

Marital Subjectivity in Neshani Andrea's *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu*

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Abstract

African women are often the victims of marital subjectivity with respect to domestic violence which male writers in their thematic preoccupations with socio-political issues of the moment, often downplay. Women often tend to suffer a lot in the hands of their male counterparts because they are being seen as people who are inferior or appendages to their male counterparts. This paper wants to address the critical imbalance that has undervalued African women in marriage with the aim of examining the psychological and emotional results of abusive marriages on women. There are some factors that can lead to marital subjectivity like lack of understanding, pride, societal pressure and lack of communication among spouses and this can eventually lead to domestic violence. The source of information for this study is from the internet, projects, journals and the novel of Neshani Andreas. The theoretical framework adopted is Radical Feminism. The paper therefore, advocates for women empowerment.

Keywords: Male Dominance, Subjugation, Oppressions, Domestic Violence, Patriarchy

Introduction

Marital subjectivity has its root from the Bible in Ephesians 5:22, where women were ordered by God to submit to their husbands and this text is the brain behind this issue of marital subjectivity. Any time a woman wants to do something useful with her life outside her husband's

help, the society will always remind her of this biblical passage. They will as well tell her that a woman has no identity except for the one given to her by her husband. She, the woman is seen as a weaker vessel, an appendage and a neck to the husband. Violence in marriage affects the lives of millions of women worldwide, irrespective of their socio-economic status. It cut across ethnic, cultural and religious barriers, impeding the rights of women to participate fully in society. The urgency of addressing this global problem is tragically illustrated by the treatment of women in conflict or crisis situations, where various forms of harassment, intimidation were experienced by women in their marriages. Women worldwide remain vulnerable to life threatening conditions and abuse of physical and psychological integrity. For instance, studies indicate that 58%- 60% of women have experienced physical abuse by an intimate partner in their lifetimes. Violence against these women by male partners is widely condoned by many Nigerian societies, where the belief is that a husband may chastise his wife by beating her is deeply embedded in the culture. The struggle to improve the conditions of women in an unhappy marriage, across the globe, has continued to receive significant attention over the decades. As part of global concerns, one of the key issues addressed at the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women (FWFW) in Beijing was the elimination of violence against women who suffer untold violence in their marriage. In Nigeria, Women in Nigeria (WIN) a Non –Governmental Organization (NGO) in conjunction with Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (CEDAW) have continued to champion the struggle for the total liberation of women from domestic violence in marriage.

According to an international conference held in Chicago by End Violence Against Women International (EVAWI) on domestic violence and gender bias; in this conference there is a proclamation on the stop violence against women formula, grants to support families in the

Justices system, the inclusion of domestic violence in the criminal jurisdiction, all this proclamation are steps to eradicate domestic violence in marriage. The conference highlights the latest research and promising practices to advance to health care system's response to domestic and sexual violence, bringing together the field's leading medical, public health, and domestic violence experts from across the United State and the world. Across the globe, being married appears to affect the level of happiness positively. Angus Campbell analyses, with other measures of quality of life, however, suggest that "the effect of marital status is moderated by gender, for men, being married negatively affects the quality of life, while the effect is positive for women" (127). In all too many communities in the United States, especially poor and minority ones, marriage is in retreat. Even though marriage has lost ground in minority communities in recent years, marriage has not lost its value in these communities. In the words of William Manning, as part of global concern, this report shows that African Americans and Latinos benefit from marriage in much the same way that Anglos benefit from marriage. "It also presents evidence that marriage matters in countries, such as Sweden, that have markedly different approaches to public policy, social welfare, and religion than does the United States. In other words, marriage is a multicultural institution" (1-15).

It is interesting to know that in Africa, marriage is viewed as a sacred institution. It is the most celebrated institution in all African cultures. Eirich William is of the view that

African marriages are spiritual and social family affairs and involve the combining of two lives, two families, and even two communities. There is no great civilization

that has ever existed that abstained from marriage as one of its core fundamentals of nation building (78).

Scholars have been interested in the effects of women's participation in the workforce on marriage dynamics for decades. Marriage is a journey through life which enhances and enriching entire communities. Marriage promotes sharing, tolerance, consideration, empathy, selflessness, and other virtues. Lack of marriage is the death of a nation and a people, communities that fail to recognize marriage become self-destructive with a range of social, economic and health issues. In Module 2 of *Social Institution and Social Stratification*, many scholars have given different definition on marriage as an institution and social organization. "Marriage is an institution to satisfy physical, psychological, social, cultural and economic needs of men and women. It allows men and women to establish a stable relationship with each other in order to form a family" (139). An essential characteristic of marriage is the biological fact that a man and a woman can be joined together as male and female in a union that is orientated to the generation of new life. In Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, "the union of marriage provides for the continuation of the human race and the development of human society" (4). Marriage historically has been used in political unions between nations, between different ethnic groups to secure peace, trade and development. According to Michael Oyetade, "marriage is one thing that unites African culture, although two marriages will never be similar" (24). Marriage is dignity and a true sign of commitment. It defines our humanity and contributes in making us more human.

There are factors that can cause marital subjectivity in the society ranging from lack of understanding, lack of communication, pride, familial and societal pressure, inadequate funds,

these also lead to domestic violence in families. In addition to this, men have generally been regarded as dominant, masculine and independent, whereas women are often portrayed as weak sensitive and dependent. With this perception, women have become objects in the hands of men, an object to be used in one way or the other for satisfactions of others. In accordance with Simon de Beauvoir's *Concept of the 'Other,'* "women are seen as objects, tools or instruments, men actualize for pleasure" (4). Often times, women are victim of marital subjectivity, most women lament on their broken homes. In spite of diverse technology, globalization that the world is experiencing, marriage is still influenced by family today. Women divorce their husband to escape from such abusive and unhealthy relationship; most women stay because of their children and the religious women see it as something which one cannot leave because of the vow made at the altar. Marriage is the oldest institution on earth; however, there are factors that affect marriage as an institution. These include lack of understanding, low income, lack of communication, inequality, pride. More recently, scholars have grown interested in the role finances play within marriages as well as how one's financial satisfaction is affected by women's participation in the workforce. Moreover, if these issues are not addressed by couple it can lead to divorce, and in most cases domestic violence.

However, inequality among couples affects marriages, in most cases the man usually has the upper hand and will want to prove his superiority over the woman. In such a family, the husband objectifies the wife; he sees the wife as his property and not as help mate. As Russell Hochschild and Anne Machung says, "the first marital role ideology is a traditional role ideology where the wife's primary importance is at home even though she also works, while the husband's is strictly at work"(316). Previous research of Roehling Bultman has indicated that despite the increasing

numbers of women in the workforce and financially independent married women, “men still tend to believe in the more traditional gender role ideologies” (12). Specifically, men tend to believe that the breadwinner role should be male dominated while the homemaker/caretaker role should be female dominated. Marital subjectivity according to Eirich William result to marital instability, marital strain, or at the minimum, would result in coping strategies to continue to maintain the traditional gender ideologies present in comparatively normative couples (44). According to Olufemi Tolorunleke, “Marriage should be an exciting and beautiful adventure and the relationship between husband and wife is intended to get better with every passing day or year” (20). However, little things can slip into the relationship and as Chuka Okafor puts it, “when these little things are not properly handled, they can cause serious problem which may lead to separation for a long time” (57). Information from electronic media, magazines, newspapers, court proceedings and environmental observations revealed that marital instability abounds in our society today and this is due largely to marital conflicts that couples experience in the process of trying to perform their marital roles as demanded by their society.

In our society today, women are mostly the victims of abusive marriages. It is pertinent to state that marriage and the family are under great pressure today. Upon marriage a married woman surrenders to her husband’s exclusive sexual rights and obedience. Abiola Aremu says that “this equally gives her husband the liberty to violate and batter her if he feels that she has not adequately fulfilled her obligations, or for any other reason” (10). Chioma Ibeku therefore proposes that,

where the socio-cultural context of domestic violence is largely dependent on the gender power relation, men are always right; they always win in any case against their wives; the female relatives of a man are usually the first to accuse the woman and find her guilty irrespective of obvious signs of physical abuse(22) .

Marital subjectivity as a broad term can be defined as an individual who possesses conscious experience, such as perspectives, feelings, and belief who wields power over some other entity especially in marriage. In marriage one partner will have control over the other which is mostly common among the men. There are diverse ways, in which a partner can be subjective to the other in marriage they include through cheating, verbal abuse, familial pressure, incessant need to blame, domestic violence.

The theoretical framework used in this paper is Radical Feminism. Though there are other types of feminism but the researcher made use of Radical Feminism. Radical feminism emerged in the late 1960s as the offshoot of the women's liberation movement. Though it was more visible in America it later spread to other European countries. Kate Millet is considered to be the mother of radical feminism. Radical feminism is a philosophy emphasizing the patriarchal roots of inequality between men and women, or, more specifically, the social domination of women by men. Radical feminism views patriarchy as dividing societal rights, privileges, and power primarily along the lines of sex, and as a result, oppressing women and privileging men. Radical feminism focuses on the rejection of the patriarchal ideal that the private sphere (for women) focuses on childrearing, marriage, and the maintenance of the household. Due to this private

sphere, the political sphere of patriarchy results in women being harmed through rape, domestic violence, and prostitution.

Radical feminism opposes existing political and social organization in general because it is inherently tied to patriarchy. Thus, radical feminists tend to be skeptical of political action within the current system and instead tend to focus on culture change that undermines patriarchy and associated hierarchical structures. Thus they (Radical feminists) tend to be more militant in their approach (radical as “getting to the root”) than other feminists. A radical feminist aims to dismantle patriarchy rather than making adjustments to the system through legal changes. Radical feminists also resist reducing oppression to an economic or class issue, as socialist or Marxist feminism sometimes did or does.

It opposes patriarchy, not men. To equate radical feminism to man-hating is to assume that patriarchy and men are inseparable, philosophically and politically. Although, Robin Morgan has defended “man-hating” as the right of the oppressed class to hate the class that is oppressing them. Famous radical feminists include Andrea Dworkin, Catharine MacKinnon, Valerie Solanas and Alice Walker. Radical feminists do not believe in buying and selling sex acts, which is called prostitution. The Radical feminists rather believe in ending rape and domestic violence. According to their ideology, Radical feminists assert that global society functions as a patriarchy in which the class of men is the oppressors of the class of women. They propose that the oppression of women is the most fundamental form of oppression, one that has existed since the inception of humanity. As radical feminist Ti-Grace Atkinson wrote in her foundational piece “Radical Feminism” (1969):

The first dichotomous division of this mass [mankind] is said to have been on the grounds of sex: male and female ... it was because half the human race bears the burden of the reproductive process and because man, the 'rational' animal, had the wit to take advantage of that, that the child bearers, or the 'beasts of burden,' were corralled into a political class: equivocating the biologically contingent burden into a political (or necessary) penalty, thereby modifying these individuals' definition from the human to the functional, or animal(82).

In respect to this, this group of feminists seeks to abolish patriarchy by challenging existing social norms and institutions, and believe that eliminating patriarchy will liberate everyone from an unjust society.

Marital Subjectivity in Neshani Andreas' *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu*.

The Purple Violet of Oshaantu, is about the marriage between Shange and Kauna as narrated from Mee Ali's point of view. Victor Ogbeide in his article, Violet without Purple: The Colour of Spousal Violence in Neshani Andreas' *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu*, says that

Kauna is a mother and wife; she is dominated and oppressed by her husband at the same time that she has to bear the moral burden of the demands her children make on her and subordinate her needs to theirs in the face of abandonment by their father (57).

Shange's characters in the novel show the visible power of patriarchal ideology that forces men to suppress women as a sign of their masculinity. Isam Shihada remarks that "women pay dearly with their freedom and dignity to obey the laws of the patriarchal...system that dominates society"

(179). These women, though their cultural and geographical backgrounds are quite different, all have one thing in common. They suffer severely and in a moment of utmost distress they fall into utter silence. Kauna was depicted as a woman who silently accepts mistreatment from her husband because she believes that she needs protection in order to live respectfully as a woman. Ogbeide remarks that:

all forms of spousal abuse have one purpose which is often to gain and maintain control over the victim. Abusers use many tactics to exercise power over their spouse or partner. On account of their weak constitution which often conspires with many oppressive patriarchal cultures in many parts of the world, women are often the hapless victims of spousal abuse (55).

The woman's position as a full time house wife with no educational background or money of her own makes it easy for her husband to perpetuate violence against her and her children, without her making any effort to stop the violence or report it for fear of losing her marriage and her source of dependence. Kauna can be regarded as a full time house wife; she depends on her husband for her daily income. Despite the suffering and oppression from their husbands, they could not leave their marriage. "Kauna states, "Maybe if I had been a nurse, a teacher or any of those office workers, he would have treated me better" (51).

For Kauna, much of the happiness she derives from life (and almost all of her miseries) emanates from her marriage to her husband. The woman suffers humiliation; she was beaten and turned into punching bag in the presence of her children. Shange notorious for his infidelity in the village, even his children have become used to his regular beatings of their mother as the oldest of

them, Kandiwapa, always treats her mother's bruises each time her father beats her. "Kauna's eldest daughter, the eleven -year-old Kandiwapa, who was crying at the top of her voice, ran in to give me a hand. Carefully, we carried Kauna to her hut and laid her on the bed" (59). Abubakar Sadiya opines that "Women are naturally strong at heart but very little things that seem unimportant tend to break them down and hence, they become vulnerable to psychological trauma" (34).

The novel identifies the psychological trauma, marital incompatibility which women experience in marriage. In the marriage of Shange and Kauna, it is evident that they are not compatible for each other; this is narrated by Mee Ali as thus "I never understand why Shange and Kauna had ever married in the first place. They are like night and day" (51). At the beginning of Kauna marriage to Shange, she is considered beautiful and young, during the time Shange marries her it is the period the flower purple violet bloom in Oshaantu this make the villagers to refer to her as the "Purple violet of Oshaantu"(110). Her beauty begins to fade as a result of constant beating from her husband. Kauna is abused by her husband when she finds out that Shange is a cook in the mine. This however, makes him angry and calls for another beating which Mee Ali through her narration accounts to as thus "Kauna was lying on the ground covered in a blanket of sand. She moved like an old cloth as Shange's shoes struck her mercilessly all over her tiny body. The heavy mine shoes sounded as if they were breaking every bone" (58).

Kauna is a woman that came from a respectable home, it is even recorded that she is a virgin when she married Shange. Moreover, it occurs that Kauna did not give birth on time, moreover, Shange family mount pressure on her. She has to endure her in- law complain and Shange assault. "My other real problem was that I did not get pregnant immediately. That simply

depressed me... I was accused of having used and abused some Depo Provera contraceptives during my teenage years” (21). Ogbeide comments that:

Since Shange did not marry Kauna out of love but for his selfish ego- massaging, he has absolutely no respect or even regard for her feelings. He falls into the class of men who exert their so-called masculinity on helpless women as Mukwankala rightly puts it” (61).

He has never beaten a fellow man outside but he beats his wife at home at every opportunity. He has turned Kauna into an object of public ridicule and laughter in the village; the women laugh at her for not been able to hold on to her husband while the men see Shange’s behaviour as “normal.” “It was as if the failure of their marriage was her fault! They laughed at her and stigmatized her” (51). Another instance where Kauna experience psychological and emotional trauma during her husband’s funeral. She act hysterical during her husband death and people think she has gone mad. First she refuses to cry when her husband died. “People must know the truth. He did not eat my food and I did not kill him! You hear me. You hear me. You evil people. I know what you are thinking” (12). “What has got into her? Is she sick? People asked curiously” (13). Her action during mourning makes people to think that she cause the death of her husband

There is a rumour that apparently you are not behaving like a widow ... That you are not mourning the death of your husband ... You are not crying ... No tears ... Your face is so dry that some people say they are embarrassed.’ ... ‘People think you are glad he is dead ... They think that is why you are not crying ... They think ...” (48).

In African society, widows are subjected to different forms of suffering for instance, incessant complains from in-laws, Sadiya asserts that “when the society tends to interfere in family matters, the shattering situations grow worse rather than better, in reality a bereaved person on losing a spouse is actually at the weakest moment of one’s life” (606). In supports of this assertion Muhammad wrote that “On humanitarian grounds one is expected to be treated with more love, care and tenderness, to cover for the irreparable loss and make efforts in sustaining life and build endurance to survive the devastating situation” (29). This is evident in Kauna’s marriage, the family believed she poison her husband as a result of the abuse, his wealth and properties which is not true. “While we are all here, we would also like to know about the wealth of our relative.’ ‘We need to know about his money, bank accounts, insurance policies, his cattle and all sorts of other things (99- 100). This confrontation leads to argument and quarrel between the family and Kauna. Kauna respond and states “Do you honestly think I would know anything about Shange’s wealth... (100).

Weiss Bettina opines that the Oshiwambo proverb “a woman is the house” which stands for the notion that the wife is the closet person to her husband, is applied by Shange’s relatives to force Kauna to confess where her husband’s wealth is safely kept” (51). This allegation by Shange’s relative shock Ali since she knows about their marriage and assault that Kauna experience in the marriage “How could she know? I thought. It was unlikely that Shange never gave Kauna information about his personal financial matters” (100). The allegation of the Shange’s relative against Kauna goes thus “You women these days go about making business out of your dead husbands’ bodies are still cold and you are already sleeping around” (101).

However, the maltreatment by the deceased family is not only limited to Kauna, it is common happening in Oshanntu village. This is also depicted in Mee Sara marriage to Victor, she is subjected to suffering and they accuse her of killing their son in order to inherit the husband property. This is revealed through Mee Ali narration she recounts that “I still vividly remember how they tore that poor widow apart” (102). The wife is only one that stands by the side of her husband when he was sick “Mee Sara nursed him throughout his illness. She watched her husband fading away and finally dying”(103). Her husband’s relatives did appreciate her effort during his illness but accuse and abuse her for making her husband suffer before killing him, “IT WAS THE WIFE! MEE SARA BEWITCHED HER HUSBAND!” Victor’s relatives insisted that Mee Sara explains to them what muti she had used to make him suffer like that for so long. Why didn’t you just kill him instantly? Why did you have to make him suffer like that first? (103). The deceased family the lady, Ali explain the physical appearance of the wife and the psychological and emotional trauma that the wife went through while mourning the death of her husband “she looked like a frightened bird. Her face was wet with sweat ...Her lips were so dry, they looked as if they’d been dipped in chalk” (103).

Kauna and Mee Ali in the two novels are the two closet people to the abused women. Mee Ali enjoys a happy marriage as opposed Kauna, Andreas makes a comparison between their marriages thus: Kauna is gentle and suffer in silent while Mee Ali is vocal and does give room for any form of abuse. This is evident in the way she refuses to be intimidated by her husband relatives when they accuse her of bewitching her husband and even called her a whore “whore always get good men. I swear she has given my brother some mountain mutakati” (17). Ogbeide asserts that “Anybody, however, who is not subjected to beatings like Mee Ali is only “lucky” in their own

estimation, for these women, marriage has become a loveless entrapment that must be endured” (62). Another aspect of marital subjectivity can be seen as domestic violence. This is made evident in Kauna case, when she discovers that her husband only works as a cook in the mines, when Shange realize this makes him angrily and he beats his wife severely, Seemingly angry that his wife has possibly discovered the nature of his work as a cook in the mines as seen in the photograph given to her by her friend, Shange beats the living daylights out of his wife:

Shange had never seen the photo before, but he recognized himself. He asked his son to show him where he had found it... Kauna and her basket full of water landed on the ground. Kauna tried to escape Shange’s rage, but he was too fast for her. He caught her. Kauna was lying on the ground covered in a blanket of sand. She moved like an old cloth as Shange’s shoes struck her mercilessly all over her body” (58).

After Michael his friend has managed to bring his murderous rage under control, the reader is shown the pathetic image of the helpless Kauna: Blood mixed with sand all over her face, in her mouth, nose, eyes, ears, head and clothes, and the sight of her children crying helplessly”(59). After beating his wife he drove out of the house to meet his mistress without having pity on Kauna condition “minutes later we heard the sound of the vehicle being driven violently away” (60).

Conclusion

Marital subjectivity is as old as man since it is bound to continue as far as marriage is concerned. In every marriage, this marital subjectivity features evidently. Husbands brutalize their wives and children sometimes without remorse. Today it is the sole reason for high causes of

separation and divorce cases. It is also the cause of suicides some women due commit so as to free themselves from that suicidal marriage which they have entangled themselves.

In the Bible, we saw where women were ordered by God to submit to their husbands in Ephesians 5:22 and that text is the brain behind this issue of marital subjectivity. Any time a woman wants to do something useful with her life outside her husband's help, the society will always remind her of this bible passage. They will as well tell her that a woman has no identity except for the one given to her by her husband and this is practically unfair to the female gender. In *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu*, Mee Ali and Kauna are the characters who were portrayed as being victims of this marital subjectivity. Their marriages were not all that wonderful yet they endured their husbands' taunts. Even when their husbands died, they were not exonerated. This shows that whatever a woman does in this life, she will always be seen as a victim of this marital subjectivity.

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