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A Thematic Study of Cultural Discourse in Purple Hibiscus by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

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Abstract

Chimamanda Adichie tells a story of coming of age in her book Purple Hibiscus. Consequently, a great deal has been written on the ideas and motifs in Adichie's writing, especially Purple Hibiscus; yet, the concerns surrounding cultural discourse in Nigeria have rarely been the main subject of discussion. Typically, the work deals with a number of subjects that examine the evolving patterns of cultural discourse in Nigeria. This paper's main goals are to examine some of the novel's major themes and delve into the Achike family's and Nigerian society's cultural discourses.

Keywords: age, theme, discourse, culture, society etc.

Introduction

Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has drawn attention from critics and the general public for her two novels, Purple Hibiscus (2003) and the Orange prize-winning Half of a Yellow Sun (2006). She has had numerous reviews of her fiction published in academic journals as well as newspapers. Chimamanda Adichie tells a story of coming of age in her book Purple Hibiscus. Consequently, a great deal has been written on the ideas and motifs in Adichie's writing, especially Purple Hibiscus; yet, the concerns surrounding cultural discourse in Nigeria have rarely been the main subject of discussion. Typically, the work deals with a number of subjects that examine the evolving patterns of cultural discourse in Nigeria. This paper's main goals are to examine some of the novel's major themes and delve into the Achike family's and Nigerian society's cultural discourses.

In Purple Hibiscus, coming-of-age and identity-defining challenges are paralleled with Nigerian political instability and ethnic conflicts.(Peters 2012) Despite being set in Nigeria, the narrative is relatable to teenagers everywhere, as seen by the translations into languages across the world. It's the tale of finding oneself in a harsh and heartless world full with terrible parents and nasty classmates. The allegory between personal and national identity elevates this story from a typical narrative of adolescent angst into a thoughtful analysis of the formation of self; further, it does so in a way that dissipates some of the isolation that typically marks adolescence, allowing a reader to belong to a larger world. Purple Hibiscus (2003) and Half of a Yellow Sun (2006) are two of Adichie's works that Susan Z. Andrade (2011) describes as "a politics of the family while quietly but clearly telling stories of the nation" (p. 91).

At least in the beginning, African literature was more of a response to a particular historical event than a cultural statement.(Ogundele 2002) Of course, colonialism is that history, to which it responded both in terms of subject matter and educational objectives. It has attempted to supplement, if not completely replace, history in the school curriculum by drastically misrepresenting the colonial past. Its early goals also strongly suggested the recovery of the pre-colonial past. It’s now widely accepted term,

"postcolonial African literature," does, in fact, continue to emphasize its provenance and occupation above everything else. O ne of the pioneers and respected legislators of modern literature, Chinua Achebe, said in 1975 what was universally understood to be true:

Here then is an adequate revolution for me to espouse to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement. And it is essentially a question of education, in the best sense of that word. ... I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past with all its imperfections was not one long night of savagery. (44-45)

This declaration, which is simultaneously cultural and political, indicates an early understanding of the new literature's significance in black Africa's overcoming and eventual complete redemption from the horrors of colonialism and the slave trade. It was believed that a great deal of the creative energy in writing would be directed into these endeavors.

The Story of Achike Family

Literary traditions are created and recreated all the time. Every aspect of literature is always changing and evolving, and readers and authors alike are always debating the definitions of literary genres and lineages. For instance, since the late 1960s, academics have uncovered and identified alternative literary traditions that address the omissions and exclusions of the (white, male) canon, challenging the dominating literary canon in Anglo-American criticism. However, the endeavor of creating any tradition, regardless of its means, might lead to the replication of the transgressions of the prevailing canon, as noted by African American literary critic Heather Hewett (2005).

The story of Purple Hibiscus revolves around an Igbo family in late 20th-century southeast Nigeria. Readers learn that the fifteen-year-old female narrator, Kambili Achike, has a complex personality that can only be summed up in a series of paradoxes, and that her father, Eugene, is a devout Catholic. A prosperous businessman, he generously donates enormous sums of money to the local church but shows little kindness to his father, an Igbo traditionalist whom he constantly calls a "heathen" (24); In the newspapers he edits, he criticizes the military rule in Nigeria; nonetheless, he violently enforces his extreme religious beliefs on his children, Kambili and her brother Jaja, by beating them regularly. When their Aunt Ifeoma invites the two teenagers to spend a few days in Nsukka, they accept, temporarily fleeing the stuffy environment of their Enugu home.

Amaka, Obiora, and Chima, three children, reside in a modest apartment with their widowed university lecturer mother Ifeoma. Even with the family's financial struggles, Ifeoma's apartment is lively with laughing and conversation. This laid-back setting gives Kambili and Jaja a different role model from the fear-filled atmosphere that exists at the paternal home. More than anything, the Achike kids' brief sojourn in Nsukka provides them with a fleeting sense of peace, represented by their aunt's experimental purple hibiscus hybrid, which is described as "rare, fragrant with the undertones of freedom" (14). Moreover, it is a flower blooming in Aunty Ifeoma’s yard. Her botanist friend made it since hibiscuses aren't often purple. Jaja is moved by the flower's look, and it is via them that he finds his passion for gardening, which plays a significant role in his journey to Nsukka where he must learn to open up and become independent. After that, he returns to Enugu with some purple hibiscus stems and plants them there. The purple hibiscus becomes symbolic of Jaja and Kambili's mental awakening because of its part in it; these are qualities they lack under Papa's control but discover in Nsukka with Aunty Ifeoma. Kambili expresses her hope for freedom at the book's conclusion that Jaja would plant purple hibiscus

when he is released from prison.

Some academics have referred to Adichie's book as a Bildungsroman since Kambili develops throughout the book (e.g. Bryce 2008: 58; Hron 2008: 30). Though not all reviewers have specifically labeled the story as such, few have disputed that the protagonist grows from a shy, compliant girl to a more confident young lady. For example, she first conceals her father's physical violence, but in a talk with her cousin Amaka, she subsequently acknowledges the severity of his mistreatment. Numerous reviewers have pointed out Kambili's attitude shifts, and it is true that these shifts are crucial to understanding the character's development. However, a straightforward account of the protagonist's activities in the narrative—such as the speaking act she finally undertakes—does not adequately capture the nuanced nature of her intellectual growth, an aspect that I believe is essential to understanding the book. Stated differently, a thorough examination of Kambili's personality should not only focus on her actions but also on her thoughts, namely how she interprets her surroundings and incorporates them into her narrative discourse in her role as narrator.

Political Unrest in Nigeria

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Purple Hibiscus can only be read against the backdrop of Nigerian politics and history because it forms the core of the book's storyline. To provide further context, the novel is set in the post-1990s. The Nigeria-Biafra (1967–1970) conflict had a significant impact on the events depicted in the book. After becoming a British colony in 1861, Nigeria remained such until the country's struggle for freedom culminated in its victory in 1960. But there remained still a certain area of Nigeria under the passive rule of the British. This region, which located in the north, had the lowest percentage of literacy in addition to being economically disadvantaged. The British attempted to rule Nigeria through Emirs (Amirs), who were presumably the leaders of the ethnic groupings. The Yoruba tribe is another tribal clan that inhabits the southern and western parts of Nigeria. They assisted the British in the eighteenth century in procuring slaves.

Igbo, a different Nigerian ethnicity, was the dominant ethnic group, especially in southeast Nigeria. Since Western culture had a major impact on their society, segregation was not feasible all at once. They were also not eager to recover their lost ethnic culture, and it's possible that they were happy with the British and Nigerian fusion even as a symbol of their cultural identity. Since they were traditionally decentralized, the majority of Igbo people became Christians. They benefited from the British people, just as they helped them directly.

The northern part of Nigeria, on the other hand, was quite different; the Hausa and Fulani were the dominating ethnic groupings there. The Islamic laws governed them, and the leaders of the communities were known as emirs. Because this region of Nigeria was undeveloped in every way, the British colonists attempted to entice the locals with promises of financial gain in exchange for their conversion to Christianity. The Muslim Hausa and Fulani people, who desired to preserve their own culture and social status, rejected the proposal. As a result, the Igbo and Yoruba ethnic groups' main credo was to embrace modern culture rather than hold onto their traditional ways. The most vulnerable colonization strategy was adopted by the British, and religion was used as a weapon to impose soft power. Churches and missionaries quickly dispersed throughout western Nigeria, and by 1966–1967, the Igbo people were heavily involved in Nigerian power politics and had received the majority of their education outside of the country. The Biafran war was also causing the ethnic tension between the democratic minded tribe like Igbo and autocratic minded people like Hausa/Fulani, and Yoruba. So, there was clash

of interest between the tribes resulting in the formation of two groups with individual interests in a nation. Education, politics, society, economics and to some extent history, also got politicized. Amidst these cultural differences and ethnic tensions, the booming production of oil only elevated the gap.

Decolonization of traditional African and Christian Culture

Father Amadi and Father Benedict are two of the novel's most significant religious figures. Father Benedict was attempting to conquer the indigenous people of Nigeria through the politics of white males, in contrast to Father Amadi who was attempting to make Catholicism relevant to the modern Nigerian society. Eugene represented these folks who were carrying "The White Man's Burden." Further, Oduyoye in his 'Be a Woman, And Africa Will Be Strong' examined the phrase "Cultural hermeneutics" as the activity of "reinterpreting the old, promoting the good, and imagining the new." (Oduyoye, 1988) Oduyoye's cultural hermeneutics, in contrast, permits both affirmation and critique of both traditional African culture and the Christianity brought by colonists, as opposed to idealizing African culture.

In a certain sense, it is a redeeming worldview, performing the hard interpretative work to win back the good from defective cultural sources. In its vivid critique of colonial Christianity and its portrayal of Igbo patriarchy as interwoven, Purple Hibiscus exemplifies the critical, or skeptical, dimension of cultural hermeneutics. At the same time, the novel exemplifies the liberatory and committed dimension of cultural hermeneutics in its portrayal of alternative, positive modes of Igbo Christianity that reject the oppressive elements while affirming the life-giving aspects of the religion.

The novel takes place in postcolonial Nigeria, where religion—specifically, Christianity in this case—plays a significant influence on how family relationships develop. The first few lines of the novel also emphasize how crucial Roman Catholic adherence is to Kambili's family and hint at the connections between violence, the church, and her father's dominance;

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. We had just returned from churc. Mama placed the fresh palm fronds, which were wet with holy water, on the dining table and then went upstairs to change. Later, she would knot the palm fronds into sagging cross shapes and hang them on the wall beside our gold-framed family photo. They would stay there until next Ash Wednesday, when we would take the fronds to church, to have them burned for ash. Papa, wearing a long, gray robe like the rest of the oblates, helped distribute ash every year. His line moved the slowest because he pressed hard on each forehead to make a perfect cross with his ash-covered thumb and slowly, meaningfully enunciated every word of "dust and unto dust you shall return." (6)

The first line, which alludes to Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe, asks readers to study Adichie's book in the context of Achebe's examination of Igbo patriarchy and the advent of Christian missionaries in a traditional community. The first phrase continues to highlight Kambili's Papa Eugene's strength both physically and emotionally, as he becomes enraged at his son's decision not to partake in communion and "flings" his "heavy missal" (the word's tone suggests a different kind of weapon) (6). The significance of religious texts in this family and its link with the violent father are literalized in this picture of Eugene tossing the book of liturgical readings that follows the church calendar. The fact that Kambih devotes the first page of her book to explaining how palm fronds are used in church rituals throughout the year emphasizes how important church rituals are to both her family and this book.

The recurring image of Kambili and her brother Jaja taking ceremonial "love sips" (9) from their father's

tea on Sundays after church is possibly even more unsettling than the opening scene: the children are each called to take a sip while the liquid symbol of British imperialism is still almost boiling. Kambili recalls, "The tea was always too hot, always burned my tongue, and if lunch was something peppery, my raw tongue suffered. But it didn't matter, because I knew that when the tea burned my tongue, it burned Papa's love into me" (9).

The majority of the reforms occurred in the educational system, which destroyed their faith and forced Christianity into people's thoughts. Major characters in Chimamanda's works are born within a certain society, but they gradually began to practice different religions. (Karthiga, 2022) According to Adichie, Aunty Ifeoma is modeled by the ancient Igbo women who supported males in their positions. She fulfills the responsibilities that are traditionally associated with men, although not holding a chieftaincy title like her brother Eugene. Following her husband's death, she takes on the position of head of the family in both her nuclear family and the extended family that Eugene left behind due to his orthodox father. Ifeoma looks for their father, Papa-Nnukwu, and sees to it that he receives quality medical treatment from the time of his illness until his eventual demise. When their father passes away, Eugene offers burying him at a Christian cemetery to show off his sanctimony, but Ifeoma rejects him and Aunty Ifeoma gets up and starts to yell. Her tone lacked stability.

“I will put my dead husband‟s grave for sale, Eugene, before I give our father a Catholic funeral. Do you hear me? I said I will sell Ifediora‟s grave first! Was our father a Catholic? I ask you, Eugene, was he a Catholic? Uchugbagi!” Aunty Ifeoma snapped her fingers at Papa; she was throwing a curse at him. Tears rolled down her cheeks. She made choking sounds as she turned and walked into her bedroom. (134)

Ifeoma's involvement in the household subverts the expectations of gender roles. Even in death, she honors her father Papa-Nnukwu's religious position. Despite her Christian faith, she expresses her strong confidence in her people's culture and religion as she observes Eugene, a self-professed Catholic, living a double life.

Patriarchy

Although Eugene can be seen as a self-made man, his authority is best understood in Purple Hibiscus from the Big Man's perspective. Adichi stand empty Big Manism; too well, that is, for my people. (Anya, 2003) The "Big Man persona offered and developed a highly valued way of masculinity in pre- and early-colonial [...] Africa. In later periods, the model was adapted to include both indigenous and western displays of conduct, consumption, and hospitality. In these times, the Big Man demonstrates his rank by the extravagant usage of luxury objects and the number of members of his family and dependents. But despite his constant maltreatment, both mental and physical, Eugene speaks to Kambili with words of love and faith: "Kambili, you are precious" (137), after spilling boiling water over her feet. Eugene leads the family in a lengthy prayer after lunch that includes "ask[ing] God to forgive those who had tried to thwart His will, who had put selfish desires first and had not wanted to visit His servant after Mass" (24). This is before he beats his wife to the point of miscarriage because, stricken with morning sickness, she asks to wait in the car instead of visiting the British priest after church. Eugene demands that the family "recite sixteen different novenas" in order to win his wife's forgiveness following the beating, the miscarriage, and the children's cleaning up of the bloody path that leads to the stairs (26). According to Lily Mabura's (2008) thesis, Eugene's frequent beatings of his wife to the point of miscarriage—which destroys proof of their sexual union and links it to both "original sin" and

"animal origins"—are not a coincidence (218-19). Furthermore, Madelaine Hron contends that Eugene is only replicating, as opposed to re-presenting, British culture—a colonial subject of Homi Bhabha trapped in imitation (31). Eugene is abusive, to be sure, but he's also a kind man who runs a newspaper that opposes the harsh Nigerian government and distributes his riches to great organizations. In this approach, Adichie portrays the interconnectedness of patriarchal oppression, colonial self-hatred, and fundamentalist Christianity not as an abstract, demonized cliché but rather as one terrible aspect of an otherwise fine guy who is obviously trying to do the right thing in many different contexts.

Multiple narrative points that highlight the problematic aspects of traditional Igbo society, particularly with regard to women, pose a challenge to interpreting the novel in a way that limits its critique to colonial Christianity. "Christianity became the prison through which the knowledge of the world was refracted," according to Ania Loomba (1998, 105). Eugene's father, Papa-Nnukwu, and his sister Ifeoma did not adhere to the foreign way of life. He is the one who upholds the traditional Igbo way of life. While his son Eugene was embracing European culture, he was opposed to assimilating into foreign religions and cultures. This is the main reason why the family is tense. Aunty Ifeoma has not ensnared her children or herself in the religious system. Papa-Nnukwu seemed to be threatening to Eugene.

Papa-Nnukwu expresses his sorrow for allowing Eugene to "follow those missionaries" and eventually losing him as a son. Ifeoma, his daughter, argues with her father's grief by reminding him that she did not leave him, to which Papa-Nnukwu responds (perhaps in jest) "But you are a woman." You do not count".(53) Later, during a customary cultural gathering, Papa-Nnukwu emphasizes these gender differences among the Igbo people by telling his grandkids that while women "cannot look" at the powerful male mmuo, women "are harmless" (61). "Don't speak like a woman!" Papa-Nnukwu chastises Jaja for asking a simple inquiry regarding the celebration. (62). With its short list of allusions to women in Igbo culture, this section almost appears designed to draw attention to the devaluation of women as more than just a product of colonial importation.

Igbo gender expectations

The fact that Kambili's mother, Beatrice, respects her abusive husband on the grounds that he does not choose to marry another woman in order to carry more children as the cultural custom requires and as people from their community have firmly suggested, further emphasizes Igbo gender standards. Similarly, Beatrice's choice to remain with her abusive husband appears to be influenced by the conventional wisdom that "[a] husband crowns a woman's life" (54). In African culture, a group makes the decision to marry and have a kid rather than an individual. The woman will have to give up all of her aspirations and follow society's expectations, against her choice. Both Igbo culture and Christianity are shown to be sources of great pain, particularly for women, but they are also sources of hope and healing. An alternative interpretation of Igbo-Christian faith is developed in the story. Aunty Ifeoma from Kambili is a prime example of this alternate kind of Christianity. Even in the 1990s, Eugene disapproves of Ifeoma's displays of feminine confidence, such as her bright red lipstick and jeans. Ifeoma is Eugene's sister and a widowed university professor, as Kambili frequently points out. Her children feel free to express their opinions and even talk about how Christianity is linked to imperialism; her home is a hive of conversation and joy. Ifeoma's family is likewise deeply Catholic; they frequently invite the local priest to their meal, attend church, and kneel together for evening prayers. However, they accept the traditional language Eugene considers inappropriate for devotion, and their recitation of the rosary is interspersed with Igbo praise songs. Another antagonist is Eather Amadi, the town priest of Ifeoma.

Father Amadi cherishes aspects of his Igbo culture, like as performing Igbo music at Mass, in contrast to Kambfli's biological father. Father Amadi, in contrast to Eugene, expresses gratitude for Kambili's embodiment rather than dread or shame over it, urging her to run, speak, and laugh. At least based on her narration, Kambili gets her first love. While Father Amadi honors his vow as a celibate priest and responds to Kambili's declaration of love with tenderness rather than with a shaming distance, their quasi-sensual relationship may be seen as a redemption of sexuality and the body—which are disproportionately associated with Africans in colonial imagination.

Coming of Age and Issues of Identity for Kambil

Purple Hibiscus chronicles Kambili's transformed life sparked by time within Ifeoma's family and under Father Amadi's spiritual instruction. Kambili's burnt tongue starts to recover under the care of these two surrogate parents: she starts to talk, smile, laugh, and sing praise songs in Igbo while driving Father Amadi's automobile. Notably, Kambili enters the stage to sing praise hymns for Christianity in the Igbo language. Along with Father Amadi and her aunt's family, Kambili travels to witness a Marian apparition. Kambili had an encounter with the holy while the other members of her party say they have not seen anything. She relates;

"… I saw her, the Blessed Virgin: an image in the pale sun, a red glow on the back of my hand, a smile on the face of the rosary-bedecked man whose arm rubbed against mine. She was everywhere. [...] "I felt the Blessed Virgin there. I felt her," I blurted out. How could anyone not believe after what we had seen? Or hadn't they seen it and felt it, too?" (190)

According to Cheryl Stobie (2010), Kambili's encounter with the mother of God is significant because it was initially witnessed by a young African girl in the village, dispelling the myth that Christian spirituality is associated with Western institutions, hierarchy, and patriarchy. It also challenges the idea that women cannot participate in traditional Igbo religious ceremonies (429). This mystical vision affirms Kambili's Christian faith and emphasizes how the divine is present in African bodies and faces, and how Christianity is characterized by love and joy rather than rage and fear. Kambili's vision of the Virgin Mary, together with the support of Aunty Ifeoma and Father Amadi, gives her hope throughout her dark days and gives her the strength to oppose her father's persecution and the pain it causes.

The ambiguity of the story is eventually resolved in Kambili's growth as well as in the closing scenes of the tale, when Eugene's untimely death prevents him from doing any more harm to his family. This isn't a divine intervention, though; rather, it's the outcome of his wife using tribal medicine to contaminate his British tea in an attempt to ultimately safeguard herself and her kids. Readers are left with an ethical conundrum by this decision: how should we interpret Beatrice's actions? Is this a wise decision? Is it a loving gesture? Is her self-sacrifice completely redemptive, or does it put her own misery at danger in an attempt to save her children's unfair suffering? In a seemingly selfless act of motherhood, Beatrice admits her wrongdoing to her kids and is prepared to turn herself in to the authorities. However, Jaja eventually admits to have committed a crime in order to protect his mother from the repercussions of her deeds. To put it another way, Jaja gives his life in order to save his mother. Beatrice is imprisoned by the harsh practices of a Christianity that exerts oppressive control over both the body and the intellect, as well as by her ignorance of the detrimental impacts of Igbo patriarchy. However, it would be oversimplified, if not outright incorrect, to characterize Beatrice as a victim devoid of agency. To protect herself and her kids from the aggression of an increasingly uncontrolled paterfamilias, she ultimately turns to murder. (Hillman, 2019)

Post War Situation in Nigeria

One of these books' main themes is the suffering of women and children, particularly on the front lines of conflict. Given the importance of maternity in a woman's life, feminism does not exclude motherhood or maternal politics for African women. (Steady, 1981) Purple Hibiscus takes place during General Ibrahim Babangida's reign, some twenty or thirty years after the Nigerian Civil War. There are traces of the politically and economically unstable Nigeria of the 1980s and 1990s in Kambili's upbringing. Human rights violations committed during Babangida's reign are reflected in the novel through rumors of dishonest politicians, covert detentions, and unexplained deaths. These violations have been listed by Human Rights Watch here. It is reported that the real-life journalist Dele Giwa, who was murdered in 1986 at his Lagos home by a mail bomb, served as the model for the character of Ade Choke. Additionally, in 1995, author Ken Saro-Wiwa was put to death; his corpse was burnt with acid and buried in an unmarked grave, just like the way the novel's Nwankiti Ogechi is slain (141).

According to Ogaga Okuyade (2009), Adichie criticizes Babangida's misuse of authority by portraying Eugene's house as a "microcosmic representation of the entire Nigerian nation." Eugene's peculiar stance and hegemonistic yet religious reign are eerily similar to General Ibrahim Babangida's regime's autocratic nature and histrionics (254). In the same way that Aunty Ifeoma grants Kambili and Jaja a little period of freedom, Babangida's regime allows the Nigerian people to experience democracy in a military setting. Nigerians welcomed democracy with all of their hearts because of its inventive and redemptive quality. (255). Adichie employs the conflict as the novel's metaphorical precursor as opposed to its actual one. The British colonization of Nigeria, which sought to bring the many tribes together into a single country, is also to blame for the conflict, which was a political coup intended to upset the balance of power among various ethnic groups. Like a teenager navigating both the past and the possibilities of the future, post-colonial Nigeria is trying to forge its own route and select the best course toward its national ambitions. But the route is rocky, paved with danger, and full of unknown surprises, much like puberty. The leaders of Purple Hibiscus are the most powerful or likely of them, and Kambili and Jaja's decision on the future must take into account Nigeria's ultimate destiny.

Conclusion

The introduction of western education and religion during colonialism weakened African indigenous religions. In Purple Hibiscus, Chimamanda Adichie urges a rebellion and resistance against all imperialist ideologies and structures that threaten African cosmology and cause Africans to lose trust in themselves. Adichie creates characters who challenge western norms in order to investigate the reclaiming of African culture from colonialists. Adichie uses her cultural expression to highlight her African identity. Ifeoma, while becoming a Christian, preserves her people's traditional beliefs because of her love and loyalty to her traditionalist father. Because Papa-Nnukwu adheres to his forefathers' customs and traditions, he also forfeits the wonderful things in life that his son Eugene promised. But there are challenges associated with expressing one's beliefs; Papa-Nnukwu encounters rejection and disregard in his pursuit of cultural expression. Because Amaka maintains her African name, which provides her cultural identity, she also forfeits her Catholic Church confirmation sacrament.

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