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SELECTED WOMEN NOVELISTS' REACTION TO POLYGAMY AND LOVE.

SIWOKU-AWI, O.F.

Abstract

Polygamy is defined by the The New English Dictionary and Thesaurus (Gedess and Grosset, 2000) "as the practice of being married to more than one person at a time. Other related notions are polyandry which is " the practice of having more than one husband at the same time; bigamy is defined as "the act of marrying a second time when one is already legally married". In some cultures of the world some of these acts are defined as criminal while in others they are considered integral aspects of cultural heritage that should be preserved or still as religious practices that might or might nor be observed. The Christian religion teaches a one-man-one-woman marriage whereas Islam approves of a one-man-four-women marriage. It is the second marriage type that is referred to as polygamy; it is legally acceptable in the Islamic culture. This article is about the effects of the marriage types and how women are adversely affected when such relationships are devoid of love and the pain of hypocrisy when a clandestine love affair is discovered. In actual fact, both men and women suffer, but it may not be an understatement to say that women are more hard hit by the disappointment.

Polygamy: a threat to female mental health.

Polygamy's daily practice as depicted by women novelists studied and the reality of patriarchy reduce the woman to a state of nonplus. This instinctual sexual drive of man to dominate the woman has not escaped the pen of every female writer considered in this research work. When polygamy is not practised in reality by marriage to two women, it is practised in other forms, some kind of illicit sexual relationship. The white woman experiences husband sharing so also the black woman. While in some parts of the world, infidelity is called illegal and a breach of the marriage contract, in Africa, a man is only a man when he can prove his virility through intimacy with many women. The white man may keep his girlfriend out of the way of the legal wife; it is considered a mark of respect for her to

keep the relationship discrete. On the contrary, African culture admits and favours polygamy as a choice of marriage. A woman who objects to a second wife is considered jealous and selfish. Traditional African religions and Islam make it a normal family lifestyle. Islam has, as one of its tenets, that a man could marry as many as four wives.

The authors whose works I studied have presented man as as problematic to the woman's mental health. Figes in Days describes the trauma of a deserted woman who desperately clings to life as she relives the experiences of childhood and tries to come to grips with the moment. The woman is hospitalized for an unknown ailment. Doctors could find no reason for her illness. A situation that we would term psychosomatic or an indication of stress from home or work. The anonymous woman is oblivious of the fact that her husband has gone away with another woman and that he must find excuses for not visiting her. The man is only fed up with the marriage and like one changes clothes, he must find another lover, without the least consideration for the emotional and mental well being of the mother of his two children. It is significant that in *Days,* the characters do not have names with which they could be identified, an indication of the universality of male dominance, the sorrow of broken relationship and infidelity in marriage. Francis, in *Second-Class Citizen,* runs after Trudy, the white woman and every woman in the run down part of London, where he lives with Adah. Neighbours call on Adah to put a string on her husband. Pa Palagada, in *The Slave Girl* dishonours his wife by impregnating his wife's slave girl, Chiago, who becomes his mistress. He gives little consideration to the fact that he owes his feeding and lodging to the sweat and business acumen of Ma Palagada. Pa Palagada's desire to take on a younger blood and flesh as bedmate overrides the feeling of appreciation he should have for his wife.

Some traditions marry the widow off to another member of the family, who should take care of the deceased's wife and in some cases raise a family through her. Owulum, Nnaife's elder brother, dies leaving behind three wives. Adankwo, the first is a nursing mother, the middle wife, Ego-Obi, childless, and the last, is Adaku. The novelist does not proffer reasons for Owulum's death; in the traditional setting, it is usually a witch, a wizard or an enemy somewhere. No one would imagine

proper nourishment in homes where there are too many mouths for the man to feed, there are constant bickering and fighting as Adaku and Nnu Ego later prove. Nnu Ego's ploy to keep Owulum's widows at bay does not produce the desired result:

> What was she to do? It had been all right when this was just a prospect. Not hearing anything definite from home, she had begun to tell herself that maybe the senior Owulum's wives had decided against coming. For she had sent messages to Ibuza to let Nnaife's people know that things were difficult in Lagos, that Lagos was a place where you could get nothing free, that Nnaife's job was not very secure, that she had to subsidise their living with her meagre profits (118).

Adaku, the more ambitious widow of Owulum, comes to Lagos to try it out, as Nnaife's second wife. Nnu Ego is completely torn into shreds.

> Nnu Ego knew her father could not help her. He would say to her, "Listen, daughter, I have seven wives of my own. I married three of them, four I inherited on the deaths of relatives. Your mother was only a mistress who refused to marry me. So why do you want to stand in your husband's way? Please don't disgrace the name of the family again (119).

Nnu Ego, once described as the most beautiful woman ever seen, has become haggard, rough, worn and old looking, because of the hard life of Lagos and successive maternities. The first threat is that she finds Adaku enviably attractive. Nnu Ego has a hard time of it with Adaku, who from the start is determined to assert herself and enjoy her sexual relationship with Nnaife to the maximum. They oppress Nnu Ego with their giggles, squeaks and pleasure groans:

> There was silence from the bed, and then a burst of laughter. Nnu Ego could have bitten her tongue off; what hurt her most was hearing Nnaife remark: "My senior wife

> cannot go to sleep. You must learn to accept your pleasures quietly, my new wife Adaku. Your senior wife is like a white lady: she does not want noise". Nnu Ego bit her teeth into her baby's nightclothes to prevent herself from screaming (124).

Undoubtedly, this new situation contributed to Nnu Ego's mental disintegration. The bitterness cuts deep into her subconscious and she finally gives way to dementia.

Esi is forced to consider polygamy in order to escape loneliness. Contrary to expectation, she is further plunged into a vacuum that she has created. She cannot keep Ali attached to her, as the latter ends up rarely paying her visits. The initial emotional ties are gone, leaving only the gifts that Ali gives as proof of a subsisting marriage. A major consideration should be whether a woman could have a fulfilled life without being someone's wife. Can she have other ways of making her life useful to mankind apart from a marriage relationship? A conversation in *The Slave Girl* explains the tradition:

> Have you ever seen a woman who never got a husband? countered Amanna. It did not need a reply. Every woman, whether slave or free, must marry. All her life a woman always belonged to some male (117).

Beyala paints the pathetic picture of equally educated Sorraya, who finds little satisfaction with the two worlds of white and black to which she tries to belong to. She is not fully accepted by the white community nor is she anymore fully part of the African culture that she emanates from. She is alienated and frustrated and she ends up committing suicide. Her marriage to Alexandre, the white man, brings no satisfaction. She is lonely in the midst of the many people who surround her to celebrate her success.

Radical socialist feminists, like Simone de Beauvoir, have reasons to oppose marriage and the questions often asked are: Why would a woman sign in for her doom? Why would she wilfully accept slavery, all in the name of love? Why would she subject herself to such inhuman treatment just to have children or just for sex? Why would she accept a position of inferiority in order to bring honour to her family or in order to enjoy prestige? Why would she yield to emotional battering? Why

would she become mad all in the name of love? Most women may not have thought through any of these questions, but it is apparent what their choice would be. These questions remain unanswered. While all feminists agree that some marriage practices seriously circumscribe the woman, some still consider it a better compromise to the total annihilation of men, which militant feminists propose.

Divorce: the flight of fancy or the quest for life.

When there is no happy equilibrium in a marriage, the contemporary option is divorce. A formal separation is a culmination of the mental and emotional dissociation, which may have already taken place. In "The making of a Hero", Sander describes the funniest hero who strikes immense success in his relationship with women. Incidentally, his father, a German SS, officer has had a very horrid relationship with his mother. The father is extremely strict on the mother, who is prevented from sleeping with her hands under the blanket for propriety's sake. She has to keep her eyes to herself and at one harsh word from him, she cringes like a dog and she is not allowed to ask questions: "She was a good wife if she willingly bit her lips, that way she was playing her part on the home front as it were" (40).

The German hero's father seriously gagged the existence of his wife, who dutifully obeyed and played the role:

> It never entered her head that it could be different, that there could be relaxed moments in life free from domination and hierarchy, free from the immediate call of duty. It had been drummed into her at an early age that giving birth to her children would be a painful business. She stood by this knowledge and was not at all surprised when it turned out the way that everyone had said it would. All she realized after marriage was that the "painful business" referred to the whole thing. Intercourse included. She put her arms round her husband. He liked it that way, and besides it

was part of her duty. That was what it meant to be married (41-42).

The woman's love making is perfunctory; it has become a duty and not a spontaneous expression of love. She suddenly realises the brutality of her husband and starts considering divorce. The son, the hero, never learns to display his true feelings, without losing affection in return, a backlash from mother - father relationship in the home. Later in life, he gets over his father's brutish eccentricities and he can put his hands on top of the blanket without being reprimanded. With militant opposition to the archetypal HE, who is representative of all men, the three Ms K discuss their disdain of men's dominance in determining what women should want. In a pessimistic outburst, the three Ms K vehemently request the annihilation of all men and their genitals, let there be total anarchy they say, because women do not have a chance.

You have to fit in even if it's no longer so obvious that we do. HE dictates whether you sit or lie down, who is healthy and who is ill. Who deserves affection and who doesn't. Whose the weekends are and whose the weekdays. Who gets fucked, how long it takes, who gets paid for it and who gets a cuddle for it. Who has a social right to sympathy. Who has to waste their energy in fear that something might have happened to him when he doesn't ring, that he might have lost all interest or found someone else. He does the defining.

- Which HE?
- The archetypal HE.
- And if he doesn't do the defining and choosing, then, my dear, there's something wrong with your superHE.
- We're controlled by this superHE.
- You don't have to waste your energies on HIM. You can leave, can't you.
- That's just it. Leave. It's always the same. Even we are doing it. Away with whatever it is you don't like. Away with your past, into the dustbin with it. Knock off their heads, off with their pricks "away with"? On all levels, right up to total annihilation. We haven't got a chance (132).

Many of the inhibitors to a successful emotional fulfilment and stability within the home have constituted the

thrust of our discourse so far. Besides, the problem of arranged marriages, which had been the culture in most parts of Africa and is fast disappearing in Europe, there are other factors which may cause feelings of failure and defiance in a woman. For instance, if a woman gets married because everyone around her is doing so, or it is simply the thing to do after schooling, or it is what her/his parents want; reasons like these are likely to lose their intensity and justification after a while. Our quest for civilisation, modernity and progress has propelled most cultures of the world forward; however the issues of marriage often remain very delicate and intriguing. Patriarchal regimes put a lot of restrictions on the woman who is particularly called upon to make many more adjustments. On the whole, marriage is a socio-cultural union intended to serve the interests of the society. The woman can only experience an emotional equilibrium when she is conciliatory and compliant with societal demands. With formal education the woman has gained a lot more independence. She could make her choice; it is then important to note that the reasons that determine her choice of a partner or her decision to marry at all, may also cause her to quit the marriage. If men are known to marry for progenies, the same reasons could cause his separation from his wife and vice versa. If a man marries to ensure his lineage, his life must continue in his children, then he would have nothing to do with a woman who cannot satisfy this need.

Children are expected to bring joy and much fun to a marriage, but what happens where there are none? The undue emphasis on children being the fruit of marriage leaves the childless couple despondent and unfulfilled. The man who cannot cope with such a fruitless venture opts out, or takes to extra-marital affairs. Maladjustment to a spouse's emotional disposition, idiosyncrasies, interests or career pursuits, particularly the wife's, have sometimes led to a break up. Feminine writers often portray such women as torn between their allegiance to their husband, and children and their economic or academic pursuit. A case in point is Esi in Aidoo's *Changes - A Love Story*. In the first place, the patriarchal paradigm, which makes the husband's interest superior to the wife's, also feeds his jealousy and resentment. He therefore makes it his responsibility to keep her uncultured and grossly economically dependent to safeguard his honour. M'am in

Maman a un amant, could not read nor write until she meets her lover, M. Tichit, who sets about making her well-cultured and literate.

Figes describes a kind of marriage that seems to work for many, the companionate marriage where the woman does not harbour a desire to outshine her husband, she is beautiful but modest, and although accomplished and cultivated, she likes her wifely and domestic duties. Most women who are selfless, caring and godly will opt for this kind of marriage - in fact, they will work for it. Figes seems to recreate the picture of the virtuous woman as described in Proverbs 31 of The Bible. It is true that feminists have their own interpretation of Bible doctrines. They claim that conventional interpretation perpetrates patriarchal traditions. Indeed references are made to the fact that some patriarchs in The Bible are misogynists. Barbara Brown Zikmund reports on new conceptions by Jewish and Christian feminists, who may have experienced curtailment due to biblical interpretations of male oppressors. She writes, in " feminist Consciousness in Historical perspective":

> Jewish and Christian feminists use new interpretative principles to liberate God's Word in Scripture. They are willing to risk, out of a belief that God has promised liberation to all creation. They are redefining authority to celebrate the resources of community in interpreting God's Word. By allowing women's experience to inform the task, they are discovering new theologies and leaving behind old oppressions (28-29).

They are these old forms of oppression that have often led to the relatively higher rate of divorce in the Christian community. The greater liberty that Christian women have experienced than their Moslem counterparts is seen in their higher frequency of getting out of a marriage that does not work for them, even though The Bible, like the Coran does not really encourage divorce. Another major cause of rift in the conjugal relationship of educated persons is decision making. Decision making can be categorised as syncretic, where spouses make decisions jointly, autonomic couples make decisions separately, with a minimum of consultation, while autocratic decisions are husband dominated. All in all, the man makes the

majority of decisions affecting both his own and his wife's use of resources. What seems preferable to most educated women may be the syncretic category, where both spouses are actively involved in the decision making process. Such couples are likely to carry over this tendency to other spheres of operations, like chore-performance or social activities, in which case, where there are no servants the man may be willing to help out with house-hold duties. This is not feasible in the autocratic or husband dominated relationship, which typifies patriarchy in operation. The husband governs the resources and the life of his spouse. It is this stifling traditional pattern that most feminists have kicked against. Even Emecheta, who says that she is not a feminist, creates female characters, who kick against oppressive patriarchal attitudes. Adah, in Second *Class Citizen*, vehemently opposes Francis' unreasonable high-handedness about their relationship. She finally breaks away, gaining custody of her children in a court ruling. The fact that a male-dominated relationship dehumanises the woman is real. She has to bow to the whims and caprices of the man. She may not have a choice about what she spends her money on, what clothes she buys or what charities she supports. Relationships built on this male-dominated style most often end in divorce or estrangement, incidentally, this has been the popularly preferred operation in most patriarchal societies. While such a marital relationship survived in the past because it was sustained by religious beliefs and taboos, it does not seem that such could last long today.

The autonomous decision-making style may create tension below the surface. This style works better in a single parent lifestyle. There is no reason why a spouse in an autonomic relationship may not be able to make independent decisions, especially where each person has his/her resources. Tensions arise where men have a bloated view of their own worth, role and personality. If a man wants to be king in his home, then he puts a weight behind his claim. He makes everyone bow to his orders. Nnaife, in *Joys of Motherhood,* takes the law into his own hand, when he discovers that he will make little financial gain from a bride price on Kehinde, his daughter, who already is pregnant for the meat seller. This proves the climax in his assertion of his patriarchal rights.

In western societies, education and social security have actually created more opportunities for expression of the emancipation of women. An educated woman who is gainfully employed may not have any need to depend on financial support from the male spouse. In case she is unemployed, the welfare provided by social security programmes affords a minimal means of sustenance, which could still enhance her independence. Social welfare may also encourage a woman to manage her income instead of the "common purse" which the patriarchal system has seriously exploited to batter women materially and emotionally. The British magazine " Cosmopolitan" of November 1999 reported on a new kind of sin, that is, Sexually Transmitted Debt - STD.

> By falling in love and agreeing to share a home, a bed and a bank account with a man, many women find themselves penniless at the end of a relationship - or worse deeply in debt. In fact, this financial malaise has reached such epidemic proportions, the Government plans to warn women not to share finances with their partner, and the Law Commission is producing a consultation paper to be submitted to Parliament later this year. The report will particularly highlight the property rights and liabilities of home sharers and could lead to much needed changes in the Law (37).

The British Government's initiative to encourage women to have a separate account from their husbands should make women financially independent. They will not be left in the lurch should there be a break-up. Financial handicap may not constitute the only cause of divorce. Studies have indicated that extended family structure or issues of fertility are often the causes of a divorce.

Both spouses may be implicated in the case of infidelity. Most men find the infidelity of women unbearable, whereas the woman, understanding the nature of men (African men particularly are expected to be polygynous by tradition) may be willing to cope with the other woman. The choice of opting out by divorce imposes devastating effects on all the parties involved. If the couple belong to the elite, they are mindful of

their status, as the new lifestyle may jeopardise their interests. Their children are exposed to untold psychological ailments like delinquency, drug abuse, alcoholism, poor academic achievement, truancy or sexual promiscuity. Also in the autonomic decision-making mode, where parents act at variance with each other, their children may suffer from the same psychological problems. The argument of psychologists is that, even though divorce has its attendant disadvantages, it may be a better option if the mental well-being of spouses and children who are held in the grips of a sad relationship, is at stake. A break-up becomes inevitable, where there is no longer an emotional bond and where moral support or mutual respect are lacking, where indifference, verbal or physical abuse have taken over the tender loving care, which forms the crux of the marital vows couples make. The typical man's delight in inflicting torture on the woman or in seeing her writhe in pain has been one of the reasons for psychiatric disorders in women.

It seems then that if more emphasis is laid on love as the motive for marriage, there is a greater chance of success, happiness and fulfilment. The other possible reasons like procreation, financial security, social status, allegiance to parents and political considerations may likely be the very causes of divorce, especially when such anticipations are foiled.

Passion and love: euphoria or pragmatic choice.

The fact that love should be the only motivating reason for marriage is undoubtedly the point of Christian morality and most psychoanalytic procedures. Determining what love means and should be seems to be a major problem for people who are caught in the throes of passion and erotic fancy. The amorous is often identified as love, therefore sexual pleasure is considered by psychoanalysts as primordial to the success of marriage. Philosophers like Kierkegaard consider marriage a restraint to love, they opined that within marriage the spontaneity of love is gone while sex and conjugal duties become boring and repugnant to the married woman. de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, explains this philosophical reticence of marriage as consummating love in the following words:

> To reconcile marriage and love is such a tour de force that nothing less than divine intervention is required for success; this is the solution reached through devious ways

> by Kierkegaard. Love, he says, is spontaneous; marriage is a decision; the amorous inclination, however is to be aroused by marriage or by decision to wish to marry. Something so mysterious as to be explained only by divine action paradoxically occurs in virtue of reflection and the whole process must be simultaneous. This is to say that to love is not to marry and that it is hard to see how love can become duty. But the paradox does not dismay Kierkegaard. He agrees that 'reflection is the destroying angel of spontaneity', but says that decision is a new spontaneity based on ethical principles, it is a 'religious conception' which 'should open the way to amorous inclination' and protect it from all danger (460).

If marriage is inhibiting to love, the conclusion may be not to marry. But Kierkegaard opined that it takes the divine to protect love and it is marriage, which gives a simultaneous expression of love and a decision to keep it. However, it seems the demonstration of passion and sexual pleasure within marriage often destroys the spontaneity, which is the basic ingredient of love and amorous relationships. In short, marriage is deemed to kill feminine eroticism in the effort to regularise it. This conception of passion and physical love, as being primary to marriage, as feminine sexual satisfaction is primary to psychoanalysis, makes marital union unnecessary as long as both man and woman can have sexual pleasure without being married. This contradicts Christian teaching that states that love and passionate or amorous expressions must only take place within marriage. Sexual passion should not constitute an end in itself, nor a means to an end, it is not a raison d'être and it should not be treated as such. Beyala breaks down all taboos and constraints around sexual passion, imposing on it a shocking freedom, which, not only moralists will question but the liberal also. Sexual pleasure outside the marriage bond is justified and seems the most natural thing to do when there is denial or when it becomes a means to solving economic hardship.

This may be considered indicative of the French culture where marriage is contracted not for the love of it, but for the apparent security it provides. Love and passion are sought for outside the home. By societal consensus this is accepted as the norm. Barbara Cartland confirms this in *La Fugue de Célina*:

> Mais il ne faut pas compter sur les Français. Leurs mariages sont toujours de convenance. Un Français qui possède un titre de noblesse sérieux attend d'une femme qu'elle lui apporte soit un domaine, soit une fortune, en échange de son nom (100).
>
> But you should not rely on French people. Their marriages are often of convenience. A French man of serious nobility wants a woman to bring him property or fortune in exchange for his name.

We may quickly add that the Frenchmen in Beyala's books that have so far been published, are not very rich nor are they of the nobility and therefore could take black women as lovers. French nobility restricts marriage to people of their class. Alexandre and M. Tichit are quite comfortable; Marcel Pagnol Marcel, of no fixed address, has to make an improvement on his lifestyle before he can gain Saïda's hand in marriage. In Victorian times, marriage, notably in French culture, particularly among the nobility, was contracted not for love but for the profit to be derived from it. Besides, as in most other stratified societies, the marriage union could only take place between two people of the same social class. Victor Hugo, in his *Ruy Blas,* intricately weaves the intrigue of a servant disguised as nobleman who falls in love with the queen of Spain, a move that spells doom to him and the queen. What is apparently primary to love and marriage in modern psychology should be friendship. Duck (qtd. in Wood) opines that sexual activity is less important than the meaning it has for the relationship. In the long run, a meaningful male/female relationship should be built on friendship and not on eroticism. Privileging sexual activity as the basis for close relationship enhances the male hegemony in which masculinity perceives women in terms of sexual potential. In the traditional context a woman is only meaningful for her sexual ability. Men have a proclivity to view friendship with the opposite sex as potentially sexual. In fact, they do not imagine the possibility of a cross-sex friendship that excludes sexual activity. This is why women have been treated

more or less insensitively as sexual objects without much consideration for their emotional needs.

While man only attributes sexual pleasure to the woman, his quest has always been to maintain an exclusive rule over her sexual performance. In this wise, some northern states in Nigeria and some other Islamic communities in Africa, give away their daughters in marriage in the teenage years in order to keep them in subjection to a single man and of course, in order to curb their promiscuity; besides they are brutally mutilated in what is called female circumcision. This is a practice that is still very much with us today, even though a lot of governmental and non-governmental initiatives have been adopted to curb the practice.

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