

**Sisterhood as Survival Strategy: Overcoming Child-marriage Trauma in Phebe Jatau's
*The Hounds, and Maryam Bobi's Bongel***

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Abstract

Child marriage is a pervasive issue affecting millions of girls globally but more so in developing countries. Africa has one of the highest prevalence of child marriage globally while Nigeria has one of the highest prevalence in the continent. Within Nigeria, the prevalence varies with the north having the highest rate. The practice of child marriage is a violation of the rights of the child and it has negative devastating consequences for the girl child. Victims of child marriage are exposed to intersectional abuse and oppression which leaves them traumatized. Reflecting the social realities in their environment, the pathetic plight of the child bride is reflected by Maryam Bobi and Phebe Jatau in their literary works. However, despite the devastating trauma that the protagonists were subjected to, the authors contend that the victims can be liberated, empowered, and self-actualized. Using Maryam Bobi's *Bongel* and Phebe Jatau's *The Hound* as the critical literary text for the analysis, Obioma Nnaemaka's Nego feminism with particular emphasis on her sisterhood concept is the theoretical framework. It is discovered that though child marriage is a patriarchal supported practice that constitutes a threat to the girl child emancipation, female friendship offers comfort, support, stability, and healing in addition to helping victims overcome the ravages of child marriage and navigate the victims toward the pursuit of their dreams and eventual elevation. The authors demonstrate and assert the possibility of female friendship and sisterhood support in liberating and empowering victims of child marriage.

Keywords: Female friendship, Sisterhood, Child-marriage, Liberation, Empowerment.

Introduction

Child marriage, defined as a marriage before the age of 18 is a pervasive issue affecting millions of girls worldwide. Although child marriage affects both sexes, girls are disproportionately affected as they are the majority of the victims and have a ratio of six to one in comparison with

their male counterparts. With this understanding, the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF, 2007) defines child marriage as “Any marriage carried out below the age of 18 before the girl is physically, physiologically and psychologically ready to shoulder the responsibility of marriage and childbearing”. The practice of child marriage is noteworthy in the poor countries of the world and within the poor sections of most given country’s populations. Africa has the highest rate of child marriage globally, with 38% of girls married before the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2020), while Nigeria has one of the highest rates in Africa with 43% of girls married before the age of 18. However, the rates vary quite significantly across Nigeria as the Northern part of Nigeria has the highest rates of child marriage in contrast with the other regions. The practice of child marriage is a violation of the rights of the child and it has significant negative effects on the emotional, health, and psychological well-being of the child (Ahmed, 2017). Many interrelated factors can be said to be the cause of the high prevalence of this practice in the region. This includes the existence of cultural and religious norms that promote child marriage. For instance, countries with a preponderance of Islamic belief in “child or early marriage” are known to have a high prevalence of child marriage since influential religious leaders often support the practice and voice strong opposition to campaign against it. Poverty is another significant factor that encourages child marriage as families view early marriage as a means of reducing financial burden (Oxfam 2017). Cultural and societal norms also play a role, with child marriage often seen as a way to preserve family honour and protect girls from premarital sex (Murray 2018). In recent times, security issues, armed banditry and abduction of school pupils have further expanded the surge of child marriage. Such girls who marry early are more likely exposed to intersectional abuses such as domestic. A crop of female writers from northern Nigeria reflects the social reality of the victims of child marriage in their works. They not only reveal the pathetic plight of young girls forced into early marriage under a suppressing patriarchal system but also highlight how intersectional abuse and exploitation leave them traumatized and devastated. However, the writer goes on to suggest that through the strategy of women's friendship and sisterhood support the victim of child marriage can be helped and empowered to overcome child trauma and its devastating impact.

Female writers have in various instances in the past relied on the concept of sisterhood as one of their weapons to challenge the patriarchal system that has oppressed women in their society. Within feminism, sisterhood refers to the bond of solidarity and support among women. The

concept of sisterhood has been a constant theme in literature, particularly in the works of other female writers. As African female writers came to the scene, with Nwapa's *Efuru* in 1966, they exploited the theme of sisterhood support and female bonding in their works to help each other. This theme is woven into various literary works of African female writers. In Bauchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), sisterhood support plays a crucial role in the lives of female characters, particularly the protagonist Nnu Ego, she finds solace in her relationship with fellow market women who provide emotional support. In Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*, the author explores the strength of the female relationship and how two friends Aissatou and Ramatoulaye assist and support each other as they grapple with the challenge of marriage, family, and identity in Senegalese society. In Chimamanda's *Americanah*, female friendship and support in the life of the protagonist, Ifemelu helps her to cope as she navigates the challenge of immigration, identity, and relationships. Zaynab Alkali in *The Descendants* equally utilizes the concept of sisterhood and female friendship between her protagonists. Seytu and Glo to achieve self-actualization for Setyu who is a victim of child marriage.

Methods and Material

In this paper, two northern Nigerian authors, Maryam Bobi, and Phebe interrogate the possibility of using female friendship as a strategy of liberating and elevating traumatized child brides. Obioma Nnaemeka stated in her proponent "that women appropriate and refashion oppressive space through friendship, sisterhood, and solidarity and in the process reinvent themselves" (Nnaemeka 1997 p. 67). With the above assertion, Nnaemeka is of the view that the suffering of the oppressed and repressed African woman can be lightened by the friendship and support of fellow women. To this effect, such a show of alliance and solidarity empowers victims strengthens them emotionally, psychologically, and financially, and navigates them toward self-actualization. In African society, women frequently refer to one another as sisters out of a sense of togetherness. This sisterhood is manifested in the cooperation rather than the competition with each other. African women also share a collective identity, where individual interests are subsumed by the needs of the community, as seen in the common practice of African women sharing the responsibilities of things such as childcare, household chores, and economic activities with themselves in their community (Nnaemeka, 2004). Mama(1996) affirms that African women's communalism is characterized by mutual support and solidarity among women who often provide

emotional, financial, and practical assistance to one another. Sisterhood is thus one of the traits of African womanism in that it refers to the reality of women in Africa who are communal, looking out for the good of others rather than being individualistic. Nego feminism as a brand of African feminism draws on this innate nature of African women and advocates for its use as a tool for the emancipation of the oppressed gender. In this wise, Obioma Nnaemeka's feminist theory, known as Nego feminism with emphasis on the concept of sisterhood offers a realistic framework for this study. The employment of this theory enables a feminist strategic avenue to assist the girl child who goes through intersectional oppression, such as child marriage by rendering support and empowering victimized child brides to achieve gender equality. Nnaemeka argues that an appropriate feminist theory must recognize and adapt to specific cultural, historical, and social contexts, she thus suggests that feminist engagement in Africa should focus on collaboration, negotiation, and compromise, in contrast to Western feminism which seeks to challenge, disrupt, and deconstruct (Nnaemaka, 2004).

Nnaemaka describes Nego-feminism as no-ego feminism and negotiation. In her words, she asserts that; 'in the foundation of shared values in many African cultures are the principles of negotiation, give and take, compromise, and balance. Here, negotiation has the double meaning of "give and take/exchange" and "cope with successfully/go around." African feminism challenges through negotiations and compromise. It knows when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal land mines; it also knows when, where, and how to go around patriarchal land mines. In other words, it knows when, where, and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts" (2004: 377 – 378). Writing on the relevance of sisterhood support, she insists that female friendship and sisterhood are essential components of African women's lives that should be utilized and reclaimed to achieve the goal of gender equality. Nnaemeka thus emphasizes the cultural significance and empowering potential of sisterhood and female friendship in Africa and extension Nigeria. The two authors contend through their narratives that the well-being, happiness, and ultimate victory of these victims of child marriage are intricately connected with the lives of other women. The authors explore diverse forms of deep and honest friendship between the child brides and other women who help and support them physically, financially, and emotionally.

In *Bongel*, Bobi reveals that Bongel's childhood is lost to an early marriage at the age of twelve to a sixty-five-year-old Alhaji where she is traumatized as a child-bride. A teen pregnancy results in

birth complications that culminate in a stillbirth and obstetric fistula, factors that lead to her abandonment and divorce. However, a fresh start as a student brings her to develop close friendships with Kauthar and Salma. These women's bonds help her to cope with the negative consequences of child marriage and the challenges she encounters.

Jatau's *The Hound* is a poignant portrayal of the complexities and traumatic effects of early marriage and the eventual liberation of the victim through the tool of sisterhood support and female friendship. Jatau's protagonist Rebecca is abused and repressed in an early marriage to Mr. James who later abandons her with "a hydrocephalus baby" (The Hound 90). Traumatized and left alone with a special needs child and without an obvious means of survival, Rebecca is perplexed about how to cope with her plight. However, in line with Nnaemeka's Neco feminism which encourages the identification of coping mechanisms by females in a patriarchal setup, the author employs sisterhood support and female friendship to elevate her from her trodden state.

Sisterhood as a Ray of Sunshine in Adversity in Bobi's *Bongel*

In *Bongel*, there is a focus on the peculiarities of sisterhood through the friendship of Bongel and Kauthar and later Salma. Bongel and Kauthar met on the first day of resumption at the university during the registration process. Bongel has just been admitted into the university on a state government scholarship after her ordeal in child marriage and the hurdles of surgeries for obstetric fistula. Grateful for the scholarship that covers her tuition, she is at a loss on how she will sustain herself in terms of feeding and other personal needs while on campus. As providence would have it, she and Kauthar meet and become close intimate friends. They start by "sitting beside each other in class. Whoever got to class first reserved a sit for the other" (*Bongel p 12*) and "hanging out at the Sultan cafeteria for lunch breaks" (*Bongel p:11*). Their friendship develops to the extent that "it became common knowledge that to find one of them, you must first look for the other person" (*Bongel p:11*). Their bond was obvious to everyone, "the peak of it came when Kauthar decided to move in with Bongel from campus instead of coming from home as she used to do" (*Bongel p;12*) the relationship is so knitted that "*Bongel* could hardly imagine life without Kauthar. They advise and empower each other stretching the bond of friendship into sisterhood. "They have become like Siamese twins" (p. 11). The friendship between Kauthar and Bongel reflects the interconnectedness of the African woman. Collaborating with Nnaemeka's view that African

women are culturally communal, taking pleasure in relating with their fellow women and rendering mutual support to each other, the friends extend their relationship to other members of their family. Kauther's mother accepts and treats Bongel as a daughter. With this situational context, Weems opines; "If all sisters simply loved each other, our children would be more secure, for they would not just have one female guardian, but many to attend to their needs" (as cited in El Arbaour, 2023, p. 54). The sisterhood relationship between Bongel and Kauther creates a bond that allows an alliance to assist each other. As depicted in the text, Kauther is from a relatively richer background compared to Bongel's. Thus, in their relationship, Bongel benefited financially such that when they go out for lunch at the cafeteria "Kauther always insists on paying for the snacks and soft drinks" (p 11). Also, during their stay in the hostel together "though Bongel didn't ask for it, Kauther improved her standard of living by ensuring they didn't lack essential household supplies. In addition, any weekend she went shopping or visited her home which was barely an hour's drive from school, she would buy things for *Bongel*" (p. 48). This financial support relieves Bongel from worrying about supporting herself through medical school. The financial support provided resonates with Nnaemeka's stance that the African woman needs to render mutual support and solidarity to enable the oppressed to navigate the challenges of poverty (Nnaemeka, 2004).

Again, the author brings up the need for emotional and psychological support for the African woman to the fore when Bongel is depressed and feels misunderstood by her close friends. Her period of pain and grief is made easier to bear with the friendship she makes with Salma a female coursemate. "It is the ever-smiling Salma" who announced in an attempt to cheer her up "I brought you breakfast" (83).). Accepting her arm of friendship, "Salma stayed on to watch Bongel eat and share jokes" (pg:83). Salma's sisterhood friendship helps Bongel to heal and carry on emotionally as she attests "Bongel couldn't have felt more thankful to Almighty Allah for bringing her some comfort at such a time" (pg. 83). Their friendship comforts Bongel and allows her to forget her negative experiences. Metaphorically, Salma is a ray of sunshine in Bongel's troubled existence. Bongel testifies that "Walking shoulder-to-shoulder with Salma to the exam hall on Monday morning evoked a feeling she had forgotten. It seemed as if the sun had inched out from under a cloud after a century." The emotional and psychological support provided by Salma helps Bongel to feel validated and understood, calming her feelings of isolation and loneliness. She is thus comforted and regains her sense of security and reassurance about her self-worth which in turn

boosts her confidence and increases her resilience to succeed and overcome the hurdles of the patriarchal society. The author here validates Nnaemeka's assertion that "women appropriate and refashion oppressive spaces through friendship, sisterhood and solidarity". (Nnaemeka 2004 p.67)

Sisterhood as an Alliance for Support in *The Hound*

In *The Hound*, the friendship, female bonding, and sisterhood support between Rebecca and some other female characters, Mulikat, Mrs. Ogunkoya, Ugozi, and Aunty Maimuna help Rebecca to survive and cope emotionally during and after an oppressive, repressive, and suffocating marriage. Her moving sojourn as a poor village girl, discriminated against at college, her toxic marriage experience, and her eventual emergence as a heroine are largely due to the sisterhood support, she enjoyed. At the beginning of Rebecca's academic pursuit at an "elitist school in Lagos" (*The Hound*, p:35), she is faced with a lot of challenges largely due to her background. "Rebecca became more conscious of her poverty day to day. Not only was she looked down on because she was from the north, her classmate also discriminated against her because she was poor" (*The Hound*, p:33). Consequently, "she felt little, she felt small in her own eyes" (*The Hound*, p:33). Her precarious situation makes her question her fate, "Why am I poor? she pondered" (*The Hound*, p:34). She needs a friend and wants to belong, but this she finds difficult as "she felt condemned to mediocrity: that everyone was better than her and that she has nothing to offer" (*The Hound*, p:34). The unfriendly atmosphere in which Rebecca finds herself is to affect her adversely if not for the timely close friendship she clicks with Mulikat, a daughter to a Nigerian diplomat who was serving in Romania. The bond between the two girls helps Rebecca to cope emotionally as well as academically. Before now, the author recounts that "Rebecca was not a very brilliant student obviously because of the major setback she had from lack of proficiency in the use of English language.... she lagged. Her father was often disappointed with her report card." (*The Hound*, p:44). However, the togetherness and bond soon have a positive effect on the girls, especially on Rebecca as "Mulikat and Rebecca often studied together during prep and at weekends. She learned to study from her friend. Mulikat.... "Who read her books over and again until she could make sense of its contents...she excelled. Rebecca learned to do the same" (*The Hound*, p:46-47). The solidarity between the two young girls helps them to overcome the challenge of not being accepted in a new environment and the challenge that comes with adapting. Studying together, they pass their 'O' levels with flying colours. They decided to enrol in the same school for their higher school

certificates. Rebecca at this point, admits that apart from the desire to acquire education, “her other motivation was Mulikat.... she looked forward to being with her so they could continue their friendship” (*The Hound*, p:52). On being informed that the best students in Arts and Science subjects were given government scholarships, the two friends strive hard to excel. In line with the feminist concept of sisterhood which has a positive impact, Rebecca and Mulikar can provide emotional and psychological support to one other which helps to build self-confidence, self-esteem, and resilience, thus enabling them to overcome obstacles, challenges, and barriers in the course of their study. Their togetherness provides a platform to share knowledge and skills thereby facilitating mutual learning and growth (Mama 1996, p.189). According to Amadiume, the concepts also help African women to develop a sense of identity and belonging which is essential for building self-confidence and self-worth (1987 p.156). As revealed in the novel, the two female friends were able to achieve academic height which they could not have reached on their separate efforts. This is evidenced when the author says; “Their joint efforts pay off as they both got the scholarship” (*The Hound*, p:53). “Having been set on the path of academic success through the bond of sisterhood with Mulikat, it is through the support, assistance, and intervention of Mrs Ogunkoya who takes special interest in Rebecca that she is admitted into the university. Furthermore, as a poor undergraduate who cannot even afford textbooks and clothes to go to class, it is another female relationship that gives her the financial and emotional support she needs during her most vulnerable time.

Her friend “Ngozi, one of her course mates gave her used clothes and jewellery. She was rich and was married to a rich lawyer” (*The Hound* p. 83). After her marriage fails, she is traumatized and feels abandoned. From her marriage experience with James. Aunty Maimuna, who is Rebecca’s older sister’s friend fills the void such that “they were close” (*The Hound*, p:94). Though Aunty Maimuna is not in support of the marriage between Rebeccas and James, “she however decided that hers was not to condemn but guide and side with Rebecca on any decision she made” (*The Hound*, p:95). The novel emphasizes how the mutual female solidarity eventually turns into female sisterhood. With this “Aunty Maimuna supported Rebecca and Ruth while they lived in the family house in Kaduna. She consistently supplied money, food, and clothing as often as she could” (*The Hound*, p:95). In this text, the sisterhood relationship between Aunty Maimuna and Rebecca is empowering and as such, the latter becomes stronger and revives her dream to forge

on despite the odds. The author recounts that “Aunty Maimuna brought Rebecca everywhere to the company she kept, the company of the high and mighty----that gave Rebeca new hopes, and she learned to dream again and to hold her dreams”. The author here also agrees with Nnaemeka’s concept that Nego feminism prioritizes the empowerment of African women, recognizing the significance of education in promoting gender equality and social justice (Nnaemeka 2004, 145). She argues that education should be contextualized within African cultural values, promoting a holistic approach that addresses the social, economic, and political realities of African women’s lives (Nnaemeka, 2004, 167). To her, the girl child should be empowered through education as this is a vital tool that promotes social change (Nnaemeka 2004, 213). In this regard, Rebecca’s achieving her goals and dreams impacts others. “She was interested in how to help women like her do school and be self-actualized (*The Hound* 111).

Results and Conclusion

The two authors depict through their narrative that the well-being, happiness, and victory of their protagonists are intricately connected with the lives of other women through the display of cultural and communal practice of sisterhood. A situational context that shows the interconnectedness of women’s lives, the rendering of mutual support to each other, Moreso to the more vulnerable. The writers collaborating on Nnaemeka’s stance also reveal how responsibilities are shared with other women in their communities to relieve pressure on the affected victims. In their novel, Bobi and Jatau emphasize how female friendship can ease pain and give women the strength they need to face and overcome trauma caused by male subjugation. The novels illuminate that female friendship and sisterhood empower victims of child marriage to overcome obstacles and challenges. To this end, Bongel and Rebecca’s fulfillment of their dreams and eventual elevation to heroines after traumatic experiences of child marriage serve as evidence of the power of female friendship that works to free the girl child from an oppressive patriarchal system.

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