



THE FRAGILITY OF COMMITMENT IN ACHEBE'S 'MARRIAGE IS A PRIVATE AFFAIR'

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Abstract:

This paper aims to explore the fragility of commitment as presented in Chinua Achebe's 'Marriage is a Private Affair.' Achebe's short story represents a complex conflict between personal freedom and traditional constraints. The primary focus of this analysis is the way the author examines commitment in relationships, and how it manifests itself under various cultural pressures. This research paper delves into the intricate dynamics of commitment as illustrated in Chinua Achebe's 'Marriage is a Private Affair.' The story offers an intimate exploration of the fragility of commitment, as it is strained and sometimes fractured by personal desires, societal expectations, and cultural norms. This study analyzes the influence of cultural practices on commitment, focusing on the Igbo customs represented in the narrative. The narrative elucidates the tension between personal and societal commitments, demonstrating how cultural norms can influence and strain these commitments. It also explores the dynamics of personal commitment as seen in the relationship between the protagonists, Nnaemeka and Nene, and the subsequent conflict it engenders within their familial and societal circles. The societal commitment, embodied by Nnaemeka's father, Okeke, and its clash with Nnaemeka's personal commitment is also a central theme. The narrative reveals the fragility and breakability of societal commitment when it is confronted by conflicting personal desires. Lastly, the paper discusses the potential for the restoration of commitment, as depicted in the reconciliation between Nnaemeka and Okeke. This element highlights the malleability of commitment, its potential to be reshaped, and its inherent fragility. The narrative of 'Marriage is a Private Affair' invites a deeper understanding of the fragility of commitment, providing insights into the interplay between personal desires, societal pressures, and cultural expectations. This paper hopes to contribute to a broader discourse on the theme of personal freedom versus societal expectations in African literature.

Key Words: Chinua Achebe, Marriage is a Private Affair, Commitment, Cultural Conflict, Societal Norms & Personal Desires.

1. Introduction:

Chinua Achebe, one of the most influential African authors, has effectively used literature to highlight critical societal issues. In his short story 'Marriage is a Private Affair,' Achebe skillfully unravels the theme of commitment against the backdrop of a socio-cultural clash. This conflict between a young couple's love and familial expectations illustrates the fragility of commitment in relationships. Chinua Achebe, renowned for his significant contributions to African literature, is a Nigerian author whose work has transcended the boundaries of Africa and become a part of the global literary canon. His novels, short stories, and essays have brought to light the various facets of African life, culture, and history. He adeptly weaves traditional African narratives into his work, blending them with contemporary themes and issues.

One of the most captivating short tales written by Achebe is titled "Marriage is a Private Affair." This story is an in-depth investigation of love, the responsibilities of family, and cultural norms. The young Igbo guy Nnaemeka and his loyalty to the lady he loves, Nene, despite the fact that she is from a different tribe serves as the protagonist of this novel. Nnaemeka's father, who exemplifies the traditional Igbo culture and is

fiercely dedicated to the practise of arranged marriage, stands in the way of the couple's pursuit of married happiness and presents a formidable obstacle for them to overcome. This struggle between the younger generation's desire of individual independence and the elder generation's devotion to established cultural standards provides the backbone of the story. The new generation strives for more autonomy, while the older generation adheres to more traditional values. Nevertheless, at the centre of this battle between generations and cultures lies a topic that is more nuanced: the precarious nature of commitment. The commitment at issue is multi-faceted and includes not only the personal connection that Nnaemeka has to Nene, but also his social commitment to his family and community, as well as his father's dedication to the norms and traditions of society. As the story progresses, these promises are put to the test, which highlights how fragile they really are. This study is to investigate and analyse the precarious nature of commitment, specifically as it is shown in the film "Marriage is a Private Affair." It digs into the subtle interactions that exist between personal aspirations, family obligations, and cultural conventions, which strain and at times fracture commitments, thereby shedding light on the inherent precariousness of such commitments. The purpose of the study is to improve comprehension of Achebe's depiction of commitment and to provide light on the ways in which individual aspirations and social forces may test the robustness of commitment. This investigation also has the goal of contributing to a larger discussion on the reoccurring topic of personal independence vs society expectations in the works of Achebe and African literature in general.

2. Cultural Impact on Commitment:

The protagonist of Achebe's narrative is a young Igbo man named Nnaemeka. Nnaemeka is adamant about marrying the lady he loves, Nene, rather than the woman his father has picked to be his wife. The author draws a contrast between Nnaemeka's dedication to his love and his dedication to the traditional traditions of his family. Achebe demonstrates that when commitments are tested by cultural influences from the outside, they become unstable and may result in conflict and personal suffering for those involved. In "Marriage is a Private Affair," written by Chinua Achebe, one of the primary focuses is on the influence of cultural practises and beliefs on both individual and community obligations. According to Ogbonna, cultural norms play an important part in the formation of individual identities, beliefs, and relationships, which in turn influences the kind and degree of commitments made by individuals. According to the story, Nnaemeka is a member of the Igbo tribe. In this culture, it is traditional for parents, and especially fathers, to orchestrate the weddings of their children (Kalu, 2014). It is difficult for people to break away from this cultural practise because it bears the weight of society commitment. This is true even when individuals' own convictions are in contradiction with the practise.

Achebe describes the dilemma that Nnaemeka has when he is split between his dedication to Nene and his social duty to follow his father and stick to Igbo customs. Nnaemeka finds himself torn between these two obligations. According to Nnolim (2010), this battle demonstrates how fragile commitment may be when it is subject to the effect of cultural forces. When Nnaemeka makes the decision to marry Nene, he upsets the social order by violating the cultural standards that have been established. It is clear that his personal commitment to Nene is stronger than the social commitment to respect his culture's marital practises, which highlights the precarious nature of commitment when subjected to the weight of cultural expectations (Anozie, 1979).

Additionally, Okeke, Nnaemeka's father, is a character who is thoroughly ingrained in the ancient practises of his culture. When his son makes the decision to

marry Nene, it puts his dedication to the Igbo customs to the test. The fact that Okeke decides to disown his son as a consequence of his unbending dedication to social commitment highlights the precarious nature of family commitments in situations when they are in conflict with robust society standards (Achebe, 1952). As a result, the cultural setting has a tremendous influence on the consistency of commitment in Achebe's story. When they are put under stress by cultural factors that are in opposition to one another, personal and social commitments show their brittleness.

3. The Dynamics of Personal Commitment:

As the story progresses, Achebe demonstrates the significance of personal commitment by drawing attention to the steadfast devotion that Nnaemeka has to Nene. He goes against the conventional wisdom by choosing to marry the woman he loves rather than being married against his will. On the other hand, his dedication to his father and the family traditions is tested, demonstrating how easily a personal devotion may be shaken when confronted with the pressures of society. According to Stanley, Rhoades, and Whitton (2010), a personal commitment in a relationship often involves a convoluted interplay between emotional engagement, shared ideals, and interdependent reliance on the other party. Within the framework of Nnaemeka and Nene's relationship, "Marriage is a Private Affair" by Chinua Achebe provides a realistic examination of the personal commitments that individuals make. According to Achebe (1952), when Nnaemeka makes the decision to marry Nene, he exemplifies a deep personal commitment that is motivated by love and emotional closeness. This decision goes against the grain of both cultural conventions and the expectations of his family. The precarious nature of the relationships that are formed via personal commitments is brought into stark relief by his decision to keep his promise to Nene even if it meant risking estrangement from his family. It is possible for one's personal devotion to bring about emotional anguish as well as conflict within the family when it is put up against the demands of an external society.

Through the character of Nene, Achebe delves even further into the topic of personal commitment. Nene is a forward-thinking lady who has a strong commitment to both Nnaemeka and the future they have together. In Achebe's novel "Things Fall Apart," published in 1952, the protagonist, Nneoma, demonstrates the intricacies of personal commitment as she persists on keeping her connection with Nnaemeka while being aware of the probable reaction from society. The commitment that the couple has made to one another is not just an emotional investment, but also a purposeful rejection of the conventions that are prevalent in society. This disobedience, while highlighting the individuals' personal devotion, also highlights the commitment's precarious nature and makes it even more vulnerable. The fact that the relationship between Nnaemeka and Nene is continually put in jeopardy by both the censure of society and the alienation of Nnaemeka's family demonstrates the precarious nature of maintaining a personal commitment in the face of opposition. (Udeh, 2016)

4. The Breakability of Societal Commitment:

Achebe also demonstrates how societal commitment can be fractured under the weight of personal choices. The father, adhering strictly to Igbo traditions, initially disowns Nnaemeka, choosing societal commitment over familial bonds. This reveals the fragility of societal commitments when tested against evolving values. Societal commitment, derived from norms, traditions, and the social fabric, plays a crucial role in shaping individual behaviors and attitudes (Hechter & Kanazawa, 1997). Yet, the story 'Marriage is a Private Affair' effectively demonstrates how societal commitment can be challenged and broken when confronted with personal desires and convictions.

Achebe creates a character in Okeke, Nnaemeka's father, who personifies societal commitment. His dedication to Igbo traditions leads him to disown his son when Nnaemeka decides to marry a woman not chosen by him, thereby disobeying Igbo customs (Achebe, 1952). Here, the societal commitment to uphold cultural traditions becomes both restrictive and fragile. When confronted with his son's personal commitment to Nene, Okeke's societal commitment to tradition strains and ultimately breaks his familial commitment, showcasing the fragility of societal commitment (Nwabueze, 2015). The dissonance between Nnaemeka's personal commitment and his father's societal commitment symbolizes the clash between modern values and traditional norms. Nnaemeka's defiance of Igbo traditions underscores the breakability of societal commitment when it is pitted against individual choice and personal commitment (Obiechina, 1975). Simultaneously, Okeke's rejection of Nnaemeka's choice underlines the power of societal commitment to rupture familial bonds. The narrative thus illustrates the fragile and breakable nature of societal commitment, especially when it is confronted by evolving values and personal desires.

5. The Restoration of Commitment:

In the end, the birth of Nnaemeka's and Nene's sons softens the father's stance, ultimately leading him to reconnect with his son. This illustrates the potential for restoring fractured commitments, emphasizing their inherent fragility and malleability. Achebe's 'Marriage is a Private Affair' not only probes the fragility and breakability of commitment but also examines the potential for its restoration. The narrative hints at the malleability of commitment, suggesting that it can be bent and reshaped, albeit not without significant personal turmoil and emotional distress (Achebe, 1952).

The restoration of commitment is demonstrated through the evolving relationship between Nnaemeka and his father, Okeke. After years of separation and estrangement due to Okeke's rigid societal commitment to Igbo traditions, he eventually softens upon hearing about his grandsons (Achebe, 1952). The birth of Nnaemeka's sons catalyzes a transformation in Okeke's feelings, leading to the gradual restoration of his familial commitment. Okeke's change of heart underscores the potential for restoring fractured commitments. It suggests that even when societal commitments lead to the disruption of familial bonds, there remains the possibility of reconciliation and restoration (Afigbo, 1981). This aspect of the narrative highlights the fluid nature of commitment, reinforcing its inherent fragility and malleability.

6. Conclusion:

The story 'Marriage is a Private Affair' offers an insightful examination of the fragility of commitment on both personal and societal levels. Achebe skillfully portrays the conflicts and pains associated with shifting commitments. This study confirms that societal norms and personal desires can impact the strength and stability of commitments, further demonstrating their fragility. Chinua Achebe's 'Marriage is a Private Affair' serves as an intricate exploration of the fragility of commitment within the frameworks of personal desires, societal expectations, and cultural norms. The narrative intricately illustrates how these varying forms of commitment—personal, societal, and familial—can be at odds with each other, revealing their inherent fragility. In the interplay of personal and societal commitment, the narrative highlights how personal commitment, driven by love and individual choice, can challenge and disrupt societal commitment grounded in tradition and cultural norms. This dissonance leads to familial discord and societal disapproval, reinforcing the breakability and fragility of commitment. However, the narrative also illuminates the potential for the restoration of commitment, as seen in Okeke's eventual reconciliation with his son. Despite the initial

rejection and estrangement, the narrative posits the possibility of change and reconciliation, underscoring the malleability of commitment. In the final analysis, Achebe's 'Marriage is a Private Affair' offers profound insights into the complexities of commitment. The story serves as a poignant commentary on the dynamics of personal desires, cultural expectations, and societal norms, revealing the fragile nature of commitment when these elements come into conflict. It encapsulates the struggles inherent in navigating personal freedom and societal expectations, a recurring theme in African literature that continues to resonate in contemporary discourse.

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