

Religious deception: catholicism in fiction and fact in 'purple hibiscus'



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Religious Deception The primary purpose of religion is to promote morality and peace within its followers, and its fundamental principles are based on the spread of such peace in the hopes of unity. However, author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie presents her belief that religion dictates morals to the point where it can have the opposite of the desired effect. One instance in which Adichie's belief is reflected in the story is through the personality of Eugene Achike, Kambili's father. He is portrayed as an obsessive follower of Catholicism, forcing the religion on the rest of his family and acquaintances. Adichie contrasts the traditionalist attitude of Kambili's father to Auntie Ifeoma, who is also a Catholic but is much more liberal and open-minded. She is portrayed as a much more gentle and flexible character, a complete opposite of Papa. A careful examination of the research indicates that Adichie correctly asserts that although religion has the capacity for good, it possesses the potential to manipulate morals to the point at which one may misinterpret negative actions as positive ones.

Adichie illustrates the negative effects religion can have on one's sense of morality through the personality of Eugene, Kambili's father. Eugene is portrayed as a wealthy man that harbors good intentions through religion, but negatively impacts those he wishes to benefit with Catholicism. When Kambili was caught eating before mass, which is prohibited in Catholicism, her father, stating he has no other choice, punishes her by pouring boiling water over her feet, causing her to cry in pain. He displays reluctance to hurt his daughter but insists he must carry out this act of violence in the name of upholding the rules of his faith, as a way to teach " what you do to yourself when you walk into sin. You burn your feet" (194). The fact that Eugene

inflicted this painful punishment on his daughter against his will emphasizes the extent to which religion manipulates his motives. The desire to conform to his religion is so strong that it overpowers Eugene's paternal instinct and drives him to hurt his own daughter. Another instance in which Kambili's father displays his fanatic passion to Catholicism is when Kambili's brother, Jaja refused to receive communion, the most important aspect of a Catholic mass. Upon learning about Jaja's act of blasphemy, " Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the étagère" (3). In this incident, Eugene once again emphasizes the influence religion has on his perspective and emotions through his impulsive behavior. The severity of his reaction to Jaja's infraction also depicts the lengths to which Eugene is willing to go to teach Jaja his lesson. By breaking figurines, which were precious to Kambili's mother, Eugene also indicates that he perceives religion to be a priority above everything, including the happiness and belongs of his wife.

The manipulation of morals through religion depicted in Purple Hibiscus is also present in the real world. An examination that delved into the motives of religious terrorists revealed that "[the terrorist's] deep Calvinistic religious beliefs appeared to fuel a willingness to kill women and children in his desire to eliminate slavery" (Johnson). Although the acts committed by the man in question are atrocious, the fact that the purpose of his actions was to end slavery indicates that he carried out these deeds with good intentions, much like the actions of Eugene. Additionally, Muslims statistically make up the majority of terrorist groups because " the interests of a number of Islamic countries are in conflict with the interests of powerful Western countries"

(BBC). This article clearly portrays the pervasiveness of religion's negative influence on moral judgement, since it is driving many people to carry out acts of terrorism in order to preserve their own faith. This occurs in *Purple Hibiscus* on a much smaller scale, with Eugene committing acts of violence on his own children when they violate the interests of his religion. The religious extremists illustrated in both of these articles support the existence of too much faith in religion that Adichie portrays in the actions of Papa.

Adichie uses Auntie Ifeoma to contrast with the violent nature of Papa in order to further emphasize the ability of religion to distort one's perception of good and bad. Ifeoma explicitly expresses her opinion on Eugene's desire to exert control over others that "Eugene has to stop doing God's job. God is big enough to do his own job. If God will judge our father for choosing to follow the way of our ancestors, then let God do the judging, not Eugene" (95). Ifeoma blatantly portrays the sharp contrast between her and Eugene's perspective on control, which Adichie includes to establish Ifeoma as a representative of the original purpose of religion. By introducing such a character, Adichie effectively conveys that although Eugene has good intentions, he is contradicting the very purpose of Catholicism. Later in the story, Kambili reflects on Jaja's resistance of Eugene's control, comparing them to "Aunty Ifeoma's experimental purple hibiscus: rare, fragrant with the undertones of freedom" (15). Kambili's remark captures Adichie's sentiment that religion has the potential to make a positive mark on one's life, as long as it is contained. Ifeoma practices the same religion as Eugene, but is flexible and open to new ideas allowing her to maintain control of her morals in order to help others in a genuinely positive way.

Adichie's point that religion, as long as it isn't extreme, is perfectly capable of spreading well-being is reinforced when a church in Texas "partnered with organizations to help those affected, cleaning debris from their homes and distributing needed items" (NBC). In this case, religion inspired its followers to reach out to those in need to make a positive impact on the society around it, much like how Ifeoma allows Catholics to guide her in teaching Kambili valuable moral lessons. Furthermore, when a church shooter devastated the families of a Christian church, Muslims lended a hand in raising money to support the victims, with their only motive being that the "beloved Prophet Muhammed reminded us on our duties towards our neighbours" (Farrell). This behavior is parallel to Ifeoma's treatment of Kambili, using the little resources she possesses towards helping Kambili enjoy her stay with Ifeoma, and teaching Kambili the wrongs of Eugene's ways. The personalities of the generous people depicted in these articles and that of Ifeoma serves as a contrast that further illustrates Adichie's message that religion can only be beneficial up to a point. The actions of both Osteen's church and the Muslims that reached out to the Christian victims reflect Ifeoma's broader perspective regarding religion, driving her to take actions are seen as blasphemous to Papa's narrow viewpoint.

A careful inspection of real life occurrences compared to the course of events in *Purple Hibiscus* definitively support Adichie's claim that at a certain point, religion can negatively impact a person and others around him. By integrating the stark differences between Papa's impulsive and fanatic attitude and Ifeoma relaxed and flexible nature during the story, Adichie illustrates the line between the positive and negative influences of religion.

By presenting the idea that religion may have a certain limit of benefit, Adichie speaks out against the horrors of religious extremism but praises the kindness inspired by the same faiths.

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