

# UNANSWERED CRIES

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SETTING: Sierra Leone

## ***Meaning and relationship between the title and content:-***

UNANSWERED CRIES: - The title can be taken to mean refusing to grant or accept some one's request/wish for something or refusing to cooperate with someone in accomplishing something. The book is mainly about female genital mutilation (FGM) and its supposed benefits.

A mother's desire and wish to have her daughter circumcised are frustrated, refused, denied and even mocked. According to Makalaay and indeed the entire village women led by the Bondo secret society, it's only through circumcision that a girl would be able to prepare adequately for parenthood, be submissive, faithful and loyal to her husband and possess self-control without which she would be despised, mocked and even be rejected for marriage! She therefore takes it upon herself to get her daughter circumcised but all her efforts are frustrated, blocked and not reciprocated as follows:-

Her daughter Olabisi flatly refuses to cooperate with her on the matter of circumcision and runs away from her home back to the city. This is her first hurdle which she fails to overcome. This was first the setback she met.

Also the hunter (Pa Amadu) whom she contracted to help get her daughter back colludes with her (Olabisi) and helps her escape back to the city. It's like everyone and everything is conspiring against her. Here we see how her efforts to get her daughter back continue to hit one dead wall after another.

Her ex-lover (Ade Jones) flatly refuses to cooperate with her in her quest to have Olabisi circumcised. Her threats & theatrics don't move him an inch. He even threatens to kill her if she doesn't vacate his premises. So here again we see Makalaay's desire to have Olabisi circumcised blocked by her father hence unanswered cries.

Yah Posse and other members of the Bondo Secret Society's efforts to have Olabisi circumcised all hit a dead end; she escapes from their captivity by fighting her way out this fight becomes the proverbial last straw that broke the Carmel's back, it gets personal from then onwards since they are on a mission to teach her a lesson for clearly showing contempt and disregard for their customs and beating Yah Powseh's daughters.

<sup>1</sup>Lastly, Makalaay's last hope, the Court of justice, rules against her! This surely strikes a hammer blow on her and leaves her with a lot of pent up anger, bitterness and a feeling of betrayal from her only daughter. It's like the gods have ganged up against her to punish her for an unknown crime. In the end, we realize that all Makalaay's efforts to circumcise Olabisi have not succeeded. Her pleas, wishes, and cries have all been frustrated and eventually denied hence UNANSWERED CRIES.

### **Character and characterization**

#### **MAKALAAY**

- *Unrefined and vulgar*- she uses lots of abusive and foul language against Ade and Bisi; for instance she calls Ade a skirt chaser, useless man and a hopeless father.
  - She also calls Bisi a stupid girl and a Gborka which is a derogatory term for uncircumcised girl; pg 19 (*"you did worse than that you stupid girl, you stripped two bondo girls naked and looked at their private parts. You! A Gborka!"*)
- *She's quite temperamental (Hot tempered)* – this is exhibited by the way she easily gets angry at the slightest provocation for instance she slaps Bisi for being too inquisitive and she's also angry at Bisi for dancing pg 14 (*Makalaay's slap hit Olabisi on the face like a small bomb, toppling her off the stool*), she also twists Bisi's ears pg11(*"Makalaay grabbed Olabisi's left ear and twisted it hard like a driver twisting the ignition key of a stubborn car"*)
- *Upholder and custodian of African culture*- she implores Bisi to be circumcised and also advocates for her to learn her native tongue. We see her telling Bisi *"one day you will come and stay with me permanently and learn your native tongue"* she further goes on to claim that the only way people will ever respect and stop calling her (Bisi) Gborka is if she gets circumcised.
- *Strict disciplinarian* – warns Bisi of dire consequences if she ever disobeys her. Her punishment would be beating her until her skin peels. Pg11
- *Superstitious* – she believes in the power of spirits. She trusts the spirits would make her childbirth difficult if she doesn't obey them, that's why on page 22 we see her meekly submit herself to the fate of the spirits by saying *"whatever the spirits say I will do"* and *"don't say that. Please! I'm pregnant."* Pg 22.
- *Desperate*- she is so desperate to get her daughter circumcised (all in the name of obeying the fictitious spirits) that she is ready to move heaven and earth just to ensure her beloved daughter is circumcised. Some of her desperate acts include; bribing Pa Amadu the hunter with a goat of his choice from her husbands herd if he brings Bisi back to her, leaving home late at night to look for Bisi despite the risks and threats from her husband Adamu, seeking the arbitration of the court of law to compel Ade Jones to allow Bisi be circumcised.

- *Hypocrite* – while she’s a staunch advocate fo<sup>2</sup>r female circumcision which in her own opinion she believes would make Olabisi abstain from sex till marriage, her own FGM couldn’t make her abstain as she conceived Bisi at the tender age of 16 yrs. and out of wedlock. Pg 83
- *Conservative* – is someone who’s resistant to change i.e. a conservative person doesn’t welcome or embrace change; they like to maintain the status quo. Makalaay shows this by her insistence on Bisi’s circumcision.
- *A hypocrite*- is a person who professes beliefs and opinions he or she doesn’t hold in order to conceal his/her real intentions. while she claims FGM would makes a girl abstain from sex till marriage and be faithful in marriage, on digging deeper we realize she was circumcised at the tender age of ten, *started having sex* at the age of fourteen and became pregnant with Bisi at sixteen

#### **OLABISI**

- *Inquisitive* -she asks far too many questions, this actually lands her in trouble when she foolishly asks Rugiatu and Sallay whether they are Gborka (a disparaging term for an uncircumcised girl)
- *Streetwise* (street-smart) – is defined as being able to deal with dangerous or difficult situations that you often find in urban settings. No one epitomizes this more than Bisi as shown below:-
  - First the way she flung the bucket behind her towards Dauda who fell on his face like a log of wood and hence stopped chasing her.
  - Also the way she fought off attacks from Rugiatu, Sallay and Yah Posse hence avoiding grievous and actual bodily harm and forced FGM.
  - Lastly the way she maneuvered her way out of dangerous situations in Freetown whenever students went on rampage.
- *Religious*- she repeatedly calls upon God for help whenever she is faced with daunting circumstances. For instance when she finds herself in the unfamiliar and unfriendly territory around Bondo women’s circumcision camp with Yah posse and her girls closing in on her, she said “*what am I to do? God if you are there help me*”
- *Brave*- Olabisi is a daring girl in many ways. By standing up to her mother and saying no to circumcision, she showed great courage and fearlessness and also by maneuvering herself out of danger after danger the way she did when escaping from the village back to the city, she showed great courage and heroism.

- *Agent of change* – in the world of many sierra Leonean women, circumcision is sacrosanct, a rite of passage that every girl worth her salt must undergo. It is (apparently) the only way:-
  - To make them faithful and committed in their marriage,
  - To get them ready for parenthood
  - To impart subtle cooking skills
  - To make them love and respect their husbands, when Bisi chose to go against this common grain by refusing to be circumcised, she became an instant celebrity of sorts, a pioneer champion of girls' rights. By saying no to the barbaric and backward practice she became an agent of change, above all she was sending a message that one doesn't have to be circumcised to learn how to cook delicious meals or even respect their husbands.
- *Remorseful and apologetic* – on pg. 65 we see how she unreservedly apologises for the umpteenth time to her father after their secret love affair with Eddy is dramatically exposed to all and sundry in the court.

#### **YAH POWSEH**

- She's the *Digba Sowe* i.e. the chief circumciser; this gives her a position of leadership and reverence amongst the village women.
- *she is a staunch custodian and champion of African traditions and practices*, this is seen through her role and social rank in the society, she undertakes this responsibility with great zeal and pride
- Superstitious,

#### **OYA**

- *Forgiving* - despite Ade Jones long list of transgressions which include unfulfilled promises about marriage, eloping with other women such as Yamide, she still finds it in her heart to forgive him like a mother forgiving a spoilt child. pg 43
- *Supportive* – she supports her husband-to-be when he has a brief altercation with Makalaay over Bisi's circumcision. She categorically states that "if I'm going to be your wife, I must stand by you" pg. 47.
- *Responsible* – she exhibits qualities of a responsible parent by giving Olabisi motherly advice to stay away from boys until she gets married. She also helps clean Olabisi like a loving mother would do to her own daughter, as Olabisi's soon to be surrogate mother; she thrives in this role which only serves to forge a strong bond of friendship between the two. Pg.45
- *Liberal* – she is an open minded person, someone who changes with the changing times. Despite being circumcised herself, she's against this barbaric tradition.
- *Educated* – she's a lawyer by profession, this shows how educated she is. Her character is used to represent all the African educated womenfolk who shun the negative cultural practices.'

### **ADE JONES**

- *Promiscuous/womanizer* – Makalaay referred to him as a ‘skirt chaser’, Oya also said something to that effect i.e. *“I’ve been doing that for the past three years while you chase after girls”*. All these points to one thing, Ade is indeed a womanizer. Pg. 41
- *Funny and witty* – He tells Oya some cock and bull story about being attacked by several friends (mosquitoes) they hosted the previous night. This joke shows how funny, inventive and humorous Ade is. Pg.40
- *Anti FGM* – his stance on FGM puts him on a head on collision course with Makalaay who is hell-bent on ensuring Bisi is circumcised, this position puts him in the same bracket as other alienated Africans. He firmly supports his daughter who refused to be circumcised. we deduce this from these comments *“No Bondo woman is going to circumcise my daughter for the sake of superstition or tradition”* pg. 62
- *Irresponsible* – he has not been a good father or role model to his daughter, his hands-off approach has given Bisi immense freedom which she inevitably misuses. We see Bisi having a love affair with Eddy right under his nose without as much as getting a whiff of this. If he were responsible, maybe he would have detected this early on and averted the enormous embarrassment they suffered at the hands of Makalaay’s lawyer Salam Sassay.66
- *Temperamental* – easily gets angry, he threatens Makalaay that he would kill her if she doesn’t vacate his premises.

### **EDWARD COLE (EDDY)**

- He’s Olabisi’s boyfriend.
- He’s a *traitor*, betrays Bisi by revealing their secret escapades to lawyer Salam Sassay who promptly uses that information to embarrass her in the court.

### **BONDO WOMEN**

- They are staunch custodians and strong defenders of African traditional practices; this is shown by the way they came out in large numbers during the court proceedings to show solidarity with Makalaay and Yah Powseh.

## **THEMES IN UNANSWERED CRIES**

### *1) FGM*

Female genital Mutilation is the removal of a woman's genitals usually the sensitive part known as clitoris, this is done to inhibit sexual desires. It is performed as a rite of passage to mark a female's progression from childhood (a girl) to adulthood. Upon initiation the now 'woman' female earns respect from her peers and the society in general. She's then considered ripe for marriage and parenthood among other things. The book revolves around a mother's desire to get her daughter circumcised, we see an age old institution (Bondo Secret Society) established just to perpetrate this practice. Yah Powseh sits pretty on top as the high priestess (chief circumciser) a job she performs with great zeal and determination.

We further see other characters such as Makalaay, Yah Powseh, Oya, Rugiatu and Sallay who have all faced the knife sometimes in the past. Membership of the Bondo secret society is an exclusive affair only achievable through circumcision.

The group of six young naked girls in the Bondo Secret Society's dance procession are all being led away to be circumcised.

The shrieks and cries of the girls in the Bondo camp confirm they are being circumcised.

This practice is prevalent in Africa, in Tanzania it is widely practiced in the lake zone regions, Singida, Tanga, Dodoma etc.

### *2) POSITION OF WOMEN IN THE SOCIETY*

The position of women in the society is the roles they play and their social standing in the society. Each society has its own distinctive roles for their women, for instance in some African societies the role of a woman is firmly fixed as the subordinate of a man, child bearer and home maker. They are expected to play such roles with due diligence and minimum fuss. In this book the author portrays

They are portrayed as the custodians and upholders of traditions and morals. Yah Powseh and Makalaay fight tooth and nail to ensure Bisi is circumcised (though they failed). This shows they want to ensure continuation of cultural practices.

Women are also shown to be strict disciplinarians who believe in the old adage "spare the rod and spoil the child. No one epitomizes this more than Makalaay who twists Bisi's ears akin to a driver turning the ignition key on a stubborn car; she also threatens to beat her until her skin peels if she ever disobeys her again. All these are done to instill a sense of discipline and responsibility on Olabisi.

### 3) CONFLICTS

Are misunderstandings, disagreements, or fights. Every society has its own fair share of conflicts, this book is no exception, we see the following conflicts:-

Olabisi vs. her mother - this conflict is caused by Olabisi's refusal to honour her mother's wish of getting her circumcised.

Olabisi vs. Rugiatu & Sallay - this is caused by Bisi's innocent mention of the taboo word 'Gborka' in reference to the two girls.

Olabisi vs. Yah Powseh – Yah Powseh tried to kidnap and circumcise her by force when she lost her way in the forest and found herself in the middle of Bondo's circumcision camp. This led to a physical altercation in which Olabisi triumphed thanks to her street-smart skills.

Ade vs. Makalaay – caused by the two former lovers' conflicting opinions on whether Bisi should be circumcised or not. While Ade has stamped his foot down and said no to FGM, Makalaay is of a conflicting opinion.

Oya vs. Ade – Oya feels Ade's love for her is not sincere, she believes Ade is afraid to commit; on the other hand Ade is dragging his feet and wants to live one day at a time and see where the relationship goes. Oya wants immediate commitment (marriage). Also the small matter of other women in the picture notably Yamide further causes friction between the two lovebirds.

Dauda vs. Makalaay - caused by the latter's desperation to get Bisi back home. He threatens her with divorce if she doesn't stop. All his threats fell into deaf ears though as Makalaay went out all the same.

The legal battle between the two lawyer's Oya and Salam Sassay is another great cause of conflict in the book as they find themselves in opposing corners each trying to sway the judge.

### 4) SUPERSTITION

Is defined as the belief or faith in magic or supernatural powers that cannot be explained by logic.

This theme manifests itself through Makalaay who's terrified of the spirits; she believes the spirits would make her experience difficult childbirth if she doesn't obey them by offering her daughter for circumcision

Yah Powseh also believes in the spirits and apparently acts as their messenger, for instance she tells Bisi "the *spirits wants you circumcised*" pg 35.

Also the hunter Pa Amadu wears an **amulet** on his left arm designed to make him invincible to wild animals.

*Amulet is a piece of cloth worn around the neck or arm believed to offer protection*

5) *IRRESPONSIBILITY*

When one fails to act in discretion or accountably, they are said to be irresponsible.

Ade Jones is a father to a teenage girl, now that comes with a lot of responsibilities. As a father he's supposed to be a role model to his daughter, model her to be a responsible and personable girl and counsel her whenever necessary. However our dear Ade failed miserably on that front because he employed a *laissez-faire* approach instead of a hands-on methodology in exercising his parental duties. This gives Bisi a lot of freedom which she inevitably misuses. If he were a responsible parent maybe he could have salvaged the whole situation from the onset hence avoiding the embarrassing debacle in the courtroom.

6) *PROTEST*

To protest is to show opposition, dislike, or disapproval over something.

This is portrayed through Bondo women's marching and singing songs of protest on the streets of Freetown in a show of solidarity with Makalaay.

Bisi protests against her mother's desire to circumcise her.

Dauda bitterly opposes Makalaay over her going out at night to look for the run-away Bisi. He even threatens to divorce her.

Oya is also not impressed by Ade's promiscuous ways not least the way he shies away from marriage.

7) *PROMISCUITY*

This is having sexual relationship with many partners i.e. sleeping around.

Ade is a known skirt chaser. He has several partners such as Yamide, Oya, and Makalaay.

Olabisi is also promiscuous as claimed by her mother on pg 32. *"Olabisi has also shown she is promiscuous, at the age of fourteen she is no longer a virgin"*

8) *BETRAYAL*

Is portrayed through Ade and Eddy.

Eddy is considered a traitor because he revealed their secret bedroom escapades to lawyer Salam Sassay who promptly used that information to embarrass Bisi in and her father in court.

Makalaay took offence with Ade for revealing how she started having sex at fourteen and became pregnant at the tender age of sixteen.

9) *CULTURAL ALIENATION*

To alienate yourself culturally is to detach, disengage or cut off yourself from your peoples way of life by disowning their culture and other practices. This is usually caused by foreign influence i.e. western education.

The following characters have alienated themselves from their people's way of life:- Olabisi - Yah Powseh calls her a 'white woman' which is a figurative way of referring to someone who has embraced white peoples culture

Dr. Koroma and Oya were all circumcised ass children but upon receiving western education now consider FGM backward and outdated.

10) *LOVE AFFAIRS*

Love is a mutual feeling of attraction between two people usually a male and a female. Male and female relationships are a common occurrence in the book. There's a relationship between Ade and Oya.

Olabisi's relationship with Eddy also stands out prominently in the book.

11) *STIGMATIZATION*

Stigma is defined as the sign of disgrace which sets a person from other 'normal' members of the society.

In the book uncircumcised girls are considered lesser beings only fit for village riffraffs. They are abused, disrespected, looked down upon and generally disregarded, heck, they can't even get married. A Gborka is an outcast in the eyes of these villagers.

12) *TABOOS*

A taboo is something generally forbidden or prohibited.

In the book this theme manifests itself as follows; an uncircumcised girl is expressly forbidden from calling circumcised girls a 'Gborka'

It is also forbidden to discuss in public how the circumcision operation is done. Asking someone to do that is akin to asking them to strip naked in public!

Contact me for clarifications, comments or compliments.  
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