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REVIEW ARTICLE

CHRISTIAN RELIGION IN JOHN HABWE'S *PARADISO*

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ABSTRACT

This study elaborates how John Habwe depicts Christianity in his book *Paradiso* (2005). Throughout the book, the writer shows how Christian religion can be used as a tool of oppression. Habwe uses examples from some churches to depict conflicts and hypocrisy in the church. This leads to the conclusion that Christianity has been used to con members of the church in order to enrich its leaders. This paper explains various types of oppression against believers in the church as portrayed in *Paradiso*. It was found out that religious leaders and believers employ the following in oppressing other believers: use of oppressive religious regulations, hiding behind religious fellowship, promise of economic prosperity, justifying wrong deeds, use of propaganda and scramble for power.

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INTRODUCTION

Religion affects the society in various ways. According to Bilton, *et al.* (1987:414), religion has influence on the social life of man. This means that if religious teachings are deconstructed to oppress the believer, majority of them will be affected since no one wants to question God. Many religious denominations have come up and majority of them spread the gospel of prosperity. Bilton *et al.* (1987), goes on to say that religion gives holy laws concerning societal way of life. Members of the society follow these laws as they consider them divine. The purpose of this study is to analyze various ways of using Christianity to oppress the believer in Kiswahili novel. The data was collected from John Habwe's *Paradiso* (2005). *Paradiso*, is a realistic Kiswahili novel written by John Habwe and published by The Jomo Kenyatta Foundation, 2005. The writer discusses challenges facing religious leaders and suggests its solutions. He shows that religious leaders who repent and change from their bad ways are saved and those who stick to sin are punished. *Paradiso* is a Kiswahili word meaning paradise. As depicted in *Paradiso*, the journey to paradise is full of challenges which all the believers must overcome. According to Njogu and Chimerah (1999), the work of literature is to portray the society as it is. This is because the artist is the product of the society depicted in his / her work. This statement was of great value to the writing of this paper as it shows how the novel can help us understand the social ills and correct them. Religious oppression affects many members in the society. Many researches in Swahili literature have analyzed various types of oppression in the society as portrayed

in Kiswahili literature. These works include: Ndungo (1985), Momanyi (1998), Kimani (2003), Gitau (2005), and Kavuria (2008). These researchers have discussed how oppression against men, women and children is portrayed in Kiswahili literature. This research was aimed at filling the gap of discussing how some social institutions like the church can be misused to oppress the believer.

Christianity and oppression in *Paradiso*

Religious regulations / laws

Some of the rules laid down to the believers are confusing. These rules and regulation are forced on the believers without making sure that they understand them. A case in point is that of Mzee Mango in *Paradiso*, 2005. The church elders' advises Mango that polygamous marriage is not godly. They want Mango to divorce his wives so that he can be a true Christian. This advice confuses Mango since he had read about famous people in the Bible like King Solomon and King David who were polygamous. Therefore, we can claim that this is an act of oppression to the believers because people who pass through the same situation as that of Mango are affected psychologically. Mango needs to understand why he has to divorce his wives. It is more confusing especially when the believer reads the opposite from the Bible.

As a result of this confusion, Mango decides to act as the gospel tells him. He believes that when Jesus saves a man with a scar he remains with that scar but without sin. The analogy of the scar helps us understand why it is necessary for Mango not to divorce his wives. They are like scars committed in sin and will remain even in salvation.

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From the talk between Mango and the church elders, it's clear that some religious leaders while advising the believers sometimes don't consider the consequences of their advice. Mango had five wives and he is advised to have only one to be a true Christian. This means that he has to divorce the other four women. Divorcing the four wives would make Mango a 'true' Christian but cause suffering to the women. It is true that the Bible teaches about monogamy. The emphasis is on those who would want to be deacons and leaders in the church. Paul wrote to Timothy in *1 Timothy 3:1-2*, about the qualities of those who aspire to be bishops. Among the qualities of a bishop is that he should be a husband to one wife. These teachings of Paul are deconstructed by some believers to mean that a good Christian is one married to one wife. It is clear Paul did not ask his followers to divorce their wives. The church elders changed Paul's teaching to suit their idea of a true Christian but doing so puts believers like Mango in dilemma of what to believe.

Religious fellowships

Paradiso, shows how religion can be misused to hide individual intentions. Religious gathering like worship and fellowships can be used to facilitate some evils amongst the members of the society. Lona welcomes Joshua to live in his house as a brother in Christ. Her husband, Mganga has no objection to this. He feels that Joshua should be assisted because he is needy. Mganga is not a Christian like his wife but he is a generous gentleman who loves his visitors. Joshua misuses Mganga's generosity by having a relationship with his wife for ten years while staying at his house. It is evident that Joshua and Lona misuses religion by using Christian 'brother' and 'sister' tag to conceal their acts of adultery. It should be noted at this point that Christian teaching warns against coveting someone's wife. The writer of *Paradiso*, use sarcasm to portray hypocrisy among some believers. Joshua spends most of his time reading the Bible but goes against the same Biblical teachings by sleeping with his host's wife. He is a good example of believers who use religion to oppress others. Joshua who is supposed to be a brother in Christ to Lona ends up being his lover. He calls Lona by the name sister in order to conceal their illicit relationship. Though a Christian, Lona doesn't see any problem with his relationship with Joshua in fact when her mother questions her behavior, she asks her;

Hata ndugu katika Kristo angeweza kuwa mume. Kuna ubaya? (uk. 35)
(*Even a brother in Christ can be a husband. Is there a problem with that, pg. 35?*)

Joshua and Lona finally end up in marriage. This makes Mganga hate all women because of he believed that all of them act like Lona. The brother in Christ relationship is deconstructed to suit adulterous behavior of Lona and Joshua. Habwe portrays the members of the church as individuals who are not keen on the behavior of their leaders. Joshua for example, remains the pastor of church even after snatching Mganga's wife. In fact he is promoted to be the head of New Jerusalem church. Church leaders like Joshua now become the advisors of the members on moral issues. For example he advises evangelist Michael to get married so that people don't

suspect him of adultery when they see him with women. Again Habwe sarcastically portrays the hypocrisy of church leaders who advise others against the evil in which they indulge in. It is clear from *Paradiso* that getting married is not a solution to adultery. Some people might not engage in fornication but become adulterous after marriage. Michael who was advised to get married to avoid being suspected of adultery ends up sleeping with another woman, Patricia who was a close friend to Michael's wife Lydia.

Habwe shows how religious fellowship can be used to conceal some illegal businesses. Boribori, his wife and ten other believers are arrested for drug trafficking. The New Jerusalem church was a storage place for their drugs. The write deconstructs religious fellowship as a meeting with some hidden lawless agendas. It is assumed that the society view the church as a place where people are taught about moral issues. However, in *Paradiso*, the church is used to promote adultery and drug trafficking. Habwe aims at creating a new church without blemish. This can be seen in passing of judgment against Boribori by Justice Moriasi. While reading his judgment, Moriasi says that the church should continue weeding out people who negatively affect its growth as done by Boribori and his wife, Judy.

True friendship is betrayed in the church. Religious fellowships are used by some preachers to engage in sexual activities. Michael is already married but has an affair with Patricia, his wife's best friend. Patricia is seen as an active Christian who visits the church regularly. Later it is found out that Patricia has been visiting Pastor Michael to make love with him in his church office. Thus, religious gathering for fellowship in this case is seen as a source of extramarital affairs instead of promoting spiritual growth. The visitation of believers by the pastors is also deconstructed. The main aim of visitation is to spread Christianity. Therefore, when a preacher is seen visiting a believer, it is assumed that that he is doing God's work. However, in *Paradiso*, some pastors' visitation has different intentions. For instance, Musa is found making love to Salome by Salome husband. This lead to Bishop Musa being injured. The report reaching the congregation during the Sunday Service is that Bishop Musa was attacked by the devil while doing God's work. The visitation by Bishop Musa was to spread adultery while claiming that he was spreading the word of God.

The gospel of prosperity

Paradiso, depicts prosperity gospel as a method of enriching the preachers and leaving the faithful in perpetual poverty. The road to prosperity becomes clearer when believers give to the preachers generously. Habwe describes how religious teachings are tailored to talk about the material needs of majority of the members of the congregation. This expands the number of the church members as majority of them would wish to find ways of delivering themselves from poverty. Habwe shows that majority of the denominations associate economic prosperity with being saved. Poverty is associated with lack of or having little faith. The poor are assumed to have failed to obey God. The giving of alms is emphasized without bothering to find out how those who give generously get their money.

The rich are valued and the poor condemned. In *Paradiso*, Lona condemns those who go to church on foot. Each member of the church is expected to drive a car. According to Lona, the New Jerusalem church measures individuals level of Christianity by their ability to acquire a car. The poor believers are seen as sinners who God decided to punish by making them poor. Dividing the believers by considering their material possession makes the majority give up. They believe that they offended God. It is also a way of making them give more money to the church with the expectation that God will bless them. They use their little resources with the expectation of getting riches like their colleagues in the church. Sometimes poor believers tend to believe that, God wanted them to be poor and that's how things should always be.

According to Njiru and Shorter (2001), many upcoming denominations are proud of the economic prosperity gospel. Such denomination attract many people to their congregation who seek economic prosperity. They do so by announcing when they are preaching using the media. The denomination put more emphasis on testimonies about how people got economic emancipation after attending their church. Shorter and Njiru posit that religion is portrayed by the proponents of prosperity gospel as a means to economic success. Most teachings in the church make promises of success to the congregation. It is easy to attract people to such teaching because of their financial needs.

Privatization of church property

Some religious leaders sometimes privatize church property. The church is seen as belonging to those in authority. Thus, the believers cannot question those in authority as they are assumed to own the church. In *Paradiso*, when Amuko's wife is healed after Michael praying for her, Amuko donates a vehicle to the church. However, Pastor Joshua takes the car and privatizes it. This is a clear case of corruption in some churches. The church leaders end up stealing from the church instead of protecting it. All the offering in some churches i.e. the love offering, offering for thanksgiving and giving of ten percent to God ends up in the hands of the pastors. Order to increase the amounts of money earned by each pastor from the offering, the believers is asked to give more money to God. It is clear that the Bible teaches about giving to God but it also teaches about the role of the church in helping the needy in the society especially the widows and the orphans. This is not the case in The New Jerusalem Church. The leaders don't have plans to help the needy in their society. They assume the teachings in the scripture about helping the poor. The emphasis is put on teaching about giving all types of offerings to God which ends up in the hands of the preachers. Habwe depicts a Christian church which is full of corrupt leaders ready to do anything to get more money from the congregation.

Another example is that of Joshua and Musa who use the 10% offering as it pleases them. They fail to involve church members in any church activities that concern the use of money. This gives them ample time to swindle church money. Thus the believers become tools of giving money in the church to enrich their leaders without finding how that money is used in the church.

Propaganda

The various denominations scramble for more members. When other denominations get more members than their competitors, the later use propaganda to undermine their achievements. Propaganda is used to portray the other denomination as evil so that it doesn't attract members. When the New Jerusalem church gets majority of the members, the other denominations claim that they are practicing Satanism (*Paradiso*, page 53). The propaganda is used to depict the New Jerusalem church as evil. The Bible teaches against cheating. Cheating is associated with Satan. According to *John 8:44* Satan is described as a murderer and the father of lies. In this verse, Jesus tells his followers that there is no truth in the devil, and even goes so far as to say that lying is the devil's native tongue. Habwe depicts the church leaders as people who practice what the Bible teaches against. They lie in order to deny believers a chance of choosing the denomination they want to belong to. Some of the evil deeds by the religious leaders is concealed by the use of propaganda. In fact when religious leaders engage in ungodly activities, it is reported to members that those are plans by Satan to destabilize the church. A good example is that of Bishop Musa. When Bishop Musa is beaten after he is found making love to Salome, the report given to the church is that Musa was attacked by the devil while spreading the word of God. Though Musa was practicing adultery, Omae informs the congregation that Bishop Musa was attacked by Satan. The congregation was asked to pray for Musa who was now at the hospital. It is our opinion that the right thing was to expose Musa's adultery and counsel him to avoid doing the same. Instead of doing that, Satan takes all the blame as the church members keep on sinning.

Justifying wrong deeds

Habwe shows that some of the church leaders look for means to justify some of the evil deeds in the church. They do so by involving the name of God in all they do whether bad or good. By using the Lord's name, they make the believers not to question their misdeeds. No one is willing to question God and this enables the leaders not to be accountable for their doings. When Salome and Musa are found making love, the congregation is told they were doing God's work. Pastor Michael warns against such behavior. He says that:

Lakini aibu yetu ni kudai kuwa yote tunayatenda kwa jina la Bwana. Ati tuko njiani kwenda paradiso. It is shameful that we do all these in the name of God and pretend that we are going to paradise. It is difficult for religious leaders like Joshua to warn the congregation against evil when they also engage themselves in the same. Therefore, what is emphasized in the church is performing miracles without preaching the gospel. In *Paradiso*, religious leaders are not pleased when Michael preaches against rape, stealing, adultery and corruption. This is because some the leaders practice the vices Michael is preaching against. The church teachings therefore, are purposively selected to avoid preaching against such vices. Religion is therefore deconstructed to benefit the needs of the preacher but not to spread the gospel as it is. According to *Paradiso*, the believers also don't like those who rebuke their evil deeds. Any preacher who preaches against evil is seen as

having the aim of annoying the congregation. They don't like being told the truth. For example, Leah says that Michael has been preaching about her because she was the only lady in that church who was not married. Also rumors were that she had two children with Bishop Joshua outside wedlock. Most of the believers prefer attending church services where prosperity is talked about. They don't want to be corrected. This situation makes the religious leader to tailor their teachings according to the likes of their congregation. Anything which is not pleasing to the congregation is left out in the sermon in order to continue keeping them in the church.

Fighting for church leadership

Church leadership attracts many members of the congregation. To them leadership is a key to church offerings. This makes the religious leaders to use all means available to remain in leadership. Some go to the extent of fighting for power. Others kill their fellow Christians whom they see as a threat to their position in the church. In *Paradiso*, Mango is poisoned because of competition for power in their church. There were also ten people who were poisoned because of leadership conflict in the church. Nine among them pass on. According to *Paradiso*, most of the conflicts in the church are caused by scramble for leadership positions. It is because when one is a leader in the church he has access to offering. Any religious leader who is just seen as a threat to his colleagues. Anyone who is talented is given a lot of conditions which restrict him from preaching the gospel. Joshua sees Michael as a threat because he attracts a lot of believers. Thus Joshua's conditions to Musa are that he must get married to Joshua's daughter and should not preach without Joshua's permission. Joshua is afraid of competition from talented preachers like Musa. The church in this case is taken as individual's property. Anyone who preaches in that church must follow the regulation laid down by these church owners. We assume that the congregation does not get quality teaching because of the conflict in the church. The conflict among the church leaders can lead to members of the congregation who support the opposite sides engaging in a fight. In *Paradiso*, members who support Michael and Joshua fight as a result of the conflict between the two. The conflict in the church makes non-believers wonder about Christianity. One of the police officer who was called to quell the fighting in the church wonders:

Nyinyi mnaabudu Mungu gani? Sasa mnapigania nini? (Uk. 77)

Which God do you worship? Why are you fighting?

The conflict in the church makes the people of Kibera where the church was located to remain with many unanswered questions. They wonder if the believers who fought worship God. *Paradiso* challenges the essence of Christianity. It poses the question as to why people who worship the same God fight for power. Such conflict pushes people away from the church. Members of the congregation who used to talk as brothers now view their colleagues as enemies.

Oppressive rules

It is our opinion that some rules laid down by some denominations are oppressive to the believers. Such rules are

made without considering the needs of the believer. Mango after losing his wife is given a lot of conditions by the church before they lay his wife to rest. The Budalangi church of God want him to buy a cow, twenty kilograms of sugar, five kilograms of cooking oil and five thousand shillings. It is ironical that Mango who is bereaved is expected to feed the congregation as the church demands. Mango is the one who needs help. The church in this case is converting burial ceremonies into a business where they get money and food. Such oppressive practices are against Christian teachings as explained by Michael:

...Bwana Yesu alisema ukienda mahali pa msiba ni vyema kushiriki katika msiba na kuwapoza walioathiriwa (uk. 95)

Jesus said that when you go to a place of mourning you should mourn and console with the mourners.

It is ironical that religious leaders who are supposed to be consoling the mourners are the ones oppressing them. After the burial the bereaved are subjected to more problems. After losing their person they also lose their property by feeding the mourners and the servants of God. These deeds by religious leaders convert burial ceremonies to be a situation where people feast at the expense of the bereaved.

Conclusion

This paper has explained in detail how Christianity can be deconstructed to be a tool of oppressing believers in Habwe's *Paradiso*. Habwe has clearly depicted conflicts and hypocrisy in the church. Some of the church leaders use their position to acquire property. Therefore, the church as portrayed in *Paradiso* is a kind of business where teaching is tailored towards the importance of giving of offerings to God. From the research it was noted that religion can be used to promote good morals in the society. However some religious leaders have misused religion by deconstructing its teaching to suit their desires. We have shown in this paper that religion can be used to oppress the believer because people fear questioning anything that is concerned with God. According to Habwe's *Paradiso*, many denominations were concentrated in the slums where majority of the people were poor. The location of the churches was purposeful since the poor could easily be swayed to give in order to prosper economically.

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