

A Critical Overview of Chinua Achebe's "Marriage is a Private Affair"

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Abstract: A story plays a vital role in human life, we all are born story tellers knowingly or unknowingly. That's why they charm us since time immemorial. But we like to read and listen to the story of others and narrate our own stories. The writers with their sheer craft of imagination and creativity catch readers in their bait. The aim of this paper is to rekindle the interest of short stories in general and consolidate the position of Chinua Achebe's as a story writer in particular. Edgar Allan Poe, Nawal El Saadawi, Alex La Guma, Herman Melville, Nurudin Farah, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Buchi Emechetta, Anton Chekhov, Bessie Head, Henry James, and Najib Mahfuz, among others, not only distinguished themselves as master novelists but were equally at home in the terrain of short fiction. However, Achebe's efforts here are quite commendable. Despite the scantiness of his production, Achebe takes solace in the very high quality of his output. Achebe has written not only interesting short stories but he tried to bring to fore the most pertinent change which is occurring in this ever changing world. The paper analyses the short story, Marriage is a Private Affair written by Achebe, through various facets of human life. The present paper concerns the most important institution of human life "marriage". The paper attempts to understand the concept of this sacred institution. It discusses how the institution of marriage is for a man and a woman and not for the customs and traditions of the society at large.

Keywords: Short story, Marriage, letter, love, tradition.

The secret of a happy marriage is finding the right person. You know they're right if you love to be with them all the time.

Julia Child

Literature is an artistic depiction of human values. Literature has a lasting value. Technology can become obsolete but not literature. For it is a contemplation of the nature and significance of our existence. Literature imbibes various things in its texture; it helps in instilling morals values, culture, knowledge, and tradition above all it imparts humanitarian outlook towards life. A short story plays the same role in inculcating these values.

A short story is one the genres of literature. Its power hasn't diminished despite much technological advances. A short story is a brief work of prose fiction. It has a plot which may be comic, tragic, romantic or satiric. The story is presented to us from one of the many available points of view. Due to the succinct nature of short story they are enjoyed by the people across all age group. A short story has all the elements of a novel in miniature form, but the writer of the short story has to work deliberately and

diligently to condense things with telling effect on the reader. In his book *Modern Short Stories*, Pocock talks about various kinds of humour in a short story as:

There are many kinds or shades of humour in short stories — there is humour of wit, which you admire but do not laugh at; there is pathetic humour, which makes one smile with a lump in one's throat; there is the humour of satire, and of irony — the rather cruel humour of making fun of those who deserve it; there is the humour of the unexpected; there is that quaint and delicious humour which we call drollery; and lastly there is sheer fun (8).

Being perhaps the most chameleon like form of literature, the short story has changed its form, structure, plot design etc. from nation to nation thereby altering the previous conceptions of its nature. In accordance with the tendencies of readers as well as writers the short story has manifested in the diversified forms viz; sketch, marchen, yarn, parable, novella, cycles etc. The present paper is an attempt to analyse a short story of Chinua Achebe. This story as evident from the criticism can't be marchen; likewise can't be fantasy too.

Chinua Achebe is Nigeria's best known writer and probably the most distinguished writer of fiction from Africa. Educated at Government College, Umuahia, and later at University College, Ibadan, he joined the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation in 1954. The best-known among his novels are *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964) and *A Man of the People* (1966). Achebe has also distinguished himself as a poet; his collection of poems, *Beware Soul Brothers*, won the Commonwealth poetry prize in 1972. He has tried to bridge the gap between the past and the present through his writing and helped to give Modernity to native Nigeria. His stories are based on his own experiences, 'felt in the blood, and felt along the heart' and that is why they are successful in evoking the readers' participation. The story for the analyses is taken from Chinua Achebe's collection of short stories *Girls at Wars and Other stories*. It was published in 1952 under the title "The old Order in Conflict with the New" in the *University Herald* of University College, Ibadan, Nigeria where Achebe was a student. The title of the story was changed when the story was reprinted in 1972, in the story collection *Girls at wars and Other Stories*. To read Achebe's stories is to see Africa and to transport one's self into the realms of African traditions and custom, his success as a story teller lies in this.

Before embarking into the analyses of the short story, "Marriage is a Private Affair", let's analyze marriage. If we look at the etymology of the word marriage it came into being in 1300c from Old French word *mariage* meaning action of marrying entry into wedlock. According to the *Collins Dictionary* it means the relationship between two people who are married, it is an act of marrying someone. According to *Oxford Dictionary* it means the legally or formally recognized union of two people as partners in a personal relationship and also a combination or mixture of elements. As per *Encyclopaedia Britannica* "Marriage, a legally and socially sanctioned union, usually between a man and a woman, that is regulated by laws, rules, customs,

beliefs, and attitudes that prescribe the rights and duties of the partners and accords status to their offspring (if any)".

Marriage, an important institution which regulates sex, reproduction, and family life finds its route into classical philosophical issues. Marriage is one of the most ancient, significant, universal and essential social institutions which has been in existence since the beginning of human civilization. There are various types of marriages: monogamy, bigamy, polygamy, group marriages, polyandry, tree marriage, common law marriage, exchange marriage, endogamy, exogamy so on and so forth. There are various rituals and traditions associated with marriage. With the change of time the concept of marriage has also undergone a drastic change, people are accepting these changes. For example earlier marriage in the same sex was never heard but nowadays we have tried to respect the difference among people. The concept of marriage is a vast topic which can't be dealt in the limited space of the present paper. Through the story *Marriage is a Private Affair*, Achebe has raised the pertinent issue of the society. Marriage which is between a man and a woman should be according to them or not? Should marriage be a private affair? Does the bond of family gets shattered when one marries outside the community? Is there a guarantee of lasting happiness when one marries within the community? Is it wrong when two people like and love each other should marry? Let's try to find the answers of these questions by analyzing the story of Chinua Achebe, *Marriage is a Private Affair*.

The story, "Marriage is a Private Affair" depicts varied themes: marriage concept, gender role, conflict, tradition and modernity, culture and tradition, superstition and advancement, guilt and repentance, obstinacy and submission, life and death. The story also deals at length the relationship between parents and children. Earlier in the story family was bounded by tradition which everyone has to observe. It also deals with the personal freedom and decision to marry depends on engaged couple. The story questions the custom of arranged marriage by exposing the prejudice against inter-tribal marriage and which calls for tolerance and understanding in order to protect an institution believed to be the bedrock of society. The story is narrated by third person narrator and the setting of the story is colonial Nigeria in the decade before independence, the story depicts how the old ways of remote village comes in clash with the new ways of city life. It brings out the conflict between men versus society, man versus self, arranged marriage versus love marriage. Characters in his story are very few but they are convincing as human beings. The main characters are Nnaemeka the son of Okeke, Nene the girlfriend/so to be wife who is not from Ibo community, Ugoye the girl chosen by the father to marry his son and of course the father Okeke. The story opens with Nene enquiring from Nnaemeka "Have you written to your dad yet?" (Achebe 22). They live in Lagos, a modern south western city in Nigeria. Nnaemeka is familiar with his father's temperament and his desire. He knew that the news of his marriage against his father wish will be a blow to the wish of his father, Okeke who desires him to marry according to tradition with the choice of a village girl in his community. Nnaemeka says: "I wish I were sure it would

be happiness to him (Achebe 22)". If he marries to the girl of his father's choice then it would be acceptable in the community, if he doesn't it would be considered something as a grave sin committed against the community. If Nnaemeka reveals this to his father it will be a conflict in father and son relationship. Achebe deftly portrays the conflict between tradition and modernity, with the son refuses to adhere to tradition and the father who held tradition values. We too find such types of problems in our country too where parents consider that it is their right to marry their children but they forget that marriage should bring happiness to their children. Nothing is permanent except change; sometime change is for good at times bad too. Nnaemeka wants to change his life by following his heart rather than following the tradition of his father.

Nene feels that the news of their marriage will bring happiness. She was shocked when Nnaemeka replied "Yes. They are most unhappy if the engagement is not arranged by them. In our case it's worse – you are not even an Ibo (Achebe 23)." In the meantime Nnaemeka received a letter from his father regarding his decision to marry him to Ugoye, "an Amazon of a girl who used to beat up all the boys, himself included, on the way to the stream, a complete dunce at school (Achebe 23-24)". He reads his father's letter:

I have found a girl who will suit you admirably – Ugoye Nweke, the eldest daughter of our neighbor, Jacob Nweke. She has a proper Christian upbringing. When she stopped schooling some years ago her father (a man of sound judgment) sent her to live in the house of a pastor where she has received all the training a wife could need. Her Sunday school teacher has told me that she reads her Bible very fluently. I hope we shall begin negotiations when you come home in December (Achebe 24).

Tore between his desire and his father's desire, he decided that he will not obey his father. Finally Nnaemeka went to meet his father to seek his forgiveness. He explained to his father that he could not marry Nweke's daughter. The conversation between father and son has a tinge of humour as: "I don't love her. / Nobody said you did. Why should you? (Achebe 24)". Achebe takes his heritage seriously. Even when the subject of his stories is slight, he is always able to capture the reader's interest with reasonable storytelling skills. Nnaemeka's father was not ready to listen to him when he said "Marriage today is different . . ." his father replied "nothing is different. What one looks for in a wife are a good character and a Christian background (Achebe 24)." Obeke is stubborn, he refuses to accept anyone outside his community. He dislikes the whole idea of his son's choice of marriage according to his will. The conflict in the story arises due to the difference in opinion between Nnaemeka and his father who belong to two different worlds - one to the westernized post-independent Nigerian state of Lagos, and the other still bound by the traditional values of the Ibos. This is an important issue which arose as a result of the tragic encounter of the Africans with the European culture.

When Nnaemeka told to his father about the qualification of Nene Atang's that she is a teacher. His father said "Did you say Neneataga, what does that mean? (Achebe 25)". Here Achebe chooses to play on the sounds in the names to create humour. The fact that he cannot pronounce the name correctly also emphasizes the linguistic differences between them (Ibos) and Calabars. Okeke remonstrated "If you consider that a qualification for a good wife I should like to point out to you, Nnaemeka, that no Christian woman should teach (Achebe 25)". He was very angry with his son's outrageous behavior. This reaction of his father reflects gender stereotype and patriarchal mentality. He favors Ugoye as she is submissive and subservient in her outlook. For Okeke role of a woman is like: "St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians says that women should keep silence (Achebe 25)".

The society depicted in the story is strongly patriarchal. The men are in charge of all activities. Ugoye's father pulled her out from her school when he felt that she has learnt what is required to fulfill her duties as a good wife. After a while his father asked him about Nene, when he came to know about that she is from Calabar "That night the old man did not eat" (Achebe 25). He became silent which was more dangerous than his angry speech. Okeke tried to persuade his son Nnaemeka not to marry with Nene. Later when Okeke tried to convince his son, he was hardened. At last, Okeke abandoned his son. Nnaemeka wrote to his father "You will change your mind, Father, when you know Nene (Achebe 26)." But for Okeke his son's wife does not exist. This again highlights his deep rooted tradition, instead of seeing his son's happiness he got stuck to the tradition. "'Marriage is a Private Affair' in terms of some aspects of life in Negeria in the 1950s and points out that the authorial voice in the story favors the young man's position over that of his father (Aubrey 25)"

In the meantime, when people in the village came to know about the marriage, some of the men in the village even suggested him to visit native doctor to cure his son's mind. This again points to the mindset of the people in the village as the cure of every problem is with the native doctor. The entire village considers it as their responsibility as among the Ibos, society is always given more priority than individuals, and what happens to an individual is the collective responsibility of the society or the villagers. Okeke's reply to the men is interesting, he says "If my son wants to kill himself let him do it with his own hands. It is not for me to help him (Achebe 27)." Meanwhile, Nnaemeka sent a letter to his father, along with the photograph of their wedding. He received the reply from his father which he showed it to his wife after six months, it reads like this:

It amazes me that you could be so unfeeling as to send me your wedding picture. I would have sent it back. But on further thought I decided just to cut off your wife and send it back to you because I have nothing to do with her. How I wish that I had nothing to do with you either (Achebe 27).

When Nene read the letter and saw the mutilated picture she began to sob. She began to sob after

looking at the damaged picture. Nnaemeka consoled her that his father is a good natured man and that one day all would be right. This attitude of Okeke again shows his hatred towards Nene and his conviction in tradition. This attitude of prejudice is not only confined to Okeke and his village but the people in Lagos also maintain a distance from Nene. But things gradually started taking a different turn "Slowly and grudgingly they began to admit that she kept her home much better than most of them (Achebe 28)". Soon people got to know, that Nene and Nnaemeka are happy couple and this information spread to his father's village too. But Okeke still doesn't want to talk about his son and nor others let talk about him. Rather than seeing his son happy he remains rooted to his tradition. He was able to forget his son for eight long years. Nene had given birth to two sons during these time period. Nene wrote a letter to Okeke that his grandsons were eager to see their grandfather: ". . . Our two sons, from the day they learnt that they have a grandfather, have insisted on being taken to him. I find it impossible to tell them that you will not see them. I implore you to allow Nnaemeka to bring them home for a short time during his leave next month. I shall remain here in Lagos . . . (Achebe 29)".

She requested him to allow his grandsons to see him and she would not come to the village. Okeke's heart melted as soon as he read the letter of Nene. He regretted that he made a mistake of not allowing his grandsons and daughter-in-law for eight years into their home. Achebe probably has used a lot of irony to state the point that an individual cannot survive alone however great he is.

Okeke realized that his own stubborn attitude and strict adherence to traditional values has resulted in his alienation from his son, daughter-in-law and grandsons.

Achebe has used many symbols in the story. When the first conflict broke out between the father and the son Achebe has beautifully shown it with the help of symbolism of the weather. It was the month of December and the weather was hot and dry, which in accordance depict the mood of father and the son. Finally, when Okeke realized his mistake the weather changes: "The sky was overcast with heavy black clouds and a high wind began to blow, filling the air with dust and dry leaves. It was one of those rare occasions when even Nature takes a hand in a human fight. Very soon it began to rain, the first rain in the year" (Achebe 29). The rain symbolizes fertility, rejuvenation, purity, cleansing, rebirth, growth, new life and hope. As also in the story it symbolizes the new beginning of the relationships.

By the shift in the attitude of Okeke, Achebe wants to bring to fore the point that family ties are difficult to break. Italics are also used for phrases and sentences in the story. In *Marriage is a Private Affair* all the letters are written in italics. This foregrounds the letters. The letters written by Nnaemeka, his wife and his father reiterate the conflict between father and son that dominates the story and it could therefore be argued that the letters hold the story together. Given that those letters contain the main conflicts in the story, they too help to highlight them and how they are resolved. At a different level, given that they come at regular intervals, the

infusion of the letters enhances the rhythmic qualities of the story. Achebe has used simple language, hence it can be said that simplicity is the hallmark of Achebe's writing. There is a verbal irony in the title of the story as marriage is mostly arranged by the community and parents, but for Nnaemeka and Nene, it was a private affair.

Globalization has brought not only nation, things, information, people closer but it has also brought hearts of people close. In his short stories, Achebe has shown how literature can deal with trying moments such as colonization and war and their aftereffects, how art can emerge from moments of utter chaos, and he has responded with sensitivity to the suffering of others. The story helps to understand other culture and its customs. Through this story Achebe might be telling that marriage is a private affair, it would be happy and joyful if it were done independently and with personal choice. Achebe also wants to point out that stale tradition and superstition will bring problems and conflicts. He wants us to develop a broad outlook towards people and life. As Okeke narrow mindedness led him not to accept the marriage of his son with the girl from other community. The story reveals that children respect their parents as they consulted them before their marriage. The writer also wants us to be guarded when making a personal independent choice to bring lasting happiness and joy ever after in one's life. The story also highlights the point that love has no boundaries; it transcends the limits of caste, creed, colour and customs. Earlier concept of marriage was different now it is different, and parents should accept these changes. Thus I would like to conclude this paper with the words of Mc Laughlin: "A successful marriage requires falling in love many times, always with the same person".

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