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Creating Gods: Eugene’s God-Like Representation

As a Means of Control and Manipulation

        Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s debut novel *Purple Hibiscus* chronicles the struggles of Kambili Achike, particularly the conflict between her abusive, controlling, and fanatically religious father, Eugene, and the rest of her immediate family. Even though the family is aware of the harm Eugene does to them, it is not until much later in the novel that anyone dares to threaten the control Eugene has over them. Eugene maintains control over his family by making himself equal to God, as seen through the novel’s many religious references, spiritual language, and various faiths that are discussed.

        Though he is a devote Catholic, Eugene often, intentionally or not, strives to be the God he worships. Kambili recalls that Eugene would watch and see if the entire congregation partakes in Communion, and if someone chose not to for two consecutive weeks he would “encourage Father Benedict to call and win that person back into the fold” (5). Eugene watches over the congregation as if he is God, and he gives orders to priests like God would. He is the omelora, the “One Who Does for the Community,” of his umunna, meaning that provides for all of them, as if they were all his children. Though he insists that whatever he gives is actually from God, and not from him, he is still the one physically handing out money and food. If he truly wanted his umunna, and everyone else he helps, to believe the spotlight did not belong on him, then he would want to give more anonymously or have his immediate family members help with the giving. Instead, he prefers to do so himself. When he is comforting the distressed wife of Ade Coker, he tells her that “none of those who trust in Him shall be left desolate” (37). It is difficult to tell if he is talking about God or himself, especially since he is the one who supports her financially after Ade’s assassination. Eugene’s bed even hints that he sees himself as god-like: the custom-made bed is larger than a king size, meaning that Eugene sees himself as higher than a king. Since kings are traditionally believed to rule because of their divine right to do so, only God is higher than a king.

        He even has his own versions of communion. The purpose of Holy Communion, according to Catholic tradition, is to bring people closer to Jesus by consuming part of him. By becoming closer to Jesus, the congregation also becomes closer to each other. Eugene’s “love sips” of his tea and the juice tastings can both represent his own Holy Communion with his family, the people he wants to control. He offers the tea to his children “because you share the little things you love with the people you love” (8). Like Christ, Eugene gives up part of himself, in this case part of his prized routine, out of love. The tea burns Kambili, but she does not mind because it “burns Papa’s love into me” (8). This is reminiscent of burning hell fire, as though the love sip is not only an act of supposed love, but also a penance, signaling what kind of god Eugene really is.

        The tastings of his factories’ products, such as the cashew juice, is also a symbolic meal that brings the family together, like Communion. Eugene is sharing another part of himself—his livelihood and work—with them, and though the point of the tasting is to give feedback, Beatrice, Kambili, and Jaja are expected to only offer praise. Eugene is a god who commands praise, rather than organically attracting it like the God they are supposed to worship at Mass.

        In fact, Eugene is artificially God in several ways. For example, his factories create food such as “wafers and cream biscuits and bottled juice and banana chips” (12). However, life cannot be sustained on these items, and they are all manufactured in a man-made factory, making them unnatural, in a direct contrast to the images of edible vegetation in the Garden of Eden or the loaves of bread and fish Jesus gave out in the Gospel. Eugene is also selfish, because rather than giving up a direct part of himself, he offers sips of tea and bits of his products. Because of his human limitations and naturally flawed nature, Eugene can, at best, be a less worthy version of God, which explains why he gets so aggravated when he sees his family act imperfectly. That is a reminder of his own imperfections.

        People around him also treat Eugene like a higher being. “During sermons,” Kambili says, “Father Benedict referred to the Pope, Papa, and Jesus—in that order. He used Papa to illustrate the Gospels” (4). Father Benedict does more than just use Eugene to illustrate the Gospels; he implies Eugene *is* the Gospels. In the Catholic Scriptures, the Gospels discuss the works of Jesus, and by referring to Eugene before Jesus, Benedict is putting Eugene before Him. He also does not discuss what Jesus accomplished in the Gospel reading of the day because he is too busy telling his congregation what Eugene does, like “us[ing] the *Standard* to speak the truth” (4). Using the specific example of the *Standard* is rather meaningful because it has a few similarities with Scripture. Catholics believe the Scriptures are words inspired by God and physically written down my others, usually people who became martyrs for writing it. Eugene, being the owner of the paper, inspires the *Standard*, and gets the credit for the stories printed even though he does not actually write them himself. Throughout the novel, the staff of the *Standard* is constantly threatened by government officials for speaking the kind of “truth” Father Benedict mentions in his homily, which even leads to Ade Coker’s death, or martyrdom.

        Eugene’s immediate family also treats him like an almighty figure. Kambili gets annoyed when her mother compares Eugene to other men. “I wished that Mama would not compare [Papa] with Mr. Ezendu, with anybody; it lowered him” (20). Though Eugene is as much as a mortal man as Mr. Ezendu or anyone else, Kambili still sees her father as above them, as if he were greater than human. She also considers everything he says “important” as if it were law. “I forgot myself,” Kambili says, as she is listening to her father describe the current state of the government, “Sometimes I wanted to stay like that forever, listening to his voice, to the important things he said…most of what Papa said was important” (24). In that particular instance, Kambili looks up at him while he is speaking, as though she were kneeling before a holy vision. When Eugene dies, Kambili is shocked because “he had seemed immortal” (286), just like God.

        In addition to seeing Eugene as God the Father, the first part of the Catholic Blessed Trinity, Kambili also sees him as the Son and the Holy Spirit. While in Nsukka, Kambili often worries if Eugene will find out that she is not following her schedule or if he knows that Papa Nnukwu is staying with him. She is also shocked that Jaja starts to ask questions during their time in Nsukka, even with the most mundane ones such as wondering what an *okada*, a motorcycle, is. “I did not think he would ask that question or any other question” (127). She has been taught to never question anything, meaning that she has been taught to never question her faith in her father and his lifestyle, especially since he is spirit-like enough to find out.

        On Good Friday, Kambili remarks that her father is not feeling well and that they attend Mass. However, Catholics do not attend Mass on Good Friday; they attend services. A Mass is when bread and wine are consecrated. It is against Church Law to consecrate either on Good Friday, and extra is consecrated on Holy Thursday so that Communion can still be given on Good Friday. Despite that, it is still not a Mass, and Kambili’s Freudian slip is a sign that she sees her father as Jesus. On Good Friday, the Passion of Christ is read, which chronicles how Jesus suffered on the way to his eventual death on the cross. Kambili sees her father as the one who is suffering to that degree, and she sees his suffering as a sacrifice rather than something he deserves. This portrayal of Eugene as a Christ figure foreshadows his death, and it also explains why Kambili still appears faithful to him even when he is at his worst. She justifies it by the good he does for others.

        Because Eugene sees himself as God and is treated as such, he dislikes other branches of faith because those threaten him and his way of life. He is dead against the Igbo practices of his father, even though they do nothing to directly harm him. In fact, as Kambili witnesses in Nsukka, Papa Nnukwu looks much happier with his faith than her family does with theirs. When Papa Nnukwu dies, Eugene insists on a Catholic burial and is furious with Ifeoma for not bringing in a priest to convert him on his death bed. Even though his father is dead, Eugene still wants to control him via his own branch of twists, egotistical, pseudo-Catholicism. He also dislikes the way Father Amadi celebrates Mass at St, Agnes because he breaks out in Igbo songs. He is offended by this because Amadi makes the Mass more accessible to the congregation, which tells them that each of them can be holy rather than just a privileged few. This is in direct contrast to Eugene, who would probably be outraged that Amadi also sees Jesus directly in others. “I see Christ in their faces, in the boys’ faces,” (177) Amadi told Kambili when he discusses the boys he plays soccer with every week. Eugene would not approve; only he can be divine. Everyone else is supposed to live up to his expectations.

        However, huge parts of his control quickly break down after Jaja and Kambili return from their first visit to Nsukka. At Nsukka, Jaja found his happiness in Ifeoma’s garden, implying that he found his spirituality in nature, similarly to his grandfather. Therefore, he does not need Eugene, and he shows him that by not receiving Communion on Palm Sunday.  He tells his father the “wafer gives [him] bad breath” (5), secularizing the host and attributing to it the ability to upset his natural state—as if the host in Eugene’s church was one of the artificial wafers “Papa’s factories ma[k]e” (6). Jaja also wants the key to his room, to prevent himself from being under Eugene’s watchful eye. He later refuses to drink or comment on the cashew juice, and so he refuses to partake in Eugene’s communion. Eugene does not punish Jaja for his behavior because he realizes that he has lost control over his son and that without his son believing he is all-powerful, Eugene is powerless. It is significant that this happens on Palm Sunday, because it is on this day that Catholics remember how Jesus entered Jerusalem and was welcomed by those around him. Eugene is not welcomed by his family, and his faith in himself starts to unravel because he is seeing more and more that he is not like Christ.

        Kambili also starts to lose faith in her father, but not to the extent of Jaja. Through Father Amadi, she learns that truly believing in God does not mean fearing him; it means loving him, as seen through her crush on Amadi. Thanks to him, she is able to grow and she starts seeing Amadi as a divine figure, as seen in what she says at the end of the novel:

“Jaja will come home soon,” Father Amadi wrote in his last letter. “You must believe this.” And I believed him, even though we had not heard from the lawyers and were not sure. I believe what Father Amadi says, I believe the firm slant of his handwriting. *Because he has said it and his word is true*. (301)

Kambili believes him without any evidence, based solely on faith, as though he is God. The repetition of “I believe” is reminiscent of the Catholic baptismal vows, and so Kambili is taking her vows to the God she sees in Amadi. These vows can also be seen as marital vows, and since Eugene told Kambili that she was “Christ’s bride” (273) when she was confirmed, these vows she takes to Amadi are not just her new baptism; she is also being confirmed in her new faith, reinforced by the romantic undertones of her relationship with Amadi. Now, she really is Christ’s bride. “*Because he has said it and his word is true*”is not a direct Bible quote, but it encompasses many written down throughout Scripture and leads the reader to believe that the letters Amadi sends to Kambili are considered to be divine truths to her, as if these letters are answers to prayers.

 Though she still prays for Eugene in her new parish, it is in the same vein as someone describing the temptation to sin: “I have nightmares about…the silence of when Papa was alive. In my nightmares, it mixes with shame and grief and so many other things that I cannot name…” (305). Like someone lying or skipping Mass, Kambili feels shameful when she thinks of her father in a positive way. Her conflicted feelings reflect that even though she wants to think of him, she knows it is wrong and bad for her, as though he is a drug. For Kambili, Eugene went from being God to being Satan.

The evolution of Eugene from God to Satan in Kambili and Jaja’s eyes represents a religious growth from childhood to adulthood, a growth many Catholics and other people of faith undergo as they mature. Jaja and Kambili used to be content with being silent and never questioning their lives. However, as they get older and see other alternatives, they start to question their faith and realize that they have a choice in what they believe and what belief system works best for them. Because *Purple Hibiscus* is a coming of age story, it is not surprising to see the physical and emotional development of the two teenage main characters. However, the novel’s take on religious growth, especially in such a prominent way, is unique feature that prevents Adichie’s novel from becoming cliché and predictable.