

Evangelism and Colonialism: in Selected Novel of Barbara Kingsolver’s Poisonwood Bible

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Abstract:

In Christianity, Evangelism is the commitment to or act of publicly preaching of the Gospel with the intension of spreading the message and teaching of Jesus Christ. Some Christian traditions consider evangelists to be in a leadership position; they may be found preaching to large meetings or in governance roles. In Africa Evangelism and Colonialism continued their journey simultaneously. In the early eighties Christian missionaries became a disruptive force in African society. This paper attempts to study the Evangelism and colonialism in Barbara Kingsolver’s selected novel Poisonwood Bible.

Keywords: Evangelism, Colonialism, Christianity, Christian missionary.

Introduction:

The poisonwood Bible (1998), by Barbara Kingsolver, is bestselling novel about a missionary family, the Prices, who in 1959 move from the U.S. State of Georgia to the Village of Kilanga in the Belgian Congo close the Kwilu River. *The Poisonwood Bible* is a story told by the wife and four daughters of Nathan Price, a fierce, evangelical Baptist who takes his family and mission to the Belgian Congo in 1959. They carry with them everything they believe they will need from home, but soon find that all of it- from garden seeds to scripture – is calamitously transformed on African soil. What follows is a suspenseful epic of one family’s tragic undoing and remarkable reconstruction over the course of three decades in postcolonial Africa.

The novel is set against one of the most dramatic political chronicles of the twentieth century: the Congo’s fight for independence from Belgium, the murder of its first elected prime minister, the CIA coup to install his replacement, and the insidious progress of a world economic order that robs the fledgling African nation of its autonomy. Through the character like Nathan Price I want to focus on the dominant tendency of Europe. Exactly Nathan does not represent here his missionary profession but rather than he represents the colonial America which colonized Africa to seek diamond, cobalt, copper and zinc. American colonization not only loots the natural resources of Africa but also disturb the ecological balance of region.

Evangelism and Colonialism in Poisonwood Bible:

Here through my research paper I tried to explain how Nathan’s evangelical, self-righteous, judgmental attitudes not only threaten the lives of his family members but also the people in the remote Congolese village of Kilanga. Nathan is so obsessed with his own ideas of Christianity that he never sees the suffering of Kilanga people.

Through my writing I want to talk here about the domination tendency of American white male, Nathan Price who not only dominate his female family members but also Congolese. Before turning towards the domination of Nathan in Kilanga I would like to throw the light on the history of colonization in Africa. Colonialism is the policy of acquiring full or partial political and economical control over another country. The colonial experience began in the late 1400s in Africa and in the late 1800s and early 1900, it reached a peak. Their first intension was establishing trading post in Africa, later on turned into Christian missionaries which seeking to convert Africans and spreads western culture. Nathan Price is one of the representatives of this policy. The way Nathan behaved with Congo people focuses on his dominant tendency just like his country. Further Africa’s abundant supply of natural resources, attracted many European traders towards the country. To gain the supremacy over

African people and its natural resources European started to force them to accept foreign rules as well as Christianity. In the 1870, European captured almost African territory under their control. Along with the political and economical policies Christian missionaries also become a disruptive force in African society. Many adventurer entrepreneurs attracted towards Africa in search of or in obtaining sources of raw materials. Somewhere moved there to recreate European Culture in African land. Further due to the political power the local government which was run by traditional African leaders (Chiefs and Kings) was allowed little real authority. European dominance in Africa not only degraded the economic condition of Africa but also destroy many traditional forms of agriculture. Here Nathan Price is perfect mixture of domination of cultural and patriarchal society.

Nathan represents America and Europe who without knowing the need of natives try to force his own will on them. As Nathan plant their garden, Mama Tataba- their house keeper informs them that “you got to be make hills” (PB 48) rather than simply planting them in the flat earth. Nathan takes offense to her advice and also ignores her comment that the poisonwood plant he is handling will hurt him. But Nathan thought he will “demonstrate to all of Africa how to grow crops!” (PB 45) Just as he wanted to impose American values on Congo land. As a result the next day, Nathan wakes up with “a painful rash on his hands, and arms presumably wounded by the plant that bites.” (PB 49) A few weeks later, heavy rainfall washes out the garden. As we find at the last part of the novel Nathan is washed out from Kikango’s land. Nathan was so obsessed with his opinion regarding America and Christianity that even though he thought that “No insects here to pollinate the garden” as that garden is planted with “Kentucky wonder bean” (PB 98). Whatever he finds in the lands of Congo he feels it irritable of American and not good to lead towards the salvation.

We come to know about Nathan Price nature very first time when Leah Price discussed it. “Father feels makeup and nail polish are warning signals of prostitutions, the same as pierced ears” (PB 19) In the second book ‘The Revelation’, Nathan Price come out at forefront as one of the obsessed figure who wants to bring salvation to Kilanga. Very successfully Kingsolver here throws a flash on patriarchal domination over the family and society. Orleana recalls watching helplessly as Nathan became less and less aware of their children and their family’s basic needs; his fixation on his mission left her so overwhelmed by the practical details of daily survival that she could not see the larger problems looming ahead. Kingsolver declared on official website (FAQS). He’s a character, invented by me, to serve my plot. I count on readers to know what literary fiction is, and to understand the relationship between the character and theme ... I created Nathan price as a symbolic figure suggesting many things about how western nations have approached Africa with a history of arrogance and misunderstand. Kingsolver describes Nathan Price in such a way that his ignorance and suffering creates sympathy for Price daughter and disrespect towards Nathan.

Kingsolver in the Second book *The Revelation*, focuses on Nathan’s nature as an obsessed figure. As Nathan’s daughters start to adapt the life in the Congo, he becomes even more entrenched in his beliefs and his desire to “save” the people of Kilanga. Nathan reveals himself to be representative of the colonial powers that believed they could and should control the Congo nation. Here Kingsolver criticized American political policy. As Nathan believes he is bringing civilization to the African people, just as the foreign governments claimed they were civilizing the nations they colonized. Nathan blindly tries to impose his will upon the people of Kilanga without ever taking a moment to find out what they want or already know. Such behavior parallels the approach the Europeans and Americans took toward the Congo. Nathan’s decision to stay in the Congo despite his family protests and the recommendation of the Underdowns also shows him to be incredibly selfish and single -minded. Like the countries in power, Nathan acts without caring about what is

best for those who depend on him. He is concerned only with achieving his own agenda. Reverend criticized Belgians for its selfish attitude towards Africa but Nathan stuck to his own point of view. As Reverend proclaimed, “In seventy five years the only roads the Belgians ever built are the ones they use to haul out diamond and rubber.” (PB 149)

Maurice A. Williams criticized Kingsolver for presenting a harsh picture of American involvement in the political affairs of the Congo. Maurice is not agreed with the Kingsolver and her comparison of Jesus to poisonwood – a noxious plant caused severe irritation to anyone who comes in contact with it. The comparison of the poisonwood Bible to The Holy Bible is evident. Kingsolver declared I have no antagonism toward generous – hearted Christianity, or missionaries, and I took same care to show that my favorite character is Brother Fowles, a Christian who does a beautiful things with the notion of mission.

Nathan’s views represented those of the colonial (American and European) powers trying to control the Congo. Most of the time we come to know about political situation of the Congo through the conversation between Leah (Beene) and Anatole. As Anatole proclaimed, “Diamond yes,” “Also cobalt and copper and Zinc. Everything my country has that your county wants,” (PB 274) In this section, Kingsolver shows the people who are depend upon Nathan realizing that they have been betrayed by him and reacting to that sense of betrayal. In a similar fashion, Adah and Leah discover that they have, in a sense, also been betrayed by President Eisenhower, who ordered Lumumba’s murder. As a president, Eisenhower is a father figure the leader of their country. Learning that he is capable of murder leads them to questions what their country stands for.

In the fourth book *Bel and the Serpent*, we finally reach the crisis that has been hinted at since the beginning of the book: Ruth May’s death. Preceding her death are series of events making the collapse of different institutions. First, the village votes to end Nathan’s ministry, signifying his complete failure to bring Christianity into their lives.

Kingsolver through her novel tells the story of the Congo’s journey to independence after colonial rule. Unfortunately, that journey didn’t end with Lumumba’s election in 1960 or with his death in 1961. After Lumumba’s death, Mobutu ruled for more than three decades, destroying the country’s economy in the process. The Congo would not have a chance to be truly free until Mobutu was no longer in power. Therefore, to make her story follow history, Kingsolver needed to continue tracking the lives of the Prices.

Book six of the *Poisonwood Bible* is entitled ‘song of the three children’. This section provides readers a final comment on colonialism from the perspective of the different philosophies of the characters. What we came to know at last how all three women respect Africa. In the end, as all three Price daughters point out, Africa will not be changed. Out of three Rachel has changed the least. After so many years of witnessing injustice, Leah has lost her faith in justice and instead hopes for balance between good and evil. Meanwhile, with her lost disability; Adah has also lost her sense of betrayal. Instead she sees the world filled with misunderstandings, she comments “Illusions mistaken for truth are, the pavement under our feet. They are what we call Civilization,” (PB 637) that comment makes sense in terms of what Nathan said about the Americans and Europeans bringing Civilization to Africa. In fact, he believed he was bringing civilization to Africa in the form of a Bible. In reality however, as Adah observes, he and the other colonial powers were simply bringing to Africa a series of illusions – illusions of what they thought Africa was, and illusions of what they thought Africa would be.

Conclusions:

The book six of the *Poisonwood Bible* gives the novel a circular feel and a sense of closure. It is fitting that Orleanna return to Africa with her three daughters to say good bye to Ruth May, for it is in Africa that Orleanna will find peace after spending so many years

grieving for her lost child. By revisiting the memory of the forest picnic, the spirit offers a new, larger perspective on an old event. This leads one to reevaluate the other moments in the story and wonder in what unseen ways did these characters touch history. As it is described, “Every life is different because you passed this way and touched history.” (PB 643)

The death of Mobuta and the reconnection of Orleanna to Ruth May’s sprite also suggests that a healing process has begun for both the Congo and the Price family, Ruth May’s spirit instructs Orleanna to forgive herself. Because Ruth May’s spirit is also the spirit of Africa, its directive to forgive pertains not only to Orleanna, but to all people who had no control over the damage and suffering that their leaders and forefathers inflicted on innocent lives

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