

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF HUME’S NOTION OF POLYGAMY

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Abstract

Polygamy is a form of marriage in which a man marries two or more wives. Polygamous marriage is an acceptable practice in many countries in Africa, including Nigeria, which has the fifth highest prevalent rate in the World. Sometimes, polygamy is used to solidify economic and political relationship, while at other times, it serves to enhance one’s social status. The practice of polygamy has raised ethical questions about whether or not it usurps the sovereignty of man and enslave him to a woman. The main problem that the paper seeks to address is: Can polygamy promote happiness? What is the justification for the practice of polygamy? Employing the method of content analysis and hermeneutics, this study examines a critical analysis of Hume’s notion of polygamy vis-à-vis the call for its rejection as a form of marriage. The paper shows that Hume’s incisive and innovative exposition of polygamy remains highly commendable in that it identifies incessant quarrels, fighting and jealousy as major defects capable of causing bodily/psychological harm and maiming of the spouses. The paper asserts that the premises upon which Hume based his outright rejection of polygamy is logically flawed. The paper concludes that Hume’s explication contains metaphysical elements (love and jealousy), which shows him to accept metaphysics as a meaningful enterprise from the back door after his blanket rejection of it as sophistry and illusion from the front door.

Keywords: Polygamy, Metaphysics, Socio-political, Jealousy, Unhappiness, hermeneutic, Psychological

Introduction

David Hume is a Scottish thinker renowned for his important contributions to philosophy, specifically Epistemology in which he attacked the causal principle and in the process; removed objectivity from science. Immanuel Kant (2012) once remarked that ‘Hume woke him up from his dogmatic slumber’. Buttressing the remarkable influence that Hume commands, Morris and Charlotte (2023, p.1) maintain that Hume is classed among the most influential philosophers in Western philosophical tradition, whose immense impacts in the realm of economics, epistemology, ethics, and socio-political philosophy remain indelible. His most insightful work in the realm of Epistemology is *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, published in 1748.

Hume was greatly disturbed with the incessant rate of marriage break-up in Europe, and as a Philosopher, he devotes his time to finding lasting solution to the quagmire. In order to get at the root causes of divorce, Hume x-rays the different types of marriage operated in Europe and picked out monogamy-one man and a wife- as the ideal. In his view, polygamy should be expunged as a form of marriage, because it contains several disadvantages and flaws that encourage divorce. Hume also harps on the importance of chastity, friendship, love and faithfulness in marriage. Highlighting the views of Hume on marriage and love is not the primary aim of the paper, but on the critical analysis of his position regarding Polygamy. Therefore, to achieve the objective, the paper is structured into three parts. Part one introduces us to a brief biographical sketch of David Hume. Part two explicates on the types of marriage in Hume's perspective and his notion of polygamy, followed by the lessons his views portend for humanity. In part three, we put forward a critique and comments which summarize the paper.

Hume on the Typology of Marriage

Hume begins his discourse on polygamy by first, analyzing the different forms of marriage present in his day. For him, the different customs, laws and practices globally have made it for diverse types of marriage to exist. Thus, he espouses that there is the marriage type which comprises of a man and his wife and this is called monogamy. The other consists of one man with two or more wives and it is known as polygamy. Lastly, he outlines community marriage, where women are shared to men randomly and children from such union are taken care of by the community as the third type of marriage. Buttressing his exposition for the sake of clarity, Hume (1896) posits:

As circumstances vary, and the laws propose different advantages, we find, that, in different times and places, they impose different conditions on this important contract....I cannot, at present, recollect my authorities; but I have somewhere read, that the republic of ATHENS, having lost many of its citizens by war and pestilence, allowed every man to marry two wives, in order the sooner to repair the waste which had been made by these calamities..., where a great many men and a few women are supposed to be shipwrecked on a desert coast; the captain of the troop, in order to obviate those endless quarrels which arose, regulates their marriages after the following manner: He takes a handsome female to himself alone; assigns one to every couple of inferior officers; and to five of the lowest rank he gives one wife in common. The ancient BRITONS had a singular kind of marriage, to be met with among no other people. Any number of them, as ten or a dozen, joined in a society together, which was perhaps requisite for mutual defence in those barbarous times. In order to link this society the closer, they took an equal number of wives in common; and whatever children were born, were reputed to belong to all of them, and were accordingly provided for by the whole community (pp.3-4).

Hume uses the above to explicate on the various marriage types prevalent in his day. He explains that different situations and laws operating in diverse places and time determine the type of marriage that is practiced there. Thus, after the pogrom in Athens, Hume reveals that polygamy became the acceptable type of marriage promoted to encourage massive

procreation with a view to increasing the population that was reduced by war. He also explicates on community marriage where, as a result of shipwreck, the captain has the power to distribute women aboard the ship to the men, including himself with children from such union becoming the responsibility of the community as a whole. Interpreting Hume on the above, Nieli (2017) posits:

Hume commences the fundamental part of his investigation with a fleeting narrative of the great assortment of marriage practices and customs that had existed in human society. ...in different epochs and places, people enforce dissimilar conditions on the marital contract. Tradition and law in divergent eras and places have allowed polygamous marriage-one man with two or more wives; one man and one woman, monogamy;...assigned several men to one wife; allowed group marriages between numerous men and numerous women as in the case of Tonkin in Vietnam, and permitted sailors to indulge in provisional marriages with local women after docking their ship at the harbor in an alien land with the union lasting for a season (p.13).

From the above, Nieli also agrees with Hume that the marriage types include; monogamy, polygamy, polyandry, group and provisional marriage. These marriages, as we can decipher from the quotation, are based on different customs, laws, and are carried out in diverse periods and places.

Hume on Polygamy

In dissecting his views on polygamy, Hume (1896) first discards the notion that all marital customs are similarly good in producing desirable outcomes. So, his dislike for polygamy stems from his conviction that it destroys man's sovereignty and makes him a slave to women. Putting this point concisely for easy understanding, he asserts:

The authority of the husband in a polygamous marriage is an actual usurpation which put an end to that proximity of rank, not to say equality, which has naturally been established between male (husband) and female (wife). Nature has made men to be their chums, their lovers, their sponsors. Do we need to freely exchange such appealing appellations for the barbaric caption of master and tyrant? (Hume, 1896, p.9).

Hume uses the above to show how polygamy debases man and make him exchange his sovereignty for passion in the hands of women (wives). This implies that the husband can sometimes be controlled in such a way that one would think he is under a spell by one or two of his wives to the detriment of others. Hence, Hume further reveals that polygamy comes with several disasters like incessant fighting between children or wives, quarrels between husband and wives, and some offsprings from such arrangement copy the negative lifestyles of their parents and they are not thoroughly guided by their father. Buttressing this fact tersely, he posits:

The catastrophes brought by polygamous marriage do not abate with the adults in the union. Kids born in such arrangement copy only the character trait of masters and slaves and never comprehend the significance of human equality. The large number of children produced by such marriage also denies each child of considerable fatherly

guidance, since a polygamous dad have little or no time to spend with each of his many offspring....what attention can a parent, whose wives gave birth to fifty children, give to inculcating moral principles when he himself is scarcely acquainted with them? (Hume,1896, p.12).

Hume once again demonstrates clearly why polygamous marriage will never appeal to him because it deprives children the natural affection from their father, prevents them from imbibing good principles and denies them sound upbringing. Sometimes, the father of these children, as insinuated by Hume, would end up not adequately knowing all his children. The children may be malnourished, their education placed in jeopardy due to the inability of the father to provide for their up-keep. For emphasis, Hume placed great premium on the care and education of children in marriage. Thus, it can be deduced that his justification for asserting that the education of children may be in jeopardy in a polygamous marriage originates from his notion that the husband is scarcely available in such arrangement to cater for the welfare and education of his children as highlighted in the above quotation. Adducing a cogent justification of Hume's strong dislike for polygamy, Brandon (2017) lucidly explicates:

Hume triggers his criticism of polygamy with the experiment of a hypothetical protector. Having numerous wives, says the polygamy protector, remains the only efficacious cure for the malady of love and the only convenient for liberating men from bondage to the females which violence of our craving has imposed on us. It is by several spouses alone—spouses who can simply be used anytime and traded off one against the other that men redeem their right of sovereignty, and satisfying our cravings, reinstate the authority of thinking in our minds... (p.71).

Brandon (2017) clarifies that Hume's response to those defending polygamy follows the tradition of Locke's well-known onslaught on patriarchy and he did so in a way that greatly resonates with current liberal mindset. For Brandon, Hume was dissatisfied with polygamy for a number of reasons. First, the sufferings in polygamy in terms of the husband not satisfying the sexual urge of his multiple wives is unbearable, especially when the husband spends more of his time with a particular wife, thereby giving room for infidelity for those wives whose cravings are not met by the husband; and this may lead to divorce (Brandon, 2017). Secondly, Palmer (2015) also interprets Hume to opine that most children from polygamous marriage are not well-taken care of by their father, especially when his business or source of living collapses; and the father finds it difficult to direct the children alright with sound moral principles. Thirdly, Palmer (2015) equally lists the frequent tiffs between the wives on one hand and the occasional squabbles among the many children of the marriage to constitute another vital justification for Hume's outright rejection of polygamy. By and large, it can be inferred that Hume's exposition of the ills of polygamy prepared the ground for his insightful explication on divorce. Highlighting a better position for the ills of polygamy, Hume (1896) posits:

To render polygamy more odious, I need not recount the frightful effects of jealousy, and the constraint in which it holds the fair-sex all over the east. In those countries men are not allowed to have any commerce with the females, not even physicians, when sickness may be

supposed to have extinguished all wanton passions in the bosoms of the fair, and, at the same time, has rendered them unfit objects of desire. TOURNEFORT tells us, that, when he was brought into the *grand signior's* seraglio as a physician, he was not a little surprised, in looking along a gallery, to see a great number of naked arms, standing out from the sides of the room. He could not imagine what this could mean; till he was told, that those arms, belonged to bodies, which he must cure, without knowing any more about them, than what he could learn from the arms. He was not allowed to ask a question of the patient, or even of her attendants, lest he might find it necessary to enquire concerning circumstances, which the delicacy of the seraglio allows not to be revealed... (p.13).

Hume (1896) concludes that polygamy is a detestable form of marriage in that it encourages bad education of children, breeds jealousy, destroys love, promotes barbarism, leads to the crippling of women as is evident in Spain and prevents a husband from bringing his associate home in order not to inadvertently bring a lover to his numerous wives. Giving a profound elucidation of his strong distaste for polygamy, he asserts;

In another country, where polygamy is also allowed, they render their wives cripples, and make their feet of no use to them, in order to confine them to their own houses....The bad education of children, especially children of poor condition, is another unavoidable consequence of these eastern institutions. Those who pass the early part of life among slaves, are only qualified to be, themselves, slaves and tyrants; and in every future intercourse, either with their inferiors or superiors, are apt to forget the natural equality of mankind. What attention, too, can it be supposed a parent, whose seraglio affords him fifty sons, will give to instilling principles of morality or science into a progeny, with whom he himself is scarcely acquainted, and whom he loves with so divided an affection? Barbarism, therefore, appears, from reason as well as experience, to be the inseparable attendant of polygamy. To demonstrate that polygamy is more loathsome, I need recount its appalling effects of distrust, jealousy,....No husband dares invite his friend to his home; else he brings a lover to his avalanche of wives. Polygamy promotes depraved education of progenies, destroys love and companionship. Therefore, from reason and experience, barbarism seems inseparably concomitant with polygamy (Hume, 1896, pp.9-10).

Having outlined the flaws of polygamy, Hume readily suggests that in order to regain one's sanity and prestige, one man, one wife (monogamy) remains the only panacea to harnessing of peace, stability, friendship and happiness in marriage. However, Hume kicks against those who advocates that polygamy "remains an effectual remedy for the disorder of love and freeing men from the slavery of women..." (p.8).

A Critical Analysis of Hume's Postulations on Polygamy

From the evaluation of Hume's explication on polygamy, one can infer that the loss and destruction of man's sovereignty by a woman as revealed by Hume in the name of polygamy,

contains a metaphysical mystery that nobody can explain. It is an established fact that when a man is in love, he can even behave childishly to a woman and vice-versa. That which makes him (the man) exhibit such conduct is a spirit (metaphysics) which Hume negates, but held to be responsible for making the man a slave to his wives. Hume also inadvertently refers to love as a spell which makes a husband to be easily controlled by his wives. This admittance clearly shows Hume to accept metaphysics as being meaningful from the back door after discarding it as meaningless from the front door in his famous critique of metaphysics. It is note-worthy to mention that Hume placed tremendous significance on love as being central to the attainment of happiness in marriage, but he fails to comprehend the fact that love in itself is metaphysical in nature. Today, when a man does the bidding of his wives due to love, most families believe that he is under the spell or charm of the wives, and this is responsible for ill-feelings of the man's family towards the wives. As a metaphysical concept, love is very strong and possesses the power to make a man or woman do things that are sometimes inexplicable.

From the social and political point of view, a critical analysis of Hume's assertion that polygamy facilitates neglect, destroys love and makes a husband unable to provide care for his family, when x-rayed in the perspective of Africa, particularly Nigeria, would be unfounded and cannot be sustained logically. This is due to the fact that in some parts of Africa, particularly Nigeria, polygamy remains a standard and acceptable culture/practice for Muslims in the South-West (Yorubas) and North (Hausas) which they are happy to indulge in. This acceptable practice of polygamy shown above is against the position of Hume that polygamy promotes unhappiness and make some husbands unable to acquaint themselves with their children. Showing how Hume committed a flaw in hastily generalizing that polygamy facilitates unhappiness, Alao (2025) asserts with reference to Nigeria:

Nigeria has the fifth highest prevalent rate of polygamy globally. Nigeria has witnessed some Presidents, Governors, Senators, and Ministers practicing polygamy. Obasanjo had more than two wives. Buhari is a polygamist. Babagida is also a polygamist. Senator Adeleke, the current governor of Osun State is a polygamist. Atiku, former Vice-President of Nigeria, is a polygamist. These individuals are happy with their families and taking good care of their children... (p.12).

Also, for some persons in the South-East, polygamy is also practiced as it is seen as a symbol of wealth and for preserving the name and values of a family, especially where a first wife fails to give birth after several years of marriage. In this regard, the family of the husband might persuade him to take a second wife so as to preserve the name of the family and its values. Some scholars such as Anyanwu (2022) and Onyeji (2020) reiterate that in Igbo land, a man can be asked to take a second wife if it is established medically that the wife would be unable to conceive so as to perpetuate his name and that of his family.

Polygamy is also used in some parts of Nigeria to enhance social and political status. The belief here is that a polygamous husband who is able to manage his family without any issues and maintain harmony among his wives would be responsive and able to cater for the teeming needs of his constituents with ease when given leadership position. This is mostly evident in the award of chieftaincy titles to such husbands in South-East, South-West and the North. The above exposition shows that Hume's call for a blanket rejection of polygamy as a form/type of marriage cannot be sustained anywhere in the world including Nigeria.

Demonstrating the relevance of polygamy as a vehicle for elevating the status of a man socially and politically into leadership positions, Joshua (2019,p.5) avers:

...It is noteworthy that irrespective of the bickering and challenges accompanying polygamy, the polygamous men are able to coordinate the entire family effectively and today, most of our great leaders came from such families. But, the pertinent question is: how were these men able to handle those challenges of many wives yet succeeded in bequeathing to us a society of high cultural, communal and moral values?

From the perspective of the above author, polygamous men succeeded because they ensured that the interests of their wives were not toiled with and they were also treated equally. However, Hume must be commended for his insightful elucidation that polygamy promotes jealousy. This is true as most wives in polygamous marriage have scalded the bodies of their co-wife or husbands with hot water as a result of jealousy. Jealousy is also a vital metaphysical element (spirit) in Hume's explication which pushes one into committing an act that has detrimental consequences as well as enthroning regret after the dastard act has been performed. Buttressing this fact succinctly with reference to Nigeria, Ahmed (2024, p.11) reiterates; "Hauwa'u, the first wife of Mallam Ibrahim, poured hot water on her co-wife, Bushra Ibrahim, and fled Jere Town in Kagarko Local Government Area of Kaduna State. Her grouse is that Bushrat prevented their husband from coming to spend quality time with her". There is no denying the fact that jealousy has sent some wives and husbands to their early graves in Nigeria as well as maiming many. Highlighting a vivid example of the power of jealousy in making a husband/wife do the unthinkable with regards to monogamy, Okoye (2023, p.2) avers; "In Ikotun area of Lagos State, a jealous husband, Gabriel Chukwuemeka, poured acid on his wife whom he accused of seeing another man. The wife sustained various degrees of injuries, while the husband is currently in a police cell in Ikotun". Also, a jealous wife poured hot water on the reproductive organ of her husband and Anyanwu (2022,p.4) captures it clearly; "After making his intention of marrying a third wife known to his wife, the wife angrily boiled water in a kettle and emptied its content on her husband's penis out of jealousy...".

The above expositions by Okoye and Anyanwu affirm that jealousy is rife in any marriage type be it polygamy or monogamous marriage, while Onyeji (2020, p.3) highlights jealousy in polygamy thus; "A high court in the Federal Capital Territory has found Maryam Sanda guilty for killing her husband Bilyaminu Bello. The Police, while presenting evidence in court, said the wife stabbed her husband with a kitchen knife out of jealousy for the other wife with the intent to kill". Bamidele (2020, p.5) also gives a comprehensive account of jealousy in polygamous marriage by positing:

A house wife named Atika has stabbed her husband Ibrahim Salihu to death in Mararaba, a settlement in Karu Local Government Area of Nasarawa State. Salihu is married to two women and spends two nights with each on a rotational basis. He is also known to bid farewell to each wife before going to the other's room and that was what he did on the fateful day when Atika suddenly grabbed his finger and bite it. His shouting attracted the attention of the second wife who got to the scene and tried to tie the bitten finger. As she was on it, Atika came

from the back with a knife and stabbed Salihu on the neck continuously leading to his death after losing so much blood.

The resultant effect is that Atika is standing trial for killing her husband. The above scenario confirms that jealousy thrives in both monogamous and polygamous marriage globally, especially in Nigeria. Hume pointed out in his analysis on polygamy that some husbands, as a result of jealousy, cripple the legs of their wives and sometimes deny them medical attention. This view of Hume can be likened to the scenario of acid pouring adumbrated above.

The paper also aligns with Hume on his notion that polygamy comes with several disasters like incessant fighting between children or wives, quarrels between husband and wives. In Nigeria, there are cases of wives fighting themselves and children doing same. Some of these fights can also lead to shedding of blood and maiming. Thus, the study applauds Hume for living true to his name as a philosopher, whose postulations can be used to make accurate predictions of the future. The position by Hume that polygamy has the tendency to promote improper upbringing of children is also accepted by the paper. In most polygamous homes in Nigeria, children are left to fend for themselves particularly if their father has lost his means of livelihood and the wives are full time housewives without any meaningful means of employment. We sum up by agreeing with Nieli (2017, p.8) that the innovative arguments put forward by Hume on polygamy is vital for today's world where the practice seems to be the norm in different society globally. The paper also stands with James Fieser (2016, p.1) who explains that Hume is a very important philosopher whose vast influence is evident in contemporary philosophy. In his view, Hume contributed significantly to the growth of philosophy especially in the areas of philosophy of religion, aesthetics, political theory, theory of knowledge, ethics, economic theory and philosophy of history (Fieser, 2016, p.1). Commenting on the vital contribution of Hume to moral philosophy with specific reference to the discourse on polygamy, he avers:

Hume's postulations on polygamy was couched with apt philosophical precision associated with a genius who attached plausibility in his quest to overcome any daunting task. Hume is prominent for being among the first to offer a lucidly earthly moral philosophy, which founded morality in the pleasing and beneficial effects resulting from our actions (Fieser, 2016, p.1).

It must be mentioned that a lot of scholars were greatly influenced by Hume's explication of divorce and polygamy; hence a sort of revival and renewed interest has now been given to his essay on *"Of Polygamy and Divorce"*.

Conclusion

Polygamy remains a marriage type that is generally acceptable globally, particularly in Nigeria. It has its benefits and disadvantages. Hume's position that polygamy be jettisoned on the grounds of promoting unhappiness, jealousy, improper upbringing of children, incessant fights/quarrels among wives, children and enslaves men is flawed. In Nigeria, there are lucid evidence of flourishing polygamous marriages with the children, wives and husbands exuding happiness. A vivid example is Atiku Abubakar, former Vice- President of Nigeria, Senators Ned Nwoko and Adeleke (present governor of Osun State), who are doing well for themselves and managing their wives and homes without any form of issue capable of truncating the family's happiness. The Paper also contends that Hume's explication of

polygamy contains some form of metaphysics manifesting in his use of love and jealousy. The inadvertent use of metaphysics by Hume as that which enslaves men to their wives and usurp their sovereignty, brings to the fore the fact that Hume accepts the meaningful nature of the subject from the back door, but discards it as sophistry and illusion from the front door. Therefore, the study holds, contrary to Hume, that polygamy, just like monogamy or any marriage type, has the capacity to guarantee mankind socio-economic and political happiness provided the financial implication can be met.

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