

The Clandestine Polygamy and the Female Madness in The Official Wife

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ABSTRACT

Studies on madness, for different reasons, have mainly focused on women as the most affected group. In patriarchal societies, madness is associated with women as the challenge of the weak gender which cannot handle difficult situations. In The Official Wife, Okurut presents a female character with a frequency of madness resulting from her patriarchal marriage. Other female characters in the novel are not only driven into madness because of patriarchal subordination, but also the dilemma of the kinds of marriage that they are involved in. Through the clandestine marriage, male characters marry more than one wife secretly while they are officially involved in Christian marriage which discourages polygamy. Okurut presents the Ugandan society where Christianity is entertained as a form of civilization while the societal traditions including polygamy are embraced. In the narrative, Liz's confusion and madness against the system is a representation of the real condition of the female characters who have failed to understand and accept the existing system which acknowledges Christian marriage and accepts polygamy at the same time.

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1. Introduction

This article examines the representation of the clandestine polygamy in *The Official Wife* by Mary Karooro Okurut, the Ugandan female writer, and its relationship to the madness condition of the married female characters. In this article, it is argued that the madness observed in female characters is the demonstration of the failure to define and accept the clandestine polygamy as a type of marital relationship in their society. In the novel, Christianity is portrayed as the new religion brought by colonialists, and also as a type of civilization which encourages monogamy and discourages polygamy. Whereas Christian marriages do not allow polygamy, clandestine polygamy is formed as a result of the male characters' desire to have more women despite that they are in Christian marriages. The novel shows that this new form of marriage is the source of madness in female characters when they find themselves neither in Christian marriages nor in official polygamy arrangements. Such a situation is mainly presented through Liz who suffers different kinds of madness condition on finding that the husband is secretly married to another woman, Manga.

The Official Wife is a representation of the marriage life of the educated middle class Ugandan couple, Ishaka and Liz. It is the depiction of the frustrated modern woman who goes mad on finding that the husband is unofficially involved with another woman. The novel shows that Liz is engulfed with madness because the husband is in relationship with Manga as his second wife. The psychological situation which Liz goes through suggests the difficulties the female characters face when their husbands are involved in clandestine polygamy. On the other hand, Okurut's punishment to Ishaka in the end of the narrative demonstrates her criticism for such male behaviors which are backed up by the patriarchal society. In the novel, Okurut through the character of Ishaka portrays the societal desire to embrace their old marriage traditions as well as the Christian traditions of marriage for different purposes.

In this analysis, the concept of madness is based on the features of madness identified by the characters in the concerned society as well as the features which define a kind of madness in an individual as identified by psychologists. While this article recognises that madness, as Ussher (2011) argues, is "more than a set of symptoms (and more than) a diagnosed category" (11), it looks at madness both from a clinical and societal view of what can be considered the symptoms of madness in the characters.

While Gomory and Cohen (2013) clarify the challenges involved in defining madness and their argument is on how one can identify the real cause of madness and whether it is a social or a biological problem. However, Szasz's definition of madness can be useful as it contains most of the features associated with madness clinically and culturally:

The term of madness refers to potpourri of emotions and behaviors, expressed verbally or more often non verbally, composed of variety of ingredients, any one of which may be dominant in any one case. The ingredients are anger, aggression, fear, frustrations, confusion, exhaustion, isolation, conceit, cowardliness, and difficulty getting on with others (Szasz, 2006: 12).

While there are other definitions of madness from sociological and religious point of view, Szasz definition includes the symptoms which can be observed in the characters without a clinical attention. Moreover, Szasz adds that "madness is an idea and not a tangible thing, as different people react to it differently" (33). Accordingly, Szasz's definition renders this article a room to evaluate the type and level of madness in characters without much consideration of the clinical perspective as it is beyond the reach of this paper.

In the novel, the author presents the female character, Liz, who through her psychological situation, the challenges of the institution of marriage are reflected. The portrayal of madness in the novel, demonstrates the levels of the effects of patriarchy in marriage and the ways some female characters who fail to accept the patriarchal demands suffer the consequences including madness. In Africa for example, as Mba (2013) claims, madness is believed, most of the time, to be caused by witchcraft, sorcery or spirit possession as well as other manipulations by gods, goddesses, and ancestral spirits. This implies that, in most cases, the description of sources of madness depends on the societal view of what madness is.

In Africa, the study on clandestine marriage is a reflection of the existence of polygamous traditions which are discouraged among the Christian believers. Fenske claims that, "polygamy is a distinctive feature of African marriage" (2001:1). Polygamy is one of the features which differentiate Africa from other parts of the world especially the West, where for different reasons polygamy has existed throughout the history of the continent. With the introduction of Christianity, polygamy is one of the marriage traditions which were seriously discouraged by missionaries. However, until now, polygamy tradition, as Oguda expresses "is neither completely accepted nor completely rejected" (2012:14). In many parts of Africa, this kind of marriage survives as a frequently protected symbol of African identity, for it is attributed to some significance.

Some of the importance attached to the traditional African polygamy mainly include handling the challenges of childlessness and infertility in marriage, source of labour especially in the agrarian communities, accommodating the barren women and taking care of the widows (Mbiti, 1969: Kathide, 2007: Anozie, 1998). The representation of the aspect of polygamy in the African fiction includes mostly those which identify polygamy as one of the sources of female characters' subordination, humiliation and oppression in a patriarchal society. On the other hand, some literary studies have shown that polygamy can stand in the advantage of women where sisterhood is well practiced. In this perspective, unity among female characters can suppress patriarchal authorities and practices in marriage (Mwetulundila, 2019:, Moola, 2017)

In this article, the clandestine polygamy forms a new direction in the institution of polygamy since it is formulated behind another form of marriage which is Christian monogamy. Some of the major characteristics of polygamy is the recognition of the wives by the society, the hierarchy of the wives and the roles distribution in marriage. However, these features lack in clandestine polygamy. In the novel, *The Official Wife*, the unofficial marriage of Ishaka to Manga exemplify the clandestine type of polygamy where their marriage is not officially recognised but exists behind their Christian marriage.

In most cases, as Cixous and Clement claim, "women's madness is represented as a form of resistance" (1986:136). And this kind of resistance according to Caminero is a "sign of women's powerlessness" (1998:4). The association of madness with women is historical and is mostly related to the consequences of patriarchal oppression and subordination. Sass and Mountain at different times have argued that madness, as shown in the literary analysis, is part and reality of black woman and part of her life which has led to most studies on madness to focus on women. In their views, the study of madness in a literary work can provide an insight to a particular author or character in a certain society and the extent to which patriarchal subordination has contributed to their madness condition (Sass, 1992: Mountain, 2001).

In the feminist view, it is through the madness condition where individuals with madness find voice and space to speak or act in a manner that condemns patriarchy which makes madness a form of resistance. Ogundipe and Showalter in the same line address 'madness' as a form of resistance of the female characters against patriarchy (Ogundipe, 1994: Showalter, 1987). Their explanation is a reference to two types of madness condition in female characters. The first type

is when some individuals are naturally affected psychologically and unconsciously react abnormally, and the second one is when some individuals create the madness condition so as to earn voice in the circumstances where women are voiceless.

The madness condition in the novel is reflected in different forms where the protagonist is affected psychologically as she goes through hallucinations and insomnia in her reactions to marital problems. On the other hand, the narrative portrays the kind of madness that is triggered by the presence of the victim's husband, Ishaka, who she considers to be the source of her madness. Liz is one of the female characters who chose to marry in church in the hope that this type of marriage will prevent their husbands from being polygamous. The protagonist expresses her anger and disillusionment over the societal and religious systems which govern the marriage institution. She is angry against the situation in her society where the individuals "have one leg in Christianity and another in tradition (O.W 133)". As a result, there is a dilemma which is created by society as those who are involved in Christian marriages engage in polygamy secretly and are not questioned by neither the society nor the church. This is what throws Liz into madness.

2. The Insomnia and Double Bed Sarcasm

According to Kingston (2015) insomnia becomes an important literary device when conferred upon a character, a time during which the character can contemplate sources of anxiety, motivation, suffering or happiness, to explore his or her world and place in it. In this section, the paper focuses at the way the writer uses the sleeplessness as a space for the protagonist to communicate her marital challenges. Liz's sleeplessness is a creation of a 'space' for the protagonist's expression of her feelings about the society and the husband who is secretly married to another woman. The protagonist identifies the source of her sleeplessness, that is, the absence of her husband which is symbolically demonstrated by the empty space in their double bed. The empty space on their bed is a representation of the failure of their Christian marriage and Liz's concern is on the husband's failure to stick to the marriage vow that took place in church. Liz's sleeplessness turns into a discourse in which the reader can study her situation and desires and the reflection of the situation of women in the society.

The 'double bed' is a metaphor introduced by the protagonist in the narrative which is part of the consequences of her insomnia. 'Double bed' represents her loneliness and the absence of her husband who is supposed to be with her in the bed at night. The metaphor presents the uselessness of their Christian marriage and Liz, angrily, expresses her situation, "I groan and turn and turn around helplessly in this stupidly huge bed" (O.W, 10). Her dissatisfaction is expressed in her words like 'stupidly huge bed' which implies that the idea of having a huge bed for the married couple is good but only when the couple is faithful to their christian vow. Through insomnia, she expresses how she feels about her home, her bed, her husband and the general society in relation to marriage and the clandestine polygamy.

In the same context, Liz refers to her marriage as "hollow and meaningless marriage" (O. W, 11). The reference to the words 'useless' and 'meaningless' by the protagonist shows that, in her view, her marriage is dead notwithstanding that in the eyes of the family and society her marriage still exists. This situation can be described in Ifechelobi's assertion that in African patriarchal societies there is unequal power relations between men and women as the system systematically positions women to be disadvantaged and oppressed (Ifechelobi, 2014). To elaborate, marriage is one of the institutions where women lose their freedom and live in the patriarchal dictates. In Liz's situation, the husband Ishaka is free to have another woman while to the wife having another man is unspeakable. Liz's sleeplessness communicates her failure to accept the situation, but also the failure of the society to help those who are affected by the system. In the societal eyes, Liz is torturing herself by her failure to accept her rival as her husband's wife.

Protagonist's methods of finding sleep defines her mental state and her desire to sleep so that she can forget about her husband and his secret marriage. For Liz, sleeping is a method of escape where she says "I wish I could sleep even for ten minutes" (O.W, 43). The situation suggests that it is only the sleep that can give her a break from thinking about her absent husband and her loneliness. The character's desire to sleep for ten minutes shows that she cannot sleep at all and her sleep is hampered by her denial of the situation. As a solution to her sleeplessness, the protagonist invents a 'sheep counting' method where she counts some imagined sheep in her room. Different sheep with different challenges are imaginably set in queue by the protagonist where each is supposed to cross the fence regardless of their physical challenges. Metaphorically, the protagonist is creating a problem and solution to this category of animals and struggle to solve it, that is crossing the fence. The nature of the method of the solution to her sleeplessness reflects her imagined way of getting away from her problems which is implied in the sheep.

Symbolically, the problem of crossing the fence facing the sheep implies her own failure to deal with the state of madness caused by her husband's clandestine marriage. Liz is psychologically trying to find comfort in helping the sheep,

which on the other hand, are facing the challenges like hers. According to Liz, some sheep are fat and some are lazy and yet they are all supposed to cross the fence. Both the sheep and Liz are supposed to move from the existing situation regardless of their challenges where crossing the fence implies Liz's acceptance of her situation or moving on with a different lifestyle. On the failure to solve her challenges, Liz's mind creates the same problem to the sheep and struggles to solve it.

In the representation of the struggle by women in the novel to cope with the situation, the writer uses Liz's situation as an example where in the same context of her room, the protagonist conducts a Christian service on her own for re-baptizing her rival, Manga because she thinks that her current name 'malaika' which means an angel is too good for her and does not fit her actions. By conducting the pastor's role of re-baptizing, symbolically, is a representation of her rejection of the woman and the tradition which accepts secret marriages of the Christian men. Liz's mental situation is evaluated in her actions where she conducts a service and assume the presence of the pastor, the child, and the parents of the child:

Mother: the child is not yet baptized.

Rev: Name the child

Mother: Manga

Rev: Manga! That is not a Christian name. It sounds like...a pagan name (O.W, 68).

As pointed out earlier, the writer creates space which contains a certain kind of madness where the protagonist expresses her anxieties and suggests solutions. Liz is playing the role of the child's mother to suggest the name for the child which is Manga. Okurut shows that the protagonist's mental problems focus on the actions which would undermine her rival and gains satisfaction through the service she is conducting. This kind of re-baptizing solution and that of sheep counting express a form of mental problem while at the same time reflecting the protagonist's desire to solve her marital problems. Through the baptism, Liz recalls the traditional belief that "one's life is defined by his or her name: that bad name bewitches the owner" (O.W, 65). According to Liz, Manga is something like mud or untidy and her rival deserves such a name. Protagonist's activities in her room suggests her helplessness and her level of madness. By naming her rival Manga, she is also referring to the pagan names which are associated with evil, including that of being married as a second wife to a Christian husband. According to Cauchon, (2001) characters like Liz, in their state of madness, struggle to find the means to escape or solve their conflicts. By giving the rival a bad name, Liz finds a certain level of relief which convinces her that she is better than Manga.

3. Hallucinations, Physical Confrontations and Societal Response

Some of the major conditions associated to hallucinations include "the conviction of its reality and the absence of a real object" (Ey quoted in Coreia et al, 1973:43). These features suggest the context where the individual characters claim with confidence of the things they see and hear while in the real sense they do not exist. While hallucinations can communicate different things from the unconscious part of the individual's mind, Jung argues that, "a personality, a life history, a pattern of hopes and desires lie behind such experiences" (1963, 127). In the view of such argument, it shows that hallucinations, to a great extent, are designed by the unconscious mind from different experiences which happened or did not happen while the individual had wanted them to happen. These views can explain the condition of the protagonist in *The Official Wife* whose hallucinatory experiences are related to her existing situation.

The nature of the hallucinations experienced by Liz suggests an indirect way of disclosing her desire to solve her psychological problems caused by her husband's decision to marry a second wife secretly. Okurut, through hallucinations, demonstrates how the mind of the character is struggling to show that she is involved in solving the dilemma she is facing. Liz's hallucinations about the unfinished tasks like the half-closed water taps in the kitchen makes her spend sleepless nights while going to the kitchen frequently. Liz admits that she is getting panic attack and as a result, she goes to close the water taps 'ten times each night' (O.W, 49). Liz sees the half-closed water tap and the entire family drowning, and this makes her go to the kitchen frequently to ensure safety before the family drowns. Her mind is disturbed by incompleteness which is implied in her marriage and which is reflected in her struggles to control the water tap. The protagonist takes the water tap problem seriously and believes that it can cause danger or even death to her family which is symbolically represented by 'drowning'. The condition alludes to Liz's state where she is already abandoned by Ishaka who has married another wife secretly. Her fear that the family can be drowned is a reference to the husband's complete abandonment of the family and the feeling of insecurity is causing Liz to hallucinate about a drowning family.

In portraying the danger of her disturbed marriage, the narrative shows the protagonist hallucinating about fire, which proposes the protagonist's worst psychological condition. The fire hallucinations take a serious image than that of the water tap where the protagonist claim that her house is on fire. Liz calls the fire brigade who arrive at her place only to find that there is no fire. She insists that the house is on fire while everyone else cannot see the fire or a house burning.

In the earliest discussion of events, Liz's madness condition included the actions which take place in her house without involving other members of family or society. The fire event involves a wider society including the police and the neighbours who arrive at her place on fire alert. In addressing her problem, the police admit that Liz is going through a kind of madness which needs a medical attention, and for that reason, she cannot be charged against "a false alarm" (O.W, 54). The recognition by the police and the neighbours that Liz is suffering a kind of madness is expected to bring a solution to her psychological situation. On the contrary, both the police and the neighbours leave the place without offering any help. This situation describes Liz's helplessness and loneliness in her condition as the society views her madness condition resulting from marital problems and hence considered as an individual's problem.

In the societal eyes, Liz is supposed to accept and understand her husband's decisions to marry another woman and avoid causing herself problems. The description of the situation of women under patriarchy can define Liz's state where according to Miller (1991), women are seen to be in a state of bondage, silent, subservient and helpless. Additionally, women are supposed to be dependent to their husbands. Liz's state is that of helplessness, the condition which is common to women in patriarchal society where women are supposed to depend on their husbands economically and socially and tolerate all types of humiliation because men are a superior gender.

Symbolically the writer has placed Ishaka on the centre of Liz's madness where her mind is always troubled by her husband's presence. While some events like dreams, sleeplessness and hallucinations take place when Ishaka is far from his wife, the events of confrontation take place whenever Ishaka is in the sight of his wife, Liz. For instance, the protagonist reaction in the church upon seeing Ishaka approaching the holy table is regarded as abnormal and hence a form of madness. Liz shouts and fights Ishaka in front of the congregation, and eventually, she admits that the reaction is not normal "...I hadn't realized that I am shouting. All around me are in shock..." (O.W, 39). Liz's mind reflects a denial of the reality that a husband who has broken the Christian vow of marrying one wife and has secretly married another woman can still go to church and approach the holly table for the holy communion.

In this context, Liz is sarcastically portraying the failure of the church in making sure that its members remain in monogamous arrangements, and also the failure of the church in helping women who are psychologically and socially troubled like Liz. The major response of the church leaders and members is that of advising her to go home like a good wife and take care of the home and the children. These views, shows that Liz is not right in her reactions because she is interfering with the husbands right to be free by confronting him in the public. Liz's place is 'home' and the societal response to her reaction proves their common understanding of the woman's place, which is home. In other words, Liz role as claimed by Kolawole is "a homemaker and a mother" (Kolawole, 1997:31). The society surrounding Liz does not have a concern on the women who have problems related to jealousy and the need to question the husband's decisions. In that understanding, Liz is not right because she has abandoned her role and place as a woman and instead, she is fighting the husband who has decided to marry another woman.

The position of Liz in the society as a woman makes her helpless. For example, in the incidence where she consciously decides to confront her husband in a hotel where he is spending time with the second wife. This event makes the protagonist falls into the category of the mad character who creates madness so as to create space for communicating their challenges. On hearing the conversation between Ishaka and Manga in the hotel room, Liz shouts with anger and as the narrative express, "I am shouting, I am screaming, I am kicking the lousy door, I am out of myself" (O.W, 98). In her anger, Liz fights the husband, the rival and shouts at the hotel staff and draws attention, she says "within no time, the whole damn hotel staff have arrived at the battlefield" (O.W, 99). Okurut gives her character the courage to consciously face the husband in the hotel while at the same time she loses control and engulfed by madness upon seeing the husband with her rival, Manga. In the novel, the hotel is a space created for the character to express her anger and helplessness where her actions are considered to be a form of madness by the hotel staff. In this event, Liz is involved in both planned and natural madness condition where she plans to confront her husband and Manga, but she naturally gets into real madness in the middle of the action. The societal response to her confrontation is that of encouraging her to go home as a good wife, as advised by the hotel staff. Whenever Liz reacts against her husband away from her home, the madness condition is not a concern to those around her but their concern is on the place where she belongs which is home and not in the public. In other words, the societal response also can be in line with Mountain's claim that, madness is part of life and reality for a black woman in their patriarchal societies (2001).

The novel's portrayal of Liz's helplessness is a reflection of the society where women are voiceless and ignored when they decide to speak and at the same time viewed as trouble makers. Liz's recovery from her madness condition when she decides to leave Ishaka and opts for the life outside marriage suggests the husband's direct effect to her psychological condition. Okurut through Liz's marriage portray the difficulties facing the married women and offers an alternative life style which can be safe to these women, that is staying away from abusive husbands. Liz's struggle to remain in her marriage even after a serious psychological damage shows the importance attached to marriage in the Ugandan society where the failure of the society to help women suffering in marriage suggests that women cannot have an alternative but to remain married. The consequences of Liz's denial of the husband's humiliating actions makes her isolated in the society which is a common response to women with madness. While her madness does not save her directly it is her psychological condition which makes her leave the husband which suggests that she is saved by her madness in the end.

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