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A Multi-Theoretical Deconstruction of Matrimony in Adesuwa O'man Nwokedi's The Marriage Class

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Abstract

This paper presents a comprehensive critical analysis of Adesuwa O'man Nwokedi's novel, *The Marriage Class*, using a multi-theoretical framework to deconstruct the complexity of modern relationships and the institution of marriage in the novel. The study investigates the complex interplay of personal desire and societal pressure, arguing that the novel functions as a social miniature where the forces of patriarchy, class, psychology, and culture merge to shape romantic destinies. The methodology involves a close reading of the text through four distinct critical lenses: Nego-feminism by Obioma Nnaemeka, Marxism of Karl Marx and Pierre Bourdieu, Psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, and Socio-Cultural Theory of Pierre Bourdieu's habitus and postcolonial critique. The analysis reveals that the characters' journeys are not merely personal but are deeply mediated by negotiated gender strategies, economic determinants, unresolved psychological traumas—including the pervasive theme of unrequited love—and the tension between traditional norms and contemporary identities. The findings conclude that a successful, authentic union requires exceeding or skillfully negotiating these external and internal forces, moving beyond marriage as a social mandate or economic strategy towards a practice of mutual recognition and commitment, a central tenet of Nego-feminist praxis. This analysis is expanded to include a detailed examination of all ten couples, incorporating their specific relationship durations, a deeper psychoanalytic exploration of Abi's trauma and deceit, and a broader socio-cultural discussion on age-gap relationships and the dynamics of love across divides.

Keywords: Nego-feminism, Marxism, Psychoanalysis, Socio-Cultural Theory, Marriage

Introduction

Adesuwa O'man Nwokedi's *The Marriage Class* is a seminal work in contemporary African literature. The novel skillfully transcends the conventional boundaries of romantic fiction to establish itself as a penetrating sociological and psychological examination of the institution of marriage. Set against the vibrant and intricate backdrop of urban Nigeria, the novel's ingenious portrayal of ten couples—brought together in a mandatory, fast-tracked pre-wedding class at St. Claire—creates a potent literary laboratory. This setting functions as a controlled environment where the varied motivations, deep-seated conflicts, and competing ideologies that brace up the monumental decision to marry can be isolated, observed, and dissected with remarkable clarity. Far from being a mere plot contrivance, the marriage class serves as a powerful metaphor for the intense scrutiny, both external and internal, that modern couples must endure. It is a pressure cooker where personal desires collide with societal mandates, and private anxieties are forced into the public space. The narrative structure employs a stream-of-consciousness technique, granting readers intimate, unfiltered access to the characters' internal struggles, revealing the vast and often tumultuous chasm that exists between societal expectations and personal, often unarticulated desires.

The novel's profound significance lies in its unflinching refusal to offer simplistic, sentimental narratives where love invariably conquers all. Instead, it presents a subtle, at times starkly realistic, tableau where only six of the ten couples ultimately proceed to the altar. This statistic alone, a 40% attrition rate within a group at the point of matrimony, invites

a deeper, more critical inquiry into the very nature of commitment, compatibility, and self-knowledge in the modern era. What complex alchemy of forces compels individuals to enter the lifelong contract of marriage? Is it the presence of genuine, deep love and mutual respect, or is it the overwhelming, often suffocating, weight of social and familial expectation? Is it a strategic calculation for economic security, social mobility, and class consolidation? Or could it be a reflexive, often unconscious, attempt to resolve deep-seated psychological wounds from past relational traumas? The Marriage Class compellingly posits that for many, the answer is a complex, messy, and often contradictory space where the language of the heart is persistently interrupted by the grammar of economics, the spectres of the past, and the loud proclamations of culture.

This paper argues that Nwokedi's novel functions not just as entertainment but as a critical social document that dramatizes the violent and often tragic collision of the private, authentic self with the public, highly regulated institution of marriage. The "marriage class" serves as a symbolic crucible in which the foundations of modern love, commitment, and identity are tested, and often found dangerously wanting, under the intense heat of various systemic pressures. To fully unpack this rich and intricate textual tapestry, this study utilizes a multi-theoretical framework. By reading the text through the complementary lenses of Obioma Nnaemeka's Nego-feminism, Marxist and Bourdieusian economic theory, Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, and postcolonial socio-cultural theory, this paper deconstructs how romantic destinies are deeply mediated by external systems and internal psyches. Ultimately, the novel demonstrates that a successful, authentic union requires moving beyond marriage as a social mandate or economic strategy, transforming it instead into a deliberate practice of mutual recognition, self-knowledge, and commitment.

Negotiating Patriarchy: A Nego-Feminist Reading

A reading of the female characters' agency in *The Marriage Class* is most effectively executed by integrating Obioma Nnaemeka's foundational work of "Nego-feminism." Nnaemeka conceptualises Nego-feminism as an indigenous African feminist variant that provides a culturally detailed framework for "negotiation, compromise and a no-ego spirit" (362). Moving away from confrontational binaries often found in Western radical feminism, this lens insists that African women challenge patriarchal constraints through dialogue, strategic compromise, and mutual accommodation. By looking at the text through this integrated framework, the paths of Abi, Ogechi, and Ewa reveal themselves not as simple narratives of submission or rebellion, but as nuanced patriarchal bargains where gender dynamics are constantly renegotiated within the realities of contemporary Nigerian life.

The Bargain Of Emotional Security and Unrequited Love: As the protagonist of the story, Abi's narrative is the most poignant exploration of a deeply flawed Nego-feminist bargain that is severely compromised by the irrationality of unrequited love. Her engagement to Raymond (after dating for fifteen months) is a reactive bargain born from a position of deep psychological vulnerability following her traumatic abandonment by Lucas. The damage inflicted by Lucas was not merely emotional; it was physically devastating, nearly causing her to suffer Takotsubo Cardiomyopathy (Broken Heart Syndrome), a stress-induced heart condition that literalizes the metaphor of a "broken heart." Furthermore, Lucas assassinated her character, telling people "he had to get married that far away from Lagos to keep her from showing up and scattering the place," (Nwokedi ch. 11), a cruel manipulation tactic designed to paint her as unstable and obsessive. This portrayal of Lucas as a monster is central to understanding the depth of Abi's trauma. Yet, the irrationality of desire and the power of fixation still make her love him, an addiction that leads her to compulsively scroll through his social media profile, even in Raymond's presence at St. Claire, wishing she was still in his life.

Raymond became her "lifeline," a safe harbour saving her from drowning in her heartbreak. In this bargain, she exchanges the potential for passionate, authentic love for the promise of emotional security and social legitimacy. However, this is an agreement she cannot fully commit to because her heart remains with Lucas, the object of her desire. Her negotiation fails to adhere to Nnaemeka's core principle of transparent, balanced compromise. Her constant scrolling through Lucas' social media profile is a testament to this unresolved attachment or obsession. She stares into the abyss (Lucas) and it gazes back into her. This dynamic perfectly illustrates Friedrich Nietzsche's warning: "... for when you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you." In this context, Lucas is the monstrous abyss of her past trauma and obsessively gazing into his life, and the abyss stared back and reached out to her. She allows that destructive force to permeate her own psyche, ultimately transforming her into a "liar" and "two-timing" partner, thus becoming a monster in her own right in the eyes of Raymond.

Her behaviour towards Raymond is consistently irritable. We can see this when she comes to meet him at the marriage class: she pulls away from his embrace, a physical manifestation of her emotional distance. If her heart were with him, she would have sunk into his arms despite her tiredness, but instead, his presence repels her. This shows that being with Raymond fundamentally irritates her; he is a constant, unwelcome reminder of the safe but passionless bargain she has made, a poor substitute for the unrestrained but desired Lucas.

Her subsequent deceit is a flawed and desperate attempt to renegotiate the terms of her life outside the confines of this initial, reactive bargain. She desires to be with Lucas again which makes her deceptive to her fiancé, Raymond. This deceit is a direct manifestation of the self-deception Nietzsche described: "a bad person deceives others because they have grown accustomed to deceiving themselves. In other words, it is usually because they are not honest with themselves that they think they have to lie to themselves and others." Abi is not honest with herself about her

unresolved feelings for Lucas and her lack of genuine love for Raymond. This internal dishonesty compels her to lie to Raymond, making her a deceitful person in his eyes. This deceit leads directly to what Immanuel Kant warned against: "By a lie, a man throws away and, as it were, annihilates his dignity." Abi, through her lies to Raymond, annihilates her own moral dignity and the trust that was the foundation of their relationship. Raymond's final condemnation, "Not all of us are two-timing liars like you, Abi," is the direct consequence of this Kantian annihilation of dignity and the ultimate reason he calls off the wedding, stating, "We're done, Abi. I can never trust you again" (Nwokedi ch. 11). A deceitful person can never be trusted in a relationship, especially in a marriage. Her failure is a Nego-feminist cautionary tale about the dangers of entering a negotiation from a position of profound weakness and self-deception. Her realization that she failed to recognize someone "willing to speak her language" shows that successful negotiation requires self-awareness and clarity about one's own desires and needs, something impossible when one is trapped in the cycle of unrequited love. Her ultimate punishment—losing Raymond—serves as a stark warning about the perils of allowing societal expectations and unresolved trauma to override one's own truth.

Confrontation and Negotiation: Ogechi's character arc is a textbook illustration of a journey toward a functional Nego-feminist resolution. Initially, she embodies a form of Western-influenced liberal feminism characterized by assertive individualism, career ambition, and a confrontational attitude towards patriarchal norms. Her identity is built on her "strong, independent" status and her accumulation of Western cultural capital—her education, career, and "proper" English. Her engagement to Zulu is itself a patriarchal bargain, but one she makes reluctantly with the patriarchy of time—the societal pressure on women to marry before they are deemed "too old." However, she refuses to negotiate the terms of this bargain with Zulu himself (whom she has been dating for over five months), viewing his indigenous habits, accent, and identity with contempt, a clear sign of what Frantz Fanon diagnoses as internalized colonialism (88). This unyielding, ego-driven approach—which directly violates Nnaemeka's "no-ego" mandate—reaches its peak in the car scene, where she directly challenges his authority, saying, "Never you try that in your life, Chizulukeme... Quit my job for what? For whom?" This is a direct assault on the traditional patriarchal expectation of female deference. Zulu's retort, "Woman, you better watch your tongue!" (Nwokedi ch. 9) is the traditional patriarchal system pushing back, reasserting its symbolic authority. A purely Western feminist reading might frame this as an irreconcilable conflict between female liberation and male domination.

Ogechi is not the only woman who attempts to step on the patriarchal mines; Abi almost does as well when she tells Raymond, "Are you out of your mind, Raymond?" and he looks at her clenching his jaw. Words like these escalate the conflict, illustrating that language carries profound structural weight. As the narrative progresses, Ogechi carelessly deploys her words to actively erode Zulu's confidence (Nwokedi ch. 9; 12).

However, Nego-feminist theory reveals the futility of Ogechi's unyielding stance in this specific cultural context; it leads only to the relationship's dissolution. This is why Nnaemeka 'nego-feminism' is grounded in negotiation and the idea of 'no-ego'. She postulates that "African feminism (or feminism as I have seen it practiced in Africa) challenges through 'negotiations and compromise,' knows when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal landmines; it also knows when, where, and how to go around patriarchal landmines" (377-378). Her subsequent realization—that she must come down from her high horse—is not a defeatist surrender but a critical moment of Nego-feminist insight. She understands that to achieve her goal of a stable partnership, she must engage in a process of negotiation ("nego") and shed the ego that prevents her from appreciating Zulu's inherent value. Her decision to "stoop low to conquer" is a strategic recalibration, a move from confrontation to dialogue, embodying the "no-ego" spirit essential for finding a middle ground where both her independence and their cultural differences can be accommodated.

The Hypergamic Bargain: Ewa's character represents a more transparent and less conflicted form of patriarchal bargaining, specifically through the lens of hypergamy. Her relationship with Sanya (together for two years) is, from a Nego-feminist perspective, a strategic negotiation for economic security and social status. Her materialism and frivolous spending, culminating in a debt of ₦14,350,000, are not merely personal failings but performances of a class identity that her fiancé is expected to fund. Sanya's act of clearing this debt is a powerful display of economic capital that fundamentally alters the power dynamics of their relationship, solidifying his role as the provider and her role as the dependent.

Her decision to then opt for a low-budget wedding is a fascinating Nego-feminist manoeuvre. It is her way of renegotiating the terms of their bargain. Having received a massive economic benefit, she offers a symbolic concession—scaling back the wedding spectacle—as a form of reciprocation. While this structural arrangement raises questions regarding the authenticity of her emotional attachment, a Nego-feminist reading would focus on the pragmatic logic of her actions. She is manipulating the system to secure her comfort, and her "compromise" on the wedding is a strategic move to maintain the stability of her primary bargain. It is a calculated exchange, reflecting Deniz Kandiyoti's concept of the patriarchal bargain (274), where women trade subordination or specific performances of femininity for male protection and economic provision. This resonates with Alain de Botton's assertion that "romantic love is a modern-day invention, and that most people would not fall in love if they have never heard of it," suggesting that Ewa's version of "love" is a scripted performance heavily influenced by capitalist and social-climber narratives rather than an authentic, pre-social emotion. This is further illuminated by Alain Badiou's critiques of modern love, where he states that "In today's world, it is generally thought that individuals only pursue their own self-interest. (True) Love is an antidote to that. Provided it

isn't conceived only as an exchange of mutual favours" (14). Ewa's relationship with Sanya is precisely conceived as an "exchange of mutual favours"—her beauty and companionship for his financial backing—thereby failing Badiou's test of "true love" and serving instead as a testament to her self-interest.

Capital And Commodity: A Marxist-Bourdieusian Critique

A Marxist-Bourdieusian critique of *The Marriage Class* reveals that the romantic superstructure of courtship is directly anchored upon a rigid, deeply competitive economic base. By fusing Karl Marx's materialist critique of capitalist social relations with Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of overlapping capitals, intimacy in the novel shifts from a purely emotional experience into a series of structured market transactions. Within this dense economic framework, the characters' romantic paths are heavily mediated by systemic financial pressures, class variations, and the uneven distribution of social assets rather than mere personal choices.

The Fetishism Of the Wedding Spectacle: Ewa's narrative is the most explicit illustration of Marx's concept of commodity fetishism, where social relations between people are disguised as relations between things (Marx 142). Her obsession with branded goods and luxury items is a quest for social validation through consumption. She attributes a magical, life-altering power to commodities, believing they can confer status and identity. The massive debt she accumulates is evidence of this fetishism. Sanya's act of clearing this debt is, therefore, not just a romantic gesture but a dramatic infusion of economic capital that fundamentally commodifies their relationship. He is not just saving her from debt collectors; he is purchasing equity in their shared future. Her decision to opt for a low-budget wedding is thus framed within this transactional logic—it is the only thing "she could do for him," (Nwokedi ch. 12) a reciprocal payment that reinforces the underlying economic nature of their bond. Meanwhile, in Yoruba culture, it is the bride's family that funds the wedding ceremony because they are the hosts, and the groom and his family are the guests. Thus, any contributions made by the groom are complementary.

This critique is intellectualized through the character of Itse, who voices a pure Marxist indictment of the modern wedding industry. He questions why society demands validation through rings, signatures, and feeding thousands. The modern wedding operates as a spectacle (Debord 34). The wedding is no longer a simple ceremony but a public performance of economic prowess, and a social relation mediated by an image of consumption. Similarly, Boma (in a relationship with April for five months) laments spending over 10 million Naira on dual ceremonies, underscoring how both traditional and religious institutions have been co-opted by capitalist logic, creating a superstructure where the expense of the wedding often completely overshadows the substance of the marriage itself. This aligns with Alain de Botton's view of modern love as a capitalized invention, where the rituals of commitment are often empty performances driven by social and economic pressures rather than genuine feeling.

The Clash of Capitals: The turbulent relationship between Ogechi and Zulu is an insightful case study in class conflict, best understood through Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital. He argues that social positioning is determined by the possession of economic, cultural, and symbolic assets, which shape an individual's habitus—their social dispositions (Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital" 241). Their domestic struggle is not merely about money but about the relative value of different forms of capitals. Ogechi possesses significant cultural capital: her Western education, professional career, and mastery of "proper" English. She views Zulu's "local" identity, his accent, and manners with disdain because his forms of cultural capital—rooted in indigenous Igbo identity—are, in her Bourdieusian field, deemed inferior. This is intertwined with internalized colonialism where she has internalized the colonizer's hierarchy of cultural values [1].

However, Zulu possesses his own capital. His insistence on his Igbo name, Chizulukeme, is an assertion of symbolic capital rooted in tradition and ethnic pride. He also possesses significant economic capital (his business) that is independent of her Westernized cultural markers. Their conflict is a clash of these differently valued habitus. When he retorts, "Woman, you better watch your tongue!" he is not only asserting patriarchal authority but also defending the symbolic capital of his cultural identity against her perceived elitist assault. Their reconciliation, from a Marxist perspective, represents a difficult synthesis of these different capitals, where Ogechi must learn to recognize the value of his indigenous capital, and he, in turn, must respect her professional ambitions.

The Contrast in Financial Wisdom: By leveraging Bourdieusian theory to contrast the financial wisdom—or lack thereof—of Ewa and April, Nwokedi delivers a scathing critique of a system that routinely misallocates capital. The novel creates a stark contrast in financial priorities between these characters, which can be summarized by the Yoruba adage: "eni ni ori koni fila, eni ni fila koni ori"—he who has a head does not have a cap, and he who has a cap does not have a head. Ewa, who has the "cap" (a wealthy fiancé), squanders ₦14,350,000 on frivolous consumption and debt, portraying a profound lack of financial wisdom or "head." In contrast, April, who possesses the "head" (the ambition and plan to study in Milan), lacks the "cap"—the €20,000 (approximately 8 million Naira as of 2022) needed to fund her education. This financial disparity and Boma's inability or unwillingness to bridge this gap for her, compared to his own willingness to spend over 10 million on their wedding, becomes a central point of conflict that contributes to their breakup. This juxtaposition shows the perverse economic priorities within the "marriage market," where spectacle is often valued over substantive investment in a partner's future and personal growth.

The 'Japa Syndrome' as Economic Determinism: The novel's brief but potent reference to the "japa syndrome" (the urge to emigrate from Nigeria) and the pathetic state of Professor Fadaïro ground its romantic narratives in the harsh Nigerian socio-economic reality, reinforcing Marxism core tenet: the economic base always dictates the cultural superstructure. Itse's use of "japa" as an excuse to call off his wedding with Omasan is a stark demonstration of how macroeconomic failures—corruption, unemployment, and currency instability—directly determine the most intimate life choices. This economic determinism is also physicalized in Professor Fadaïro, a man of immense cultural capital (an academic) who is reduced to poverty, sitting in a wheelchair in a bushy yard. This heart-breaking image is a powerful Marxist critique that shows that in a failing economic base, cultural capital can become utterly devalued. This backdrop makes the economic calculations of characters like Ewa and Ogechi seem less like vanity and more like a pragmatic, if cynical, strategy for survival and dignity in a precarious economic landscape.

The Unconscious Mind: A Psychoanalytic Deconstruction

A psychoanalytic reading of *The Marriage Class* uncovers the unconscious drives, repressed histories, and repetition compulsions that govern the characters' romantic choices, revealing that the conscious pursuit of a marital partner is often a disguised, pathological re-enactment of past traumas. Through the utilization of Sigmund Freud's structural map of the psyche and Jacques Lacan's structural revisions of desire, intimacy shifts from a rational, deliberate pursuit into an internal battleground. The text demonstrates that individuals are rarely transparent to themselves; instead, their choices are continually sabotaged by repressed psychic ghosts that actively dictate their present romantic behaviours.

The Death Drive and Repetition Compulsion: Abi's narrative functions as a textbook Freudian case study of neurosis rooted in traumatic loss. Her sudden abandonment by Lucas acts as a psychological catastrophe that fundamentally fractures her ego. Her id—the seat of primal, unconscious desire and the pleasure principle—remains fiercely attached to Lucas, the source of both intense ecstasy and deep pain. He represents the uncontrolled fulfilment of her libidinal drives. Her superego—the internalized voice of societal, religious, and familial morality—dictates that she should be a faithful, grateful, and virtuous fiancée to Raymond, the "good" and stable man. Her ego, the rational mediator tasked with reconciling the demands of the id and superego with reality, is utterly overwhelmed and fractured. It cannot reconcile these powerful opposing forces, leading to a state of paralyzing anxiety, self-deception, and ultimately, the neurotic symptom of her deceit.

This psychic gridlock triggers a severe repetition compulsion. As Freud notes, the psyche possesses an unconscious drive to re-enact traumatic events to master them (12). Abi compulsively returns to the source of her trauma by stalking Lucas on social media. She is fixated at the moment of her abandonment. Lucas becomes Abi's personal death drive. Her obsession mirrors Friedrich Nietzsche's warning that gazing long into an abyss causes the abyss to gaze back into you. Abi gazing into his life allows this destructive force to gaze back into her, compelling her to reach out and systematically destroy her current relationship. Her realization that she had "been a willing participant" is a moment of painful psychoanalytic insight, acknowledging her own agency in her self-sabotage driven by her desire. This is the moment the abyss gazed back, and she became an active participant in her own moral and emotional undoing, leading to the Kantian annihilation of her dignity through deceit.

The Objet Petit a and The Phantom Lover: The theme of the haunting ex-lover is central to the novel's exploration of unrequited love. It is perfectly conceptualised through Jacques Lacan's notion of the objet petit a (Lacan 52). This is the unattainable object-cause of desire, a phantom that sets desire in motion but can never be obtained, because desire is ultimately for the lack itself. For Abi, Lucas is her objet a. He is the unattainable object of her desire, the phantom that makes Raymond seem inadequate by comparison and a victim of unrequited love. For Boma, his ex, Felicity is his objet a. She is the void that the "good" April can never fill because April is a real person with flaws, while Felicity exists in his memory as a fantasy, an idealized lack. His engagement to April is thus built on a foundation of absence and unrequited love for a ghost; he is attempting to use her to treat the narcissistic wound inflicted by Felicity's rejection. This dynamic is captured in Abi's own reflection on her relationship with Raymond, which she describes as "as heart melting as it is, is alien...and a tad smothering" (Nwokedi ch. 2). This feeling of alienation and smothering is the direct result of the presence of the objet petit a (Lucas). Consequently, loving Raymond becomes an arduous obligation when one is with an undesired partner, rendering his efforts toward affection and care unappreciated, creating a barrier to genuine connection between them. This sentiment connects deeply with the philosophical advice on marriage. Friedrich Nietzsche advised, "When marrying, ask yourself this question: Do you believe that you will be able to converse well with this person into your old age? Everything else in marriage is transitory." The failure of relationships plagued by unrequited love is precisely a lack of this deep, abiding friendship because "what makes most relationships fail is not a lack of love, but a lack of friendship" (131). For true love to coexist with friendship, it requires a unique synergy, summarized by Paul Valéry: "true love is when you can be stupid together." Samuel Richardson called this the "highest state of friendship," while Rainer Rilke described it as a "harmonious living side by side." In essence, partners must "match each other's energy," a quality Felicity had for Boma, and Lucas, in his monstrous way, had for Abi, but which Raymond and April lacked for their respective partners, leading to the experience of unrequited love from the other side.

Nosa's situation is tied to a deeper, paternal trauma and a chain of unrequited love. He was jilted by his ex, Demi, and in his emotionally lost state, hooked up with Nkoyo. His desire remains with Demi, but he feels obligated to Nkoyo. He is marrying a phantom (the ideal of the responsible father and the lost love with Demi) to escape the shadow of another

(his own irresponsible father). This is an unsustainable foundation, as Nkoyo intuitively senses his actions are “simply out of duty” (Nwokedi ch. 7), lacking genuine desire, making her love for him, in effect, unrequited. The failure of these three couples—Abi/Raymond, Boma/April, Nosa/Nkoyo—portrays the destructive power of the *objet petit a*, where the pursuit of a phantom from the past prevents the formation of a real, reciprocal connection in the present.

A Tripartite Conflict of Ambition, Prejudice, and Primal Need: Ogechi’s internal world is a fierce battleground for her id, ego, and superego, which directly manifests in her contentious relationship with Zulu. Her id is driven by primal, often acknowledged desires for companionship, sexual intimacy, and social status—the basic need not to be alone, especially as she perceives her window of opportunity for marriage closing. This id is not necessarily in love with Zulu but is desperate for the security and social validation that marriage represents. Simultaneously, her id is also the source of her raw, unfiltered contempt for what she perceives as his “bush” manners, a visceral reaction to the clash of habitus.

Her superego is a complex amalgamation of conflicting voices. One component is an internalized, hyper-Westernized, feminist-adjacent superego that valorises career ambition, absolute independence, and a confrontational stance towards traditional male authority. This is the voice that tells her she is “too good” for Zulu and that she should not have to compromise her identity or career for any man. Another, more traditional component of her superego has internalized the societal pressure to marry, creating immense anxiety about her age and marital status. This internal conflict within the superego itself—between feminist independence and traditional expectations—generates significant psychological tension.

Her ego is tasked with the impossible job of mediating this internal war while also dealing with the external reality of Zulu. Initially, her ego fails. It resorts to the primitive defence mechanism of projection, attributing all her internal conflict and self-loathing onto Zulu, whom she brands a “local fool” and a “stupid lowlife” (Nwokedi ch. 9). Her aggressive outbursts are the ego’s failure to contain the id’s frustration and the superego’s contradictory demands. The relationship breakdown is a direct result of her ego’s inability to find a healthy compromise. Her performance is not just about finding a husband; it is a defence mechanism against the trauma of being “ordinary.” However, her character development showcases the strengthening of her ego. After the breakup, her id’s fear of loneliness becomes overwhelming, and her superego’s traditional pressure intensifies. This forces her ego to recalibrate. It begins to suppress the more militant, Westernized demands of her superego and negotiates a truce between her id’s need for companionship and her remaining self-respect. Her decision to reconcile with Zulu is not a defeat of her ego but maturity. It demonstrates an ego strong enough to prioritize a pragmatic, real-world solution over an inflexible, ideologically pure but lonely stance. She learns to negotiate not only with Zulu but, more importantly, with the warring factions within her own psyche.

Ego and the Performance of the Self: The psychoanalytic reading of Ewa focuses on her ego, which is fundamentally structured around external validation and social performance. Her id may drive base desires for pleasure and consumption, but it is her ego that channels these desires into a specific project of creating a spectacular social media persona. Her ego is not oriented towards reconciling internal conflicts between id and superego in a healthy way; rather, it has identified with the social media gaze itself. The lavish wedding she initially desires is not for her own intimate satisfaction but is a massive project for her ego—a public performance designed to elicit envy and admiration from her followers. Her superego, in this case, is not a voice of morality but the internalized pressure of this digital “society of the spectacle.” Sanya’s money is the fuel for this ego project. When she amasses debt, it is a failure of her ego to manage reality. Sanya’s bailout is a restoration of her ego’s potential. Her decision to then have a low-key wedding is a paradoxical ego manoeuvre: it is a performance of humility designed to show that she is capable of growth and appreciation, thereby securing her status as a “good” person, not just a glamorous one. Her entire romantic endeavour is thus a complex ego defence mechanism, where the relationship with Sanya is a means to fortify her socially constructed identity, echoing de Botton’s idea that modern love is often a performance for an imagined audience.

Insecurity and Internalized Superego: Chioma’s insecurity about her beauty provides another rich site for psychoanalytic exploration. Her anxiety is not just a personality trait but the result of an overbearing superego that has fully internalized the patriarchal and societal gaze. This internalized voice constantly monitors and criticizes her body, measuring it against an impossible ideal and convincing her that other women are “more beautiful.” Her fiancé’s reassurances function as a supportive ego, attempting to mediate between her harsh internal critic (superego) and her vulnerable self-image. Her journey involves strengthening her ego and resisting the persecutory demands of this internalized superego. This struggle is illuminated by the words of Edgar Allan Poe: “There is no exquisite beauty... without some strangeness in the proportion,” suggesting that perceived flaws are integral to unique beauty. Furthermore, Christian Dior’s maxim, “the secret to all beauty is happiness, for there is no beauty without happiness,” points to the solution. Chioma’s lack of beauty, as she perceives it, stems from her unhappiness and lack of self-acceptance. The path forward is to stop comparing herself, as comparison is the thief of joy, and to practice self-acceptance. AK successfully alleviates her fears by consistently reinforcing that “her beauty is total and complete, inside and outside” (Nwokedi ch. 12), helping her ego to gradually internalize this positive view and quieten the critical superego.

The Clan and the Colony: A Socio-Cultural Analysis

A socio-cultural analysis situates the novel within the specific contemporary Nigerian environment. This section uses Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus and Anthony Giddens’ sociology of modernity to explore how deeply ingrained

collective dispositions and institutional structures regulate contemporary intimacy. Bourdieu conceptualises the habitus as a system of durable, transposable dispositions acquired through cultural socialization that dictates how individuals perceive and navigate their social world. By approaching the novel through this integrated framework, marriage in urban Nigeria ceases to be a private contract between two individuals; instead, it reveals itself as a highly policed institutional field where traditional communal values, colonial legal legacies, and globalized modern identities constantly collide.

The Tyranny of the Social Gaze and the Marriage Mandate: The central premise of the novel—the church-imposed pre-wedding marriage class at St. Claire—is a powerful socio-cultural artifact. This setting establishes religious and social institutions as the primary regulators of intimacy. The intense pressure to marry is a core element of the Nigerian habitus. It functions as an ingrained, collective understanding that a successful adult life concludes with marriage. The character Itse vocalizes this external pressure: “Because everyone around us seems to think getting married is the right thing to do.” This collectivist ethos exerts a form of symbolic violence that drives couples to the altar, sometimes against their authentic, private desires. The stigma of being unmarried, particularly for women like Ogechi, is a powerful social force.

This social gaze focuses intensely on Kris and Bola, whose relationship subverts generational norms. Their relationship represents the “older generation and younger generation” dynamic. They have been together for a year. The scepticism of Kris’ relatives and the disgust of Bola’s mother are not based on the couple’s compatibility but on a perceived violation of the socio-cultural habitus regarding appropriate age pairings. The concerns about Kris’ fertility, while medically archaic, reveal how traditional societal expectations about a woman’s primary role as a mother are weaponized to police non-conforming relationships. The resolution, facilitated by Auntie Taiwo, is a powerful example of “women supporting women” and “women supporting men” ideology which is central to African feminism. Scholars like Chikwenye Ogunyemi, Mary Kolawole, and Obioma Nnaemeka argue for a feminism that is communal, supportive, and works in dialogue with, not in perpetual opposition to men and cultural structures. Auntie Taiwo does not confront her twin sister with Western feminist rhetoric but uses a pragmatic, culturally-grounded argument that acknowledges Bola’s love and reassures about Kris’ ability to conceive, thereby supporting both the young man’s choice and the older woman’s potential for happiness. Her intervention also corrects the archaic notion that fertility is solely a woman’s issue. A modern understanding recognizes that fertility issues involve both parties, including factors like rhesus factor (blood compatibility), moving beyond the simplistic and stigmatizing blame placed on the older woman.

The portrayal of Eric and Ivie offers another facet of generational dynamics. They have been together for three years and their relationship provides another perspective on the “older generation and younger generation” theme. Here, the age gap is compounded by Eric’s previous marital experiences. He is “badly burnt” and “not as enthusiastic” about remarrying, representing the caution and emotional baggage that can come with age and experience. Ivie’s fervent desire to marry represents the optimism and societal pressure felt by the younger partner. Their dynamic shows that the “old and young” conflict is not just about societal perception but also about differing life stages and emotional capacities. Eric’s eventual succumbing to Ivie’s wishes to avoid losing her is a different kind of negotiation, one where the older partner makes a concession to the fervent desire of the younger, depicting that these dynamics are not solely gendered but are also structured by experiential disparity.

Navigating the Boundaries of Habitus: The novel’s depiction of inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic relationships provides a critical lens through which to examine the limits and possibilities of love across cultural boundaries. The assertion that “love does not recognize ethnicity” is an idealistic notion that the novel itself complicates through its detailed characterizations. The relationship between Chioma (Igbo) and AK (Yoruba) is presented as one that transcends ethnic differences with relative ease. AK’s constant reassurance of Chioma’s beauty, both inside and out, suggests a relationship where ethnicity is not a site of conflict but mutual admiration and support. Their success story promotes an ideal of love that is beyond ethnicity or tribalism.

However, this ideal is challenged by the intra-ethnic conflict between Ogechi and Zulu. While Chioma and AK’s inter-ethnic relationship seems to transcend ethnicity with relative ease, reverse is the case between Ogechi and Zulu, whose contempt for Zulu’s Igbo identity, his accent, and manners and her own “internalized colonialism” show how cultural prejudices, ingrained in one’s habitus, can be a major source of conflict and disdain. Her Western-oriented habitus clashes violently with his more traditionally rooted Igbo habitus. Their relationship shows that love can be just as challenged by differences in cultural capital within an ethnic group. Their journey towards reconciliation is not about love magically transcending culture, but about love creating a new, hybrid space where different cultural habitus can be respected and integrated through difficult, Nego-feminist-style negotiation. Similarly, the societal scepticism towards Kris and Bola’s relationship, which crosses both age and potentially ethnic lines, further illustrates how the collective habitus polices any union that deviates from the normative script. These narratives demonstrate that in a complex society like Nigeria, love must constantly negotiate not just the psychology of two individuals but the accumulated weight of cultural histories, class aspirations, and ethnic identities.

Legal Pluralism and the Marriage Act: The practice of having a traditional marriage followed by a white wedding is a legacy of legal pluralism in Nigeria. This structural duality creates immense economic and administrative friction. The Marriage Act explicitly regulates these overlapping institutions:

"No marriage in Nigeria shall be valid if either of the parties thereto at the time of the celebration of such marriage is married under customary law to any person other than the person with whom such marriage is had" (Nigeria, Marriage Act, sec. 33).

This statute establishes that a valid traditional wedding legally prevents a subsequent statutory or church marriage to a completely different person. However, for a church marriage to be the sole legally recognized union, it must be conducted in a licensed place of worship and registered. The common practice of having both is often driven by socio-cultural pressure and fetishization of the white wedding as more "prestigious," a potent symbol of internalized colonialism and the lingering cultural hegemony of Western norms, which devalues rich indigenous ceremonies. This legal confusion, as emphasized by Boma's financial lament, is a direct socio-cultural cost of Nigeria's colonial history.

International Lovers Versus the Pathology of Proximity: The novel presents a profound irony through the juxtaposition of the "international lovers," Bianca and Prince, and the three couples destroyed by unrequited love (Abi/Raymond, Boma/April, Nosa/Nkoyo). This irony is central to the novel's critique of modern relationships. The couples plagued by unrequited love are physically close, sharing the same city, attending the same marriage class at St. Claire, yet they are emotionally worlds apart. Their relationships fail because of internal, psychological barriers: Abi is haunted by the ghost of Lucas, Boma by the phantom of Felicity, and Nosa by the shadow of his father and his ex, Demi. Their proximity does nothing to bridge the emotional gap created by their unresolved pasts and their fixation on lost objects (*objet petit a*). They gaze into the abyss of their former relationships and are consumed by it.

In stark contrast, Bianca and Prince sustain their relationship across continents. It is important to note that they had their differences just like every other couple in the novel; long-distance relationships are fraught with their own unique challenges of communication, trust, and loneliness. However, they eventually overcome it with love and got married, becoming the first among all the couples to do so. Their success can be understood through Anthony Giddens' concept of the 'Pure Relationship' [2]. A pure relationship is one entered into for its own sake, for the satisfaction it provides to each partner, and maintained only through constant communication, mutual trust, and emotional intimacy. It is not held together by external structures like proximity, family pressure, or tradition. That they are the first to marry is deeply significant. It suggests that their relationship, forged in the crucible of distance, has been tested and proven to be a 'Pure Relationship'. Their success story embodies the timeless wisdom of Shakespeare: "The course of true love never did run smooth." So, long-distance relationship is the ultimate test of this modern form of bonding.

The irony is therefore stark and instructive: those who are physically close fail due to emotional distance, while those who are physically distant succeed due to emotional closeness. The novel seems to argue that geographical proximity is a poor substitute for psychological and emotional availability. The failures of Abi, Boma, Nosa are failures of self-awareness and emotional resolution; they are not truly present for their partners who are right beside them. Bianca and Prince, separated by miles, achieve a presence to each other that the others lack. This irony powerfully reinforces the novel's overarching theme: that a successful marriage is less about external circumstances and more about the internal work of self-knowledge, the dissolution of psychic ghosts, and the conscious, practiced choice to commit to the person in front of you, whether they are in the same room or on another continent.

Conclusion

The Marriage Class ultimately functions as a powerful diagnostic tool for the modern condition of love and marriage, particularly within the complex socio-cultural landscape of urban Nigeria. The multi-theoretical application in this analysis reveals that the journey of these ten couples is not a series of isolated events or personal dramas but a collective narrative profoundly mediated by larger, often invisible, systems. The Nego-feminist critique uncovered the complex strategies of negotiation and compromise that women like Abi, Ogechi, and Ewa employ within patriarchal structures, moving the analysis beyond simplistic binaries of victimhood and liberation. The Marxist critique exposed the economic calculations and commodity fetishism that underpin the romantic superstructure, demonstrating that the heart has its reasons which reason (of the market) often knows. The psychoanalytic reading laid bare the unconscious ghosts of past traumas and the pervasive theme of unrequited love that drive compulsive, self-sabotaging behaviours, revealing that we are often mere puppets of our repressed histories and fixations on lost objects. The socio-cultural framework situated these struggles within the specific pressures of Nigerian society, where tradition, colonial legacies, and globalisation are in constant, dynamic negotiation, further complicated by legal pluralism, the challenge of inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic harmony, and the unique challenges and opportunities of modern relational forms like the long-distance 'Pure Relationship.'

The "marriage class" at St. Claire, therefore, is more than a setting; it is the symbolic space where these four forces—negotiated gender power, economics, psychology, and culture—converge and demand to be addressed. The successful couples—Chioma and AK, who overcome insecurity; Ewa and Sanya, who navigate their economic bargain toward a more mutual appreciation; Ogechi and Zulu, who bridge a cultural and ideological divide through negotiation; Kris and Bola, who overcome generational bias with the support of their community; Eric and Ivie, who reconcile differing life stages; and Bianca and Prince, who sustain commitment across continents through the practice of a 'Pure Relationship'—demonstrate that it is possible. But their success is hard-won. The fact that only six of the ten couples proceed to marry is a telling statistic. It suggests that the process of intense scrutiny and self-reflection, however painful, is a necessary

crucible. The four couples who part ways—Abi and Raymond, Boma and April, Nosa and Nkoyo, Itse and Omasan—do so because their relationships were founded on unstable ground: unhealed trauma and unrequited love, economic pragmatism masquerading as love, sheer obligation, or unexamined social pressure. Their dissolution is not a failure but a correction, a painful yet necessary step towards authenticity.

The Marriage Class eventually posits that true love is not a fleeting feeling but, as Erich Fromm stated, a “practice”—a disciplined, conscious, and daily commitment that must be built on a foundation of self-knowledge, economic clarity, cultural sensitivity, and honest choice, rather than on the shaky ground of social mandate, unexamined economic strategy, unrequited love, or the unresolved ghosts of the past. The classroom, in the end, teaches that the most important lessons are not about marriage, but about the self that one brings into it [3-24].

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