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PATRIARCHY SANCTIONED UNDER RELIGIOUS FANATICISM : THE NERVOUS CONDITION OF MUSLIM AND CHRISTIAN WOMANHOOD IN NAWAL EL SAADAWI' s *GOD DIES BY THE NILE* AND CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE 's *PURPLE HIBISCUS*

Abstract

This article intends to unravel the myth of eternal feminine in Muslim and Christian societies, by exploring the gender asymmetry inscribed within as being traditionally and religiously reinforced by the patriarchal social order. Particularly, this asymmetry is generally maintained by unscrupulous representatives of religion, who seek to incarnate an unquestionable godly power that is oppressive to the female sex. Gender bias, in this regard, becomes justified in the name of God, or through a repressive discourse of righteousness which is male-prescribed and male-maintained, but claimed to be divinely ordained. With the patriarchalisation of religious tenets, women become further incapacitated to improve their lot and thus stifle the patriarchal energy seeking to relegate them to the auxiliary status.

Using Nawal El Saadawi's *God Dies by The Nile* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, the article tries to uncover the patriarchal distortions of Muslim and Christian cultures where misogynistic reading of religion is used against battered and sexually exploited women. The concern of this article is to depict, through the stories of these women, how the instrumentalization of religion by the patriarchal order can dangerously breed a chaotic culture which deliberately embraces a limited view regarding any female autonomous development.

The paper shows through the protagonists' dissident acts that to break free from the phallocratic mentality, women need to dogmatically and indignantly dethrone those God abstractions inflicted on their consciousness. A participation in de-patriarchizing oppressive God images will empower these subaltern women to cease playing the game of sex roles, imposed on them by the patriarchal social order.

Keywords: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Christian, Muslim, Nawal El Saadawi, Patriarchy, Religion, Women.

1. Introduction

The statement that Muslim women are oppressed under Islam is not equally met with the claim that Christian women are oppressed under Christianity. This lopsided view is manifested in the fact that the very term "Christian Women", as a stereotypical and monolithic category of gender, finds no existence in current feminist scholarship. Unlike Muslim women, Christian women have never been homogenized under generic and essentialist labels like "Christian women", or "Western women", which may produce problematic assumptions regarding their treatment under Christianity. This view is illuminated by the Algerian sociologist Marnia Lazreg who is very attentive to the Orientalist inclinations of western feminist politics in which Muslim women are stereotypically "made to

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2 Taken from Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel *Nervous Condition*

conform to the configuration of meanings associated with the concept of Islam " (Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence*, p.7).

As a Muslim woman getting increasingly alarmed by my Otherness in current feminist discourse, I feel committed to cross the hegemonic divide fabricated between Christian and Muslim women. Crossing this divide is tantamount to demonstrating that whether Muslim or Christian, women as daughters of Eve have always been prone to dogmatic religious beliefs which repress their individual freedoms. This means that the survival of patriarchy as an institution in both Muslim and Christian societies has always needed a gendered discourse of righteousness that would sanction discriminatory practices against women.

Feminists are adamant to investigate how patterns of gender bias are propagated under the word of God to reinforce the lowly position of women. Notably, the Egyptian feminist writer Nawal El Saadawi, known for her militant struggle against religious bigotry in the Arab world, argues that "conservative interpretations of religion and cultural indoctrination in patriarchal contexts account for the female subordination to men" (El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, p.70). Correspondingly, the Christian feminist Mary. B Mahowald devoted a significant attention to the misappropriation of religion in Christian societies. For her "Christianity and other religions have exhibited a gender-based individualism through their concurrence in, and replication of, the patriarchal structure of society" (Mahowald, *Feminism, Socialism, and Christianity revisited*, p.48). Mahowald further added that religion can be dangerously transformed into a gender biased enterprise when men control the leadership positions of various institutional religions, and women become intentionally excluded from those positions. Women, as a result of this exclusion, are socialized to be passive recipients of men's faculties. They are often pressurized to comply with a repressing code of behaviour which is male-prescribed and male-maintained, but claimed to be divinely ordained. This view was endorsed by Simone de Beauvoir when arguing that in patriarchal societies, "woman must only mediate the law; she does not possess it" (De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p.106). According to some cultural assumptions, woman is a passive spectator because she is the Other, an auxiliary or deficient being incapacitated by her emotional and physical frailties to reach the masculine state of sovereignty. For De Beauvoir, the categorization of women as the second sex is a product of social stereotyping which has historically used the biological differences between the sexes to promote a polarized view of gender. Understandably, the biological destiny of woman has not only particularized her as the weaker sex, but also branded, on the other hand, man as the sovereign being.

Beauvoir's existentialist view on the predicament of women in patriarchal societies is vividly portrayed in *God Dies by The Nile* (1985) and *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), two feminist narratives written respectively by the Egyptian Nawal El Saadawi and the Nigerian Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. The Muslim and Christian women under study inevitably incarnate the essence of the Beauvoirian womanhood, as they are similarly socialized, under debilitating cultural norms, to succumb to the prescriptions of sex dualism. Echoing De Beauvoir's view, Chimamanda Ngozie Adishi claims that "the problem with gender is that it prescribes how we should be rather than recognizing how we are" (Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists*, p.34). Comprehensibly, being a woman is, an ascribed identity determined by social paradigms which come to define gender roles, regulate gender relationships, and construct gender identities. This paper explores thus what it means to be gendered Muslim and Christian woman in Egyptian and Nigerian environments plagued by social disparities and religious deficiencies. The nervous condition of Muslim and Christian womanhood and the heavy burden of cultural norms in reinforcing gender hierarchy is then this article's main focus.

Both Nawal El Saadawi and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie draw a disturbing picture about the flagrant violation of religion, maintained by corrupt religious men who fail to make a connection between what they preach and what they practice. The representatives of religion in our selected narratives are then Mayors who abuse their villagers, Imams who forcibly marry young women without their consent, priests who condone wife battery, and religious fanatics who heartlessly beat their children over unreasonable causes. Nawal El Saadawi, or Simone de Beauvoir of the Arab world as often called by western feminists, uses her writings to address these issues in a very categorical way. Her novel, *God Dies by The Nile,* resonates with her view already expressed in *The Hidden Face of Eve* that "the reasons for the low status of women in our societies, and the lack of opportunities for progress afforded to them are not due to Islam" (El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, p.41).She blames some economic and political forces, propagated by men, for making Islam an instrument of fear and oppression against women. In *God Dies by The Nile*, the village Mayor embodies these economic and political forces, as he belongs to the privileged ruling class which takes advantage of its financial positioning to exert power over poor peasants. The novel is then centred on the ordeal of Zakeya's family, inflicted by the Mayor of Kafr El Teen who uses his authority to sexually exploit her nieces, Zeinab and Nefissa. Unsurprisingly, under misogynistic reading of religion, the Mayor's sexual transgressions go incontestable and the plight of these female victims goes accordingly unheard. El Saadawi depicts poignantly the complicity of some religious men like Sheikh Hamzawi, the Imam of the village, and Sheikh Zahran, the Chief of the Guard, in exploiting Kafrawi's financial vulnerabilities and Zakeya's illness to promote the Mayor's lustful interests. Being aware that the prevailing religious and political orders stand no power to resist such godly power, Zakeya decides to take her own measures of resistance by murdering her oppressor, and thus liberate her family from the shackles of blind obedience.

Purple Hibiscus is grounded in the same religious despotism depicted in *God Dies by The Nile*. Much like Nawal El Saadawi, Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie is interested in unveiling the patriarchal distortions of cultural norms, dressed often in religious clothing, to give a sense of legitimacy to repressive acts. Adichie, is careful to exhibit a feminist spirit which recognizes the cultural peculiarity of her African context. She creates fictional households which are microcosm of a contemporary Nigeria plagued by ethnic confrontations, religious fundamentalism, and significantly haunted by burdensome postcolonial instabilities. The repressive comportment of the patriarch in traditional Nigerian homes is very often revelatory of the dictatorial governance of the ruler at a global scale. The public and private settings of *Purple Hibiscus* are obviously no exception, as it is evidenced in the way, Eugene, the household patriarch, replicates the repressive structures of the government and the religious asceticism of fundamentalists. The novel is then a statement against fanatical faith preached by Eugene, who mercilessly tortures his wife and children for what he single-mindedly thinks immoral comportments. In the voice of his daughter, Kambili, Adichie brings to light the day to day surveillance maintained against the wife and her children, and more importantly the psychological trauma that arises from such enclosure. The narrative begins with domestic violence in the Palm Sunday, but ends up ironically with subversion and rebellion against the forces of repression. The murder of Eugene by his wife is portrayed in a positive light, giving glimpses of hope for a promising future to Kambili and her brother, Jaja.

2. Sanctioning Gender Asymmetry under The Word of God in Nawal El Saadawi's God Dies By The Nile and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Purple Hibiscus

In Nawal El Saadawi's *God Dies by The Nile*, the Muslim culture under study does not only employ superstitious beliefs to subjugate its female folk, but it instrumentalizes religion to maintain the status quo. The religious men of the village of Kafr El Teen, who are "responsible for upholding the teachings of Allah, and keeping the morals and piety of the village intact" (El Saadawi, *God Dies by The Nile,* 30), are the ones who violate these morals when they cunningly use their position to marry young women against their will. The Imam of the village, Sheikh Hamzawi, sees no contradiction between preaching the Word of God in the mosque and forcibly marrying a young woman without her consent. As an Imam very knowledgeable in religious matters, he is aware of the Islamic marital jurisprudence requiring the consent of the bride in his new conjugal partnership. Even worse, the sexually impotent Sheikh seems to give a sense of spiritual validity to his act when he brainwashed Haj Ismail, the man who helped him marry Fatheya, into believing that Allah will reward him generously because he has done "a service to the man who preserves the holy mosque and defends the teachings of God in this village" (29). The corruption of the Imam can hardly be passed over in silence; given the way he tries to use advantageously his prestigious position among the villagers to attain his selfish goals. For the respected Sheikh, his position as the village Imam entitles him to marry the woman he desires, even without seeking her consent. God is also thought to be on his side to serve this selfish interest, simply because he is a man who preaches his Word by providing religious guidance to the villagers of Kafr El Teen. A significant difficulty in combatting this religious hypocrisy occurs when violence becomes mandated to maintain this male power. Haj Ismail, for instance, instructs the father, Haj Mesoud, to beat Fatheya several times because, according to him, "women are only convinced if they receive a good hiding" (31). Haj Ismail's argument follows a patriarchal logic which approaches women as subservient beings, lacking this male sagacity to deliberate over important issues like marriage. For these men, there is no need to seek the consent of Fatheya in marriage, because women, as irrational creatures controlled by their biological nature, are irremediably and irredeemably doomed to depend upon the assistance of their male guardians. The latter are then religiously permitted, according to the prevailing cultural norms, to use violence as a disciplinary measure to redirect their female subordinates towards the path of righteousness.

The transition of woman from the supremacy of the father to the supremacy of the husband will entrap her in a loveless conjugal life where she is required to comply with what Nawal El Saadawi calls the philosophy of *God Above, Husband Below (*El Saadawi, *God Above, Husband Below*, p.*90)*. Regarded as an emblem of servitude, women are called to be submissive wives because their devotedness to God is thought to be contingent upon their ability to obediently comply with their husbands' orders. Aligned with this philosophy, the polygamous husband warns Fatheya that, as a wife of Sheikh Hamzawi, she is doomed to swear the oath of bondage to her husband. Fatheya, in this sense, is not supposed to have a public existence, as she is not allowed to venture out of the domestic sphere except twice in her life. "The first time when she moves from her father's to her husband's house. And the second, when she leaves her husband's house for the grave allotted to her in the burial grounds" (30). The polarization and dichotomization of sex can hardly be underestimated in these disenfranchising instructions which behaviourally and spacially circumscribe the wife to her husband' sexist inclinations.

Fatheya is supposed according to these inclinations to comply with the dictates of the public/private doctrine which sentence her confinement in the domestic sphere of duty. In the midst of this seclusion, bonds of affection are hardly to be shown by the husband who is, according to the Moroccan feminist and sociologist Fatima Mernissi, persuaded to play "the role of master instead of lover»(Mernissi, *Beyond The Veil*, p.113). In explaining the dialectics of sex roles in traditional conjugal relationships, Mernissi further argues that all what the wife expects to get from her husband are orders, and what she is expected to give is obedience (Mernissi, *Beyond The Veil*, p110). The binary categorization of sex has affected heavily the familial and conjugal language which is more likely to be a language of confinement and containment rather than that of love and mutual respect. Going against the status quo is dreadful to contemplate for Muslim women, whose docility and passivity are not only made cardinal virtue of femininity, but also a religious imperative for the maintenance of this dutiful hierarchy. With regard to the misappropriation of religion, any rejection of these cultural norms would be seen as a tantamount to subvert what is traditionally accepted and religiously mandated. Accordingly, to say that a woman who does not accept docility as her chronic proclivity is unfeminine would be an understatement. She is rather identified under debilitating cultural norms as irreligious or fallen creature, because she has transgressed the Muslim code of righteousness; and thus, upset the teachings of Allah.

In *God Dies by The Nile*, women like Fatheya are credited social validation when they emulate the spirit of obedience and comply unquestionably with this normative code of behavior. Fatheya stands no power to transcend the dictates of the patriarchal gaze requiring her to display this wifely obedience. The narrator describes that when instructed to not step out of the domestic realm, Fatheya seems to succumb to this surveillance as she no longer "insisted on visiting her aunt, perhaps because each time he got into temper and tried to stop her from going out»(30).

The religious despotism of Sheikh Hamzawi is similarly accepted in the Christian world of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. The novel opens with Eugene acting harshly against his child, Jaja, who did not go to Communion on Palm Sunday. Eugene reads Jaja's refusal to follow the Holy Communion as a contravention of religion, and resorts to violence as a disciplinary measure. To maintain his power over his children, Kambili describes how the catholic father gives his children "scripture passage or a book by one of the early church fathers to read and meditate on" (Ngozi Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*, p.31) then imposing on them to recite sixteen different novenas later on at the dinner time. Furthermore, the protagonist adds that even in their free time, she feels persecuted by being prohibited from chess games or newspaper discussions, because such ways of entertainment stand against her father's path of righteousness. Eugene's path of righteousness is seemingly intolerant to his supposedly heathen father, Papa Nnukwu, who is forbidden to maintain closer relationships with his grandchildren. More accurately, Eugene's religious dogma pushes him to look narrowly at all traditional norms which do not comply strictly with his doctrinal convictions. Such alien norms are unsurprisingly identified under Eugene's legacy as blasphemous. Accordingly, Papa Nnukwu who still believes in superstition is obviously regarded as a heathen who deserves to live on the fringes of the community. As a heathen, Papa Nnukwu is even prevented from sharing drinks or meals with his grandchildren. According to Eugene's self-righteous legacy, eating or drinking in a heathen's house is a sinful act which needs to be severely punished. This religious absolutism can be shown clearly in the way he instructs his daughter to pray for forgiveness after eating with her grand-father, and thus desecrating, as claimed by the devoted father, her Christian tongue.

Eugene's adherence to religion is quite similar to Sheikh Hamzawi's. The corrupt comportment of the Sheikh is explicitly shown when he tries to persuade his wife, Fatheya, to

give up her surrogate son because the latter was born of sin and fornication. He even daringly blames the innocent child for all his misfortunes, arguing that "the men of the village no longer like me to lead the prayer, because their prayers might not be favorably received by God»(105). Paradoxically, men like Sheikh Hamzawi and Eugene are afraid to desecrate their Muslim prayers and Christian tongues, but they display no attention regarding their repressive conducts towards their female folk. Eugene, who convincingly identifies his father's superstitious beliefs as the gateway to Hell, is not able to see his constant torture of his wife and daughter as conductive to the same gateway.

Eugene's brand of religion is very hostile to women, whose deviant sexuality needs to be rigidly tamed in accordance with a set of clothing regulations. Such regulations identify the wearing of trousers by women as sinful, and the exposure of their hair in the church as ungodly. It's noteworthy that Eugene does not pursue any possibilities of communication which would enable him to share opinions and judgments with his daughter. Rather, by enforcing judgmental rules upon his children, he succeeded disappointedly to create an irritable household milieu devoid of fatherly empathy and dominated only by fear and anxiety. In order to maintain this authority over the children and their mother, physical assault becomes a common occurrence in Eugene's household. Adichie depicts poignantly how Eugene mercilessly beats his wife and daughter over uncontrollable matters, like breaking the Eucharistic fast and the inability to receive the priest, Father Benedict, because of menstruation pain and pregnancy tiredness, respectively. Upon her break of the sacred fasting, Kambili tries to explain to the devout father that she felt obliged to eat corn flakes before taking Panadol, an explanation that was received by a heavy leather belt landing over her back. The justifications advanced by Kambili can never be comprehended under the father's dogma which indignantly approaches her act as a sacrilege committed against a sacred Christian ritual.

This religious dogma is subsequently carried out to its extreme, when arguing to Kambili, that his violent reactions are meant to purify her soul and redirect her into the path of righteousness. It comes as no surprise that violence under Eugene's self-righteous legacy becomes religiously justified and thus, emerges as an ultimate corrective measure for Kambili's transcendence. Interestingly, domestic violence maintained against women cannot be understood outside its patriarchal social context, where pervasive power unbalances between the sexes come to regulate gender relationships. For the British sociologist Sylvia Walby, male violence against women is "part of a system of controlling women, unlike then the conventional view which holds that rape and battering are isolated instances caused by psychological problems in a few men" (Walby, *Theorizing Patriarchy, p.03*).Seen in this light, the patriarchal implications of the physical assault experienced both by Kambili and her mother, Beatrice, can hardly be disregarded. Eugene's abusive comportment is symptomatic of his failure to deal adequately with his daughter and wife as equal beings. In other words, the power unbalances embedded in the patriarchal logic that men are inherently superior to women nurture a psychology of abuse for the pious father. Given the way men and women are seen appositionally, it would be safe to argue that Eugene's offensive behavior reproduces the Hegelian dialectics of slave /master. In his household, Eugene enjoys the position of the master exerting an unquestionable authority over his subordinates who are supposed, under such dialogical logic, to display the spirit of self-effacement in regard to their paternalistic masters. When ordered to cut off all ties with her heathen grandfather, Kambili stands no power to oppose her father's verdict. A tantamount to do so will be regarded as an act of rebellion against this power hierarchy.

Even the daughter's unplanned meeting with Papa Nnukwu is seen as an act of defiance to the authority of her father. Kambili, in the midst of this faith-based torture, describes desperately her suffering: "he poured the hot water on my feet, slowly as if it were conducting an experiment and wanted to see what would happen" (194). Being circumscribed by her father's self-righteous doctrine, Kambili feels obliged to repent from her sins, confessing in a sobbing voice "I am sorry! I am sorry!"(195). But these remorseful words are seemingly more directed to the earthly god, whose judgment, according to the feminist writer Mary Daly, is metamorphosed into God judgment. In her book "*Beyond God The Father*", Daly sees that this metamorphosis symbolizes the rise of a false deity, named the Judge of sin "who confirms the rightness of the rules and roles of reigning system, maintaining false consciences and self-destructive guilt feelings" (Daly, *Beyond God The Father*, p. 31). The creation of this consciousness, regarding such repressive God projections, makes women more amenable to submission and more powerless to resist their enslavement. The fear of divine judgment, which is associated with the fear of male judgment, will repress any attempts of dissidence. Similarly, Kambili is not able to rebel against her father's verdict of crucifixion because it is thought revelatory of a divine judgment. It would be safe to assume that the male attempts to control the natural and the supernatural realms resemble a pre-reformation mediation between God and women. This means that women, generally thought to be unable to understand the language of divinity and unqualified to exert this male hermeneutical privilege, are imperatively connected to God only through male mediation.

In *God Dies by The Nile* and *Purple Hibiscus*, the Mayor of Kafr El Teen and Eugene fulfill perfectly this corrupt mediation, as they succeeded to maintain a godly power over their female subordinates. In Nawal El Saadawi's narrative, the villagers of Kafr El Teen are "God's slaves when it's time to say prayers only. But are the Mayor's slaves all the time" (53). To put it rather blatantly, the earthly god of Kafr El Teen is more feared than the Heavenly God, who is invoked only in prayers and sermons. In Chimamanda Ngozi's narrative, Eugene enjoys almost similar position in Father Benedict's sermons which, according to Kambili, refer "to the pope, Papa, and Jesus–in that order»(04). Even worse, the narrator tells us that the name of Eugene was oftentimes used to illustrate the gospel and teach moral lessons in St. Agnes Catholic Church. The symbolic hierarchy God-male-female that arises from such religious bigotry has stirred feminist responses which try to uncover the androcentric construction of this prescribed order. Notably, the American feminist Rosemary Radford Ruether describes accurately the paradigms of this power hierarchy as follows:

> "God is modeled after the patriarchal ruling class and is seen as addressing this class of males directly, adopting them as his "sons." They are his representatives, the responsible partners of the covenant with him. Women as wives now become symbolically repressed as the dependent servant class…They relate to man as he relates to God»(Guninder Kaur Singh, Nikky, *The Feminine Principle in The Sikh Vision of The Transcendent*, p.46).

It is clear that men like Eugene and the Mayor of Kafr El Teen adhere fervently to this chain of command. They act as if God delegated his power to them in order to exert authority over their female subordinates, and administrate their homes in a manner commensurate with their interests. It probably goes without saying that Eugene and the Mayor of Kafr El Teen come to daringly identify themselves as subordinate deities serving the kingdom of God.This is a flagrant violation of religious tenets exhibited by these supposedly devout men who try to project an anthropomorphized view of God which propagates only masculine interests. Since men are identified by the idolatries of sexism as anthropomorphic deities, the Divine images

inflicted on the consciousness of these subaltern women are mainly associated with repressiveness and oppressiveness. The domestic gods incarnated in Kafr El Teen and Enugu are prototypic cases of this God-male-female order, crafted by the phallic mentality to violate the egalitarian voice found in the gospel and the Quran, and bestow thus inferiority on women. This means that the differential treatment of sexes has not been decreed by God, but rather proclaimed by the context of sexism and patriarchalism. In the Quran for instance, God does not proclaim a hierarchical view regarding the status of men and women. In addressing His male and female believers simultaneously, He rather uses the term "allies»to highlight this gender justice: "the believers, men and women, are allies of one another. They enjoin the common good and forbid the bad, they observe prayers and give charitable alms and obey God and His Prophet". (*Quran*, 9: 71). The verse is a clear statement against the ascendancy of one sex over the other. Men and women should not be categorized appositionally as they are thought to be allies created to support each other. Likewise, the Gospel does not mandate any discrimination on the basis of race, sex, or other social considerations. As such, "there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus»(Galatians 3: 28). Such spirit of equality runs counter to the dialectics of power hierarchy propagated by the legacy of sexism as shown by some fanatic patriarchs in the selected novels.

Despite of the lack of textual evidence regarding the inequality of sexes in the image of God, the manipulation of scriptural interpretations continues to regulate gender relationships in Muslim and Christian societies. The patriarchalization of religious tenets features prominently in *God Dies by The Nile* where the idea of God is employed oppressively in many ways against women. The Mayor's agents use religion to enslave women like Zeinab and Nefissa under their master' sexual exploitation. The religious men of Sayeda Zeinab, for instance, deceitfully exploit Zakeya's psychological distress, diagnosed according to the prevailing beliefs as a manifestation of spirit possession, to boost the Mayor's lustful interests. For these men, Zakeya is terribly haunted by evil spirits because she has disobeyed the law of Allah, but more importantly encouraged her niece Zeinab to follow this disobedience. More accurately, Zakeya cannot understand at this point in the narrative that the Mayor is blasphemously placed by these men on an equal position with God, and any contravention of his authority would be approached as a sacrilege against the Divine. As such, Zakeya disobeyed Allah or the god of Kafr El Teen, because she kept her niece away from the Mayor's malevolent gaze.Yet according to these men, an opportunity of redemption will be possible if Zeinab obeys some divinely prescribed rules which include purifying baths, prayers of forgiveness, verses of the Koran, but more importantly confronting the iron gate leading to the Mayor's house. To redeem her aunt from the evil spirits constantly haunting her, Zeinab has to sacrifice herself to the Mayor's assaults, and endure passively the consequential psychological trauma. For fear of offending once again the vengeful god, Zeinab accepts to blindly undergo the redeeming measures decreed by the men of Sayeda Zeinab, without suspecting the Mayor's exploitative plants. Obviously, the Mayor can never be suspected for his insidious plans, simply because he enjoys a divine sovereignty which entitles him to be fearfully obeyed by the villagers of Kafr El Teen.

Zeinab' submission to this false consciousness illustrates Fedwa Malti Douglas's definition of the religiously corrupted society as: "a male –oriented world in which women are pushed into the role of non-thinking servants" (Douglas, *Nawal El Saadwi and Arab Feminist Poetics*, p.101). Zeinab is an unthinking servant because she succumbs under such idolatrous thinking, which corruptly elects tyrant patriarchs like the village Mayor as domestic gods, having the incontestable right to subject the peasants to their authority.

Likewise, at the beginning of the novel, Beatrice seems to resonate with Douglas' definition, when clinging to a marital existence where physical assaults become the order of the day. Instead of rebelling against this spousal violence which has resulted in several miscarriages, Beatrice is paradoxically grateful to her husband for not taking another wife, because according to her, "a man of his stature cannot have two children" (75). For her, Eugene's class privilege entitles him to have many children, preferably male offspring who can subsequently uphold his doctrinal and political agendas.Yet,Beatrice is unable to understand that it is Eugene who must be blamed for this inability to bear more children, as he is the only one responsible for the miscarriages she underwent. Also, Beatrice is unable to understand that a man of his stature cannot mercilessly beat his pregnant wife, simply because she refused a priest's visit after mass, then foolishly pours holy water to cleanse his house from her presumably sinful act. Hence, Beatrice illustrates De Beauvior's view that "woman makes no claim for herself as a subject because she lacks the concrete means, because she senses the necessary link connecting her to man without positing its reciprocity, and because she often derives satisfaction from her role as the other."(De Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, p.30). Unsurprisingly, when woman is never defined in relation to herself but rather in regard to man, the game of gender role will be unquestionably accepted.Correspondingly, Beatrice derives satisfaction from her role as submissive wife because she feels annexed to her husband, and thus unable to develop a sense of being beyond this marital bondage.

Caught in a vicious cycle of gender polarization, women like Beatrice, Zeinab, and Zakeya are forced to suffer in silence and choose surrender as a strategy of survival, because rebellion is thought to be a violation to the Muslim and Christian feminine codes of decency. The conversation held between Eugene's sister, Aunt Ifeoma,and Beatrice illustrates to what extent women are indoctrinated to passively accept the lesson of submission imposed upon them. When asked to rescue her body from marital abuse, Beatrice declined categorically any possibility of rebellion that would mean, according to the prevailing social assumptions, the dissolution of the sacred family bonds. The virtuous Christian wife is supposed to preserve the sacredness of these conjugal bonds, even if it entails subjecting her to deprivation and humiliation. Mary Daly convincingly argues when addressing the issue of women subordination that the "the goodness attributed to the few is not the goodness of self - actualizing person but of an impotent creature, lacking in knowledge and experience" (Daly, *Beyond God The Father*, p. 62). Docility of behavior, meekness of character, and sensitivity of emotions are all normative ideals which women are expected to dispense. Wifely submission is regarded as the pinnacle of femininity and the maintenance of familial bonds is keyed only into the mother's propensity for self-abnegation. Seen from this perspective, it becomes clear that under the Muslim and Christian cult of womanhood, the idealization of virtues, like passivity and docility, becomes synonymous with the idealization of pain and suffering. Intoxicated by the flowery language of such exalted femininity, women become further disarmed to confront the existentially abrasive structure implemented against them. The presence of this fetishized model of femininity in a sacred light exacerbates the oppression of women like Zakeya, Zeinab, Beatrice and Kambili and render them powerless to daringly confront their oppressors.

Given the way women are handicapped by the dictates of gender bias, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question about the 'speakability' of the subaltern would be relevant in this context. For Spivak, the subaltern stands always in an ambivalent positioning in relation to power, and is thus denied the opportunity to have a voice within this power hierarchy. Yet, Nawal El Saadawi is hopeful about the possibility of emancipatory routes that can be envisaged only if the female 'Other' grows conscious of her subalternity. For El Saadawi, "to be conscious that you are a slave still living under oppression is the first step on the road of

emancipation" (El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve,* p. xv). This view is in line with Mary Daly's that "the beginning of breakthrough means a realization that there is an existential conflict between the self and structures that have given such crippling security" (Daly, *Beyond God the Father,* p.24). Positioning the female self as an integral part in this gender dialogical tension means that women cease to act as selfless beings or pitiful victims, and start to fight vigorously for their emancipation. This emancipation would involve acts of dissidence that inevitably engender a direct confrontation between the victimized and his victimizer, between the salve and the master, but more importantly between those former unthinking female servants and the fallacious gods.

3. Dethroning Inadequate Gods and Female Self-Transcendence

The increasing distortions exhibited by the unscrupulous patriarchs of Kafr El Teen have sustained reactionary acts of dissidence by women like Zakeya and Fatheya, who at a critical moment in the narrative, decide to rebel against male despotism. When the villagers of Kafr El Teen react against the illegitimate son brought up in Sheikh Hamzaoui's household, Fatheya stands steadfastly against the claims calling for his abandonment, and even goes to protect him against their assaults. Sheikh Hamzaoui, on the other hand, remains passive in regard to these aggressions for fear that the Mayor will chase him out of the mosque,in case he decides to still shelter the illegitimate son with Fatheya. The latter decides to defy her oppressors alone, but armed with a newly emerging and sprouting militant spirit. The narrator describes her fierce determination as follows:

> During the struggle for the child, Fatheya's clothes were torn away….her eyes were filled with strange insane determination. She was soft, and rounded, and female and she was a wild animal, ferociously fighting those who surrounded her in the night. She hit out at the men with her legs, and her feet, with her shoulders and her hips all the while holding the child tightly in her arms.»(115)

Surprisingly, Fatheya, the obedient and submissive wife, who never dares to question the dictates of her husband, is transformed into an assertive subject claiming authority over her own life. Fatheya's subversive act is grounded in her deep conviction that Allah cares for the poor people who worship him, and accordingly; He will bestow his mercy on her and her husband when the Mayor expels him from the mosque. Understandably, Fatheya's breakthrough is manifested in the way she rebels against the godly power exerted over the peasants of Kafr El Teen. In light of Mary Daly's feminist insights, Fatheya dethroned the false deity or the demon dressed as God. According to Daly, "the basic idol breaking will be done on the level of internalized images of male superiority, on the plane of exorcising them from consciousness and from the cultural institutions that breed them.»(Daly, *Beyond God The Father*, p.29). The process, then, includes destroying the malignant God projections, like the Judge of sinners, which have long dominated female consciousness and defined repressively the male- female relationship.

Similarly, Zakeya dethrones the fallacious god repressing her, by revengefully exterminating him, and thus putting an end to his malevolent gaze constantly roaming over her nieces' bodies. Her dissident act comes as an ultimate reaction to Zeinab's revelations which uncover the Mayor's corrupt intentions towards her and her family. More importantly, uncovering the corrupt plans of the Mayor is synonymous, for Zakeya, to unveiling the fearful truth about the god of Kafr El Teen. Zakeya, at this point in the narrative, becomes able to understand that it is Zeinab's refusal to play the role of sexual partner which sustained the Mayor's revenge against her son. It is also the same refusal which led previously the religious men of Sayeda Zeinab to maliciously relate her sufferings with her niece's disobedience of God. Zakeya failed previously to understand that the god referred by these religious men is

that of Kafr el Teen, and going against his authority will involve the unjust imprisonment of her son and brother. But now Zakeya comes to realize that when the god of Kafr El Teen sets his malevolent gaze upon a woman's body, a whole system must obediently respond: the law of justice can be broken, the word of God can be violated, and the privacy of the individual can be invaded. Zakeya is seemingly no more satisfied with the god who sanctions such injustices to selfishly gratify his lustful interests, and assert his authority over his village peasants. She knows that injustice permeates all domains and any possibility of resistance must be sought individually beyond any collective struggle. Her authoritarian words after murdering the Mayor reveal this epiphanic moment: "I was blind, but now my eyes have been opened…I know who it is. I know it's Allah…I buried him there on the bank of the Nile."(138). By using the word Allah, Zakeya speaks in the same patriarchal language that has been employed to enslave her and her family under the Mayor's exploitation. Now, she understands that the fear of being severely punished by this fallacious god has paralyzed and entrapped her in a vicious cycle of exploitations. Unsurprisingly, the poor peasant is not afraid of any punitive measures because murdering her oppressor enabled her to free herself at last from patterns of containment and confinement. The novel ends paradoxically with the murderess Zakeya enjoying her newly acquired freedom in the prison cell, with no indication of the villagers' reaction to their Mayor's sudden death. This may be suggestive of a new period free from religious surveillance and class exploitation for the peasants of Kafr El Teen.

The subversive act of dethroning false deities is similarly highlighted in Chimamanda Ngozie's narrative. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Beatrice can no long endure the incessant maltreatment of Eugene who once again beats her during her pregnancy, an act which led inevitably to another miscarriage. Humiliated by her husband's mistreatment, Beatrice decides to lead Eugene silently to his demise in the same way she has been forced to suffer in silence. To rescue herself from her marital abuse, Beatrice resorts to kill her husband gradually by starting to pour poison each night in his cup of tea. Her resolution stems from her conviction that in a world where tyranny is sanctioned by religion, negotiating routes of empowerment against the directives of a man, whose name is evoked parallelly with the pope and Jesus Christ, is something quite impossible. Beatrice is aware of the masculine tendencies of the church, being represented by Father Benedict, who never intervened to rescue her body and soul from the physical and psychological humiliations she was forced to undergo. For Father Benedict, Eugene is the epitome of perfection and going against his religious regime is seen as a contravention of religion itself.

To live sacrificially and martyrizing her soul and body to Eugene's religious obscurantism becomes something no longer endurable for Beatrice. Disrupting the supremacy of the vengeful god, as the only emancipatory measure left for her, becomes in this case something imperative. It is noteworthy that the silent act of murder committed against Eugene did sustain neither remorse nor sadness for Beatrice. Furthermore, the widow mother goes against the mourning rituals requiring her to wear all black or all white, and attend the first and second year memorial Masses. Kambili explains poignantly that "the compound gates were locked. Mama had told Amado not to open the gates to all people who wanted to throng in for Mgabalu, to commiserate with us"(288). For Beatrice, it is unreasonable to mourn the death of a tyrannical husband who turned her body into a spectacle of abuse and bloodshed. There is no need even to feign sadness or any sort of affections, because the murder at last has freed her from all the assaults she underwent throughout her union with Eugene.

Like Frantz Fanon's colonized subjects, women like Beatrice and Zakeya find in violence their inevitable means of emancipation from the male bondage which has long disenfranchised them. Under the Fanonian theory, violence against injustice becomes a revolutionary act which does not only eradicate the authority of the oppressor, but it also destroys the alienation of the oppressed. Correspondingly, it would be safe to argue that by using violence in dislodging the Mayor and Eugene from their supreme positions, Zakeya and Beatrice succeeded to destroy the colonizer /colonized bond imposed on them. Their rebellion, in this regard, against the patriarchal social order highlights their metamorphosis from submissive figures to subversive agents.

4. Conclusion

The article has examined how the instrumentalization of religion via repressive God projections can be an efficient tool to promote masculine legacies and keep women in their lowly position. Echoing Mary Daly's view, the patriarchal and anthropomorphic caricatures of God can dangerously lead to the projection of invincible and tyrannical male figures that use the Word of the Divine to maintain this status quo.

Notwithstanding, the socio-cultural differences that may exist between the Muslim world of Nawal El Saadawi and the Christian world of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the article has shown that the misappropriation of religion is a common predicament for Eve's daughters and not exclusively relegated to Muslim women.

El Saadawi and Adichie are adamant to unveil the injustices that can arise from this misappropriation: a man of power like the Mayor of Kafr El Teen is allowed to have many sexual partners. His act is never seen by the religious men of Sayda Zeinab as immoral, but the son born of his illegal sexual adventures is considered as a social curse. Correspondingly, Kambili and Beatrice are required to succumb to the whims of this religious absolutism by passively surrendering to Eugene's faith- based retaliation. While the devout husband is free to pursue his self-righteous policies, the wife and her daughter are encouraged to bear the wounds of crucifixion and always comply with the verdict of the patriarchal order. It is against the auspices of this brimstone and fire religion that Beatrice and Zakeya decide to fight and thus reclaim their bodies and souls from this dutiful bondage. For them, it is no longer bearable to martyrize themselves on the altar of self-defeating asceticism which mainly serves phallocentric dictates. Their dissident acts show how the patriarchal cross of martyrdom, promoted by the model of the vengeful God, can dangerously engender the resurrection of vengeful female agents who see in violence their ultimate route for survival. Seeing violence as such would mirror the failure of the religious and judicial systems in protecting women like Beatrice and Zakeya from male sexual and physical assaults. In fact Zakeya and Beatrice cannot funnel their self-empowerment via any justice channel because according to Nawal El Saadawi in punitive terms "moral codes and standards in our societies very rarely apply to all people equally»(El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, p.27). Moral codes cannot be applied equally because the discourse of good and evil is gendered according to the dictates of the patriarchal order. By holding power over religion, which would normally extinguish the fire of women's immolation, the Mayor of Kafr El Teen and Eugene managed to keep their controlling gaze over Beatrice, Zakeya and Zeinab.

Redeeming religion from misogynistic distortions and castrating the repressive God images have been the concern of many Christian and Muslim feminists in recent years.For these activists, since women are oppressed under the name of the Divine, the struggle for gender equality should be grounded systematically in religious paradigms. Locating their militancy within a religious framework allows them to argue convincingly that the differential treatment of sexes was mandated neither by Islam nor by Christianity. Rather, it was framed

by cultural conditioning and the circumstantial development of hermeneutical and interpretive reasoning. The aim of this feminist activism, generally labeled as Christian and Islamic feminisms, is to rediscover then the egalitarian spirit of both Islam and Christianity, which in return would bring forth new understanding of the woman question within ethical discourse. Particularly, the Egyptian feminist writer Leila Ahmed argues that the Quran "makes a clear statement about the absolute identity of the human moral condition, and the common and identical spiritual and moral obligations placed on allindividuals regardless of sex»(Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p.65). In the same vein, Rosemary Radford, claims that "whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine or an authentic relation to the divine, or to reflect the authentic nature of things" (Radford, *Feminist Interpretation: A Method of Correlation*.p.90). Seeing Islam and Christianity from this egalitarian language can stifle the patriarchal energy seeking to repress women under debilitating cultural prohibitions, and contribute significantly in empowering them in their struggle for gender justice. De-gendering God talks and de -anthropomorphizing God images via a gender neutral language would redeem religion from patriarchal claims and rescue women like Beatrice, Zakeya, and Zeinab from sexual and physical transgressions. This means that the instrument used for enclosure can subversively turn out to be one of disclosure by reclaiming the Word of God as a source of enfranchisement for women.

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