

*Review***Violet without purple: The colour of spousal violence in  
Neshani Andreas' *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu*****Ogbeide O. Victor**

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Women are often the victims of spousal abuse which male writers, in their reductionist preoccupation with socio-political issues of the moment, often down play. This is the issue fore-grounded in this paper from the standpoint of a female novelist as seen in Neshani Andreas' *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu*. It argues that wife battering continues courtesy of the silence of the fairer sex themselves in deference to the oppressive yoke of patriarchy which has come to define their existence. Until they learn to stand up to the bullying antics of their partner, women are likely to continue in their oppression. The possibility of this, the paper contends, is the very essence of the network of friendship among the women themselves as well as the central character's resolve and radical transformation at the end of the narrative.

**Key words:** Spouse, abuse, marriage, battering, patriarchy, couple.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Marriage, unarguably one of the oldest institutions in the universe, is the legal joining of two consensual adults (usually male and female) who love each other and have agreed to spend the rest of their lives together as a couple. The Genesis account of creation in the Bible says that the Almighty God Himself solemnized the first marriage in human history. "That is why a man will leave his father and mother", says Genesis 2:24, "and he must stick to his wife and they must become one flesh". In his inimitable wisdom, The First Cause planted within humans the capacity for romantic love – a quality that would draw men and women together. The World Book Encyclopedia (1977) says, "A man and woman who marry hope to share a sexual relationship and a permanent romantic attraction". The building blocks of most successful marriages are mutual love, trust and understanding by both partners in the relationship. Couples who have agreed to get married are expected by societal conventions to see each other as partners in the union devoid of master-slave relationship.

Often regarded as an initiation into adulthood in many societies, marriage is a life-long commitment. To have a long lasting and fulfilled marriage, violence and abuse must be reduced to the barest minimum as they actually mock and negate the very essence of the social institution. Unfortunately, many marriages either just wobble along cheerlessly or have broken up due to social and psychological factors which often lead to spousal abuse; a situation whereby one of the partners in the marriage becomes a punching bag for the other involved in the union.

**SPOUSAL ABUSE**

*Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia (2011)* defines spousal abuse as "a pattern of abusive behaviour by one partner against another in an intimate relationship such as marriage, dating, family or cohabitation". Also known as Intimate Partner Abuse (IPA), spousal abuse is the

mistreatment that a woman or a man may experience at the hands of a marital partner. It may happen at any time during a relationship including while it is breaking down or after it has ended. Spousal abuse is slightly different from domestic abuse. This is because while the former involves only the couple, the latter may include everybody in the home including the children.

Spousal abuse occurs in all countries and it transcends social, economic and cultural groups. According to Funmi (2011), "domestic violence is not peculiar to one society. It is not peculiar to any race, tribe or any nation. It is an international phenomenon. It happens in America, Asia and the continents just as it happens in Africa". The "Awake Magazine" for example, states that "every year in Russia, fourteen thousand women die as a result of domestic violence" (2011). All forms of spousal abuse have one purpose which is often to gain and maintain control over the victim. Abusers use many tactics to exercise power over their spouse or partner. On account of their weak constitution which often conspires with many oppressive patriarchal cultures in many parts of the world, women are often the hapless victims of spousal abuse. According to Obioma (2007), "Abuse of the female body is global and should be studied and interpreted within the context of oppressive condition under patriarchy".

In a study carried out by Fawole and Aderounmu (2005) on "Intimate Partner Abuse among Civil Servants in Ibadan, Nigeria" for example, 78% of females were found to have been assaulted by their intimate partners compared to 18% of male victims. The precarious situation of the fairer sex is compounded even more by the fact that 68.7% said that they had decided to remain in the relationship because "they did not want their children to suffer" if they divorced their husband while 78.8% said they were still in the abusive relationship because of their hope that their partner would change. Unfortunately, the African novel, a genre dominated by men whose constant focus is the socio-political issues of the day hardly reflects the harrowing lot of women in the society. In fact, according to Saadawi, the marginal attention to woman by men in their fiction is to feature her either as one of a series of stereo-types like a dutiful wife and a whore or as a mere prop for the ambition of the man. In her assertion, the standard female stereotype in male fiction is a capricious vamp, a playful and beautiful slave, a she-devil imbued with cunning and capable of thousand artifices, an explosive danger versed in all the arts of deceit and conspiracy, a seductive mistress captivating in her passion.... Woman in all the aspects of the role she is made to play, whether it be that of a queen or a slave bought from the market, remains a slave (2007).

Nwapa (2009) corroborates this rather phallogocentric cultural ascendancy inspired view when she states that "Nigerian writers such as Achebe, Ekwensi, Soyinka, Clark and Amadi have all in their earlier works played

down the powerful role of women".

Wole Soyinka, has however, argued that women should pick up the challenge to write about themselves if they feel that they have not been convincingly and realistically portrayed in fiction by men. He tells David in an interview:

But that is the role of women. I can't enter into the mind and body of women. No, let women write about themselves (1995).

It is no gain saying that over the years many African women have become creative writers not only to deliberately subvert the perceived androcentric picture in the African continent but also to use their characters as witnesses to their oppression and opposition. Notable among such African women writers that deal with domestic issues affecting women are Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Zainab Alkali, Adaora Ulasi, Mariama Ba, Chimamada Adichie, Ama Ata Aidoo and recently Neshani Andreas whose novel forms the spine of this paper. In a nutshell, this paper proposes to carefully examine the possible solution to spousal abuse, the often-taken-for-granted issue of spousal abuse as portrayed by Andreas' in *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* (2001).

The theoretical underpinning of this paper is womanism, the African version of feminism. The concept of womanism evolved from the African feminists' eagerness to draw a line between their own accommodating version and the extreme radical western feminism. Unlike the fanatical bra-burning and men-hating western feminists, the womanist believes that men and women have complimentary role in marriage or relationship. The womanist does not celebrate man or woman alone, for self fulfillment is hardly possible outside the "couple" situation. According to Ogini (1996):

Womanism recognizes that the needs of the black woman are not the same as those of the white woman, while equally affirming that the African woman has passed through a chain of oppression under the system of patriarchy.

### **BATTERING THE PURPLE OUT OF THE VIOLET: WOMEN'S LOT IN THE PURPLE VIOLET OF OSHAANTU**

Set in Oshaantu Village in Northern Namibia, *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* is about the status and role of women in traditional Namibian society steeped in patriarchy. Through issues like marriage, divorce, widowhood, reproductive rights, religion, inheritance and economic status of women, the novel critiques a traditional system that seeks to silence women and close any pattern to empowerment. Essentially, the novel is about Kauna and her marriage to Shange as narrated by

her older friend, Mee Ali. Kauna's life clearly illustrates what Judith Newton and Deborah Rosefelt call "the intersection of multiple oppressions" (1985). Kauna is a mother and wife; she is dominated and oppressed by her husband at the same time that she has to bear the moral burden of the demands her children make on her and subordinate her needs to theirs in the face of abandonment by their father. Like the heroines of Nwapa's *Efuru*, Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* and Ba's *So Long a Letter*, Kauna's marriage is one continuous hellish nightmare.

At the beginning of the marriage, Kauna is considered as beautiful, as the purple violet that grows in Oshaantu village. Her beauty, however, soon varnishes after a series of battering and abuse by her husband, Shange. The fearless Mukwankala describes Kauna's present facial state as "something that looks as if it has been through some strange incisions made by a clan from outer space. All forms of spousal violence from the physical to the emotional are visited on the hapless woman by her bully of a husband who finds her a ready made punch bag when he is angry. Mee Ali, the novelist's mouth piece, tells us that Shange "was a complete bundle of contradiction" who "was nice to some people, arrogant to others and usually mean to his wife". Notorious for his infidelity in the village, even his children have become used to his regular beatings of their mother as the oldest of them, Kandiwapa, always treats her mother's bruises each time her father beats her. On one occasion, however, the beating of their mother becomes too much for the children to handle. Seemingly angry that his wife has possibly discovered the nature of his work as a cook in the mines as seen in the photograph given to her by her friend, Shange beats the living daylights out of his wife:

Then it all happened so fast, Kauna and her basket full of water landed on the ground. Kauna tried to escape Shange's rage, but he was too fast for her, He caught her. She screamed. I have never heard her screaming like that ... Kauna was lying on the ground covered in a blanket of sand. She moved like an old clothe as Shange's shoes struck her mercilessly all over her tiny body. The heavy mine shoes sounded as if they were breaking every bone. She had covered her face and part of her head with both arms and hands.

After Michael his friend has managed to bring his murderous rage under control the reader is shown the pathetic image of the helpless Kauna:

Blood mixed with sand all over her face, in her mouth, nose, eyes, ears, head and clothes, and the sight of her children crying helplessly (59).

By choosing "Cuca shop", a public arena often visited by men to confront Shange, Mukwankala the champion of

downtrodden women in the village makes spousal abuse a public matter, thereby compelling the men in her community to face their traditionally sanctioned roles as bullies. Her attention to Shange's physical strength to question his masculinity is revealing:

...tell me how many men you have beaten in this village the way you beat your wife? ... men who beat women are the ones who cannot stand up against other men.

Like magic, Shange's humiliation under the acerbic tongue of Mukwankala stops him from beating Kauna again although he continues to assert his domineering attitude over her by deciding when she is allowed to visit her family; and continuing his extramarital affairs. He does not completely stop his abuse of her though; he only switches to a different form of abuse-emotional abuse.

By spending virtually all his free time with the other woman in the "white house" whom he has built a modern house for, only to come home to bully Kauna, Shange emotionally abuses his legitimate wife. For a man who hardly sleeps at home but satisfies his sexual urge very often outside, leaving his wife high and dry, sexual abuse logically follows in the heels of emotional abuse. But for her good Christian upbringing and discipline, Kauna would have been forced by the unremitting circumstance she finds herself to seek warm embrace in the bosom of another man who cares.

Earlier in the narrative we are told that, like other male chauvinists in the village who are afraid of an economically empowered women, Shange had discouraged Kauna from owning animals of her own. This form of financial abuse itself is a function of the patriarchal wisdom that prevails in the village that "a wealthy bride is not good for a husband's ego".

Given the constant buffeting of his wife without what can be called concrete or justifiable evidence, one is more than convinced that love is obviously not the reason Shange married Kauna. Kauna herself tells us his real reason when she explains to her friend Mee Ali one day:

I was the daughter of a pastor and a teacher, a high school girl and a virgin. I was perfect for him. It was more for his ego than anything else.

Since Shange did not marry Kauna out of love but for his selfish ego- massaging, he has absolutely no respect or even regard for her feelings. He falls into the class of men who exert their so-called masculinity on helpless women as Mukwankala rightly puts it. He has never beaten a fellow man outside but he beats his wife at home at every opportunity. He has turned Kauna into an object of public ridicule and laughter in the village; the women laugh at her for not been able to hold on to her husband while the men see Shange's behaviour as "normal".

Like Okonkwo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) all the men, with a possible exception of Michael, are either wife beaters, drunks or dullards who cannot protect the women in the family. As a man who does not abuse his wife like all other men, Michael is considered to be under his wife's control and therefore weak and not a full man. Ironically, even Michael himself does not see anything unusual in the lethal beatings that Kauna has to endure as he refers to them as nothing but "marriage problems". In fact, like several other men in the community, Michael views domestic violence as a private matter as well as a normal part of most marriages. In tandem with the men, the local women with the exception of Mee Ali and Mukwankala believe that domestic violence is a part of marriage. Mee Maita for example, believes that far from being an enjoyable haven, marriage should, be one miserable life long experience. Husband and wife should fight everyday; he should abuse her and the children, he should go after other women.

Of course, Ali firmly opposes this warped view of marriage, stating "that marriage doesn't need to be a miserable thing". Mee Maita is a veritable representative of the local culture's passive acceptance of the abuse of women. But the gossiping Maita is not alone. For, even Kauna's mother insists that Shange is the man God has given to her daughter as husband so she must accept him as he is. According to Mee Ali, even the nurses in the hospital are not always sympathetic to the battered local women because "when they come for treatment they lie to the doctors saying that some cow had kicked them in their face while they were milking". Like Ali, we are hardly surprised that "they always come back worse". These local women are a veritable manifestation of what Chapman (2001) calls "internalized oppression". According to him:

Black women learn early in their social development to deny the sexism to which they are subjected. They are in an unusual predicament. Often by the time a black girl reaches adolescence, the expectation that relationship with ...men will be harsh, oppressive and intense has been ingrained in her mind. The black women, I see, have a subconscious attitude that I called "internalized oppression", an almost tacit acceptance that they, as women, will be mistreated by both society and black men (1995).

Shange's clan do not seem to help the unenviable course of the women as they lessen the severity of Shange's abuse by claiming that he is not a perfect man and that he makes mistakes like any other human being. Thus, soaked in the fast fading practice of patriarchy, the community and even the local church are both unsympathetic to Kauna's suffering. In fact, they do not even acknowledge her suffering let alone thinking of how to help her out. Little wonder, therefore, that when

Shange suddenly drops dead rumour makes the round that she must have poisoned him to death. In deed, in a patriarchal setting that prevails in the novel, Andreas tells us that the grim reality which the women have to contend with leaves them with very few choices. This is why many of the local women would rather hide their husband-inflicted bruises and scars with brown shoe polish despite the untold physical and emotional pains they have to endure.

Shange's kindred spirit in the African novel is the fundamentalist Catholic sadist, Eugene in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2006). Eugene is both a religious zealot and a violent figure in his household where he submits his wife, Beatrice and two children, to severe battering and psychological cruelty. His house is a luxurious prison where indices of battering abound. Like Kauna, Beatrice frequently gets "black eyes" and the brutal beatings and the acts of dehumanization she and her children suffer at the hands of her husband Eugene remain fresh in the reader's mind. Purplish in colour are the bruises resulting from the series of beatings Eugene inflicts on Beatrice which make her lose two pregnancies like Kauna. Unlike the attractive purple in the violet of Oshaantu "purple" in Adichie's usage, says Adeola (2011) "symbolizes brutality, oppression and dehumanization". Thus, what presides in most marriages as portrayed by Adichie and Andreas is, to use Aduke Adebayo's words the disappearance of "the living happily ever after myth of marriages" (1996).

As stated in the introduction, sometimes the table turns and the man becomes the victims of spousal abuse. This is however rare. Joshua, Kauna's big uncle regularly gets beaten up by his termagant of a wife. He tries, however, to cover up this shame by playing the strict uncle whenever he visits his relatives. While John's case may be regarded as the exception rather than the rule in the rural community of Oshaantu, there is no gainsaying the fact that no matter the victim, spousal abuse has disastrous implications for the micro-society, the family.

## CONSEQUENCES OF SPOUSAL ABUSE

Bruises, broken bones, head injuries, lacerations and internal bleeding are some of the fall out of Intimate Partner Abuse. In very many cases medical attention and hospitalization are called for. Victims who are pregnant run the risk of miscarriage, preterm labour and injury to or death of the foetus. Many of these victims become psychological or emotional wrecks as they battle with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSA) which they experience for a long time. In addition to depression, victims also commonly experience long term anxiety and panic.

In the *Purple Violet of Oshaantu*, almost every woman carries bruises and or scars which they try- unsuccessfully to cover with shoe polish. Some of them

even tell lies to the doctors when they go for treatment to hide their shame and embarrassment. They have become so desensitized to the extent that they now think that being beaten by their husbands is a part of marriage. Anybody, however, who is not subjected to beatings like Mee Ali is only "lucky" in their own estimation. For these women, marriage has become a loveless entrapment that must be endured. Agarwal (1989) is no less right:

Much of the violence against women especially rape and wife beating goes under and unreported due to the silence of the victim and their families.

In a patriarchal world like we find in Oshaantu opting out of marriage is akin to breaking a taboo. Accounting to Kolawole (1998),

Divorce is almost a taboo in many African societies and this account for the high degree of tolerance by women. In most societies, young men enter into marriage feeling triumphant but the girl expects the worst and this prepares her mind to tolerate abuse and violence in marriage.

Perhaps, as a corroboration to the above assertion, Harvey (1994) has averred that for a cross cultural study of violence, the situational level of experience must be divorced from the representational level of knowledge. He claims that the former is relatively unproblematic in that it seems likely that the idea of constantly rendering physical hurt has cross cultural validity. In such societies, continues Harvey, both sexes acknowledge a husband's right to hit his wife.

This attitude produces a situation in which women experience violence while accepting it at the level of representational knowledge that such acts should be legislated and thus non-violent. However, as might be expected exceptionally harsh or frequent punishment might be contested.

In spite of the above, it is noteworthy that some of the bold and fearless women in Oshaantu, having been beaten, mistreated and pushed to the wall of frustration, insults and demoralization defy tradition by divorcing their husbands. When Mee Fernie, for instance, divorces her husband, the village people, including her own relatives unused to such open defiance of supposed community convention, predict her downfall and starvation. But to their utter consternation, Mee Fernie becomes the sole financier of her children's education and their up keep without going to her former husband for assistance. Similarly, Mee Nangala, Jacopo's wife, will brook no insults and economic abuse from her husband and his relatives as she decides to divorce her husband to do well for herself. Ironically, it is her husband that goes economically asunder.

As the daughter of a pastor as well as the fact that she is wholly dependent on her husband, Kauna realizes that she cannot divorce Shange. She, therefore, defies

tradition by making no secret of her suffering, like many of the village women, at the hands of her abusive husband. Although the villagers are quick to suspect her of poisoning or witchcraft when her husband dies, she does not care. In fact, her husband's physical, financial and emotional abuse seems to have hardened her into an emotionless wife who, contrary to convention, will not shed a tear for her dead husband nor speak a tribute to him at his funeral. Instead of all this, she is defiant and vocal about her sufferings in the marriage:

Well, I'm sorry you all feel uncomfortable about my behaviour, but I cannot pretend ... I cannot lie to myself and to everybody else in this village. They all know how I was treated in my marriage. Why should I cry? What? For my broken ribs? For my baby, the one he killed inside while beating me? For what? For what Ali?

If indeed, there is no fury like a woman scorned, then certainly a woman scorned, beaten to the point of losing a pregnancy like Kauna must be the very embodiment of a thousand furies. Apart from a few conversations with her bosom friend, Mee Ali, Kauna is a woman who has been abused into silence by her husband. In fact, this silence becomes a very powerful form of speaking against oppressive social customs after Shange's death. At the meeting with Shange's relatives, she embraces silence after bravely responding to their questions with counter questions despite her in-law's accusation of greed. At the funeral, Kauna's silence is made visible by the blank space on the programme where her name would have been. Her refusal to weep or pretend to be affected by her husband's death is a function of the fact that she had considered him dead even while still alive on account of the abuse-induced strained relationship. This is why after the real death she begins to see herself not only as a woman in relation to a man but as an individual. When, therefore, her husband's family disown her and kick her out of her marital home, she goes almost too willingly. She is all too ready to start a new life for herself as a free woman.

The negative effect of domestic violence on children is seen in the reaction of Kauna's children. Like Jaja and Kambili in *Purple Hibiscus* who have become hardened by their father's terrorism at home. Kauna's children have become unwilling witnesses to their father's constant battering of their mother. In fact, we are almost drawn to tears like Mee Ali when Kandiwapa tells her that she always treats her mother's bruises every time her father beats her. But for the sudden death of Shange which, like the classical *deus ex machina*, comes to put a stop to the relentless battering of her mother, one is not sure that Kandiwapa would not have either run away from home or defend her mother in any way possible. This is surely not unthinkable for, according to Harvey (1994),

Lack of physical strength and the intractability of kinship hierarchy make confrontation difficult for children. They often respond by leaving home.

It is no exaggeration to say that it is the domestic abuse which many “compliant” women in the village have come to regard as a part of their tradition that awakens the radical consciousness in Mee Ali and Mee Mukwankala. To them, these obnoxious and oppressive patriarchal practices must be resisted without compromise. Ali refuses to accept spousal abuse as the norm by emphasizing her status as a fellow human being. Whenever she is called “lucky” for being married to the gentle Michael, she resists being incorporated into oppressive traditional practices by declaring that she simply does not deserve to be “treated like a filthy animal”. She minces no words in telling Kauna that if she had been married to an abusive husband, she would have left him because she wants to be a wife and not a punching bag.

Similarly, Mukwankala’s fearless confrontation of Shange at the “cucu shop”, after the latter has beaten his wife mercilessly, is a metaphor for the women of Oshaantu to stand up to the bullying antics of their heartless men whose masculinity remains questionable if they think it begins and ends with wife battering and ego-massaging. Kauna’s rock solid decision not to speak at her late husband’s funeral is not only truly revolutionary but also a big blow to the huge and oppressive patriarchal edifice. Her taciturnity becomes a form of protest against the hypocritical practice that a widow must sing praises of her dead husband at his funeral even if he was a bad one while alive. Hear her:

No! I am not going to tell the lies that widows tell at their husband’s funeral. I am not going to say what an honourable, loving and faithful husband he was, while everybody in the village knows what type of a man he was. No, I will not make a laughing stock of myself. No, not because of Shange or anyone else.

Kauna’s repetitive use of the word “No” in one paragraph is an indication that, like Stephen Hero of James Joyce’s *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, who vehemently refuses to “worship” any “god” except art, she has decided to confront the whole oppressive patriarchal establishment that treats women as second class citizens. Indeed, her courageous decision of outright taciturnity is not against her late husband per se, but against the overwhelming but anonymous tradition and the hypocritical religious set up which is blind to all the sins that a man may commit provided he fulfils his financial obligation to the church. Surely, Shange may have succeeded in battering Kauna his wife but there is no mistake as to who takes home the moral victory – Kauna of course!

## CONCLUSION

What is clearly discernible in this narrative laced with local words like *muti*, *oshitangu* and *opuwo* to add local

colour to the narrative, is a dissection of the positive and negative interests that lie behind tradition and gender roles. Neshani Andreas shows us a society where the women are under the yoke of patriarchy. Curious enough, many of the traditional women perhaps, oblivious of the sweeping changes in the continent, struggle daily to protect the oppressive status quo. Despite this, however, the novelist shows us through several elements of optimism that the battle against oppressive patriarchy is not unwinnable.

Away from the unattractive marital experience between Shange and Kauna the novelist shows us her concept of marriage and how it should be through the almost ideal marriage of Ali and Michael. Through the latter couple, Andreas tells us that a good and enjoyable marriage worth striving for is possible and achievable. The greatest symbol of marital optimism in the work is ironically, Kauna the much abused woman. Her analogy of the Mahangu Millet is as forceful and illustrative of her transformation as it can be. Kauna compares herself to the Mahangu Millet, the plant that the women of Oshaantu cultivate. This plant is repeatedly destroyed by cattle – considered as men’s property and under their care. Despite this merciless destruction, the Mahangu finds the strength to repair itself and grow better often bigger and more vibrant than the Millet that has not been threatened by any danger. Like the classical phoenix which rises reinvigorated from its ashes, Kauna’s transformation from the much abused woman to a strong, independent and liberated female freed from the shackles of oppressive patriarchy is possible. Her farewell to Mee Ali emphasizes this fact. Once again, like most feminist novels, *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* ends with the central female character taking control of her life at last.

Although Kauna’s resistant silence does not change discriminatory social practices, although the social hierarchy has not shifted, she is able to establish an autonomous voice for herself within that structure. Shange’s death has freed her from her years of unhappiness and physical battering. True, she is walking away with only her children and without any means of sustenance. But she is determined to build a new and better life for herself and her children. The traditional patriarchy with all its discriminatory customs is still intact. Yes. But Andreas illustrates that it is through the possible transformation of the individuals like Kauna that the eventual transformation of the entire community is possible. Indeed, going by the women solidarity at Kauna’s farm and the network of friendship formed among them one is more than convinced that the purple violet will again thrive in all its beauty, unhindered and unencumbered, in the rural paradise of Oshaantu

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