

Review Article

Religion and Alienation in “Le Renégat” and Purple Hibiscus

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Abstract: If political imperialism has long been discussed in political and in literary forums, religious and cultural imperialism have not yet been exhaustively tackled. Yet, half a century after the official end of colonialism, religious domination is still resented by Christianized people. Religion remains an unsuspected yet powerful instrument of neo-colonial domination, resulting, most of the times, in self or in others’ alienation. Albert Camus and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie are novelists whose works dramatize the alienating power of such a seemingly noble ideology. Far from being a call to apostasy or rebellion against the received Christian faith, this article analyses the extent to which Christianity was a tool for neo-colonialism and alienation, as it is presented in “Le Renégat” by Albert Camus, and Purple Hibiscus by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

Keywords: religion, alienation, imperialism, neo-colonialism, post colonialism.

INTRODUCTION

Africa has long been an experimental ground for missionary work. Evangelization, which is still in progress, has had moments of success and failure. The progress from 40,000 African Christians in 1900 to 116,558,000 in 2018 (Todd M. Johnson et al., 5) evidences to the still ongoing evangelization in Africa. However, this mission did not go without problems. Black Africa has often expressed resentment to this disguised form of cultural and religious imperialism. The 1960s waves of independence in most African countries demonstrate Africans’ determination to set themselves free from any western yoke. However, if political independence seems to have attracted more focus, the religious and cultural independence have, to date, attracted less scholarly attention. , apparently out of respect for Almighty God, who is feared for his cruel hand in punishing renegades. It was this imperialism that Achebe tackled in his famous post-colonial novels, such as Things Fall Apart and No Longer at Ease. Mudimbe too addresses this issue in Entre les eaux, while Mongo Beti’s Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba and Ville cruelle don’t hide the social malaise brought about by an alien religion. . Little has been unveiled on the feelings of a Christian of European descent, who lived in Algeria at the time of French imperialism in the country, and whose leading

figures are Jacques Derrida and Albert Camus. Nor has the fiction of Ngozi Chimamanda Adichie finished attracting enough literary criticism by scholars.

This article is a comparative analysis of the impact of Christianity on some characters, as presented in “Le Renégat” and *Purple Hibiscus*. The two texts belong to different geographical and historical backgrounds: Algeria after the Second World War for “Le Renégat”, and post-colonial Nigeria for *Purple Hibiscus*. It is divided in three major sections: the first section dwells on the state of confusion brought about by zeal and cowardice in one missionary’s mind, (“Le Renégat”). The second section discusses the uselessness of church donations without holiness, and the third , which is a comparative analysis of the two texts, lays emphasis on the two writers’ treatment of mission and vision in a new Christian order.

I. ZEAL AND COWARDICE: TWO OPPOSITES IN ONE RENEGADE

The Renegade, a character with no name other than the one associated with his denial of Christ, is an absurd and proud character. He boastfully leaves Europe and the comfort of his seminary so as to become a missionary among the African ‘savages’, whose true nature he ignores. He only has a shallow idea about

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what he views as savagery, but instead of being scared, he believes that this is exactly where his evangelization mission fits most. Despite a past tarnished by theft at the chancery and the dropping out of his seminary, he trusts in his zeal and in the support he hopes to get from Jesus Christ, whom he plans to impose on the pagans.. A true French man in an Algerian background, he is a perfect mirror of France, which in Algeria is equivalent to “an incredible discipline, a fable and bible, yet a doctrine of indoctrination”, as Jacques Derrida puts it (qtd in Young 622). Behind this avowed evangelization zeal, hides a high dosage of a non-avowed pride: he embarks on a perilous mission not for God’s glory, but for his own aggrandizement and glorification, as he proudly confesses: “rejoindre les plus barbares et vivre de leur vie, leur montrer chez eux, et jusque dans la maison du fétiche, par l’exemple, que la raison de mon seigneur était la plus forte...je rêvais d’un pouvoir absolu, celui qui fait mettre genoux à terre, qui force à capituler, les convertir enfin » (join the most savage and live their life, show them at their home, up to the house of the fetish, for instance, that the reason of my lord was the strongest, ...I dreamt of an absolute power, the one which forces to the knees, which forces to capitulate, to convert them at last; transl. mine, 47).

He thinks himself capable of achieving success where years of missionary work has failed, and plans to win the savages through identification with them first, followed by a sudden use of force which no savage will resist. Nevertheless, he gets from his self-glorification a lesson so humiliating that he ends up losing focus and orientation : “on m’a fait boire une eau noire, amère, amère, et aussitôt ma tête s’est mise à brûler, je riaais, voilà l’offense, je suis offensé. Ils m’ont déshabillé, rasé la tête et le corps, lavé à l’huile, battu le visage avec des cordes trempées dans l’eau et le sel » (They had me drink a black water, bitter, bitter, and immediately after that my head started burning, I laughed, there’s the offense, I am offended. They stripped me naked, shaved my head and my body, washed me with oil, flogged my face with ropes soaked in water and salt; transl. mine, 47).

Physical torture forces him into non-negotiated capitulation from his mission. Instead of forcing the savages on their knees and reign over them, it is them, the savages, who ignore everything of Christ, who force him on his knees in front of their fetishes, to the level of blasphemy: “et lui, l’autre, le seigneur de la douceur, dont le nom me révolse, je le renie” (As for him, the other, the lord of mildness, whose name revolts me, I deny him ; transl. mine, 53).

To ensure that his arrogant evangelization mission is put to an end, the “savages” cut off his tongue. Whereas Camus likes putting silence at the center of oppression among victimized characters in his fiction, the renegade does not become mute. He talks, or at least his spirit talks, and it says nonsensical things

since truth no longer exists either on his lips or in his head. He gradually embraces the religion of the so-called savages: “J’ai essayé de prier le fétiche, il n’y avait que lui.” (I tried to worship the fetish, there was nothing else but him; transl mine, 47) The persecutor now persecuted renounces whatever was his earlier source of pride, and becomes so depraved that he works against future missionary work. His conversion into paganism seems to indicate the end of an era, the end of Christianity, which might also mean the end of European supremacy over Algeria. He finds disappointing all his former faith in Jesus-Christ, and he is seeking vengeance against Europe which told him lies about Africa and about religion (38). He plans to kill the missionary sent to replace him, so that no other lie will be told to the African ‘savages’ in the name of evangelization. The amputation of his tongue, and the conversion into a fetish worshipper, mark the end of Christian predication and the end of the European religious supremacy over Africa.

It should be reminded that the short story’s setting is Algeria, whereas the missionary is European. A step into missionary work opens his eyes to the spiritual and the physical strength of the ‘savages’. He kneels down before the worst of them, the *féticheur*, licking dust before him, and worshipping him, as a sign of total defeat, total failure in his mission. Frantz Fanon, who spent most of his active life in Algeria, knows that the natives, who saw the white men coming to occupy not only their land, but also to freely arrest, beat and starve them, took it as their moral duty “to silence the settler’s defiance to break his flaunting violence. They went up to Africanizing the Europeans, namely by forcing him into acceptance or respect of their local beliefs (Fanon 34).

The strength of the feticherur which overpowers the missionary enlightens on the truth that Africa was not culturally a *tabula rasa* before colonization and evangelization. They had protective forces, which they respected , obeyed and often worshiped. Echenim rightly reminds that “le féticheur traîne derrière lui une atmosphère qui lui donne une dimension extraordinaire, aussi bien sur le plan psychique que sur le plan de l’acte accompli” (the witch doctor trails behind himself an atmosphere which gives him an extraordinary dimension, at the level of the psychic as well as the finished act as well. Transl. mine, 19). He demonstrates his power to defeat without too much fighting.

Now, it becomes revolutionary that a pure white in a double duty of evangelization and civilization gets totally disoriented up to adhering to his adversary’s ideology. What is the author’s point in putting in him such a confused mind? Two reasons, one historical, the other philosophical, seem to be attributable to this.

Historically, colonial activities went hand in hand with evangelization. As Algeria was a land settlement for some Europeans, missionaries feared that the life of European settlers could begin to mirror the savage habits of their conquered subjects (Francis, 62). The missionaries had to give themselves a discipline which imposed their power on other spiritual leaders in Algeria. Meanwhile, the colonized and the evangelized Algerians never ceased to object (Rahal) a kind of proselytism whereby Christian missionaries wanted to impose Catholicism as a superior faith (Giuliana, 6).

Philosophically, the post-world war period where the story is set instilled in many Europeans' mind a feeling of helplessness, nihilism and the absurd, whereby the existence and the kindness of Almighty God are questioned. Attempts to turn to God for help brought nothing but bitter disappointment. This 'lost generation' desperately turned to atheism and to existentialism, refusing to believe in God's existence and replacing him with man who alone could be relied on to restore dignity damaged by atrocities.

Camus' fiction emphasizes this feeling of absurd and the questioning of God's existence, particularly in *L'Étranger* and in *La Peste*. In the latter, a medical doctor treats the plague's victims, without lifting his eyes up to heaven, where God quietly rests, undisturbed by the cries of those unjustly suffering on earth (*La Peste* 103). The doctor's aim is "lutter de telle ou telle façon et ne pas se mettre à genoux" (struggle this way and that way and not fall on the knees. Transl mine, *La Peste* 107). The two meanings of being on one's knees, i.e. worship and surrender to a stronger authority, are what the renegade, in complete defeat and disillusionment, will embrace: he worships pagan gods, and he surrenders to the pagans' power.

In view of this, the renegade is a special character. He has no personal name. He is a confused mind, which reflects the disorientation of those who had lost so much to the wars and who had many a time experienced man's powerlessness and God's silence. The reader of "The Renegade" is reminded that "Dieu ne parle pas au désert" (God does not speak in the desert; transl mine, 57), which is another confession of the protagonist's mission failure: either his preaching (he is never depicted preaching, anyway) would not be God-inspired or the people who live there are not meant to hear a word from God, or both.

Through the Renegade, the myth of the white man's supremacy over the Blacks is dismantled. He can humbly and sincerely admit: « nous nous sommes trompés, nous recommencerons, nous ferons la cité de miséricorde, je veux retourner chez moi" (We made a mistake, we will start again, we will build a city of mercy, I want to go back home ; transl. mine, 58). The character who was expected to stand for Christ openly

turns into a renegade, only to ensure his survival, not even a dignified survival, but a survival on knees, i.e. in complete humiliation and powerlessness. His total surrender lends support to the claim that evangelization was an unnecessary enterprise in a land which had its own cultural and religious force.

II. Church Donations and Holiness

Purple Hibiscus, which is central to this second section, significantly demonstrates the mistake in seeking to equate church donations with holiness. Three characters serve as embodiments of the truth that church donations and holiness are two different aspects of Christianity. They are papa Eugene, Father Benedict, and Father Amadi.

Papa Eugene, the protagonist of *Purple Hibiscus*, is both a well-to-do businessman and a passionate catholic. Like the Renegade discussed above, his attitude to religion will greatly influence his human relationships, and it will end him in disaster. His devotion and donations in the church prompt Father Benedict to set a new upside down hierarchy, consisting of "The Pope, Papa, and Jesus—in that order" (12). The reader is already foreshadowed of a coming crisis; the paradox of putting Jesus last and yet seeking perfection. Even if Papa Eugene were a living saint owing to his regular charity donations and his continual exercise of piety and virtue- the white man's virtue- Jesus should remain on top of any hierarchical pyramid, at least among Christians.

One of Papa Eugene's most fatal flaws emanates from his distanciation with those he considers unholy. He breaks his wife's figurines with no apology to anybody, in an outburst of anger against his son Jaja who did not receive Holy Communion, not because of a capital sin, but because the host gives him bad breath. His frustrated pride still leads him to breaking his son's left hand because he missed two questions in his catechism test and was not named the best in his Holy Communion class (153). He still burns the legs of his daughter Kambili methodically, for the 'capital sin' of having stayed in the same house with Papa Nnuku, a pagan, when they visited their village (200). A dictator disguised behind proselytism, Papa Eugene never expects opposition: his family members have learned the art of crying silently (192). The businessman who has *The Standard* to speak the truth against power abuse by the government, a man who got a human rights award by Amnesty World, and a living saint in his parish priest's eyes, is the same who turns out to be the greatest transgressor of his family's rights, starting with the right to talk. Nobody talks back when he explodes in anger.

If any paralinguistic communication was capable of changing things, the sign language in his house would have taught him how to rechannel his physical, verbal and psychological abuses. But nothing

changes Papa Eugene. His wife, Mama Beatrice, is so powerlessly subdued to his wicked decisions that begging him is her only remaining negotiation tool. Nonetheless, her pleading of “please, Biko, please” (217) does not stop her husband from pouring hot water on his daughter’s legs. Silence fills the air as those daring words from a bleeding heart of a long silently enduring mother fall on the usual deaf ears of a “living saint” in the person of Papa Eugene. A ‘saint’, indeed, when out of compassion he scoops his victim and carries her to hospital, where she will be treated not only for burns, but also for broken ribs and internal bleeding. A ‘saint’ also, when he boastfully quarantines his own biological father, Papa Nnuku, who abandoned half-way the process of becoming a Christian, because of the disheartening Christian teaching according to which the Father and the Son are equal. The old man, a good adept to the Igbo traditional religions, swallows in silence his son’s rejection, together with its consequent deprivation of a communion with his son and his grandchildren. The killing of Ade Coke, the editor of Papa Eugene’s *The Standard*, symbolizes not only the political muzzling of citizens by a dictatorial political regime; it also symbolizes the zero tolerance in Papa Eugene’s house, with its ensuing bleeding and life loss.

In view of the damages caused by an imported religion, a reader may take *Purple Hibiscus* as a twenty-first century version of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*. Okonkwo’s clan could no longer act like one, because of the white missionary’s intrusion into traditional beliefs. Likewise, Papa Eugene has blindly embraced the white man’s religion, and his family can no longer act like one. The opening sentence of *Purple Hibiscus* is enlightening on this: “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...” (11). The falling apart will gradually build up to a climax when Mama Beatrice poisons her husband’s food and he dies, while her son Jaja offers himself to be jailed instead of Mama.

Interestingly, as if to correct any judgment which would blame religion for all forms of social disorders, Adichie brings in a young African priest, Father Amadi, who knows how to adjust Christianity with the Igbo’s indigenous life, and who becomes the foil to father Benedict. With father Amadi, order is restored, sanity is reestablished, and rescue is given to Eugene’s main victims of his religious wrought: his two children. He is unlike the European missionary, father Benedict, who remains a stranger in a parish where he has spent seven years (12), and encourages a return to pre-Vatican II Council use of Latin in certain parts of the mass, widening this way the gap between young Christians and the old conservative ones. Father Benedict also turns into a follower of papa Eugene, who hates Father Amadi, for the great offence that he

sings in his sermons exactly like the “godless leaders of one of Pentecostal churches” (37).

Unlike Father Benedict who encourages masses in English and Latin, Father Amadi sings in Igbo. This is scandalous to Papa Eugene, more conscious than the white missionary of the necessity to safeguard the use of these European languages in Christian worship- as if they were the only languages understood by God. In indignation, Papa Eugene condemns, curses and prays: “That young priest, singing in the sermon like a godless leader...people like him bring trouble to the church. We must remember to pray for him” (37). There is an impression that the colonized cannot become Christians unless they become Europeanized or Latinized (Nmah, 6)

Father Amadi’s priority goes not toward encouraging church donations and external practices of piety; he rather aims at building up people’s mind and body together. Reliance on cultural and social values to evangelize yields positive results; it uproots Kambili and Jaja from a life of total suffocation where they were strangled by their father, into a life open to the world, a life which liberates them and which activates all the dormant potentials in them. It is this non-conformist priest, Father Amadi, whose missionary vision will yield more fruits, by restoring honor, hope and faith to those who had been left heart-broken by overzealous conservative minds. His pattern in evangelization emphasizes the place of local values in evangelization, and it calls to mind the colonial priest in Mudimbe’s *Entre Les Eaux*, rendered by Echenim in these words:

Des réactions d’un prêtre face à une institution qu’il conteste et admire en même temps. S’il s’engage dans la révolution, c’est dans le souci de vouloir, par sa présence, ‘nier la responsabilité de Dieu dans la colonisation comme dans l’exploitation’. Ce faisant, il peut ainsi nier le rôle joué par le Vatican dans l’entreprise de la colonisation et de l’exploitation de l’Afrique.

(Reactions of a priest vis-à-vis an institution which he contests and admires at the same time. If he gets involved in revolution, it is with the aim of using his presence to ‘reject God’s responsibility in the colonization and exploitation.’ Thus, he can deny the responsibility of the Vatican in the colonization business and in the exploitation of Africa. my transl; Echenim, 58).

Father Amadi’s stand also repositions Christianity to its right place in society. Apparently, religion does not act like opium to people, as Carl Marx preached. The problem with religion is linked with ignorance. Papa Eugene in black skin functions as the right hand of a ‘holy’ colonial white master, and he ends in self-alienation. He alienated himself against his culture (no Igbo language is spoken, Igbo songs are

condemned, and Igbo religious practices are castigated). He seems to lack spiritual maturity to understand that flagellation has never been a means to achieve holiness, that a life of seclusion from the world is a choice and not an imposition, and that, even in religious matters, violence breeds violence. No religion divides or oppresses. It is rather people's misinterpretation of the Bible which misleads human beings into subjugating others in the name of Christianity.

A question which arises from this analysis is why Adichie created an upside down Christian world in a 21st century Igbo (Nigeria) world. What is her intention in putting a big dichotomy between real life and the expectation from Christ's preaching? One thing seems to be that Christianity has not yet produced its expected changes on Christians' life. The world is still upside down: a European priest praises external practices of virtue, such as donations to the poor, and attendance to practically all church services... ; an old man, Papa Nnuku, a reincarnation of Chinua Achebe's Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, wakes up to discover that the so praised imported religion creates a new family order, by daring to preach that the Father and the Son are equal, justifying in this way all the disregard Papa Eugene has for his father, in a community where age imposes respect. He leaves the church to avoid the power structure thus created, and yet he still falls in the web of his son's adherence to it. Through marginalization and oppression, the son demonstrates this superiority over his father.

Another character with controversial Christian attitude is the European missionary, Father Benedict, who remains a stranger in a parish where he has spent seven years (12), and encourages a return to pre-Vatican II Council use of Latin in masses. Father Amadi's adjustment to indigenous life turns him into an enemy of the one who should have nursed him. Their antagonism validates the idea that Christianity has not yet produced its expected changes on Christians' life: there is still room for a new Christian order.

III. A New Christian Order

Both the renegade and Papa Eugene lack a fair balance in their mission and their vision of holiness and life, and they pay it back with their lives. They are brought back to realism by those to whom they had assigned the duty to exhibit their feigned holiness. The renegade wants to force the 'savages' into acceptance and adhesion into his own religion, the same way Papa Eugene thinks himself assigned by God the duty to bring by coercion to holiness all his family members, seemingly in a sheer ignorance of how to live that holiness. The feeling of absurd that prevails in both texts comes from the protagonists' mental confusion. The renegade ceaselessly admits: 'quelle bouillie, quelle bouillie. Il faut mettre de l'ordre dans ma tête'(what a mess, what a mess. Order should be restored to my head ; my transl, 37). In uncertainties of

aim, background, evangelization can only turn into chaos.

As for Papa Eugene, behind his religious zeal hides a confused mind, manifest in his lack of knowledge of effective and acceptable means to live one's call to holiness. A look into his so-called acts of holiness reveals a rather cruel father who, after breaking his son's left hand for the crime of not being the best in his first Holy Communion class, carries remorsefully the child in his arms, like a baby, all the way to the car, crying and praying (153). Likewise, after burning his daughter's legs- for a pseudo-sin of staying in the same house with her non-Christian grandfather—he cries and mutters prayers (218) not in contrition, but in deep compassion for her pain.

The protagonists from both texts are oppressors who disregard human dignity in the name of religion; they know Christ but ignore the right way to serve him. In a disguised pride, like most colonial masters, they embark on destructive acts toward those they want to impart positively and what they get in return is a destruction of their own lives. In this respect, Nadine Gordimer rightly observes that we are entering an age from religious persecution – the denial of people's right to follow their faith in freedom—into a religion which persecutes freedom. Religion nowadays has the power to terrorize, through its followers, across all frontiers (Nadine Gordimer 116-17). By presenting protagonists who turn victims of their zeal for God, both writers eloquently militate against all forms of imperialism, be it political, economic, or cultural. Cultural imperialism, of which religious domination and intolerance are part, is either suicidal or genocidal.

It should be noted, however, that the texts are not anti-religious. They eloquently demonstrate that religious knowledge in an inconsiderate mind can lead to ruin of the soul, one's age and level of education notwithstanding. The practice of religion, therefore, should not be left unguided. If evangelization and sanctification remain the major objectives of Christianity, harmony between economic, cultural and political matters is a prerequisite for success. Unfortunately Jeyifo observes that there has never been a successful harmonization of economic and political domination with domination on the cultural plane (Jeyifo, 610), and that has not gone without regrettable consequences.

Imposing one's cultural values on other peoples demonstrates a deep lack of respect for their values, and it goes with its own risks. Religious imperialism has already been achieved in Africa, often through coercive and disdainful means. Those to whom 'missionaries', i.e. colonialists and post-colonialists in the name of God, impose their cultural and the so-called behavioral superiority, may be powerless to openly oppose oppression, but their silence does not

mean acceptance. If silence meant consent, Papa Eugene's death wouldn't have been planned by his ever silent wife. Likewise, the savages from Taghâsa, whose single word the reader ignores, powerfully reacted against the intruder and they happened to put humility and humiliation where arrogance and pride prevailed. In this post-colonial era, the transfer of values from one geographical region to another should always take into consideration other people's dignity and values.

CONCLUSION

The authors of the two texts tackle, at different levels and within different approaches, the conflicts between Africa and the western world on the one hand, and between religiously assimilated Africans and conservative ones on the other. Although published only in 2006, Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* advocates colonial alienation as an ever-present African reality, with its two interlinked forms, both incarnated in the person of Papa Eugene: "An active (or passive) distancing of oneself from the reality around and an active (or passive) identification with that which is external to one's environment" (Ngugi 302). The larger the distance between the self-acclaimed religious model and the target of the evangelization and sanctification mission, the higher the level of arrogance, and the more fatal the retaliation. The renegade, with a tongue cut off and a mission terminated, is in a confusion of mind after discovering power and spiritual strongholds among those he underestimated as weak and uncivilized. The role reversal of the protagonists from oppressors to oppressed demonstrates that only the respect of each other's rights, values and dignity can save the world from the self-destructive pit towards which it seems to be moving slowly, unnoticeably, but very surely. In a disguised pride, characters embark on destructive journeys toward those they want to impart positively, and, paradoxically, the end result is a destruction of their own lives. Common traits among the two texts is the writers' condemnation of all forms of dictatorship, and a call for humility in the service of God.

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