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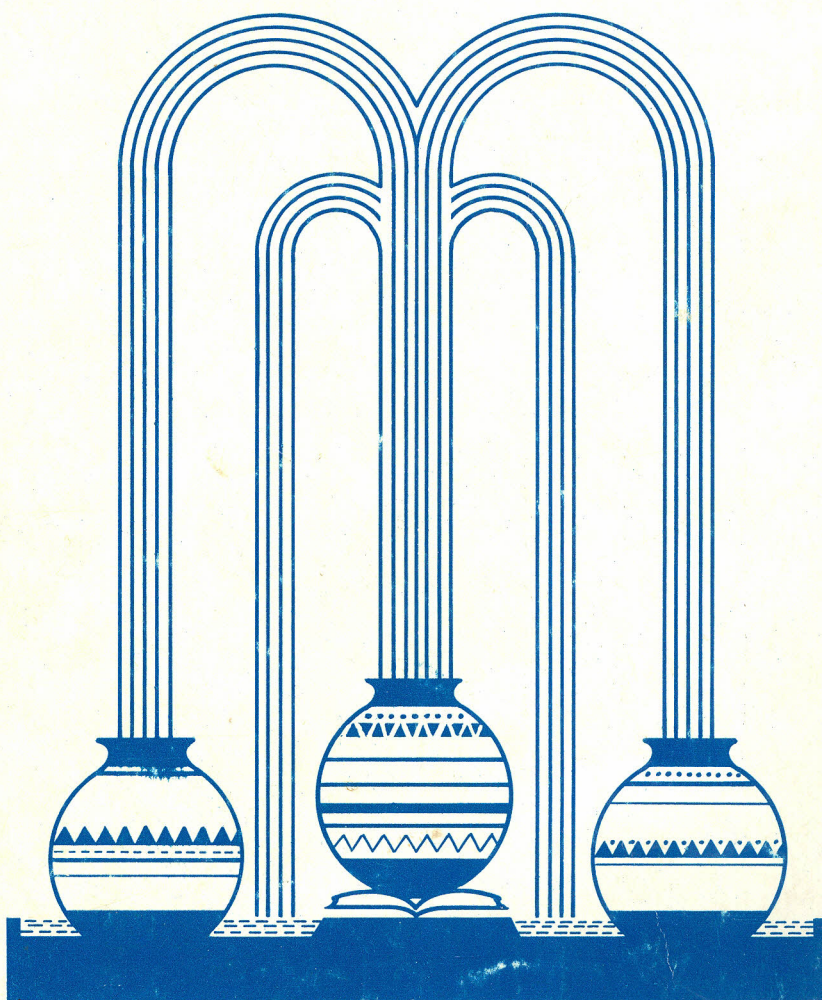
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International Journal of Arts and Social Sciences

VOLUME 1

DEC. 1999

ISSN 1563 – 1028



Journal of the Faculty of Arts
Kenyatta University

AFRICANA

BOOK REVIEW

Sitwala Imenda

Unmarried Wife

Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers Ltd.,

1996. pp.141

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Introduction

It is common to hear people talk ill of polygamy. Feminists talk of it as a demonstration of male greed and irresponsibility. Some perceive it as an outdated custom that has no place in modern society. Inspiration writers look at it as a pre-occupation of those courting marital chaos. Either way, it has to be acknowledged that the destruction of African traditional structures has affected this aspect of the African family life.

Our society is at crossroads. There seems to exist a desire in most African societies to adopt the christian philosophy of marriage but a close look at the actions of men reveal otherwise. It is, in a more immediate sense, a question of culture clash. The book under review attempts to explore the physiological, psychological and sociological factors that lead to infidelity or second marriages. This novel is set in South Africa just at the dawn of a new era as the country is shedding off apartheid policies and a wave of democratic changes set in.

Context

Tsepo Molefe otherwise referred to as T.M. meets Bongiwe Shabalala, a University Biochemistry lecturer, and immediately falls in love. Whereas Bongiwe had been frustrated in her previous love life by Twani who abandoned her and married another woman while she was in London with their daughter, Tsepo Molefe is happily married to Naledi. His marriage is by all standards a happy one. He is a production manager in a company which pays well. The question that one may ask is: Why should a happily married man who confesses often that he loves his wife and demonstrates this through actions take on another lover? Should we dismiss him just as one of those playboys in need of adventure or does this relationship contribute to his physical and emotional needs? As it turns out in this novel, Molefe is more productive at his place of work and shows more love to Naledi his wife while having an affair with Bongiwe. The author of the novel seems to insinuate that such relationships are healthy. In a sense, she agrees with the popular view that men need some variety and that the urge to stray is built into masculinity.

The relationship between Bongiwe and Molefe flourishes without Naledi discovering it at all. This is partly because Molefe's work requires him to stay out for long and when he arrives home after his nocturnal escapades he performs all the duties at home perfectly. He is also careful not to

leave any trace of his infidelity behind. Bongiwe on her part loves him so much yet at the same time knows that Molefe has a wife whom he equally loves. She does not mind being a second wife yet she knows that society would object to this. She says to Molefe:

T.M. I know you love me and go out of your way to please me. I know also that as a married man, society expects you to stay at home all the time and give all your love to your wife and children. However, I wish to remind you that society also does not expect you to love another woman, or worse still, to have children with a woman other than your wife. You chose to disregard society's values the day you first made love to me. For my part, not alone have I disregarded the values of society but also those of my own father and mother. This relationship is, therefore, not guided by any other values than our own. We must identify these values and work out our relationship accordingly. I do not want to be treated like a girl friend any more (p. 89).

Her father and mother, both devoted christians, cannot accept this arrangement. When information gets to them, they reject and disown her. The dowry paid by Molefe is also rejected. What comes out of this story is that modern demands that polygamy should be outlawed do not take cognizance of the realities in our society.

But equally significant in this drama is the role played by Father Michael. Being a Catholic priest he advises Molefe against marrying Bongiwe but as far as Molefe is concerned, it is too late since they already have two children. At the end he acknowledges defeat:

I do not for one moment approve of what has happened, nor could I give you my blessing. However, it is not for me to judge you. I am also just a human being with my own weaknesses. As such I just wish to acknowledge that if what you have done today brings you so much hope and happiness then perhaps there is something in it which I am failing to see. Look at those children. See how happy they look. I shall not interfere with their happiness any more, and indeed perhaps I do not even have such right ... Mr. Molefe, although you violated our agreement, I still admire your resilience (p. 134).

This acknowledgement reveals among other things that for the church to survive in Africa is should accept the fact that African traditional practices must be accepted. It would be a waste of time preaching against practices which the entire congregation is far from accepting. On another level, the church would do itself great service to accept that the sin of marrying a second wife is not as serious as keeping uncountable concubines.

Conclusion

As it is revealed in this novel, rural men and women believe polygamy is a decent, legitimate and acceptable way of life. To many, getting married to a man who is already happily and successfully married carries less risks than getting married to someone who has not yet proven himself, or who

may not even be interested in marriage but just feels compelled by circumstances to marry. But Mrs. Bama's view on what is happening on the marital front in Africa sums up the authorial vision. She argues that second marriages should be legalised. In fact it would strengthen marriages because women are going to work overtime to ensure that their men are satisfied with them. At the moment, they work hard to get a man but once they have him nailed down in a marriage they take everything for granted. She concludes:

Every woman needs a man in her life, regardless of her level of education or her financial independence. There aren't enough men of decent character to go round. We need to share those relatively fewer men with a commitment to family life, instead of clamouring for monogamous marriages or pressurising men who do not want family responsibility into marriages just so that every woman can have a man to herself. This will inevitably lead to broken marriages - with the attendant miseries and high emotional costs (p. 72).

This is a very interesting book even to those who do not agree with the authorial vision. Certainly, it is illuminating and the arguments advanced therein are quite provoking.

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