

Lynn Mbuko and the Criticism of Early Marriage in there is Time for Everything

Dr. Busari Lasisi

Department of French
Kaduna State University, Kaduna
Nigeria

Abstract

Polygamy as an institution is as old as the society in which we live. For a long time, as tradition and religion demand in certain African countries precisely in Northern Nigeria, a man is free to have under his roof more than one wife. In this part of the country, this heavy tradition is weighing on young girls. This tradition forces women into early marriage. They don't need to be educated according to custom, because the only place of the woman in the society is beside her husband or in other word, in her matrimonial home. This old tradition has become a source of concern nowadays. This inferior position accorded to the African woman has caused her a lot of problems among which is early marriage of young girls. That is what Lynn Mbuko sorted to explain in her new book titled There is time for everything. We would be looking at early marriage and its consequences on young girls, and at the end, we would try to draw some lessons from the play. The objective of this research is to find out to what extent early marriage has affected the development the girl-child in particular and the society in general. Early marriage serves as our main focus in this research. Uneducated parents, girl-child and the society are used as data to arrive at our findings. A sociological approach has been used. The findings of the research show that the girl-child is mostly affected by this old tradition in the society. Our findings also equally have implications for guidance and counseling at home and in the society not only in Nigeria but also in other countries of the world.

Keywords: Early marriage, forced marriage, tradition, custom

Introduction

African Feminist writers such as Mariama Bâ and Aminata Saw-Fall have used their pens to combat polygamy and other evils which are lagging behind the development of the African woman. These women were not the first to speak against the adverse condition of the woman. Before them, writers as Mongo Beti, Sembène Ousmane to mention only these had begun to combat the bad condition of the woman.

These women writers which we have just quoted are the courageous women who have opened the way to other novelists to tackle violently the defects which African women are suffering. However, Calixthe Beyala, Ken Bugul, Keita Fatou, Regina Yaou, Veronique Tadjou, to mention just a few, follow the path which has been charted by their predecessors and continue the fight not only polygamy, but also other defects such as forced or early marriage, the excision of the woman, prostitution and the practices of widowhood.

Lynn Mbuko then comes into play in laying bare the social discrimination against the female child who does not benefit from the distribution of the work. While the male children are working outside in the farm with their father, head of the family, the female children and their mother remain at home. Lynn Mbuko shows us through this play that the Nigerian muslim woman is oppressed by her condition of captivity. The imprisonment of the African muslim woman dating back to its loss of freedom which the playwright is trying to portray. Such is the fate of Fatou, the mother of Zenabou. It is Zenabou who goes to the market for her. It is also Zenabou who carries food to the farm for the male members of the family who have gone there to work.

The Playwright and Her Life

Lynn Mbuko, of Igbo origin, has taught French at Federal Government College, Kaduna, in the Northwest of Nigeria where she has been Head of the Department of French. She has also been the Vice President of the NAFT (Nigerian Association of French Teachers) Kaduna State branch.

Her works include the followings: *Essays for Junior Secondary* (1992), *Background Notes on Cultures and Civilization for Schools and Colleges* (1995) and *nursery rhymes and Songs for small children* (1998). *There is time for everything* (2001), theater piece in five acts which also marks her adventure in the field of theater.

Summary of the Play

Garoua is a village in northern Nigeria where villagers lead a quiet and peaceful life. The main occupation of men is agriculture whereas women do petty trades. The men spend the whole day working on the farm with their sons who, in the evening, go to the Koranic school. With the introduction of the western education, this old tradition seems to be upset. As Muslims, the villagers must protect their children against any contact with a strange doctrine which will influence them.

Some parents choose to send their children elsewhere while others are forced by the leader of the village to register their wards at this school who adopted strange doctrines. Girls, according to tradition, are forced to marry very early.

Zenabou, the main character of the play, is one of the victims of this tradition. At a young age of thirteen, she is forced to abandon the western education and marry an old rich illiterate Hajj Oumar. With time, Zenabou becomes pregnant and during childbirth, a serious disease attacks her. She is hunted by her parents and abandoned by her husband.

The history pushes her to meet with Dr. Mariama and as a result, she becomes a nurse and decides to help other women attacked by the same maternal disease. As times go on, the fifth wife of Hajj Oumar becomes sick and he takes her to the hospital where Zenabou works. It is here that the old Hajj becomes seduced by the charm of Zenabou and decides to remarry her. Will Zenabou accept this proposal to return to Hajj Oumar? Left for the reader to guess after the reading of the play.

The Causes of Early Marriage

The reasons for forced or early marriage are many and vary based on social, cultural and political context. Some Muslims believe that marrying out their young girls at times without their knowledge is based on religious obligation. These beliefs come from the confusion these parents have between religious and cultural practices.

Our findings show that some families marry their daughters early in order to control their sexual habits. They take this measure to guard against their daughters involvement in sexual activities outside marriage. Above all, these parents tend to avoid illegitimate pregnancies.

Having read the play, we find that the major cause of early marriage, arranged or forced marriage is illiteracy and poverty. Poverty is, in most cases, the cause of early marriage in most African societies nowadays. Families who are confronted with poverty prefer giving out their young girls in marriage to rich and old men who can take of her and by extension, the entire family. That is why Lynn Mbuko leads us to a distant village in Northern part of the country in question. Here, the people are not open to the outside world, hence the lack of western education. It is then a joy to parents who have a lot of girls under their roof because a girl becomes a commodity to be sold to the higher bidder. Girls do not have a voice as to what affects their marriage. All decisions regarding their marriage are taken without their knowledge. Poverty and illiteracy lead parents not to grant any important place to the African woman when it comes to marriage.

This bad position accorded to the African woman gives birth to the ills that we have listed earlier and which form the themes described by the new Nigerian playwright. The same weakness is also described by Guillaume Oyono-Mbia in his piece entitled *three contenders. .. one husband* where Juliette revolts against the decision of her parents to give her in marriage. Before we go further, listen to her: "Am I therefore a commodity for sale? Is this the reason why I cannot be consulted for issues of marriage which affects me?" (20)

Poverty pushes Ahmadou to give his only daughter in marriage at the time he receives a message from Hajj Oumar. According to him, the five hundred Naira received from this rich merchant is enough already to solve his numerous problems especially that of food, who knows how many times he has seen such an amount of money in his life? Illiteracy equally pushes Fati, the mother of our principal character to support this old and heavy tradition by forgetting the consequences that are going to come out. What does she said?" In fact, I find the early marriage of young girls the best solutions nowadays" (43)

Lynn Mbuko and the Criticism of Early Marriage

Mbuko puts into play Fati, the mother of Zeanabou who even goes further to add her decision to remain faithful to this tradition which is old as the world in which we live (43). Even when Zenabou refuses the proposal of her parents due to the fact that Hajj Oumar is old and illiterate, but to her mother, it is the money that counts. Mbuko shows us the image of the traditional African woman who, pushed by poverty, can exchange anything against money. Ahmadou, the head of the family, gives her only daughter in marriage because of money and to avoid receiving lashes. As to his wife, it is a chance she cannot escape because Hajj Oumar is stupidly rich. Zenabou becomes a commodity to sell, this is seen through the behavior of all those around her. What is paramount to people around her is nothing but money, the wealth and fortune of Hajj Oumar. Our victim goes a little further to explain why she cannot marry the old man which is the choice of her parents. According to her, she would like to complete her education before going into marriage. In traditional African society, girls must not stay long before marriage and that is why the traditional African religion is against western education which, according to the mother of Zenabou, is a waste of time for girls.

The play describes the character of Fatima, a childhood friend of Zenabou. She is not a good friend. The love between her and her friend Zenabou is based on money. One wonders if she is educated. That is what the playwright fails to indicate. Fatima also comes from a polygamous household and she wants Zenabou, her childhood friend, to fall into the same category. She complicates the problems for Zenabou by showing her the benefits that she will get if she becomes the wife of Hajj Oumar, namely purchase of fine fabrics, pilgrimage to Mecca etc ... One sees that Zenabou seems to be convinced when she says: "I would like to go up to Jeddah. People always say that things are less expensive down there" (49)

Going further in act 3, we find out that Fatima plays the role of Zenabou's parents by organizing her departure to her grandmother's village where Hajj Oumar also lives. She is a demon that has entered the family of Ahmadou. It is the same Fatima who has pushed the father of our victim to sign the act of marriage. One wonders at this stage if she has been bribed by Hajj Oumar, otherwise, how a simple friend can play an important role in a marriage instead of the parents of Zenabou.

Fatima, in collaboration with the mother of Zenabou, manipulates the latter to leave his paternal roof. She is young and she cannot do anything other than to submit to their proposal. Zenabou represents the image of the African woman who has no decision in matters that concern her, because according to custom, her place is in the matrimonial home. Ahmadou is not a good family head, he is brave but when it comes to taking serious decisions, he becomes weak and changes his opinion quickly without thinking about the consequences. He is influenced by Fatou, his wife, to take serious family decisions. Fatou is old in the African tradition and that is why she always supports it. She is different from the woman described in *So long a letter* of Mariama Bâ where the latter struggles to free herself from this old tradition. Zenabou's mother's main problem is how to get money at all cost. She has forced her unique daughter to give up against her intention to complete her education.

The grandmother of Zenabou has not also helped the situation. She is part of the misfortunes which surround her. It is in her house that the final preparations of the marriage took place. She has managed to convince Zenabou finally by making her see the chances when she get married with a rich man known to all. She advises her to be docile and submissive to her husband.

The wealth and social position of Hadj Oumar have much influenced the family of Zenabou. That is where the family is pushed to make this decision which costs the life of their only daughter. History has not finished with Zenabou. Destiny has disrupted the benefits which her family was waiting for. Their daughter arrives in a polygamous family where she is faced with so many problems. She is now face to face with the consequences of early and forced marriage such as neglect, rejection, scorn, quarrels between co-wives, jealousy and so on.

The piece reminds us of the history that was presented by a Ghanaian playwright Margaret Kwakwa in *Money does not create happiness* where Saaba leaves Kyewu despite the riches of the latter. Hajj Oumar and Mr. Kyewu the father of Saaba are of the same class. They can use their wealth to exploit young girls. Despite the fortune of Hajj Oumar, his young wife renders him unfortunate. According to him, he is lord in his home by the power of his money but it brings him no happiness.

Despite his wealth, Hajj Oumar ends up by transporting Zenabou to the clinic in a wheelbarrow. He thinks that the money can do everything, even if it means to use his wealth to buy women and change them any how like clothes. He is a pathetic character who is opposed to the emancipation of the African woman.

The two nurses who appear at the end of Act 4 represent the corrupt society in which we live in Nigeria today. Another man's food is another man's poison, so says the old adage. They want to take advantage of the fall of Zenabou to enrich themselves by all means.

The last act of the play describes the steps undertaken by Zenabou toward her success. Rejected by her parents and her husband, she undertakes a trip which only God knows where it will lead her to. Let us make a little reference once again to Aïssatou in *So long a letter* of Mariama Bâ where the latter leaves for America perceived as a land of welcome. The destiny of Zenabou pushes her to meet with Dr. Mariama who is seen here as her land of welcome. The education received by Dr. Mariama is different from the one received by Zenabou. The former has received a western education and liberal whereas the latter received an education of the village influenced by tradition where women are forced to marry at a tender age and to remain locked in their husbands' homes. Domestic works do not need any western or formal instruction.

Dr. Mariama, the now bread winner and benefactress of Zenabou sees in her an ability to contribute to the development of the community in which she lives. A young illiterate girl forced to marriage at a tender age where she becomes the fourth or the fifth wife cannot contribute anything to the development of her community. Zenabou must thank God for bringing into her life Dr. Mariama who plays here the role of her parents. She has rebelled against the treatment of her parents and that of her husband. She launches herself into the bush in order to fight against every wild beast in life. It is in this bush that she comes across Dr. Mariama who changed everything around her. It is not only her parents and her husband that Zenabou left behind, she also brakes away especially with this traditional society which wanted to imprison her forever.

Having become nurse, Zenabou has sympathy with women who are in the same path which she has travelled. It is destiny that has made this painful separation between her and Hajj Oumar. Without this separation, Zenabou whose departure was painful and pathetic would not have become what she is today. She must now resort to her benefactor for advice. That is why when Hajj Oumar offers to remarry her; she does not waste time to have the opinion of Dr. Mariama before taking a final decision. This shows us that she cannot make or take decisions herself. We note that tradition still plays a role in her life. She is not yet mature. When she was under her parents, she cannot do anything than to submit to their decisions. Zenabou has not learned her lessons yet, when she comes face to face with any situation; she is expecting someone else to give her advice. Our victim is still young, she is not grown up yet.

We are faced with two generations: a traditional generation old where Zenabou comes from and a modern generation having Dr. Mariama as a product. The latter has received a complete western education opposed to that received by he former. Dr. Mariama is modernist and independent while Zenabou depends on the heavy tradition in which she has lived. It is this new generation that will be the key to the empowerment of the old generation.

Let us take a glance again in *Three suitors ... one husband* of Guillaume Oyono-Mbia where Juliette gets rid of the heavy tradition through the arrangement made with her boyfriend. With regard to Zenabou, she can do nothing but to flee for Garouwa where her destiny has arranged for her a benefactor.

Conclusion and Some Lessons to Learn From the Play

At the end of this brief study, what is therefore the lesson that can be drawn from the play of this new Nigerian playwright? We find through our study that the educated woman is different from that who is not. The latter accepts traditional cultures while the former is opposed to it. Having read the play, we have the impression that the playwright is trying to bring to the knowledge of the reader and her spectators the reasons why young girls are forced into marriage such as poverty, illiteracy and respect for traditional cultures. Therefore, it is the parents that need to be educated and be enlightened to get rid of old traditions. That is why *There is time for everything* is a play that invites all of us to give African women in general and Nigerian women in particular an important place in the society instead of locking them up without cause.

Lynn Mbuko believes in marriage as a divine institution ordained by God, but it must be between two individuals who love each other. The playwright is against these destabilizing agents of marriage such as polygamy, religion, culture, custom, forced marriage, and early marriage. African women have much to contribute to the development of their various societies in which they live, but early and forced marriages destroy this dream. It is time that young girls get rid of these traditional cultures which lead to nothing.

We find out that the consequences that result from early or forced marriage are enormous and at times painful. Among these consequences are divorce, suicide, adultery, high level of mortality, premature delivery and domestic and sexual slavery. In most cases, the costs of managing these results are supplied by the society.

The playwright has a word for all the young girls whom to our mind, this play is dedicated. Their freedom is in their hands. The way they hope to manage their future depends essentially on themselves. How do they do it? It must begin from the beginning. They must go to school first to know how to conduct and place themselves in the society. And when we talk of an educated woman it is not just any woman. We are then talking of women such as Dr. Mariama who was able to graduate to the social scale in life.

Finally the message here is clear. Lynn Mbuko opens an interesting debate. The school will try to open the eyes of young girls, but will it bring a final solution to the ills such as early marriage, forced marriage, arranged marriage and polygamy?

References

- Bâ, M. (1981) "So long a Letter". Dakar: The New Editions of Senegal.
- Kwakwa, M. (1982) Money does not make happiness, Lagos: West Africa Books Publishers Ltd.
- Mbuko, L (2001). "There is time for everything" Aba: Lynnette Publisher.
- Oyono-Mbia , G (1964). Three suitors... a husband, Yaoundé: Edition Key.
- Kane, C. H. (2002) "The Ambiguous Adventure", Paris: Julliard, 1961.
- Roques, M. (1964) "Mariages arrangés, mariages forcés" in Lien Social, no 627, 27 juin,
- Girard, A.(1964) "Le choix du conjoint; une enquête psychologique en France", Paris: PUF.