

A Review of “Caucasian Ovtcharka”

Author: Kasham Keltuma

Reviewer: Sylvia Onyekachukwu Ohiaeri

“The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you’ll go.”

Dr. Seuss

“I am going to marry you.” Those words said by Mathias carried the promise that the protagonist hoped to hold on to in Kasham Keltuma’s beautifully written page-turner of a novel “Caucasian Ovtcharka” She is a Nigerian woman who finds herself within a family that holds on tightly to their cultural beliefs. Her father, a traditionalist, from the moment she was born, parades her as a “white bone. He pridefully informs anyone who cares to listen that his daughter is a white bone, a medium of good fortune to those who please her and the opposite to anyone who displeases her. He and her mother bring her along as company to poor homes and sick fellows they go to visit for her to supposedly heal them or bring wealth their way. Therefore, as is done in forced marriages, regardless of how she felt about it, the protagonist is married off to a disabled man, the son of her father’s client, not to make the disabled man whole again but to keep his family in wealth. She does not love him, however she remained in the marriage, a marriage that at last, reveals her father’s disloyalty and her mother’s hopeless compliance. She is forced to find a new reality, one where she is neither betrayed nor heartbroken.

Driven by hurt from betrayal, most women are represented by the character of the protagonist. She only found solace, loyalty, and unconditional love with her ovtcharkas, something she tried countless times to experience with the people in her life. The phrase *“nothing do me,”* from her favorite song became her mantra for managing her sad reality - the reality of a woman bent at will in every corner by the same people she loves.

One would think that a person with a limp should be characterized by compassion, show unconditional love especially to his wife a “white bone.” Ultimately, though, we see a husband who lacks the ability to stand for himself and his immediate family. His affection is questionable, sometimes he showered his wife with gifts to provide her comfort, other times, he’s eager to please his sinister father-in-law at the expense of his marriage. Thus he is constantly tossed around by one family member or another, compelling the reader to withdraw any iota of sympathy mustered for him at the start.

Traditional, the word aptly describes her father and mother. The woman is aware of her husband’s infidelity, but regards it as normal, just as most women in traditional African societies would. She, not only stayed in the marriage out of duty, but also justifies his actions by referring to him as “powerful.” A born manipulator. His character represents every scheming, domineering and patriarchal resolute husband. To him it’s not a question of who gets hurt in the process, just as long as he gets what he wants. His loyalty lies with no one, not even his own wife.

Karen, the “best friend.” Her character is every girl who wants the best for her friend, but seems to be in dire need of love herself. She shows nothing but love for her friend, the protagonist. Showing it in the ways she knows how to: disliking her friend’s husband because her friend does not love him, encouraging her friend to meet up with her lost-and-found boyfriend even when while married. She showed us in many ways that she herself needed the love she desperately tried to offer her best friend. Being “*between boyfriend number nine or twelve*” and writing her final school leaving certificate four times is clearly evident that Karen needed to pay attention to her own life. She only came to this realization at last. Her character brings one question to mind: can one truly guide their loved ones to enjoy an experience that they themselves are yet to attain?

Mathias was a man of nobility. Every Nigerian woman would rather be with him. He is honest, gentle, a man of his word, a *“meticulous man,”* as described in the novel. The protagonist’s father became his stumbling block. Mathias wanted to do the honorable thing, pay part of his girlfriend’s dowry before leaving for Israel, but the protagonist’s father, having already arranged a husband for his daughter, refused it. Mathias’ nobility might be viewed under the lenses of judgement when he is seen, almost unclothed, in the matrimonial home of his former girlfriend six years later. Mathias, showed that family can be created even between people from different bloodlines when he chose his girlfriend to be his next of kin: *“Oh, by the way, you’re my next of kin. I thought you should know.”* Karen and Mathias were loyal friends to the protagonist. However, their loyalty became half-felt during their absence at the protagonist's toughest moments. Whereas, the truest form of loyalty was rather seen in the character of Gosh, her dog who understood emotions she could not put into words. Dogs, indeed, are man's best friends.

“My husband’s grandfather was a district officer . . . during the British colonial era.”

The above quote from *Caucasian Ovtcharka* references to the period between 1914 to 1960. Here, there is a historical fact beneficial to everyone, especially teenagers, 6th graders and higher.

The protagonist’s parents had a mindset about marriage mostly peculiar to Nigerian parents of this era. The wife remained loyal to her husband no matter what he did. This trait, strongly portrayed by the protagonist’s mother, defined the typical Nigerian wife during, and prior to that era. She seemingly worshipped her husband, showed him unwavering loyalty, even when her daughter’s marriage was on the verge of being wrecked.

There are numerous historical insight in *Caucasian Ovtcharka*, all pointers to its profound educational benefits. This encourages integration of subjects as a teaching pedagogy. Subjects like literature, history, Civics/Social Studies, Christian Religious Studies, and even economics will conveniently pass for such integration.

Readers of all ages, especially secondary or high school students have a lot to benefit from Caucasian Ovtcharka. Themes such as marriage, family, loyalty, betrayal, unwholesome traditional practices, Female empowerment, cultural dynamics, and ultimately human resilience through the eyes of a young Nigerian woman found a space for expression.

The resilience exhibited by the protagonist is very much worth emulating. she understood her situation had become too tough for her to handle. Thus, she created her own shock absorber, her mantra, "Nothing do me," in order not to be overwhelmed by her problems.

The protagonist described correctly the betrayal from her own family as the "**[the] betrayal of the highest kind.**" the description sums up every form of betrayal meted out on the protagonist. Naming her problem helped her find a way out of it. This could prove instructional for young adults who are starting out into the world. Kasham Keltuma's style of writing is intriguing as well as admirably educational. Caucasian Ovtcharka could easily endear to a wide range of audiences, both young and old, connect to their experiences, cause them to question 'what next?' and also leave them with a hint of what the answer could be.

In this debut novel, Caucasian Ovtcharka, she ensures every character embodies a lesson for every reader. Karen and her friend, for example, demonstrate varying sides of every teenage life - one of abstinence and focus on studies and the other of indulgence and struggle through life. Thus, for recommendation, this book is packed with highly rich social, religious, and economic take-away for young adults, and should be adopted by libraries, and schools as a leading text, for students.