

EXPLORING THE PORTRAYAL OF RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM IN UNIGWE'S *ON BLACK SISTERS' STREET*

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Abstract

There is hardly any shortage of studies on the problem of religious extremism. However, what most studies on religiously motivated terrorism and armed conflict lack is a balanced view, a perspective which recognizes that Islamic religion is not the only religion susceptible to extremism. This is the lacuna which this paper seeks to fill, the exploration of extremism in the context of Christianity, a religion which all too often claims to distinguish itself from the acts of extremism often pointed out in Islam. Using the Christian religious setting of Chika Unigwe's second novel, *On Black Sisters' Street*, the researcher through the lens of postcolonial theory studies the way in which the novel, through the family of Brother Cyril–Ama's supposed father – represents religious extremism as a menace strangulating the peace and unity of families in post-colonial (post-independence) Africa. In detecting and discussing Brother Cyril's extremist actions, the paper further employs Alex P. Schmid's EMI-20, an instrument developed for the detection of extremism using *Twenty Indicators for Monitoring Extremism*.

Keywords: Extremism, Rape, EMI-20, Christianity, Fanaticism

Introduction

Whereas Christian religious extremism is assuredly evident in the writings of African literary writers whose works are set in the colonial African times (for example, Ferdinand Oyono's *Old Man and the Medal* and Mongo Beti's *Poor Christ of Bomba*), these writers' portrayals of this issue are nothing compared to what is seen in post-colonial literature, a very typical example being that of Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*. Reading the text, a reader can't help but see the colonial portrayal of religious extremism as a mere herald of things to come in post-colonial Africa. What is most worrisome about this situation is that in these post-colonial texts, the white man is no longer the one perpetuating these acts. Rather Africans themselves are the ones who, in the name of promoting Christianity, have become the extremist adherents of creeds and practices which do not actually align with Biblical teachings. This sordid fact can only point to one thing: that the Christian religious practices and doctrines instituted in Africa by the white men could be nothing but a

colonial tool which has the goal of subduing the identity of Africans while serving the interest of enriching European economy and identity.

It is worthy of note that the representation of “family” is one of the core discursive issues in Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street*. Unigwe uses the image of the family as the building block of society to draw attention to the challenges facing African women, girls and children (the weakest elements of society) and thus the challenges facing Africans in general. In the text, the role of the father as the protector of the family, the source of strength and courage for the children, and the source of happiness for the wife, is primarily missing, if not challenged. Whereas fathers and husbands are generally perceived as the backbone of the family, Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street* seems to show that due to the perversion of the Christian religion, African men – most especially the extremely religious ones – are increasingly failing in this role, becoming instead a source of psychological torment and anguish for their children and wives. Ama’s father who is known as Brother Cyril in Unigwe’s novel is a good example of such men who, in their pursuit of so-called religious interests, extremely oppress their family. The man can fittingly be described as a religious extremist. But first of all, it is important to understand the meaning of this word by exploring its various contemporary semantic shades.

Understanding Religious Extremism: A Review of the Term

One of the definitive elements of African society is religion. From the Sub-Saharan regions of West, East and Southern Africa to the desert countries of North Africa, the African man – whether of black ascendancy or of fair-skinned Arabian descent – is typically a religious man, holding firmly to his belief in, and respect for, God (or, in some cases, a multitude of gods and goddesses). John Mbiti puts it this way: “Africans are notoriously religious so much so that religion permeates all departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it” (1). “The individual’s immersion in religious participation,” Obaji M. Agbiji and Ignatius Swartassert, “starts before birth and continues after death” (3), such that for the typical African man, “to live is to be caught up in a religious drama” (Mbiti, 1). This religious drama extends to all facets of African traditional life; both the universe and practically all human activities in it are not only seen but also experienced from a religious perspective (Agbiji and Swart, 3). Similarly, Nokuzola Mndende argues in the context of ritual, saying that in Africa, “religion is part of the fibre of society; it is deeply ingrained in social life, and it is impossible to isolate and study it as a distinct phenomenon; therefore, when members of a family clan gather together in a sacrificial ritual for the ancestors, that too is a religious activity”(161). For Mbiti, as the religious worldview informs the philosophical understanding of African myths, customs, traditions, beliefs, morals, actions and social relationships, it is almost unthinkable for an African to live without religion (15). In fact, the religious consciousness is so deeply

ingrained in the typical African person to such an extent that the resort to religion comes automatically in an unconscious process whether they are in danger, in pain, in the moment of ecstasy, joy, or sorrowing at home or in the diaspora (Ezra Chitando, Afe Adogame and Bolaji Bateye 5-7). However, as with every other cultural commodity which is easily abused when in abundance, the preponderance of religious practices in Africa has resulted in various forms of abuse, otherwise seen as religious extremism.

However, even though Islamic religious extremism has been so loud in recent years following the 9/11 New York bombing, its extremely violent nature does not becloud the extreme tendencies perceivable in most Christian religious groups. In the second to sixth chapters of his book *When Religion Becomes Evil: Five Warning Signs*, Charles Kimball points out five warning signs of religious extremism as: absolute truth claims, blind obedience, establishing the “ideal” time, the end justifies any means, and declaring holy war. Although these do not all apply to every form of extremism seen in Christian religious bodies, there is no gainsaying the fact that today’s Christianity is itself a religion built on the dogma of absolute truth and blind obedience, with many contemporary pastors and self-ordained bishops always declaring holy spiritual wars against perceived enemies (neighbours and competitors) and expecting their followers to follow without questioning their moves.

Christian religious extremism, which constitutes the focus of this research, can be clearly detected using EMI-20, that is, the twenty indicators for monitoring extremism, which is an instrument which Schmid developed from – most importantly – the works of Manus I. Midlarsky, *Origins of Political Extremism: Mass Violence in the Twentieth Century and Beyond*, and Astrid Bötticher & Miroslav Mares and others. According to Schmid’s EMI-20, extremists tend to do most of these twenty things: (i) “situate themselves outside the mainstream and reject the existing social, political or world order.” They even (ii) “seek to overthrow, with the help of a revolutionary vanguard, the political system in order to (re-) establish what they consider the natural order in society – whether this envisaged order be based on race, class, faith, ethnic superiority, or alleged tradition.” Similarly, they usually (iii) “are in possession of an ideological programme or action plan aimed at taking and holding communal or state power.” Hence, they generally (iv) “reject or, when in power, subvert the liberal-democratic conception of the rule of law; use the political space provided by it to advance their cause in efforts to take state power.” Also, they not only (v) “reject universal human rights and show a lack of empathy and disregard for the rights of others” but also (vi) “reject democratic principles based on popular sovereignty.” Extremists as well (vii) “reject equal rights for all, especially those of women and minorities;” just as they (viii) “reject diversity and pluralism in favour of their preferred mono-

cultural society, [for example] a worldwide Islamic state,” or a colonially Christianized Africa which is subject to the British empire.

Furthermore, in order to achieve their goals, extremists (ix) adhere to an ends-justify-the-means philosophy. Thus they (x) either actively or inactively “endorse and glorify the use of violence to fight what they consider “evil” and to reach their political objectives (e.g. in the form of jihad)”. Corresponding with their endorsement of violent approaches, they (xi) “show a propensity to engage in mass violence against actual and potential enemies when in power or when enjoying impunity.” This propensity speaks of their being (xii) “single-minded (black-or-white) thinkers who want to purify the world and demonise, debase and dehumanise their enemies in hate speech, characterising them as ‘inferior’ and earmarking them, implicitly or explicitly, as expendable.” Therefore, as extremists tend to (xiii) “subordinate individual freedoms to collective goals,” they (xiv) “refuse to engage in genuine (as opposed to tactical and temporal) compromises with the other side and ultimately seek to subdue or eliminate the enemy.” They are, as such, (xv) “intolerant to all views other than their own dogma which is expressed in anger, aggressive behaviour and hate speech.” Their dogma leads them to (xvi) “exhibit fanaticism, portray themselves as threatened and embrace conspiracy theories without necessarily being irrational in their strategic choices.” More so, they not only (xvii) “exhibit authoritarian, dictatorial or totalitarian traits,” but are equally (xviii) “unwilling to accept criticism, and intimidate and threaten dissenters, heretics and critics with death.” This set of people (xix) “expect obedience to their demands and commands rather than subject[ing] their views and policies to discussion even within their own group.” This is simply because they have (xx) “fixed ideas and closed minds and believe there is only one truth – theirs. In its pursuit, they are often willing to face punishment or even death and sometimes actively seek martyrdom” (Schmid, 21-22).

In Africa, for example, religious extremism has rapidly been on the increase over the past few years. There are said to be many factors that are responsible for the present crisis in Africa (Somali, Nigeria, Cameroon, etc.), such as: “poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, discrimination and political/economic marginalization” (Muhsin Hassan 18). Consequently, the adverse effects of colonialism, poverty, unemployment, illiteracy and marginalization have forced many people to join violent and non-violent extremist groups. This is so typically portrayed in Chika Unigwe’s novel, *On Black Sisters’ Street*, where we see religious extremism thrive within the family of an assistant pastor whose extremist and unjust positions the wife cannot resist because of her poverty and other socioeconomic circumstances.

Brother Cyril as an Embodiment of Religious Extremism in *On Black Sisters' Street*

In *On Black Sisters' Street*, Ama's father is the main embodiment and perpetrator of religious extremism. Ama's father—"whom everybody called Brother Cyril because he was a Christian and belonged to a church where everyone was Sister and Brother" (Unigwe, 265)—is not just a member of a church but a member of the echelon, particularly an assistant pastor, in the church. Describing him, the omniscient narrator says: "He was an assistant pastor of the Church of the Twelve Apostles of the Almighty Yahweh, Jehovah El Shaddai, JehovahJireh, one of the biggest churches in the city. The devil did not belong anywhere near the house of which he was the head" (OBSS,266). To safeguard this house from what he calls the influence of the devil, he keeps his daughter Ama isolated from her friends:

Her father did not encourage her friends to visit because he said friends sometimes led one astray. When they did come, he told them Ama had to study. From the window of her room, Ama would watch young girls from the neighbourhood shouting out to one another as they played *oga*, their feet raising dust as they stamped on the ground. (OBSS, 255-6)

For this, Ama resents her father. In her heart, she truly "wished she could crumple up her father and hurl him off the balcony. Fling him so far that his face would smash into the hills" (OBSS256). Not only does her father prevent Ama from the normal process of socialization (with friends and peers) which a girl needs at her young age, he also prevents her from having an enjoyable life and from experiencing the zest of living by stopping her from listening to the kind of music she enjoys.

Practically locked up in her father's house, Ama will get so bored that the only friend she can talk to is the pink wall. In the height of her boredom, she has learnt to keep herself entertained by listening to the loud music which, from the record store across the street, blares into the house, "loud, happy voices that trembled the house, making her want to tap and dance" (OBSS266). Sadly for her though,

Her father would have none of those. 'They are the devil's music,' he said. 'They do not edify the things of our Lord. They are the devil's music [he insists]. The devil shakes his waist and sways his horns when he hears music like that. He claps his hands and stokes his fire for the many souls that he's winning. . . . So instead of the kind of music she heard from across the street, Ama's house was infused with music from Voices of the Cross, the Calvary Sisters, Jesus Is Savior Band, *NdiUmuaziJesu*. Voices that grated on her nerves. She never thought of telling her father that the voices

irritated her. She knew what would happen if she did. (*OBSS*, 266).

But while her father, as the narrator reveals, seems – at least on the surface level – like a man who believes in the maintenance of holiness in their house, seeing everything religious as something to be treasured above human feelings and emotions, it is worthy of note that he is not really an honest, sincere, caring and loving husband and father.

Bro Cyril's religious strictness and austerity are, in actuality, mere masks that shield what he truly is: an extremist who uses his position as a pastor to commit and cover up his acts of paedophilia, worse still, the rape of his own daughter. Although he preaches that "the things of the Lord were not to be abused, nor slighted, nor ridiculed," a man who believes dictates the laws of his house in firm accord with his religious teachings, he is equally a man who is debased, a rapist who continuously has carnal knowledge of his daughter for many years (from the age of 8 to 11), and who uses harsh and angry words to shut up and control his daughter and wife. Describing some of the indicators of extremism, and thus the features of religious extremism, Schmid clearly points out that extremists tend to "subordinate individual freedoms to collective goals" (No. 14 of Schmid's EMI-20), they "refuse to engage in genuine (as opposed to tactical and temporal) compromises with the other side and ultimately seek to subdue or eliminate the enemy" (No. 14 of Schmid's EMI-20). They are, as such, "intolerant to all views other than their own dogma which is expressed in anger, aggressive behaviour and hate speech" (No. 15 of Schmid's EMI-20).

These are seen clearly in the life of Brother Cyril who uses aggressive speech and actions against his family in order to perpetually keep Ama silent about his raping her. Right from Ama's girlhood, his father has devised a means of harshly punishing her in the name of "disciplining" her when she contradicts even his little directives that do not go against moral principles: "her father would put her across his knees and, with her mother watching in a corner, tear into her with a treated *koboko*, the cow-hide cane that he nicknamed Discipline" (*OBSS* 267). With his cowhide, he is able to keep Ama in constant fear and reverence of her, so that – being in acute fear of him – she easily gives whenever she comes to her room at night. Speaking about the strategies used by terrorists, in other words, extremists, in the pursuit of their goal, Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara F. Walter observe that "terrorism works not simply because it instils fear in target populations, but because it causes governments and individuals to respond in ways that aid the terrorists' cause" (50). They further make the core argument that since extremists are too weak to impose their will directly by force of arms, "they are sometimes strong enough to persuade audiences to do as they wish by altering the audience's

beliefs about such matters as the terrorist's ability to impose costs (punishments) and their degree of commitment to their cause" (50). Similar to the violent extremists, al-Qaida and the Irish Republican Army (IRA), discussed by Kydd and Walter, in Ama's case, her father Brother Cyril uses his constant acts of terror that come in the form of moral discipline to instill fear in his daughter, to make her remain in constant dread of him. As the narrator points out, sometimes when Ama thinks of going against her father's wish, she remembers what the punishment will be, the cow-hide which he will use to flog her to his satisfaction. Says the narrator:

There was nothing Ama feared more than Discipline cutting a rawness into her skin that hurt for many days after. Discipline also always showed its face when Ama disobeyed her parents, because her father was a great believer in "Sparing the rod spoils the child." He even had a wooden tablet with the Bible passages alluding to that inscribed in a flourish on it and hung up on the door of Ama's room. "So that you'll never forget." (*OBSS*,268)

While there's nothing wrong with instilling discipline in a child who errs, Brother Cyril does not use his so-called disciplinary measures to correct Ama's delinquency (Ama is actually not a delinquent child) but to subdue her spirit into submission to rape. Just as Kydd and Walter have pointed out earlier, the extremists often combine violence with persuasiveness in order to push the government and individuals to give in to their demands. The same is true with Ama's father, during Ama's girlhood, he has devised the means of keeping her subdued using force as well as the citing of Biblical passages. Whenever he sneaks into Ama's room at night to have sex with her, Ama tries to put up a resistance:

She would hold her body stiff, muscles tense, as if that would make her wish come true. When she did this, her father would demand, 'What's the Fifth Commandment?' 'Honor thy father and thy mother,' she would reply, her voice muffled by the collar of her nightgown in her mouth. And then she would relax her muscles, let him in, and imagine that she was flying high above the room. Sometimes she saw herself on the ceiling, looking down at a man who looked like her father and a girl who looked like her. When the pain made this difficult, she bit on her lower lip until it became numb. (*OBSS*,275)

Thus Brother Cyril is not just a religious extremist who uses several antics to maintain a positive public image but also a core hypocrite who uses the deceitful application of scriptural passages to guilt-trap, and thus force, his daughter Ama to allow him rape her.

Ama remembers that this history of raping and defying her has lasted for several years, starting from her eight birthday up until her first experience of

menstrual flow at the age of eleven (*OBSS*,301). Relating the first occurrence of this filthy incident, the narrator explains that it has started the night after a big birthday party has been held for the little girl:

For Ama's big party, her father, predictably, wore one of his white safari suits... After the guests had gone and Ama had been sent to bed certain that this was the happiest day of her entire life, her father floated into her dark room in his white safari suit. Ama thought he was a ghost and would have screamed if he had not pre-empted her by covering her mouth with one broad palm and smothering the scream in her throat. With the other hand, he fumbled under her nightdress, a cotton lavender gown with the print of a huge grinning bear. That was the first time it happened. (*OBSS*,273-4)

It is not just ironical but also symbolical that Brother Cyril wears white as a symbol of his holiness, and yet wearing this same colour he goes to rape his daughter. His unleashing sexual violence against Ama while wearing his white safari suit not only suggests that he does not really have regard for the holiness he claims to represent but also that this seeming holiness is but a garb meant to conceal the fact that he is a wolf in sheep's clothing.

This indeed is a typical feature of extremists: they pretend to be what they are not and using their persuasiveness, they confuse others in order to gain their sympathy (Schmid, 12). What makes Ama's situation worse is the fact that she is all alone in her woes and only has the walls of their house to confide in. In desperately in need of someone to cry to, Ama narrates to the walls how her father has held her nipple between his fingers and squeezed; she tells the walls of the pain of the squeezing and the coldness of her father's hands. As the rape continues night after night, the wall not only heard of how he ignored her when she said that he was hurting her inside, but also of "how she tried to push him away when he lay on top of her, but he was a mountain and she did not have the strength in her to move a mountain. She told of the grunting and the sticky whiteness like pap that gushed out of him. 'It's warm and yucky,' she complained to her walls. 'I'll never eat pap again!'" (*OBSS*, 276).

One can't help but wonder why Ama cries to the walls instead of to her mother. Why has her mother neither noticed her daughter's dejection nor try to find out what ails the little girl? As the narrator reveals, Ama's mother is a totally subdued woman who is living in fear in her husband's house and who will do everything to prevent being sacked by the husband, Brother Cyril. Ama even suspects that she is not unaware of the fact that her father has been raping her.

When Ama got older and wiser, she would think that her mother walked around in a deliberate state of blindness. Otherwise she

would have seen into her heart and asked her, “*Nwa m*, my daughter, what is the matter?” She wished her mother would ask her so that she could tell her, but she never asked, choosing instead to complain about Ama’s hair being as tough as sisal. (OBSS,277-8)

Ama’s mother is, pure and simple, a subjugated woman who has totally resigned her life to whatever fate her husband dictates. Ama sometimes feels sorry for her “the way she had to boil the clothes the assistant pastor on his way to becoming pastor had to wear so that his purity glowed, the way she walked with her back hunched when the clothes did not come out clean enough and Brother Cyril, who did not tolerate shortcomings and wanted them all ‘to make it to heaven,’ expiated her sin with a beating” (OBSS,300).

Even when, in her adulthood, Ama eventually finds the words to tell her mother what her father has done to her for over three years, she has hushed her up and pretended not to believe it. In fact, she has “lifted a hand and slapped [Ama] on her mouth,” asking her, “how dare you talk about your father like that? What has taken possession of you? Have you gone mad?” (OBSS,305). It is not that Ama’s mother needs any convincing to believe what Ama is saying. While she already knows what has been going on behind her back, she wants to be kept in the dark about it so as to maintain her plausible deniability. In fact, Ama herself wishes there was a way she could free her mother and herself from the house in Enugu with the thirty-two steps leading up to heaven (OBSS 300). Following Ama’s revelation of Brother Cyril’s history of incestuous sexual relation with her, not only does her mother slap her but she also immediately and resolutely takes her husband’s side and does nothing to verify what her daughter has just said.

The father Brother Cyril himself waves the allegation away as false and unfounded, the rant of a liar. Furthermore, he uses the opportunity to announce his disowning of Ama as his daughter, and to inform the young girl that he is not his biological father:

‘I am not your father. You hear that? I took in your mother, and this is all the thanks I get. All the thanks I get for saving you from being a bastard. All the years I raised you, fed you, this is all the thanks I get. You know what happens to children without fathers? Children who are born at home? Father unknown. *Imemkpuke*. I want you out of my house. I want you out. Tata. Today! As God is my witness, you shall leave my house today!’ (OBSS,306-7)

In the wake of this revelation, Ama feels happy that this extremist she has called father all through her life isn’t really her father. She is delighted at the

thought that she has another father who must be a better man than Brother Cyril—“he had to be. She willed it” (*OBSS*,308).

Back to the question raised earlier: why has Ama’s mother done nothing to question her husband or to even complain about the beatings, harsh words and unfair treatment she and Ama get from her husband? The reason is that she is a woman who has become a slave to her misguided sense of loyalty and gratefulness for what Brother Cyril has done for her in the past. Being a woman who, in her early adulthood, has been laden with an unwanted pregnancy, with nowhere to live and no one to help her, she has been surprised that Brother Cyril has then not only taken pity on her but has equally asked to marry her despite the fact that she has been pregnant for another man, an unknown man. For this seemingly benevolent act of Brother Cyril, she has become heavily indebted to him and, in the course of their marriage, resigned to live with whatever form of brutality, emotional exploitation and inhumane treatment she might get from him.

As such, she has sold all her right to Brother Cyril and is ready to take his own perspective in every matter, even if he says that yellow is green and that red is white. “I made a mistake. One mistake that could have destroyed me completely,” She opens up to Ama:

Yet Brother Cyril took me in and married me. He saved me from a terrible life. How many men would marry a woman who was carrying a child for another man? Tell me, Ama, tell me. And you throw all that in his face. What have I done to deserve this? Tell me, Ama, what have I ever done to deserve this? He could have sent both of us out tonight. Many men would. You know that. Yet, out of the goodness of his heart, he didn’t. (*OBSS*,310)

Notice in her statement above that her concern is not about whatever Brother Cyril has done to Ama, but about his not throwing her out of the house for her past mistake of underage, unwanted, out-of-wedlock, pregnancy.

Despite knowing deep in her heart that her husband is an extremist, she still sees him – this religious extremist and rapist – as a man who abounds in the “goodness of [the] heart” (310). What she does not know is that the reason why Brother Cyril has not asked her out of the house is not because he is a kind man who has a good heart but because he simply cannot afford to lose her. He cannot afford to lose this wife of his, who he has craftily been able to tame and subjugate into becoming an ever-working washing machine, a machine ready to do his bidding at all times, ready to boil, soak and bleach the white clothes he wears every day without as much as a grumble let alone a complaint. He, moreover, cannot afford to lose her and risk having his secrets in the public. Unfortunately, Ama’s mother does not know her worth, her

rights as a wife and mother, and thus lives as a slave under the roof of a man who treats her as the lowliest of servants rather than as a wife and companion. Her husband's religious extremism has totally subdued her through and through such that she no longer has any identity or knowledge of herself left apart from the one he confers on her.

Conclusion

The foregoing underscores non-violent religious extremism to be immanent in fanatical Christianity, the kind of Christianity championed by Brother Cyril in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*. Studying the novel using the twenty different indicators for monitoring extremism (EMI-20), which was developed by Schmid, this research found out that acts of extremism could be seen in different religions, not just in Islam. It is also found that extremism does not constitute in armed violence alone, but involves any form of aggressive, inhumane and cruel action taken either against fellow adherents of the religion or against non-adherents with the claim or pretence of fostering the will of God. As such, Cyril's continual rape of Ama for about three years is an act of religious extremism, for not only does Cyril claim to be defiling her with moral authority, but he also wants her to believe that God has sanctioned this abhorrent act. Similarly, his continual beating and verbal assault of his wife both constitute acts of religious extremism. Hence, since religious extremism—both violent and non-violent—permeates all kinds of religion, it is imperative that the popular view of extremism, mostly portrayed in Western media, as having an Islamic-only colouration be changed and replaced with a balanced view which accepts and seeks to condemn the existence of religious and secular extremism in all its forms.

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