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Loss as a Metaphor for Selfhood in Neshani Andreas' *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu*

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Abstract

This study examines the spousal neglect and cataclysmic domestic violence that debilitate Kauna physically, emotionally and spiritually in her marriage with Shange in Neshani Andreas' *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu*. The symbolic implications of the colours of purple and seek violet are central to the evolution of the introspective personality of Kauna, who defies tradition and obstinately refuses to cry and mourn Shange, her abusive husband after his sudden death, or to present a tribute in his honour at his funeral service. Considering her strange attitude as disrespectful to the Shange clan, Kauna is made to lose all of the wealth as well as the homestead that she built up with Shange. But she resolves to start life again and make it a better one than what she had with Shange. This inquiry seeks to lend fortitude and impetus to women in precarious situations so that they may not only be hopeful in whatever they lose, but they may attain selfhood in their vision for regeneration. It makes a modest contribution to the corpus of female writings that address spousal terrorism by, and death of the man as mutually inclusive for the freedom, survival and selfhood of the woman in contemporary African cultures.

Key Words: Loss, Metaphor, Selfhood

> *Until a woman feels adequately freedom over her body to decide what sexual and marital options and roles to choose from, she may remain for the*

> *man a vassal, the creature of another's will, frustrated in his transcendence and deprived of every value (de Beauvior, The Second Sex, 21).*

Introduction

Efforts by the African woman to evolve a credible identity for herself are often met with such ubiquitous factors that trammel those attempts and ensure failure and loss. This reality has been entrenched by traditions and cultural norms that are compelling in nature and oppressive in application. Simone de Beauvior's opinion above highlights imperative paradigms through which the woman in Africa is perceived and treated. In many contemporary African societies, several families are becoming receptive to female education, and accordingly, women are getting recognised as capable of participating in and contributing to the different processes of governance, politics, commerce, production and reproduction. Consequently, whether educated or not, they to have their sense of selfhood, an identification that is both unique and profound, as well as a platform on which to express themselves.

However, in many African cultures, though the woman is educated and also contributing meaningfully to the micro and macro systems, she is still regarded with condescension, and efforts abound that insist on muting her, and making her have a negative image of herself and a limited perception of her abilities. Such cultures often require the total submission of women to men, yet where this obtains, there are still structures in the culture that consistently denigrate women in favour of their male counterparts. Akachi Ezeigbo captures this phenomenon when she asserts that:

> A woman cannot but behave like a snail in our patriarchal society. Most Nigerian cultures devalue women, consider them fickle or untrustworthy … What does a woman do when she knows she is not to be trusted and she is not as highly valued as her male counterpart? In such cultures as these, the woman must learn survival

> strategies to be able to overcome the impediments placed before her … and *be proactive and strong* (Emphasis mine, 26).

Ezeigbo's analysis above delineates the arduous process for the woman to evolve a credible identity for herself in many cultures in Africa. This makes it inevitable for the woman to negotiate with her male counterpart for space to express herself intellectually, creatively, emotionally, etc.

Ada Uzoamaka Azodo asserts that a serious-minded woman and her "Id" wanting to negotiate with men would at least have some "Ego" to be tampered by some "Superego". To this end, since the Id usually desires such needs as food, shelter, pleasure, etc., it will consistently demand for them. The Ego gains relevance within this context because it is the rational and problem-solving part that controls some of the impulses, and translates them into strategies of effective gratification that tame and discipline the cravings and impulses. It searches for appropriate sources of gratification that will keep the Id out of trouble (36-37). The Superego performs the role of posing moral questions and highlighting appropriate and legitimate ways of fulfilling the desires of the Id without offending the societal precepts or hurting the environment. Azodo in this thesis observes that the African woman is bogged down by both survival needs and the social environment (37). The catenation of the woman's survival needs and the social environment constitute a prominent factor that has continued to impede a credible female identity and selfhood. Neshani Andreas' *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* is situated within this framework of the woman who, while in pursuit of identity and survival (the twin values considered in this study as selfhood), also incurs losses because of the debilitating structures in the society that pauperise her efforts.

Neshani Andreas was born in 1964 in Wavis Bay, Namibia, as one of eight children for parents who worked in a fish factory. She trained as a teacher at Ongwediva Training College and then for a postgraduate degree in education at the University of Namibia. She taught English,

history and business economics from 1988 to 1992 in a school in rural northern Namibia, where her novel *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* is set (www.woyingi.wordpress.com). Andreas also worked with the American Peace Corps in Namibia, and as a programme officer for the Forum of African Women Educationalists in Namibia (FAWENA). That Forum was involved in teaching in the rural North, the social, religious and traditional complexities which became the dominant source for Andreas' novel under study in the article (www.namibian.com.na). She died of lung cancer in 2011. Evaluating her legacy, Andreas is described as:

> … a brave woman who did not shy away from confronting Namibians with issues that are difficult to face, like the endemic violence against women …
>
> Not only a soldier in the struggle for women's rights, the single, sometimes lonely, often discouraged yet determined Andreas continues to inspire fellow writers through her authenticity, simplicity and success even after her death.
>
> …
>
> Namibia lost a gentle fighter for women's rights, who used her writing as a 'weapon' … to fight the violence and oppression of women in our society, not in a grand political manner, but by trying to empower women in the novel … (www.namibian.com.na)

The above sets the template for the appraisal of Andreas' *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu*. The novel, which is narrated in *medias res* and largely through the flashback technique, depicts the travails of women in marriage, (where the man dominates, brutalizes and dictates for the woman), the woman's lack of empowerment, the inferior status of the woman in both the family and social contexts, the gender inequality that translates to gender inequity, the disinheritance of the widow of her husband's properties, the oppressive tenets that define widowhood, as well as the value of female solidarity, etc.

Kauna's Choice and Its Consequences

Meme Ali and Meme Kauna are young ladies in Oshaantu, both married to Tate Michael and Tate Shange respectively. The latter is notorious for having and making public his extra-marital relationships, and for frequently battering his wife Meme Kauna. Unfortunately, Tate Shange dies suddenly: he did not sleep in his home, but returned there in the morning, sat on a chair and died, with "… his head flopped forward like someone who was sleeping in his chair" (11). Shange's death generates a set of reactions among every person and group in his family and the community: his wife, Kauna becomes hysterical in shock at her husband's sudden death. Her desperation is borne from the imminent implications on her of that death. Prominently:

- He spent the night before his death at his girlfriend's house, and returned home in the morning, without doing anything, he sat on a chair and died. This is an unusual sequence of events for which his wife, Kauna, will account, to prove her innocence. In her hysteria, "Kauna … marched over to where her husband's car was parked … she marched to and fro between the living room and the fresh lines that the car had left in the soil" (12).
- Kauna was largely neglected and often battered by her husband, and could be suspected of a reprisal. Evidently, she "… barefoot, her hair uncombed, wearing an outsize dress that hung loosely over her body exposing one shoulder and half of her breast … (12). Also, she "… was lying on the ground covered in a blanket of sand. She moved like an old cloth, 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 her arms and hands … Shange … kicked her hard in the stomach. She flew into the air and fell on the ground" (58-59).
- She is likely to be accused of having killed him because he was in an extramarital relationship that was publicly known, and to which he had committed a lot of his resources.
- Kauna experienced initial childlessness in her marriage with Shange. She was accused of having used contraceptives

during her teenage years, and those may have damaged her uterus. Since Shange's previous girlfriends had borne children for him, ostensibly, Kauna was the problem.

- She is likely to be stripped of everything she acquired while in the marriage, and evicted from the family and the homestead.
- Her mother had dissuaded her from considering leaving the marriage because a divorce would adversely affect her father's work and reputation as a preacher.

Essentially, Kauna is aware of the intense dynamics that usually operates against women. She recognizes Kate Millet's notion that "patriarchal societies typically link feelings of cruelty with sexuality, the later often equated with both evil and power" (44), which Shange signifies in the novel. Consequently, in Kauna's solitary mood, she prepares herself for Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi's argument that the experience of selfhood or identity, "be it constituted or constituting, and the experience of difference, be it racial or sexual, and the process of reconstructing subjectivity" must be experienced by the woman simultaneously in the realm of specific sexual politics. Kauna is conscious that these are imminent for her, and they will certainly entail losses.

Notably, Kauna's fairly impressive background and her dreadful experiences in the hands of Shange constitute a conflictual and an atrocious dyad. She was the daughter of a pastor and a teacher, a high school girl and a virgin. Unfortunately, her initial childlessness in the marriage compounds her problem, and she is taunted by different people. One day on enquiring about Shange's whereabouts, his sister tells her that "he went to those [women] with fertile wombs!" (21) And at another time, Kauna's mother accosts her with: "All the women who married around the same time as you, have babies now – even the ones who married after you" (21). These impose on her the psychology of the accused: she cannot get pregnant, she causes Shange's people to get anxious for a grandchild, she feels very uncomfortable, and discloses to her friend, Ali, that her sister-in-law's remark on her "killed" her, and that since then, she never asked anybody where Shange was or went. She rather worried silently" (21).

These different experiences and her helpless dependence on her abusive husband get Kauna to grow largely introspective and reticent, while developing intrinsic stoicism and resilience. These traits are consistent with the colours purple and violet, which Kauna symbolizes.

The colour purple or violet indicates an inward thinking personality. A person associated with purple or violet does not care much about what other people think of him/her. Inward thinkers tend to be more independent people with a greater need to control their own lives and destinies. It may also suggest a need for individuality and to express that individuality. Purple or violet describes a person who finds it hard to accept ideas and beliefs that are different from his/hers ("Color Purple-Violet-Color Psychology and Personality Meaning"). These characteristics are visible at the death of her husband, Shange, for "Kauna shocked almost everybody who arrived. She was not behaving like a widow. She walked straight up to the villagers and told them that her husband had not slept at home the previous night and had not eaten her food as he returned in the morning, and she did not kill him! (12). Even though Kauna makes these assertions in a state of delirium, they are statements that represent the profundity of her sentiments and attitude/response to the diverse trends that she has been exposed to. Her hysterical status constitutes a medium through which she can safely reveal her thought processes.

In her distress, she also feels better and fully justified not to mourn Shange by weeping, thereby satisfying the societal and familial requisite for widows. The general notion that Kauna is not behaving like a widow emerges from Kauna's obdurate refusal to cry as a demonstration of mourning her husband. It constitutes a matter of general concern among the members of her husband's family and the whole community. Kauna has not shed a tear for Shange several days after his death, and "mourners are getting tired. Rumours that Kauna was not crying or showing any emotion towards the sudden death of her husband spread like wild fire. People started to whisper and Shange's relatives got mad" (48). In fact, Kauna's "face is so dry that

some people say they are embarrassed …" (48). People feel that she is happy that he is dead.
However, Kauna explains to her friend, Ali, the reasons why she feels that Shange does not deserve her mourning him:

> I'm sorry you all feel uncomfortable about my behavior, but I cannot pretend. … I cannot lie to myself and to everybody else in the village. They all know how I was treated in my marriage. Why should I cry? For what? For my broken ribs? For my baby, the one he killed inside me while beating me? For cheating on me so publicly? For what? For what? (49)

Kauna's clear declaration above of her decision and the reason for it, comprise manifestations of the features of the colour purple which she denotes in this novel. The colour purple is associated with royalty and nobility, creating an impression of luxury, wealth and extravagance. … Purple has power, and a richness and quality to it that demands respect. It is ambitious and self-assured ("The Color Purple and The Color Violet"). Thus, it is characteristic that Kauna feels justified in her refusal to perform her widowhood roles to honour her abusive husband at his death. She objects to rattling in the sand like a snake in pretence of being devastated by her husband's death (49). She is not persuaded by her friend, Ali, who argues that "even if you hated him, do not behave as if you want the world to know that you are happy he is dead. If you do this, you will give people reasons to accuse you of being responsible for his death" (49). Conversely, Ali also admits that she appreciates the dehumanizing treatment that Kauna suffered in her marriage with Shange. She always wanted Kauna's suffering to end, but she never imagined that it would happen that way, "nobody needed to die" (51).

Kauna's Losses and the Evolution of Selfhood

Kauna makes a case for herself as her hopes for a peaceful and loving marriage were dashed by the acute turn in Shange's attitude to an unkind and brutal husband:

> I have been angry my whole life. I have been angry about this marriage and with this man [Shange], so at this stage [of his death] I really don't think I care what happens to me if I don't cry for him. I really don't care. *I have nothing to lose*. … those who want to see me crying will be the first to accuse me of being a hypocrite (Emphasis mine 50).

There is a dominant irony in Kauna's claim that she has nothing to lose. Essentially, for her to gain selfhood, she has to suffer enormous loss, and unlike Ali's expectation and desire, someone has had to die as a prerequisite for Kauna's attainment of selfhood. Kauna's attitude challenges the veracity of the cultural norm that dehumanizes women in favour of men. Thus, she serves as a sample of Ngozi Anadi's opinion that cultural norms "can be questioned and challenged when … [they] reinforce gender inequality and other fundamental rights" (351). For Kauna, selfhood and loss constitute a site of struggle, and she also bears the burden of evolving the modalities of that struggle. To free herself from the general perception that "it was her fault that her husband looked at other women, It was her fault that her husband beat her" (51), she has to experience varieties of loss, which include:

- auna loses self-esteem as she "cannot walk among other women with her head uplifted and straight" (63).
- he loses the wholeness of her upper lip after the severe beating by Shange, which also gets her hospitalized: "the cut on the left corner of the upper lip left a scar that made it look bigger than the rest of her mouth. A scar that will remind us all, and particularly Kauna, of all the horror of physical abuse (64).
- he loses the right to leave the horrendous marriage because of her obligation to protect her father's reputation as a

preacher: "… a divorce will have a really bad effect on Daddy's preaching" (67)

- he loses all of Shange's wealth – his cattle, along with her goats and pigs, his landed properties, and eventually, the homestead.
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At a meeting to which Kauna is invited by the Shange family members, she is required to explain the cause of Shange's death, and to declare his wealth to them so that those may be shared among his brothers, sisters and mother. But Kauna is neither able to explain the cause of Shange's death nor declare his wealth. She also refuses to have to personally or by proxy say anything – a tribute – during Shange's funeral service, as expected of every widow. She asserts that "there is nothing to be said" (37), and Shange's family members regard this as an affront: they accuse her of trying to disgrace the Shange clan, and to demonstrate to the whole world what a horrible man Shange was, especially as he did not sleep at home the night before he died (138). Kauna is resolute in her decision not to tell lies as widows often do at their husbands' funerals. In this connection, Simone de Beauvior avers that, "woman can be defined by her consciousness of her own femininity no more than by saying that she is a female, for she acquires this consciousness under circumstances dependent on the society of which she is a member" (44). By implication, Kauna has to define herself by making her own choices through the realities around her.

Expectedly, Shange's family members ask Kauna to leave the homestead with her children, because the former have taken possession of Shange's homestead. Kauna distributes to her neighbours and friends most of her belongings – her baskets, clay pots, etc., and at their departure from Oshaantu, "they looked like people who were going away for a weekend, they had so little luggage. Yet, despite all her losses, Kauna sees her fate as that of the millet, thus:

> After it has been knocked down, stepped on and mercilessly destroyed by cattle, it finds the strength to repair itself and grow better. It is often bigger

> and more vibrant than the millet that has not been threatened by any danger and cut to the ground (174).

Prominently, Kauna's losses generate her selfhood, and evolve her specific identity as strong, focused and determined. Her individuality on the one hand, propels her to be resolute in her convictions, and on the other hand, makes her confident to endure her horrific marriage to Shange as well as the consequences of her decisions that are largely repugnant to the expectations of the community.

Generally, the symbol of loss and the symbol of selfhood in Andreas' *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* are mutually inclusive in the evolution of Kauna's personality, implying that to experience loss engenders a gain of selfhood. Kauna's doggedness and successful transcendence over the tempting inheritance matter, her insistence on neither telling lies about her husband nor glorifying him by presenting a tribute in his honour at his funeral are all indicative of her attainment of selfhood. As she refuses to relinquish her selfhood to please people, it is, therefore, consistent that she is equipped with the correct attitude and disposition to absorb the outcome of the losses that she must experience. As Shange's family members sequester her from the family and the homestead, she leaves Oshaantu with hope, which she expresses to friend, Ali, using the regenerative nature of the millet. The imagery of the millet engenders the attribute of resilience, tenacious striving to live and a refusal to be obliterated, which are reflected in Kauna's personality. She defies traditional norms and roles as stipulated for widows in Oshaantu, and she pays dearly for that. She is a misfit in the atmosphere of disapproval, which naturally generates diverse forms of loss for her.

Essentially, the elderly woman, Mukwankala recalls that Kauna was beautiful when she arrived Oshaantu as a new bride during the bloom of purple violets, but Shange turned her "beautiful face into something that looked as if it had been through some strange incisions made by a clan from outer space" (148). Mukwankala reinforces Kauna as a symbol of the title of the novel that has

transmuted from the beautiful delicate bride to a battered, scarred, dejected, deprived and dislocated widow. Kauna's losses as well as the physical and psychological scars get her to become both indurate and resolute, as she notes to Ali:

> … whatever I do, whether I faint or cry on top of my lungs so that I lose my voice and say how 'wonderful' a husband Shange was, they [his family members] will do what they will do … I will not make a laughing of myself (139).

Kauna's audacious selfhood finds relevance in the symbol of the colours "purple violet" that Kaunda signifies. The colour purple relates to the imagination and spirituality. It stimulates the imagination and inspires high ideals. Being an introspective colour, purple enables one to be in touch with one's deepest thoughts. Both purple and violet share similar properties: they contain the energy and strength of the red colour, and the spirituality and integrity of the blue colour. This represents the union of the body and soul which creates a symmetry of the physical and the spiritual energies ("The Color Purple and The Color Violet).

The juxtaposition of the colours purple and violet on the one hand, and Kauna's poor status on the other hand is pertinent because purple and violet generate spiritual fulfillment and enable people to expand their awareness, while also connecting them to a higher consciousness, and transforming their souls ("The Color Purple and The Color Violet). Kauna's personality reflects these characteristics. Her audibility and strength constitute a departure from the usual "current over-emphasis on … [women's/widows'] voicelessness and helplessness as victims" (Mary Modupe-Kolawole, 39). Kauna resists the image of a *tabula rasa* that would be validated by other people, Shange and his family members. She represents herself in full, and evolves strategies to cope with the burdens of survival needs and the social environment, thereby remaining stable within the contexts and roles of the Id, Ego and Superego.

Conclusion

Neshani Andreas in *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* weaves a delicate quilt of horrendous experiences of domestic violence and spousal abuse as typified in what Kauna goes through in the flashback depictions in the novel. Kauna is, thus, portrayed as a type that is encountered in Namibia as well as many other African cultures. She signifies the countless helpless women that are trapped in situations that are life-threatening, and which also strip them of their physical, emotional, psychological, economic human properties. By Kauna's action and willing assumption of the consequences, she confronts the sixth mountain on the woman's back as identified by Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, which is the woman herself. Ogundipe-Leslie notes that "women are shackled by their own negative self-image, by centuries of interiorization of the ideologies of patriarchy and gender hierarchy. Their own reactions to objective problems therefore are often self-defeating and self-crippling. Woman react with fear, dependency complexes and attitudes to please and cajole where more self-assertive actions are needed" (36). But Kauna is different. She is peculiar because her losses instigate strength to surmount and survive her predicament with hope to start anew and live a better life with her children and possibly, a man who will truly love her and treat her with respect. Here in lies the essence of Kauna's credible selfhood that emerges from her identity as the "purple violet of Oshaantu."

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