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## **A Portrayal of Clashes of Ideologies Among the African Natives in African Writing in English: A Study of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* And Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus***

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**Abstract:**

*In African writing in English, the conflict between the Western and the Native has been a recurrent theme for many writers. The impact of colonialism and Christianity on the natives' ways of thinking and living and the resultant conflict among the natives because of the clashes in the opinions is another issue that finds expression in the African literature. When the colonials started inhabiting African nations they started with conversion of the natives to Christianity and affected a change in their mentality. They propagated the beliefs in their minds that their native ways of living and worshiping are savage and irrational. They promised them a deliverance from the pagan beliefs and showed them a refuge in White Western culture. They denigrated their roots and origin by emphasizing their blackness in a derogatory manner and propagated the belief that conversion to Christianity and following Western views is the ultimate solution for their liberation. Many of the natives failed to see through their lies and believed in their strategies of putting the natives against each other and breaking the bonds that had always kept them united. They discouraged communal gatherings and traditional rituals where people used to unite and share a common heritage. These strategies eventually worked in favour of colonial masters who successfully created confused hybrids. These hybrids could neither embrace Christianity completely nor could they reject their native ways which were part and parcel of their existence. The present paper deals with clashes of ideologies between such hybrids and the native believers who refuse to give in to the twisted colonial teachings. The works taken for the study include *The River Between* by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o is a Kenyan writer and was born in 1938 while Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a Nigerian writer, born in 1977. Though both the writers belong to different times as well as places, still they seem to share the pain and effects of colonialism quite similarly.*

**Key words:** *Christianity, Missionaries, Colonialism, Post colonial, Culture, Clashes, resistance*

### **1. Introduction**

Ngugi wa Thiong'o is highly acknowledged for his harsh criticism of colonial rule, Christianity and post colonial effects in Africa. Many of his works deal with these issues and he has for this many a times faced wrath of government also. In spite of the resistance though, Ngugi has never abstained from showing his reaction against any kind of prejudice or ill-treatment by the colonials against the masses. An example of his criticism of the role of missionaries in Africa may be seen in the following words:

Religion is not the same thing as God.  
When the British imperialists came here in 1895,  
All the missionaries of all the Churches  
Held the Bible in the left hand,  
And the gun in the right hand.  
The white wanted us  
To be drunk with religion  
While he, in the meantime,  
Was mapping and grabbing our land  
And starting factories and businesses  
On our sweat. (Thiong'o 1982, 56-57) <sup>1</sup>

Similarly the works by Adichie are a clear indication of her views regarding the role of colonialism and Christianity in defining the fate of Nigeria and its people. The country kept on struggling on the basis of religion or ethnicity even after its independence. Adichie attributes the differences among the natives to the divide and rule policies of the colonials that made their way into the lives of people even after they left. Her novel *Purple Hibiscus* talks about how people dangling between the native ways and new faith fail to imbibe the real meaning of Christianity due to its twisted version propagated by missionaries. Eugene succumbs to the fight between his past and present and tortures his family members brutally during the process. In her second novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* also, she explores the obvious connections between the Nigerian Civil war, which killed million of innocents, and the legacies of colonialism.

## 2. Ideological Clashes Symbolized by Physical Entities

If we look at *The River Between* by Ngugi and *Purple Hibiscus* by Adichie, we see many similarities between the lives of major characters and the impact of colonialism and Christianity on them. In both the novels, on one hand we have pseudo-religious fanatics who fail to understand the real meaning of religion, while on the other side are the members of their families, both Christian and non-Christian, who silently suffer because of the obsession of their patriarchs with Christianity. We have yet another category of people characterized by Muthoni, Amaka and Ifeoma who have embraced Christianity but at the same time respect their native culture and question the validity of Christian doctrines that they find contradictory and unacceptable.

In *The River Between*, we see that the two opposing villages, where the action of the novel takes place, are geographically distinct from each other. This distinction indirectly highlights their differences and antagonism which arise due to the difference in the belief system of the respective inhabitants owing to colonial education and Christianity. The *Kameno* people believe in continuation of indigenous cultural traditions like polytheism while the *Makuyu* people have already embraced Christianity and colonial educational systems, rejecting everything native.

If we look at *Purple Hibiscus*, we see the similar symbolism which hints at the atmosphere in Eugene's house steeped in Christian ideologies. The house of Eugene is walled form all the sides, protecting it from the outside world. Even the school the children go to shows the similarity in terms of discipline. At both the places, children were not allowed to go beyond the territories decided by Eugene. Kambili, tells us that:

Our house still took our breath away, the four-story white majesty of it, with the spurting fountain in front and the coconut trees flanking it on both sides and the orange trees dotting the front yard...The walls that surrounded Daughters of the Immaculate Heart Secondary School were very high, similar to our compound walls, but instead of coiled electrified wires, they were topped by jagged pieces of green glass with sharp edges jutting out. (Adichie 2009, 45)

There is a stark contrast between Eugene's house and Aunt Ifeoma's house. It was in Ifeoma's house where the children get exposed to the freedom and discover themselves. Unlike their home, it was small and Kambili feels that she "could reach out and touch it (ceiling); it was so unlike home, where the high ceilings gave our (their) rooms an airy stillness (Adichie 2009, 113). They get to know the real meaning of religion and relationships in that house. The members in the house are full of love and understanding for each other. Kambili realizes the differences between the houses more when she comes back home from Ifeoma's house. Kambili says that:

I wanted to tell mama that it did feel different to be back, that our living room had too much empty space, too much wasted marble floor that gleaned from Sisi's polishing and housed nothing. Our ceilings were too high. Our furniture was lifeless: [...] the leather sofa's greeting was a clammy coldness, the Persian rugs were too lush to have any feeling. (Adichie 2009, 190)

## 3. Hostility Between the Christian Values and the Native Beliefs

In *The River Between*, Joshua, a convert, hates his native African culture. We see him repenting at times for having got married to Miriamu. He does not want his children to have any contact and affinity with the native culture. He strictly follows whatever missionaries ask him to, without understanding the real meaning of Christianity. His religion has no place for people who are not Christians. Joshua preaches people about the Bible and asks them to give up their native rituals and rites completely. Ngugi openly rejects and condemns this education by missionaries that alienates people from their roots. Talking about the loss of traditions and culture in Africa and the role of colonialism in it, he says that:

Christianity as an organized religion is corrupt and hypocritical: besides acting as an agent of imperialism. It exercised a highly disruptive influence on African life and was the chief villain in alienating the African from his own culture. (Thiong'o 1972, 31)

As the novel *Purple Hibiscus* begins, the role and impact of strict Christian codes in the house of Eugene becomes apparent. The narrator tells us that, "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" (Adichie 2009, 1). The incidence hints at the imbalance that strikes when Jaja does not go to communion and Papa, that is Eugene, the patriarch of the house, tries to punish him. The incidence clearly reveals that Eugene controls as well as punishes the members of his house with his personal version of religion which is symbolized by his punishing Jaja by throwing at him 'the heavy missal.' As long as the people of the house are following him unquestionably, the figurines, which symbolize their silence, obedience and order, stay securely in the house. The moment they question or disobey him, they break.

Like Joshua, Eugene hates the native African culture and the people who follow it. He discourages his family members to speak in native Igbo language and prefers English. He does not let them mix up with their grandfather whom he hates for following heathen ways. When they go to meet him occasionally he instructs them that, "Remember, don't touch any food, don't drink anything. And, as usual, you will stay not longer than fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes" (Adichie 2009, 61). He takes part in Church services very strictly and is a very renowned and respected person there because of his charity. The futility of his exaggerated prayers seems obvious when Kambili tells us that, "he prayed for the conversion of our Papa-Nnukwu, so that Papa-

Nnukwu would be saved from hell” (Adichie 2009, 61). Though he prayed for him but never took care of him. She further tells us that Eugene would spend a lot of time “describing hell, as if God did not know that the flames were eternal and raging and fierce” (Adichie 2009, 61).

#### 4. Questioning the Contradictions and Hypocrisies

The friction between the Christianity and the native religious practices is clearly evident in *The River Between*. Joshua takes the lead and earns many followers of Christianity in the form of converts. His daughter Muthoni, on the other hand symbolizes the faith in the ancient roots, in spite of embracing the Christianity. She does not understand the logic that how certain rituals may prevent/forbid a person from becoming a Christian. She does not renounce Christianity totally but questions candidly the things that she does not like in the colonizers’ religion. She says:

I want to be a woman. I want to be a real girl, a real woman, knowing all the ways of the hills and ridges... I too have embraced the white man’s faith. However, I know it is beautiful, oh so beautiful to be initiated into womanhood. You learn the ways of the tribe. Yes, the white man’s God does not quite satisfy me. I want, I need something more. My life and your life are here in the hills, that you know. (Thiong’o 2008, 26)

Like Muthoni, the character of Ifeoma in *Purple Hibiscus*, shows a sharp contrast between the real values of a religion and the values that Eugene talks about. Her religion does not make her control her family members in a suppressive way. She effectively controls her house but at the same time offers freedom to each member. Her Christianity does not make her hate her father, who unlike her believed in native ways and did not convert to Christianity. In African society, it is not considered good for a father to stay with his daughter and take help from her after she is married. But keeping aside these societal norms when his son Eugene refuses to take care of him in his old age, she takes care of him and he dies happily at her home. It is in her home that Kambili and Jaja observe Papa Nukwu praying for Eugene and thus discover themselves and the true meaning of religion.

We see that Ifeoma and her family are also Christians but they do not desert their people who still believe in the native ways and religion. Like Eugene, they do not hate or stop visiting Papa Nnukwu who refuses to embrace Christianity. Like Muthoni, Ifeoma’s daughter Amaka also is a rebel. She openly questions the things that she does not feel comfortable with. Unlike Eugene, she is unwilling to follow Christian beliefs without questioning them. She is not ready to become a faltering hybrid, like Eugene by disrespecting her native beliefs and values in order to imitate European ways. She does not understand the validity of taking a Christian name in order to be baptized. She expresses her disgust about other prejudices which project the European to be superior to others. Thus she questions Christianity when she says that it is illogical that Virgin Mary always appears in Europe. She further says that, “...it’s about time our Lady [Virgin Mary] came to Africa. Don’t you wonder how come she always appears in Europe? She was from the Middle East, after all” (Adichie 2009, 137-38).

#### 5. True Meaning of Religion

In Ifeoma’s house, Kambili sees that all her cousins, who are Christians, love Papa Nnukwu. Even Papa Nnukwu, whom Eugene has deserted, does not harbor any grudge against his son. He prays for him and believes that he is not bad but under the influence of a curse. Eugene on the other hand is totally opposite to him. He does not love or take care of his father even in his old age. He lives in a big mansion while his father is on the verge of dying of hunger. We come to know that, “Papa-Nnukwu had never set foot in it, because when Papa had decreed that heathens were not allowed in his compound, he had not made an exception for his father” (Adichie 2009, 62). It becomes clear that like Joshua, Eugene also has a very narrow vision and understanding of Christianity. He believes in charity but only for the people who follow him blindly. He lacks compassion for the people who according to him have lost their path. He does not even respect his father which even Christianity prescribes. His hypocrisy is revealed when we come to know that, “Papa himself never greeted Papa Nnukwu, never visited him, but he sent slim wads of naira through Kevin or through one of our umunna members, slimmer wads than he gave Kevin [driver] as a Christmas bonus” (Adichie 2009, 61).

Joshua, who professes to be an ardent Christian, does not show any compassion or even pity for his daughter and other family members. He distances himself from her completely for her liberal views about religion. His compassion is only for the people who blindly follow Christianity and in the same manner detest native beliefs. He totally fails to see through the divide and rule mechanism of the colonizers. He fails to see the uniting power of the native traditions. Therefore when he comes to know about the death of his daughter he seems unmoved:

Joshua heard about the death of Muthoni without a sign of emotion on the face. [...] He did not ask Miriamu when she died or how Miriamu had learnt of the facts. [...] To him, Muthoni had ceased to exist on the very day she had sold herself to the devil. Muthoni had turned her head and longed for the cursed land. Lot’s wife had done the same thing and she had turned to stone, a rock of salt, to be forever a stern warning to others. The journey to the new Jerusalem with God was not easy. It was beset with temptation. But Joshua was determined to triumph, to walk with a brisk step, his eye on the cross. (Thiong’o 2008, 53–54)

Similarly in *Purple Hibiscus* when Eugene comes to know about his father’s death he does not seem to be moved. Even when Ifeoma asks him to help him bury their father, all he is concerned about is giving him a Catholic funeral. When he receives the news, Kambili tells us that:

Papa sat down and slowly lowered his head into his hands, and I wondered if he was crying, if it would be acceptable for me to cry, too. But when he looked up, I did not see the traces of tears in his eyes. “Did you call a priest to give him extreme unction?... “Is that all you can say, eh, Eugene? Have you nothing else to say, *gbo*? Our father has died! Has your head turned upside down? Will you not help me bury our father?...“I cannot participate in a pagan funeral, but we can discuss with the parish priest and arrange a Catholic funeral.”...Auntie Ifeoma got up and started to shout. Her voice was unsteady...Was our father a Catholic?... “Kambili and Jaja, come”, Papa said standing up. (Adichie 2009, 188-189)

Both Ngugi and Adichie satirize obsessive African converts to the new Christian religion who do not even know what they were fighting for and against. They hate their own culture and religion for something that they do not even understand properly. Moreover, they take upon themselves the task of punishing the people for committing petty mistakes by branding them sins. Both Eugene and Joshua on many occasions punish their family members in inhuman ways. Eugene goes up to the extent of breaking fingers, burning feet and hands with boiling water, which leave his family traumatized. His wife miscarries on many occasions owing to his frequent beatings. Similarly for Joshua also, even family members are no exception when it comes to punishing for wrong deeds. In *The River Between*, we see that:

Sometimes, when alone with Miriamu, his wife, he would look at her and sadly remark, 'I wish you had not gone through this rite.' Not that Miriamu shared or cherished these sentiments. But she knew him. Joshua was such a staunch man of God and such a firm believer in the Old Testament that, he would never refrain from punishing a sin, even if it meant beating his wife. He did not mind as long as he was executing God's justice. (Thiong'o 2008, 31)

## 6. Conclusion

Both the novelists in their works, while exposing the Christian and colonial machinery of exploitation, do not condemn any religion out rightly. They, in fact highlight the way the minds of the natives are customized to make them hate everything that is native and traditional. The writers seem to bring forth the obsession of some natives with the new religion up to such an extent that they start taking up the role of a cruel master/reformer. The intent of the writers may be summed up in the comment by Adichie when she says that, "in modern society, many Africans no longer condone traditional African religions. Instead...they perceive the Christian Religion as "far more superior." What some of these African believers do not realize is that Christianity, if taken to an extreme, can also be a problem. This is because as several Africans embrace the new religion brought to the continent by European missionaries, they tend to reject ancestral worship and anyone associated with that practice" (Agbaw-Yenika 2008, 43).

## 7. References

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