

# In pursuit of redemption: reading the poisonwood bible



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Youth is malleable. A child's surroundings, after all, shape the person that the child becomes. Leah Price, who witnesses the most dynamic shift in Barbara Kingsolver's novel *The Poisonwood Bible*, consistently challenges the established culture of the charismatic Congolese atmosphere by breaking down gender roles and taking on the mature responsibilities that her sisters often avoid. Leah is characterized by conflict and passion, always actively working to approach her life's struggles with brevity despite her constant internalized religious and familial debates. *The Poisonwood Bible* – with a narrative based in outlining the various forms of redemption – is heavily reliant on Leah Price's shift to open-mindedness in her worldview, asserting that in order to challenge the inequity of a rigidly unjust surrounding, one must actively work to defy the limited expectations placed in front of them and understand conflict from points of views besides their own.

Leah Price is easily defined as a feminist. In her ever-maturing perspective on life, she learns to never succumb to the patriarchal social structure established by her father or the community in which she lives. Such defiance is countered by her fourteen-year old self that arrives in the Congo, shrouded in the strict Christian beliefs she was raised under. Kingsolver's shining moment for Leah's rebellion against the Congolese social structure is when Leah assists the village men in hunting. When finding her prey, Leah "followed it with [her] eye as Nelson taught [her] to do, looking for the path of its hopes" (348). The dark, foreboding connotation given to "path of its hopes" relates to an animal's death, amplifying the depiction of Leah's harsher individualism as she attempts to equal the actions of men in the Congo. The vigor of Leah's tone accentuates the divergence from absolutes

in her life. Leah rejects her father's judgment and the judgment of her local adversaries in order to defy the expectations placed ahead of her. The actions of the other Price daughters serve to highlight Leah's personality shift throughout the novel. Rachel's moral compass is stagnant in its sense of greed and self-fulfillment while Adah is able to find her voice and stand up for herself. Leah, however, is defined by her ability to consistently see ahead of her own perspective, which allows her to confidently hunt with the other men in Kilanga. "[Leah] felt mixed up, grateful, and sick at heart" when "Nelson had ridiculed Gbenye's aim by calling him nkento. A woman" after Gbenye ridiculed Leah's social audacity (349). The negative connotation given to "woman" creates a conflicted tone in order to candidly illustrate the blatant misogyny of the Congolese culture. The fact that Leah feels conflicted in the first place implies her clear moral and ideological shift towards individualism, rather than dependence on her father or God. In addition to her gender, the color of Leah's skin places a consistent social and political backlash on her life in the Congo.

White skin is a mark of privilege and disconnect from the struggles of the Congolese culture. The juxtaposition of the Price family's assumed privilege and the actuality of their struggles allows Kingsolver to comment on the political relationship between America and the Congo. Leah is unique in that her contributions to the Congo become more and more political as her life spent with Anatole progresses. Kingsolver utilizes the minor detail of a meaningless banana when Leah states, "I live among men and women who've simply always understood their whole existence is worth less than a banana to most white people. I see it in their eyes when they glance up at

me” (437). The lingual contrast between the words “ existence” and “ banana” are utilized as extreme, yet honest depictions of the cultural subjugation by white people against black individuals, starkly illustrating how marginal a black person’s worth is regarded in the country. The undercurrents of racial tension within the country often pit Leah as a disgrace for marrying Anatole because she is stereotyped as pompous and unfairly superior. Kingsolver’s comments on race may reflect her struggles as a white minority living in the black majority of the Congo as a child. The gentle, understanding tone behind “ I see it in their eyes” allows Leah to take on a open-minded perspective – one in which she remains respectful and loving of her nation despite the constant anger and judgment passed her way. Race is utilized as a facet of the political allegory within The Poisonwood Bible in regards to the United States’ imperialistic involvement in the Congo. The comfort Leah eventually feels as she ages in the country is a microcosm for possible resolutions to the Congolese racial structure; patience and hope are the hallmarks of Leah’s acceptance into the culture in addition to her flexible understanding of the viewpoints against her. The peaceful image of Leah in old age, saying, “ I wake up in love, and work my skin to darkness under the equatorial sun...and I understand that time erases whiteness altogether” implies a picture of her prosperous life and the admiration Leah feels towards a homeland that fosters her livelihood and family (526). Love and hard work evaporated the connotation of her skin tone and allowed her to feel a full sense of belonging in Africa. The effects of guilt place heavy weights on the shoulders of each of the Price family members. Leah’s longstanding guilt lies in her inaction towards Ruth May, not following her mother to America and struggling to fulfill herself in a

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country that often denied her. Regardless, Leah's redemption is found in her eventual acceptance into African society because her race is dismissed, seen simply as an external factor, allowing Leah to work and give back to the environment that shaped her.

One of the most blatant factors to shape Leah is the presence of religion throughout her entire life. The Poisonwood Bible is not only a political allegory but it also engenders elements of a religious allegory, bound by an overarching theme of sin and redemption. The entire Price family's most prevalent sin is their unwillingness to deal with the realities of life. Their redemption, in its simplest form, is to overcome this unwillingness. Leah's early stages in the Congo are characterized by her drive to adamantly defend her father's actions; fourteen-year-old Leah is defined by absolutism. Kingsolver, however, hints at the degradation of such a relationship in the final lines of Book One, when Leah exclaims, " My father, of course, was bringing the Word of God – which fortunately weighs nothing at all" (19). The caustic tone of Leah's final statement sets the stage for eventual rough familial discourse, hinting at the differing religious perspectives that will eventually move Leah away from a life lived in absolutes. The verbal contrast of " God" and " nothing" grants Leah her own unique voice that is not dictated by her father, Nathan. In the sink-or-swim atmosphere of the Congo, Leah constantly finds herself at the will of dangerous odds and in scenarios her Father does not agree with. The repetition of " sin" and the brief sentence structure of " sin, sin, I felt drenched and sick of it" suggests Leah's frustrated tone, which parallels the slow devolution of Leah's relationship with her father (285). Parenthetically, Nathan's ardent Christianity serves

more of a symbolic purpose rather than a helpful one, often leaving the family at the mercy of Nathan's stubbornness. The pinnacle of not only Leah, but the whole Price family's loss of trust in Nathan occurs after the ant attack, accented clearly and helplessly by Leah's voice when she states, "My father was not a ghost; he was God with his back turned, hands clasped behind him and fierce eyes on the clouds. God had turned his back and was walking away" (310). The metaphorical comparison of Nathan to God emphasizes the degradation of Leah's paternal dependence because both her father and her religion are failing to support and comfort her, thus leaving her in search of new forms of protection and guidance. Leah's rejection of religion is a speculative decision as a child. Her defiance pits her against her greatest roll models, but only after she realizes her roll models were the ones leaving her behind and ignoring her. There arises a newfound sense of purpose and action within Leah as she transitions away from Christianity because she takes her issues into her own hands. The opposing non-religious perspectives that Leah adopts lead to her expansive worldview and understanding qualities. Rejection of the easiest solution is Leah's most critical asset and her repudiation of the religiously moral code she was raised on is the turning point for Leah's individualism. She finds her voice when her voice is no longer her father's or her God's.

Leah's redemption never avoids risk. She always cares deeply about the world, but as a child she had clung happily to the belief in divine and absolute justice. Without absolute assurance she opens her compassionate, kind heart to the pain of acknowledging the inevitable injustice in the world. The greatest accomplishment Leah finds is that after losing her faith in

divine justice she responds by devoting her life to bringing justice into her corner of the world. Kingsolver allows Leah to witness the clearest form of redemption because by the narrative's end, there is no denying that Leah Price worked for fulfillment. In the face of overwhelming odds, Leah struck down the inequality that surrounded her and found solace in the perpetual state of breaking and fixing that life is often defined by.