

MARRIAGE IS A PRIVATE AFFAIR by Chinua Achebe

‘Have you written to your dad yet?’ asked Nene one afternoon as she sat with Nnaemeka in her room in Lagos.

‘No. I think it’s better to tell him when I get home.’

‘But why? He should be let into our happiness now.’ Nene said

Nnaemeka was silent for a moment, and then ‘I wish I were sure it would be happiness to him. You see Nene, you have lived in Lagos all your life, and you know very little about people in remote parts of the country.’

‘That’s what you always say. But I don’t believe anybody would be unhappy when their sons are engaged to marry.’

‘They are most unhappy if the engagement is not arranged by them’ replied Nnaemeka ‘In our case it’s worse—you are not even an Ibo.’

This was said so seriously and so bluntly that Nene could find nothing to say. In the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the city it had always seemed to her something of a joke that a person’s tribe could determine whom he married.

As Nnaemeka walked home that evening he wondered how to overcome his father’s opposition, especially now that a girl had been found for him by his father. Nnaemeka remembered this girl well. She was an Amazon of a girl who used to beat up all the boys, himself included.

He reread the letter from his father:

‘I have found a girl who will suit you admirably—Ugoye Nweke, the eldest daughter of our neighbour. She has received all the training a wife could need. Her Sunday School teacher has told me that she reads her Bible very fluently. I hope we shall begin negotiations when you come home in December.’

On the second evening of his return from Lagos Nnaemeka sat with his father under a cassia tree. This was the old man’s retreat where he went to read his Bible when the parching December sun had set and a fresh, reviving wind blew on the leaves.

‘Father’ began Nnaemeka suddenly ‘I can’t—I mean it is impossible for me to marry Ugoye Nweke’

‘Impossible? Why?’ asked his father.

‘I don’t love her’

‘Nobody said you did. Why should you?’ he asked. ‘What one looks for in a wife is not love but a good character and a Christian background.’

Nnaemeka saw there was no point in pursuing that line of argument.

‘Moreover,’ he said ‘I am engaged to marry another girl who has all Ugoye’s good qualities, and who....’

His father could not believe his ears. ‘What did you say? He asked slowly and disconcertingly.

‘She is a good Christian,’ his son went on, ‘and a teacher in a Girl’s school in Lagos.’

‘Teacher, did you say? If you consider that a qualification for a good wife I should like to point out to you that no Christian woman should teach. St Paul in his letter to the Corinthians says that women should keep silence.’ This was his pet subject. After a long homily he at last came back to his son’s engagement, in a seemingly milder mood.

‘Whose daughter is she, anyway?’

‘She is Nene Atang from Calabar. I know she is not an Ibo but she is the only girl I can marry.’

This was a very rash reply and Nnaemeka expected the storm to burst. But it did not. His father merely walked away into his room. That night the old man did not eat.

When he sent for Nnaemeka the next day he tried all possible ways to dissuade him but the young man’s heart was hardened and his father eventually gave him up for lost.

‘I shall never see her .’ he said.

From that night the father scarcely spoke to his son. He did not however cease hoping that he would realise how serious was the danger he was heading for. Day and night he put him in his prayers.

Nnaemeka was also very deeply affected and puzzled by his father’s grief, but what he didn’t take into account was that never in the history of his people had a man married a woman who spoke a different tongue.

‘It has never been heard,’ was the verdict of an old man speaking a few weeks later. In that short sentence this old man spoke for all his people. ‘Have you thought of consulting a native doctor about your son?’ he continued.

‘He isn’t sick’ replied Nnaemeka’s father.

‘What is he then? The boy’s mind is diseased and only a good herbalist can bring him back to his right senses.’

‘I shall not call in a native doctor.’ Nnaemeka’s father was known to be obstinately ahead of his more superstitious neighbours in these matters.

Six months later the father sent a short letter to his son:

‘It amazes me that you could be so unfeeling as to send me your wedding picture. I would have sent it back. But on further thought I decided just to cut off your wife and send it back to you because I have nothing to do with her. How I wish that I had nothing to do with you either.’

For eight years Okele would have nothing to do with his son.

Then one day he received a letter from Nene herself:

'Our two sons, from the day they learnt that they have a grandfather, have insisted on being taken to him. I implore you to allow Nnaemeka to bring them home for a short time. I shall remain here in Lagos..'

The old man at once felt his resolution giving way.

He leaned against a window and looked out. The sky was overcast with heavy black clouds and a high wind began to blow filling the air with dust and dry leaves.

Very soon it began to rain, the first rain in the year. It came down in large sharp drops and was accompanied by the lightning and thunder which mark a change of season.

Okele was trying hard not to think of his two grandsons, but he knew he was fighting a losing battle.

How could he shut his door against them? He imagined them standing sad and forsaken under the harsh angry weather—shut out from his house.

That night he hardly slept, from remorse.

By the next morning he knew what he must do.