

## Disrupting Hegemony, Anticipating the Future: A Nietzschean Reading of *God Dies by the Nile* and *Purple Hibiscus*

Rogers Asempasah, Christabel Aba Sam\*

Department of English, University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast

\*Corresponding Author: Christabel Aba Sam, [christabel.sam@ucc.edu.gh](mailto:christabel.sam@ucc.edu.gh)

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history

Received: April 22, 2021

Accepted: July 23, 2021

Published: July 31, 2021

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: None

#### Keywords:

Nietzsche,  
Adichie,  
The death of God,  
Purple Hibiscus,  
Motif,  
Saadawi

### ABSTRACT

El-Saadawi's *God Dies by the Nile* and Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* have been widely and independently explored from varied perspectives. Such liberated critique is however surprising since the two texts can be found to have ethical and political confluence – the motif of the death of God. Drawing on the notion of travelling theory, this paper argues that the death of El-Saadawi's and Adichie's protagonists is a contestation and a disruption of the norm and a signification of the novels anticipatory sensibilities. The paper also examines how the different textual utilization of the motif of the death of God contributes to our understanding of the circulation of motifs in literary production and contextual interpretations. The paper makes a significant contribution to the scholarship on El-Saadawi and Adichie.

### INTRODUCTION

*Purple Hibiscus* and *God dies by the Nile* confront the reader with a certain female audacity that raises ethical questions. This audacity revolves around the killing of important male figures in the two novels. The question that arises is not simply ethical but one of interpretation that relates to agency and anticipatory discourses. Nawal El-Saadawi remains an important voice as far as the experiences of women in the Arab world are concerned. She forcefully contends with the issues of religion and its potentially exploitative assumptions, especially as they disempower Muslim women in the Arab world. Her contestations are profoundly intensified by disclosing the intimate link between religion (i.e., Islam), patriarchy and gender. Therefore, underlying El-Saadawi's imaginative works are subversive culturally and historically derived paradigms which challenge such oppressive systems. Consistently, her works are dialectical in their interrogation of religious traditions and orthodoxies, as she seeks ways of re-negotiating religious dogmas. *God dies by the Nile* is a compelling narrative on the plight of women in a predominant Islamic setting- exposing how religion becomes an exploitative patriarchal tool of oppression. The story is told of Zakeya, the protagonist, and how she comes to know and understand the wild personality behind the 'sacred' image of the despotic Mayor of Kafr El-Teen. While scholarly recep-

tion of her works are diversified in terms of how symbols are deployed to expose the danger of the patriarchal class system in Egypt (Islam, 2007); how fundamentalist Islamic ideals are carefully subverted to discredit counterfeit assumptions as well as how she uses theatrical guidelines to illustrate the dynamics of repressive power (Reddy, 2017), other critical commentary on Saadawi's works chiefly focus on the destructive temperament of trinities (Islam, gender and patriarchy and politics, religion and sex) and how they succeed in distorting reality and creating lasting imbalances. In all of these readings, the significance of the killing of the Mayor has simply sufficed as consolidating female agency (Issaka, 2010; Kolphur, 2015; Nadaf, 2015; Reddy, 2017). While this is relevant, the killing of the Mayor, as we argue, is symbolic of the ethico-politics that lead us to engage with Nietzsche's idea of the death of God as an important motif.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, on the other hand, is an important voice in contemporary African fiction. Particularly, her novels feature the complex weaving of history, politics, gender and culture – a composite that defines the complexities in postcolonial Africa. While several critics have assessed Adichie's novel along the lines of a coming of age novel – chronicling the lived experiences of young Kambili, from innocence to maturity and tabling the infinite problems of hegemonic patriarchal Africa, others have also looked at

the ways in which her novel speak to issues of feminism and womanism, deconstructing imbalances, identity politics and a critique of western supremacy (Kivai, 2010; Emery, 2012; Yohannes, 2012; Amartey, 2013; Bello, 2014; Martin, 2015; Rackley, 2015). Particularly, Oha (2007), Kurtz (2012) and Meher (2016) have looked at how the motifs of silence, flower, palm and figurines become symbolic of tyrannical times and a conscious awakening leading to freedom. While these studies remain crucial in terms of Adichie's artistic dexterity - connecting history and arts, our understanding of the new postcolonial nation becomes clearer if we engage with the motif of the death of God.

Critical commentary on the two texts, as we have demonstrated, suggest few attempts to compare the two texts although they can be found to be operating on both ethical and political grounds. This point of convergence has to do with the motif of the death of God crystallized in the killing of the two male protagonists. The objectives of the paper are three-fold; the paper aims to shed light on how the circulation of motifs contributes to our understanding of these texts; to demonstrate that these two texts engage in a broader dialogue with philosophical concepts in order to speak to specific postcolonial situations; and also to show how the motif of the death of God operates in different religious contexts. The paper is literary and it involves a re-reading of the selected texts and library search support. The analysis is also informed by the theoretical considerations of the paper. The paper is structured into three parts; the first part deals with Nietzsche's idea of the death of God. In part two, the paper explores how this concept functions in Saadawi's *God dies by the Nile*, and finally, how the concept operates in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*.

Generally, motifs and what they signify in any literary production and interpretation are important since they become denotative of the ways in which writers draw crucial associations between ideas and patterns that may not be overtly observable. A motif according to Daemmrich (1985) is a subject, a central idea, a recurrent thematic element used in the development of an artistic piece. Motifs have dual relationships by referring to the semblance of phenomena and fluctuating position in texts; series of relational patterns and a selective principle that classifies concordant phenomena on the basis of frequency of occur (Daemmrich, 1985, p. 567). In other words, motifs serve as signifiers for particular phenomena. In this paper, we engage with Nietzsche's radical motif of the death of God in connection with Said's (1983) idea of traveling theory, which presumes that:

cultural and intellectual life are usually nourished and often sustained by this circulation of ideas and whether it takes the form of acknowledgement or unconscious influence, creative borrowings or wholesale appropriation, the movement of ideas and theories from one place to the another is both a fact of life and a useful enabling of intellectual activity (Said, 1983, p. 157).

Said (1983) suggests that when an idea moves from one geographical context to the other, there are bound to be variations based on the particularities of that geography so that the idea assumes new meanings; in terms of shifts and

constants, outside of the original. So that tracing from Nietzsche, we engage with how the idea of the death of God is used in other contexts. Nietzsche's radical idea of the death of God has attracted several critical debates particularly with regards to its metaphysical assumptions and the fact that it is a social rejection or cultural dismissal of the Western, Judeo-Christian God (Beery, 2020; Grimhood, 2017 & Ruprecht, 1997). To quote Grimhood (2017):

Nietzsche's argument over the Death of God is far more polemic than it is an exercise in close reasoning, and at least one of its aims is to open our eyes to a world without fixed parameters of meaning and truth, and in its place, a raw flux of energy and power. (Grimhood, 2017, p. 2)

In other words, operating within the logos of the idea of the death of God as Nietzsche posits, our concern in this paper is to demonstrate that there is the possibility of a new world where 'faith' is vested in alternative realities. Indeed, before Nietzsche's radical concept of the death of God, truth was located in the transcendent; it was the only objective means for assessing morality and authentic selfhood. Indeed, the supernatural was the absolute as far as solutions to the world's problems are concerned. Nietzsche's concept of the death of God was in reaction to the supposed 'undemocratic' nature of Christianity which had become the leading religion in Europe during the 1800's. For him, Christianity was simply a sect responsible for championing godly roles despite the pioneering human factor. Therefore, there was the need for a new paradigm which will replace Christianity or religious dogmas. For Nietzsche, the idea of the death of God refers to a radical conception of a world in which secular ideas rather than religious ideologies define human conducts, aspirations and values. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche (1966) postulates that:

God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? (Nietzsche, 1966, p. 125)

The death of God is a way of saying that humans are no longer able to believe in any such cosmic order since they no longer recognize its existence. The death of God, as Nietzsche posits, will lead not only to the rejection of a belief in the cosmic or physical order but it will also lead to a rejection of absolute values and universal moral laws binding upon all individuals. In other words, the death of God is the collapse of the absolute and the birth of a desired solution to misery as a result of Christian resentments. Nietzsche's argument therefore presupposes that the death of God is the birth of innovation and a framework of possibilities which favors humanistic values. Thus, everything is possible when there is no 'final authority (God)'. In this paper, we deploy Nietzsche's concept of the death of God as a critique of modernity into the postcolonial context in order to show how a re-reading of Nawal El-Saadawi's *God dies by the Nile* and

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* provide insights into the re-staging of the motif of the death of God as a radical destabilization of the structure and feeling of patriarchy. Additionally, our overall objective is to argue that the anticipatory apparatuses in these two texts are inseparable from the motif of the death of God. Our analysis shows points of convergence and discontinuities in the way the two authors deploy the motif of the death of God.

### ***God Dies by the Nile: Nietzsche and the Islamic Discourse***

In El-Saadawi's *God Dies by the Nile*, we are confronted with a different religious dispensation outside of what Nietzsche presumed to be the negative effects of the supernatural. Kafr El-Teen is a dominant Islamic community ruled by the Mayor of Kafr El-Teen. The Mayor is both the spiritual and political head of the town and so he becomes the peoples' symbol of providence and protection; their creator of values. The Mayor of Kafr El-Teen is accustomed to issuing his wishes with an assured hope that his subjects will meet those demands – turning them into slaves of his will. He is a brutal dictator because he uses his authority to oppress the people under his watch. Interestingly, the sheikh of the mosque, Sheikh Zahran, shares his conviction when he declares that 'we are God's slaves when it is time to say our prayers only. But we are the Mayor's slaves all the time' (El-Saadawi, 1997, p. 69) presupposing the extent to which the Mayor becomes indispensable as far as life in Kafr El-Teen is concerned; suggesting that even Allah's power is restricted compared to that of the Mayor. The Mayor's power becomes unopposed and total because he practically controls the minutest detail of the day-to-day affairs of the people with brutal fists.

In *God dies by the Nile*, the Mayor of Kafr El-Teen is portrayed as the epitome of moral piety, the symbol of the patriarchal class system in Egypt - he believes in the social ordering of the society where the upper class and men are at the apex with women, children and peasants at the bottom and hence, he considers himself better than any other person in his community since he has become their referent in all things. He is indeed worshipped because he is infallible:

He was above suspicion, above the law, even above the moral values which governed ordinary people's behavior. Nobody in Kafr El-Teen would dare suspect him of any evil. They could have doubts about Allah, but about him, it was impossible. (El-Saadawi, 1997, p. 98)

The image of the Mayor is unimpeded as far as sacredness and truth are concerned. He and God shared a common denominator. In fact, the people assume him more pious than Allah so much that he becomes the acceptable standard for moral piety. It is important to recognize that this exaggerated sacred image of the Mayor is an indication of the extent to which he has become 'idolized' as their preferred messiah. Interestingly, the Mayor of Kafr El-Teen becomes the peoples' knowledge because outside of him exists no form of truth despite the grave exploitative practices he sanctions. He is not in the least suspected of being capable of such evils. The enigma in this blind praise as far as the Mayor's

sacred image is concerned is the problematic of religion. As Saadawi observes, religion becomes a political tool with which powerful groups justify injustice as a divine order (El-Saadawi, 1997, p. 145). The minds of the people are controlled and restricted into believing an aspect of reality which is presumed to be the ultimate and therefore there is little or no attempt to its precepts. This is why Zakeya (the protagonist) is portrayed in the throes of a psychologically unstable individual. Zakeya's psychic trauma is prompted by her struggles to make connections with the happenings in her family and the possibility of the Mayor's complicity. It was inconceivable – a blasphemy of the truth that had defined her life from time immemorial.

It is important to observe the extremist strategies the Mayor and his minions used to get Zeinab and Zakeya (Zeinab's aunt) to oblige the Mayor's selfish demands (110) because men like him did not know 'impossibility'. They (Zakeya and Zeinab) were brainwashed into believing that Allah required them to 'obey' and 'submit' to the wishes of the Mayor and therefore they had no choice than to reluctantly agree to the Mayor's selfish demands. While he succeeds with Zeinab, the advent of Galal (Zakeya's son) gradually neutralizes the influence of his (the Mayor) 'omnipotence'.

When Galal returns from peace-keeping and subsequently marries Zeinab, he restricts her from any longer serving the Mayor despite the countless efforts to compel him to rescind his decision. His obstinacy eventually leads him to prison – he is incarcerated because his audacity had become a rebellion of the established order; a breach of the moral values that governed the lives of the people of Kafr El-Teen and consequently a disobedience to God. Arguably, Galal's 'disobedience' lifts the veil of pretense and the divinity of the Mayor so that Zakeya (his mother) discerns the true nature of reality - She becomes conscious of the deception in what had become their symbol of providence and morality because she dares to imagine a better and safer life without the Mayor.

'Zakeya was sitting in her usual place listening to what was being said. Suddenly another tiny star lit up in the darkness of her head. She could not grasp anything at the beginning but a slow movement kept going through her mind, and once it started it went on slowly at first, then a little faster. For once she had started to think. It had to go on. She had caught the top of the thread between her fingers and now the reel will keep turning and turning until it reached the end, no matter how long... She whispered in a strange voice. 'Zeinab! Zeinab!

She whispered back, 'what's wrong Aunt?

'I was blind, but now my eyes have been opened'. (El-Saadawi, 1997, p. 171)

Zakeya and the rest of Kafr El-Teen were blind to alternative truths – they only knew of the Mayor's truth which was in the main patronizing, oppressive and limiting. It had seized their self-consciousness so that reality was seen through only the Mayor's eyes. Zakeya's discovery of the potential of substitute realities signifies the end of absoluteness and a regenerative mode of being. When Zakeya kills the Mayor, she creates a free atmosphere where people are

no longer bound by restrictions and prohibitions suggesting the potential of new modes of being. The killing of the Mayor is symbolic of the fact that there is no absolute reality and that moral laws are contextual. When the Mayor dies, there is the birth of alternative values because the people of Kafr El-Teen will no longer be restricted by the hegemonized religious beliefs of the Mayor.

### **Breaking ‘Gods’: Eugene Achike and the Future Horizon in Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus***

In Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*, the image of God is characterized in the character of Eugene Achike (Papa Eugene). Eugene is an accomplished man who seeks to establish order as he sees it onto his family. He embraces Western values and imposes these values on his wife and children. Although Eugene Achike is an Igbo, he has grown a distaste for his culture so much that he forbids his children and any member of his family from associating with paganism including his father (Papa Nnukwu) because he had refused to be saved (i.e., renouncing the Igbo traditions and becoming Westernized). He is a wealthy man – his factories and news papers were favourites because of their Western quality and its freedom-oriented focus respectively. Eugene’s sense of power and authority, no doubt, derives from his identification with British Catholicism. Eugene is a complex character. Part of this complexity is because he is both admirable and repulsive. He assumes that the needs of his children are the same as his own and therefore he expects that they (his children) live and appreciate life his own way and yet he loved them. Like the Mayor, Eugene is considered the model of true religiosity. Kambili tells us that:

During his sermons, Father Benedict usually referred to the Pope, Papa and Jesus – in that order. He used Papa to illustrate the gospels. (Adichie, 2004, p. 12)

It is important to recognize the significance of the connection the narrator strikes between Eugene, the Pope and Jesus. Jesus is the son of God and the Pope, the supreme leader of Catholicism on earth and therefore Papa Eugene inadvertently takes the place of Jesus in the body of the Trinity. Indeed, his immediate family and the society could not think of any form of reality outside of him. He had practically colonized reality. Father Benedict testifies to the fact that:

When we let our light shine before men, we are reflecting Christ’s Triumphant Entry. He said that on Palm Sunday. ‘Look at Brother Eugene, he could have chosen to be like the other Big men in this country. He could have decided to sit at home and do nothing after the coup to make sure the government did not threaten his business. But no, he used the Standard to speak the truth even though it meant the paper lost advertising. Brother Eugene spoke out for freedom. How many of us here stood upon for the truth? How many of us have reflected the Triumphant Entry? (Adichie, 2004, p.13)

The metaphor of the standard divulges issues of modeling and acceptability in relation to religiosity and masculinity. He had become the standard for moral piety and fighting for freedom. As the epitome of hegemonic maleness, his entire world is woven around self-assertion, power and ma-

terial success. These items in his agenda are strict and tight, blurring the possibility of alternatives. It is important to recognize that Eugene’s children; Jaja and Kambili only appreciated the world through their father’s eyes. They did not have privilege for choices; the only thing permissible was their father’s orders. He was the meaning of the world and their reality presupposing that he had become their present and future. Eugene’s children knew of only one reality until their Nsukka experience. Their bond with Father Amadi and their association with Ifeoma’s family carefully dissolved the sticky silence that ruled their lives. Jaja and Kambili began to appreciate the dissimilar pattern of life in Nsukka and Enugu. In Nsukka, there was no iconic figure of reality, uprightness and acceptability; everyone understood reality in distinctive ways. There were no putative behaviours which required ‘slave morality’ and self-denial. They had grown an awareness that reality was relative and therefore they needed to define their own reality exclusive of their father’s. And this reality was beyond their father’s redemption. When Eugene’s children went to Enugu, everything including what they considered usual had become unfamiliar, repressive and intimidating with a continued insistence on his puritanical principles in a postcolonial civilization. But Jaja could no longer bring himself to conform to the restrictions imposed on his being. He wanted to be.

Jaja’s defiance seemed to me now like Aunty Ifeoma’s experimental Purple Hibiscus: are, fragrant with the undertones of freedom, a different kind of freedom from the one the crowds waving green leaves chanted at Government Square after the coup. A freedom to be, to do (Adichie, 2004, p.16)

Jaja’s defiance is indeed different. It has been provoked by an increasing desire to define himself based on his own experiences rather than the life he has been accustomed to. Eugene’s wife is unable to cope with the slave morality that her family is subjected to because it has become so suffocating and overpowering and so she kills Eugene. When Eugene is killed, life is no longer regulated, mechanical and pretentious because ‘truth’ is disintegrated and it becomes available in recognizable bits different from the universal vacuum it initially occurred. It is also important to recognize that Eugene’s family is no longer controlled, constrained and repressed because they are now disconnected from the absolute truth (death separates them from the influence of Eugene) and reconnected to collectivism.

### **The Death of God in two Postcolonial Contexts**

It is interesting to note that the idea of the death of God operates within three unities of religion, patriarchy and colonialism. The complexities in the masculine performance of the Mayor and Papa Eugene can be read in terms of the co-operation of the vestiges of these unities so that the death of God in the postcolonial context assumes different semiotics outside of Nietzsche’s original contextualization. Contrary to Nietzsche’s position that Christianity is the most fatal and seductive lie ever created, this paper has shown that religions in themselves impose limitations on reasoning and initiative so that any such act is interpreted as corruption of faith.

Quite apart from this, the postcolonial situation becomes grave because of the support of colonialism and patriarchy as negatively affecting the operations of will power – which is why the agentic roles of Zakeya and Beatrice become ethically crucial. In the postcolonial context therefore, the idea of the death of God constitutes a de-emphasis of western supremacy as against black inferiority and accentuating positive male-female principle. There is a conscious attempt by the authors to correct and overthrow colonial mental habits that cripple the foundations of a new civilization. The death of Saadawi and Adichie's male protagonists demystify the desire for cultural romanticism as ugly and camouflage; the contradiction between what such cultures profess and what they actually seek to achieve; which is what becomes evident in the character of Papa Eugee. The disconnect between his strong Catholic Christian beliefs and his everyday treatment of his family is absurd and ridiculous. Such posturing, as we argue, creates a condition of cultural/human vulnerability, degrading cultural authenticity and disallowing the possibility of newness. Thus, the future nation must be responsive in abolishing colonial and religious ideologies and cultural fantasies that lack clarity.

While we grapple with the treachery of colonial mental habits, it is important to also recognize that the death of God holds promise for communal redemption. Part of the imperial nature of Enugu and Kafr El-Teen as political states had to do with the autocratic leadership of Papa Eugene and the Mayor. The monologue which characterized their leadership is intrinsically Eurocentric – the individual focused approach- because it cajoles the potential of their subjects into a wedlock of inferiorities and self-repression; suggesting an age of cultural crisis. The communal nature of African civilization is carefully restricted by the conscious attempt to silence 'oppositions' and in this case, muting alternative perspectives. The incarceration of Kafrawi, Elwau, Galal and the regimental lifestyle of Kambili and Jaja are symbolic of colonial governmentality which require a new renaissance. Thus, the dignity of communalism is re-born in the death of Eugene and the Mayor.

While we consider the foregoing as differences in contextualization as Said's (1983) travelling theory observes, there are points of resonance. One of the key characteristics of Nietzsche's discussion is the tendency of religion to make persons irrational; what he refers to as slave morality- where values are filtered and enclosed in pretences so that will power becomes infamous. The religious notoriety of the African equally prescribes such unfounded conformist attitudes which become fatal for the progress of the nation. Zakeya's measured realization of the pretentious image of the Mayor and Beatrice's cautious resolve to gradually poison her husband to death exemplify the burden of how religion deflect the need for any progressive enterprise. The prominence of religious fundamentalism in postcolonial Africa today contends with the desire for plurality which is essential for newness.

## CONCLUSION

Dwelling on Said's travelling theory, this paper has demonstrated that a re-contextualization of Nietzsche's

idea of the death of God evokes critical issues that hinges on postcolonial futures. The paper has shown that the unique ways in which Adichie and Saadawi disrupt hegemony – muting absolutism, demystifying cultural idealism and redefining vulnerability - by casting their female protagonists in radically religious prejudiced settings become significant in terms of prefiguring the possibility of a free world. The paper has also revealed that although the two writers may appear to be skeptical about the emergence of a new African society because of the complicated liberation that their women enjoy, their belief in revisiting the oppositions of social hierarchies is an important call as far as the psychology of colonial subjects are concerned. Thus, the killing of Papa Eugene and the Mayor remains a potential signification of endorsing hope in liberality, layering of social structures and collectivity.

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