

MIGRATION AS CATALYST TO MARRIAGE DISINTEGRATION IN A CONTEMPORARY WORLD: ISSUES IN FLORA NWAPA'S EFURU AND IFEOMA OKOYE'S BEHIND THE CLOUDS

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Abstract

Migration of different types and for various reasons has been part of human history and existence. Marriage disintegration has become a common phenomenon in contemporary world. Most united and close-knit families have greatly given in to dislocation and movements of the principal family heads. Migration as an integral cultural and societal activity has been identified as a catalyst to breakdown of marriages. In most cases, family unity and continued existence are susceptible to intrusion by extraneous elements leading to eventual breakdown. Literary artists have captured incidences and situations of marriage breakdown occasioned by various issues other than migration such as; childlessness, neglect, abandonment and others. Thus Flora Nwapa 's Efuru and Ifeoma Okoye's Behind the Clouds present perceived happy marriages that fall to the challenges of shift in business and job locations by the male spouses. Using the sociological framework of Max Weber's 'Social Action' which studies aspects of human behaviour, this paper makes a literary analysis of the incidences and disruptive effects of migration in marriages in the texts under study. The essay specifically identifies relationships and social interactions as causative factors of eventual marriage disintegration. It further identifies male protagonists as easy victims of extraneous influences and relationships.

Keywords: Migration, Marriage, Disintegration, Contemporary, Social Action

Introduction

Marriage in Africa in the contemporary world undergoes several forms of transformation which have affected its peace. Some of these occur due to changes in social relationships, economic pressure and societal demands and expectations. These factors largely place a lot of pressures on marriages and families, dismantling existing orientation and stability. One of these factors is *migration* or movement for a search of one thing or the other by partners in a marriage. Migration is described as "an integral part of the social and economic fabric of the world and the human kind" (William Barriga 162). There are therefore needs and situations that make movement expedient and is making it a

necessary aspect of human activities. William Barriga is still of the opinion that “the reasons why people move in ancient times are basically the same reasons why they too move today ... in search for food, green pasture, better standard of living, flee from inhospitable climate, political persecution, enemies” (168). These reasons include search for a better trade and contract for more money which are basic to families in contemporary times. Migration in modern usage is seen as “a trend of displacement and movement made by individuals with the hope to find more personal convenience or better material or social condition” (Fatemeh Pourjafari 680 - 1). Migration has been a part of human identity and activity as people embark on such ventures at different times for different purposes. Marriages in contemporary times face a lot of challenges primarily migration, displacement or separation or other forms of disruptions that take the partners to different places separately. This situation usually comes with great consequences. The individuals in the course of movements interact with others, hence, social relationships are fostered. Thus, Max Weber, a sociologist describes a social relationship as denoting “the behavior of plurality of actors” (Janusz Mucha 4). In social relationships, different individuals are involved and are taken into account in their various actions and dispositions.

Issues of marriage and migration are contained in the novels of Flora Nwapa and Ifeoma Okoye, who are among leading female writers. Various writers have examined these two select texts: *Efuru* and *Behind the Clouds* and have been diverse including studies on causes of family and marriage disintegration. Hence making a feminist analysis of the causes of marriage crises, Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo in “Marriage and Family in Mariama Ba’s *Scarlet Song* and Myriam Warner-Vieyra’s *Juletane*” identifies polygamy as the major cause of marriage disintegration. She writes, “The family is crucial to the health of the individual as well as that of the society. For Ba, Marriage is the pivot of family life. In her novels the ideal marriage is one based on a monogamous relationship while polygamy is represented as a disruptive and destructive force in marital life” (57). Here polygamy is listed as a leading cause of marriage disunity. In the essay, “African Cultural Conception of Motherhood in *Efuru*” the writer identifies childlessness as a catalyst to marriage crises and as a disruptive factor to existing peaceful marriage and says: “In African societies, a woman’s identity is closely related to her capacity to produce children. This ideology of motherhood is so widely spread that what is natural, the capability to procreate, takes a cultural dimension. In fact, for Africans, a woman must not be “unproductive” or “childless”, be it naturally or voluntarily. In both cases, being

childless identifies her not as a female but as “a man”. Consequently childlessness, natural or voluntary, is synonymous with social rejection and defines the woman as an outcast” (Kouadio Germain N’Guesson 2). Childlessness in African cultural setting carries a stigma and deprives the woman peace in her marriage.

Similarly, Ogoma, Daniel Ebum in “Reflection on an African Traditional Marriage System” posits that “African traditional conception of marriage is teleological. It is primarily for procreation. Marriage can be dissolved on the ground of childlessness” (96). The writer however is optimist and advances a healing tendency of marriage as contributing to the relative peace in the society. “Feminist Consciousness and Assertions in Ifeoma Okoye’s *Behind the Clouds* and *Chimere*”, evaluates “the impact of feminist consciousness on the lives of Okoye’s female characters and how effectively they utilize education, economic independence and sisterhood to strategize, redefine themselves, challenge the status quo and attain their goals” (Margaret Fafa Nutsukpo 16). Here, *Behind the clouds* is studied as a feminist text, while Ifeyinwa Ogbazi equally made “A Structuralist Reading of Ifeoma Okoye’s *Behind the Clouds*”. The review generally reveals that much critical works concerning marriage and family are done as feminist studies dwelling on polygamy and childlessness as identified factors of family disintegration. But, there are still gaps as to the causes of family disintegration in contemporary world among which is migration. This paper is therefore standing on the premise of a sociological study using Max Weber’s Theory of Social Action to examine the effect of migration on the family using the afore-mentioned texts. It observes instances of movements of the principal marriage partners that lead to eventual breakdown of their families. The essay further identifies a principal couple’s culpability and vulnerability as basic ingredients in marriage disintegration.

Conceptual Analysis

From time immemorial, and in human history, people have been on the move for one reason or the other. The reasons for these movements are however relative in context. Migration therefore is seen as “a heuristic label encompassing a plethora of phenomenon related to the translocation and meeting of peoples and cultures across various kinds of borders. Migration needs to be seen in context” (Marcus Hartner and Marion Schulte 13). Migration therefore can be geographical, job or occupational according to the situation that warrants it. There are so many

reasons why people break off their activities and associations in one place for another. Hence, Fatemeh, Pourjafari and Abdoulali Vahidpour observe that:

Nowadays we live in an era of constant changes and movements, the immediate result of which is that nothing is stable and borders have become mixed. The outstanding developments in the field of communication technology such as satellite, TV, Internet and the modern means of transportation followed by the globalization of the world economy are all the influential factors in making our age the age of mobility and borderlessness. The traditional settler life-form has given its place to a new nomadic life style and migration has become a familiar trend. (679).

Movement of people is a common seamless activity and people move for different reasons. Migration influences the different aspects of social and cultural life of the people including marriage and family. Thus, marriage and the family play a vital role in upholding social relationships as much as having its own challenges. Hence, it is observed that “just as elsewhere in the world, the traditional African family setting is under assault from many factors, some unique to the continent, others brought about by external forces. These include ... both men and women working away from home ...” (Mario Azevedo 361). While migration is common to the world, the issues of family relationships and marriage are somewhat unique to the African continent.

African society holds families in high esteem and sees it as the basis for cultural existence and living. Supporting the issue of family challenges and its attendant consequences, Azevedo further portends that “the most striking aspect of African migrant labour is that people involved did not cut themselves off from their rural homes, but sought through wages, to supplement their families’ economic position in the countryside ... This has led to a number of negative results ... As a result most men leave their families at home, causing much separation” (369). The negative effect of separation has become a crushing agent of families and marriages in Africa. It is believed that “family disintegration due to work force migration is a relatively new phenomenon affecting quite a large number of families in developing countries around the world that raised a lot of concerns regarding the mental health of children and adolescents left behind” (Nemes B. 1). Migration is identified as a challenge to families and marriages in contemporary times. This therefore, reiterates the fact that marriage as an institution suffers the effect of external factors of social relationship.

Social relations as a concept relates to “what people do, or what they are involved in, is their behavior be it overt or covert, omission or acquiescence. Action is a behavior to which the actor attaches a subjective meaning” (Janusz Mucha 2-3). The explication of Weber’s idea includes actions of individuals in close knit families, though much emphasis is on the subjective individual action. Mucha further posits that “social action is for us an individual’s behavior either historically observable or theoretically possible or likely, in relationship to the actual or anticipated potential behavior of other individuals” (3). The actions of individual persons are the key stabilizing factor or otherwise in relationships. In addition, social relationship is characterized by “at least minimum of mutual orientation of the action of each to that of the others, its content may be of the most varied nature: conflict, hostility, sexual attraction, friendship, loyalty, or economic exchange. It is however very important to know that Weber considers conflict or hostility as social relationship” (4). It is evident that these factors are expedient in close knit relationships such as the family. Therefore, hostility or any form of disagreement among people is a potent tool to disintegration.

But in the Weberian sense, “social relationship does not mean that the partners understand each other very well that they accept a common definition of situation. The subjective meaning needs not necessarily be the same for all the parties who are mutually oriented in a given social relationship. There need not in this sense be reciprocity” (Janusz 5). Relationships in families and marriages are not fully reciprocal as individual understanding and action become limiting factors to completely mutual relationships. Thus:

A social “conflict” and “hostility” in Weber’s typology are distinctive features whereby conflict as a social relationship is “action oriented intentionally to carrying out the actor’s own will against the resistance of the other party or parties. The term peaceful conflict applies to causes in which actual physical violence is not employed. A peaceful conflict is competition insofar as it consists in a formally peaceful attempt to attain control over opportunities and advantages which are also desired by others. (Janusz 6).

Conflict of interests, hostility, physical violence are all associated factors in marriages and family relationships. These issues are replete in the narratives of the two texts under examination and will be dealt with. Hence, a literary analysis of a sociological approach of migration and disintegration in families and

marriages are expounded in Nwapa's *Efuru* and Ifeoma Okoye's *Behind the Clouds*.

Issues of Migration and Effects in Nwapa and Okoye's Texts

Incidences of migration and family disintegration are raised in the novels of Nwapa and Ifeoma Okoye's. The two novelists are recognized as the earliest female writers in African Literature. Flora Nwapa is recorded the first female novelists to be published in Africa and her novel *Efuru* is the first novel written by an African woman to be published in English. Mbanefo Ogene acknowledges that "Flora Nwapa was the first Nigerian feminist novelist with the publication of her novel *Efuru* in 1966" (101). Ifeoma Okoye's *Behind the Clouds* was published in 1982. Ogene further records that "Ifeoma Okoye sets out to redeem the intimidating images of women in the African setting" (106). These women have espoused family and relationship issues in their novels, explicating cultural factors affecting the peace and stability of the African marriages. In a similar idea, these novelists have produced novels "which have at their center the theme of social disillusionment as it is experienced by sensitive and ambiguous young women in Nigeria. In Ifeoma Okoye's *Behind the Clouds*, Ije a well qualified Ibo woman who has studied accountancy and married the man of her choice finds that her marriage is unable to withstand the strains brought to bear upon it by her apparent barrenness "(Rhoda Cobaham Sander 17). Most marriages in the African setting fall apart under the weight of barrenness and childlessness as triggering factors to crises. *Efuru* who has only a female child suffers unstable marriage largely due to absence of children and especially a male child. However, Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo believes that "there is hardly any woman protagonist in the novels that opts for the single state or celibacy, each chooses a man who also chooses her, but all the marriages end badly or even tragically. In spite of the efforts the women make to preserve their marriages, and in spite of their devotion to their husbands, they are rewarded with abandonment or rejection" (58). The issue of abandonment and rejection go hand in hand with migration and separation which has become a straining factor in contemporary family.

In the two texts under study, issues of migration rear its head as a family condition and need answers. It is however obvious that the concerned couples live happily in love until one partner decides to make a movement or shift base. In *Behind the Clouds*, the couple *Ije* and *Dozie* had lived happily and faithfully since their courtship and marriage, "their life had been one of give and take, a

life full of the joys of sharing. They had learnt to understand each other, to be able to communicate even without speaking” (6). The fact that *Ije* and *Dozie* are love birds that maintain a stable happy marriage is not in doubt. The relationship between them is very close as each communicates their minds to the other as seen in the narrative of the text. Ernest Emenyeonu concurs to this and says that “*Ije* and *Dozie* a middle-class Enugu couple are so close that they often think the same thoughts” (181). Similarly, Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru* marries *Adizua* out of love and both live happily as husband and wife, “they saw each other fairly often and after a fortnight’s courting she agrees to marry him. But the man had no money for the dowry. The woman saw that he was unable to pay anything she told him not to bother about the dowry. They were going to proclaim themselves married and that was that” (*Efuru* 7). Their love for each other grows and blossoms. In the same vein David I. Adeleke observes that “*Efuru* falls in love with a poor farmer *Adizua*, and elopes with him because he doesn’t have the resources to meet traditional wedding requirements” (Online). Such is the scenario in *Efuru*, as they continue to live together in love until the point when the need arises for more family business ventures.

In attesting to the love between the couples, Ezeigbo asserts that “the women protagonists in the novels first seek happiness in marriage which begins harmoniously but later hits the rocks” (57). A similar pattern of disruption is experienced once the male partner begins to expand the scope of family business by moving away from the family, turning around the peace already existing. *Ije*’s problem starts as soon as *Dozie* expands his business to Port Harcourt. He tells *Ije*, “a friend in Port Harcourt is helping me to get a contract for designing a hotel there ... if I succeed in winning the contract we will be swimming in money” (*Behind the Clouds* 35). The movement to Port Harcourt connects *Dozie* to *Virginia*, the woman that is the object of crises and disruption of marital peace for *Ije*. And suddenly, “one day a woman named *Virginia* shows up at the house claiming she is carrying *Dozie*’s baby. *Dozie* admits to a stunned *Ije* that he had spent a drunken one night stand with her. *Virginia* moves in and begins to take over the household insulting *Ije*, driving the servants crazy” (Emenyeonu 181). This strange woman enters the marriage in deceit to ruin the couples existing happy marriage. *Virginia* is described as “only crafty and vicious ... calculating woman; a woman who makes sure she gets what she wants, who knows on which side her bread is buttered” (*Behind the Clouds* 84). *Virginia* becomes the cause of *Dozie*’s family disruption. The problem starts with *Dozie*’s movement to Owerri and Port Harcourt for contracts. The environment and social

interaction makes him culpable and guilty of unfaithfulness in spite of the love and trust he enjoys from his wife Ije. The fact of Weber's social action "presupposes the existence of other individual and some action by him. This means there can be no social action in isolation. Therefore, social action is possible if there is another human being whose action or behavior is prompting to the given individual to act in a particular manner" (Rashmi Priya Online). Dozie engages in social interaction during his business trips meets with friends and attends night clubs where he gets entangled with Virginia. Further to this, "Dozie opens a small office at Owerri and transferred a handful of his workers to the town ... Ije was pleased with Dozie's successes, but she detested the days and nights she had to spend alone because of Dozie's business trips ..." (*Behind the Clouds* 57). Dozie's absence creates a vacuum as Dozie makes these trips to and fro Owerri and Port Harcourt in search of new contracts, Ije is not happy about the travel though she enjoys the money made from the business expansion. At the end, the result of these travels becomes unpalatable.

Eventually the bombshell drops as Virginia tells Dozie about her pregnancy and it becomes a trying time for Dozie. This fact and development keep him depressed and unhappy and he finds it difficult to confide in Ije his beloved wife. "Dozie came back from Owerri looking sad and agitated. The mood continued into the next day and to Ije's bewilderment, Dozie would not confide in her as before, although she pleaded with him to tell her what was troubling him" (73). This pattern of secrecy and agitation features in *Efuru*, as Adizua keeps late night and at times even stays away all night as soon as he gets entangled with a strange woman. The wife Efuru complains to her mother-in-law, "I don't know why he comes back very late and won't eat my food, ... he has been doing this for weeks now. What beats me is that I have not offended him, if I had offended him, I would render an apology easily" (51). This change of attitude by the men usually disrupts the peace of the family and disorganizes the women. For Efuru, she decides to stop cooking for Adizua as a defence mechanism from the pains and emotional trauma. Further as Adizua eventually elopes with the strange woman, Efuru decides to quit the marriage. Separation and disruption of marriage is chiefly suffered by the women. While Efuru is convinced that a woman is involved in her ordeal, the narrative asserts that "men behave this way when women are in their lives and she is so influential that they cannot but bow to her whims and will" (*Efuru* 54). Adizua goes to Ndoni with a strange woman described as "the daughter of a bitch, a worthless woman" (58). In *Behind the Clouds* Virginia is the influence over Dozie. The

knowledge of the fact of her existence in Dozie's life is devastating to Ije, she moves out of the house, takes on a new job to enable her gain solace. The two scenarios in the texts have similar pattern of influence and pain that come with them. These leave the marriages crushed and disintegrated.

Conclusion

The narratives in the two texts indicate issues of migration. The men in the two texts embarked on movement out of the home only to get influenced by their social relationships and engagements. These consequently affected their marriages. However, while the issue of job mobility is of paramount importance to families in contemporary world, it is observed that some men are culpable and vulnerable to negative influences that affect their marriages resulting from their social relations. Women are resilient and cling tenaciously to their marriage, making sacrifices to make it succeed. Efuru confesses her faithfulness to Adizua, "God in Heaven knows that since I married Adizua I have been faithful to him. Our ancestors know that since I ran away from my father's house to Adizua's that nobody, no man has seen my nakedness" (*Behind the Clouds* 58). Similar expression is made by Ije who never in her widest imagination thought that Dozie could be unfaithful to their marriage. Ije herself is over trusting of her husband, while her faithfulness to her husband and marriage is not questionable. The paper however observed that the men in the texts betrayed the trust reposed in them by their wives who love and supported them selflessly. Equally, the drive for more income initiated the need for migration to other areas which became the veritable ground for eventual disintegration of their families. The men are culpable being easily influenced by external factors and social actions, unlike the women who withstood such influences in the course of their social relationships. Men became the architect of their marriage crises and disintegration as soon as they began to leave their homes in search of better income. The paper therefore suggests that married couples should migrate together should there need to shift habitation due to job or business. Also couples, especially men should confine in their partners on their new social relationships and social engagements made in the course of migration to avert such avoidable unpalatable results of marriage disintegration.

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