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Christianity, Monogamy and Second Marriage Politics: Social Inclusion Rethinking in Sitwala Imenda's *Unmarried Wife*

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Abstract
This article examines how Christianity, monogamy and second marriages function as both inclusive and exclusionary social institutions in Sitwala Imenda's novella, *Unmarried Wife*. I employ close reading and thematic analysis to explore the experiences of protagonists Tsepo Molefe and Bongiwe, understanding how marriage and faith shape their agency and societal acceptance. It draws ideas from African Feminisms, particularly Stiwanism and Nego-feminism. The study aims to unveil the gendered power dynamics that shape characters' lives. Specifically, Stiwanism is applied to highlight how families serve as a site for inclusive social transformation. In contrast, Nego-feminism highlights the strategies that (wo)men employ to navigate and subvert patriarchal limitations, showcasing their agency even in restrictive environments. These frameworks illustrate how Tsepo Molefe and Bongiwe's quest for love, recognition, and security within a second marriage is challenged and validated by institutional forces. In this regard, the article argues that although Christianity and monogamy often reinforce exclusionary norms, particularly for unmarried mothers and their children, second marriages present a contested alternative for social inclusion. Ultimately, the study argues that negotiation and collaboration between genders are crucial for fostering inclusive social change. By challenging prevailing narratives surrounding marriage, faith, and legal structures, *Unmarried Wife* encourages readers to reexamine the complexities of relationships and family life within rapidly evolving African societies.

Keywords:
Contested space, Exclusion, Inclusion, Marginalisation, Unmarried mothers, Vulnerabilities.
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Introduction

This article examines how Christianity, monogamy, and second marriage function as both inclusive and exclusionary social institutions in Sitwala Imenda's novella, *Unmarried Wife*. With the emerging trend of oppression and its contestation within patriarchal

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systems, exclusion and inclusion notions are yet unresolved and need ceaseless scrutiny. Notably, this study is compelling because it uniquely intersects literature, gender complexities, and African feminist discourses to examine the complexities of marriage and religion, particularly in terms of the inclusion and exclusion of underprivileged individuals in society. The debate surrounding monogamy and polygamy remains a contentious issue in many societies, often influenced by religious doctrines and legal frameworks (Ahinkorah 2021; Chireshe & Chireshe 2011; Mbatha 2011; Zondi 2007; Rakoczy 2004; Macey 1999; Ogundipe-Leslie 1994). Drawing on the previous line of reasoning, I conduct a close reading and thematic examination of *Unmarried Wife*, a valuable text for critical analysis that offers a unique literary lens through which to explore issues of 'inclusion' and 'exclusion'. By exclusion, I refer to the transformation of one group into a position of privilege while demoting the other group to a marginalised status, stripped of crucial social rights like acceptance, recognition, and humanity. The narrative illustrates this disparity by depicting unmarried mothers and children born outside the confines of Christian monogamy as fake or illegitimate citizens. In contrast, married mothers and their children are regarded as bona fide citizens.

Moreover, the exploration of gender dynamics within marriage and religion invites reflection on the necessity of legal reforms and social restructuring. By addressing themes of oppression, identity, and societal expectations, this research contributes to unending discussions about gender equality and sustainable social changes. This research primarily offers a new perspective to the existing knowledge gap, which is the under-representation of unmarried wives and children born outside traditional wedlock in religious and legal frameworks. In doing so, this study builds upon and expands the scope of Rakoczy's (2004) work, which focuses on "religious language as a tool of oppression" by analysing the systemic exclusion of non-traditional family structures. Additionally, the study examines how feminist activism in Africa seeks to address these disparities by advocating for legislative reforms and religious inclusivity. Though previous research has extensively analysed gender oppression within religious and marital contexts, significant gaps remain in addressing the plight of unmarried women and children.

Against this backdrop, this article aims to bridge this gap by examining how these marginalised groups circumnavigate systemic discrimination and proposing alternative frameworks for social equity. By integrating insights

from religious criticism, feminist anthropology, and literary analysis, this research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of gender oppression and the potential pathways for reform, given the fact that people enter marriages with different reasons ranging from legal, social, libidinal, emotional, financial, spiritual, and religious purposes (Monger 2020). The argument put forth is that legal frameworks, much as Christianity and monogamy, often fail to provide adequate protections for unmarried mothers and their children, reinforcing social stigmas and economic vulnerabilities.

In examining how legislation alongside Christianity and monogamy contributes to ongoing social deterioration, the researcher examines Imenda's (1996) *Unmarried Wife* to reveal how gender- and sex-based oppression is rooted in legal and religious establishments. Otherwise, the research studies whether the narrative in question proposes possible methods for dismantling or negotiating these oppressive social structures. The analysis of the novella enables the study to contribute to the broader conversation about how gender roles, marital expectations, and religious influences shape social morals. As such, gender studies continue to generate complex debates because conversations that confront established norms face resistance from both men and women (Adichie 2014; Ogundipe-Leslie 1994).

More succinctly, Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) demonstrates that some men and women (especially married women) engage in active resistance against gender equality, which makes achieving emancipation more complex. She says, "African men seem to be often riled by the idea of equality between men and women …[and] they are uncomfortable" (p. 209). Again, she elaborates on her troubling case regarding the harshness of married women as a bottleneck towards inclusivity and social transformation, contending that, "these married women are afraid to shake the status quo, they are afraid and want security through men; they are harsher on other women than men are" (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994, p. 211). This line of reasoning echoes the 2014 TED Talk Show titled "We Should All be Feminist" by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, highlighting how "gender is not an easy conversation to have. It makes people uncomfortable, sometimes even irritable. Both men and women are resistant to talking about gender or are quick to dismiss the problems of gender. Because thinking of changing the status quo is always uncomfortable" (n.p.). Therefore, the opposition to change demonstrates how hard it is to combat structural oppression and

accomplish significant social advancement that unmarried mothers and their children experience. Hence, these gender-based oppressions and opposition to change dynamics adversely lead to stigmatisation and increased vulnerability.

My analysis is informed by concern over the societal treatment of unmarried mothers and children born outside the confines of Christian monogamy. Imperatively, I recognise the urgent need for an inclusive approach to social change, acknowledging that these marginalised individuals are legitimate citizens and sometimes are orphaned by both human and non-human forces. The narrative portrays the societal responses, which often reflect bias, addressing only one aspect of their challenges while neglecting broader contextual factors that contribute to their situations. For instance, unmarried mothers frequently face derogatory labels, branded as chaotic or immoral for their circumstances, yet the role of the men involved in these relationships is rarely scrutinised. In this case, the story seems to invite readers to rethink and critique society's tendency to overlook the complexities surrounding both (un)married men, who may lack commitment. This double standard highlights the patriarchal structures embedded within societal norms, which often permit men to evade responsibility without consequence. Within this framework, women lacking committed partners may find themselves drawn to married men or remain single and are usually poorly treated as misfits. The prevailing narrative may suggest that men are the root cause of these societal issues, yet the broader society remains silent, directing its condemnation solely to women. This is captured in the novella, especially in the scene where Bongiwe demonstrates the necessity, while TM sleeps away, of letting the matter pass. Along similar trajectories, the mainstay of feminist and gender discourses in Adichie's (2014) "We Should All Be Feminists" inspired me to underscore this study, aiming to critically analyse how legal, religious, and marital structures perpetuate oppression and impose vulnerability not only on women but also on men.

By synopsis, *Unmarried Wife* tells the story of a man, Tsepo Molefe (also abbreviated as TM), who has two wives: Bongiwe Shabalala and Naledi. Bongiwe is the unmarried wife, whereas Naledi is the married wife. Among other things, Naledi prefers monogamy to polygamy because she believes the latter is "unchristian" (p. 116). Bongiwe is Tsepo Molefe's second wife, and she is unknown to Naledi. As the novella reveals, Bongiwe is unconcerned about Molefe's past as long as he respects and accepts his role

as a father to the children around him. However, Bongiwe finds it difficult to communicate her innermost feelings to her religiously conformist parents, Reverend Shabalala and Nokuthula, as well as Father Michael, a church priest, due to the long-held belief that one cannot be content with another woman's husband (the socio-religious construction of monogamy). Her eventual attraction to a married man disrupts the family's trust in her. As a result, Bongiwe's passion for a married man is seen as an affront to the institution of monogamy, which her parents consider an essential part of their religious belief system. This way, the novella portrays how Bongiwe strives for love, respect, and peace of mind, things she cannot find in a young, single man who has not yet established himself or settled down.

TM, on the other hand, grows fond of Bongiwe despite the church and society at large, which has not yet accepted second marriage as a common practice. As the narrative unveils, Bongiwe and TM collaborate to find a different way to legalise their affairs, which brought about a contentious path of a second marriage. Despite this, TM's feelings and social expectations remain conflicted, making it difficult to decide whether or not to pursue a second marriage. Regarding the marriage controversy, the novelist divides the story into two opposing groups of women: the United Christian Front (UCF) and the Unmarried Wives Caucus (UWC). The UCF views monogamous marriage as sacred, while the UWC supports second marriages and the enactment of the Surname Act to install their agenda of recognition and legalising their rights as bona fide citizens (wives and children). As the story unfolds, state laws recognise the second marriage as a voluntary choice for the couple who choose to live that way. In the end, Bongiwe and TM marry each other under the magistrate court after the second marriage has been legalised.

Literature review

Existing studies suggest that the oppression of women and children is a deeply entrenched issue, persisting across various social structures, including religious, legal, and marital institutions (Ndaluka 2024; Phiri 2019). The rise in gender-based and sexual violence in Africa has resulted in numerous cases of homicide, and the continent is experiencing a decline in trust towards monogamous marriage, which is thought to eliminate witchcraft-related practices, mistrust, gender-based violence and killings (Ndaluka 2024; Chireshe & Chireshe 2011; Falen 2008; Zondi 2007; Rakoczy 2004; Ogundipe-Leslie 1994).

Globally, international institutions like the United Nations[1] (UN) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) ceaselessly combat gender-based violence linked to women and children. However, the exclusive oppression manifests as endless conditions facing underprivileged individuals. This evolving oppression, shaped by socio-political and cultural transformations, underlines the need for continued scholarly investigation and intervention. For instance, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDG) notes that "gender roles and relationships are not fixed; they evolve based on circumstance" (n.p.). Profoundly, Rakoczy (2004) critiques Christianity's patriarchal framework, highlighting how male-centric religious language and hierarchical structures contribute to women's subordination. The notion of God as "Father, King, and Lord" is used to justify women's marginalisation, reinforcing systemic discrimination (Rackozy 2004, p. 30). Similarly, Amadiume (1987) argues that Christianity introduced a male deity, diminishing the prominence of female spiritual figures and deepening gender disparities. Hastings (1994) further traces the historical roots of Christian marriage norms in Africa, illustrating their impact on gender roles and social inclusion. These previous arguments align with studies of Monger (2020), Singh (2013) and Anderson (2007), which demonstrate how religiously endorsed marriage practices perpetuate gender inequalities. Conversely, Güngörmüş et al. (2015) argue that religion can serve as a source of solace and empowerment for victimised women, providing emotional and psychological stability in times of distress. This dual role of religion, as both an oppressive and a redemptive force, echoes Wuthnow's (1996) and Macey's (1999) observations on patriarchal violence within religious settings.

Undeniably, this intersection of religion and marriage further aggravates gender imbalances. Studies by Dhillon et al. (2023), Chireshe and Chireshe (2011), and Falen (2008) discuss how traditional marriage customs,

[1] The UN's commitment to gender equivalence globally has been fostered since its establishment in 1945 through different frameworks. These frameworks include "the Charter of the United Nations, the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Resolutions of the General Assembly, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women, and most recently the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" (UNSDG). https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/universal-values/gender-equality-and-womens-empowerment

including monogamy and polygyny, reinforce power asymmetries. For instance, these studies found that in monogamous settings, women often struggle to negotiate safe sex, increasing their vulnerability to HIV and AIDS (Ahinkorah 2021; Chireshe & Chireshe, 2011; Dhillon et al., 2023). Moreover, Singh (2013) and Anderson (2007) highlight how practices such as dowry and bride price in marriage commodify women, limiting their agency and increasing their risk of domestic violence. On the other hand, Fenske (2015) challenges monolithic critiques of polygyny by arguing that it serves as both an alternative to and a critique of colonial and Christian monogamous ideals.

In this regard, I find previous scholars' resonance in literary criticisms of Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* and Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*, to mention a few, as they demonstrate religiously sanctioned oppression by illustrating how societal norms marginalise women through enforced marriages, rape, religious exclusion and blocking educational paths (Rather 2024; Addison 2021). Mutunda (2007) expands this discourse by examining how women also contribute to the perpetuation of oppressive norms, challenging the binary of men as perpetrators and women as victims by saying "women also victimise one another and are partially responsible for their marital unhappiness" (p. 91). In this case, Mutunda's view aligns with Freedman's and Jacobson's (2012) critique of the oversimplified portrayal of gender roles in policy responses to gender-based violence. According to them, "policies are limited both nationally and internationally" in responding against sexual and gender-based violence by "overgeneralising" that women are the only "victims" and men are the only "perpetrators" (Freedman & Jacobson 2014, p. 12). Critically, the knowledge gap in existing literature is the underrepresentation of unmarried wives and children born outside the Christian monogamy parameters and other legalised marriage forms. While previous research has extensively analysed gender oppression within religious, legal, and marital contexts, significant gaps remain in addressing the plight of unmarried women and children. This study aims to bridge this gap by examining how these marginalised groups navigate systemic discrimination and proposing alternative frameworks for social equity.

Theoretical Framework

In discussing how the institution of monogamy, second marriages, and Christianity reinforce (un)inclusive social transformation, I draw on

Ogundipe-Leslie's (1994) "stiwanism (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa)" and Obioma Nnaemeka's (2003) "Nego-feminism". Nnaemeka (2003) argued that "African feminism(s) is not reactive; it is proactive" (p. 377). An expression coined by notable feminist critic Nkealah (2016), who posits that these African-based theories "empower women while enlightening men" (p. 63). Succinctly, stiwanism positions the family as a site of social transformation and emphasises the necessity of harmonious co-existence between men and women. In the current study, stiwanism is applied to examine how TM and Bongiwe's attempts to find love, respect, recognition, and security in a second marriage are both challenged and validated by different societal forces. Stiwanism is also used to critique the gendered double standards that allow married women to enforce rigid norms that marginalise unmarried women. On the other hand, I employ the nego-feminism conception of "negotiation" to examine how the novella and its characters, as well as other embedded literariness, advocate for negotiation, balance, and strategic compromise in navigating patriarchal systems. In her words, Nnaemeka (2003) believes, "it (nego-feminism) knows when, where, and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts" (p. 378). In the context of analysis, the study employs Nnaemeka's framework to explore Bongiwe's choices, arguing that her relationship with TM constitutes a form of negotiation within a restrictive social structure characterised by monogamy and Christianity. Furthermore, we are enlightened through nego-feminism that TM, Bongiwe, and Naledi's marital conflicts illustrate how characters either negotiate around or challenge monogamous ideals.

Methodology

Methodologically, I employ close reading and thematic analysis of Sitwala Imenda's *Unmarried Wife* to explore how monogamy, second marriages, and Christianity function as both inclusive and exclusionary social institutions. The study focuses on key characters—Tsepo Molefe (TM), his married wife Naledi, and his unmarried wife, Bongiwe—to examine their agency in reinforcing or challenging societal norms around marriage and faith. To extend further the analysis, Wiseman (TM's friend) is also discussed about the exposition of men's libidos, and Mrs. Nosisa Bam (a Christian) is introduced in the discussion to bring forth the contested perception of polygamy from a female voice in the narrative. In the religious context, Prof. Kapuci (introduced as an eminent Bible scholar from Rome

and a professor of theology) and Father Michael are juxtaposed to accentuate the contested space of Christianity regarding the social inclusion and exclusion of unmarried mothers and their children.

This research is structured around three analytical approaches: close reading, thematic analysis, and contextual analysis. In the close reading, I dissect character interactions and narrative developments to reveal how marriage and faith-based morality shape personal choices and societal acceptance. Whereas, in thematic analysis, the research centred on identifying recurring themes related to marital status, gender expectations, and social transformation. Last, contextual analysis involves situating the novella within the historical and cultural discourse of Christianity and marriage in African societies (Falen 2008).

Being a literary study, the forthcoming sections thus conduct a close reading of Imenda's *Unmarried Wife*. The discussion examines the literariness employed in the narrative, including oxymoron, ambiguity, symbolism, metaphor, and irony, to suggest whether existing socio-political and cultural structures can adopt flexibility and inclusive transformation. I further dichotomise the feminist perspective on marriages, religion, and legal transformation to institutional attitudes towards second marriages by examining how characters such as Father Michael (a Catholic priest), Bongiwe's conservative Christian parents, and broader social groups, including UWC and UCF, respond to the evolving discourse on marriage and morality. I then draw on espoused feminist perspectives to analyse how (wo)men negotiate oppressive structures while striving for inclusion and transformation, examining the intersection of gender, marriage, law, and religion in the novella.

Monogamous Marriage as a Symbolic Oppressive Social Structure

Chireshe and Chireshe (2011) defined monogamy as an exclusive union between one man and one woman, upheld by Christian doctrine as a sacred institution. Thus, I apply monogamy and Christianity interchangeably, for they inform one another, as Aguboshim (2021) claims that monogamy aligns with divine principles and offers social and moral benefits. Here, the biblical ideal and God's original plan for marriages are valued. Aguboshim (2021) asserts that monogamy provides social and ethical benefits, including marital satisfaction, a low level of stress, child welfare, economic stability, and a positive social perception of it as a moral and modernised model of marriage. However, Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) considered marriage

as an oppressive structure that reinforces women's subordination, restricting their economic and social agency. Specifically, she identified that in monogamy, not only men but also "married women" collectively retard women's efforts to cross the bridge of inequality towards sustainable development, which is hailed in this study as inclusive social transformation (p. 209). Such a line of reasoning also accounts for why there is intensified verbal violence emanating from women's oratorical contests regarding the plurisignification of second marriages.

The novella depicts the patriarchy as an agent for women's oppression within the monogamy structure. Through this recurring motif of women subjugating themselves, men are looking at alternative ways to flourish at the expense of women by imposing threats. This is captured when TM's friend, Wiseman, discusses women's initiatives against oppression and the recognition of the Surname Act. He has this to say:

> Don't worry. All this momentum carries its fuel. The whole thing will burn itself out in due course," […] If these women become too big-headed, or too big for their boots, we shall sort them out and cut them to size one way or another. Don't forget that we are also capable of imposing tricky sanctions against them should this become necessary" (Imenda 1996, p.35).[2]

The first statement might imply that the society consistently enforces stigmatisation via a patriarchy, a social structure that often undermines women's initiatives by promoting men's more room for navigation. The following sentence in the passage illustrates further the notions of toxic masculinity behaviours (of imposing sanctions unnecessarily) in handling constraints posed by speaking women, which TM objects to.

In their work, *Rethinking Polygyny: Co-Wives, Codes, and Cultural Systems*, presents different views that challenge conventional perspectives on polygyny by showing its diversity (wealth-increasing and Sororal polygyny), economic underpinnings, and gendered complexities (White et al. (1988). He suggests that polygyny should be viewed in contrast to the simplistic evolutionary model equating it solely with male reproductive success. Instead, it emphasises the need for historical and ecological analyses, as well as broader consideration of female agency and recognition

[2] All subsequent references to this primary text comes from this edition of the publication.

that polygyny operates within complex cultural networks, rather than being a singular phenomenon (White et al. 1988). The novella in question presents contrasting views on polygamy and patriarchy. Some women, particularly those in the Unmarried Wives Caucus (UWC), advocate for polygyny, arguing that it provides financial security and emotional stability. This assertion aligns with White et al. (1988) and contradicts a contested argument presented elsewhere in this article by Chireshe and Chireshe (2011) and Falen (2008). The novella introduces a married woman, Mrs Nosisa Bam, who voices out her perception and what might be the thought of many who see the two structures of marriage (monogamy and polygamy) as suitable for Africans, setting in the following lines:

> Getting married to a man who was already happily and successfully married carries fewer risks than getting married to someone who had not yet proven himself, or who may not even be interested in marriage but feels compelled by circumstances to marry […] By making theses marriage official, men will be forced to take a relationship seriously and develop a sense of responsibility (p. 103).

Conversely, women in the UCF reject polygyny, aligning with the church's view that it is sinful. For instance, Naledi, TM's wife, also sees polygyny as a "monster" (p. 93), representing the traditional resistance to alternative marriage structures. Through the lens of Nego-feminism, Bongiwe's decision to enter a second marriage is not a rebellion but a compromise. Rather than rejecting marriage altogether, she navigates societal expectations to secure stability via recognition and acceptance. However, Stiwanism critiques this necessity for negotiation, arguing that true social transformation must dismantle oppressive structures rather than forcing women to adapt to them. As Lancaster (2013) cautions against viewing marriage as an unchanging institution, the novella similarly seems to advocate for an adaptable legal and religious framework that prioritises human dignity over doctrine. As such, Imenda's fictional portrayal of legalising second marriages implies the reduction of social instability by offering a practical, albeit contested, alternative to monogamous rigidity.

In the same vein as monogamy, some men in the novel manipulate the situation to further their mission of dominance. This situation aligns with Ogundipe-Leslie's (1994) idea that men "seemed riled by the idea of equality between men and women" (p. 209). While unmarried wives

negotiate for inclusivity in legal frameworks, especially the notion of the Surname Act and legalising second marriages, some men (irresponsible for their deeds) are supporting monogamous marriages (to extend their unwatched extramarital affairs). In the novella, Wiseman complains to his friend, TM, for letting Bongiwe and other unmarried wives advocate for the Surname Act and second marriages thusly:

> I warned you that if you weren't brave enough to put a lid on this beauty of yours, all hell was going to break loose. First, it was that big demonstration. All the women were out in the streets that day; there was no one to prepare lunch for the children. Now, I hear that very man is being quizzed in his house to account for his movements (p. 109).

With this limited perception of women's role and space, the passage highlights the need for men to liberate their minds. Wiseman, for instance, assumes that sexual pleasure and serving children and husband are enough for women, and men should not be questioned for their extramarital affairs. These, according to the novella, increase street children, stigmatisation and lack of identity for those children and unmarried mothers in a prying society like that of Bongiwe and TM. The statements "we stand rejected by both society and our churches" (p. 64) and "Unmarried wives' predicaments (improper recognition, spouse's time and intimacy, society acceptance and religious misfit) are not covered by the Bible" (p. 117) demonstrate the agency for inclusivity and room for flexibility in social cultural norms.

In describing men's libido as a metaphor for toxic masculinity in sustaining monogamous marriage, men tend to have an epistemic view in justifying their diverging ways to extramarital relationships. Others blame their hypersexuality, believing that their first intimate encounters are insatiable to their sexual drive. As such, the novella critiques these unrealistic practices and expectations within monogamy, particularly the assumption that men can sustain long-term relationships with a single partner. TM and Wiseman represent two conflicting yet complementary perspectives on extramarital affairs: while Wiseman unapologetically engages in casual relationships, TM attempts to legitimise his desires through a second marriage. Nnaemeka's Nego-feminism offers a lens through which to interpret TM's pursuit of polygyny, not as rebellion, but as a strategic move within a restrictive system. Nnaemeka (2003) argues that African women

often engage in "negotiated feminism", where they adapt to patriarchal constraints rather than directly opposing them. Bongiwe's relationship with TM embodies this principle, as she seeks social legitimacy through marriage rather than challenging the institution outright. At the same time, Stiwanism critiques gendered double standards surrounding libido. While men's desires are often excused as natural, women who express similar urges are labelled immoral or excessive. TM's question, "how can you be certain that there are no women like you, women who will completely neutralise your libido and still yearn for more?" (p. 44), challenges the notion that only men experience sexual dissatisfaction. The novella thus exposes how monogamy disproportionately restricts women's autonomy while permitting men more sexual latitude.

Christianity as a Metaphor of Exclusion of Non-Christian Family Structures

The novella under question critically examines Christianity's role in sustaining gender inequality in the family and at the societal level. As one reads, *Unmarried Wife* presents ambiguous and paradoxical situations that highlight the need for scrutiny when it comes to the fate of unmarried mothers and children born out of wedlock. In this section, I focus on Bongiwe as the unmarried mother and her children (Lungiwe and Nokutula). They are neglected, especially by her grandfather, who is a religious conformist. It is captured as the narrator expresses that "neither she nor her children would ever be welcome in her father's household again-three generations of the same blood had wiped themselves out of one another's existence" (p. 22). Bongiwe's father, being a religious figure, symbolises the exclusionary stance that Christianity (the Anglican church) imposes on its subjects. Scholars such as Amadiume (1987), Ogundipe-Leslie (1994), and Wuthnow (1996) argue that religion often functions as a double-edged sword, providing moral guidance while simultaneously enforcing oppressive norms. For instance, Amadiume (1987) critiques Christianity for introducing preference of men-leaders and women-subjects by saying "Christianity introduced a male deity, religious belief and practices no longer focused on the female deity […] While women formed the great majority of the congregation body of the church, few men, the clergy, constituted the headship of the church" (p. 229). Against such empirical studies, even in literary works, religion is often contested as either a site of remedy for people's challenges or a tool of oppression (Rather 2024;

Olugbemi-Gabriel & Dawodu 2017). *Unmarried Wife*, on the other hand, seems to reinforce the same trajectory about Christianity by drawing ambiguous assurance to women in marriage while affirming oppression to those impregnated out of the church's wedlock. In the novella, the rigidity of Christian doctrine is embodied by Father Michael, whose resistance to second marriages symbolises the church's reluctance to adapt to social change. By applying Stiwanism, this article critiques this rigidity, arguing that religious institutions (Anglican and Roman Catholic) should evolve to support women's inclusion in social transformation.

The narrative further highlights the exclusionary nature of Christianity through the female (named the lady) passenger's declaration: "Well, I left your church. Now I am looking for a sinner's church—a church that will accept me, my children, and their father" (p. 131). This reply and moment underscore the alienation felt by women who do not conform to Christian marital ideals. Furthermore, TM's recall of his sister Palesa's death because of a failed abortion reinforces the theme of Christianity's inflexibility, which prioritises doctrine over human compassion. However, the same trajectory in literary works can be brought to the table, that every belief system has a way of legitimating innocent death, as of the enslaved girl who is buried alive in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* and the death of Ikemefuna in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The latter two innocent deaths do not justify that a particular religious belief is oppressive, even though the actions signify the double meaning of oppression and upholding doctrine.

Moreover, from a Nego feminist perspective, the novella appears to reflect that while Christianity remains rigid, individuals like the lady passenger, TM, and Bongiwe convey their realities within the confines of religious constraints. However, Stiwanism advocates for a more radical transformation, arguing that religious institutions must actively adapt to contemporary social challenges rather than merely navigating around them. Such a line of reasoning also explains why Prof. Kapuci, a religious figure in the novella, suggests the need to adapt, revise, and contextualise religious scriptures to the African setting. TM, among other things, is captivated by Prof. Kapuci's presentation, which read, "Christianity, the Cultural Element in the Bible, and the Demands of Modern Times" (p. 52). Contextually, Prof. Kapuci is very much interested and moved by the advancement of the town church, which places their catholic songs into the context of modernity, capturing the interest of both generations and teaching context. He contends: "the church must change to accommodate a

change in cultural, scientific and other circumstances of the people it serves […] if this is not done, the church will lose touch with the realities of people's lives and their special and unique circumstances" (pp. 53-55). Prof. Kapuci's transformative stance appears dedicated to the pressing matter of social inclusion for underprivileged individuals who feel rejected by the institutions they once served. Once this advice is taken into consideration, the rate of street children could be minimised, as well as the social stigma of unmarried mothers. The evidence from the text that aligns with contemporary realities in society is that often, unmarried mothers, despite performing all wifely activities, are less valued and recognised. In the text, Bongiwe takes a stance against this derogatory coinage, as she says: "the world believes that because we go out with married men, we are cheap and have loose moral standards. As such, we are regarded as evil women" (p. 31).

Second Marriages as Contested Marital Space Towards Social Inclusion

As discussed earlier, monogamy and Christianity are portrayed as social institutions which promote social stigmatisation of unmarried mothers and children born outside the church parameters. This study, therefore, argues that although Christianity and monogamy often reinforce exclusionary norms, particularly for unmarried mothers and their children, second marriages present a contested alternative for social inclusion. The narrative presents various characters with compelling arguments regarding the discourse surrounding second marriages, which I am convinced is a contested alternative towards inclusion. Mrs Nosisa Bam confirms a pressing concern that "getting married to a man who was already happily and successfully married carries fewer risks than getting married to someone who has not yet proven himself or who may not even be interested in marriage but feels compelled by circumstances to marry…" (p. 103). In this assertion, Mrs. Nosisa Bam underscores her belief that legalising second marriage will no longer coerce premature marital commitment. She further argues that "legalising second marriages may have severe repercussions for the hotel industry, which may lose a large percentage of its business, but I stand convinced that this will be a worthy sacrifice for the betterment of our society" (p. 106). This avowal accentuates Mrs Nosisa Bam's certainty that formalising second marriages could play a crucial role in alleviating the spread of sexually transmitted diseases and infections.

Further emphasis on second marriage as contested marital space for unmarried mothers and their children, a character described by the narrator

as "smartly dressed middle-aged gentleman" critiques the portrayed as current legal framework, claiming it excessively favours women while restricting men, stating that "The present system is too tight for us men, and too friendly and over-protective towards women. African women have never had it so easy. Unfortunately, this is at our expense. We are suffocating" (p. 107). His argument presents a contrasting perspective, raising critical questions about the novella's objectives. My question is whether legalising second marriage promotes social inclusion or prolongs the oppression of married women while simultaneously granting men more freedom? Or one may think that the legal system not only marginalises men but also creates a contradiction that undermines social equality.

This study again expands Monger's (2020) assertion that marriage motivation among individuals spans a variety of influences, including but not limited to "… legal, social, libidinal, emotional, financial, spiritual, and religious purposes" (p.33). I expand his framework of motivations to incorporate the biological implications of ageing, particularly for women who often feel societal pressure to marry earlier due to biological limitations. In the novella, Bongiwe expresses her distress about ageing and her encounters with uncommitted men. She says this to her father:

> Babe, I've been hoping and waiting. I am now thirty-five years old, going on to thirty-six. I need to settle down. I cannot keep changing men and hoping every time that I've now met the right one, only to find that all he wants is just a bit of adventure (p.21).

Her preference for TM, who is committed despite being a married man, highlights the multifaceted nature and the urgent need for a second marriage in her marital choices. This decision protects her against the milieu of betrayal, uncommitted and societal expectation, which constrain her in the social web of oppression.

Again, Mrs Nosisa Bam's advocacy for legalising second marriage delves into the practicality of sharing the limited pool of "men of decent character". She further contends, "We need to share those relatively fewer men with a commitment to family life, instead of clamouring for monogamous marriages or pressuring men who do not want family responsibility into marriages just so that every woman can have a man to herself" (p. 104). This line of reasoning echoes the sentiment that societal pressures regarding marriage must change to reflect recent authenticities, recognising that age,

emotional connection, and familial responsibilities might be the key determinants in marriageability.

Additionally, the novella critiques the rigidity of legal structures in addressing evolving marital realities, particularly those that Bongiwe, TM, and some men, such as Wiseman, experience due to societal hindrances. Imenda conveys UWC's message that they require a second marriage parallel to polygamy, as seen in the statement: "We also love our children and their father" "the real victims are the children, not us"; "how many wives did your grandfather have?" (p. 98). UWC's statements reflect a nostalgic longing for the past (polygamous) marriage institution. As second marriages often accompany legal restructuring, the novelist portrays them as a suitable option for society as a whole, presenting them as a contested pathway towards social inclusion. This pathway holds the potential for significance in destigmatising unmarried mothers and legitimising children born outside the parameters of Christian wedlock. This paradigm shift also embeds a commitment which will lead to a decrease in communicable diseases associated with unstable relationships. Alongside this legal struggle against stigmatisation and legitimisation, legal frameworks are championed in the narrative through the MP's statement regarding the need for new legislative reform as follows:

> We want legislation … that will acknowledge the realities of the way we live; legislation concerning the hypocrisy, social abuses, and lies of our lives; legislation that will compel society to accept itself instead of spitting in its face and denying the essentials of its existence; legislation that will urge churches to undertake what I perceive as an inevitable introspection, leading to unavoidable reforms (p. 62).

This struggle embodies Stiwanist ideals, as it seeks to include women and children within the legal framework rather than marginalising them. The novella suggests that legislative flexibility is crucial in addressing the evolving motivations to marriage.

Finally, Imenda's speaking for unmarried wives/mothers and their children demands special scrutiny as it reflects the systemic continuation of silencing the lesser group (Spivak 2010). While reading *Unmarried Wife*, one may challenge that Imenda (a male voice) speaks for women and other vulnerable groups, such as children born out of wedlock, and customs reveal inadequacy and doubt. Given such doubts about the representation

of vulnerable members by influential individuals echoes notions of "epistemic violence" (Foucault, 1965) and *subalternity* captured in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (Spivak 2010, my emphasis). The latter two treatises account for the continuity of silencing of underprivileged individuals in our society. One may find the previous statement compelling when analysing some incidents in the novella, which point against monogamy to the level of victimising women and preferring men under the umbrella of polygyny's nostalgia. For instance, TM saying "marriage now means a lot more sacrifice on the part of men than it used to before, and a lot more sacrifice than it does for a man and a victory for a woman" might imply that women are the lesser group which tolerate victimisation and men are supposed to remain free (p. 75). His blame directly attacks monogamy and Christians' standards in prohibiting having extra-marital affairs while the first partner is still alive.

In justifying the agency of the narrative towards social inclusion, it creates another contested space for exclusion for those who feel wronged by the new ways that are being adopted. However, the narrative provides a critical lens for understanding the social web and its impact on societal perceptions of religious reality. Drawing on Nego-feminism, TM appears to be negotiating an alternative way to monogamy through a conservative Father Michael who embraces rigidity. Also, the question is whether Imenda signals speaking for women's vulnerability or promotes men's insatiable desires (libidinal). Additionally, TM's reply "I think you ladies are getting out of line. You must all have lost your heads. Who do you think will listen to you?" (p. 33) sends the mixed message that women/ladies in his (patriarchal) society have their limits and pursuing those expectations is considered unacceptable. Thus, even though they try to speak, they can't be heard. As Spivak inquired, can the subaltern speak? Implying that any act of talking to be effective involves reciprocity in terms of reply/response, and if nothing is done after one has spoken, it might mean that one is not heard.

Despite all the activism and transformation taking place here, the church remains intact, which perhaps leads us to infer that one must choose a different faith that aligns with their morals and expectations. Furthermore, the novelist establishes his claim about why men are initially attracted to monogamy. At the same time, they prefer extramarital relationships, through TM and Wiseman, who, due to social expectations and the ideal demands of Christianity. However, these expectations reveal the other side

of the rigid and double-edged nature of patriarchal and social norms, which, in one way or another, disturb continuity when they remain unchanged for too long. Relentlessly, the study attempts to reveal how we can rely on the literariness of novellas to establish a common understanding that it does not matter who writes/speaks, as long as the obstacles that cling to underprivileged people and keep them on the periphery are disclosed. Historically, most women used pseudonyms to write during the era of strict patriarchal publishing (Armitage 2018). Likewise, male artists[3] used pseudonyms to write women's discourses and revealed no challenge until it was discovered in publishing houses. Another important observation is that the narrative concludes by showing that Bongiwe's and Tsepo Molefe's struggle succeeded in influencing the national law to recognise unmarried wives and children born out of wedlock. Although Christianity remains unaffected despite numerous reasons for its decline, it will ultimately lose the trust of its congregation in addressing its challenges. As the critic, the narrative is successful in instilling changes to the mother law, which will eventually influence other institutional systems, such as religion, to adopt a way that suits the masses.

Conclusion

This study reveals that monogamy, second marriages, legislation, and Christianity function as both obstacles and facilitators of social transformation in *Unmarried Wife*. Though the narrative portrays Christianity and monogamy as rigid frameworks that marginalise unmarried women and their children, second marriages present a potential, albeit contentious, avenue towards inclusivity. Nevertheless, these alternatives are subject to debate, as highlighted by the resistance from Father Michael, who adheres to strict Christian doctrines, as well as Bongiwe's conservative Christian parents, who view unmarried motherhood as morally unacceptable. Additionally, opposition from groups such as the United Christian Front reinforces monogamous and marital values. In contrast, the formation of the *Unmarried Wives* Caucus reflects a growing challenge to traditional marital norms and legislative structures, indicating ongoing discussions about marriage and gender roles

[3] Male authors who wrote under female pen names by Author House Staff Writer, March 8, 2021. Retrieved from https://blog.authorhouse.com/male-authors-who-wrote-under-female-pen-names/ on the 07th March 2025.

in African societies. By employing Stiwanism and Nego-feminism, the study posits that negotiation, compromise, and gender collaboration are vital for achieving meaningful social transformation. Ultimately, the novella encourages readers to reevaluate the rigidities surrounding marriage, faith, and law, underscoring the necessity for flexibility in accommodating diverse family structures. Thus, the study aligns with the perspective that marriages can serve as a site of change and emphasises the importance of an adaptable legal and religious framework that prioritises human dignity over doctrine. In doing so, it advocates for a more inclusive and equitable society, not in opposition to Christianity or the legal systems of any country, but one that acknowledges the complexities of gender, faith, and family life.

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