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RELIGIOSITY AND FAMILY DYSFUNCTION IN CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE'S
PURPLE HIBISCUS

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Abstract

This discourse explores the disruptive character of religiosity in the family in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. The study appraises conflicts arising from religiously informed decisions of major characters in the novel and their consequences on their families. It also critiques characters' contempt for indigenous mores that have sustained family cohesion in African cultures, in this instance, the Igbo culture of Nigeria. Analysis in this discourse is from literary and sociological perspectives.

Keywords: Adichie, religiosity, family dysfunction, leadership, Igbo society

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Introduction

Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (henceforth *PH*) depicts the tensions and struggles in a Nigerian family. The family is an essential unit of human society that considerably influences the outlook and behaviour of the individual from infancy through adulthood. It, therefore, not only caters for the physical and emotional wellbeing of its members but invariably impacts their future development. At the head of the patriarchal family is the father who supports, directs and caters for the other members financially and emotionally. The decisions he makes and the type of leadership he provides are often informed by his economic, cultural, religious and psychological dispositions, among others. His religious mindset is fundamental as every religion has prescriptions for family organization and relationships. Religion could be a unifying force in the family (Vermeer (2014), Schettino (2012), Pearce and Axinn (1998), Meyers (1996), Ellison and Esherkat (1993), Joep de Hart (1990), and Lenski (1963)), or a divisive one, especially when rigidly practised in ways that pitch it against deep-seated indigenous mores and values that are essential to familial coexistence. Where the latter occur, the family could become dysfunctional.

This study is premised on the notion that literature remains a platform where African writers scrutinize society. Though the African novel in its early years addressed mainly cultural and colonial conflicts, it has gradually shifted focus to interrogating socio-cultural tendencies that impact negatively on society. Ernest Emenyonu calls this tendency "self-examination" (xv). The exploration of religiosity on family wellbeing in Adichie's *PH* is clearly part of this self-examination. This focus on society is not novel as any African work of art that fails to address issues of socio-cultural or historical significance is often considered alien to African aesthetics. This study therefore advances the view that Adichie's *PH* is a diagnostic exposé on religious obsession and its disruptive impacts on the family. It directs critical attention to two family heads in *PH* to ascertain the functioning and wellbeing of their families, vis-à-vis their religious standpoints: Eugene Achike and his biological sister, Ifeoma Ifediora.

Notion of Religiosity

Religiosity is a concept that is not easy to define when it is the subject of scientific research (Rusu and Turluic 354). Two reasons have been proffered for this difficulty: first is the "imprecise nature of the English language" which provides varied synonyms for religiosity (such as religiousness, devotion, holiness, piousness, faith, church membership, and church attendance), and second is that different academic disciplines approach the concept from diverse perspectives without any kind of collaboration (Holdcroft 89). This complexity in defining religiosity has made psychologists and sociologists to appraise it by describing its dimensions rather than tackling the imprecise meaning of the term. This is why Ann Bergan and Jasmine McConatha define religiosity as dimensions associated with religious beliefs and commitment (24). The most cited dimensions of religiosity are those of Charles Glock and Rodney Stark, who list and elaborate the experiential (personal faith), ritualistic (worship experience), ideological (professed doctrines), intellectual (knowledge of tenets of the faith) and consequential

(visible outcome/effects) dimensions as means of measuring religiosity. However, current research shows that there is little agreement on the sanctity of these taxonomies. Thus, most scholars simply use “religiosity” interchangeably with “religion” (see Hackley and Sanders (2003), Stolz (2008), Mukhopadhyay (2009), El-Menouar and Stiftung(2014), Whitehouse (2002), and Clayton and Gladden (1974)) and some like Jonathan Schettino who equates it with “spirituality.” However, we adopt Miron Zuckerman, Jordan Silberman, and Judith Hall’s definition that religiosity is “the degree of involvement in some or all facets of religion,” like belief in the supernatural and commitment to religious doctrines that includes offerings of money or property (325). We also adopt the related view that religiosity is “affected or excessive devotion to religion,” where “devotion” is “earnest attachment to a cause” or “religious observance” (*Dictionary.com*). This study focuses more on “religious observance” of Eugene and his rigid Catholicism which is reflected in his religious correctness that often borders on the absurd, especially when viewed from an Igbo worldview that holds in high regard many of the norms he traduces in the process.

Concept of Family Dysfunction

Though the notion of family is often perceived in personal terms, family relationships are also shaped by social structure because familial attitudes and behaviours are not randomly determined; they are influenced by social forces and shared values in different societies. Thus, David Newman views the family “as a social institution, [with] established and organized systems of social behavior with a particular and recognized purpose” (4). The family is a social unit with definite functions; its ability to perform such roles determines its functionality. Juliet Mitchell identifies four critical functions and social structures that are vital to family set-ups: production, reproduction, socialization and sexuality (16). To her, “Production involves all the economic resources that are created by families and reproduction deals with the procreation of future generations, socialization occurs when parents and older generations’ family members pass on ideologies and values to their children; and sexuality by the fact that sex is referred to in terms of marriage” (6).

The notion “dysfunction” describes conditions of “relating badly” or “not performing as expected” (*Encarta Dictionary*). Three views closely describe Eugene’s family in *PH*. Tina Tessina explicates that “dysfunctional relationships are those that do not perform their appropriate functions; that is, they do not emotionally support participants or foster communication among them, or appropriately challenge them, or prepare or fortify them for life in the larger world” (1). Harriet Lerner states that “conflict, neglect, abuse of all sorts, shame, conditional love, faulty disciplinary styles, gender prejudice, sexuality intolerance, and denial of feelings, emotional deregulation, rampant anxiety and much more” are ever present in dysfunctional families (5). And Raymond Jamiolkowski’s view is that “a dysfunctional family is one in which conflict, misbehaviour and abuse on the part of individual members occurs continually and regularly, leading other members to accommodate such actions. There, children sometimes grow up believing that such conditions are normal” (3). These various

perspectives, though external to Igbo cosmology, arguably diagnose Eugene's family in *Purple Hibiscus* as dysfunctional.

A Glimpse of the Igbo Worldview

The Igbo worldview is fundamentally religious. To Victor Uchendu, "the Igbo are a religious people [because] given effective protection; [they] are very faithful to their gods" (94-95). Many scholars of Igbo culture and religion are in agreement that an understanding of the Igbo people must factor in their cosmology (see Nwoga (1985), Iloanusi (1984), Onwuejiogwu (1981), Afigbo (1981), Isichie (1977), Njaka (1974), Ilogu (1974), Anozie (1968), and Uchendu (1965)). Eugene's worldview (of course distressfully warped by his negative attitude towards Igbo culture) is that his guarantee of attaining heavenly bliss with his family in the afterlife via his adopted religion is to reject in its entirety his people's indigenous way of life, including their *Omenani* that is at the core of family functioning in Igbo culture. Edmund Ilogu explains the meaning and significance of *Omenani* in Igbo universe thus:

The [Igbo] word used in describing custom is '*Omenani*.' This word is sometimes interpreted as tradition. *Omenani* [is] the means by which traditional [Igbo] society enforces conformity. Culturally speaking, *Omenani* is the means by which the social ethos is measured, and values of society are continued from one generation to another, and the process of socialization through the education of the young ones are facilitated. Harmony and equilibrium are in this way maintained as every member of the society knows what to expect from his neighbours and what to give to them, simply by observing the well-known customary way of behaviour and moral code. That is *Omenani*. (22-23)

Most of the challenges in Eugene's family are consequences of his displacement and replacement of the Igbo *Omenani* with the Christian/Catholic ethos in a manner that completely alienates his family from virtually all that delineates the functioning family in Igbo culture.

Review of Critical Views on *Purple Hibiscus*

Chimamanda Adichie's *PH* has been studied from diverse perspectives. Four distinct perspectives stand out. First is Adichie's reconstruction of previous notions of womanhood and female identity in the novel which has birthed a number of significant studies (examples are Tigner (2007), Kivai (2010), Fwangyil (2011), Nadaswaran (2011), and Stobie (2012)). These inquiries analyze gender roles and women empowerment from perspectives that privilege women's voices even though they might seem silent. They also re-examine the whole concept of victimhood in gender relationships as it concerns women, and explore silence as a powerful tool behind which oppressed women could strike back at their male tormentors and oppressors.

A second area is studies that explore the novel as a bildungsroman that portrays challenges of childhood in a society that empowers parents to exercise absolute control over their children (examples are Onukaogu and Onyerionwu (2010), Peters (2010), and

Tigner (2007)). These works probe the psyche of children practically living in bondage under strict rules imposed by their parents to keep them in check. The child is thus perceived as a victim of cultural norms that do not permit them to question the wishes of their parents. This is why Kambili and her brother have no say in whatever their father desires for them. Abalogu Onukaogu and Ezechi Onyerionwu's interesting exploration of the characters of Kambili in *PH* and Ugwu in *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) highlights Adichie's interest in "the growing-up motif." Adichie continues this trend in *Ifemelu in Americanah* (2013).

A third category is studies that explore *PH* as a masterpiece that vividly reflects the travails of a country in dire straits plagued by innumerable political and socio-cultural challenges of nationhood, especially that of corruption (examples are Oha (2007), Singh (2013), Udumukwu (2011), and Ikediegwu and Eke (2013)). These studies analyze various aspects of the Nigerian society reflected in the novel and criticize or justify them depending on their social visions. They highlight issues like class struggle, exploitation, oppression and the human condition in postcolonial Nigeria. Aspects of religion are sometimes explored in these studies; however, the attention directed at them is often tangential except for few like those of Singh, and Ikediegwu and Eke. The latter study specifically examines religious fanaticism and absurdity in *PH* and concludes that Eugene's fanaticism in "everything European makes him also a fanatic of the Western culture and leaves him culturally alienated of his Igbo background" (224). Though it acknowledges that religious fanaticism could have destructive effects on individuals and their families in society, it does not explore family dysfunction as a consequence of religiosity.

Lastly, there are studies that investigate literary aesthetics in aspects of language, narrative technique, symbolism, meaning and context among other aspects of style in *PH* (examples are Kabore (2013), Hewitt(2005), and Osunbade (2009)). These works assess artistry in the novel and search for where there are imitations or radical departures from styles of earlier writers. For instance, Osunbade applies pragmatics in what he calls a "context-driven study [which] specifically explores the processes by which the meanings of utterances are modified in use" (138). These studies do not address the aspect that the present one sets out to explore: plot a cause and effect trajectory between religiosity and dysfunction in the family.

Religiosity and Erosion of Family Functioning

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic, multicultural and multi-religious country where an individual's stance on religion could provoke animosities, protests and mayhem across several divides similar to the reception of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* (1988). *PH* is set in contemporary Nigeria where the non-religious are considered "abnormal"; where religion is a site where power, control and influence are contested, which entrenches the "we" and "them" dichotomy that engenders dogmatic stances that disrupt communal unity; which when taken to the home front erodes the functioning of the family.

PH is therefore a subversive text in its dialectical exploration of man's religiosity and its capacity to enslave and justify domination in the family. The novel presents a

story of struggle for liberty and happiness in Eugene Achike's household; a family steeped in palpable apprehension of a father figure who takes his intolerance of deviations from his rigid perception of Catholic doctrines to extremes thereby rendering his family dysfunctional. The dysfunctional virus in Eugene's household becomes obvious when, according to Kambili the narrator : "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" (PH 3). Thus, Eugene's extremist religiosity was exposed by his son's act of omission which he (Eugene) deems a brazen affront to his faith. His rage has nothing to do with his social personality as a philanthropist, "Omelora . . . The One Who Does for the Community" (PH 64), rather, he condemns his son for deviating from his erstwhile subservient compliance to his father's dictates which falls short of expectations of an offspring of one whom the Parish Priest, Father Benedict, counts among only two other names deserving of mention at every Mass: Jesus Christ and The Pope. What is at stake here is pride, a fruit of militant religiosity, not Christian piety. PH also foregrounds the irony that parishioners are admonished to emulate Eugene's lifestyle as a defender of the oppressed, being the publisher of a national tabloid that condemns political tyranny and oppression in the Nigerian polity, unaware that he is a tyrant in his household; unaware that his private life is diametrically at variance with his public image. Though he is admired and respected in his community, he is intimidating at home just like the military his newspaper denounces. He links his self-righteous piousness to the uncompromising views he imbibed under the tutelage of a white missionary. Consequently, he lived by the letter, rather than the spirit, of the Bible which is evident in his readiness to whip into line or cut off (ref. Matthew 5:29-30) anyone in his family who deviates from his dictates.

II

Eugene's family is dysfunctional because of his parochial religiosity. Even the clergy is not insulated from his self-righteousness. He verbalizes his disdain for all leaders of Pentecostal churches as well as a visiting priest to his parish who dared sing in Igbo language in the middle of the sermon: "That young priest, singing in the sermon like a Godless leader of one of these Pentecostal churches that spring up everywhere like mushrooms. . . People like him bring trouble to the church. We must remember to pray for him" (PH 29). Elsewhere he denounces his wife right before her children for what he considers her brazen attempt to skip an after-Mass visit to Father Benedict because she felt sick. Even though she eventually makes the visit, Eugene takes the "offence" to heart and exacts a heavy price from her at home where she subsequently suffers a miscarriage from his beatings. His misguided convictions make him unremorseful at the loss he caused his wife, his family and society at large by the death of the unborn child; instead, he proclaims Mama guilty and decrees that the family "recite sixteen different novenas. For Mama's forgiveness" (PH 35). These are outcomes of his religiosity which progressively corrodes the functioning of his family. Kambili's description of his battery of her mother reveals his abrasive personality and the trauma and distress it engenders:

I was in my room after lunch...when I heard the sounds. Swift, heavy thuds on my parents' hand-carved bedroom door. I imagined the door had got stuck and Papa was trying to open it. If I imagined it hard enough, then it would be true. I sat down, closed my eyes, and started to count. Counting made it seem not that long, made it seem not that bad. Sometimes it was over before I even got to twenty. I was at nineteen when the sounds stopped. I heard the door open. Papa's gait on the stairs sounded heavier, more awkward, than usual. Mama was slung over his shoulder like the jute sacks of rice his factory workers bought in bulk at the Seme Border. . . . "There's blood on the floor,'Jaja [Kambili's brother] said. I'll get the brush from the bathroom." (PH 32-33)

This gruesome scene above and the children's jaded response to it corroborate Jamiolkowski's view that physical abuse is common in dysfunctional families. Kambili becomes so used to her mother's battery that she recreates reality to "normalize" abnormality. Yet, she likens her mother to "a sack of rice," a metaphor of helplessness.

Religiosity could delude an individual into a sense of infallibility. So it is with Eugene. He seems unaware that his actions alienate him from his family. His daughter, Kambili experiences cramps provoked by her period as they all prepared for Mass one Sunday. Mama and Jaja consequently "conspired," as far as Eugene is concerned, to sell his household to the devil in aiding Kambili defile the fast of the Eucharist by eating a little cornflakes. The following ensues:

'What are you doing, Kambili? . . . You are eating ten minutes before Mass? Ten minutes before Mass?'

'Her period started and she has cramps', Mama said. Jaja cut her short. "I told her to eat corn flakes before she took Panadol, Papa.'

'Has the devil asked you all to go on errands for him? Has the devil built a tent in my house?' He unbuckled his belt slowly . . . a heavy belt made of layers of brown leather with a sedate leather-covered buckle. It landed on Jaja first, across his shoulder. Then Mama raised her hands as it landed on her upper arm, which was covered by the puffy sequined sleeve of her church blouse. I put the bowl down just as the belt landed on my back. . . Papa was like a Fulani nomad . . . as he swung his belt at Mama, Jaja, and me, muttering that the devil would not win. (PH 101-102)

The foregoing reflects a dysfunctional home. Metaphorically, Eugene is a taskmaster flogging his slaves for some intransigence. He shows no respect for his wife as he whips her alongside their two children, stripping her of any dignity as his partner in marriage. His religiosity blinds him to the degeneracy of his actions as his family slides irrevocably down the dysfunctional lane.

The dysfunctional tenor of Eugene's family consequently displaces the children psychologically. Kambili is labeled a "backyard snob" in school because of her oddity. So she considers it strange that her cousins in Nsukka could relate freely with their parent unlike her own home where her father is dreaded. Worse, she is forbidden along with

Jaja to visit their paternal grandfather except during Christmas - for fifteen minutes - because Eugene labels their grandfather a heathen. On the other hand, their father honors their maternal grandfather because, according to him, he is a Christian who "opened his eyes before many of our people did . . . He was one of the few who welcomed the missionaries. . . . He did things the right way, the way the white people did, not what our people do now!" (PH 67). Eugene's disdain for his African heritage is a consequence of irrational religiosity and what Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin describe as "cultural cringe," which is "a process of devaluing or abandoning one's own culture from cultural alienation" (9-10). His rejection of Igbo indigenous way of life creates conflicts between him and his family on the one hand and by extension his society on the other.

III

A comparison between Eugene's household and Ifeoma's shows that fixated religiosity is mainly responsible for the former's dysfunctional abyss. First, silence reigns in Eugene's household; silence so pervading that Kambili recalls "the years when Jaja, Mama and I spoke more with our spirits than our lips" (PH 15). It is a home with little freedom of speech or thought because of Eugene's inflexible stance on matters of religion. He imposes a tight schedule on his children and regulates their existence to the point that they have no private lives. His frequent battery of both mother and children makes him a terror in the family prompting Jaja to proclaim on learning of Mama's pregnancy: "we will take care of the baby; we will protect him," and Kambili the narrator surmising, "I knew that Jaja meant from Papa" (PH 23). The regimented and dreary lifestyles of both siblings eventually become routine so that when Jaja and Kambili encounter the functioning family of their aunt at Christmas, they thought they had stumbled upon a peculiar family. Aunt Ifeoma exudes so much boisterousness which placed beside their father's sinister silence is like a whirlwind in their country home. Unlike their brooding father who is stingy with affection, Ifeoma's laughter floats way ahead to announce her presence in their household (PH 71). It was no surprise therefore that they discovered what living is in Nsukka and how odd their family has been.

Further, Eugene's rejection of all things native to his culture widens the dysfunctional gulf in his household. He is intolerant of other viewpoints not in tandem with his perception of reality resulting in people not relating with him truthfully, a situation that warranted his sister's observation that "Eugene quarrels with the truth that he does not like" (PH 95). In his denial of his own heritage, he forbids his children from speaking Igbo in public (PH 13). Ifeoma, unlike Eugene who is ashamed of their father, stands solidly with Papa-Nnukwu till the end and openly cherishes the feeling that her children are with their grandfather and speak Igbo. She is loud, open and ebullient about her heritage. She speaks Igbo with pride and owns it just as she does Papa-Nnukwu and his traditionalist beliefs and lifestyle. In her household, children laugh openly and loudly which Kambili witnessed: "they all laughed alike; throaty, cackling sounds pushed out with enthusiasm" (PH 78). Thus, compared to Ifeoma's children, Jaja and Kambili are uptight and nervous. While laughter is a constant in Ifeoma's functioning family which blends Christian belief with Igbo traditionalist ethos, silence reigns in Eugene's family

where Igbo indigenous mores are banished. Thus while holidaying there, Kambili and Jaja experience such freedom they were unaccustomed to and consequently dread returning to their own home. The contrast between their aunty and their father was not lost to them as Ifeoma's abhorrence of imposition of foreign ways on Nigerians is evenly matched by their father's zest for them, especially Catholicism (*PH* 123). Ifeoma is liberal-minded in her religious disposition as her compound is open to all to access her rainbow of flowers among which is the rare purple hibiscus (a metaphor of all shades of beliefs) irrespective of denomination (Catholics, Anglicans, Pentecostals and traditionalists). In contrast, Eugene's household is surrounded by the more common red hibiscus (a metaphor of militant religiosity) and consequently viewed through the prism of red, the colour of blood; a warning sign to all contrary forces (non-Christians and non-Catholics alike) to keep off.

IV

Adichie's *PH* throws up a number of critical African social issues even as it firmly affirms the author's pro-African stance. Eugene's religiosity is perverted and destructive to the cultural fabric of his society because it erodes African societal values, especially those concerning honouring one's parents and family above all else. His perception of Christianity negates core Christian ethos that eschews violence, anger and vindictiveness. The irony of his communal philanthropy and his neglect of his aged father makes a caricature of his professed religious piety. Further, his high-handed demeanour at home banishes love, that greatest of Christian virtues, from his family. Instead, there is gloom, despondency and pain. More distressing is that he is a recognized church and community leader which imposes on him a duty to live by example. His character in *PH* is consequently an indictment of African churches that pander to the whims of the affluent in society and declare them quintessential Christians. Eugene's fate also exposes the dire consequences of elevating by imposition an individualistic worldview over the familial and communal in a society used to traditions and cultures with contrary worldviews. *PH* thus celebrates African indigenous communal metaphysics and ridicules the apocalyptic tenor of Christianity espoused by Eugene by his tragic death and his denial of justice as his killer walks away free. The text pushes home the point more forcefully by the fact that the "heathen" Papa- Nnukwu died more honourably than his fiery Christian son, Eugene who died ignominiously by the subterfuge of his wife.

On the flip side, *PH*'s portrayal of villainy and victimhood are of critical concern. Whereas Eugene is depicted as the villain and his wife and children as victims, there is a reversal of roles in the end. Eugene dies a victim of his wife's plot and the latter becomes the villain by her act of murder, with her children as accomplices. Mama's heinous act and her willingness to let her son take the blame for it is a blot on her moral integrity. Further, the novel's tacit justification of Mama's premeditated crime is inferred from its failure to emphasize that the two men in the family were eliminated, Eugene by death and Jaja by imprisonment, leaving the two women, Mama and Kambili, the ones standing at the end of the story. This is a moral gap in the narrative as it appears murder is recommended as means to reverse situations in dysfunctional homes.

Conclusion

This study has explored religiosity and its negative impacts on the family. It privileged imaginative literature to explore family dysfunction resulting from an intemperate single-minded religiosity of a major character in *PH*. It examined the notion of religiosity and the concept of dysfunctional family before engaging in a discourse on religiosity and erosion of family cohesion by critiquing some religiously informed mindsets and actions of the major characters in *PH* from literary and sociological perspectives. It concludes that a combination of individual flaws of religious single-mindedness and traducing of age-long indigenous mores of the local culture (in this instance the Igbo culture) by the protagonist/villain in the novel rendered the central family dysfunctional. In contrast, a second family in the text functioned effectively because of the leader's temperate attitude to both Christianity and Igbo indigenous mores and tradition.

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