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Respectability Restored in Abioseh Nicol's "The Truly Married Woman,"¹ Echoed in Alice Walker's "Roselily"²

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"What is your mission here?" Ayo's father asked sternly.

Ajayi's uncle answered humbly:

We have come to pluck a red, red rose
That in your beautiful garden grows.
Which never had been plucked before.
So lovelier than any other."

"Will you be able to nurture our lovely rose well?" another of Ayo's male relations asked.

Ajayi's family party replied:

"So well shall we nurture your rose
Twill bring forth many others."³

Though replete with irony, this excerpt from "The Truly Married Woman" exemplifies the formulation of the restoration of respectability via engagement ritual utterances as demanded by the customs of a particular African people, in this case Sierra Leonian. A similar notion of restoration is reflected in Alice Walker's short story "Roselily." While Sierra Leone is the backdrop for the "Truly Married Woman," the United States of America (South) is the setting for "Roselily." Even though it is by happenstance that these two stories are related, both handle the theme of restoration poignantly.

When "The Truly Married Woman" opens, it is clear that Ajayi has spent twelve happy years with Ayo who has borne him three children (the fourth one is on the way); however, for no apparent reason, Ajayi has never gotten around to marrying Ayo "legally." Ayo's departure from home to live with Ajayi represents the spurning of Sierra Leonian traditional values at her own risk; consequently, "her father never spoke to her again after she had left home."⁴

As the plot unfolds, unusual circumstances are responsible for jogging Ajayi out of his indecision to marry Ayo. Three American missionaries happen to pass through Sierra Leone and call on Ajayi because he had once written to their organization, the World Crusading Alliance, in Minnesota, hoping to receive free illustrated Bibles from them "which he might give away or sell."⁵ His request included "large productions of religious paintings" which he would use to adorn his parlor or his bedroom wall.⁶ Even though he never received a response from the missionaries, Ajayi is honored by the fact he has been remembered. He invites the missionaries to his home: "Mine is a humble abode."⁷ "No abode is humble that is illuminated by Christian love," Olsen, the missionary replies.⁸ Ajayi promptly dispatches a fellow clerk to his house to alert Ayo that he and the visi-

tors would be arriving in half an hour. Ayo prepares the house in such a manner that all traces of a non-Christian appearance are removed or hidden:

Ayo whisked off the wall all their commercial calendars with suggestive pictures. She propped up family photographs which had fallen face downwards on the table. She removed the Wild West novels and romance magazines from the parlour and put instead an old copy of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and a prayer book which she believed would add culture and religious force to the decorations. She remembered the wine glasses and the beer-advertising table-mats in time and put those under the sofa. She just had time to change to her Sunday frock and borrow a wedding ring from her neighbour when Ajayi and the guests arrived.⁹

The visit is successful. The naive missionaries are particularly impressed with a truly happy Christian family whose photograph they take to publish in their magazine:

In some peculiar way Ajayi felt he and Ayo should marry, as millions of Americans would see their picture—Olsen had assured him of this—as "One saved and happy African family."¹⁰

The role of the missionaries in this story is somewhat messianic in that they are indirectly instrumental in bringing about a formal union between Ayo and Ajayi and, more importantly, a reconciliation of Ayo with her family, especially her father. At the same time, the missionaries' visit inevitably disrupts Ajayi's cozy lifestyle of nonchalance and noncommittal to a "marriage." Hitherto, Ajayi has been under no pressure to marry Ayo; Ayo, however, is obviously the one most affected by the brunt of culture.¹¹ As is the case here, for certain behaviors, the men do not seem to be subjected to the same standards demanded of the woman. Culture according to W.H. Goodenough is "whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members..."¹² The couple have lived together and had raised children despite familial disapproval and societal displeasure, for, as Carmel Dinan puts it, "There is emerging in urban [Africa] an increasingly large number of women who have decided to break the traditionally defined roles of wife and mother..."¹³ This departure of course creates a conflict between the old and the new, between the

traditional and the modern ways of life as exemplified in Jane Bakaluba's novel *Honeymoon for Three*.¹⁴ Naiga violates societal norms by rejecting the man chosen for her by her father and falling in love with somebody else, Nuwa. Much family conflict is caused by Naiga and Nuwa's relationship because her family is "heathen" and his family is Christian. But in the end, goodwill prevails and the two families are reconciled. Clearly, in *The Honeymoon for Three*, the old has gradually given in to the contemporary ideas of triumph.¹⁵ According to Obiechina, it is the

weakening of familial control over people...and economic independence of young people [that has] ...destroyed the matchmaking rights and their corresponding power to intervene as a stabilizing influence on marriage.¹⁶

New ideas are considered detrimental to practices supposedly essential to the spiritual and physical preservation of the village and clan. Ironically, traditionalists, in many cases, are faced with a dilemma. While holding onto traditional values, they easily fall prey to modern equivalents of traditional assets. For example, they will demand money in cash in lieu of the bride price or dowry that normally comes in a different form. Couples who have evaded the matchmaking process legitimized by the society are, however, not excused from paying the bride price. Africans generally find themselves at a crossroads in religion and cultural matters, so they feel they need to fulfill their conjugal responsibilities by paying the brideprice and by arranging a wedding ceremony: traditional, church, or both, even after many years of cohabitation.

As evidenced in "The Truly Married Woman," syncretistic beliefs pervade the lives of many Africans who have embraced Christianity. Thus, the traditional and church institutions exert a strong influence over the people.¹⁷ The church in this story capitalizes on the bearing of children out of wedlock, thus Ajayi and Ayo are required to pay higher baptismal fees as a penalty. It is well to note that despite the ostracism that Ayo's father has imposed on her, because procreation is a central institution in African society, Ayo's mother risks her husband's ire by paying secret visits to Ayo's children's baptisms. Ayo's mother rubberstamps the fact that her daughter is able to bear children. As an African woman, she is well aware of the indignities barren women in her society chafe under. Procreation is considered essential for purposes of maintaining the continuity of the tribe.¹⁸ In normal circumstances, of course, a young woman is prepared by her kin for marriage and for the transmission of cultural norms of the society to her children. Her children will be expected to do likewise when they become of age and thus continue the life cycle.

Ajayi's proposal to marry Ayo inevitably provides her with the opportunity to endeavor to make reparation, to make things right with her kin as well as her religion. Accordingly, however ironic this may sound to the reader, on the evening of the proposal, Ayo refuses intimacy with Ajayi

until the marriage has been consummated: "No...you mustn't. Wait until after the marriage." "Why?" ... "Because it will not somehow be right..."¹⁹ To set the stage for a new beginning, and as an act of contrition, Ayo moves herself and all her possessions back to her father's house. Her children, on the other hand, are sent to her older sister's house.

Wedding preparations are made in the normal way, as if Ayo had never lived with a man and bore him children. As is the practice with many African families who have embraced Christianity, a traditional engagement ceremony is still conducted, in this case the day before the church wedding. It is at this ceremony that Ajayi's relatives officially ask for Ayo's hand in marriage as well as make the pronouncement:

We have come to pluck a red, red, rose
That in your beautiful garden grows.
Which never has been plucked before . . .
So shall we nurture your rose
Twill bring forth many others.²⁰

Ayo has three children and is expecting a fourth, but ritualistically she is absolved and is thus reinstated to a chaste position. Carmel Dinan notes that getting married allows a woman "to comply with the normal expectations of her culture; she appeases her kin, and she can enjoy considerable prestige from her childbearing role" and enjoy "general social self esteem."²¹ Different cultures have instituted rites, and the force attached to these is tremendous: the transforming power of the marriage is a classical example.

At the conclusion of the engagement ritual, drinks are served, a blessing is given, and gifts are accepted and/or exchanged in fulfillment of the requirements demanded by the culture. All this is part of the restoration process, which culminates in a church wedding the following day. In a way the engagement provides a type of face-saving for the bride's family. Martin mentions that "the prestige of marriage to the introduced Christian rites and European ceremonies remains extremely high..." and a "girl wanting the highest accolade of prestige will have a church wedding which follows immediately from the [traditional] ceremonies."²²

The process of restoration is echoed in Alice Walker's "Roselily," a powerful stream of consciousness short story. The stream of consciousness technique is artfully employed by Walker in weaving together Roselily's life: past, present and even future. This method of telling the story is suited to the mood of the story and gives it unity and coherence. The structural framework for the story is a marriage ceremony and is skillfully told in the sequence of the marriage vows.

Roselily has mothered children while still living at home; however, it is taken for granted that she will continue to live there and her family will assist her with raising the children. K. Sue Jewell observes that "the never-married black woman with children is not a new phenomenon...[but] blacks, like their white counterparts, continue to value marriage as an institution."²³ No doubt,

Roselily has had the desire to get married like her peers but has been under no compulsion to do so. Ironically, during the marriage ceremony, her mind wanders; she feels intimidated by the prospect of getting married and approaches marriage with some ambivalence. She is marrying a Black Muslim, somebody whose religion is completely foreign to hers: she is momentarily disturbed by the cultural differences and is thus torn between two worlds. Her dilemma lies in her desire to preserve both of these worlds: her future husband's and the life she is accustomed to and is part of. She is leaving her home in the south to live in Chicago; and therefore she will miss the rural pleasures, simplicity of life, and the warmth of interpersonal relationships with her family. Already, she feels the full weight of alienation in the city, thus she anticipates finding it difficult to adjust to a new environment.

Chicago, she visualizes as a grimy, polluted place in comparison to Panther Burn: "She sees hovering over the heads of the clean neighbors in her front yard black specks falling, clinging from the sky."²⁴ She realizes that living in Chicago will require some flexibility on her part. Nevertheless, she will regain "respect, a chance to build."²⁵

As she stands before those "gathered here" and "in the sight of God," "like cotton to be weighed," she is not certain whether she loves the man who will become her husband in a matter of minutes.²⁶ Some of his qualities and properties, she loves: "his sobriety," "his pride," "his blackness," "his silvery gray car," "his understanding of her condition."²⁷ She is even aware of the fact that he will endeavor to remake her into "what he truly wants," for he is interested in reforming her.²⁸ She is trying to escape her past by marrying a man who will "free her" to be "respectable and respected and free," concurrently imagining herself being under the complete control of this man.²⁹ Looming before her are images of bondage:

She thinks of ropes, chains, handcuffs, his religion.
His place of worship. Where she will be required
to sit with covered head.³⁰

Ironically, she sees herself relegated to the role of "bride and virgin, wearing robes and a veil."³¹ The reader's confidence lies in Roselily's strength as a person and the fact that marrying this man seems to bring with it more benefits than liabilities.

Symbolically, during the nuptials, "the rose becomes a lily," meaning that "by means of the marriage vows, Roselily is transformed from a woman who is passionate, natural, and in the eyes of society, impure and immoral, to one who is resurrected and reborn" and thus restored.³²

As depicted in "The Truly Married Woman," a society's method of redress through the rite of restoration ensures that societal values are kept intact. Cultures have ways of "fixing" things, thus the reinstatement of the heroines in "The Truly Married Woman" and "Roselily." The women regain respect as truly married women.

Ayo's story is not complete without the coda, which adds a touch of humor to the work. The morning following the wedding, Ajayi expects Ayo to get up as usual and make him a cup of tea. This is her response:

"Ajayi, my husband," she [says], "for fourteen years I have got up every morning at five to make tea for you and breakfast. Now I am a truly married woman; you must treat me with a little respect. You are now my husband and not a lover. Get up and make yourself a cup of tea."³³

The irony of this is that Ayo has assumed a different view of her position in the house and her duties toward her husband. Ajayi, apparently, has always taken Ayo's devotion for granted, so when he initiates the idea of formal union with Ayo, his naivete blinds him from giving thought to her feelings and what her perception of the nature of a true marriage is. Her view is reflective of a comment made by Edris Makward concerning Mariama Ba, who had a

vision of an African society where men and women would share equally in the duties as well as the joys and the rewards of a harmonious relationship between *one* husband and *one* wife.³⁴

Mariama Ba placed emphasis on "free mutual choice and equality between two partners," thus signaling a new approach to marriage in Africa.³⁵

The heroines Ajayi and Roselily in "The Truly Married Woman" and "Roselily" could be considered examples of how respectability is restored through the marriage contract. Even though marriage is considered a positive and major step in a person's life, society is guilty of treating women unfairly. In Ayo's case, had she been a son, her parents would perhaps not have been as judgmental by ostracizing her when she lived with a man to whom she was not married. Similarly, Roselily would not have suffered the shame of being an unmarried mother had she been a man. "In the case of gender," observes Deborah Cameron, "it is the women who get stereotyped."³⁶ "Women are more often conceptualized in a singular condition, while men are permitted "an individuality that transcends gender."³⁷ Feminist critics have emphasized that women should not be "lumped" together; differences between them must be considered.

The selection of the two stories is not for the purpose of lumping Roselily and Ayo together wholesale. The point of this essay is to show how women are portrayed in two different but related cultures. Ayo's role as a female is told from her society's perspective. It is "she" who is restored and not her lover, Ajayi. In Roselily's case, the man she marries is merely an agent of her restoration. She hopes in her new status, she will be viewed from a different perspective now that she is born anew.

Endnotes

1. Abioseh Nicol, "The Truly Married Woman," in *African Short Stories in English*, ed. J. de Grandsaigne (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1985). Subsequent references to this short story will appear as "TMW."
2. Alice Walker, "Roselily," in *Calling the Wind: Twentieth Century African-American Short Stories*, ed. Clarence Major (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993). Subsequent references to this work will appear as "Roselily."
3. "TMW," p. 260.
4. "TMW," p. 171.
5. "TMW," p. 173.
6. "TMW," p. 174.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. "TMW," p. 175.
11. It is well to note here that in most of Africa, the long preparation for the useful role a young woman is to play in society, mainly marriage and child-bearing, is what typifies her life. She is under the scrutiny of her family, so details of her manners are noted, in particular by the members of her future husband. Because of the importance attached by traditional society to a young woman's future role, she is not allowed on her own to choose a future husband for herself. It is the responsibility of her family, working in conjunction with the family of her prospective husband. See, for example L.N. Brown, "Ama Ata Aidoo. The Art of the Short Story and Sexual Roles in Africa," in *World Literature Written in English* 13 (Arlington, Tex.), O.R. Dathorne, "Grace Ogot: Role of the Black Woman," in *African Literature in the Twentieth Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1974); and Oladele Taiwo, *Female Novelists of Modern Africa* (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 2,10–11,37–39,111–12.
12. W.H. Goodenough, *Cultural Anthropology and Linguistics*, Georgetown University Monograph Series on Language and Linguistics, No. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1957), p. 167.
13. Carmel Dinan, "Sugar Daddies and God-Diggers: The White Collar Single Women in Accra," in *Female and Male in West Africa*, ed. Christine Oppong (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983), p. 344.
14. Jane Bakaluba, *Honeymoon for Three* (Nairobi, Kenya: East Africa Publishing House, 1969). This work is steeped in Buganda culture, and the author takes every opportunity to familiarize the reader with different aspects of this culture.
15. Oladele Taiwo, *Female Novelists of Modern Africa* (London: Macmillan, 1983), p. 2.
16. Emmanuel Obiechina, *Language and Theme: Essays on African Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1985), p. 118.
17. "Syncretism" is an amalgamation of Christianity and African customs.
18. It is the influence of the church that places emphasis on no procreation prior to a legal marriage. It is a common practice amongst Africans to test whether a woman is productive prior to marrying her ritualistically. This practice, however, does carry over to those who have embraced the Christian faith if they are still entrenched in their traditions.
19. "TMW," p. 175.
20. The author uses this poetic form to authenticate the marriage. Such proclamations are used as societal references and are necessary elements of the clan's rituals. This particular culture apparently attaches importance to the virginity of a new bride.
21. Dinan, p. 350.
22. Carol Martin, "Skill-building or Unskilled Labour for Female Youth: a Baichi Case," in *Female and Male in West Africa*, ed. Christine Oppong (London: George and Unwin, 1983), pp. 228, 354.
23. K. Sue Jewell, *Survival of the Black Family: Institutional Impact of U.S. Social Policy* (New York: Praeger, 1988), p. 103.
24. "Roselily," p. 370.
25. "Roselily," pp. 370–71.
26. "Roselily," p. 371.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., p. 372.
30. Ibid., p. 371.
31. Ibid., p. 372.
32. Ann Charters and William E. Shieldley, *Resources for Teachers: The Story and Its Writer* (Boston: St. Martins, 1995), p. 205.
33. "TMW," p. 179.
34. Edris Makward, "Marriage, Tradition and Women's Pursuit of Happiness in the Novels of Mariama B.," in *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*, ed. Caroline Boyce Davies and Anne Adams Graves (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1986), p. 280.
35. Makward, p. 278.
36. Deborah Cameron, "Introduction" in *Women in Their Speech Communities: New Perspectives on Language and Sex*, ed. Jennifer Coates and Deborah Cameron (London: Longman, 1988), p. 8.
37. B. Thorne, C. Kramarae, and N. Henley, eds. *Language, Gender and Society* (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1983), p. 14.