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AN INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF GENDER, CULTURE, AND IDENTITY IN NESHANI ANDREA'S *THE PURPLE VIOLET OF OSHAANTU*

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Abstract:

Women experience marital subjectivity such as domestic violence, which is a prominent issue in the African continent. Male writers often overlook the issues faced by women in their society, instead focusing on social and political issues. African men treat women as inferior beings, primarily focusing on socio-political matters. Men treat women as inferior beings, and they endure significant suffering at the hands of men. The article examines the experiences of women in the patriarchal context of Namibia. Furthermore, the study analyses various forms of gender oppression and the psychological and emotional impacts of abusive relationships on women. This kind of oppression is caused by the lack of communication between the partners, which results in domestic violence. The article advocates for women's empowerment by drawing on Radical Feminist theory. The paper analyzes the various forms of oppression faced by women in Namibia's patriarchal society. By using Radical Feminist theory, the study highlights the victims who fail to understand their full potential, and the societal differences that prevent them from voicing out their issues or seeking assistance.

Keywords: Gender, culture, oppression, violence, feminism, women, victims

Introduction:

The novel *Purple Violet of Oshaantu*, published in 2001, explores the friendship between two women, Mee Ali and Kauna. Their friendship is unlike any other bond; their relationship is truly

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unique. They lived in the village of Oshaantu, situated in Namibia. Mee Ali is a young woman with children. Mee Ali and Kauna are non-natives, and they have a strong and enduring bond that has lasted for many years. The narrative of their journey unfolds in a post-apartheid Namibia affected by issues like the HIV and AIDS crisis and domestic violence, which are notably present in Oshaantu.

The novel begins with Mee Ali sharing her gratitude and appreciation, praising “mother,” symbolically representing nature, for providing ample food for the community in Oshaantu. One might suggest that the author’s choice to start the story by honoring nature emphasizes its significance for human survival and existence. In the Oshiwambo culture, the household's duties, including raising children, primarily fall to women, as most men seek work far from their homes.

Young Kauna is the wife of Shange, and she married him when the purple violets bloomed in Oshaantu; hence, due to this critical occasion and her beauty as a new wife, she was referred to as “the purple violet of Oshaantu”. The beauty is short-lived as Shange, the husband of Kauna, began to abuse and oppress her, and made things worse. Due to this, Kauna struggled to conceive a child immediately after they got married. This has also led her to become the target of mockery from her in-laws. Mee Ali, the first woman to marry in the village, is Kauna's sole friend and consistently tries to help her through the torment inflicted by her abusive husband, Shange, and his family. Additionally, she is the only woman who dares to confront Shange directly, scolding him, which puts an end to his physical abuse of Kauna. Nevertheless, the emotional torment persists. The whole village of Oshaantu is aware that Kauna lacks a loving and supportive husband. She finds herself trapped in a joyless marriage. Kauna has left Shange three times and returned to her parents, yet Shange always retrieves her with promises to her family that he will stop mistreating her. Shange goes out of his way to ensure that Kauna experiences no happiness.

To illustrate, Kauna has not had her own cooking space for an extended period. As a result, she is forced to share the cooking area with other women in Shange’s father’s compound. In contrast to Kauna’s marriage, Mee Ali enjoys a harmonious and loving relationship with her husband, Michael, who works away from home and returns occasionally, yet remains supportive of her during his visits. Due to the affectionate and peaceful nature of Mee Ali’s marriage, her in-laws are led to believe that she has enchanted their son. On the other hand, other men in the village are caring husbands and support their wives, including Victor, Peetu, Mukwankala’s husband, Kauna’s father, Tate Oiva, Tate Fillipusa, and others.

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Kauna faces increasing turmoil when Shange dies in his residence following a visit to the 'White House.' She becomes the prime suspect in his poisoning, particularly due to his history of abusing her. As bell hooks notes, 'The moment women begin to see male violence against women as a mechanism of social control, they will recognize the depths of their political victimization' (hooks, 2004, p. 118). This realization can spark collective action and resistance against patriarchal norms, as seen in Kauna's determination to start anew despite her circumstances.

Moreover, she heightens the suspicions by not adhering to the expected traditional behavior of a widow, delivering an emotional speech regarding the circumstances of Shange's death, and crying over her deceased husband's body. The unfortunate Kauna is stripped of all she has built by her husband's family, who seize her homestead and its contents. Left impoverished with only her children, Kauna nonetheless possesses a renewed determination to start afresh.

Gender and Identity:

The Purple Violet of Oshaantu (2001) raises issues about patriarchy and the burden on women. Andreas examines the issues faced by women and their interactions with men in post-independence Namibia. The discussion highlights how traditional cultural norms perceive women as the weaker gender in a male-dominated society. Women remain on the outskirts of society and are regarded as objects devoid of feelings or emotions. This is exemplified through Kauna's relationship with her husband, Shange, who physically abuses her for any reason or no reason at all to assert his masculinity. Shange makes every effort to demean and humiliate Kauna, even in front of their children and neighbors, because he paid lobola (Bride Price) for her. Mee Ali observes that Kauna's life is "controlled and virtually ruled by Shange" (50). Paying lobola in a patriarchal society becomes a means for men to own women, who are then regarded as objects that can be treated without care.

Despite the mistreatment, Kauna remains devoted and patiently awaits Shange's return from his lover, who resides in a house that Shange constructed for her; hence, she is known as "the woman from the white house" (p. 26). Kauna continues to express her love for Shange, even though he does not reciprocate these feelings. Unfortunately, Shange fails to recognize this sincere affection and continues to mistreat Kauna. Even though she knows he is with another woman, Kauna still sets aside food for him whenever she prepares meals for the family, hoping he will have something to eat when he comes home. Sometimes, Kauna thinks she deserves the abuse, possibly due to the

upbringing shaped by traditional societal norms. The prevailing belief in society dictates that women should manage the household and tolerate men's flirtatious and unfaithful behavior without protest. If a marriage ends, society often labels the woman as unsuccessful. Furthermore, it is the woman who faces blame if she is harmed or abused in any way by her partner. Shockingly, even women themselves often think that if their husbands harm them, it is because they have somehow earned it. When Kauna's mother sees the scar on Kauna's face..., she asks her, "What did you do to get that scar?" thus emphasising that society places so much blame on women for wrong-doing yet turning a blind eye to the domestic abuse at the hands of their spouses (p.77). The community does not make it easy for Kauna as it treats her as if the failure of her marriage is her fault.

Religion and cultural norms instruct women to be obedient in marriage and to endure whatever challenges arise. Rejecting a submission or leaving a partner can bring societal backlash. The fear of public judgment confines women to unfulfilling unions. Kauna's mother tells her to stay in her relationship as her father is a pastor, and leaving her husband would harm his reputation. Kauna remains in her situation because she feels there is no alternative to abandoning her spouse.

Many women hastily enter marriage without obtaining the skills or qualifications essential for their independence and that of their children. This is why, despite enduring significant abuse, women continue to stay with their harmful partners in the hope that things will improve. Although she is conscious of her pain, Kauna accepts it as part of her destiny. This resigned mindset she demonstrates is typical of many women in similar abusive relationships.

Mee Ali is a resilient woman. At times, she longs for her husband, Michael, to be with her. Mee Ali is resilient for her friend but feels inadequate regarding her situation. In a crisis, she longs for her husband, Michael, to be at home. At Shange's funeral, she imagines things might have been different for Kauna if Michael had been present. Mee Ali also reflects on what would happen to her family if Michael were to pass away, realizing that, like Kauna, she will have no one else to care for her. Mee Ali's anxiety about losing her husband, stemming from her insecurities, seems to reinforce the patriarchal notion that women are incomplete without men.

With Michael frequently away, she manages the family's daily responsibilities, including tending to the crops in her field, which demonstrates her capability to succeed independently, although she fails to recognize it. The passage opens with Mee Ali taking pride in her crops,

highlighting that the harvest time is a joyous occasion as the women recognize the results of their hard work. Despite the women's relentless labor and the men's absence from the fields, the harvests are still attributed to the men. Thus, it can be argued that her distorted fear of loneliness without a husband is deeply rooted in patriarchal beliefs.

The Life of Married Women:

Marriage, as an institution, is always in the spotlight. The people in her village says: "who had died, who had married, who was still not pregnant after so many years of marriage, who is now too old to get married, who has moved, who has this new disease ... (76)" thus illustrating how every aspect of marriage is scrutinised by society. While every woman envisions a fairytale ending in marriage, the initial joy often diminishes over time for many who find themselves wed to unsuitable partners. Yet, they remain in the union to escape societal judgment. Kauna experienced no moments of happiness in her marriage, as Shange's ill-tempered personality consistently overshadowed her. Kauna endures Shange's mistreatment because she was raised to uphold her marriage at all costs.

After Shange passes away, Kauna faces the expectation of mourning him as if he were a good spouse, as per tradition, or else risk being accused of causing his death with the belief that not mourning is an indication of her relief. She is also obliged to speak at his funeral, praising him as a wonderful husband. Her dry eyes and refusal to deliver a eulogy serve as her silent rebellion, further fueling the claims of Shange's relatives that she was responsible for their son's demise. They fail to recognize that she has reached her limit, has shed enough tears during their marriage, and cannot cry anymore, particularly for him. Though divorce could be an option, it is considered taboo. Moreover, divorce could disrupt the stability of the children born from that marriage.

Although Kauna puts in a lot of effort, after she loses her husband, her in-laws take her off the land, seize everything she has worked for, and leave her with nothing to show for her labor. During Shange's funeral, traditional gender roles are emphasized as women handle cooking, serve food to mourners, and care for Shange's children. At the same time, men engage in discussions about funeral arrangements and other "significant issues." Due to the gender norms imposed by patriarchy, Shange feels ashamed to admit that he works as a cook, a role that patriarchy views as suitable only for women. It is disheartening to observe that some women in male-dominated societies collaborate with men to oppress their fellow women.

Kauna undergoes a similar ordeal when Shange's family accuses her of murdering Shange for his riches and seizes everything she has worked for, claiming that it all belongs to Shange, their son. Kauna says: 'People must know the truth. He did not eat my food. And I did not kill him! You hear me. You hear me. You evil people, I know what you are thinking. I know because you are evil. Evil people, all of you' (p.12). One of Shange's cousins even moved into the bedroom where the couple shared their lives. Furthermore, Shange's family failed to ask Kauna regarding funeral preparations. She is rendered invisible simply because she is a woman. In the face of the crowd, Mee Ali, the best friend of Kauna, tries to save the situation in vain. She tried to defend her friend by arguing that only a doctor can tell them precisely what happened to Shange.

Accusing a woman of being responsible for her husband's death is always common in African traditional societies. As mentioned above, violence takes various forms such as physical, verbal, emotional, psychological, etc. Apart from spousal physical abuse, women are also victims of their husbands' relatives' verbal and psychological abuse. Kauna does not leave her husband; she instead endures his beatings till his sudden death, which sets her free. Shange's premature death is synonymous with Kauna's survival, which makes this widow refrain from mourning her dead husband.

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