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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

**Literature for Society: Personal Aspirations and Societal Conformity: A Reading of Lizzie Blackburn's *Yinka, where is Your Husband?***

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| ABSTRACT

Within most indigenous cultures in Africa, more specifically in Nigeria, marriage is an already set goal for the young female adult to attain. It is seen as a culmination of her success in that, regardless of her social or professional attainments or accomplishments—whether in career, business, or any other field of human experience, if the prefix: 'Mrs' is not added to her name, she may not fully enjoy societal respect and approval. The study seeks to examine the undercurrent existing between personal aspirations and societal conformity. Through an assessment of the nuances of marital pressures placed on single ladies within certain age brackets, its implication on their mental health and on society at large, as well as the changing paradigms of relationships and gender dynamics, the study embarks on this literary expedition using Lizzie Damilola's fiction, *Yinka, where is Your Husband?* (2022). The novel, with its exploration of societal expectations, offers a unique vantage point to foster a deeper understanding of the delicate balance individuals must strike between personal aspirations and societal conformity. Theoretically drawing from the sociology of literature and adopting the qualitative research approach, which involves the use of non-numeric data, the study seeks to address this societal pressure on single ladies; and finds out that by conditioning single adult ladies to get married by all means, these ladies are inadvertently exposed to a number of mental health issues; it concludes that a lady can find joy and fulfilment with or without being married; and recommends a social re-engineering in order to address this terrible imbalance which leaves the girl-child at a precarious margin.

| KEYWORDS

Literature, Society, Pressure, Marriage, Balance.

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**1. Introduction**

The exploration of marital pressures within literature is a journey through time, where authors have skillfully navigated the intricate dance between personal desires and societal expectations. Classic works like Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) have exemplified how marriage, far beyond a mere plot device, becomes a mirror reflecting the societal norms, gender roles, and economic factors of its time.

Lizzie Damilola Blackburn's novel, *Yinka, where is Your Husband?* (2022) emerges as a compelling addition to this literary tradition, weaving a narrative that intricately dissects the societal pressures imposed on women in their pursuit of marital fulfillment. Literature is, unarguably, the mirror of society, and Blackburn's prose-fiction is poised to illuminate how external pressures, deeply rooted in cultural norms, familial expectations, and societal traditions, shape the choices available to Yinka—the protagonist.

Cultural nuances play a pivotal role, adding layers of complexity to her narrative as she navigates the delicate balance between honoring tradition and forging a path reflective of her individuality. Moreover, the juxtaposition of tradition and modernity becomes a recurring theme in the text.

*Yinka, where is Your Husband?* delves into the intricate connections between the individual and the collective, examining how societal norms not only influence Yinka's choices but also resonate with broader discussions on gender roles and autonomy. Blackburn's narrative strategy may involve the use of metaphorical mirrors, enabling readers to see not only Yinka's reflection but also catch glimpses of their own societal values and preconceptions. This interplay between fiction and reality underscores literature's timeless ability to provoke self-reflection and foster understanding. This study endeavors to dissect the thematic tapestry woven by Blackburn in *Yinka, where is Your Husband*. The examination extends beyond a traditional literary analysis; it aspires to be a thoughtful exploration of the intricate layers embedded in the narrative. By scrutinizing the characters, plot intricacies, and underlying themes, we seek to discern how the novel contributes to the broader discourse surrounding gender roles, societal expectations, and the evolving nature of relationships in contemporary literature.

Through this exploration, we aim not only to appreciate the artistry of Blackburn's storytelling but also to uncover insights that resonate with real-world dilemmas. The purpose is to engage in a scholarly dialogue that extends beyond the pages of the novel, contributing to a more profound understanding of the delicate balance individuals must strike between personal aspirations and societal conformity.

Understanding the nuances of marital pressures in literature holds immense significance in a society grappling with changing paradigms of relationships and gender dynamics. As we embark on this literary expedition into *Yinka, where is Your Husband*, we anticipate uncovering insights that resonate with real-world experiences. The novel, with its exploration of societal expectations, provides a unique vantage point to foster a deeper understanding of the delicate balance individuals must strike between personal aspirations and societal conformity.

In traversing the pages of Blackburn's work, we aim not only to unravel the narrative complexities but also to unravel the broader socio-cultural implications embedded within the thematic exploration of marital pressures. This study seeks to contribute to the ongoing conversation surrounding marriage, marital pressure, and the evolving nature of relationships, as reflected through the prism of literature.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

The society and individuals are the materials of literature. The outer world gets transformed within the author's mind and heart and these transformed elements become reality in literature and a source of our pleasure. However, it is hardly possible to define literature precisely because the different critics and scholars from Plato down to the present age have defined literature diversely. These diverse views state different theories of literature.

In *The Theory of Literature*, Wellek and Warren explored several ways of defining literature and then came to the conclusion that the nature of literature can be understood through the particular use of literary or connotative language. They define literature as the reproduction of life. While defining the nature of literature, they remark: "Literature is a social institution, using as its medium, language—a social creation...literature represents life; and 'life' is, in large measure, a social reality, even though the natural world and inner or subjective world of the individual have also been objects of literary imitation" (94). Thus, this article is strongly anchored on the sociology of literature as its theoretical framework.

The sociological approach or sociology of literature as a theory is built on the assumption that literature is an expression of society: it originates in society and represents life and life, no doubt, is a social reality. It further assumes that social forces inevitably inform and condition the writer, his or her work, and the audience. Therefore, what a writer creates has to be studied as a social phenomenon.

Sociology of Literature is a branch of literary study that examines the relationships between literary works and their social contexts, including patterns of literacy, kinds of audience, modes of publication and dramatic presentation, and the social class positions of authors and readers. Originating in 19th-century France with works by Madame de Staël and Hippolyte Taine.

Basically, accounts of the beginning of the social interpretation of literature invariably cite the writings of Madame de Staël, especially her *De la littérature Considérée dans rapport avec les institutions sociale* (translated into the English language as, *On Literature Considered in its Relations with Social Institutions*), published in 1800. This volume discusses the relation of race and climate to literary style and the effects of women and religion on literature. The sociology of literature was revived in the English-speaking world with the appearance of such studies as Raymond Williams's *The Long Revolution* (1961) and is most often associated with Marxist approaches to literary analysis.

The sociological theory teaches that "the writer is not only influenced by society; he also influences it" (Nwahunanya 28). There are three aspects of consideration in this theory or approach to literary analysis, according to Chinyere Nwahunanya. They are:

- the sociology of the writer,
- the social context of the work itself
- the influence of literature on society

This article carefully aligns with the second approach, which is the social context of the work itself. For Onyemaechi Udumukwu, in his book, *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Introduction*, "a text cannot be understood without its social context" (258). Following this, every writer is expected to explore the relationship between literature and society. Udumukwu further argues, though, in another work, that "social responsibility is used to highlight the question of what the writer is answerable to. He or she is, first and foremost, answerable not to his or her art but to society. It is society's demand on the writer that defines the nature of his or her art" (*Signature* 131).

In summation, Udumukwu perceives social responsibility as predicated on the basic assumption that the writer is endowed with a communal voice and that the tissue of his or her art pulsates with an energy that is public in origin.

### **3. Societal Pressure: Personal Aspirations and Societal Conformity**

Almost every young Nigerian woman who is above the age of twenty-five years old can relate to the constant prodding and endless banter they get from their family members, friends, and society if she is still unmarried at that 'big age'. If the search for "her man" or "the right man" remains unfruitful for another five years and this lady clocks the age of 30 and above without the 'crown of her head' in view, she will automatically become everyone's prayer point. This is largely owing to the assumption in many parts of Nigeria that a woman's biggest achievement in life is to be able to secure a life partner regardless of whatever means she intends to make that happen. Her plethora of successes amounts to nothing; if she doesn't have a 'head' to confidently make her 'neck' straight or if the prefix: 'Mrs' is not added to her name, she may probably not enjoy societal respect. Put in other words, this "culture," which is common in many African societies, arguably reinforces the fact that a woman can only be respected wholesomely once she finally gets married.

The lead character in Lizzie Blackburn's fiction, Yinka, is a thirty-one-year-old British-Nigerian lady who is Oxford-educated and has a good-paying job that any millennial could ever dream of but seems jinxed, according to her family members, because she hasn't had a new man in her life ever since her ex-boyfriend, Femi, broke up with her abruptly. It doesn't help that her younger sister, Kemi, whom she is at least five years older than, is already married and expecting a baby, or that her cousin, Rachel, will be getting married soon to the absolute love of her life. Oh, and there is also Ola, one of her cousins who happens to be her age mate but is already married with three beautiful kids. Clearly, Yinka is bound to be a huge source of concern to her immediate and extended family for finding it difficult to keep any man at all.

To help herself find a husband, she decides to “take her destiny in her hands” by coming up with different strategies that will enable her to secure a date for her cousin’s wedding. She starts by creating a manual spreadsheet in her notebook tagged “operation wedding date.” In it, she highlights the objectives, tasks, deadlines, and key performance indicators needed to make her *brilliant* plan a reality. She takes the bold step of signing up on an online dating site – contrary to her principle – with the hope of finding a suitable partner for the big day.

Amidst all this chaos, she gets relieved of her job owing to downsizing at her place of work; however, rather than investing her energy on how to get another job or set up a money-making business, she diverts a reasonable degree of her energy towards finding a good match. Sadly, all her efforts amount to nothing, and after much persuasion from her mother and her obnoxious aunty Debbie, she decides to meet Alex, a man who Aunty Debbie swears to be kind and respectful, with a decent source of income.

Alex matches up to all the good qualities Aunty Debbie has earlier pointed out, and Yinka honestly feels she has it going good and can finally rest her dream and determined quest to get a husband. Yinka thought Alex had finally decided to express how attractive she was in his eyes, but sadly, as Yinka once observed, some men don’t know a good woman even when she’s right in front of them. Alex, instead of professing love for Yinka, her host and friend, suddenly got attracted to Yinka’s roommate, Nana, who had just returned from the gym and was to quickly pick up a few items before dashing off to catch a train. It was just within those few minutes that Alex got attracted to her, and did not even keep his lust to himself but openly informed Yinka of his attraction and interest in Nana and not Yinka:

Actually, someone has caught my eye...Yeah. In fact, someone I met recently, and I mean very recently...Wow, I really thought it was obvious. Yinka...it’s...Nana (*Yinka, where is your Huzband?* 234).

Alex’s spontaneous shift of attraction and love from Yinka to Nana, regardless of Yinka’s emotions, projects Alex as a striking example of an emotional abuser. It sells him off so cheaply as one who has little or no respect for women but switches from one lady today to another lady tomorrow. On her part, the hopes of getting a marriage proposal from Alex has not only been dashed but leaves her deeply angered, bitter, and in a pool of self-rejection. Her tone of anger and frustration can be heard loudly:

What happens next, happens so quickly for my brain to catch up. For weeks, I have literally bent over backwards to get Alex to notice me. I made a fucking plan out of Post-It notes, for goodness’ sake. And my hair. God, I spent so much on this weave. Too much money, which wasn’t wise given I’m jobless right now. And the squats! My thighs are ridden with pain and lactic acid. And all that friggin’ *yam*. In the space between Alex telling me that he likes Nana and his instruction to pass on his business card, my shock has transitioned to anger. I’m angry that I’m being passed over yet again. I’m angry that I have wasted my time. I’m angry that I’m not considered good enough (*Yinka, where is your Huzband?* 234).

The word *frustration* can be seen as the most appropriate and relevant expression to describe how Yinka felt after Alex put up that show of shame. This is because *frustration evokes a sense of weariness caused by goals being thwarted or desires being unsatisfied*. Frustration is an act or instance of causing somebody or something to be dissatisfied or unfulfilled; it is something that blocks, thwarts, and upsets somebody all at the same time.

In spite of this, however, Yinka did not slow down her nor quest to bring her singular agenda of finding a man who will become her husband to fruition. For Yinka, it is no retreat, no surrender; she only needs to tweak or adjust her approach, having had this failed experience. As Eneke—the proverbial bird in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958), would say: “Since men have learnt to shoot without missing, it has learnt to fly without perching.”

After mourning what could have been between her and Alex and also reducing communication with him, she decides to reach out to Emmanuel, whose mother thinks they would make her a good match. But again, her hopes get shattered after the shallow-minded man blatantly tells her over the video call that he is only attracted to light-skinned girls as opposed to Yinka's lovely, dark, rich skin.

With reference to a lady's skin colour, researchers have found that a good number of African men are subconsciously attracted to fairer skin ladies, perhaps due to its association with purity, innocence, modesty, and goodness, while some African women feel that darker complexions are associated with sex and virility.

Judging people based on their skin colour is one menace that has eaten so deeply into society's standard of beauty as mainstream media keeps perpetuating the erroneous narrative that a lighter complexion is more attractive than a darker shade. Lizzie gives us a detailed insight into the life of a regular, dark-skinned woman navigating the dating pool and how difficult that can be. An instance of colorism in the novel worthy of note is the insensitive statement of Emmanuel, where he clearly states his complexion preference and subtly labels Yinka as an unattractive, dark-skinned lady:

The thing is—when my mum told me about you, I actually had a different person in mind...Do you remember that light-skinned girl? Jemimah was the light-skinned girl that all the boys liked in Sunday school. 'Yeah. For some reasons, I had in mind you were her...It's just my preference...But you're pretty for a dar-skinned girl, though (*Yinka, where is your Husband?* 331).

This statement of his opens up different cans of insecurities that Yinka has locked away in the past, and for the first time in her life, she considers bleaching her skin just to get accepted and desired by men.

The pressure on single ladies to get married at a certain age bracket in Nigeria is largely due to societal beliefs. The Nigerian society expects females to get married in their 20's as they are seen to be at the prime of their beauty, strength, fertility, and maturity. It is against this perceived societal stereotyping of the female adult gender that Nigerian-born writer Chimamanda Adichie conceived and penned down her view with the subheading, "Never Speak of Marriage as an Achievement" in a section of her "*Dear Ijeawele: A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*":

Never speak of marriage as an achievement. Find ways to make clear to her that marriage is not an achievement, nor is it what she should aspire to. A marriage can be happy or unhappy, but it is not an achievement. We condition girls to aspire to marriage, but we do not condition boys to aspire to marriage, and so there is already a terrible imbalance at the start. The girls will grow up to be women preoccupied with marriage. The boys will grow up to be men who are not preoccupied with marriage. The women marry those men. The relationship is automatically uneven because the institution matters more to one than the other. Is it any wonder that, in so many marriages, women sacrifice more, at a loss to themselves, because they have to constantly maintain an uneven exchange? One consequence of this imbalance is the very shabby and very familiar phenomenon of two women publicly fighting over a man while the man remains silent (10).

Adjudged as the leading voice of the third generation anglophone writers from Nigeria, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in this piece, charges young ladies not to live their whole lives aspiring only to get married but to seek other lofty goals in life; sadly, many ladies have made wrong marital choices because they decided to settle for less, owing largely to societal pressures and the erroneous view of an unmarried lady as a failed person.

#### **4. Stylistics Implication of the word, *huzband* in the Novel's Title**

The title of this fictional work is *Yinka: where is your husband?* One can clearly observe that the English word *husband* was wrongly spelt as *huzband*. The implication is that the novelist chose to spell the word in that manner for emphasis. Stylistically, it is a manipulation or a distortion of the lexical component in order to FOREGROUND an

experience, and in this case, a lexical item or a word---to draw attention to that word. By this, the writer carefully highlights, indeed, foregrounds the importance placed on the husband as a core preoccupation of the narrative. Foregrounding is a stylistic device that brings forward or brings to the fore certain linguistic features in order to create emphasis or deviation from normative language patterns. It serves as a means for the writer to articulate their unique experiences and perspectives. Chapman Raymond, in his book *Linguistics and Literature: An Introduction to Literary Stylistics*, observes: "Foregrounding is used to describe the kind of deviation which has the function of bringing some items into artistic emphasis so that it stands out from its surroundings (48). For Ikenna Kamalu, "...foregrounding is used to represent the abnormal use of language or medium in order to make it dominant, stand out or prominent in perception (181).

There are two main types of foregrounding, namely parallelism and deviation. Parallelism is unexpected regularity, while deviation can be seen as expected regularity. What we find in the novel's title is a deviation: *huzband* as against "husband." So, the lexical item, *huzband*, is being foregrounded in order to call the reader's attention to the emphasis placed on the English lexical item, "husband," in the whole story. Consequently, foregrounding as a method of defamiliarization in textual composition, enables the reader to perceive the familiar with a sense of newness.

Yinka's narrative likely draws inspiration from this tradition, offering readers an opportunity to not only empathize with her personal journey but also to ponder the evolving nature of marriage as portrayed through the lens of contemporary literature. Yinka's story unfolds within the complex web of societal expectations and cultural dynamics. Yinka, as a character, embodies the struggle faced by many individuals in contemporary society---caught between the gravitational pull of cultural heritage and the desire for autonomy in shaping one's destiny.

## **5. Conclusion**

Yinka has struggled to love herself as a skinny, black girl in contrast to her light-skinned, fleshy sister. She, however, takes solace in the soothing words of her father, who constantly reminds her that even though the sun and the moon are different, they are both beautiful, and they serve different purposes uniquely. She grows up with this mindset instilled by her late father, not until she encounters some difficulties in getting a partner and almost decides to succumb to society's standard of beauty. Her oldest maternal aunty, Blessing, and her best friend, Nana, teach her the importance of self-love because for an individual to love another human truly, he or she must first love every bit of himself or herself---regardless of one's insecurities, imperfections, and every other thing.

Societal definitions, societal models, and societal perceptions should not be the canon or guiding model; indeed, a standard which a person must compel and compress himself or herself into, like a mold. People should be allowed to express themselves, live their lives and be free of certain societal conditioning, which could be inimical to their individual peculiarities.

Yinka is so fixated on getting approval from her family and, in the process, loses herself until she realises that there is more to life than getting married and having kids. Like in the case of her cousin--Ola, Yinka decides to take charge of her destiny and starts focusing on the things that bring her satisfaction, loving herself passionately and practically worrying less about what the future holds. And just when she begins to go with the alignment of life and take each day as it comes, love finds her in the form of Donovan, her camp buddy from her teenage years. Yinka would have ruined her life through desperation, indeed, open and visible desperation.

But how can we conceptualise desperation in the light of the lived encounters of Blackburn's protagonist---Yinka? Desperation is a total loss of hope. It is a desire to have what someone sees as an important need---which must be met by any means possible. It is a desire for help, hope, love, and connection. Rarely are people desperate when they have hope, love, and support. It is in a feeling of "no hope" that desperation sets in. Desperation can feel overwhelming and may constitute a huge threat to one's mental health. This is not far from what we find in Yinka, the protagonist in Blackburn's fiction.

Being desperate for something is not bad, but it is when you let your desperation become overly visible that desperation can lead to risky behavior. Put in other words, visible desperation can drive a person into taking risks that he or she would not normally consider or think through before getting involved. It was Vanessa Evelyn, a relationship counsellor, who warned, saying: "A woman is most dangerous to herself when she is desperate to be loved." Desperation could be at the base of some decisions that involve financial or personal risks in the hope of finding a quick solution to problems.

Desperation can lead to a variety of consequences, both for individuals and communities. Two striking consequences are psychological consequences and behavioral consequences. Psychological consequences manifest in cloudy decision-making, leading individuals to make hasty or irrational choices that they might not consider under normal circumstances; the feeling of desperation often heightens anxiety levels, which can contribute to mental health issues like depression or panic disorders; persistent desperation can lead to a sense of hopelessness, diminishing motivation and the will to pursue positive changes.

More often, people feel threatened by non-conformity with societal dictates; however, conformity is often the greatest undoing of personal aspirations. In today's world, the expectation of conformity is the norm, creating immense pressure on people—not just single and searching ladies. Many people just blend in, and this leaves their personal aspirations, personal potential, and personal giftings undeveloped, untapped, and unnoticed. But what, then, is the way out? People—single ladies inclusive, should intentionally choose not to just fit in but to stand out in their pursuit of personal fulfilment—within or without matrimony. An individual should choose to be the radiant outer layer that flows in this sea of similarity—embrace your uniqueness and make it your superpower.

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