

Catholicon of Marriages: *What if ...?* by Linda Jummai Mustafa

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Abstract

Flora Nwapa was among early African female writers and her first novel, *Efuru* is on female subjugation by men. This novel created a scenario of women being intimidated and subdued by their spouses and envisages women's revolutionary attempt to take their rightful positions in their families and society as free humans and not slaves to their husbands. Today, women in all facets of the society record positive growth as their immense contributions and impact are contributing to the growth and sustainable development of both families and society at large. However, many women still suffer violence in their matrimonial homes which hinders their contributing meaningfully in their homes and society. Some of these women die in silence. Can such violence be attributed to joblessness? Using Linda Jummai Mustafa's *What if ...?*, this study examines the catholicon of marriages for healthy marriages and homes. It goes further to examine and analyze the reasons for unhealthy marriages and calls for solutions. Contextual qualitative method is used to appraise the text while trauma theory is used to explore the text. An appraisal of the text shows that a lot of men marry much younger women and so have negative notion concerning marriages and women as they seem to marry believing that women are mere objects or slaves kept in the house for procreation. This shows that most men marry without knowing the meaning of marriage. The findings reveal that men contribute more to the failure of their marriages than women.

Keywords: Violence, Catholicon, Marriage, Joblessness, subjugation

Introduction

Marriage is a union of two people mainly of opposite sex to become husband and wife. It is the legal relationship between a husband and a wife. This simply implies that marriage must be legal and an agreement between a man and a woman must be reached. This could be through tradition or church or even in the court of law. Once it is legal, it is expected that the union will last their life time. Thus, Amao-Kehinde (2009) defines marriage as a contract that will last for all time in

the future between a man and woman who have come together to share their love and care for each other to promote their common well-being and growth. To Macious and Plumber (2005), marriage is a legal union that involves sexual activity, procreation and economic cooperation. It is obvious from the above definitions that marriage is a legal contract for the welfare of both man and woman. Marriage is therefore understood as a conjugal contract between man and woman for mutual help, to keep each other company and to procreate.

Therefore, both parents are responsible for bringing up their offspring. Indeed, couples are expected to resolve their differences amicably and move towards an acceptable path to achieve their mutual goals. Society's stability and effectiveness depend on its marital stability and success as marital stability supports the growth and sustainability of society because marriage is the bedrock of every society. It is pertinent to note that marriage gives married girls a new way of life, expectations, experiences and risks. People are supposed to be given orientation and awareness created before they commit to this 'all-important' institution called marriage. This is one of the reasons why different churches organize 'marriage courses' or 'marriage seminars' to help new couples know exactly what marriage is all about and enjoy their marriages.

Katu in his work, 'Causes of divorce and their implications for Counseling: A case study of Jos metropolis', believes that people get involved in marriage to reduce the rate at which they fornicate and live unholy life. It is understood that marriage reduces reckless sexual intercourse and lust but it cannot eradicate them as married men and women still get involved in such dangerous and harmful way of life. Children are also involved and so it is the parents' responsibilities to give their offspring emotional rest of mind, security, education and inculcate moral and social values in them. Therefore every marriage is expected to provide comfort to the children.

Family problems based on domestic violence or lack of communication between couple probably because one, especially the man is much older or one has better education background affect society adversely. Usually, girls involved in this type of marriage are not involved in decision-making and are of low status in their homes. Violence may lead to divorce or death of one of the spouses by the other just in *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Adichie where Eugene's wife secretly poisoned him to death because her husband is a tyrant and exhibits wickedness towards the entire family both nuclear and extended. Mustafa treats violence and many other vices that can break up homes. This work, therefore, examines uncivil attitudes in marriages and there consequences using *What if ...?* by Linda Jummai Mustafa.

Trauma Theory

Balaev Michelle writes that trauma theory came into existence in the 1990's by Cathy Caruth, Kali Tal, Geoffery Hartman, Shoshara Felman and Dori Laub with the publication of Cathy Caruths *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, narrative and History* and Kali Tal's *World of Hurt; Reading the Literature of Trauma*. Caruth in her book writes that 'trauma is precisely not known

in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on (4). Tal's book examines how the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, sexual abuse and incest have raised serious debate in American culture. The two books highlight the voices of people that survive trauma.

Trauma theory is pertinent to this study as most of the characters are traumatized. One of the characters suffers a mental condition caused by severe shock which really lasts for a long time. The mental shock almost took her life. Many characters have unpleasant experiences that keep them miserable. One of the characters also attempted suicide. To Balaev, analysis shows that amnesia, dissociation, or repression may be responses to trauma (6). She goes on to write in her article 'Trends in Literary Trauma Theory' that trauma creates a speechless fear that destroys identity. Trauma theory helps to explore the difficulties and complexities in relationships when the relationship goes sour especially when they involve violence. She is also of the view that trauma novels show how traumatic events disorganize relationships or strong bonding by challenging issues on moral values and social relationships or associations in a particular area or environment. Trauma novels portray serious fear in characters. Balaev defines trauma as:

.... A person's emotional response to an overwhelming event disrupts ideas of an individual's sense of self and the standards by which one evaluates society. The term 'trauma level' refers to a work of fiction that conveys profound loss or intense fear on individual or collective levels....(it) is the transformation of the self-ignited by an external, often terrifying experience, which illuminates the process of coming to terms with the dynamics of memory that inform the new perceptions of the self and world.... The event may include... the intimately personal experience of female sexual violence... The idea that traumatic experience pathologically divides identity is employed by the literary scholar as a metaphor to describe the degree of damage done to the individual's coherent sense of self and the change of consciousness caused by the experience (internet).

Uncivil attitudes in Marriages

Most marriages are like punishment where one of the partners especially the male folk seen to be authoritative and intimidates the other. Being a single woman is not a crime but our society frowns at it, as they are tagged "unserious" or "irresponsible". People are not patient with single ladies so they are expected to be married or remarry or even go back to their former husbands even if these husbands are bullies or vagabonds. This is one of the reasons why some marriages fail because some women tend to rush into any kind of marriage and they end up finding themselves alone and lonely in the vacuum they helped create and perpetuate. This study shows that most women are lonely in their homes. Mama Amos is lonely in her matrimonial home. In Mama Amos' letter in the text under study, she remembers a friend that was used to crying bitterly because she is not married at thirty five and regrets her own marriage the more. She writes: '... I remembered how you used to cry so bitterly because you were not married (at thirty

five). Those huge drops of tears that tunneled down your beautiful spotted face made me to denounce more vehemently the institution called marriage.’ (4)

There seem to be ideas governed by customs and traditions that men seem not to forget or forgo – ‘Promiscuity’. This destroys marriages as Mama Amos tells how her husband who lives with his mistress suddenly becomes very sick, the mistress runs away and she takes care of her husband. She ‘... with all the patience culture had bestowed on the African woman, would uncomplainingly clean him up.’ (7) She sold all her gold trinkets, expensive wrappers and her other personal belongings to settle the hospital bill. She does all these not knowing that the man has AIDS and she has already contracted it from him. She got married quite early and her husband keeps maltreating her, according to Child Marriage briefing: Overview of Child marriage’ there is every possibility that child marriage increases the issues of HIV. To support the above, Annabel and Mairo in their book, *The Experience of Married Adolescent Girls in Northern Nigeria* also write that ‘There is emerging evidence in sub-Saharan Africa that early marriages may be associated with risk of HIV infection’ (2)

She truly loves her husband but unfortunately, she has to pay for being a faithful wife negatively because she contracted HIV from the wayward husband. She actually loves her husband but that does not stop him from being promiscuous. Mustafa writes: ‘Never marry a handsome, proud and self-centered man. Men with these features are the ones who get carried away by the blinking eyes of seductive women.’ (15). He leaves his wife to live with prostitutes (his mistresses). The woman, Mama Amos complains bitterly, ‘He especially loved prostitutes, and if there was any new prostitute in town, my husband would be the first person to ‘taste’ her.....’ (11) The husband creates a void between himself and the wife which makes the woman feel like a stranger in her own house. Mama Amos is so traumatized that she dies regretting her marriage. She writes to a friend:

Should I now tell you not to marry, because I had a bad experience or should I warn you of the many disappointments (most times heartrending) that you will come to experience as you become somebody’s wife? Should I also tell you about the many insults you will have to bear from in-laws? Some will label you wicked and maybe your mother-in-law may call you a prostitute, but the most humiliating is to be called a thief. People can be so cruel..... all due to the fact that she carefully and thriftily cautions her husband in money matter? (5-6).

Mama Amos’ husband has AIDS for years and does not deem it fit to tell the wife even though he sleeps with her whenever he wishes. Her husband dies of AIDS and even on his hospital bed he still hides his ailment from her. She knows about the disease years after the death of her husband when she becomes ill. She is shocked to learn about what killed her husband and that she is suffering from the same ailment. Her regret is that she loves her husband. The shock alone

killed her. Mama Amos warns her friends never to trust even Pastors who will advise you to always sleep with your husband when there is distrust. She writes: 'When there is mistrust, do not listen to dramatic preaching of myopic pastors, especially when they tell you to keep the matrimonial bed undefiled. Use this opportunity to run for your life never to return.' (15) She is now humiliated and rejected by everybody, even her own father and family. She regrets trusting her husband and advises her friend to take her husband to her own doctor whenever he is sick and secretly take his blood for 'test for any signs of the plague' (15).

Forced and arranged marriages are part of the reasons why marriages do not last. In *What if....?*, Mustafa portrays most marriages as forced or arranged marriages. In the text under study, *What if...?*, Binta's parents forcefully marry her out to Anuruwa. Mustafa writes: 'Anuruwa pushed his father to force her family into giving her to him...' (140). Of course this type of marriage leads to violence, Binta refuses Anuruwa access to her body and he beats her all the time, he chains her, locks her up in his house and 'raped her until she becomes unconscious.' (155) He beats her up regularly, she becomes mentally unfit to do anything. Mustafa continues '.... it makes me happy to see her mentally unfit....' (155) Violence or duress seems to be the order of the day in most cases. The following could be consequences of forced marriage: emotional trauma, abduction, imprisonment, physical violence, rape and in very extreme cases and murder.

A. Choice by right: The report of the Working Group on Forced Marriages, writes: "From emotional pressure, exerted by close family members and the extended family, to more extreme cases, which can involve threatening behaviours, abduction, imprisonment, physical violence, rape and in some cases murder' (11) could be seen in forced marriages. This report also defines forced marriage as 'A marriage conducted without the valid consent of both parties, where duress is a factor'.(4) They go ahead to write 'that forced marriage must be seen primarily as an issue of violence against women ... it is women who most often live in fear and suffer violence as a result of the forced marriage'. (14) Violence at home is a traumatic experience that leaves many people traumatized and confused. Binta is traumatized that she most often forgets who she is – she becomes mentally sick. These young girls find it difficult to report cases of violence to their parents to avoid the consequences of divorce. In the novel *What if.....*, Mama Amos is indirectly forced to marry her husband because of her parents' cantankerous way of living, it pushes her out too early to marry any man that comes her way. Her father will always insult her mother and keeps reminding her how useless women are. If her mother tries to reply him, then she will be beaten to a stupor and end her journey that day in the hospital. Mama Amos' mother got married quite early; she was forced to marry her husband. Mama Amos father always insults his wife and beats her with belt believing that women are only good in bed and procreation. He said: '... women are just a waste.... What you all know is to open your legs wide as you can to let a man to climb you.... You are just there, lying on your back and receiving the mighty rod of a man.' (14) The woman's attempt to talk back to the husband 'escalated my father's anger so much that he beat her till she fainted' (14) and he walked out of the house for one week. The children rush her to the hospital, the children sell 'maize that we had stored from the last harvest, (14) to settle her hospital bills. Due to this type of violence in her father's house, she gets

married early 'to run away from violence and hurt but ended up experiencing an equal dose of hurt in my matrimonial home.' (14) Another character in the text, Kyauta complains bitterly, she is regularly abused by the husband over very slightest issue. Whenever she refuses to pay their house rent, her abusive husband will beat her 'terribly' for that. She endures the beatings, the injuries and the humiliation silently, pretending to people that all is well. Her husband makes life miserable and unbearable for her by using derogatory words on her. She is ready to tolerate all these until the day, he uses Kitchen Knife to slash her wrists and 'blood started gushing out' (110). Linda Jummai Mustafa writes: 'The day he used the Kitchen knife on me was the day I got the wake-up call to leave my abusive husband' (108), the same day, her husband beat her up mercilessly to have his way and threatens to kill her if she refuses him, she is violently raped that morning by her husband just to avoid being killed by him. The trauma left her speechless as she quickly packs out of the house. Violence thrives in unhealthy homes and it leads to broken families. No wonder Linda Jummai Mustafa asks what the world is turning into with so much violence and hatred. 'What was this world turning into? With so much hatred, violence and injustice, people were slowly transferring into humans with no heart and con-science.' (85).

Authoritative men are quick to beat their wives and can go to extreme to silence the wives. Mustafa writes: 'As you try to make a choice of man you will settle downwith, make sure you look for a man who talks to you, not one that barks order at you.' (15) Such behaviours also lead to abuse of power, marginalization of women, blood letting, sexual abuse and many other uncivil behaviours.

Mama Amos complains bitterly about her son who the father never beats. The boy turns to something else, going out with 'barrack boys' (16) and never assists his mother with house chores. Mama Amos complains; 'It is not that I didn't bring him up well, but his father would never allow me beat him whenever he failed to do what I had instructed him to do.' (16). Now, Mama Amos in her sick bed after the death of her husband wonders what type of child her son will be in future when she is no longer there. She is afraid that her children 'may eventually become cheats, area boys or worse still, armed robbers.' (17). Just like in *What if.....?*. Papa Amos usually stays away from his family, such actions will not save the situation but rather it will worsen it.

In the text under study, Kande, a university graduate is wrongly accused by the mum of stealing because she lost her job and no longer gives her mother up-keep money. The mother is so callous that she chased Kande away from their house and the father cannot even help her. The mother insults her in front of neighbours, visitors, friends and her younger siblings; she becomes an outcast in her own house. Kande complains bitterly; 'My mum drove me out of the main building. I stayed in a room just by the big gate of our house. It was as if I was now the gateman of the house....' (171). The mother now insists that she leaves the house since she cannot get married nor find a good job. She said; '...she is there lamenting on how she cannot get a job or a good man. Rubbish! She must leave...' (176). She keeps on insulting her daughter that the daughter tries committing suicide instead of being humiliated for nothing. Mustafa writes: 'By

the next morning, I was set to hang myself. All the reasoning I had done from the evening my mother accused me of theft to the time I was mentally prepared to end it all veered towards suicide.' (175) The girl is traumatized, she finds suicide an option. This actually brings division in this family as the man; Kande's husband is ready to leave with his daughter. Kande's mother is confrontational and always argues over nothing.

Conclusion

Though it is obvious that there is no guarantee in marriages, couples are supposed to carry out their responsibilities seriously for a lasting marriage but unfortunately men in particular abuse such conditions by oppressing and humiliating their wives silently. Couples are supposed to be extension of each other and they are happily married if they sincerely adhere to the legal/conjugal contract. They are expected to raise responsible children because everything good or bad begins at home. Parents therefore have a lot of work to do in their families to keep their marriages intact and produce responsible, hardworking, intelligent and diligent children that will impact positively to society. They must be considerate, sincere, unselfish, caring and understanding. In fact, they must try as much as possible to understand each other by communicating often. Once there is a communication gap, the marriage suffers. Polygamy is done to the detriment of women because the humiliations they face in such homes turn them to slaves, quarrelsome and cantankerous women. In most cases men in this category see their sexual relationship with their wives as a fulfillment of a pleasurable passion.

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