bible is fundamental to Eugene's perspective and acts as a justification for his repressive conduct. His view of scripture is inflexible, employing it to impose his moral code on his family, illustrating how religious texts can be distorted to endorse dictatorship. His children must engage in daily Bible study adhering to a rigorous timetable. They must avoid any subjects that an adolescent may find enjoyable. Outdated ideologies render them numb. Their excursion to Nsukka reveals that life exists beyond their household as well. What is more, one might remain a devout Catholic without engaging in daily Bible studies. As seen in the following fragment, 'Aunty Ifeoma stared at the paper in Jaja's hand. Then she started to laugh so hard that she staggered, her tall body bending like a whistling pine tree on a windy day. „Eugene gave you a schedule to follow when you're here? Nekwanu anya, what does that mean?" (Adichie 2003, 124).

Another religious symbol, the missal, appears to have a pivotal role around Palm Sunday. The turning point occurs when Jaja fearlessly challenges his father for the very first time. Jaja declined to partake in the sacrament of communion at the church service, which subsequently led to a deterioration of household dynamics. The intensity of Papa's rage becomes evident in the opening sentence: 'Things started to fall apart' (Adichie 2003, 3). The sentence, alluding to the archetypal modern African novel of Achebe, foretells and then recounts Papa Eugene's forceful act of hurling a weighty religious missal (missile?) across the room, shattering the delicate glass figurines adorning Mama's shelves. The figurines will reappear multiple times throughout the novel, serving as a symbol of both vulnerability to and resilience over Papa's mistreatment. The religious tome, known as a „missal," includes the ecclesiastical scriptures for the entirety of the year, indicating Papa's use of Christianity as a manipulative and ruinous power. Papa's swollen countenance, adorned with a rash, and his wobbly gait in this particular moment serve as a harbinger of his impending doom. Fear as a potent and overwhelming force is introduced instantly, and *Purple Hibiscus* 'forces the [reader] into the role of [a] witness' (Socolovsky 2003, 189) to Eugene's enforcement of what he believes to be divine law.

Praying is quintessential in the daily existence of the Achike household. A prayer of grace is said before each meal: 'For twenty minutes he asked God to bless the food. Afterward, he intoned the Blessed Virgin in several different titles while we responded, „Pray for us". His favourite title was Our Lady, Shield of the Nigerian People. He has made it up himself (Adichie 2003, 11). The family prays the rosary while they are travelling:'Papa started the rosary before we drove out of our gated street. He stopped at the end of the first decade, so Mama could continue with the next set of ten Hail Marys. Jaja led the next decade; then it was my turn'(Adichie 2003, 54).

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The rosary represents both piety and the burden of remorse and trepidation. For characters like Kambili, it signifies the compulsion to adhere to Eugene's standards of piety, even when it contradicts their individual aspirations for freedom and authenticity. The subsequent event in Nsukka illustrates the divergent interpretations of Catholicism by Eugene and his sister. 'After we said the last Hail Mary, my head snapped back when I heard the raised, melodious voice. Amaka was singing! (Adichie 2003, 125). Hearing a traditional Igbo song after the rosary perplexes Kambili. In their household, such a thing is inconceivable.

The church functions as a tangible environment where the characters experience both community and scrutiny. Although it serves as a site of worship, it simultaneously embodies society pressures to adhere to stringent moral standards, highlighting the tension between individual convictions and collective expectations.

Although Christianity predominates in the narrative, Adichie illustrates opposition to its hegemony through individuals such as Papa Nnukwu, who upholds his faith in traditional Nigerian spirituality. Papa Nnukwu's serene and dignified commitment to his traditional beliefs contrasts sharply with Eugene's repressive Christianity. He embodies a manifestation of cultural endurance and fortitude against colonial and religious subjugation. His character indicates that, despite centuries of Christian hegemony, indigenous cultures and belief systems have not been entirely obliterated.

Adichie, via Papa Nnukwu, poses significant enquiries regarding the function of religion in postcolonial societies: Is it possible for Christianity, a faith imported via colonial brutality, to coexist alongside indigenous traditions in a manner that honours both? Is the colonial heritage of Christianity intrinsically oppressive, as it endeavours to obliterate the cultural identities of those it attempts to convert?

2.2. Religious rituals

Adichie skillfully employs the portrayal of Christian rituals practised by Papa Eugene as manifestations of maltreatment directed at his family. As Adesokan claims (2012, 8), the author of *Purple Hibiscus* uses these rites to emphasize how Eugene adapts Catholic rituals not as 'solemn festivities associated with the church' but distorting them and causing sufferance and subjugation to his family members.

> 'Paradoxically, his actions in the novel suggest a twisted, unquestioning conviction about the appropriateness of his actions and the painful, even loving 'duty' of administering violent punishment, much like the unquestioning conviction that often attends ritual acts', whereby, according to Christian belief, he himself is the sinner (Nabutanyi 2017, 75).

One of the most grotesque ceremonies in which Eugene compels his family to participate bears similarities to the Last Supper. During this usual family practice, his children are urged to take a small sip of the scalding hot tea. Eugene's action of lifting the cup and sharing it among his children resembles the gesture performed by Jesus

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Christ. But unlike Jesus, whose deed reminds us of the saving grace we have received, Papa Eugene's 'love sip' is an indirect form of child abuse. As Kambili describes it: 'The tea was always too hot; it always burned my tongue, and if lunch was something peppery, my raw tongue suffered. But it didn't matter, because I knew that when it burned my tongue, it burned Papa's love into me (Adichie 2003, 8).

Another activity that is comparable to a New Testament act is Eugene's washing his daughter's feet. In order to cleanse them from sin, Jesus washes his disciples' feet. In a similar way, Papa Eugene pours water on his daughter's feet, but in a terrifying way, the poured water is boiling hot, and it serves as a form of punishment besides the act of purification. The passage describing this horrifying event highlights his view that she has sinned and betrayed him by sharing a residence with a heathen who, ironically enough, happens to be his own father and deserves to be punished for doing that.

> '[Papa] lowered the kettle into the tub and tilted it toward my feet. He poured the hot water on my feet slowly, as if he were conducting an experiment and wanted to see what would happen. He was crying now, tears streaming down his face. I saw the moist stream before I saw the water. I watched the water leave the kettle, flowing almost in slow motion in an arc to my feet. The pain of contact was so pure and so scalding that I felt nothing for a second. And then I screamed' (Adichie 2003, 194).

Kambili's feet are also symbolic, as they are the part of the body that allows her to 'walk' into sin (Adichie, 2003, 194). According to Nabutanyi, Papa Eugene engages in a 'twisted enactment of Biblical dictum: to punish the offending body part' (2017, 77). Eugene's mimicry of this form of punishment in disciplining his own family by targeting the offending parts of the body indicates how his childhood abuse resurfaces and is re-enacted in adulthood (Nabutanyi 2017, 76).

The concept of pain as a means of moral purification is arbitrarily applied in the novel to any person except Eugene. Eugene perceives himself as a divine emissary, and this position grants him the audacity to mistreat his family without any sense of guilt or sorrow. Eugene's inquiry: 'Why do you walk into sin?' …. Why do you like sin?' (Adichie 2003, 102) encapsulates accurately his vision about him being God's earthly representative. It is perhaps because Eugene constructs himself as an enforcer of God's command—God's servant who is tasked with reforming the sinners in his family—that his infliction of pain is ritualized. Eugene's ritualized imposition of pain may be attributed to his self-perception as an enforcer of God's order, a servant entrusted with the responsibility of correcting sinners within his family. Furthermore, Eugene is not only convicted that his wife, son, and daughter are sinners who necessitate punishment for redemption, but he also unwaveringly believes in his divine duty to strictly enforce God's law within his household by punishing any deviation from his ideal of perfect piety (Nabutanyi 2017, 75).

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His state of being almighty is also advocated by other characters like Father Benedict, who underscores the significance of this earthly person in the realm of the heavenly by providing an exaggerated hierarchy:

> 'During his sermons, Father Benedict usually referred to the pope, Papa, and Jesus—in that order. He used Papa to illustrate the gospels. 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 after the coup to make sure the government did not threaten his businesses. Brother Eugene spoke out for freedom. How many of us have reflected the triumphant entry?' (Adichie 2003, 5).

3. Conclusion

Symbolism is employed to depict the disparity in power and authority within both the family and society. In *Purple Hibiscus*, the incorporation of symbolism enhances the intricacy of the narrative and contributes to a deeper comprehension of the characters and themes. Adichie's use of symbolism in the novel amplifies the opulence and profundity of the narrative, rendering it a potent and emotionally evocative literary experience. The objects, surroundings, and behaviours serve as symbols representing the authority exerted by repressive individuals over the more susceptible ones. Objects and environments frequently serve as symbols of the physical and mental restrictions that characters face, illustrating how oppression hinders their freedom and personal development. Symbols convey the psychological effects of tyranny on characters. They portray the internal conflicts, apprehension, and suppression endured by individuals under authoritarian governance.

The use of symbolism portrays the struggle between traditional and modern values, as well as the clash of various religious and cultural ideas, highlighting how these disputes lead to the characters' feeling of oppression. Symbols frequently embody the characters' defiance against subjugation and their longing for liberation and transformation. These instances emphasise acts of defiance and the inherent optimism for a more promising tomorrow. The use of symbolism highlights the themes of silence and voice, illustrating how repressive forces suppress disagreement and how characters strive to discover and assert their voices.

Symbolism serves as a means to evaluate and criticise the detrimental effects of religious extremism on individuals. Religious objects and rituals serve as symbols of the rigid and uncompromising nature of dogmatic belief systems that restrict individual liberty and self-expression. Symbols frequently allude to Nigeria's colonial history, emphasising the enduring impact of colonialism in terms of oppression that continues to influence present-day society. This encompasses the methods through which colonial values and systems persistently exercise authority and restrict autonomy.

Symbolism is employed to accentuate the subjugation of women within both the familial and societal realms. Particular objects and interactions serve as symbols for

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the gender norms and expectations that restrict women and curtail their independence. The presence of symbols such as luxury and poverty, which are conveyed through tangible items and living conditions, serves to illustrate the economic disparities that contribute to the subjugation of the less advantaged. These inequalities perpetuate asymmetries of power and social hierarchy.

Symbols are employed to illustrate the cyclical nature of tyranny, which is sustained and passed down through generations. This phenomenon is evident in the manner in which specific behaviours and attitudes are transmitted, serving as a representation of the challenge of emancipating oneself from repressive structures. Specific symbols epitomise the concealed anguish of characters, underscoring the muted and imperceptible facets of oppression. These symbols expose the internalised anguish and grief that may not be readily apparent yet profoundly impact the characters.

These functions collectively enhance the reader's comprehension of the complex and diverse nature of oppression in *Purple Hibiscus*, offering a detailed and subtle depiction of how different forms of control and dominance affect the characters' lives.

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