Kinship and Family in Nisa and The Joys of Motherhood

Posted on October 11, 2022

Introduction

Sociologists have long strived to define the concepts of family and kinship along with their varied implications in different societal structures. The definition of the family put forth by Murdock dates back more than half a century ago, and it defines family as a social group that is attributed to shared residence, economic dependability, and procreation. It is the cohabitation of adult males and females involved in a sexual relationship, often having children who may be biological or adopted (1949). However, the definition provided by Murdock is quite limiting, especially when applied in the context of various societies, especially the remote African tribes. This essay aims to explore the distinguishing features of kinship and family life presented by two books, i.e., "Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman" by Marjorie Shostak and "The Joys of Motherhood" by Buchi Emecheta. The essay further sheds light on the life experiences of males and females at different ages as outlined in the books and draws a comparison through a personal reflection of the society of today.

"Nisa: The Life and Words of a Kung Woman" by Marjorie Shostak

The tale begins through the author's introduction of the social context in which her conversations took place with Nisa, a woman belonging to the !Kung ethnic group native to south-eastern Africa. Marjorie Shostak slowly developed an acquaintance with Nisa through a prolonged period of fieldwork, learning about kinship ties and women's roles among the !Kung community, along with an exploration of each major life phase in detail. At the beginning of the book, Shostak shared the need to learn the !Kung language to communicate directly with the subjects of her study; however, it was not until ten months into her stay that she was able to conduct her first real communication. Although Shostak conducted interviews with many women despite her initial dislike, it was Nisa's colourful language and vivid storytelling that made her an ideal interviewee for the author. The book presents accounts of Nisa's life, which every young woman can relate to, regardless of the wide chasm of culture and geography.

Kinship among the !Kung Community

"Nisa: The Life and Words of a Kung Woman" sheds light on the various patterns of kinship common among the !Kung community. With girls marrying at an average age of 16 and boys between the ages

of 20 and 30, the practice reflects the initiation of adulthood. Even in cases where girls get married at a younger age, the sexual relationship is formed only after the girl reaches puberty. One of the practices common among their community is that of trial marriages, and a girl could enter many such kinship ties before deciding to bear children with a life-long partner. These early trial marriages are arranged by adults. However, cousin marriages are considered taboo. Forced marriages are common as the parents of the girls seek to secure bride service – a practice where the groom secures meat for the family. There is great competition between the parents of the groom and the bride to have them live with them to ensure help and closeness to the forthcoming grandchildren. The girls, however, have the right to insist upon concluding a marriage if they feel unaffectionate towards their husbands.

The trial kinship practice is often stressful due to a vast age difference and the couple being strangers. In most instances, men are sexually mature and eager to form a sexual relationship. With a dearth of young marriageable females, men often cooperate and patiently spend the courtship period even if the girl displays indifference. Although multiple marriages are common among the !Kung, most people have one long-term life partner. Among the !Kung community, divorce is quite common, and in the majority of the cases, it is initiated by women. The concept of virginity is not attributed much importance or priority. Divorce is also not stigmatized, and often, both partners remarry within a year. Although monogamy is the common norm, polygamous households of co-wives are also acceptable. Levirate marriages and sororal polygyny are also practised. Among co-wives, the second wife is considered lower in rank. Co-wives often develop friendships and achieve intimacy over time. Infidelity is quite common as well; however, spouses are always given priority over lovers.

Family Life among the !Kung Community

The family life of the !Kung community is based on close contact between the infants and the mothers through the provision of constant care and nurturing by both parents. Infants, both boys and girls, are nursed by the mothers for three years or more, and in some cases, children are nursed until the mother conceives again. Once the mother becomes pregnant again, nursing is ceased, and the child is no longer carried in a sling and must walk independently. This is a period of huge adjustment for the young child and support is often provided by grandparents and aunts. Soon children become interested in active play and feel joyful in being the elder sibling. Parenting is lenient among the !Kungs, as the parents believe that children are irresponsible and that they ultimately grow up to become contributing members of the tribe. They believe that children learn as they mature and that social pressure and the desire to conform to the values of the tribe result in the process of learning appropriate behaviour.

The author highlights the family ties among siblings who often feel resentment towards the younger ones for taking their position as a centre of affection. Children are usually born approximately four years apart as prolonged periods of nursing act as natural birth control. The family life of the !Kung community is depicted through Nisa’s experiences; she learns to be affectionate to her younger brother, Kumsa, when he is a baby; however, as he grows up, their physical fights increase, and she

resents him. She narrates incidents of her relatives' visits and cousins playing and fighting together, although children are supervised for safe play. She recalls the incidents of her father kicking her pregnant mother in the stomach, attributing violence as a learned behaviour. The casual attitude with which Nisa narrates the incident of her infant sister dying depicts the commonality of infant mortality in the !Kung community. Overall, the families are closely knit, and the death of a family member requires major adjustment by the remaining members.

Life Experiences of Males and Females – Infancy to Old Age

In every community, males and females are expected to have various roles, which they learn through socialization and gaining life experiences. During childhood and up till teenage, the !Kungs spend a lot of leisure time playing. The !Kung community does not strictly segregate boys and girls, and children mostly play together, and playgroups include children of all ages. Girls are as boisterous as boys, and play does not promote competition; rather, the focus is upon the improvement of personal skills. Since the children do not attend school, it is through play and imitation that they learn the adult activities. Playing house and pretending to play marriage and parenthood, children internalize the community roles of hunting and gathering along with other activities such as singing and dancing. As these young children discover sex by watching their parents in the huts during nighttime, sexual games become a part of their play, and experimentation among siblings is common.

Upon reaching maturity, the boys and girls are entered into trial marriages and ultimately marry a lifelong partner. Women are involved in child-rearing and food preparation. They also collect plant-based foods and water, while men are often involved in hunting. There are no strict gender roles, and work is accomplished collaboratively and without shame. The concept of collective mothering is also common among women in which they gather and rest under baobab trees while nursing their babies. Women are autonomous in making their own rules rather than complying with their husbands' orders. They gather food three days a week, balancing their time in work and leisure. At a later age, women gain more influence and help their children choose spouses to build community ties.

The !Kung boys, at a very young age, are involved in the practice of hunting, and during that time, they observe the process and learn about hundreds of plants and animal species. The community normalizes the fear of young boys on their initial hunts and does not associate shame with such feelings. Hunters are deemed eligible to marry once they have their first large kill, mostly around the age of 15 to 18. Sharing and modesty are common virtues, and after a hunt, meat is shared according to pre-established rules. By the age of 60 years, when the hunting career is considered to be over, most hunters have killed hundreds of big and small animals. In the older age, men contribute to the community by catching small animals, setting up traps, and foraging for food. Men also equip women with clothing and tools (Shostak, 1981).

“The Joys of Motherhood” by Buchi Emecheta

“The Joys of Motherhood” narrates a tale of a traditional woman named Nnu Ego whose experiences helped her realize motherhood as her greatest joy and her utmost defeat. She gained insight into her identity development and completion through motherhood – giving birth to many children, especially her sons. Despite living an impoverished life, Ego regarded herself as rich as she was a mother of three sons who would ensure that she was comfortable in old age – a notion quite common among the Nigerian community. The rise of colonialism and the new ideas about the role of a woman brought many challenges for Ego, resulting in a lonely death. The story highlights the tragedy of the main character whose sole life purpose of creating the joy of motherhood left her friendless and alone.

Kinship among Nigerian Culture

“The Joys of Motherhood” highlights the pattern of kinship most prevalent in the Nigerian community. Polygamous kinship relations and child-bearing are the central themes of the book. Patriarchal domination and the portrayal of masculine ideology are eminent throughout the story. Girls are considered eligible for marriage at sixteen years of age, and the primary function of women is childbearing. Co-wives share the burden of household duties and tend to the needs of their shared husband. They also assist each other in child-rearing. However, in the case of Nnu Ego, there is potential jealousy observed towards the second wife. Another example of kinship prominent in the book relates to the inheritance of wives of a deceased brother. This results in the wife of the dead brother moving into the compound with her children. The author presents multiple marriages as a need of that society; however, not every man opts for it, especially the ones unable to support additional members of the family.

Family Life in the Nigerian Community

Set in a society influenced by colonialism, the family life structure evolves as the native population adopts the new systems of belief. The traditional views about family are depicted through the beliefs of Nnu Ego, who considers individual needs to be of secondary importance in contrast to the livelihood of the family as a group. Each family member is considered to be a part of the whole, ensuring contribution towards the betterment of the household. The contrasting views of the younger generation are evidenced by prioritizing individual desires over those of the family. Oshia’s desire to gain an education influences his decision to accept a scholarship and move to the United States. This shift is observed in Nnu Ego’s daughter, who also breaks tradition to exercise her right to choose a life partner of her liking. These new patterns of familial ties clash with Nnu Ego’s beliefs, which prioritize her role as a mother throughout her life. Her upbringing influenced her ideals of being a perfect mother, and to achieve that ideal, she remained friendless throughout her life, dying a lonely death.

Life Experiences

The Ibo, or the Igbo as they are often referred to, are a group of people native to south-eastern Nigeria. Their traditional culture strictly regulates women's roles and promotes their subordination to men. Oppression of females, i.e., the wives and daughters, is exercised under the male privilege that men enjoy. In such a male-dominated society, the life experiences of women vary from those of men, as presented by Emecheta. Females are portrayed as a marginalized group oppressed through gender, race, and class, and their methodical silencing often bars them from reaching their optimal potential. The prevalence of patriarchy is evident in that women feel pride in giving birth to boys, and despite impoverished living conditions, a mother of sons is deemed to have high prestige. Gender roles are taught from childhood, and women learn that marriage and motherhood are their primary goals. To cope with the economic pressure, women may assist men in earning by setting up stalls to sell goods. Men often leave for long periods to earn money.

Nnaife and Nnu Ego depict the stereotypical roles of men and women of the Ibo culture that is based in a time of change. The erosion of the old tradition of boys serving as the main support of the family is observed in the story. A girl's skill and education earn her respect rather than an increased bride price. While the !Kung community did not feel shame in any task, the story of Nnu Ego describes her unease that her husband did laundry and washed personal garments belonging to women – she attributed this subservience as a compromise of his manhood. Due to changing times, the gender roles are quite blurred and even though most women identified themselves as mothers, they occasionally took up the role of being the breadwinner for the family as well (Emecheta, 1979).

Reflection and Insight

The books "Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman" by Marjorie Shostak and "The Joys of Motherhood" by Buchi Emecheta present kinship relations, family life, and gender role experiences in societies much different from ours. While reading both books, certain similarities common to both cultures are observed, which include a trend of early marriage of girls, with 16 years being the average age. In regards to kinship, polygamy is common to both cultures and is attributed importance in terms of the distribution of the burden of household tasks and child-rearing. Although co-wives are common, in both stories, the protagonist women display feelings of animosity and jealousy towards the other wives. While sexual exploration is an eminent theme of Shostak's book, and its prevalence is observed even in children's games and play, Emecheta's book highlights the theme of motherhood. Women in both societies perform the duties of child-rearing, household chores, and helping the men provide for the family.

All over the world, various types of kinship practices are in place, with most cultures of the West promoting monogamy as the only form of marriage while others practice polygamy in the form of polygyny and polyandry. Fraternal polyandry and sororal polygyny, along with levirate and sororate,

are forms of marriages prevalent in cultures around the world. A newer form of marriage structure introduced in Shostak's book is that of a trial marriage of girls who have not yet reached puberty. This not only promotes the young couple learning about married life roles but also allows multiple trial marriages and women's right to divorce, depicting the openness of this society towards practices that are most suited to their needs. Compared to the !Kung's concept of trial marriages, matrimony in our society is more structured and is a legal affair. Also, there are laws in place to prevent child marriages. The practice of arranged marriage is not limited to the !Kungs or the Nigerian community; it is practised in many other cultures around the world, and adults choose their spouses based on practical reasons.

The books by both authors explore gender-attributed roles, and much like the practice in the modern world, the !Kungs are not bound by gender constraints. Even when young, the !Kung girls are as rowdy as boys. They do not feel shame in performing any task, and the ultimate goal is to benefit the family; however, a shift from this is observed in Emecheta's book, and with changing times, the individual interests and desires took precedence over that of the group. Conclusively, there is no single form of kinship and family structure that can be applied across the globe; therefore, it is the culture that shapes the most suitable practice for survival.

References

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