



A Review of Chinyere Oko-Jaja's *Before and After "I Do"*

Onyeka Ike, Phd

Department of English and Communication Studies,
Faculty of Humanities,
Federal University Otuoke,
Bayelsa State, Nigeria.

Before and After "I Do" is one of Dr Chinyere Oko-Jaja's educative, informative, motivational and inspirational works with invaluable messages predicated on the time-tested teachings of the Bible. The book thematizes the sensitive issue of marriage and relationship in a generation which is fast losing value for what is sacred and noble. Undoubtedly, the author's choice of words and expressions in the work, her testimonies, nuances, idiosyncrasies and efficient management of tropes in the book reveal her as a seasoned academic as well as a focused and dedicated servant of God; a woman with limitless divine potentials to impact maximally to a generation in dire need of genuine, unassuming, committed, uncompromising and truth-conscious revivalists. In reading line after line and one chapter after the other, a reader is constantly thrilled and at the same time challenged to observe that the writer is a strong believer in the ageless truth of God's infallible word, and has a passionate desire to maintain the Ancient Landmark which has suffered various forms of dilutions and embellishments from many contemporary proselytizers.

It is in view of such dilutions that the marriage book market today has become a jumble and jungle of confusions and chaos. Hence, it is not uncommon to find marriage book titles such as "Twenty Reasons Why You Should Marry an Educated, Beautiful and Fashionable Lady of Your Choice," "Ten Sharp Ways to Capture Any Rich and Handsome Guy You Are Interested In," "Twenty-five Ways to Make a Man Interested in You," "Don't Mind Her, She Will Still Agree," "Thirty Solid Ways to Win the Heart of a Lady You Love," etc. Obviously, many of these perspectives do not genuinely portray the pattern of God who is the Author and Originator of the institution of marriage. Truly, in the marketplace of ideas, all vendors have equal right but



not all the ideas are equally right. And although semiotics creates room for multiplicity of interpretations, it does not in any way connote the annihilation of certain fundamentals. Most of these aforementioned so-called marriage book titles and even more heretic ones are in fact trendy and more fashionable in contemporary market of marriage and relationship books and in the social media. These junks have been contributing immensely in poisoning the supposedly noble institution of marriage. And such titles sell like hot cakes in bookshops, conferences, motor parks, etc., as many young people preparing for marriage do not just read them with passion; they consume them, inhale them, internalize them, chew and swallow them hook, line and sinker. A young bachelor or spinster on a journey, for instance, finds a title such as “Ten Ways to Test Love” or “Ten Ways to Know If a Girl/Man is Really Interested in You” at a motor park and often picks it with so much passion. He could be deeply engrossed in devouring it until he gets to his destination. And when he closes it, he does so with reluctance and, of course, continues reading as soon as the next opportunity beckons. Yet such a young Christian might not have bothered to read the Bible in order to know what God says on the same issue.

Since quite a number of such writings on marriage have no scriptural or even moral basis and therefore no regards for Godliness, the reader sometimes only succeeds in acquiring a dangerous form of knowledge which often mars rather than contribute in making an individual. It is in view of such dangerous form of knowledge acquisition that Socrates - a foremost philosopher had warned:

Surely, I said, knowledge is the food of the soul, and we must take care that the sophist does not deceive us... . For there is far greater risk in buying knowledge than in buying food and drink. The one you purchase of the wholesale or retail dealer, and carry them away in other vessels, and before you receive them into the body as food or drink, you may deposit them at home and call in an expert to give you advice— who knows what is good to be eaten and drunk, and what not, and how much and when, and then the risk of purchasing them is not so great. But you cannot buy knowledge and carry it away in another vessel; when you have paid for it you must receive it into the soul and go on your way either greatly harmed or greatly benefitted.



Through this book, the author earnestly prays that God Almighty will illuminate the hearts of readers with the correct knowledge of the subject matter; the kind of knowledge that will revolutionize marriages and relationships to become what God intended it to be right from the beginning.

It is largely as a result of the acquisition of the wrong form of knowledge that our generation has reduced a respectable and honorable institution as marriage to experimentation; trial and error, sampling and testing. A few years ago, the marriage of two love birds who graduated from the same State University ended on a very tragic note. The woman stabbed the young man to death and earned a death sentence from a court. In the same manner, the world was petrified and scandalized when we were woken up with a cantankerous headline from *Punch Newspapers* which read: “Lagos Lawyer Kills Husband and Chops Off His Manhood.” It was as raw as that. The culpable lady was remanded in custody while she awaited legal proceedings. As I read that shocking news, I wondered why the leaned lady chopped off that part of the man’s body even after killing him.

To me, the gruesome “chopping off” of such a vital part of the body of a husband which a patriarchal traditional Igbo society refers to as “ife oji bulu nwoke” meaning what makes him a man is both significant and symbolic, especially in view of the fact that she did so after she killed him. When we remember such stories our hearts bleed. Truly, such incidents are representations of some tragedies that characterize many homes and marriages in our time, largely on account of wrong knowledge and orientation. Those couples would have had a better, joyful and fulfilling matrimony, rather than the ones which they endured and consequently crashed, if they had the opportunity of clinching and assimilating a copy of *Before and After “I Do.”* Also, scholars of Shakespearean classics might agree that if there had been a proper and adequate knowledge in handling the vital issue of family relationship, especially among young and growing people, the crisis between the two wealthy Veronaian families – the Montagues and the Capulets would have been handled differently as it concerns Romeo and Juliet – the two love birds in the play. This would have invariably averted the tragic deaths of the two young people and others. It would have saved the two warring families the pain of the untimely deaths of their beloved children.



One distinguishing quality of *Before and After "I Do"* as a piece on marriage is that every word, illustration, guideline and expression is predicated on the scriptures, not on mere head knowledge or human theorizations.

The work can be described as a fresh, appetizing and scintillating cake from a perspicacious oven of a master chef. It is a 256-page insightful and revealing treatise designed and published by Aleps Impressions of Number 4 Oshokoya Street, Ketu, Lagos. The graphology and artistry of the cover page reveal the beautiful hands of a young couple who have just signed the dotted lines as they display their rings which are the vital symbols of their love for each other. Expectedly, the hands are united and supportive of each other as they together commence the journey of matrimony. This, of course, is a valuable portrayal and lesson on how the journey of matrimony should begin and continue for every couple if the purpose of God is to be fulfilled in the union. These portrayals indeed make the work a symbolic and insightful piece divinely projected to call Christians to repentance on the vital issue of love, unity and togetherness in marriage; virtues that have largely vanished in contemporary times due to several militating factors. The author's dedication of the work to the Holy Spirit speaks volume of the content of her character; as one who absolutely relies on the help from God for accomplishment and fulfilment, and is committed to returning all glory to Him alone.

The book comprises of nine chapters and a foreword dutifully articulated by Rt Rev. Dr Emmanuel Okwuchi Oko-Jaja. In writing the foreword, the bishop is worried and deeply concerned about what he calls "The current trend against ideal Christian marriage" thus:

The current trend against ideal Christian marriage and family upbringing— a situation where the joy of marriage disappears a few months after wedding calls for concern. This is evidenced by incessant separation and divorce rate found in our society today, and more so the moral decadence and erosion of revered values due to lack of proper upbringing. (vii)

Suffice it to say that it is actually the myriads of problems bedeviling several marriages and indeed the society that *Before and After "I Do"* clearly sets out to find solution to, from the



first chapter to the last. Thus, the problem-solving nature of the work is another distinguishing factor.

The first chapter is titled “The Preparation.” It opens with a popular scriptural quotation: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and they become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). Here the author considers marriage as a critical project and a journey; a crucial affair which must not be handled carelessly, thoughtlessly, hurriedly or irresponsibly. She emphasizes that no one should embark on a marital journey without the necessary preparations, and that neglecting to plan is actually planning to fail. Five major areas of preparation identified include: spiritual preparation, economic preparation, social preparation, domestic preparation and sundry preparation.

In discussing spiritual preparation, there is a clear highlight on the paramount place of God in marriage as its originator. The author maintains that marriage was initiated and programmed by God, therefore it is a made in God product, not made in China, Nigeria, India, America, etc. And that just as every manufacturer produces the manual for their product in order to portray how best the product can function, God Himself has produced the most authentic manual for a successful and enjoyable marriage, not endurable one; so, anyone desiring to get the best out of marriage should endeavor to read and follow the instruction that came with it, from the manufacturer himself. Failure to do so often results to what the author refers to as a “crash” or “accident.” It is also fascinating to hear from this chapter that marriage was actually made by God to be enjoyed and not to be endured, and that the manufacture’s manual to be followed for a fulfilling marriage is as contained in the Bible. In emphasizing one of such instructions which bothers on unadulterated love, the author states:

Accepting each other as friends removes fear, inferiority complex, unfaithfulness, secrecy and unhealthy rivalry. What guides friendly relationship is respect, love and regard for one another, being sensitive to each other’s feeling and well-being. (17-18)

In accepting each other as friends in marriage, the concept of the subaltern or underdog as used by Gayatri Spivak – a Russian Formalist critic in his famous essay titled “Can the Subaltern Speak” is completely erased. Thus, the author believes that the woman is not and should



not be considered an underdog but divine helpmeet, co-heir of the promises of God and partner in progress. In discussing a critical aspect of social preparation, the author reveals a serious factor which could either make or mar any lady who desires to be honorably married. The author refers to this factor as “packaging.”

Common mistakes often made in marriage are extensively discussed in the second chapter of the book; some of which constitute wrong foundations that continue to affect and haunt the marriage as a wrong foundation affects the structure of a building. The author begins the chapter by defining marriage as a relationship where a man and a woman give their consent to each other willingly, having in mind to spend their lifetime together. Some of the identifiable costly mistakes often made either before or in matrimony include: marrying out of sentiment, marrying based on physical appearance, marrying in a hurry, marrying under pressure, marrying at all costs, marriage induced by material possession, marrying just for the purpose of raising children, borrowing to please the fiancé or fiancée, and mixed marriages which usually involve people from various religious persuasions. These forms of marriage mistakes are diligently illustrated with ample case studies and their attendant consequences. Then chapter three takes the reader to the place of prayer before and after “I do.” Here, various definitions of prayer are given by the author; some of which include: a relationship with the divine, an express invitation for God to attend to you, an access to the divine nature, a clarion call to showcase the power and glory of God, unlocking the gates of heaven to release the ordained blessings and so on.

In a nutshell, the author maintains that the importance of prayer both before and after marriage cannot be overemphasized. It is in view of this that the wise counsel of Proverbs 3: 5-6 readily comes to mind: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding: In all your ways acknowledge Him and he shall direct your paths.”

Chapter four is captioned “Targeted Courtship and Engagement.” Here the author clearly states that courtship in marriage begins the moment the two persons have agreed to get married. She likens engagement to boarding a flight to Togo, for instance, and notes that for the fact that one has boarded a flight does not guarantee one to say that one is already in Togo; that even when the flight has taken off, one is still not in Togo until one has arrived at the airport and done



all the necessary clearance which would enable him to step out of the airport. Intending couples are cautioned at this stage to know that they are not yet married and therefore should desist from fornication and other forms of sexual perversion and experimentations which are capable of soiling their testimonies as Christians. She goes ahead to state some vital rules of engagement and courtship which include: making the relationship known to a responsible authority, setting a limit, having a focused engagement, avoiding prolonged engagements since it can lead to avoidable temptations, being one's self and avoiding pretense as much as possible, avoiding any joint business or project until marriage, exhibiting self-confidence, being willing to admit one's fault, avoiding selfishness or self-centeredness, watching out for jealousy, establishing an effective and productive communication and ensuring that sex is reserved for marriage. Having stated these unambiguous rules of engagement/courtship, certain dangerous signals are meticulously outlined, and it is clearly emphasized that a broken engagement is better than divorce.

The caption of chapter five is rather a rhetorical question: "Who is a Man?" Marriage, the author maintains, is meant for men and not for boys as stated in Genesis 2:24 – Therefore shall a man, not a boy leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife; and they shall be one flesh. In defining who a man is, the author states and describes some important attributes which qualify one to be called a man from a Christian epistemological perspective. These attributes include: rationality, independent, patience, selflessness, being purposeful, being responsible, provision of leadership, provision of other family needs, risk taking, integrity, doggedness and hardworking. All these and many more, the author asserts, are the attributes of a real Christian man and not just the portrayal of biological credentials.

Chapter six deals with the choice before "I do." In this chapter, the author stresses that marriage should not be under any form of compulsion or coercion but should be entered into happily, willingly and freely because it is a decision that is often taken once in a lifetime. In stressing the importance of agreement and choice before saying "I do," the author states:

Two cannot work together except they agree. This agreement must be willful. It must not be under duress or tension. It must be made when one is conscious so he can reason



properly. The agreement should be such that the spirit, soul and body are in the partnership. The three must go together, else it will not work. The totality of a man must be involved; the spirit must carry the body along and vice versa. (197)

Agreement and willful choice are necessary because it engenders trust and genuine love which are the active ingredients that flavor and sustain marriage. They make marriage durable and enjoyable, not endurable. Pharmacists or pharmacologists will agree that the potency of a drug is not really dependent on its physical size and volume but rather on the quality or strength of its active ingredients. So, it is the strength of the active ingredient of a drug, among other factors, that mainly determines its effectiveness in curing an ailment. In the same vein, the quality, conviviality and durability of a marital relationship is not dependent on the complexion or height of either the husband or wife but on the quality of life, love and understanding which they bring into the union.

Chapter seven deals with the actual “I do.” Here, the author gives a vivid description of what happens at this stage of the marital journey, as well as what is expected of the couple who have invited people to witness the solemnization of the union thus:

I do is the end of “before” and the beginning of “after.” It is an entrance and beginning into another phase of life. At this time, it is believed that all the necessary things to be considered have been done. It is expected that the couple have looked at themselves and are convinced that they will make it. At this time, it is therefore important that they tell the public that which they have been telling themselves in the secret hence the invitation of relatives and friends. To crown it all, the one (God) who made it in the beginning is already seated as part of the witness. (215)

Chapter eight is on the issues of marital adjustment. The author believes that the process of adjustment after marriage is very crucial, and that without proper adjustment, the union will not produce the needed result. Adjustment is considered very important since the two persons who have just said “I do” actually came from different backgrounds with perhaps different orientations in life. The adjustment which is elaborately discussed in this chapter is equivalent to what the Bible refers to as “leaving” and “cleaving” when it says, “For this reason a man will



leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and they will become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). This process in marriage can be compared to a form of surgery or grafting. The former as a medical terminology can be quite discomfoting and painful; same as the later which is an agricultural terminology and involves cutting a part of a plant and joining it to another in order to produce a desirable result. This is precisely what is required in marital adjustment as expounded by the author. Although the process may be inconvenient and discomfoting, the end result in marriage is usually joy, unity, harmony and the peace of God which surpasses all human understanding.

The last chapter of the book is actually the bottom pot of the entire menu and is entitled “Home Temperature.” The lexical item “temperature” as a scientific terminology is a measure of the degree of hotness or coldness of a substance. It is interesting to read that there is a normal or optimum temperature at which God the author and originator of marriage wants every Christian family to operate or function for His purpose to be fulfilled in it. This temperature according to the author is usually predicated on certain conditionalities such as effective communication, Godly platform, discipline, the partnership role in the family, prudence and openness in financial management, inculcating core moral values to members of the family, equality in love and fair treatment and effective management of issues relating to in-laws. The author maintains that negligence of these factors could bring down any marriage irrespective of the status, placement and paraphernalia of the couple.

It is averred that the importance of maintaining the appropriate “temperature” in every family cannot be overemphasized because it helps the family to remain stable and not deviate from the calendar and programme of God, especially when passing through trials, including delay in the realization of expectations. This perspective reminds the reader that it was actually the delay in the realization of the expectation of having children in Abraham’s family and the consequent resort to the alternative to the perfect will of God as suggested by his wife Sarah that snowballed into a number of dangerous global crisis and phenomenon including terrorism. When the alternative baby Ishmael was conceived, the Bible says in Genesis 16: 12 that “He shall be a wild man; his hand shall be against every man.” In view of this Bible verse, many Christians



believe that the world would have been a better place to be without what they usually refer to as Abraham's costly mistake.

Before and After "I Do" is an invaluable compendium of wisdom and knowledge. It is an appropriate antidote for relationship and marital challenges; a potent medicine with the requisite active ingredients that could heal all manner of marital and relationship sicknesses when applied in full dosage. Like her previous writings, the diction of the work is fluid, prosaic and readily accessible to all categories of readers. This, of course, is one of the distinguishing beauties and attractions of this masterpiece. The author deserves eloquent commendations for demonstrating the discipline and obedience which it actually takes to pen down such laudable, insightful and revealing inspirations, and for reminding Christians, indeed all readers, to return to the concept and practice of marriage the way God Almighty, the inventor, designed it from the very beginning. She challenges Christians in particular to learn how to dutifully write down inspirations received from God in their walk and work with Him. The author believes that there can be no better legacy to bequeath to both the present and to posterity.