

INTERROGATING POLYGAMY AND FORCED MARRIAGE IN THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY: A REVIEW OF RASHEEDAH LIMAN'S *HEART OF A WOMAN*

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BOOK REVIEW

Title of the Play: *Heart of a Woman*
Author: Rasheedah Aliyu Liman
Publisher: Ibadan: Kraft Books Limited
Year: 2019
Pages: 53 pp.
ISBN: 978-978-918-585-6

One of the fundamental thematic focuses of contemporary Nigerian Playwrights is the issue of family. The discourse of family permeated the works of notable playwrights of earlier generations like Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, Zulu Sofola, J.P Clark, Ahmed Yerima among others. However, the later generations have adopted a different microscopic lens in specifically looking into the closer politics obtainable at the micro family unit. Rasheedah Liman falls within this category.

A methodical reading of her recent play, *Heart of a Woman* will confirm the potency of the title of this review and expatiate further on the discourse around polygamy, forced marriage and the evils that emanate from it specifically in Nigeria. Although the issue of polygamy cuts across all ethnicities in Nigeria and Africa, the play challenges the insensitive practice of polygamy and the exhibition of patriarchy towards the promotion of forceful marriage of the female-child. The story is about the socio-cultural nuances dominant among ethnic groups in Nigeria especially the Hausa Muslim ethnicity in Northern Nigeria in relation to polygamous marriage, choices of spouse and divorce. Representing the cartel of polygamist in the play is the character of Alhaji Bello who is caught in between the intricate web of divorcing his second wife and marrying a third one. However, his chauvinistic character towards his first wife Hajiya Asabe, and his daughter positions him as caricature of the typical African man. Olu Obafemi in his forward to the play opines that:

The playwright leaves no one in any doubt about the direction of her dramatic vision: her critique of the polygamist, its often tragic consequences for his family and the society. Obviously, sympathetic with the unmistakable protagonist, Hajia Asabe, her unsurpassed level of tolerance, respect and commitment to marital injunctions... (foreword, 2019:7).

Heart of a Woman is a play that celebrates the womanist ideology and advocates for the right of women and girl-child in the society making their voices to be heard against the tyranny of forced marriage and subjugation. This is evident from the dedication of the play throughout the narrative as she dedicates her drama text to "...women and girls struggling to have their voices heard" (2019:5). Complementing the dedication, Obafemi submits that:

The resolution itself is the tragic death of the husband, Alhaji Bale, through poisoning from the unlikely hands of his fiancée who represent the new age of women who cannot stand the tyranny of forced marriage and the denial of freedom of choice and association inflicted by a combination of insensitive patriarchy." (foreword, 2019:8).

Furthermore, the ideology of a womanist does not undermine the value and virtue of a man and this is exemplified in the exchange between Alhaji Bale and Hajiya Asabe his first wife at the first scene:

Alhaji Bale: Asabe... I just want you to know that I am getting married, not because you have offended me in any way. I really enjoyed our marriage. You have been the best wife and the best mother to our children. I have no reason to complain and I thank the Almighty for all the blessings throughout our twenty-three years together... I...I only want more of the happiness that I receive from you. May Allah bless your efforts (2019:12).

This connotes that the place of a man in the Nigerian society is of greater importance which cannot be underestimated. The playwright is deliberate about giving the character of Alhaji Bale the polygamist deserved reverence and respect from his first wife, Hajiya Asabe. Despite Asabe's awareness of her husband plans to take a third wife in scene one she responds with utmost humility when her husband calls:

Alhaji Bale: Asabe. (He calls out again) Asabeeeee! ...

Hajiya Asabe: (Wiping her face with her palm.) Sorry Habi, I was praying when you called. (Smiling and looking closely at Alhaji Bale). Habiang *okenan*. I have already asked Hajo to place your prayer mat inside the car. Your shedas and shoes are already packed and are in the car too (2019:11)

The submissiveness of Hajiya Asabe to her husband is further established through the foreword of the play despite the ill treatment and oppressive culture and coercive traits exhibited by Alhaji Bale:

...she bears the irreverence and irresponsible conduct of her polygamous husband, the sauciness of the second wife, and bears with equanimity the double bill disaster of her daughter Hajo, being betrothed to a highest bidding friend by a husband who is about to bring a third wife who is a junior to his daughter (foreword, 2019:7).

It is quite obvious to infer that the playwright's vivid description of Hajiya Asabe, Hajiya Saadatu and the Character of Uwale showed clearly that it is not the practice of polygamy that seems the actual problem rather, the manner with which it is practiced within the cultural environment within which the play sets. Hajiya Saadatu and Uwale lend their voices:

Saadatu: We cannot ask our men not to marry. It is their God given right...most of us are products of polygamy. Imagine that my father had not married my mother as the third wife, I would not have been born.

Uwale: (Laughing) Wallahi! We both won't have been born. You are right but all we ask for is for our men to be fair (2019:19)

Also, an in-depth reading of Liman's *Heart of a Woman* will further buttress the argument that, it is a cultural portrayal of the phenomenon of forced marriage and the evils that are emergent from it. Through the voices of Alhaji Bale and Uwale, the issue of forced marriage becomes apparent:

Alhaji Bale: (Angry) Suitor? What suitor? No! I have said it many times and I will not repeat myself again. She will only get married when I decide, period! I have my plans for her concerning her future husband (2019:14-15).

Uwale: ...so when Alhaji Bale came for her hand in marriage, everybody accepted him except the bride of course. She cried that he is old and she does not love him...how will she learn to love the man she is being forced to marry? I heard that her father threatened to disown her if she doesn't consent to the marriage (2019:18).

Composite to marital issues is the nature and manner through which divorce is served. The playwright succinctly presents a panoramic view of how divorce is handled within the cultural milieu of the fictional northern society. The patriarch polygamist, Alhaji Bale sees pronouncing the third divorce as an option to Ummah, a nagging, non-submissive wife to enable him enjoy his other wives. He speaks, "I just want her to misbehave again and that would be it, I will simply pronounce the third divorce" (2019: 13).

In similar vein, the character of Uwale gets divorced following the negative attitudes of her husband who engage in acts of drunkenness and brutality towards her. This further justifies the fact that the scenarios in *Heart of a Woman* are neatly knitted together to portray the excesses of polygamy, forced marriage, divorce and the evil of seeking protection from the servants of Allah through the character of Mallam Sharoro, a traditional herbalist who is believed to have to possess supernatural powers for safety.

Significantly, the plot of the play is linear in structure and vividly narrates the ordeal of a polygamous Muslim fictional family in northern Nigeria and their cultural affinities that have both healthier and detrimental eventualities. For a balance and near perfect portrayal, the play could have been crafted in an episodic plotting structure in order to give room for a kaleidoscopic view of both negato-positive polygamous families that truly exist.

Of particular importance is the allusion made to the religion of Islam through the use of words and phrases like '*Shariah*', '*Lailah*', '*Innalillahi wainnailaihiraaaji'un*', '*Allahu Akbar*', '*Subhanallah*', '*hasbunallahwani'imalwakeel*', '*insha Allah*', '*wallahi*', '*dunya*' among others which are partly because the characters are Muslims and largely because of the close affinity between the Arabian and Hausa language and culture.

Essentially, the play *Heart of a Woman* offers a deep criticism on individuals who despite being a Muslim with an understanding that, help should only be sought from Allah, still seek help from other esoteric sources. Consulting a soothsayer herbalist disguised as Mallam is a pre-Islamic and traditional African culture totally extrinsic to ideal Islam. This experience is found in scene four during an exchange between Hajiya Asabe and Saadatu respectively:

(Scared) Haiya Saadatu, gaskiya, this is not what I expect fa! I thought you said he is a Malam?"
Of course he is a Malam! Why do you doubt me? Do you think I will mislead you? May Allah forbid me to commit shirk. It is a great sin to ask for help other than from Allah and His servants" (2019:27).

The above statement is contrastive because, Hajiya Saadatu stressed the forbiddance to commit shirk which means associating partners with God and thereafter acknowledged asking for help from Allah and His servants. The issue of seeking solution to one's challenge from anyone other than Allah negates the core principle of Islam as the penalty renders the seeker's five daily prayers unaccepted for good forty days. Indeed, no help can be rendered to a servant without the help of Allah therefore; every endeavor should solely be attributed to Allah alone. In addendum, the messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) said, "Whoever goes to a fortuneteller or priest and believe him, such person has disbelieved in what had been revealed upon Muhammad (PBUH)." Related by Abu Dawood.

Fundamentally, the character traits exhibited by Alhaji Bale were largely un-Islamic especially his disposition on forced marriage and divorce, except for his close affinity to the mosque in the stage direction at the first scene:

A home Mosque typical of modern affluent Muslim houses is built within the compound. Mallam Sani is seen cleaning one of the two vehicles parked close to the Mosque. Alhaji Bale, an average height man comes out of the Mosque. He is chanting some prayers and slipping his fingers through his Carbi (2019:11).

This perhaps is what Obafemi observed that made him describe the deeds of Alhaji Bale in the forward as thus: "...the tyranny of forced marriage and the denial of freedom of choice and association inflicted by a combination of insensitive patriarchy and religious permissiveness" (foreword, 2019: 7).

Categorically, it is important to state that, the Shariahof Islam does not permit a father or guardian to forcefully give her daughter's hand in marriage without her consent, and frowns against incessant divorce therefore; there is no religious permissiveness of the ill conducts perpetuated by the characters throughout the play especially Alhaji Bale. Several evidences abound during the lifetime of the prophet (PBUH) on the non-permissiveness of a father or guardian to forcefully marry out a previously married lady or a virgin girl against their wish. It was narrated by Abu Hurayrah (may Allah be pleased with him) that the prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said:

No previously married woman should be married off without being consulted and no virgin should be married off without asking her permission." They asked: "O Messenger of Allaah what is her permission?" He said: "If she remains silent." Narrated by Al-Bukhaari, 4843; Muslim 1419.

In another narration:

Ibn 'Abbaas (may Allaah be pleased with him) that a virgin girl came to the prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) and told him that her father had married her off against her objections. The prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) gave her the choice. Narrated by Abu Dawood 2096; classed as authentic (saheeh) by al-Albaani.

The aforementioned quotations apparently connotes that, there is a consensus among the majority of Islamic scholars that if a woman is married off without her consent, then the marriage contract is invalid, because it is a forbidden contract which cannot be validated. This is the view of the Shafi'i and Hanbali's schools of Islamic thought. This further claims that, the issue of forced marriage, consulting a fortuneteller and irresponsible polygamy are not part of the principles and doctrines of Islam.

In conclusion, the eight scenes of *Heart of a Woman* are crafted in opulence through which the voice of the playwright is laconically articulated. It offers itself as a product emanating from the social realities of northern Nigeria cultural practices especially forced marriage. The playwright succinctly criticizes the inimical practice of forced marriage and its devastating consequences of such practice as typified in the tragic end of Alhaji Bale. The *Heart of a Woman* is a social critique and commentary that highlights the inadequacies of unhealthy polygamy, divorce and phenomenon of forced marriage with the sole intent that, readers or audience in the case of performance will learn of man's inadequacies and adopt a healthier lifestyle that will only breed nothing but a peaceful and progressive family lives.

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