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## **Conjugal Misdeeds in Linda Jummai Mustafa’s “What if...?” and “A Day in a Hotel Room”**

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*Research Article*

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### **ABSTRACT**

The breach of conjugal vows of love and fidelity and the practice of villainous acts within the marital space obstructs the peace and wellbeing of couples as depicted in Linda Jummai Mustafa’s short stories, “What if...?” and “A Day in a Hotel Room.” This paper examines the portrayal of marital infidelity, the transmission of STDs and rape; actions which contradict the marital pact and hinders the harmonious coexistence of the married characters. The theoretical framework adopted for this study is new criticism, while the methodology is based on textual analysis. The paper finds that marital abuses as seen in Mustafa’s two short stories portray marriage as an institution where violence and deceit thrive and suggests some pragmatic questions that intending couples should ask before making a marital decision and for married couples to examine the foundations upon which their marriages are built.

**Keywords:** “A day in a hotel room,” marital infidelity, STDs, rape, “what if...?”

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## INTRODUCTION

The family is the most important unit of the society where values are cultivated, nurtured, and transmitted to the younger generation. The success of the family has a direct and proportional relationship to the growth and advancement of the society. It is therefore necessary to examine the issues that threaten the growth and continuation of the family because better families will lead to a better society and a better world. In Linda Jummai Mustafa's two short stories entitled, "What if...?" and "A Day in a Hotel Room" two pertinent issues that challenge the wellbeing and existence of the family are marital infidelity, the transmission of sexual transmitted diseases and rape.

Marital infidelity disrupts the physical and mental health of couples in a marital union. In Nigeria, and many parts of Africa, it is taken for granted when a man who has a wife goes on to keep concubines and lovers, while it is regarded as a taboo for the wife to do the same. This ideology is expressed in many ways. Some people casually remark that it is man's nature to cheat; it is natural for men to be polygamous while others have said that it is not possible to expect a man to eat one type of soup every day and not get tired. Research has thus shown that, "In contemporary Nigeria, married men are much more likely than married women to engage in extramarital sex and it is more acceptable for them to do so" (Cornwall 963-980, Smith 4-23, Orubuloye 1195-1207). The prevalence of this situation is further revealed by research which shows that in Nigeria and around the world, "married women's greatest risk of contracting HIV is through sexual intercourse with their husbands" (Nabukenya 1-8, Yang, UNIFEM, Glynn et al. 51-60. It is disturbing to note that the marital space that should provide security, love and happiness to couples is now a dangerous zone where one is at risk of

contracting diseases from a randy spouse. In literary parlance, the term "home" is usually used to symbolise safety, security, sanity, and respite from the troubling storms in the outside world. This image is, however, challenged today where many marriages and the home in question stands for terror, violence, and vicious abuse. Marital infidelity can be defined as an intentional violation of marital vows leading to sexual relations and other forms of intimacy with others. Marital infidelity is the transgression of marital boundaries and the establishment of physical or emotional intimacy outside the marriage relationship (Ozgun, Munsch 469-95). Affairs outside of the marriage not only break trust but also cause rivalry, resentment and can pass a death sentence on the spouse who gets infected by diseases contracted through sexual affairs by an unfaithful partner.

Marital rape is another challenge facing marriages and it has attracted much debate and controversy. Although some women periodically make allegations of rape against their spouses, there is difficulty establishing a case of rape between couples that are "normally" expected to have a conjugal relationship. A poignant factor that underlines marital rape is lack of consent. Marital rape, therefore, is the act of engaging in forceful sexual activities with one's wife without consent. Although marital rape is downplayed, several allegations by women point to its existence and the traumatizing after effects. Marital rape is an action that strips away the dignity of the victimized and inflicts physical and psychological scars on the psyche. Although men are viewed as powerful and active agents in the sexual process, they too can be subjected to rape, even though this is not often talked about and is not as rampant as the rape of females.

The absence of legislation, economic disparities and poverty denies many women of the opportunity to seek legal redress in instances of marital rape

and some go on to live with the psychological scars and trauma. Under the Nigerian law in both section 357 of the Criminal Code and section 282 of the Penal Code, it is stated that a husband cannot be charged with marital rape. Once the marriage is subsisting, then any sexual intercourse is never rape (Branda). The dilemma experienced by women who are subjected to marital rape is aptly expressed by Esther Joseph Umoren who states that:

For offence of rape to be established, the woman has to prove that she did not give her consent to the sexual intercourse, and if given, it was by force. How will the wife establish this fact, when she has been constantly having sexual intercourse with her husband for years and even produced children for him? Also, who will corroborate the crime, calling an eyewitness to an event that happened in the inner room? Or medical evidences showing injury on the vagina (where unfortunately, there is none). 4

The plight of the woman is worsened when the husband is involved in extramarital affairs, and still, the wife must have sexual relations with him in the name of performing her “wifely duty.” This situation places the woman in a double jeopardy because she is compelled by the marital pact to submit to her husband even though he is unfaithful, which in turn places the woman under the risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases. In cases where the woman is forced to engage in sexual relations and even raped, she cannot get legal protection because in Nigeria and many other African countries, marital rape is not covered by legislation

and there is a general notion that a man cannot rape his wife.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL DISCUSSION

The concept of conjugal misdeeds in marital relationships is as primordial as human civilization, traceable to as far back as the Biblical depiction of the story of our first parents, Adam and Eve. In the same vein, conflicts in marital relations are endemic to every society and African Literature has a rich tapestry of such conflicts. Ample focus on marital infidelity, violence, rape, and other abuses are adequately captured in literature and this goes to show that the world we live in is imperfect, with imperfect beings who go on to forge marital bonds and reproduce themselves. In many African literatures, when traditional societies are depicted, polygamy is seen as one of the constituents of the cultural fabric of the people. Consequently, it is an accepted norm in Chinua Achebe’s novels like *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. In J.P. Clark’s *The Song of a Goat*, however, the table is turned when Ebieri gets involved with Tonye. This act is viewed as a betrayal and a case of infidelity by Zifa and consequently, leads to a tragic end for the family. The situation would have been different if it were Zifa that had gone on to take a lover, which goes to show that in many parts of Africa, polygamy is seen as the man’s right, while for the woman it is forbidden. In Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Second Class Citizen*, Emecheta expresses the view that spousal violence often results in marital breakdown. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Amatokuwu beats up Nnu Ego for breastfeeding the second wife’s child while in *Second Class Citizen*, Francis resorts to beating and maltreating Adah as a mask for his feelings of inferiority. Both unions break under the weight of spousal violence, with each partner forging different future paths for themselves. Ama Ata Aidoo and Ama Darko examine the

issue of spousal rape in *Changes* and *Beyond the Horizon*. Esi feels dirty and sore after the forceful sexual activity by her husband and this feeling remains etched in her mind even after taking a bath. In *Beyond the Horizon*, Mara calls her sexual experience with her husband “domestic rape” which leaves her feeling ashamed afterwards. Whereas Esi acts promptly and gets a divorce from Oko, Mara continues to endure her husband’s maltreatment and abuse, and oblivious to the extent of her husband’s greed and selfishness, she joins him in Germany only to be turned into a prostitute. The above texts reveal that indeed, there are practices in the marital space that oppose the peaceful coexistence of couples. This idea is further buttressed in Mustafa’s “What if...?” and “A Day in a Hotel Room” which will be approached from the theoretical lens of new criticism.

New criticism is founded on a content-oriented appreciation of texts without recourse to its cultural, historical, or biographical background. It primarily employs the technique of close analytical reading of texts (Augustyn). New criticism is a mode of criticism that grew in the first half of the twentieth century and like formalism, it considers texts as self-contained and sealed, having within it all that is needed to understand the work (Poetry Foundation). New criticism finds its foundations in the books and essays written in the 1920s and 1930s by I.A. Richards, William Empson and T.S. Eliot, all of which lay great emphasis on the text as an autonomous and self-referential entity. The focus is to free the literary text from any dogma and to approach it as a close structure whose essence resides in the relation and interconnection between its parts (Ritchane 283). New critics, therefore, emphasise close reading of texts, paying rapt attention to the interactions between form and meaning (Poetry Foundation).

### **Conjugal Misdeeds in Linda Jummai Mustafa’s “What if...?” and “A Day in a Hotel Room”**

Mustafa’s “What if...?” is a collection of short stories that explore a range of issues that affect the day to day lives of people in the society. The stories x-ray the human condition and provide insights into matrimonial issues, the vagaries of the teaching profession, greed and the consequences of selling the marriageable female to the highest bidder, and what the lack of motherly love and high expectations can cause in family relationships. Two of the stories, “What if...?” and “A Day in a Hotel Room,” explicitly examine the challenges posed by marital infidelity and rape.

The title, “What if...?” is an open-ended phrase. It is a prodding question that challenges one to imagine different scenarios, consider various possibilities, and brainstorm varied interpretations. It is a thought-provoking question that could mean anything. In the context of the story, however, the question, what if? is fully explicated in the last line of the short story, when the narrator, Mama Amos, who is on her sick bed, and about to die, says “what if I had been unmarried?” (17). This question may sound preposterous, and unacceptable to many because in many African societies, women of marriageable age are made to feel that marriage is the ultimate achievement. Hence, single women are disparaged, disproved, and disregarded in the society, and they generally attract more respect when they are mrs somebody. This resonates with the words of Mama Segi’s mother who tells her in the *Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* that, “our world has no patience for spinsters: It spits them out” (101). Hence, women that are not married are made to feel like they are living a wasted, empty, and unproductive life, despite the successes they may record in other vital areas of their lives as aptly seen in Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru*. This situation is further



compounded when women go on to marry but do not produce children, which results in verbal and physical backlashes from the society. And if the statement made by Baba Segi to the childless Bolanle is anything to go by, when he said, “offspring make our visit to the world complete. Do you want to remain a barren maggot? (43),” it therefore means that, women without children can never be complete and neither can they know peace in their states of incompleteness.

In the light of the degrading treatment which childless women get in the society, Mama Amos is supposedly better off, because she is married with children. But her ruminations as she lies on her bed at the verge of death are contrary to this societal perception. The thought processes of the dying protagonist, and the events of her life that lead her to this point of asking what if she had never been married has no other correlation other than the issue of marriage, marital infidelity and the attendant woes that are sometimes associated with it. Through the epistolary form, Mama Amos on her dying bed writes a letter to her best and most respected friend, Aunt Xena, an unmarried lady who is thirty-five years old. The first line of the letter reads thus: “by the time you get to read this letter, I [would] have been buried in a cold, lonely grave with not tombstone on it; a grave people would not like to visit because of its very quiet deserted look” (3). A powerful literary technique used in the story is juxtaposition, whereby the life of Mama Amos is compared with that of Aunt Xena. The lives of both women exemplify the maxim which states that “he who wears the shoe knows where it pinches.” And “the grass is always greener on the other side.” In clear terms, Mama Amos envied Aunt Xena, while Aunt Xena envied Mama Amos.

The source of the envy between the two women can be likened to Maya Angelou’s poem, “Caged bird,” where she

compares the activities of the free and the caged bird. In her words:

A free bird leaps  
On the back of the wind  
And floats downstream till the current ends  
And dips his wing in the orange sun rays  
And dares to claim the sky  
But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams  
His shadow shouts on a nightmare scream  
His wings are clipped and his feet are tied  
So, he opens his throat to sing (Angelou).

From the foregoing, Mama Amos believes that she is a caged bird, with clipped wings and tied feet while Aunt Xena is the free bird. Mama Amos is only able to speak about her marital ordeal on her death bed. And so, in her letter to Aunt Xena, she says “how I envied you! What you so painfully pined for was what I so passionately despised – marriage” (5). Mama Amos’ statement points to the fact that there is a wide chasm between appearance and reality. To the ignorant public, Mama Amos is a settled woman because she is married with children, but only she knows the condition in which she finds herself in the marriage. A deeper gaze at the events of Mama Amos’ life that brings her to this point of bitter regret reveals that her husband is at the heart of her pain and distress. A police officer by occupation, her husband is always the first to “taste” any prostitute in town. Mama Amos reveals:

My husband cheated on me even unto his death. While he recklessly enjoyed sleeping with different faceless women, drinking alcohol, and smoking cigarettes, I, the foolish and honest housewife had no other choice but to accept the gift of madness, this plague that has ravished me up to a painful death (11).

For two years, Mama Amos' husband abandons her and their children for another woman. He only remembers her after he falls critically ill and needed someone to care for him. This is like what plays out in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* where Ramatoulaye is only remembered after her husband had died and she was called upon to mourn him and perform other burial rites. In the tortuous period of Papa Amos' illness, "he would vomit, soil himself and faint" (7). When the time comes for her husband to be discharged, Mama Amos is forced to sell all her valuable possessions as well as "five bags of eguisi" (7) in order to settle his medical bill. Her husband's abandonment of his responsibilities pushes Mama Amos into extreme poverty as the sole provider of the home. This situation coupled with his "strange" illness drives her into penury and mental exhaustion and she often wondered about the nature of his sickness. After his discharge from the hospital, Mama Amos' husband falls on his knees and begs for her forgiveness and thereafter turns a new leaf. He gets involved in domestic tasks like fetching water, bathing the children, and making breakfast and this continues until the day he dies from a car accident.

Still on the analogy of the caged bird, Mama Amos is like a prisoner of love, who is confined to her marital home by the bond of love she has for her husband and her devotion to her children. She tries to live up to the standards of a good wife and mother. Although Mama Amos knows that her husband is a philanderer, her trust in him is unwavering and it is backed with her assumption that "he was careful" (11). The trust she has for her husband continues until after his death and it is after she falls severely ill that Mama Amos realises that the critical illness that her husband suffers from shortly before his death is not an ordinary one. And that even his death from a car accident was an act of suicide he staged to

save himself from the shameful and agonizing death from AIDS.

Mama Amos' husband envelopes her in a bubble of lies pretending and successfully concealing his illness from her until the very end. The attitude of Papa Amos reflects the unfortunate reality of many modern-day marriages. If the marital space cannot provide the peace, love and safety from harm that is expected, one is then forced to wonder where one can find peace, maybe in heaven. After being infected with HIV, Papa Amos continues to have sexual relations with Mama Amos, while she in turn innocently relishes the new version of her changed husband, who had turned into a doting and supportive partner. Mustafa and other writers like Ayobami Adebayo, amongst many others, depict marriage as an institution where deceit and betrayal reigns. In *Stay with Me*, for example, Yejide is deceived into marriage by Akin who is impotent and knows that he cannot fulfil his conjugal duties. He thereafter watches as Yejide runs around in distress looking for a solution to their childlessness. In the case of Papa Amos who cheats on his wife, contracts the deadly HIV and does nothing to protect his wife and mother of his children, one is compelled to recall the words of Ephesians 5:22-25, which is often read in many Christian marriages, "wife submit yourselves to your husband as to the Lord for the husband has authority over his wife as Christ has authority over the church... husbands love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave his life for it (Good News Bible). These words reveal the ideal relationship that should exist between couples. But in these morally decadent times, marriages seem to be built more on self-love, selfishness, and indifference to the plight of one's partner. Unfortunately, it is fast becoming the norm for married couples to engage in clandestine activities that risk the life and wellbeing of the significant other.

A very cogent question that one can ask in view of the biblical text above is, should women remain open and submissive to the sexual advances of their husbands even when the walls of trust have fallen, and the man is involved in extramarital affairs? The words of advice from Mama Amos to Aunt Xena are imbued with wisdom that has been refined in the fire of experience:

As soon as you notice your husband taking ill every fortnight, take him to your own doctor and, without his knowledge, take his blood and test for any signs of the plague. When there is mistrust, do not listen to dramatic preaching of myopic pastors, especially when they tell you to keep the matrimonial bed undefiled... my sister, don't listen to them! A man changes only when something drastic happens to him. 15

While Mama Amos' wishes she had never been married, Aunt Xena ironically longs for what she has oblivious of the pains that she is undergoing. Aunt Xena's expectations are not absurd because the desire for love and companionship is innate to the human nature. After enduring many heart breaks, she genuinely wishes that she is married. Mama Amos' letter is aimed at tearing the veil of naivety and ignorance that covers her face and she tells Aunt Xena to love sensibly and wisely in order not to fall victim to a treacherous partner. Mama Amos, in her letter gives practical steps to follow when she is ready to make the marital decision. "Make sure you look for a man who talks with you, not one that barks orders at you. Never marry a handsome, proud, and self-centred man. Men with these features are the ones who

get carried away by the blinking eyes of seductive women"(15).

Mama Amos' advice to Aunt Xena makes a strong point that marriage should be a well thought out decision devoid of sentiments and fanciful ideas. As against societal notions, being single is not a death sentence, but a time for self-development and preparation for the giant step of marriage. It is interesting to observe that people attend the university between 4-7 years to study for courses upon which they want to base their professional careers. And then proceed to do postgraduate programs to fully specialise in their respective fields. But the contrary is seen when intending singles plan towards getting married. In many cases, not much preparation or thought is given to it, to understand the institution of marriage and what is required to make it successful. This accounts for the spate of marital breakdown in the society today.

The second short story to be analysed is Mustafa's "A Day in a Hotel Room," which centres on an unnamed married woman who flees from her matrimonial home to take refuge in a hotel. The home that is supposed to be a safe zone is not safe for this woman, and she spends her last money to get the cheapest room in a hotel. The only time she feels a little modicum of safety is when she locks the door firmly behind herself. A closer examination of the reason behind this woman's actions reveals that the aggressor that she had fled from is her husband and the reason behind her decision is marital rape and brutality. On a morning that she prepares to go to work, her husband comes up with a different agenda. She was used to his brutality, for he was a man who loved no one, "not even his own mother" (108). When she greets him as a mark of respect in the mornings, the reply is usually a curse and a string of insults. He would begin to ask her if she donated him to her fellow witches the previous night. On this morning, after performing the household

chores of cleaning, cooking, and fetching water from the well, her husband, Segun rushes out from the room to ask her where she is going to and after confirming from her that she is going to work, he asks her “what then should I do to Mr Penis” (109). To deflect attention from the tensed situation, the woman decides to feign ignorance and to wonder why a parent will give their child such a ridiculous name as “Mr Penis.” this earns more insults from her husband, and pointing at his erected manhood, he tells her: “This is Mr Penis” and “I must have my fill before you leave” (109). All the woman’s attempt to explain the precariousness of her position in the office and the fact that another lateness might land her a query and thereafter loss of job goes unheeded by her husband, which the woman cannot comprehend, since it is from her meagre salary that she scrapes to pay the rent and take care of other domestic expenses. Her explanations land her a slap and Segun retorts:

I didn’t pay all that bride price for you to be in my house and be shaking that your ugly buttocks at me without me enjoying what I bought with my hard-earned money. You must satisfy me in bed any time and however I want it. Besides, I did not deflower you. You were already open like the Nnamdi Azikiwe Expressway. Should I not use you like every other man? Prostitute! 110

The above words by Segun reflect the mind-set of ownership which he has towards his wife. A master-slave ownership mentality might have had some modicum of humanity in it. But his attitude towards his wife reflects a kind of ownership that one exercises towards an inferior inanimate object that is hated and despised, only to be used when the need arises. His wife could as well have been a

table that is only useful when there is the need to write on it, after which, it is hatefully pushed aside. This violent outburst is the precursor to more terrible abuse. A scuffle ensues with the woman trying to push her husband away. But this is futile because he swiftly carries her to the bedroom. The violence that follows leaves in the mind the action of bandits or armed robbers who force their way into the house to rob and then decide to rape the women in the house. Even still, such calibre of persons would have had more mercy than the scene where Segun rapes his wife:

As he threw me on the bed, he brought out the kitchen knife. I was horrified at this new form of attack. When I was about to shout, Segun slashed my wrists. Instantly, blood started gushing out. ‘Shush! Don’t say a word. I will have my way or else I will kill you right here,’ Segun threatened. I was violently raped that morning. The blood from my slashed wrists splattered all over the bed, my body and some on his body. The entire scene was a bloody one. When I looked at him as he got up from me, he felt no remorse. 110

The horrendous rape incident by her husband on this fateful morning pushes the woman to flee from her marital home. She had often nursed the thought of leaving Segun after seeing how violent he was, but she was afraid to execute the plan because she feared for her life. The brutal rape that she is subjected to is a whole new level of vicious abuse and so, she takes refuge in the hotel. A very pressing question that must be asked at this point is whether Segun became a monster after he married



the woman or if he had always been a monster. An insight into this is given when the woman reveals an incident where he once displayed his volatile temper. While they were dating, he once tried to knock down his best friend with his car over an argument they had. Despite seeing all these signs, the woman goes on to marry Segun because she believed that she had “finally got a man that truly loved [her]. “I never heeded all the tell-tale signs of Segun being a chronic abusive person” (109). This statement by the woman shows that she ignored, overlooked, or downplayed all the important warning signs that should have helped her to make a better decision regarding the choice of a life partner. This is an important point to note in this story. The seriousness and commitment which marriage demands makes it imperative for prospective couples to approach the courting period as a time of studying the personality traits of the other person and to decide their viability for a long-term union. A key factor that can prompt a woman to make this kind of hasty and poor decision is the desperation to get married. The desperation that makes a woman feels that her biological clock is running, and she might soon become an old maid. Aunt Xena that is discussed in “What if...?” belongs to this category. The two stories jointly make an emphatic statement that marriage is a decision that should be made more with the head than the heart. And even then, it should be a deliberate decision not made from pressure or desperation but with a deep sense of self-awareness and a keen understanding of the responsibilities entailed.

## CONCLUSION

Marital infidelity and rape are indeed two issues that obstruct the peace and wellbeing of couples. In Mustafa's “What if...?” and “A Day in a Hotel Room,” deceit and violence results in tragic consequences for the married female characters. Papa Amos' life is cut short by

the deadly AIDS disease which he callously transmits to his wife; while the unnamed woman in “A Day in the Hotel Room” runs away from her marital home when her life is threatened by her husband who not only rapes her but also attacks her with a knife. The gory details of the two marriages above give a distasteful image of marriage. It shatters the notion of love and security that marriages are presumably built upon and leaves one wondering about the future of the society. In the face of the challenging political and economic conditions in Nigerian and many countries in the world, the home should provide the safety and comfort that is missing in the larger society. These two short stories therefore invite a lot of introspection. Married couples are invited to examine the foundations upon which their marriages are built. And intending couples are similarly encouraged to question the marital choices they are about to make. The suicidal end of Papa Amos and Segun buttresses the idiom which states that one who plays with fire should expect to get burnt. The indulgence in extramarital affairs, the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases to one's partner and other violent marital acts destroys the marriage, and the partners involved. They are acts that should therefore be avoided for the good of each partner, and the society at large.

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