

THE IMPACT OF FAMILY ENVIRONMENT AND RELIGION IN *PURPLE  
HIBISCUS AND BELOVED*

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## ABSTRACT

### THE IMPACT OF FAMILY ENVIRONMENT AND RELIGION IN *PURPLE HIBISCUS* AND *BELOVED*

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This study explores the repercussions of slavery-induced dehumanization and trauma depicted in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and explores Kambili's stifling home life characterized by her father's rigid Catholicism in *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Morrison's *Beloved* emphasizes the importance of personal engagement with the history of slavery so as to fully comprehend its horrors and overcome them. In *Purple Hibiscus*, the paper investigates the role religion plays in causing trauma, as Eugene's strict adherence to Catholicism and dismissal of traditional rituals inflict both physical and psychological pain on his family. The complex and multifaceted depiction of religion in these novels exposes them as powerful, yet often contradictory, forces in the characters' lives.

This thesis delves into the influence of family environment and religion on character development, focusing on the traumatic effects of domestic abuse and slavery in *Purple Hibiscus* and *Beloved*. Morrison and Adichie demonstrate how religion can be both traumatic and healing for their characters, and how the family context shapes an individual's religious beliefs and actions. By examining Kambili's and Sethe's experiences, this study analyzes their struggle to overcome past trauma and the significant role of religion in their journeys towards healing and finding purpose in their lives.

**Keywords:** trauma, religion, slavery, domestic violence, family environment, healing.

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## INTRODUCTION

The family environment is a very important place in human development, and it is also the place where religious beliefs are typically nurtured. Family also affects the development of psychological and spiritual life and a child's development in thinking. The family environment also changes over one's life course to take care of us when we are in need, and when we require caregiving at different points in the course of life. What constitutes a family and the environment of the family changes over time – children who need care can sometimes turn into caregivers later in life.

Through Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), we can explore the impact of cultural differences in family environments and their relationship with religion, as each novel is set in a distinct cultural context – Nigeria and the United States, respectively. By examining these two works, we can better understand how culture shapes the family environment and religious experiences and how this, in turn, influences the development of the characters in the novels. In both *Purple Hibiscus* and *Beloved*, violence occurs in and around the family environment. It also links to both authors' concern with religion and its capacity to deform the family. We will delve into the abstract ideas underpinning these concepts and investigate religion's multifaceted role in human experiences of suffering and healing and the role that cultural differences play in shaping these experiences. The goal is to unpack how religion can cause and heal trauma, how it can flourish despite or even because of the presence of trauma, and how the cultural contexts of Nigeria and the United States shape these dynamics in *Purple Hibiscus* and *Beloved*.

Religion has long been an influential and intricate force throughout human history, shaping societies and individual lives in countless ways. It has provided guidance and solace to many during times of adversity, offering a sense of purpose and meaning. However, religion's relationship with trauma and abuse is complex, as it can be manipulated to justify violence and oppression, thus perpetuating suffering and pain. One significant factor in the complex relationship between religion and trauma is the diverse nature of religious beliefs and practices. Within any religious tradition, multiple interpretations and approaches can result in varying impacts on individuals and communities. Christianity, a particularly influential and widely practiced religion, exemplifies this inherent paradox. It is rooted in the traumatic narrative of Jesus Christ's Passion, Death, and Resurrection, which involves intense suffering, sacrifice, and ultimate triumph over death. Each narrative's emotional and spiritual impact evokes many emotions and interpretations, highlighting the complex relationships among religion, trauma, and healing. Throughout their novels, both Adichie and Morrison show how the characters perceive religion in their family environment, and how they accept differences and support individuals as they change and grow emotionally, helping them move into the future. I believe that religion can influence a person's mentality through family environment, even though religion can be experienced differently in each family or person.

In *Purple Hibiscus*, Kambili explores how Christianity can be exploited and abused by the male gender, with devastating control within the family environment. The whole action of the novel is placed in Eugene's house, a successful businessman. In Eugene's view of Christian life, patriarchy dominates while his wife and children simply

exist as subjects for control. As we will see, Kambili's father uses violence to force his family members, and he even pours hot water over Kambili's feet to clean away her sins because she stays under the same roof with her "pagan" grandfather, Papa-Nnukwu. Through the novel, the reader can understand why Adichie believes that religion includes both beneficial and unfavorable sides. Therefore, she wants the reader to recognize his or her own views and accept others' differences as well as their religion. Morrison's approach to religion is different from Adichie's, in the way that she brings religion into *Beloved*. Morrison weaves Christian styles and supernatural elements with descriptions of slavery, sexual abuse, physical bondage, and psychological horror. Morrison points out the different strategies that blacks have devised to handle the horrors of captivity, and the novel makes the reader feel it contains more healing for the characters and its readers. By exploring the impact of family environment and religion in *Purple Hibiscus* and *Beloved*, readers will also gain insight into the role of cultural and historical contexts in shaping religious beliefs and practices. This understanding is essential as it allows them to appreciate the diversity and complexity of religious experiences across different cultural and historical contexts. Through this lens, readers can develop a more nuanced and empathetic understanding of the experiences and beliefs of others, fostering greater tolerance and respect for diverse religious traditions and practices.

In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison reflects on former slaves' past – the past that all former slaves try to forget. Morrison describes Sethe, a former slave but a strong woman who lives under a social system and a tyrannical culture which does not allow her to be nurtured, or to nurture others. Sethe has experienced the terror of slavery, and she believes that the next world – life after death – will be a safer place than the world she



has to endure now. But Morrison's *Beloved* is really a story of communal and personal healing and restoration, even though the novel combines facts and fictions. Morrison paints a picture of Baby Suggs who preaches to the black community that is affected by Sethe's past action. *Beloved* explores the benevolence and power in Baby Suggs because she, herself, has gone through much suffering under slavery. When Sethe arrives at 124 Bluestone Road, Cincinnati, Ohio, injured and in pain, Baby Suggs tenderly helps her to heal her body. She takes care of Sethe and her baby Denver and always keeps a positive spirit in her home and in the black community. Sethe has murdered her child, and so, according to Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos, she "carries Beloved on her conscience and in her heart. For the mother, the dead child is maternity *in potentia*, the mother truncated" (54). Baby Suggs encourages Sethe to put down her past and move on to a new life because Sethe always "sees memory as space filled with sorrow or gaps" (Hock Soon Ng 231). The novel highlights Sethe's connection to slavery that turns people into commodities leading to psychological and spiritual trauma. As Terry Otten says:

The horrific love in Morrison's novels is multifaceted – psychological, social and historical. It is for the most part the manifestation of a culture corrupted in its racial past and in its present. It is the creation of forces so brutal that they can transform conventional "signifiers" of cruelty and evil into gestures of extraordinary love – incestuous rape, infanticide, and murder articulate not the immorality condemned by the dominant culture, but the inverse. They become acts "signifyin(g)" a profound if often convoluted love. (652)

Morrison is showing that black people and white people are the same because they are human beings, but she also sees that the black culture has lost what white people took away during slavery. *Beloved* thus dramatizes the living history of slavery.

In *Beloved*, Morrison chooses Baby Suggs to restore the spiritual lives of the ex-slaves. Baby Suggs opens her own heart to help Sethe and the black community to heal

their past and to love themselves, and to help them to seek reconciliation with their memories. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Eugene believes that he is a devout Christian, but his actions throughout the novel are totally opposite to Catholic teachings. With her father's abuse, Kambili limits herself in opening to the outside world, and she continues to cocoon herself in her father's violence as a way to redeem herself from Hell. Only when Kambili comes into Aunty Ifeoma's family environment does she take the first step in changing her way of thinking about religious life. Both Kambili and Sethe, as they grapple with their past traumas, eventually break free from the constraints of their pasts and choose their paths, guided by their experiences and newfound understanding of their faith. This theme of agency and self-determination underscores the importance of fostering environments that allow individuals the freedom to explore and define their spiritual beliefs and practices rather than imposing rigid and dogmatic interpretations.

Both novels highlight how cultural traditions and historical events intersect with religion, influencing the characters' experiences and interpretations of their faith. In *Purple Hibiscus*, the influence of Igbo culture and colonial history shapes the religious landscape and contributes to the tension between traditional beliefs and Catholicism. In *Beloved*, the legacy of slavery and the struggle for freedom and self-determination inform the characters' spiritual journeys, revealing the resilience and adaptability of religious beliefs in the face of unimaginable hardship. Adichie and Morrison encourage readers to consider the broader implications of religious beliefs and practices for the individuals and communities they impact. This allows the reader to reflect on the potential for religion to guide individuals towards values and behaviors that can be either beneficial or harmful, depending on how it is interpreted and practiced.

In this thesis, I argue the family environment and religion on the development of the characters, specifically through the traumatic effects of domestic abuse and slavery in *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. The authors showcase how religion can serve as a source of trauma and healing for the characters, and how the family environment can shape a person's religious beliefs and actions. By focusing on the characters of Kambili and Sethe, this thesis will analyze how they struggle to overcome the trauma of their pasts and how religion is an important role in their journeys toward healing and finding meaning in their lives.

## CHAPTER I

### TRAUMA IN *PURPLE HIBISCUS* AND *BELOVED*

“Fear. I was familiar with fear, yet each time I felt it, it was never the same as the other times, as though it came in different flavors and colors” (Adichie 196). I believe this quotation has significant relevance to this chapter. This quote shows how each character in *Beloved* and in *Purple Hibiscus* feels fear in the past and present time. We have all experienced what we believe to be dread at some point in our lives, but we can never truly comprehend another person’s terror. In *Purple Hibiscus*, I will discuss both physical and psychological restrictions that Kambili, her mother, and her brother suffer, beginning with the physical abuse by Eugene whenever his children do something wrong or do not respond according to his expectations. This broken family relationship makes Kambili choose silence to find security from her father’s violence. Through the character of Eugene, Adichie provides the reader with an understanding of how one can deploy violence in the name of piety and its idealization. In *Beloved*, Morrison presents a representation of trauma conflict related to the daughter-mother relationship and condemns the slavery system. Trauma directly causes Sethe’s decision to kill her children after she realizes that schoolteacher has come for them. Is death kinder than slavery for them in this situation? Sethe’s maternal duty and hatred of slavery cause her to kill her daughter but her act of motherly love causes Sethe to be “traumatized into silence” (Story 25). Through this chapter, I want to engage the reader into the deep details of dehumanization and resulting trauma that slavery produces through *Beloved*, and how Kambili, in *Purple Hibiscus*, exposes the suffocation in her home, which is exemplified

by her father's strict schedules, violence, and strict Catholic rules, which cause her to keep silent throughout her childhood.

### **The Traumatic Effect in Domestic Abuse**

In *Purple Hibiscus*, Eugene appears to be a holy and respected man. People know him because of his generosity to the Church and to people in need, his fighting for freedom of speech, and his opposition to politicians' corruption and abuse of power. According to Brenda Cooper, Eugene "is a pillar of the community" (1). At home, Eugene is a violent husband and father because he believes that he is the one who is responsible for his family in many ways. Eugene is so wrong when he presents himself as a very holy, kind, and generous person to others, while in his home he is a violent father who causes Kambili's constant fear of him. Today, Eugene still can be seen as embodying violence for many families in the world, and many children still endure domestic abuse.

It is interesting that the novel begins with Palm Sunday in preparation for Holy Week. Lent is a time for every Christian to reflect on Jesus' life, suffering, death, and resurrection. Jesus' resurrection brings a new life to humanity. Perhaps Adichie is giving the reader a signal that a new life will happen in Eugene's family in the future. In Christian tradition, Palm Sunday is the beginning of Holy Week, commemorating Jesus Christ's entry into Jerusalem, His crucifixion, and His resurrection. It is a time of reflection and sacrifice, as Christians remember Jesus' suffering and death, but also look forward to the promise of new life and hope through His resurrection. Similarly, in *Purple Hibiscus*, the use of Palm Sunday at the beginning can be seen as a foreshadowing of the suffering that Kambili and her family will endure before they can experience a new

life and hope. By using Palm Sunday at the beginning, Adichie may be suggesting that just as Jesus' suffering and death ultimately led to His resurrection and a new life, the struggles and pain of Kambili's family may lead to a similar transformation and a new beginning.

*Purple Hibiscus* portrays the family's struggles with domestic violence, abuse, and rigid religious practices, but it also shows their journey toward independence, self-discovery, and freedom. During the Ash Wednesday service, Kambili observes her Papa as he places ashes on the church members' foreheads. She says that Papa's line moves more slowly than the others. He presses firmly on each forehead to form "a perfect cross with his ash-covered thumb" and pronounces each word of "dust and unto dust you shall return" (Adichie 3). However, the image of Mama Beatrice holding the palms signals her coming joy of victory over Eugene. The ashes that Eugene holds on Ash Wednesday foreshadow his death: he will become ashes by being poisoned by his wife, Beatrice. At the church, Eugene – who helps distribute ashes – will become ashes. This is also a foreshadowing, since Beatrice is waiting for the right time to turn Eugene into ashes, and she will kill him at the end of the novel.

The idea of passion and resurrection is present in *Purple Hibiscus*, and the use of Ash Wednesday and Palm Sunday can be seen as symbols of the passion and resurrection. Kambili sees her father as godlike, and his actions during the Ash Wednesday service highlight his control over his family and the church community. However, the use of ashes on this day also serves as a reminder of mortality and the inevitability of death, which are emphasized by the phrase: "You are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen 3:19). Eugene's obsession with perfection and control is a form of

spiritual death, as he has lost sight of the love and compassion that should be at the heart of his faith. His eventual death at the hands of his wife appears as a form of resurrection because it allows Kambili and her family to break free from his control and start a new life.

Likewise, at the beginning of the novel, Adichie also portrays Jaja as a rebellious character who questions his father's authority and beliefs. Jaja's actions and behaviors can be seen as a symbol of passion and resurrection as he goes through a process of death and rebirth to find his own identity and freedom. In fact, Jaja always wants to protect his mother, his sister, and his unborn brother. At the end of the novel, his eventual imprisonment for the murder of his father can be seen as a form of death because he is stripped of his freedom. While Jaja's act of intercession may not be on the same level as Jesus' act of dying to save humanity, it can still be seen as a form of selfless love and sacrifice – an innocent person who suffers for the actions of others. Jaja's love for his mother and his desire to protect her is a powerful example of the kind of love and compassion that Christians are called to show towards others: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). This declaration emphasizes the concept of self-sacrifice and the idea that the greatest act of love is to put oneself in harm's way to protect or help others. Jaja does it for his mother and Kambili at the end.

Coming back to the main idea of domestic abuse, Adichie uses symbolism to show how Kambili is affected by her father's actions. The sip of tea burning Kambili's tongue shows how Eugene hurts her. This is important at this moment to help the reader understand how badly Kambili is treated by her father. The more she believes that her

father loves her, the more violence he gives her, even when he shares “love sips,” his daily drinking of tea with her. She is happy to accept this drink because it represents her father’s love. The sip of tea also shows how blind Kambili is to abuse, which no longer bothers her: “A love sip, ... [Papa] called it, because you shared the little things you loved with the people you loved .... The tea was always too hot, always burned my tongue .... But it didn’t matter, because I knew that when the tea burned my tongue, it burned Papa’s love into me” (Adichie 8). The love sip assures Kambili that her father loves her. She adores him and considers it a privilege to share something with him, even though it is hurtful. Ironically it is the tea which Beatrice uses to poison Eugene: the tea that he always shares with his children finally kills him. Although Kambili’s tongue burns, she represses the pain because she wants to enjoy membership in the family. Adélékè Adéèkó also argues how Kambili accepts her father’s violent love: “The good life commemorated at the family’s sacramental consumption, it is assumed, should more than compensate for the violence that surrounds it” (26). Eugene plants in Kambili’s mind that he does not express love for his family through words, but through his actions. Therefore, Kambili always believes that her father has done everything right for her family and herself.

Adichie portrays Eugene as both noble and horrible as he explores the duality of human nature. The novel highlights the idea that people are often complex and multifaceted and can possess both admirable and despicable qualities simultaneously. In his public persona, Eugene is a successful businessman and philanthropist who is committed to social progress – a man who is admirable and worthy of respect. He is viewed as a role model and leader in his community, and his accomplishments are a



source of pride for his family. However, his private behavior towards his family is despicable and abusive. He uses his religion as an excuse to control and dominate his children, and his violence toward them is a form of emotional and psychological abuse. His actions towards his family show that he is willing to use his power and authority to control and dominate those around him, even those he claims to love. While Eugene's behavior towards his family is unacceptable, his daughter Kambili still loves and respects him. Kambili's acceptance of it shows how blind she is to his abuse because she wants to continue to bond with her father and continue to gain his love.

Eugene's violence and control limit Kambili's ability to think and speak. She further becomes blind to her father's actions because, in her mind, she only wants to bond with her father. It seems that this is her only purpose in life. According to Daria Tunca, Kambili's initial reverence for Eugene is boundless, despite the brutal treatment he subsequently inflicts on his family. Constantly seeking her father's approval, the adolescent places great value on being a source of pride for him (123). The relationship Kambili has with her father keeps her from being who she is and who she wants to be. Eugene makes Kambili believe that he is a person who acts on behalf of the white God. Corinne Sandwith says that in Kambili's mind, "all the images of Christ have white hair and 'wide white hands' ... and in which even God has a British accent" (99). Eugene reflects himself as the judge who will judge and punish on behalf of God. Cooper also states that Eugene "is a sycophantic anglophile, slavishly mimicking white ways and narrow Church doctrine" (2). Therefore, Eugene beats his family members to force them to become perfect people before God whose souls will be redeemed in the afterlife. Cooper continues to discuss why Kambili lives in violence and fear of her father because

of her “inability to cope emotionally with the mixed feelings of love and terror for her father” (3). This also shows Kambili’s inability to direct whatever happens to her in the future if she does not step out of her father’s world.

Eugene’s tyrannical abuse of his family traumatizes Kambili. She fears him and never dares to speak with him. Sometimes, Kambili has things to say and wants to speak, but no words come out because she is afraid of her father. She never dares to ask him to give her what she wants or even what she likes to eat. Kambili’s silence shows the presence of Eugene in the house. Silence leaves her with no voice except her father’s voice. Nwokocha describes the walls with coiled electric wires surround the family home, and a stifling silence pervades the atmosphere. The family members tread carefully on the stairs, their steps as quiet and calculated as on Sundays, patiently waiting for the father to finish his nap before they can eat. This silence establishes an imbalanced hierarchy with Eugene, the head of the household, at the top, and his family relying solely on his approval for everything, even something as essential as eating. Kambili experiences the traumatic impact of this silence, which causes her to communicate using only her eyes, stutter when attempting to speak, and steer clear of mentioning the strain within the household to evade her father’s fury and punishment (369-70). Kambili fails to interpret her father’s actions as abusive, and she adjusts herself to patriarchal society. For her, silence is as a weapon to protect herself from Papa’s abuse. The use of silence also is a metaphor for the larger social and political context in which the novel is set. Adichie explores the theme of colonialism and its impact on Nigerian society.

Eugene’s strict adherence to Catholic doctrine creates a rigid hierarchy in which he holds absolute power over his family. Similarly, British imperialism also relies on a

hierarchical structure that subjected colonized peoples to British control. Both Eugene and British imperialists use religion as a tool to justify their actions and maintain their power. Eugene's version of Catholicism justifies his abuse and control of his family, while British imperialism often used religion to justify its control over colonized peoples. Eugene's oppressive silence in his household is a tool he uses to control and dominate his family, just as British imperialism relied on suppressing dissent and imposing silence to maintain its control. Therefore, Adichie uses the relationship between religion and power to highlight how systems of oppression operate on multiple levels in society, and the importance of challenging these systems to create a more just and equitable world.

The way that Eugene teaches Kambili to live causes her to suffer low self-esteem. This situation explains her social behavior at school as well as her interaction with other characters outside of the home. According to Heather Hewett, "Kambili suffers because she cannot articulate herself – her father's patriarchal rule has subsumed her individual identity almost entirely, and his abuse rends her from her own ability to speak" (85). Because of their limited living environment, Kambili and Jaja can only talk to each other by their eyes, which they call "speaking with our spirits" (Adiche 17). Through Eugene's physical and psychological maltreatment, Kambili's and Jaja's sense of identity suffers: they do not have any chance for self-development. They feel that their house is a large prison cell that echoes the silences of suppressed voices and expressions in their minds, where they never feel the dialogue of familial space. I believe that this is still happening in the real world today. When young children are isolated from society and harm from emotional and psychological abuse, they choose other ways to communicate with the

world, or even never speak again. Adichie has brought a very real world into the story, reflecting how important the family environment is for young children.

### **Slavery's Traumatic Impact**

In *Beloved*, Morrison exposes the past of African American slavery – a horrible system that are not allowed slave mothers to raise their own children. Under slavery, slave mothers do not have the right to make life choices for themselves or their children. But maternal love forces mothers to make decisions that they should not make, as Sethe has to do. Through *Beloved*, Morrison wants to express the power of motherly love and how dangerous that love is when mixed with despair. Sethe behaves like a schoolteacher (or a master) and decides on life or death for her children. Beloved's death is a result of Sethe's protection. Many questions can be raised by the complexity of a maternity love, such as why a mother says that she loves her child but then can kill her child. Every day, we can make decisions that are either right or wrong. So, Sethe's choice to kill her child can be understood because she does not want her child to be trapped in the life of slavery.

Throughout the novel, the “rememory” is constant for Sethe rather than looking forward to a more opportunistic future (Morrison 43). Caroline Rody says, “‘Rememory’ transforms memory into a property of consciousness with the heightened imaginative power sufficient to the ethnic historical novel’s claim to represent the past” (102). Andrew Hock Soon Ng also explains his idea of Sethe's struggle to live in the present time: “Sethe cannot rest in her unclaimed experience because the house itself is constantly compelling her to confront her past” (236). According to Ralph D. Story, “Slaves could not love fully because the object of their love might be sold, brutalized, or murdered tomorrow” (26). After Sethe kills her daughter, she “sits in a bloodied shed,

holding her dead child to her breast” (Whelan-Stewart 47). And Baby Suggs is the all-loving earth mother and healer who is the source of life for Sethe.

Sethe and her family struggle with the history of slavery, facing the difficulty of getting rid of trauma. Slavery destroys a good mother and daughter relationship, guiding Sethe to believe killing her children is a real freedom. As Wendy Whelan-Stewart says, Sethe “really feels that she can end her child’s physical life and safely preserve her infant’s self within her own subjectivity” (53). Sethe only thinks about her duty to protect her children, and she makes a decision too quickly for herself and her children. She does not even look at the schoolteacher. “And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple .... Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe” (Morrison 192). The passage displays how Sethe makes her decision to kill her baby because it is “simple.” Sethe prefers sending her children “over there” (to the afterlife) rather than allowing them to return to Sweet Home and live in servitude. Through this passage, we can see how Sethe’s great passion for her children. According to Renee Lee Gardner, Sethe’s action “is motivated to take her child’s life primarily because of her role as a mother ... to fulfill the ideologically driven sense that her primary duty is to protect her children .... [and she is] willing to bear responsibility for ending her daughter’s life” (209-11). From my point of view, I do not judge Sethe’s action is right or wrong because slavery is pushing her to the edge. However, Sethe still enslaves herself because she cannot forget what has happened before.

Sethe has a strong maternal instinct and considers her offspring to be an extension of herself. Under slavery, only motherhood will allow Sethe to be human. To Sethe, motherhood is about keeping her children safe. Slavery separates mothers and children both physically and emotionally, and both the mothers and the children are considered as property of their white owners. Even these children can be sold without any regard to their own feelings or their mother's feelings. Sethe kills her daughter so that she will not have to face the horrors that she herself faces at that time. This also relates to the theme of trauma of rape at Sweet Home as Sethe repeats several times: "they took my milk" (Morrison 20). Sethe is breastfeeding her children unlike her own mother, who was sold, so that Sethe does not remember her much. Sethe feels loss and abandonment, and now she desires to heal her wounds by being a perfect mother for her own children. Sethe's body creates nourishment for her child, but her rapists take the life out of her children. Her milk is one thing that Sethe feels it truly belongs to her – but they have taken away what she most desires: to be a mother. Despite this, Sethe has worked everything out to protect her children, and she even wants to bring them to somewhere "safe." Sethe kills Beloved because she does not want Beloved to have any experience of someone stealing her milk (that is, Sethe believes someone will rape Beloved in the future). Sethe suffers the horrible memory of her past, and her trauma is represented by the figure of the ghost of Beloved. Although Beloved has never experienced slavery, she is killed by slavery. The ghost of Beloved represents the harsh memories that Sethe is unable to get rid of, and it also represents the suffering that many African-American women have gone through in their terrible history. Sethe's experience with slavery is akin to that experienced by Baby

Suggs. Baby Suggs and Sethe are both mothers and former slaves, and both women have been affected by the experiences of slavery.

Denying the past seems to be impossible for Sethe. Baby Suggs is a ray of hope for Sethe because Baby Suggs has gone through slavery, which violently oppresses her because slavery only cares about her as a slave. She takes care of Sethe and helps her learn how to love her body. Sethe is not a bad mother because her “inner quest was for completeness; her destiny was to fulfill her promises as a mother: to love, to cherish, to protect, to teach, and to give” (Story 22). She chooses to murder her own children rather than to surrender them to the physical and emotional abuses of slavery. Sethe’s murder of her daughter, Beloved, is a statement of defiance against the imperialist civilization, according to Mary Jane Suero Elliott. The “measuring” of slavery, which Sethe sees as an appropriation of speech and subjugation of black identity, is another reason she decides to murder her kid (190). Sethe’s action haunts her for the rest of her life, as she endures the tyranny of the self-imposed prison of memory. She is really tormented as she is unable to block images of the past. And Munazzah Rabbani says, “[F]uture offers her no hope, no promise of fulfilling that lack which originated in her act of infanticide” (147). Sethe completely loses her physical and emotional strength. Her memories of this cruel act of killing of her child, which make her to struggle that past trauma will never be eliminated. It stills exists in the present.

Baby Suggs always brings hope in a hopeless situation. She is a mother who – Sethe feels – is unlike any other mother in the world. When Sethe kills the baby, Baby Suggs is horrified and kneels down begging God’s forgiveness for Sethe. Terry Paul Caesar says, “Motherhood can’t be narrated in a single voice, can’t be comprehended in a

single act, and can't be experienced subjectively by a single person only" (119). Baby Suggs accepts Sethe's action because she understands Sethe's motives because during her life in slavery, her children are taken away from her, except Halle. She understands Sethe's action and how much Sethe would suffer if her children were removed from her. She does not judge Sethe for doing something wrong, and she does not say that God will punish her action. Instead she tries to heal Sethe's pain. Through *Beloved*, Morrison paints the picture of slavery and evokes the cruelty of it because many modern readers are not the victims of slavery, and it is very hard for them to relate to the feelings that the characters in the novel have had been through.

### **Chapter Conclusion**

*Purple Hibiscus* describes a broken family relationship. Under her father's strict Catholic rules, Kambili has to endure his physical and psychological abuse. Silence prevails as a result of trauma in Eugene's family members. Due to her experience with her father, Kambili finds it difficult to express herself verbally and emotionally. Even when she goes out without him, she still thinks of his judgment and punishment. In this situation, silence appears to be safe for Kambili who is experiencing trauma. While silence can be seen as a negative result of Kambili's trauma, she also uses silence as a form of protection for herself. In *Beloved*, it is not easy for the modern readers to understand Sethe's action of killing her daughter because the readers themselves are not victims of slavery, so they do not have the experience of being slaves. But according to Kimberly Chabot Davis, "*Beloved* reminds us [the modern readers] that history is not 'over' for African Americans, who are still struggling to write the genealogies of their people and to keep a historical consciousness alive" (243). Through *Beloved*, Morrison



wants to remind her readers that the African-American story has not yet been fully told. The distance of past time disappears as *Beloved* allows the readers to enter and experience the real history of slavery.

## CHAPTER II

### RELIGION AS TRAUMA

*“You should strive for perfection. You should not see sin and walk right into it.” .... [Papa] poured the hot water on my feet, slowly, as if he were conducting an experiment and wanted to see what would happen .... I saw the moist steam before I saw the water. I watched the water leave the kettle, flowing almost in slow motion in an arc to my feet. The pain of contact was ... so scalding, I felt nothing for a second. And then I screamed. (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*, 194)*

Religion can help people live with love, caring, and forgiveness, but if one practices incorrectly, religion can also be harmful for a person, or even for others. In chapter two, I will discuss religion as trauma, and how it affects Eugene’s family in *Purple Hibiscus*. Besides, I will also bring Aunt Ifeoma’s family into this chapter to see how Kambili starts to change her thinking about religion when she makes her journey to Nsukka. Aunt Ifeoma is a Catholic like Eugene, but she does not practice her Catholicism in a serious way, and she does not impose it on her children. We wonder what will happen to Kambili, and whether this journey will bring her good or bad things. Eugene converts to the whites’ religion and seeks salvation through his Catholic beliefs. In his mind, everything the whites do is right, and he believes that becoming a part of their community will make him a good person. Eugene shifts his accent to seem more British when speaking to Father Benedict. He is kind in the eager-to-please manner he usually used around religious people, especially the white pious (Adichie 46). Therefore, Kambili and Jaja faithfully follow the religious expressions of their father. They are imprisoned in their own family because of their Papa’s standards, which cause them not to recognize what life is about outside. However, Aunt Ifeoma’s family environment

helps Kambili move into new relationships, especially her with her grandfather, Papa-Nnukwu, whom her father considers to be “a heathen.” Through Papa-Nnukwu, Kambili realizes her lost culture. Now she wants to find her roots, which she has forgotten since her childhood.

Eugene’s interpretation of Christianity can be seen as a manifestation of reactionary religiosity. He holds extreme views that prioritize his religion above everything else, which can be problematic. It is not his general commitment to religion that is at issue, but rather the particular type of religiosity he practices. He accepts the authority of a religion which emphasizes absolute obedience to avoid suffering in the afterlife. He follows in the footsteps of the white clerics in his unwavering belief in their religion and enthusiasm to learn their language. As Kambili says: Papa “hardly spoke Igbo, and ... he did not like us to speak it in public. We had to sound civilized in public, he told us; we had to speak English. Papa’s sister, Aunty Ifeoma, said ... that Papa was too much of a colonial product” (Adichie 13). This shows how far Eugene is from his heritage, and he also forces his family to adhere a new way of worship. He abuses them because he wants to break their connection to Igbo traditional rituals. Through the character of Eugene, Adichie implies that behind the ostensible problem of religion is the broader problem of imperialism. Eugene adopts the characteristic of white Catholics, serves an institution run by white priests, and abandons the traditional beliefs of Nigeria. He epitomizes contempt for those who do not adhere to his Catholic faith. He tries to convince people to abandon the traditional Igbo rituals and convert to become Christians. Thus, Christianity is revealed as a continuation of colonialism, which rejects indigenous beliefs and culture. Eugene tells his children to reject the Igbo traditions and embrace the

Western culture, which will lead them to both spiritual and physical growth. He does not realize that he is a victim of colonialism, and he is training his family members to be the victims too.

Eugene uses Catholicism as the base part of his authority in his family. Eugene sees that his contribution to religion is to establish piety as a disciplinary tool. He abuses his wife and children because he thinks it is good for them, and he seems not to accept any excuse from them. Eugene controls all conversations at the dinner table as well as any information that can be received from the outside world. When anyone wants to speak, that person must echo his words and speak in his voice. Corinne Sandwith discusses the theories of Christianity that are imprinted in Eugene's mind: "Sin and redemption, exemplified in the suffering body of Christ, give privileged place to a view of the body as nobly and necessarily wounded in pursuit of purity, salvation, or the presence of God" (99). Eugene always thinks that when the body is tortured, the soul will be purified. When he beats family members, he never feels regret because he thinks that he is doing it as a responsible husband and father. In fact, Eugene goes against all the teachings of Catholicism to love and care for others. He seems not to want to understand when Beatrice asks him to understand her feeling ill. He orders her to obey him in front of their children because he is a head of the house. As Kambili observes their conversation:

We always dropped in to visit Father Benedict after Mass.

"Let me stay in the car and wait, *biko*," Mama said .... "I feel vomit in my throat."

Papa turned to stare at her .... It seemed a long moment, but it might have been only seconds.

"Are you sure you want to stay in the car?" Papa asked.

Mama was looking down; her hands were placed on her belly .... "My body does not feel right," she mumbled.

“I asked if you were sure you wanted to stay in the car.”  
Mama looked up. “I’ll come with you. It’s really not that bad.”  
Papa’s face did not change. (Adichie 29)

If only read briefly, this may feel like a very gentle dialogue between Beatrice and Eugene, but Eugene’s stare and words convey a threat of violence towards Beatrice. She cannot decide or do anything by herself because Eugene will punish her for subverting his desire. While Aunty Ifeoma is an independent woman who is freely to speak, Beatrice accepts her husband’s authority and chooses to be silent. Aunty Ifeoma is able to merge Catholicism with the Igbo rituals and culture, but Beatrice cannot because she has to obey Eugene’s order. Yerima-Ava Zi and Opoku-Agvemang explain Beatrice’s character embodies the deeply ingrained belief in wives’ submission to their husbands, as influenced by the Igbo culture and Christianity. Her clergyman’s father shapes her personality from a young age, impacting her temperament and making her more vulnerable to her husband’s abuse. Despite enduring mistreatment, Beatrice remains silent. This can be due to her belief that Eugene is always correct and must be obeyed. The understanding that seeking help from his relatives or the church would prove ineffective, as his generous donations had already won their loyalty (126-27). Beatrice becomes a woman always quiet and accepting his torture which her husband depends on in his religious ideology. His intimidating eyes compel Beatrice to go with him. Eugene construes her reluctance to go with him as impiety because he values religion more than his wife’s health. After that, he beats her for daring to express her choice, for feeling sick, for not obeying him. Eugene interprets this sin as an instance of desecration and imperfection.

Religion can help people to improve their lives and to find peace and happiness, but Eugene practices it in a negative way. I believe that Eugene does not have any experience of peace and happiness because he overestimates the perfection of religion in his life and family. He is not only the perpetrator, but also the victim of the way he learned to understand Christianity through the lens of discipline rather than that of love and compassion. This flawed understanding of Christianity leads him to judge and condemn his family, imposing strict rules and punishments for minor transgressions. Eugene's approach to religion creates an oppressive and fearful atmosphere in his household. Eugene's legalistic approach to Christianity is reminiscent of the Pharisees and Scribes, religious leaders in ancient Israel who focused on rules and regulations rather than on inner transformation. However, Jesus criticized their lack of compassion and emphasized the importance of love, forgiveness, and compassion in the Christian faith. In contrast to Eugene's approach, Jesus calls on His followers to prioritize love and compassion over legalism and judgment. By doing so, Jesus offers a vision of Christianity that values inner transformation and kindness towards others rather than outward behavior and discipline. In her article: "Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Purple Hibiscus and the Paradoxes of Postcolonial Redemption," Cynthia Wallace says: "In this way, Adichie represents the linked functioning of fundamentalist Christianity, colonial self-hatred, and patriarchal oppression not in an abstract, demonized stereotype but as one tragic element of an otherwise admirable character, a man clearly seeking to do right in many spheres" (471). In Eugene's mind, Christianity is never about rejoicing – it is a serious thing at all times. Neither laughter nor even speaking in a loud voice are to occur in his house. He sets a schedule for his children, not allowing them to watch TV or listen

to music because he believes that these are sins. I think Eugene misunderstands how to practice his religion in his life, and how the Church desires what each Christian should do.

*Purple Hibiscus* portrays the season of Lent, but it also implies that Eugene misunderstands this penitential season. He focuses on sacrifice and self-abnegation as key not only to Lent but to the entire identity of Christians. It is the time that Jesus frees humanity from sin and gives people a new life. In Catholicism, the Lenten season is most important for each Christian, reminding him or her of the Passion. So during Lent, the Church wants each Christian to spend time reflecting on the Passion, sharing and companioning with Jesus during this time. The Church also wants each Christian to offer something to God during Lent: like talking softly, less TV watching, less eating, or sacrificing something one loves or to do charity work for others. For God, all should come from a sincere heart. But Eugene demands these things all the time, causing the rest of his family to be suffocating. Eugene seems to hold his religious faith on the surface level, only knows one thing – keeping his family out of Hell. His religious belief also causes him not to allow his wife and Kambili to wear fancy clothes, or to use lipstick or anything that can enhance their beauty. Eugene's abuse not only hurts their bodies, but he also controls their tongues. He slowly turns them into puppets like himself. Eugene is never able to understand true Christian ideals because he completely misses the joy of Easter – the time that every Christian is waiting for.

Eugene sees Christianity through the lens of control and disciplinary structures, which, rather than love, is ultimately damaging to everyone. For example, he blames his family members for their sinful behavior, and he feels that it is his duty as a devout

Catholic to correct them. He does not, however, accept culpability for his aggression. He beats three of them because they allow Kambili to break the Eucharistic fast before attending Mass due to her menstrual pain. Eugene seems not to care about her pain, instead he considers that is sin as he asks Kambili, “Why do you walk into sin?” (Adichie 102). Eugene’s use of physical abuse to enforce religion on his family starkly contrasts the teachings of the Church. Today, the Church allows eating in cases of health-related necessity. In contrast to Eugene’s abusive and controlling interpretation of Christianity, the Catholic Church practices a one-hour fast before receiving Holy Communion. During this period, Catholics are expected to abstain from food and drink, except water and medicine, to help them focus on their spiritual preparation. This practice serves as a reminder of the ritual’s sacredness, assisting Catholics to enter into a state of prayerful reflection and spiritual Communion with God. Adichie’s portrayal of Eugene’s extreme and harmful interpretation of Catholicism warns against using religion as a tool for control and punishment. Instead, true Christianity should prioritize love, empathy, and understanding toward others rather than using fear and aggression to enforce discipline. Eugene supposes that everything can be controlled, but he himself falls down under his own obsession of perfection.

Kambili still fears her grandfather because her father has taught her that pagan beliefs are evil and very different from Catholic beliefs. Although Eugene is known for his generosity and benevolent work for the poor, he does not give any attention to his own father. Because Papa-Nnukwu refuses to be converted to Christianity, Eugene only allows his children fifteen minutes to visit their grandfather, and they are not allowed to touch or eat anything from Papa-Nnukwu’s home. But when Kambili stays with her



grandfather in Aunty Ifeoma's house, she recognizes that her grandfather's Igbo beliefs are similar to Catholic practices. She also realizes that he will be the first person whom she contacts to know more the importance of the Igbo cultural tradition, from which she comes. As Tunca says, "Kambili's contact with her grandfather and elements of traditional culture allows her to gradually modify her judgement on certain issues .... [She] comes to the realization that Nigerian society is not a one-dimensional entity, and that catching even the slightest glimpse of its complexities, its movements and evolutions, requires that it be approached from several angles" (127-29). Kambili understands where she comes from, and she really wants to go back to her roots. According to Madelaine Hron, "Unlike her father who denies his roots, Kambili only grows and flourishes, like the purple hibiscus, when she learns to draw on her roots and cultivate her hybridity" (34). At this moment, Papa-Nnukwu becomes an important person for her because he is the first person whom Kambili can contact to explore her own identity and the traditional Igbo culture. Kambili seems to forget that her father has forbidden her to make contact with a pagan. She seems no longer to care whether her father will know or not, and what will happen to her after that.

As she grows up without joy and happiness, Kambili desires to seek peace, joy, and love in religion, and she has found these in the prayer of Papa-Nnukwu. She wishes that she could have known more about Papa-Nnukwu and could have become closer to him before he died. She remembers when her grandfather was alive: "He was still smiling as I quietly turned and went back to the bedroom. I never smiled after we said the rosary back home. None of us did" (Adichie 169). Kambili realizes the difference between her grandfather and her father when they pray for family members. Papa-Nnukwu prays for

himself, for Aunty Ifeoma, for Papa, for grandchildren, and for others. At her home, Kambili always hears her father pray that Papa-Nnukwu will convert to Catholicism. Papa-Nnukwu brings her a feeling of peace and love in his traditional rituals, which relieve her and make her regret that she has known him so late. Through Aunty Ifeoma's family and Papa-Nnukwu, Kambili realizes that religion is not what her father has always taught her, requiring her to stay serious in her faith and to avoid non-Catholics. At Nsukka, Kambili becomes acquainted with Igbo festivals and tradition, through which she forms a bond with her grandfather. When her grandfather dies, Kambili seems to lose this important person, who would have helped her to discover Igbo culture. As Bhattcharjee and Tripathi states, "Papa-Nnukwu's death had a crucial role in allowing both Kambili and Jaja to approach adulthood with a greater understanding of themselves and a wider appreciation for familial and cultural context" (438). Coming back home, Kambili still cannot escape her father's violent hand, especially when he finds out what she did while she lived in Nsukka.

Eugene always considers his actions as a discipline of a responsible father who must protect his family to avoid people outside Catholicism. He views his strict adherence to Catholicism as a way to protect his family from the influences of the outside world. He believes that his actions are necessary to maintain the purity of the faith and shield his family from the moral decay he perceives in society. However, his strict discipline often crosses the line into abuse, blurring the boundaries between protecting his family and exerting complete control over them. When he discovers Kambili staying with Papa-Nnukwu, he punishes her:

"Kambili, you are precious." ... "You should strive for perfection. You should not see sin and walk right into it." ... [Papa] poured the hot water

on my feet, slowly, as if he were conducting an experiment and wanted to see what would happen .... I saw the moist steam before I saw the water. I watched the water leave the kettle, flowing almost in slow motion in an arc to my feet. The pain of contact was ... so scalding, I felt nothing for a second. And then I screamed.

“That is what you do to yourself when you walk into sin. You burn your feet,” he said ....

[T]he burning on my feet was climbing up, in swift courses of excruciating pain, to my head and lips and eyes .... I did not know that the sobbing voice – “I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” – was mine until the water stopped and I realized my mouth was moving and the words were still coming out .... I stood in the scalding tub; I was too scared to move—the skin of my feet would peel off if I tried to step out of the tub. (Adichie 194-95)

This passage shows how horrible Eugene is throughout the novel – what kind of person Eugene is. How can we exactly define “love”? Eugene’s punishment of Kambili’s sins by pouring the hot water on her feet highlights the stark contrast between the religious act of washing feet and the abuse of religion to justify violence and control. While Jesus’ act of washing his disciples’ feet during the Last Supper is a profound example of humility, service, and love for others, Eugene’s act of violence is an act of domination and control, motivated by his desire to enforce his strict version of Catholicism on his family. This contrast underlines the significance of examining the ways in which religion is used in society and how religious beliefs can be distorted to serve power and control. John 13:2–17 emphasizes the importance of humility and service, and shows how Jesus used this act of washing feet to teach his followers the importance of serving and loving others, especially those who are oppressed.<sup>1</sup> The passage illustrates the need to challenge oppressive uses of religion, and to strive for a more just and equitable world that is founded on humility, service, and love for others.

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<sup>1</sup> See the whole passage of St. John 13: 2-17 in *Holy Bible*. Harper Catholic Bibles, pp. 1492-93.

The act of Eugene pouring hot water on his daughter's feet is different from Jesus's act of washing the disciples' feet. Jesus' action is an act of love and self-abnegation that He performed in washing His disciples' feet. Jesus "poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him" (John 13:5). Jesus wants to teach the apostles disciples that they have to be humble, serving, and selfless towards others.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, Eugene uses religion to justify his violence and enforce his strict interpretation of Catholicism on his family. This moment is significant as Kambili realizes that her father prioritizes religious purity over his daughter's well-being, leading her to question whether he truly loves her or is blindly loyal to his religion. Moreover, the choice of scalding her feet seems intentional, suggesting a desire to leave a lasting physical reminder of his dominance and control over her. This scene highlights the need to examine the ways in which religion can be co-opted and distorted for the purposes of power and control, and the importance of challenging oppressive uses of religion in order to create a more just and equitable world. Now Kambili realizes that her father use religion only to justify his narrow, literal interpretations of faith, and his violence. It is time for her to stand up for what she wants to do for herself and for Papa-Nnukwu.

Because of the picture of Papa-Nnukwu, Eugene beats Kambili nearly to death. Her action to protect Papa-Nnukwu is a sign that she is beginning to stand up for her feelings and her life, which causes Eugene to become more angry. His anger has reached its peak, and he continues to kick her nearly to death. Kambili's emotions are beyond hurt, and she "arguably learns to question her father's principles, but she is never able to

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<sup>2</sup> "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (John 13:14-15).

completely remove the aureole she has put around Eugene's head" (Tunca 218). Her silence at this time seems to become a way of resistance. Something has been broken in her relationship with her father because he cares more about his religion more than for her, his daughter.

Beatrice finally frees herself and her children from a man who has created a hell at his house in order to save his family's members from Hell. Her poisoning of Eugene also causes her mind to become unstable, and she still keeps quiet as she did before. Kambili suffers a great shock at her father's death. When Kambili finds out about the truth of Papa's death, she is very angry with her mother, but her mother is still calm – showing how Eugene has broken her heart completely:

For a long, silent moment I could think of nothing. My mind was blank, I was blank. Then I thought of taking sips of Papa's tea, love sips, the scalding liquid that burned his love onto my tongue. 'Why did you put it in his tea?' I asked Mama .... I was almost screaming. 'Why in his tea?' But Mama did not answer" (Adichie 290-91).

Kambili should understand her mother because she did this for her family and her children. As Cheryl Stobie states, "Beatrice is the battered woman who turns into a husband-murderer because she is unable to protect the fruit of her womb, born and unborn" (432). Eugene's countless beatings and the loss of her unborn children are enough for her to end his life. Perhaps he never understands how much pain he has inflicted on his family. Eugene also never learned how to show his love for his family because he never received love during his own upbringing. However, Kambili keeps a secret: she still offers Masses for Papa and wishes she could see him. She is not sure that Jaja will understand how much she loves Papa despite all things he did to them. Kambili does not say anything to him because they both know that they will no longer endure

abuse from their father. Although a breaking of silence gives Kambili relief, it does not heal her wounds.

Eugene's greatest mistake is denying familial love and placing his religious belief above all things. Maybe he does not recognize that the religion he has followed has been a burden on himself and on each family member. His family members and the readers know that he is an abuser, but only he does not know. He adheres to rigid rules rather than flexibility in expressing his love for his family. He expects his family to think and act the way he does. Eugene regards perfection as a mandate he feels obligated by God to fulfill. Eugene's house can be seen as a penal place where his disciplinary methods rely on control. Therefore, Kambili believes Papa-Nnukwu is a heathen because her father says that he is, and she avoids him as her father instructs. However, Aunty Ifeoma shows Kambili and Jaja to another view of Igbo Traditional belief and another view of outside world. In chapter three, I will discuss more about how the new family environment helps to change Kambili's mind about Catholicism. It also brings her happiness and joy at that moment – something that she had never before experienced before in her house.

## CHAPTER III

### RELIGION AS RESTORATION

*“[Baby Suggs] did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure”*  
(Morrison, *Beloved*, 103).

In *Beloved*, Sethe’s experience is of slavery and the pain of a mother who kills her own daughter. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Kambili’s experience is that of an abused child, which causes her difficulty in dealing with the world outside. Therefore, in this chapter, I argue how religion plays a role of *healing* to help each character to overcome his or her difficulty in the past, especially the two young girls: Sethe and Kambili. Morrison’s *Beloved* considers the role of spiritual healing, both communal and individual. Baby Suggs represents a source of spiritual healing for the black community. She is a very special woman for Sethe because she encourages Sethe to lay down her past, to be strong, and to move into the future. Through her positive spirit and her religious sessions in the Clearing, Baby Suggs brings the people hope and lifts up their spirits. In becoming a part of a community again, Sethe is not alone anymore as she always was after her mother’s and her daughter’s death. Sethe’s total healing seems to happen because she starts to accept her self-love and to begin a new life. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Kambili’s life only changes after her stay in Nsukka with her Aunty Ifeoma – she turns out to be more mindful of herself and has gained self-identity. Father Amadi’s appears in Kambili’s life as a significant turning point that changes her. He speaks about a forgiving God, a God of mercy, not like her father, who always talks and teaches her about a punishing God, sin, and hell. Father Amadi chooses to see God in others, while Kambili struggles to imagine

God in the faces of ordinary people. Father Amadi brings Kambili back to her own religion, where she can feel peace and love, and be free to choose her own faith instead of having it enforced as strict and violent as her father has taught her before. Baby Suggs and Father Amadi are heroes who bring hope and joy to Sethe's and Kambili's lives.

In this chapter, I aim to explore how *Beloved* and *Purple Hibiscus* present a nuanced perspective on the role of religion in both causing trauma and healing. While the characters Sethe and Kambili have experienced different forms of trauma due to slavery and domestic violence, both novels emphasize the potential for religion to be a force for both good and evil. Through their depictions of healing rituals and the community, the novels suggest that religion can offer a path toward healing and reconciliation. However, they also recognize that religion can be used to justify violence and oppression. Ultimately, the two novels provide a complex and multifaceted portrayal of Christianity (and religion more generally) as a powerful and often contradictory force in the lives of their characters. By stepping outside of the details of the plot and characters, one can gain a deeper understanding of the novels' exploration of the complex relationship between religion and trauma.

### **Religion Brings People Joy and Hope**

In *Beloved*, religion is a healing force, and Morrison's sophisticated characterization of Baby Suggs exemplifies this idea. Roxanne R. Reed states, "Morrison gives [a] new dimension to the importance of women and the maternal role, which remains essential to this narrative; we see this in Sethe's maternal position. But more significantly, we see Baby Suggs not only in the role of nurturer to her family but also in the role of spiritual nurturer to an entire community" (66). Baby Suggs' spiritual



guidance and teachings inspire hope and healing in the community as they find solace and meaning through her words. Especially, she is able to hold space for Sethe's trauma and pain, which will turn into healing. Baby Suggs employs the beauty of nature to inspire the former slaves to recognize their own beauty through her optimistic outlook. As Reed says, "The only means of restoration for Sethe, and the community, is the guidance of Baby Suggs' spirit and her teachings as a preacher, particularly remembrances of her preaching in the Clearing, the space she claimed as her pulpit" (56). She is the voice of wisdom and knowledge within her community and family. She emphasizes the need for people to live their fullest in the present life rather than depending on their afterlife. She does not speak about sin, or about God's punishment, hell, or blessedness. Rather, she urges people to love and to care for each other. Michele A. L. Barzey says that, for Baby Suggs, "motherwork was not only about the survival of the biological family, it was also necessary for the survival of the community. The community had to share resources and knowledge in order to survive" (11). Baby Suggs understands that in the life of the slaves, nobody has loved them or cared for them. It is time for her to help them to know that they should love themselves.

While Baby Suggs' teachings and preaching do have elements of Christianity, such as her use of biblical references and her role as a preacher, her message is more spiritual in a general sense. She focuses on the importance of love, care, and community, rather than strict adherence to religious doctrine. Her emphasis on living fully in the present life and caring for one another reflects a more universal spiritual message that transcends specific religious traditions. Additionally, her teachings and practices incorporate elements of African spirituality, such as her use of the Clearing as a sacred

space and her emphasis on the healing power of nature. Baby Suggs' preaching can be seen as a blend of Christianity, African spirituality, and a more general message of love and community.

In *Beloved*, Baby Suggs' preaching is centered around the religion of loving and caring (caring – an aspect related to maternal love). Baby Suggs' mission reflects God's embrace of the outcast and the outsider, as stated in Romans 9: 25, "Those who were not my people I will call 'my people,' and her who was not beloved, I will call 'beloved.'" Baby Suggs encourages her community to recognize themselves as God's people and to be known as such by others. This theme is relevant to the current "Black Lives Matter" movement, which highlights the importance of recognizing and valuing the humanity of Black people and their struggles. The fact that Morrison gives the name of the novel to this reference from Romans is significant in understanding the novel. The quote from Romans (9: 25) highlights the theme of the value and recognition of Black lives, which is central to the novel. Sethe's act of killing her daughter as results from her belief that her child will be better off dead than living as an enslaved person. This act reflects the dehumanization and degradation of Black lives that was perpetuated by slavery. Through Baby Suggs' preaching, Morrison emphasizes recognizing Black lives as fully human and deserving of love and care. The reference to Romans 9:25 in the novel's title underscores the importance of this theme as a notice of the ongoing struggle for the recognition and value of Black lives.

Baby Suggs encourages her people to love themselves, denying slavery's devaluation of them based on race. Emily Griesinger clarifies that Baby Suggs "gives people the spiritual space to reclaim the Self, which is the God-Spirit that links each of

them to their human self and to another” (692). Her speech aims at healing the hurt because she emphasizes the people’s flesh, which symbolizes the members’ bodies as a whole:

“Here,” she said, “in this place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass .... Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back .... And O my people they do not love your hands .... Love your hands! .... [T]hey don’t love your mouth. You got to love it .... Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I’m telling you. And O my people ... hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it .... The ... dark liver – love it ... and the beat and beating heart, love that too .... love your heart. For this is the prize.” (Morrison 103-04)

Baby Suggs’ homily is a powerful call to self-love and self-respect, and a reminder of the importance of reclaiming one’s own humanity in the face of oppression. She contrasts the way her people are treated by white people, who despise and harm their bodies, with the way they should treat their own bodies with love and care. She urges them to embrace their flesh, with all its imperfections and struggles, and to appreciate its beauty and value. Baby Suggs emphasizes the importance of loving oneself, including all parts of the body and the inner self, as a means of healing and reclaiming their humanity in the face of oppression. In her article: “In the Beginning: ‘Beloved’ and the Religious Word of Psychoanalysis,” Cynthia Wallace says, “Baby Suggs’s call is not the pietistic demand of a harsher moral order, nor is it the illusory assurance that the next life will be better; instead, it is radical call to self-love, to holistic embodied experiences of dancing an emotion and community, in opposition to any rule that privileges whiteness, maleness, or mind over matter” (275). Through her preaching, Baby Suggs shows a deep understanding of the trauma and pain experienced by the black community, both

physically and emotionally. She recognizes the ways in which their bodies and spirits have been harmed by the violence of slavery, and the ongoing oppression they face in society. By urging them to love and embrace their bodies, Baby Suggs is not just providing a message of self-care, but also a way to resist the dehumanization and degradation imposed upon them by the dominant culture. Her message is one of empowerment and liberation, encouraging the community to see their bodies and lives as valuable and worthy of love.

Morrison uses Baby Suggs' voice as her own voice because Baby Suggs does not judge Sethe for her action of killing the child. As Eusebio L. Rodrigues says, "Morrison does not judge Sethe. Neither does her narrator allow her listeners to pass judgment" (163). Sethe needs healing and caring. Sethe still seeks comfort in the memory of Baby Suggs and recalls how Baby Suggs took care of her when she arrived at 124 Bluestone Road. Baby Suggs always carries a positive spirit and teaches people to love themselves and how to be happy. Linda Krumholz states that "Baby Suggs is the moral and spiritual backbone of *Beloved*. Her morality is based on a method of engagement and interpretation rather than on static moral dictates" (398). Baby Suggs suggests that if Sethe believes in herself and can learn to value herself, she will not seem so vulnerable. If Sethe can stick to her beliefs and realize that her heart is safe from chaos, she might be saved from the horrors of slavery. Sethe wishes she could hear more of Baby Suggs' sermons, experiences that would heal her spirit.

In *Beloved*, Baby Suggs "taking to her bed" after Sethe takes the life of her child can be seen as an important moment of hopelessness in the novel. It reflects the deep trauma and pain that the community is experiencing, and how even someone as strong

and resilient as Baby Suggs can be overwhelmed by the weight of their collective suffering. This moment is important to understanding the novel because it highlights the need for communal healing and shows how the trauma of slavery affects not just the individual, but the entire community.

In terms of other characters who help with healing, Denver can certainly be seen as stepping into Baby Suggs' role after her death. She is the one who goes out into the world to find help for her family, and who ultimately helps bring Beloved into their lives. Denver's growth and development throughout the novel reflect the importance of action in the healing's process. Sethe's and Beloved's relationship can be seen as a form of healing, as they are able to confront their shared trauma and pain together and come to a place of understanding and forgiveness. In this way, Morrison shows that healing is not just an individual process, but a communal one, and that it can come from unexpected places and relationships. Sethe, Beloved, and Denver can be seen as a kind of trinity whose members help each other achieve healing.

As the ghost of Beloved represents the past and trauma, Beloved returns in human form as an opportunity to help her mother redeem her past action, which causes her constant state of guilt. Beloved's return is a parallel with Jesus Christ's return to His disciples after His resurrection. The comparison between the return of Beloved in human form and Jesus Christ's return to the apostles after His resurrection highlights the transformative power of love, forgiveness, and acceptance. As Jesus Christ loves the people of Israel and calls them His own people, Beloved loves Sethe and her family: "I AM BELOVED and she is mine" (Morrison 249). When Beloved returns, Sethe again

wants to do everything for her to keep her stay forever. Through Beloved's physical manifestation, Sethe has to face and accept her past:

Tell me the truth. Didn't you come from the other side?  
Yes. I was on the other side.  
You came back because of me?  
Yes.  
You rememory me?  
Yes. I remember you ...  
Do you forgive me? Will you stay? You safe here now ....  
I will protect you ....  
I will never leave you again ....  
You are mine (Morrison 254-56).

Sethe's love for Beloved helps her finally accept the truth and move on. Denver's presence and support help Sethe deal with her past and forgive herself. Beloved forgives and loves her mother who has killed her because of slavery, and her mother does not want her to be a slave like she was. Beloved's action is similar with Jesus' action asking the Heavenly Father to forgive those who kill Him and to bless them.<sup>3</sup> Although Jesus' death is very different from the death of Beloved, Jesus is an example of love and forgiveness for His persecutors and those who mock Him. Beloved's physical manifestation represents Sethe's past trauma, while Jesus' physical manifestation after His death represents hope and the possibility of redemption. Both Beloved and Jesus serve as catalysts for healing and forgiveness for those around them, emphasizing the importance of a supportive community.

The return of Beloved and Jesus emphasize the significance of facing and accepting one's past to move forward. Sethe confronts her past trauma when Beloved returns, while the apostles find renewed purpose and mission after Jesus' Resurrection. Both stories underscore the transformative power of facing one's past and finding the

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<sup>3</sup> Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 24:34).

strength to move forward. Additionally, the use of a trinity in *Beloved* and the Christian belief in the Holy Trinity reinforce the importance of interconnectedness and communal healing. Sethe, Beloved, and Denver depend on one another for healing and forgiveness, much like the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit collaborate to bestow salvation and grace upon humanity. The sense of community and interconnectedness is central to both *Beloved* and Christianity, highlighting the necessity of love, support, and forgiveness for healing and redemption in personal and communal contexts.

Baby Suggs possesses the ability to care for others physically, heal their bodies, and tend to their mental and emotional needs. Morrison portrays Baby Suggs as a giver of both healing and comfort to those who have suffered enslavement. Sethe remembers Baby Suggs' sermons, which help her try to forget her past and move on to the future. This memory also leads the readers to understand how compassionate Baby Suggs is. She really makes space for Sethe and others to feel comfortable. Baby Suggs encourages Sethe to lay down her defenses against the pain of her memories and to think about the future. Because of her memory of the past, Sethe cannot forgive herself. And after eighteen years, she is still excluded. Everybody turns their backs on her. However, Sethe's memory of Baby Suggs will help the readers to follow Sethe on her journey, as she identifies herself and her new life. Sethe chooses to follow Baby Suggs' advice to deal with her past, and "IT WAS TIME to lay it all down" (Morrison 101). Sethe hopes that she can let the past behind and move on to the future.

Coming back to the Clearing, Baby Suggs' favorite place, Sethe sits down on Baby Suggs' rock, where she remembers Baby Suggs' massaging her neck. Sethe still wishes that Baby Suggs would do it for her one more time: "Just let me feel your fingers

again on the back of my neck and I will lay it all down, make a way out of this no way. Sethe bowed her head and sure enough – they were there. Lighter now, no more than the strokes of bird feather, but unmistakably caressing fingers” (Morrison 112). Finally, Sethe forces herself to accept the truth and move on to the new family. Sethe returns to 124 Bluestone Road and starts to see her life move forward instead of staying caught in the past.

*Beloved* has important implications for the past and present. It reminds the readers that the Spirit is still among them, moving them in extraordinary ways. In the Clearing, not only the Black community hears words of boundless love and resistance, but we, the readers, hear those words too. They are also words for people today. At this place, Baby Suggs also helps Sethe to communicate with her elders when she has passed on. As Krumholz says, “Baby Suggs’s preaching and her spiritual vision invest the world with meaning without making that meaning static or rule-bound” (398). As one continues to struggle with the dark and oppressive forces of history and present, one is encouraged to find the space to let his or her heart beat, speak, and sing. But she still finds it hard to allow herself to plan for her future. When *Beloved* suddenly disappears, Sethe laments, *Beloved* “left me .... She was my best thing” (Morrison 321). According to Rabbani, for Sethe “to be able to love her babies freely without inhibitions and restrictions was ‘a selfish pleasure I had never before’ ...; for her it was the perfect harmony, the completion of her being” (143). Paul D’s return into Sethe’s life represents the potential for a happier future for her. He is Sethe’s hope for a future and can signify a promise for her. Paul D comforts her by saying: “‘We need some kind of tomorrow.’ ... ‘You your best thing, Sethe. You are.’” (Morrison 322). Those words redeem her. Paul D tries to heal Sethe’s



feelings, to offer her a happy future, and to help her to learn to love herself. As Demetrakopoulos says, “When Sethe finally connects with Paul D, she moves towards individuation, becomes connected with her own animus energy and, thus, assumes a position from which she can escape the deadly toils of nature” (54). They both are confident that they will enjoy a future together.

In *Beloved*, Morrison uses religion as a vehicle for healing, showing how faith and spirituality can be instrumental in helping characters overcome trauma and move forward. Sethe draws on her faith to cope with the guilt and shame she feels over the death of her baby. Similarly, Baby Suggs’ sermons provide a space for the community to heal and come together. Her message of love and self-care resonates with the former slaves, helping them to reclaim their sense of humanity and worth. In *Beloved*, religion serves as a way for the characters to find hope and meaning in the face of trauma and oppression.

### **Kambili’s New View at Catholicism**

In *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie explores the theme of religion as a tool for healing, exemplified through the family of Aunty Ifeoma. Aunty Ifeoma’s family environment helps Kambili to make her first step towards independence: “I had felt as if I were not there, that I was just observing a table where you could say anything at any time to anyone, where the air was free for you to breathe as you wished” (Adichie 120). Kambili’s observation on Aunty Ifeoma’s family environment is that each child has freedom to develop his or her mind. They can speak what they want or desire in the present or in the future, or even what kind of food they want to eat. Kambili does not have any experience with joyful sounds in her abusive home. Aunty Ifeoma cares more

for the personal wellbeing of Kambili and Jaja rather than for their faithfulness to their father's perception of what it is to live the perfect Catholic life. In this place, Kambili starts to question the meaning of life, and what she wants to complete her passion and dreams in her life. Especially, she questions what is different in the practice of Catholic life in her home and in Aunty Ifeoma's home.

When the young Father Amadi appears, Kambili becomes a part of his attention because of her quietness. Father Amadi's appearance in Kambili's life at Nsukka might be considered as a new beginning in her life. In this point, Adichie wants to show the readers a kind of priest who is different from the stereotype, such as Father Benedict, who is an example for the traditional Catholic. Father Benedict is a British priest who does not like to use the native language of Igbo in the Church and says it can never be the language of liturgy. And so "Eugene acquiesces to Father Benedict's views of Igbo language and even makes the point of speaking with a British accent" (Mabura 211). In contrast, Father Amadi respects his Nigerian heritage and keeps the balance between his Nigerian culture and following a European religion. As Partha Bhattacharjee and Priyanka Tripathi compare: "Unlike Father Amadi who was trying to make Catholicism relevant to the contemporary Nigerian society, Father Benedict was trying to colonize the Nigerian indigenous people with the white men's politics" (438). Father Amadi helps Kambili to imagine the experiences of the outside world. Finally, he brings her back to normal life, and as a result she finds her voice, laughter, and smile. As Lily G. N. Mabura says,

Eugene, who has hitherto relied on a "blanket of silence" to keep his violent outbursts from leaking out, suddenly finds himself with an unprecedented challenge – that of Father Amadi, who appears on the scene as Kambili's champion .... Father Amadi is instrumental in helping Kambili ... [break] the blanket of silence over [her life] .... Father Amadi ... instills in Kambili the notion that she can do anything she wants. (216)

Father Amadi removes the silence from Kambili's world and brings laughter and happiness back to her. Kambili "finally comes to bear witness ... to her experience of the world" (Hewett 88). She seems to find her personal identity and feels "so many things churning inside" her (Adichie 267). She even wishes to hold back her feelings because they are so different from the feelings her father evokes. She is like a flower bud, and now she blooms into a beautiful flower.

When Kambili's struggle grows into maturity and self-realization, Father Amadi plays the role of an instrument in transforming her into a vibrant young girl. He follows God's word through love, compassion, and care for others and becomes socially and spiritually open to others. Father Amadi echoes God's love, mercy, and caring in his daily life. He demonstrates that religion is a mode of being responsible for the other. He neither judges nor discriminates against anyone. Father Amadi chooses to see God in the ordinary people while Kambili and her father always see God as white and superior. In the discussion with Kambili, Father Amadi figures out why Kambili is afraid of sin – even of things she does not consider to be sins:

I was always a penitent when I was close to a priest at confession. But it was hard to feel penitent now, with Father Amadi's cologne deep in my lungs. I felt guilty instead because I could not focus on my sins, could not think of anything except how near he was. "I slept in the same room as my grandfather. He is a heathen," I blurted out.

He turned to me briefly, and before he looked away, I wondered if the light in his eyes was amusement. "Why do you say that?"

"It is a sin."

"Why is it a sin?"

I stared at him. I felt that he had missed a line in his script. "I don't know."

"Your father told you that."

I looked away, out the window. (Adichie 175)

After the discussion with her, Father Amadi understands that Kambili's view of her grandfather as a heathen comes from her father. Father Amadi accepts a religion which allows him to have more freedom and to be peaceful. Therefore, he wants to bring Kambili back to her own religion, where she can feel peace and love, and to be free to choose her own faith instead of having it enforced as strict and violent.

Adichie also draws into the novel the Virgin Mary's apparition, which highlights "the spiritual realm being conceived as feminine, allowing for imaginative vision by women and sympathetic men" (Stobie 432). On her pilgrimage and with the Virgin Mary's vision, Kambili finds a new faith, which is very different from her father's faith. According to Cheryl Stobie, "The vision is one of all embracing joy and loving-kindness, traditionally associated with femininity. This is not a syncretic or exotic vision, making use of specific aspect of indigenous religion" (431). Under Father Amadi's and Ifeoma's help and guidance, Kambili gradually grows her self-confidence and high self-esteem. With the patriarchal power's voice implanted deeply within her, she now has to compete with a voice of caring, which allows her to find ways of counteracting her habitual silence. Now she and Jaja can decide for themselves the religion which they will follow in their lives. In the end, Kambili does not permit Catholicism to conceal her genuine personality. She instead chooses to embody the finest aspects of both Catholicism and Paganism.

Without her Papa's control, Kambili is free to make decisions for herself. She respects her silence now because it is different than when Papa was alive – a kind of silence that combines love and fear. Mama, Jaja, and she must find their freedom without Papa's violence. In her article, "Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Purple Hibiscus and the

Paradoxes of Postcolonial Redemption,” Wallace states, “The narrative ends with the news that Jaja will soon be released from prison on political grounds, and on the last pages there is a subtle increase of hope for mother and daughter, the promise of a new garden to plant and coming rain, even the sound of Kambili’s laughter. But it is a tenuously happy ending, neither unambiguous nor triumphant” (478). Through this quotation, as I discussed in Chapter One the idea of passion and resurrection, Jaja’s actions also lead to his resurrection, as he finds a sense of purpose and identity in prison and reconciles with his sister and mother. He also becomes a symbol of hope and inspiration for other prisoners, who are inspired by his courage and resilience. Jaja’s journey in the novel is a powerful reminder of the transformative power of suffering and the potential for individuals to find strength, resilience, and purpose in the face of adversity.

Following the difference in the silence between Kambili and Jaja before their father’s death and after his death, Cooper also claims: “Kambili hopes that the silence that has grown up between herself and Jaja after all the family tragedies and his incarceration will be broken; she hopes that they will be able eventually ‘to clothe things in words, things that have long been naked’” (12). Silence lets Kambili plan for the future, such as when Jaja and she will plant flowers and visit loved ones and favorite places. The new silence allows Kambili to hope, and she leaves her childhood behind to move on to a new life. Kambili’s new silence and voice are seen as her redemption, and they also release the reader.

## Chapter Conclusion

By writing *Beloved*, with its true historical background, Morrison has contributed to demonstrating the importance of maternal love in history and represents healing as functioning in the individual and the community. At the end of the novel, Morrison makes an ironic comment about the story when she states: “It was not a story to pass on” (323). However, Morrison has already told it. By doing so, she has claimed mothers’ and slaves’ part in history. And Helene Moglen also says, “In *Beloved*, at the intersection of realism and fantasy, Morrison maps a similar progress at a specific historical moment” (33). In *Purple Hibiscus*, Kambili affirms a different version of Christianity and also embraces Igbo language and culture. “The new rain” represents the hope of a new beginning for the rest of Kambili’s family (Adichie 307). All of the suffering is over. Kambili and her family finally can live without fear and violence for the first time. Both novels emphasize the significance of nurturing and supportive family environments in facilitating emotional growth and personal development.

## CONCLUSION

In exploring the intricate relationship between religion, trauma, and abuse in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, we have examined the multifaceted impact of religion and family environment on shaping individual lives. Both novels present persuasive examples of how religion can act as a source of comfort and healing and a driving force for trauma and distress, contingent upon specific situations and interpretations. This conclusion seeks to synthesize our understanding of these themes and offer insights into how religion can cause and heal trauma and flourish in adversity.

In *Purple Hibiscus*, raised by their deeply religious father, Eugene, both Kambili and Jaja experience firsthand the potential of using religion as a weapon. Eugene's strict interpretation of Catholicism justifies his violent and abusive behavior. This oppressive environment stifles Kambili's ability to express herself and find her path. However, Kambili's journey to her aunt's home in Nsukka provides a contrasting environment where love, understanding, and a more open interpretation of religion create a space for healing and growth. The more open and inclusive interpretation of Christianity presented by Father Amadi offers an alternative path toward healing and growth. Through Kambili's experiences, Adichie demonstrates the importance of a nurturing family environment and the potential for religious beliefs to be both a source of pain and a catalyst for personal transformation. In *Beloved*, the perspective of religion and the vital capacity of community dig into the harrowing legacy of slavery and its lasting effects on Sethe's, Paul D's, and even Denver's lives. The novel provides a vivid portrayal of the brutality of slavery, which has left indelible scars on the characters' lives. The motherly

figure of Baby Suggs acts as a symbol of hope and restoration as she employs her religious convictions and spiritual mentorship to cultivate a sense of unity and acceptance among the formerly enslaved people. Baby Suggs' spiritual guidance and the communal support of the ex-slaves demonstrate the potential for religion to provide a sense of belonging and a pathway toward healing from trauma. As Moglen says, "Sethe is saved from drowning, and her fantastic story given social shape, through the intervention of another maternal narrative: that of Baby Suggs" (34). This communal support is instrumental in helping Sethe confront her painful past and find a path toward self-acceptance and healing. Through *Beloved*, Morrison underscores the importance of a supportive family environment, religious faith, and community in facilitating emotional growth and personal development. Finally, Kambili and Sethe ultimately break free from the constraints of their pasts and choose their paths, guided by their experiences and newfound understanding of their faith.

The impact of family environment and religion in *Purple Hibiscus* and *Beloved* has shed light on the paradoxical nature of religion and its capacity to cause and heal trauma. Adichie and Morrison have masterfully woven narratives that delve into the complex interplay among religion, trauma, and healing, highlighting the importance of critical reflection and open-mindedness in navigating the diverse experiences and beliefs that shape our world. Both Adichie and Morrison also seem to send the message that religion can help guide one toward values and behaviors that are good or bad. The result depends on how a person perceives and practices religion in his or her own life.



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