

Religious Discourse in the Postcolonial Nigerian Novel: C. N. Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Americanah*

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to analyze religious discourse in three novels by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: *Purple Hibiscus* (2005), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) and *Americanah* (2013). Written in a postcolonial perspective, the study argues that in theory and in practice, Nigerian third generation writer Adichie can be seen as a reformist and progressist Christian. When analyzing the religious discourse that stems from her interviews and novels, it is easy to notice that she deconstructs the dogma of Catholic beliefs and rejects any religious fanaticism. This enables her to decenter western theological and spiritual discourses that tend to both downgrade African traditional religions and put women at the periphery of the religious sphere. The article comes to the conclusion that Adichie advocates interreligious dialogue and the empowerment of women in postcolonial Africa in general and particularly in Nigeria.

Keywords: Christianity, religion, dialogue, fanaticism, fiction, marginality, periphery, gender.

Résumé

L'objectif de cet article est d'étudier le discours religieux dans trois romans de Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie : *Purple Hibiscus* (2005), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) et *Americanah* (2013). Ecrite dans une perspective postcoloniale, l'analyse postule qu'en théorie et dans la pratique, C.N. Adichie, écrivaine nigériane de la troisième génération, peut être perçue comme une chrétienne réformatrice et progressiste. En analysant le discours religieux qui transparait aussi bien dans ses interviews que dans ses romans, il apparait clairement qu'elle déconstruit les dogmes de la foi catholique et rejette toute forme de fanatisme. Dans cette perspective, elle décentre les discours théologiques et spiritualistes qui tendent à rabaisser les religions traditionnelles africaines et à repousser les femmes à la périphérie de la sphère religieuse. Cet article aboutit à la conclusion qu'Adichie prône le dialogue

interreligieux et l'acquisition de pouvoir de la femme en Afrique postcoloniale en général et en particulier au Nigeria.

Mots-clés : Christianité, religion, dialogue, fanatisme, fiction, marginalité, périphérie, genre.

Introduction

The rapid growth of religions in postcolonial Africa has drawn the attention of many scholars and intellectuals. Most of them note that the colonial encounter with African religious practices was characterized by antagonism, hostility and the near suppression of the African ones. Postcolonial critics state that the religious situation at the colonial time was wrapped in the history of imperialism. For instance, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin observed that “there is a growing awareness of the complex role religion played in the history of imperialism, both directly through the impact of missions and indirectly, as religion acted to shape the responses of both colonizer and colonized” (B. Ashcroft et al., 2007: 188). Indeed, religion was used by the imperial power as a weapon of mental and spiritual subjugation. Through all sorts of mental manipulations, the reality of African traditional religion is turned upside down. This ideological weapon yielded by imperialism constructs some stereotypical views on African traditional religion which is therefore perceived as heathen agnosticism, non-belief and evil superstition.

In an attempt to correct the imbalance of this orientaling and imperialist view on African religious practices, Nigerian third generation writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, as an advocate of postcolonial praxis and values, has given interviews in which she unambiguously states her point of view. Furthermore, in her three novels *Purple Hibiscus* (2005), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) and *Americanah* (2013), she represents a postcolonial space in which the interconnection between political situations and religious ideologies in recent times requires a genuine reconsideration. For her, the postcolonial religious space, as noted by David Adamo, requires “mutual respect, understanding, tolerance and some level of freedom, liberation and genuineness” (2011:1). Why does Adichie insist on the crucial importance of interreligious dialogue in the societies represented in her novels? Is it just an attempt to challenge the multiform marginalities undergone by ex-colonized societies or simply a total rejection of fanaticism and fundamentalism in Nigeria?

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Utilizing the postcolonial literary theory and mainly concepts such as “centre”, “periphery”, “margin”, “cultural conflicts and “deconstruction”, the aim of this article is to study C.N. Adichie’s progressive and reformist perception of Catholicism in the African context. The analysis seeks to highlight, through interviews and novels, Adichie’s theological convictions, her rejection of religious essentialism and her resentment about the marginalization of women in African religious affairs.

1. Challenging the Catholic Dogma

1.1. Adichie's Progressive and Reformist Vision of the Church

Available evidence in the postcolonial debates suggests that religion has come into view as one of the most significant indexes of racial, ethnic and cultural identity. In the theoretical approach of religion in postcolonial debates, it is commonplace that stereotypes and falsification have been used to construct the colonized subject’s religious identity. In the western theology at the time of colonization, Africa was seen as a continent with no culture and religion. This truncated vision becomes central in the canon of western universalism which dominates the world industry of knowledge. Under these circumstances, the study of religion and religious discourse in a postcolonial perspective attempts to clarify the misconception about culture and the falsehood of the western theological discourse on African religions. More poignantly, the new wave of writers, scholars and intellectuals in postcolonial Africa find themselves in a revolutionary literary and cultural politics that are committed to some form and matrix of corrective narrative of history.

Adichie feels the need to re-orientate, adjust and revise the wisdom of western theology and belief system. In her novels, she provides insights into the possibilities for a constructive communication between Christianity and many other religions such as Islam and African indigenous religions. *Purple Hibiscus*, her first novel, describes the political instability and economic difficulties of Nigeria some decades after the independence of the country. Kambili, the central character, is a member of a wealthy family dominated by her devoutly Catholic father, Eugene. She describes him as a religious zealot who subjects his wife Beatrice, Kambili herself, and her brother Jaja to beatings and psychological cruelty.

In his critical assessment of this novel in the intersection of patriarchy, religion and politics, Cheryl Stobie contends that Adichie “can be seen as progressive and reformist in her viewpoint towards her religion. She is interested in contradictions between the reclamation of Igbo culture and the practice of religion that has a colonizing and punitive history” (2010: 422). Indeed, the Nigerian female writer revises and re-orientates western theology of missionary activity in her work by advocating possible dialogue between Christianity and African traditional religions on the basis of a syncretic paradigm. In an attempt to counter the presentation of religion that has a ‘colonizing and punitive history’, Adichie challenges the widespread thoughts of the missionary attitudes guided by unrestrained sentiments of preeminence, and advocates a more accommodating and cooperative paradigm of religious dialogue in the postcolonial debate. In an interview with Ike Anya, she makes the following observation on her interest in religious practice:

I am fascinated by the power of religion. I grew up catholic still am although I am what may be called a liberal catholic, which is that I believe in Lourdes but also think that contraception is a good thing. Religion is a huge force, so easily corruptible and yet so capable of doing incredible good. The streak of intolerance I see masquerading itself as faith and the way we create an image of God that suits us, are things I am interested in questioning. I am also interested in colonized religion, how people like me can profess and preach an aspect of their indigenous culture and yet cling so tenaciously to a religion that considers most of that indigenous culture evil. (I. Anya, 2003)

In an attempt at creating an image of religion that suits postcolonial society, Adichie offers a systemic crossing boundary into non-western religion to suggest a new version of Catholicism as she calls herself a “liberal catholic”. This version of “liberal Catholicism” is not an apostasy of colonial Catholicism but it is an alternative to the imperial projection of Christianity. This new version of religious practice can be seen as a vibrancy of postcolonial religious experience which de-centers the western religious discourse by criticizing its theological discursive formation. For Adichie, there is an urgent need to change and adjust the catholic doctrine that promotes and justifies the continual condition of marginality of the African indigenous religion as a facet of the imperial mission and the church’s worldview.

In another interview with Wale Adebani, Adichie expresses her agreement with the Second Vatican Council which encourages consideration of the possibility of a dialogue between Christianity and African traditional religions. Indeed, Adichie states:

I am catholic. It is an identity that, although I didn’t have much of a choice in, I have since taken ownership of. I am very much a Vatican II enthusiast, and think that the church should make more changes on its stance on a number of issues. Still,

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there is much that I admire and love in the church, the rich rituals, the traditions, the commitment that some orders have to social justice and scholarship as well as the sort of outward-looking faith that holds to some...vision of fairer world.(W. Adebani, 2004)

Adichie expresses her vivid admiration and enthusiasm toward the Second Vatican Council because it sets up a reformist agenda to revise and re-orientate some of the theological assumptions of colonial Catholicism by incorporating in its liturgy some elements of the indigenous culture. A shining example of this reformist agenda is perceptible through the use of native language to celebrate Mass in her writing. Such revision or re-orientation of the theology of missionary activity and practice is given more attention in the narrative of *Purple Hibiscus*. For instance, during Mass, Father Amadi usually sings Igbo songs. The young Nigerian priest is portrayed as the embodiment of changes in postcolonial religious conceptualization that offers a practice of Christianity that suits postcolonial Christians. To some extent, Father Amadi is cast in a positive light in the way that his practice of Christianity in postcolonial Nigeria is open to change, revision and adaptation. In this context, Bill Ashcroft et al. argue that Christianity in postcolonial time continues to change as a result of its encounter with the colonized cultures and form “new syncretized churches, which openly combined Christianity with elements of the pre-colonial religions” (2007:189). Such new version of African Christianity or the Africanization of Christianity is not fully adopted by some of Adichie’s characters.

In Adichie’s first novel, Eugene manifests his fear of syncretism when he criticizes Father Amadi’s saying Mass and allure in these terms: “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” (*Purple Hibiscus*, p. 29). As a true follower of authentic colonial Christianity characterized by hostility and condemnation of local culture, Eugene believes that the alternative practice of Christianity offered by Father Amadi in introducing his vernacular language when celebrating Christian rituals will bring trouble to the church. With the incorporation of folkloric elements in Christianity in such a way as illustrated by Father Amadi, the western popular wisdom of theological and religious doctrine that promotes and justifies the marginality of indigenous culture is challenged.

Taking into account Adichie's reformist agenda, it is possible to argue that she perceives religion as a democratic platform where mutuality, acceptance and integration are desirable. By casting Father Amadi in such progressive and reformist conceptualization of religion, Adichie fictionalizes postcolonial religious discourse and sides with critics such as David Adamo who stated that the reorientation or revision of the theology of the missionary activity and the pretention of Christian missionaries' claim to universality should be revised and that "Christian missionaries and other indigenous Christians should re-examine their theology of absolutism" (2001: 8). Through this approach, Adichie proposes a religious and cultural policy that aims at reducing the cultural domination and the feeling of inferiority undergone by postcolonial subjects.

1.2. Decolonizing the Church: the Africanisation of Catholic Practices

Another perspective emphasizing the emancipatory use of religion in the re-examination of Christianity is observable through Adichie's attempt to urge the Catholic Church to embrace some elements of local cultures such as using indigenous names in sacramental ordination and rituals (mainly baptism and confirmation). Here again, she keeps at a distance from the colonial version of Christianity. As evidenced by Bill Ashcroft et al., in languages, "the dynamic of naming becomes the primary colonizing process because it appropriates, defines and captures" (2007: 165). In this context, naming can be perceived as being part of the dominance system of the imperial power over the non-western world. In fact, giving first names to the indigenous population through the sacrament of baptism in the circle of the church is an elaboration of the dynamic control ingrained on the agenda of missionaries' activities. The control over people that the act of naming performs extends to the physical character of the colonized under the pressure of practical outworking of the European concern with property and possession. The ambition of naming becomes the credo of missionaries' politics of the planting of European memory. Ngugi wa Thiong'o argues that "names have something to do with how we identify objects, classify them, and remember them" (2009: 9). As such, the colonial religion's politics of providing new names to indigenous people through baptism, seeks abrogation of the African naming system which carries memories of their culture and tradition. Through names, the colonial religion plants the memory of European culture and identity which becomes an elaborative politics of the systematic erasure or effacement of the indigenous memory.

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In this context, giving a historical account of the shadowing of the African names by the European ones, Ngugi wa Thiong'o is rightful to write:

Slaves, before they left the African shore, were branded with marks of their owners. Theirs, literally, was a baptism by fire. Later, holy water would replace the hot iron: a successful Christian conversion, by force or guile, meant marking the reformed African body with a European name. Thus, in the nineteenth century, the writing of European names on the body of the African convert became the Christian norm. (Ngugi, 2009: 15).

Through the process of replacing the hot iron baptism by the holy water baptism, naming becomes the prominent feature of the politics of marginality, effacement and erasure of the African memory initiated by the missionaries' religion. The erasure of the African memory through the abrogation of the African naming system becomes the norm of Christianity.

First and foremost, Adichie challenges this Christian norm that casts a shadow on African names. Then, she formulates a postcolonial religious rhetoric adequate to the ongoing day-to-day practice of Christianity in postcolonial African society. In *Purple Hibiscus*, she proposes a revisionary alternative of this Christian norm which seeks the abrogation of the native African names. The series of exclusion of African names which carry the memory of culture and tradition on which the dominant culture of Christianity is premised are challenged and deconstructed by a suggestive politics of reform and alteration. One of the most comprehensive examples of this anti-colonial discourse is Amaka's systematic refusal to take an English name for her baptism and confirmation. Her objection to this pre-given norm of Catholicism is made evident when she states: "When the missionaries first came, they didn't think Igbo names were good enough. They insisted that people take English names to be baptized. Shouldn't we be moving ahead?" (*Purple Hibiscus*, p. 272).

In the absolutist vision of Christianity as advocated by missionaries, there was only one emphasis. It was an attempt to obliterate or dominate indigenous cultures and traditions. This emphasis leads to the marginalization, denigration and rejection of the African cultures and traditional values. In a responsive move to alter and correct this dominant culture of colonial religious marginality, Adichie asserts that time is ripe for "moving ahead" of the negative attitudes and perception the earliest history of Christianity has maintained towards the religious and cultural traditions of African societies. In this logic, she criticizes the colonial theology and its feeling of superiority over indigenous traditions and values.

In an open conversation with Father Amadi on choosing English or Igbo names for her sacramental ordination of confirmation, Amaka expresses her discontent against the prejudicial attitudes developed by the colonial theology which put forward the decline of the traditional practices and values. This sparks the following dialogue:

“I told you I am not taking an English name, Father,” she said.

“And have I asked you why?”

“Why do I have to?”

“Because it is the way it’s done. Let’s forget if it’s right or good for now”, Father Amadi said, and I noticed the shadows under his eyes. (*Purple Hibiscus*, pp. 271-2)

Beyond the simple consideration of Christianity as western religious practice, Amaka thinks that Christianity is an imperial campaign for planting western memory through the politics of renaming and suppressing indigenous ones. This campaign comes wrapped in form of canon establishment which clearly shows that norms setting are important in the construction of a new body of knowledge central to the politics of the reformed African body with a European name. Amaka believes that the nature of knowledge enclosed in the colonial and missionary activities is not only intrinsically prejudiced, but also ideologically driven and culturally misrepresented. And this new body of knowledge encased in Christian religion projects an absolutist picture of the occupying imperial power where the indigenous people’s presence and worldview are given a marginal position.

As illustrated further above, the proscription of the use of Igbo names in the sacraments of baptism and confirmation reveals the negative influence of religious fundamentalism from colonial Christianity. To some extent, both Amaka and Father Amadi are of the opinion of reforming and Africanizing Christianity. However, Amaka’s conception provides sharp picture of radicalism imbued with an endless energy of insubordination. The signs of insubordination projected through the picture of Amaka emerging from the preceded postulation are a challenge and a protest against a long tradition and history of prejudice and marginality developed by blatantly imperial theological and missionary attitudes in the practice of Christianity in Africa. More broadly, through some of her characters, Adichie shows why colonial and missionary edifices in postcolonial era need to be deconstructed and reconstructed according to a syncretic ideological project based on the dialogue between western Christianity and African religions.

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2. Interreligious Dialogue vs. Fanaticism

2.1. Advocating Interreligious Dialogue

Adichie creates a platform of exchange and communication between Christianity and Nigerian indigenous religion. Literally, dialogue means a conversation or an exchange of ideas, opinions and insights between individuals, communities or nations. In the ecumenical context, dialogue goes beyond the simple consideration of a conversation or exchange of ideas and opinions, it stands for the sharing of common concerns of religious conviction for the purpose of mutual understanding. For religious scholar such as J.D. Gort, there are four different levels of interreligious dialogue in the ecumenical context: the dialogue of histories, the dialogue of theologies, the dialogue of spiritualities and the dialogue of life (2008: 758, 760). The core objective of the establishment of this interreligious dialogue is to remove interreligious nescience and misunderstanding and to establish reconciliation.

For Adichie, establishing a dialogue between the two religious denominations, namely Christianity and traditional African religion, is an act of engaging in cultural combat. This stand aims at correcting the long history of prejudice, marginality and hostility developed by the early colonial performance of Christianity. For such a dialogue to be a reality on the African religious social terraces, Adamo David recommends the following principle:

Great attention should be paid to 'popular wisdom'. Unlike dialogue amongst theologians, dialogue at the grassroots level should pay great attention to the popular wisdom that makes the community live together in peace despite different religious tradition. In Africa, there is a need for the people who want to achieve a genuine dialogue to learn from people. Despite the different religions amongst the grassroots people in Africa, they know that the types of religious wars of the developed world are not necessary. People of different religions learn to eat together, sleep together, celebrate together and live in peace (D. Adamo, 2011: 8).

Approvingly, Adichie has the same feeling for the situation of religion in current postcolonial time. She provides insights into the chance for communication and dialogue between Christianity and African traditional religion in some areas of common concerns such as human life, education and common well-being.

Adichie represents a new postcolonial religious conceptual map where Christianity and African religion are engaged in a constructive dialogue to break down the walls of hostility and marginality, and build a bridge of mutual respect and understanding. Through the

characters of Aunty Ifeoma and Father Amadi, the Nigerian writer preaches a new version of a Catholicism orating confidence, love, brotherhood and friendship among all people regardless of their membership of or conversion to any religion and system of faith. Aunty Ifeoma is imbued with liberal disposition to approach religion in a democratizing atmosphere where she repeatedly manifests her interest in forward-looking practices in both Christianity and indigenous culture. She shows respect for her father, Papa Nnukwu's indigenous religious tradition. Aunty Ifeoma's religious sensibility is coupled with tolerance and respect, and seeks understanding and genuineness. Adichie presents Aunty Ifeoma's fashion of Catholicism as an attempt to correct the prejudicial attitudes developed by missionary Christianity during the colonial period when adherents of Christianity considered African religions as inferior religion or not a religion at all. In a spirit of tolerance and acceptance, Aunty Ifeoma teaches her niece Kambili, the beneficence of cooperation and harmonious living with people of other religious beliefs. She corrects the prejudicial image that Christian teachings and doctrines have installed in the memory of Kambili who sees her Papa Nnukwu as a pagan, a heathen or a worshipper of idols. She explains to Kambili that "your Papa Nnukwu is not a pagan, Kambili, he is a traditionalist" (*Purple Hibiscus*, p. 81). In giving a picture of a "traditionalist" to Papa Nnukwu, Adichie is presenting him as the depository of African values and religious identity. Furthermore, showing the importance of interreligious dialogue, Aunty Ifeoma embarked her family on a cultural excursion to Aro to attend the Mmuo festival where Papa Nnukwu as a repository and custodian of his culture, teaches his grandchildren, Kambili and Jaja, the mores, customs and culture of their people.

The dialogue that considers cooperation and harmonious living with people of other religions in the narrative is further exemplified by Father Amadi, the young Nigerian priest. Like Aunty Ifeoma, Father Amadi is engaged in a constructive interreligious dialogue. Father Amadi's approach of Catholicism seeks love, tolerance and understanding between people of different religious backgrounds. In one episode in the narrative when Papa Nnukwu was ill, Father Amadi gives his support by offering a gallon of fuel to Aunty Ifeoma to send him to hospital in Nsukka. Through the relationship between Father Amadi and Papa Nnukwu, Adichie is designing the framing map of palpable evidentiary proof of interreligious dialogue. When father Amadi came to announce his leaving for a mission of evangelism in Germany to Aunty Ifeoma and family, Papa Nnukwu was marvelously astonished and engaged a conversation with Father Amadi in the following terms:

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“EziOkwu? ...“Is that so? Our own sons now go to be missionaries in the white man’s land?”

“We go to the white man’s land and the black man’s land, sir...any place that needs a priest”.

“It is good my son. But you must never lie to them. Never teach them to disregard their fathers” (*Purple Hibiscus*, p. 172).

Through the above dialogue, Papa Nnukwu teaches Father Amadi wisdom from African religion which, for its sense of tolerance and lack of missionary agenda, offers a platform of cooperation and mutual respect and interreligious brotherhood and camaraderie between African traditional beliefs and Christian religion. The reminder behind the aforementioned assumption is a vibrating call for accommodating model of religious relationship in the postcolonial climate to achieve mutual respect, tolerance, understanding and peace in the society. It will be a good foundation of interreligious dialogue that can give a hand in eradicating the early imperial culture of domination, prejudice and marginality.

2.2. Rejecting Fanaticism

One of the major threats in postcolonial African societies is the rise of religious fundamentalism and fanaticism within the two most popular religions, Christianity and Islam. Religious fanaticism is a thematic concern used to talk about the strategic manipulation of religion by some political leaders or social activists to gain power and control and limit rights. In Adichie’s project of challenging marginality, she feels the need to negate the rising tide of close-minded and anti-equality discourse stemming from religious fanaticism. Adichie believes that the politicization of religion brings about authoritarian manipulation resulting in social instability and violence. The ethno-religious crises and movements between Igbo Christian and Hausa Muslim portrayed in Adichie’s writing are inextricably connected to political, social, economic disparities and militarism.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie raises fundamental political questions colored with ethno-religious conflicts which impact on the relationship between Igbo and Hausa tribes in Nigerian society. By legitimizing hate and aversion as moral code, Nigerian extremist religious forces annihilate the possibility of debate and dialogue. Due to the politicization of religious rhetoric in the country, Muslims seek to impose monolithic ideas about religion, denying and destroying the diverse cultural heritage of the country. The negative influence of fanaticism characterizing Islam can be fairly and abundantly observed in the narrative of *Half*

of a *Yellow Sun* when zealous advocates of Islamic precepts took the airport of Kano, killing and massacring in the name of religious rhetoric. Richard recounts the scenario as a first eye witness:

The first soldier waved his gun around. *Ina nyamiri!* Where are the Igbo people? Who is Igbo here? Where are the infidels?

A woman screamed.

‘You are Igbo,’ the second soldier said to Nnaemeka.

‘No, I come from Katsina! Katsina!’

The soldier walked over to him. ‘Say Allahu Akbar!’(...) ‘Say Allahu Akbar!’ the soldier repeated.

Nnaemeka knelt down. Richard saw fear etched so deeply onto his face that it collapsed his cheeks and transfigured him into a mask that looked nothing like him. He would not say Allahu Akbar because his accent would give him away. Richard willed him to say the words, anyway, to try, he willed something, anything, to happen in the fling silence and as if in answer to his thoughts, the rifle went off and Nnaemeka’s chest blew open, a splattering red mass, and Richard dropped the note in his hand. (*Half of a Yellow Sun*, pp. 152-153).

The animosity and the viciousness at stake in the passage above suggest how religious affiliation has led to ethnic hatred and violence in Nigerian society. In the world depicted by Adichie, over-zealous Muslim soldiers are killing non-Muslim communities by tagging them as marginalized and non-conforming “infidels” according to their religious rhetoric. They normalize the injustice and prejudice that they perpetrate by giving their horrible and violent practices divine justification. The character named Abdulmalik adheres to this supposedly pure tradition when he says: “We finished the whole family, it was Allah’s will” (*Half of a Yellow Sun*, p. 148). For Abdulmalik, it is Allah who allows them to exterminate the “infidels”, the non-Muslim communities.

The strategies of religious fundamentalism depicted above seek to impose monolithic ideologies by exhibiting violence and hatred along ethno-political line. The point to be raised here is in consonance with the politicization of religion. Mostly, in such a situation where religion and ethnicity are politicized, social instability follows. This is explained by the fact that the rise of extremist religious forces all over the world is not occurring in a vacuum. Indeed, it certainly happened in places where there is socio-political and economic injustice or a systemic marginality.

Adichie’s goal in depicting the negative influence of religious fundamentalism in *Half of a Yellow Sun* is geared towards its defeasance and eradication, as it projects a picture of a culture of domination, oppression and injustice. She engages in a creative dialogue that can build the bridge of mutual trust and break down the walls of antagonism to negate extremist

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religious manifestations. She contrasts these extremist practices with a more tolerable one with the character of Mohammed whose brand of Islam is opposed to the inhuman practice of Abdulmalik and his mates. He condemns the negative impacts of such extremist practice when he underlines the animosity and brutality perpetrated by over-zealous Muslims. As an eyewitness of the massacre, Mohammed vehemently condemns this ethno-religion hatred and registers his revulsion at those bigoted and extremist Muslims. He condemns their practice by saying: "Allah does not allow this; (...) Allah will not forget them. Allah will not forget the people who have made them do this. Allah will never forget this (*Half of a Yellow Sun*, p. 148). For Mohammed, the spirit and essence of any religion should promote love, peace, equality and justice. This is the reason why he condemns the actors and political leaders who instrumentalize the language of religion to achieve power and social control. Through the character of Mohammed, Adichie is challenging fanatic religious discourse and ethno-religious movements which are not compatible with social cohesion, peace, equality and justice.

3. New Perspectives on Religious Discourse: Adjusting Gender Politics

3.1. Empowering African Women in Religious Spaces

Adichie ventures into a more visible field of preoccupation which gives inconsequential and marginal position to women in discussing the issue of religion in the current postcolonial climate. The religious interpretations in the contemporary postcolonial epoch breed a culture of exclusion that marginalizes women's worldview. In a critical assessment of the intersection of gender politics and religious beliefs, Sue Tolleson Rinehart and Jerry Perkins assert:

Western culture's popular wisdom is unchallenged when it assumes that men are the Church's authority, but women are its sustenance: power may be in the hands of the predominantly male clergy, but the spirit and homely daily continuance of the Church community are in the hands of its women, or such has been the picture the culture usually evinces. (Rinehart and Perkins, 1989: 33).

The characterization of religion in such a popular wisdom of western culture stems from the patriarchal configuration of the society which gives preeminence to men. In focusing on gender identities and gender relations in the context of religion, Adichie reveals that religious systems in the world and particularly in Africa are locked in a circle of male social dominance

within societal structures. As gender expectations are constructed through culture and reinforced through religion, it becomes apparent that some religious norms and prejudices cannot but reflect patriarchal values which are characteristic of all societies all over the world. It follows that in the histories of religions, the voices and expressions of women are once in a blue moon articulated because of the well-established patriarchal dispositions of societies in which these religions have emerged.

This voiceless nature and characteristics which shows the invisibility and state of marginality of women in religious interpretations is considered by Adichie in her novels. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Kambili shows interest in the currently accepted image of God as a male figure. She compares God to British male patriarch when she states: “Sometimes I imagine God calling me, his rumbling voice British-accented. He would not say my name right (*Purple Hibiscus*, p. 179). In this view God is compared to a British patriarch. The use of third person singular “He” in this extract is meaningful. This is grammatically used to refer to a man or male figure since Christian Holy Trinity doctrine presents God as the Father, the Son and the Spirit. The absence of a female image in this tripartite representation of God symbolizes women’s marginalization in the sphere of Christian religion.

The picture emerging behind these assumptions is the consideration that religion can be labeled as a fluid concept with interpretations and practices embedded in traditional culture which is a pale copy of patriarchy. In this respect, religious norms and traditions cannot but contribute to the formation of gender politics which is detrimental to women’s causes in the society. Admittedly, Christianity in the view of the above doctrine and teaching exposes a picture that is profoundly discriminating against women. The Christian view of women is locked in social norms and patterns of patriarchal social organization. It goes without saying that such view will perpetuate stereotypical expectations of gender roles that maintain male social dominance within the social fabric. In congruence with such tandem sustaining men’s worldview, some patriarchal dispositions which project a marginal and voiceless status of women in the context of religion is evidenced through the council of the church in *Purple Hibiscus*. The narrator states: “the church council meeting had started, and we heard the male voices rise sometimes in argument, just as we heard the up-down cadence of the female voices in the backyard.” (*Purple Hibiscus*, p. 68)

Looking critically at what constitutes the concerns at stake in the above statement, it becomes apparent that in the account of religion, the voices of women are hardly heard. More

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tellingly, the church council, which is the administrative body in charge of the running and management of the church's affairs, assumes that men are the church's authority. At the church council meeting, men are arguing and making decisions; whereas women are devoid of their vocal resonance. Women's voices are described as "up-down cadence in the backyard" which shows the inconsiderateness and marginality of their status and position preventing them from participating in leading activities in the practice of religion.

The picture of women emerging in Christianity is not much dissimilar to the image of women in African traditional religions in terms of gender politics. In native African religions, it is not uncommon to find stereotypical expectations of gender roles. Some religious practices such as female genital mutilation participate in the construction of gender marginality by subordinating the role of women in the configuration of the society. Gender imbalance in which the women are victims, have mistakenly been established as a canon or a norm. Assumptions and speculations arising from this injudicious tendency seem to provide substantiations to silence women through well-established gender stereotypes. Such gender stereotypes or anomalies are all-encompassing in the traditional African worldview. They play a part in the excessive subordination of women under the tutelage of men.

Women's submission and devotion to men is relentlessly emphasized in the society as well as in religion. Reflections on the above preoccupations disclose that religious interpretations offer ground for the continued existence and nourishment of patriarchy. The entrenchment of patriarchy which adds force to gender marginality in the context of spiritual practices is well exemplified in *Purple Hibiscus* through the character of Papa-Nnukwu who is seen as the custodian and repository of traditional African religion. The ethics of traditional African religion, which is itself chiefly deep-seated in patriarchal beliefs, habitually employ a huge amount of force and power to sustain male domination. In fact, in the cosmos of the Igbo depicted by Adichie, speculations and interpretations from religious practices represent the elected body of knowledge through which cultural norms, ideals, values and the mindset ideologies of patriarchy are handed on publicly, thus asserting a subordinate status of women. Through these misinterpretations of religious beliefs, which place women under the tutelage of men, religion itself seems to be patriarchal in reproducing gender division of roles. Adichie reveals the sides of traditional African religion which sustain the shrinkage of women's

engagement in leading religious matters to justify the infusion of patriarchal interests in religious discourse and practice.

A manifestation of traditional African religion, which reproduces gender division of roles, is considered when Adichie presents Papa-Nnukwu as an advocate of African traditionalism and spirituality. In this view, he is pictured as the representative of his culture and spiritual practices. The ongoing sparse evidence substantiates that the teachings and doctrines of Papa-Nnukwu's culture and spirituality do not open door for the emergence of women's standpoints. His religious and spiritual teachings evolving around patriarchal structures is voiced through his traditional premises about power and gender relationship when he comments on the images of women in the masquerades. During the pilgrimage to EziIcheke to watch the Mmuo festival, Papa-Nnukwu leads his grandchildren into the realm of spirit to teach them the wisdom and principles of his traditional culture. The grandchildren learn that women's spirit in the Mmuo procession is of less value. He said: "This is a woman spirit, and the women mmuo are harmless. They do not even go near the big ones at the festival." (*Purple Hibiscus*, p.85). In the sphere of spirituality of Papa-Nnukwu's belief system, women are of less importance and are given inconsequential status. They are hovered at the margin of the traditional and spiritual practices, such as the showcase of the powerful and biggest mmuo procession at hand in the above example in which they are prohibited to come close to the most important and 'big ones at the festival'.

In this excursion into traditional and ancestral spirituality under the supervision of Papa-Nnukwu, the traditional postulates about the prioritizing and privileging of masculinity becomes apparent. As a rule, women cannot even look at, or take leading roles in, the cultural and spiritual practices of the mmuo festival because their spirits are harmless. All the privileges and honors are accredited to men who perform the most important roles by interacting with the most powerful mmuo. Papa-Nnukwu forbids his granddaughters to look at the *agwonatumba*, the most powerful mmuo in Abba's neighborhoods. He warns them to look away because "Women cannot look at this one!" (*Purple Hibiscus*, p. 86). Doubtlessly, the abovementioned statement underpins the issue of gender discrimination which implicitly reveals the root cause of the marginalization and effacement of female figures in traditional performance of religious activities. Due to these moral principles governing the spiritual practices as depicted above, women are subsequently considered as subordinate individuals under the tutelage of men. With reference to these marginal placements of women in the

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running of traditional and spiritual practices, Adichie seems presumably to challenge the issue of gender imbalance in the realm of religion in which women are caged in frozen silence.

3.2. Gender Politics and the Decentering of Christian Leadership

Adichie believes that religious institutions need to go through changes suitable for gender neutrality to correct these gender anomalies inimical to women. In her postcolonial rendition of religion and gender identity, she does not forget to provide ground for accommodating gender equality which takes interest and proud in women's participation in the formation of new religious orientations and interpretations. For example, in *Americanah* female characters are assuming leading roles as pastors and evangelists. Indeed, Adichie uses the emancipatory figures of women in a renewed Christianity to destabilize and deconstruct the early gender stereotypes which promote excessive subordination of women in the performance of religious activities. It follows that the religious norms and prejudices reflecting traditional patriarchal structures that maintain women's marginality and omission in leadership roles on the terraces of religion start to wane. *Americanah* shows zealous Christian women advocating and assuming leading roles as religious elite, leader or pastor. In the narrative, Ifemelu's mother explains her conversion from Catholicism to Revival Saints, a Bible-believing church and a living church in this way:

I am saved, she said. Mrs Ojo ministered to me this afternoon during the children's break and received Christ. Old things have passed away and all things have become new. Praise God. On Sunday we will start going to Revival Saints. It is a Bible-believing church and living, not like St Dominic's. (*Americanah*, pp. 41-42).

The idea in the above excerpt illustrates the fact that in the current postcolonial climate, gender discrimination in the context of religion has started to wane. Adichie's use of Mrs. Ojo as an elected minister or reverend in the Christian church to minister and save Ifemelu's mother, sufficiently disrupts the canon of the pervasive male-oriented Christian doctrines and ideologies which put only men at the epicenter of leadership roles in religion. Through the character of Mrs. Ojo, Adichie is stating that women's status in religion needs to be changed. For her, women should take more interest in religious principles and participate fully in the formation of new interpretations in gender line.

In another venue in the narrative, a reference is made to a woman pastor in these terms: "he told her about the pastor at church, a white woman" (*Americanah*, p. 349). This implies

that Adichie intends to contribute to the growing debates about woman pastorship at the center of many controversies. For her, a practical democracy in the context of religion, which promotes gender equality and recognizes human rights, is of an urgent necessity.

In the same context, Adichie purposely redeems the image the Blessed Virgin in the history of Catholicism as an inspiring and empowering female figure to make her argument about recognizing female gender in the performance of religious leadership roles. Through the image of the Blessed Virgin, the voice and articulateness of female citizenry reaches a salutary status. In the doctrine of Catholicism, the Blessed Virgin is the mother of God in the name of Jesus and, she has the power to intercede on behalf of humanity. She is venerated and celebrated with praises, songs and prayers. Through this strength, the Blessed Virgin gains a statutory figure in the Catholic Church processional services and activities. To pay tribute to this empowering female leader in catholic faith, Adichie captures the mysterious apparition of the Blessed Virgin in a small village where people go on pilgrimage for salvation and redemption. Through the eye and mouth of Kambili, one reads:

When we finally turned into the dirt road with the hand-painted sign that read WELCOME TO AOKPE APPARITION, all I saw at first was chaos. Hundreds of cars, many bearing scrawled signs that read CATHOLICS ON PILGRIMAGE, jostled to fit into a tiny village that Auntie Ifeoma said had not known as many as ten cars until a local girl started to see the vision of the Beautiful Woman. People were packed so close that the smell of other people became as familiar as their own. Women crashed to their knees. Men shouted prayers. Rosaries rustled. People pointed and shouted, see, there, on the tree, “that’s Our Lady!” Others pointed at the glowing sun. “There she is!” (*Purple Hibiscus*, p. 274)

The intended message through the representation of the Blessed Virgin, here in this Aokpe apparition, is to defeat and combat the male chauvinistic attitudes in leading the Catholic Church activities. The attitudes of this kind come from such male patriarch as Eugene who casts doubt on the apparitions of the Blessed Virgin and thinks that the church must officially verify the “authenticity of the apparitions” (*Purple Hibiscus*, p. 99). Here, a special devotion is given to the image of women. They become recognizable and visible through the deified image of the Blessed Virgin which compels men to shout prayers, and rustle rosaries in her celebration. When we move under close critical analysis of the issue of gender roles interpretation in the field of religion, we can argue that Adichie is pleading for the recognition of female image in leadership religious roles. She is preaching a democratizing religious practice, which can advocate equalitarian attitudes and partnership

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between men and women, and lends a hand in eliminating any form of marginality and any culture of oppression and injustice.

Conclusion

This article has mainly consisted in analyzing the issue of religion in the postcolonial African space, particularly in Nigeria where C.N. Adichie's three novels are set. Dealing with such subject, the Nigerian female writer distinguishes herself as a postcolonial and feminist novelist through her militancy for a reorientation and a deconstruction of western Catholic theology. She also blames the religious hierarchies that grow and feed on the teaching of gender division of roles. Adichie seems presumably to be in search of a religious and cultural democracy through the possibility of a constructive and genuine dialogue between the world religions in a peaceful space where fanatic ideologies are negated and pacified. Therefore, Adichie seems to advocate that the approach of religion and religious discourse should attempt to clarify the possibilities and constrains of a genuine religious dialogue. This approach of religion in current postcolonial climate should bring about interreligious dialogue and allow any adherents of whatever religious faith to see themselves as equal partners. It must demarcate itself from imperial religion, namely Christianity that considered followers of African indigenous religions as inferior during colonization and even after the political independence of African societies.

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