

ETHICALITY CONTROVERSY OF CHILD BRIDE IN MARYAM BOBI'S *BONGEL*

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Abstract

This paper examines the story of Bongel, a 12- year old girl, whose education was sacrificed on the altar of child marriage by her father, Malla Buba, to save the family from poverty. The discussion considers the virtuousness of the decision of Mallam Buba under the ethical lenses of the African traditional enclave of Mallam Buba, Hedonism, Situationism, Collectivism, Utilitarianism, Absolutism and Biomedical ethics, highlighting the points of convergence and divergence amongst these principles of ethics on the appropriateness of Mallam Buba's action. While some of the applied ethical theories justify Mallam Buba's action, others condemn it. The paper concludes that a sensitive issue like Bongel's case should be approached from the view of the absolutists and that whatever cultural practice is applied should be universally ethical.

Key words: Child bride, Fulani marriage culture, Bioethics, Ethical culture, Maryam Bobi

Introduction

The issue of child bride has attracted global attention from scholars and human rights organizations alike. Its menace has been exposed so the practice can be curbed. Although several studies have examined it from both socio-cultural and medical perspectives, adequate attention has not been given to how economic hardship in a home can influence and encourage the practice. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the question: to what extent can the practice of child bride be justified within the context of the economic hardship of Mallam Buba's household as portrayed in Maryam Bobi's *Bongel*?

Biomedical ethics out rightly decries and discourages child marriage, arguing that the child bride is not yet biologically and mentally ready for the enormous

tasks that come with marital responsibilities. However, the tenets of some other theories of ethics do not seem to make this fact a priority in their postulations if applied to what is right or wrong in matters that pertain to the appropriate age a young lady should be certified as marriageable. In the culture of most developing nations, a young girl is seen to be ripe for marriage after menarche. This explains why there are married girls between the ages of 10 and 15 in these societies.

The Convention of the Right of a Child puts the age of adulthood at age 18 which has also been signed by 194 countries (UNICEF, 2011). This means any marriage contracted before the age of 18 comes under the category described as child marriage. This issue, amongst others, has raised a universal alarm through the emergence of feminist movements that campaign for the rights of women and the full emancipation of the 'woman being' in a world of patriarchal dominance. It is true that the developed world may have officially recorded significant breakthroughs in this area but progress is yet emerging in the developing world such as Africa- where household poverty is still a prevailing plague.

Cultural ethics is generally determined by the world views of ethnic groups (Ayantayo, 2017). Even though many countries have set the legal age for marriage at 18, no serious commitment has been seen in the enforcement of this law in most of these countries concerned (Ahmed, 2015; UNFPA, UNICEF, WHO, UN Women, the United Nations Foundation, et al, 2013). A joint press release by some international organizations interested in the welfare of girls and women reports that in 2012, 70 million women all over the world within the age bracket of 20 and 24 married before they clocked 18. The existence of diverse ethnic groups warrants multicultural perspectives to issues such as the ethicality of child-bride. The differences in cultural values further pose the challenge of culture conflicts. According to the report, about 50000 girls die during pregnancy, and more of them are in developing countries. The United Nations reported that, 16 million adolescent girls give birth every year.

Studies have revealed further that the major cause of death of girls between the ages of 15 and 19 in these countries is complications during pregnancy and child birth (Ozcebe & Bicer, 2013; UNFPA, UNICEF, WHO, UN Women, the United Nations Foundation, et al, 2013; UNICEF, 2011). This happens because of the biological immaturity of these under-age wives, as their pelvis and birth canals are yet to be formed fully. Studies have further revealed that child-brides have greater risk of becoming victims of violence and wife-battery as they are left under the manipulations of their cruel and exploitative husbands (ICRW, 2006; Nour, 2006).

Maryam Bobi and Bongel

The author of the eponymous novelette is one of the few writing voices from Northern Nigeria which has long been regarded as a literary desert due to the paucity of creative writers from the region on the Nigerian literary platform. Literary proliferations have been at a very low rate from this region with only a few male writers on its literary scenes. It is however significant to note that today, the story is changing with the discovery of writers like Maryam Bobi, the author of *Bongel*. Maryam Bobi is a graduate of Mathematics and Computer Science from the Federal University of Technology, Minna, Niger State, Nigeria. She has loved reading and writing stories since her primary school days. Her love for stories ignited the passion of becoming a writer in her. Her eventual publication of *Bongel* initiated her into the revered canon of the Nigerian literary writers. Even though *Bongel* is her first published work, it has given her a respected place amidst the patriots of Nigerian writers. *Bongel* is the co-winner of ANA (Association of Nigerian Authors) prize for prose fiction in 2015. Maryam is happily married with children.

Bongel dramatizes complex issues around the personhood of the girl child. Among other matters, this narrative confronts its readers with the dilemma of the appropriateness of child bride amidst contradicting ethical doctrines, ranging from that of the Hausa-Fulani cultural enclave of the eponym, biomedical, hedonism, situationism, utilitarianism, collectivism and absolutism.

Literature is a veritable tool in medical education, especially in the empathetic virtue and the decision making skill. It is capable of helping medical practitioners in training to imbibe through the experimental platforms it provides for student physicians in the understanding of complex emotional and ethical issues. Literary works can present hypothetical complex clinical and health matters to examine and enhance clinical and social skills of budding physicians (Mayaki, 2017). The subject of Maryam Bobi's *Bongel* is a case in point.

Bongel relates the story of a 12- year old Nigerian Hausa-Fulani girl whose educational dream was sacrificed on the altar of child marriage to save the family from poverty. Bongel, the bright eponym has just concluded her primary education but she is being awaited by the rich Alhaji Tanko (who already had three wives) to whom she has been betrothed. Bongel's mother, Jumai, is not in support of the marriage but she could not prevent it because it was the Hausa-Fulani tradition to marry out daughters at that age. Malam Buba, Bongel's dad, is excited by the prospects the marriage will offer his family and thus persuades his daughter:

My child, selfish is not our creed. We are a communal people. You don't let your personal ambition jeopardize

the family or communal interest. You want to go to school, the family needs cattle to survive. You of all persons should still remember the recent challenge we had. It cost the size of our herd to deplete at an alarming degree. Rather than being this way you ought to be proud. You ought to be grateful to Allah that through you, the family has been able to bounce back to its feet (Bobi, 2015:56).

Although this story is fictional, it represents the situation around numerous child-bride marriages that has been conducted in Africa. It buttresses the fact that the practice is not only necessitated by tradition but it is further enforced by the prevailing poverty in the land. Obviously, Mallam Buba considered the economic gains of marrying his daughter off at that age and reckoned that it will work for the greater good as his daughter would also enjoy the privileges of being married into a rich home while he is absorbed of the economic cost of fending for her.

The Medical Humanities, a multidisciplinary field of Medicine that encapsulates the Humanities, Social Sciences and the Arts with their application to Medical Education and practice, is still a burgeoning field of academic inquiry in the Nigerian and in fact, African literary discourse. Maryam Bobi's portrayal of how harsh socioeconomic realities encourage the practice of child bride with its consequent mental health implications both on the parent and the girl-child victim is a contribution to the pioneering literary texts that will constitute the backdrop for the future of scholarship in the Medical Humanities within the ambits of the Nigerian and African literature in general and especially in the engagement of bioethics. This is very significant to the growth and development of this genre of literary inquiry in Nigeria and the African continent.

Conflict of Ethical Doctrines on Bongel's Marriage

The existence of diverse cultures and idiosyncrasies has occasioned the postulations of different ethical doctrines that may agree or disagree on issues depending on the tenets of individual doctrines and the special circumstance of the case to which they are applied (Omoregbe, 1933). As a result, something may be right in a place or situation but adjudged wrong and unacceptable in another place and condition (Dyck, 1977; Lillie, 1961). This appears to be the case of the appropriateness of Bongel's marriage viewed under the binoculars of different ethical teachings applied to the situation of Mallam Buba's household and cultural enclave.

Bongel was married out at age 12. With the way the story unfolded, it is clear that the writer reports the everyday negative stories about child bride. Medically, a woman is certified as marriageable when her pelvis and birth canal are fully formed (ICRW, 2006; Nour, 2006). The female pelvis expands with the onset of puberty. The question is, at what age does this happen fully in women? If an exact age has been discovered, is it universal? Can it be generalized? A major reason why biomedical ethics discourages child-bride is the pains and likely complication at child birth. With caesarean section and the technology of painless birth, is this point still valid? If Bongel had access to all the possible modern day medical care for pregnant women, will her story still have a tragic ending? Medical Science may need to redefine the biological maturity indices of marriageable age or period for females. It is important to note the deliberate use of 'age or period' as one is not meant to be a synonym for the other. This is because there are cases of ladies that are advanced in age but lack the physiological and anatomical requirements that support pregnancy and childbirth while there are others termed as under age who nature have graciously endowed with these needed childbearing features.

In most African marriage traditions, a girl becomes a woman after menarche. Her first menstrual flow is seen as a natural initiation into the world of women. At this point, she releases ovaries waiting to be fertilized by the sperm which must necessarily come from a man. She is therefore seen as mature enough for marriage and of course gets yoked to a husband. Note that the maturity indication is not age but menarche. However, experience has shown that menarche does not necessarily translate into maturity of the mind. Being pregnant further exposes the adolescent girls to greater psychological challenges. It is important to bear in mind that child-bearing is a major reason for marriage in Africa. That is why it can be stigmatizing to be married and not have a child, especially a male child. This background gives insights into the mindsets of Mallam Buba, Bongel's poor father and Alhaji Tanko, Bongel's husband who was desperately in need of a male child.

Mallam Buba is a Fulani man. The culturally mature period for traditional Fulani girls to get married is menarche. The ethics of his culture justify his action. Culture is the generally accepted way of life in a community. It is an established fact that what is acceptable in one culture may not be acceptable in another. According to the Fulani culture, it was not wrong for her to be married at that period of her life, although this culture may be termed primitive. Mallam Buba is also a needy man in search of better economic foothold. Bongel's marriage will not only reduce his burden as the bread winner; it will also amount to profits for him through the collection of dowry. He has also accessed the situation and seen double gains in the marriage contract. He explained to Bongel

that the marriage will enrich his household and usher her into an enhanced economic class as her husband, Alhaji Tanko, is a rich man. Mallam Buba is a Fulani man who wants the best for his family according to the dictates of his culture. He might be an ignorant man but he is definitely not a wicked man.

Hedonists believe that pleasure is the primary or most important intrinsic good that one should pursue. They believe that every person has the right to do everything in their power to achieve the greatest pleasure possible to them (Finis, 1983; Graham, 2004). The Fulani culture places Mallam Buba as the head of his home. He used his powers to make sure his daughter got married to Alhaji Tanko despite his wife's disagreement and Bongel's hesitation. He made the derivable pleasure from the marriage contract his priority and motivational force for this action. He did not consider the feelings of his daughter or the intellectual appeal of Bongel's Head Mistress. Is Mallam Buba a hedonist? It is however important to emphasize the fact that the man was trying to do his best to better the lot of his family- including that of Bongel's future.

Situationism ethical theory purports that the rightness of an action depends on the situation one finds oneself. As such, people have to take the actions that will give them happiness, given the peculiarity of their circumstances (John, 1998; Rachana, 2004). Going by this theory, Mallam Buba's economic dilemma and cultural beliefs justifies his action. However, this theory like Hedonism does not seem to consider the welfare of the victims of its action. Mallam Buba's choice of action truncated Bongel's future.

Proponents of the theory of Collectivism posit that the right action is the one that places higher emphasis on the effects of a moral action on the collectivity of groups of people and that the identity, goals and good of the groups is more important than the interest of individuals that constitute the group (Earley, 1993). If Bongel's marriage meant good to the entire family of Mallam Buba by bringing him into fortune, then according to this theory, he has done the right thing. Again, the question that may confront observers is the provision of this theory for the welfare of the victim of its action.

Interestingly, the cultural context of Bongel's Fulani tradition supports the line of reasoning of the ethics of Collectivism as typical of the African tradition. The Fulani tradition embraces Collectivism as against Individualism. This is to illustrate the philosophy of Ubuntu where an individual is (exists), through another. This contradicts the Western ideology popularized by Rene Descarte: 'Corgito Ergo Sum', a Latin expression which means "I am because I am". While Ubuntu emphasizes 'we', Corgito Ergo Sum emphasizes 'I'. Mallam Buba's Ubuntu psychology is reflected in his encouragement to his daughter to marry Alhaji Tanko:

‘My child, selfish is not our creed. We are a communal people. You don’t let your personal ambition jeopardize the family or communal interest (Bobi, 2015:36).

This excerpt sheds light on the communal life of the Fulani people to which Bongel belongs. In the context of her culture, she will be doing her family a disservice to reject an offer that is capable of bringing them out of poverty. It is understandable that she has some losses to incur, but the question is how great are her losses compared to the survival of her entire family? Is Bongel not selfish to have chosen her education over the survival of her entire family? Considered in the context of the Fulani’s culture, Bongel must be very wicked to have turned down such a juicy offer- an offer in the good of the family.

According to the ethical principles of Utilitarianism, an ethical theory that promotes the greatest good by prioritizing the greatest happiness as the criterion of the virtuousness of an action (Graham, 2004), Mallam Buba’s decision to marry off Bongel might not be wrong. His decision maximized pleasure and minimized pain for his household. Bongel’s marriage to Alhaji Tanko obviously saved the entire family. It provided the platform for merriment for well-wishers and guests at the wedding. If Bongel did not marry Alhaji Tanko, the family would remain in the financial hardship they were at that particular time; but her marriage brought financial emancipation to her father and gives her a better economic status as she becomes the wife of an Alhaji.

However, the ethical theory of Absolutism states that the right action in any given circumstance is the same everywhere irrespective of language, ethnic and cultural differences across the globe. It purports further that the rightness of an action is always absolute and not subjective to any culture or the beliefs of any group of people (McDonald, 2010). For adherents of Absolutism, there is no relativism in what constitutes right or wrong action. Going by this theory, Mallam Buba’s action is condemnable. He sacrificed the future of his daughter to solve a temporary economic challenge. He took away the joy of childhood from his daughter. Bongel who was supposed to still be playing around with friends in her village square was forced into the world of adults by forced marriage. Bongel never had a say in that marriage. She would have loved to continue her education rather than getting married. Moreover, she showed no iota of affection for Alhaji Tanko. She pleaded with her father to no avail. She was voiceless in a decision that concerned her life and destiny as she was married off like a disposed property.

Conclusion

From the above, it is clear that the ethical theories of the Fulani culture, Hedonism, Situationism and Utilitarianism support Mallam Buba's action while Biomedical ethics and that of Absolutism condemns it. There is, therefore, a conflict of principles between the culture of Bongel's social enclave and the practice of medical ethics. It is important to note that the world is collapsing into a single culture on certain matters that have universal significance such as child-bride. Consequently, there is need to enact principles to protect the rights of minors and the under-privileged: the category that Bongel tactically falls into. This is why the principle of ethical culture has been advocated. Ethical culture encourages respect for humanity. The fact that a practice is cultural does not necessarily justify it.

Mallam Buba's Fulani culture robs Bongel of her rights. This culture cannot be adjudged to be ethical going by Absolutism. It does not respect Bongel's humanity. It violates Bongel. It takes away her personhood by not giving her a chance in determining her fate. It reduced her to a 'thing' that is sold out for wealth and the comfort of the family. Bongel's childhood is taken away from her as she is forced into becoming an adult, a wife and eventually an unlucky mother. A child that should be playing within the courtyards of a high school is callously saddled with the responsibility of a grown up woman. This culture is salvage and unethical.

It is interesting to observe that under whatever ethical lens Alhaji Tanko's dilemma is considered, suffering cannot be entirely eliminated. It is either he suffers with his family or Bongel suffers. The idea of making an informed choice is only an attempt to minimize suffering. This brings us to yet another question: Does man have to live with suffering in the world? Is there really a cure to human sufferings? How can suffering be completely eliminated from the world?

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