

**Book Review : Ally Nkonge Cheune: The Link**

**by**

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Place of Publication: Kampala, Uganda

Publishing Company: Kyeyune Publishers

ISBN: 978-9970-9373-1-8

*The Link* is a 124 paged novella written as an epistle from a father to a daughter. The novella achieves its importance in bridging the gap between a father and a daughter hence creating a link. Many fathers shy away from discussing patent issues with their daughters and often the task is left to mothers and aunts. This book clearly links a parent to a child. The narrators use first person to detail events in the novella. It is divided into two parts; part one A Letter to my daughter is written by a father whereas part two The Responses details responses from the daughter Jamilah and her close friends; Ruckia and Lillian.

In part one, the father vividly explains his expectations of his daughter Jamilah in the wake of ICT and its effects on society and the clash among the western, African and Islamic cultures. He narrates to her how she was born, the selection of her name, birth rites and the favors that were bestowed upon her as expounded by allusion to the life and teachings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)<sup>1</sup> and the Kiganda Culture<sup>2</sup>. The father explains the conditions under which Jamilah was raised. In a flashback, he states that his wife and him had to contend with

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<sup>1</sup> Prophet Muhammad (c.570-632CE) is believed to be the seal of the messengers of God in Islam. The Quran was revealed to him and he was sent to restore Islam

<sup>2</sup> The ways, beliefs and customs of the Baganda. The Ganda are the largest of the 43 ethnic groups living in Uganda

leaving their daughter with a baby sitter amidst the rampant child sacrifices and how they had to pierce her ears so as to save her from the kidnappings.

He emphasizes he has groomed her to be a good Muslim<sup>3</sup> and Muganda<sup>4</sup> girl and this has been done through the constant Islamic teachings, the selection of schools, movies and songs. He translates a song about the grooming of a girl child; *Abaana b'obuwala* (Pg. 28) which urges the girlchild not to abort their pregnancies. He urges his daughter to continue looking for knowledge, developing her personal talents, leadership skills as well as knowing and exercising her rights so as to become a well-respected woman.

Furthermore, he reminds his daughter about the status of women in the Qur'an<sup>5</sup> by mentioning some of the greatest women; Mariam the mother to Prophet Isa, Asia the wife to Pharaoh and Sumaya the first Muslim martyr. He mentions that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) stopped female infanticide<sup>6</sup> and that women are allowed to beautify themselves, wear ornaments and become professionals like nurses and teachers thus a clear depiction of the elevated status of women in Islam. He also urges her to heed to the advice of adults not like the he-goat which refused to listen to words of the wise and continued to be eaten by the leopard in a myth. He encourages her to read more legends, folktales, fables, proverbs and riddles as they are a very good source of information about life lessons.

He requests Jamilah to guard her chastity until she gets a practicing Muslim, good looking and good-hearted man of her choice for marriage. He also urges her to make purposeful consultations before getting married;

**‘My daughter, there is no happiness for a father in having a grown-up unmarried daughter in a home’ (Pg. 80).**

He goes on to warn her that in case, a marriage fails to prosper, divorce and separation is always an option as it is acceptable in Islam. However, he states that it should be the last option as she should work towards maintaining a happy marriage for her sake and for the children. He concludes by asking her not to be wary of his advice. He asks her to be ready to face challenges in life, make wise decisions, continue searching for knowledge, remain

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<sup>3</sup> A Muslim is a person who adheres to Islam and its teachings and practices

<sup>4</sup> A Muganda is a person who belongs to the Ganda ethnic group in Uganda

<sup>5</sup> Qur'an is the central religious text of Islam

<sup>6</sup> Infanticide is used to mean the murdering of children below the age of one year. This was a common practice in the Arabian period called Jahiliyah

optimistic, humble, respectful and to know how to use her strengths and weaknesses positively while putting God first.

In part two, Jamilah responds to her father after sharing the letter with her two close friends. They too, send their responses to Jamilah about the famous letter. Jamilah starts by appreciating her father for giving her a chance to respond to the letter as well as sharing it with her two close friends. She applauds him for recognizing her eighteenth birthday with such a letter. A letter so full of guidance about various aspects of life and pledges to share the knowledge with other girls of her age. She thanks her father for the Islamic and Kiganda cultural teachings, choice of schools, movies and songs among other things she is grateful for.

Jamilah also acknowledges her mother for the love and care for she believes, she has been saved from various mishaps because of that. She applauds the preparation she was given before receiving her first menstrual period and the dress code according to Islam and Kiganda culture. In her response about the criteria of selecting a husband, she seems baffled by the challenges in selecting the right man as she quotes from Euripides<sup>7</sup>, *Madea*;

**O Zeus! Why is it that you have given men clear ways of testing whether gold is counterfeit but, when it comes to men, the body carries no stamp of nature for distinguishing bad from good. (Pg. 3)**

She wonders how she will be able to find a Muslim and yet good-hearted man in the wake of many Muslim men marrying the non-muslims. However, she believes that the preparation given to her by the parents will indeed give her an edge in managing life. She points out her admiration for the love and care her father accords her mother. She also mentions that she is talented in volleyball and still on the journey of self-discovery. However, she worries about getting employment after her studies especially because of corruption in the job sector. She concludes by thanking her father for providing her with the necessities and the pledge to finance her further studies.

Jamilah's friend, Rukia congratulates her upon making eighteen years of age and wishes her a happy birthday. She goes on to bid her friend to listen to her father's words of wisdom and states that she feels like the message was directed to her too. She agrees with most of the words of wisdom and suggests that they both live up to the expectations of those so dear to

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<sup>7</sup> He was a tragedian of classical Athens whose plays survived in full and the author of *Madea*

them. She also acknowledges that growing up in a world influenced by the western culture is challenging but calls upon her to follow her religion. She cautions Jamilah to remain steadfast in pursuing her future.

Rukia narrates the story of her life. She shares that she was so sickly as a child that many people thought she would not stay alive but thanks to her mother's patience and care, she survived to tell the story. She bases on this to urge her friend to respect her parents as they endure so much for the sake of their children's well-being. She states;

**Blessed is the child who sleeps in the mother's arms. (pg. 105)**

She shares her thoughts about marriage and appreciates Jamilah's father for the perspective of financing a girl's education even after she has got married and requests her friend to involve her parents in matters to do with marriage when the time is right but she should ask for dowry that is within the husband's means. She agrees with her friend's father about polygamy and the decisions for divorce and separation.

Rukia concludes by asking Jamilah to read her books so she can perform well. She insists that besides textbooks, Jamilah should read magazines, newspapers, novels and listen to songs often. She requests her to heed to the advice in the letter and incase, there are issues she does not agree with, she requests her to think about them first before sharing her disagreements with her father.

Lillian is another friend who appreciates Jamilah for her friendship and the chance to read and respond to the letter. She asks Jamilah to listen to her father's words and promises to give her response in regard with her own upbringing and culture. She also asks her to appreciate and love her parents for the love, care and the steps they took in grooming her to be the person she has grown into. She states that whereas Jamilah's father has a lot of expectations of her, she has a right to stand fight for her rights;

**'...you have to stand firm and tell your fathers what**

**you want for yourself.... (Pg. 113)'**

She acknowledges Jamilah's father for basing on religious teachings to raise her daughter, selecting the best possible schools for her, and his guidance on pivotal matters like career expectations, marriage, pre-marital sex and polygamy. She reminds Jamilah to keep in mind her religion and culture as she grows up and to continue relating well with her father.

Ally Nkonge uses this novella to set a background and foundation for parents raising girls in this era. The world today as it stands with technological advancement coupled with cultural diversity, parents are bound to be challenged in creating a link between their children and themselves. The novella shares perspectives from parents in particular a father and children. The selection of a father as the main character is symbolically used to show that a father too needs to have a link with the children in particular the girl child. In the African culture, the girls are usually sent to their paternal aunts to be groomed before they come of age. However, in the novella, it is a father that has taken the stand to share various issues of grooming with the daughter.

The novelist also includes two other responses from his daughter's friends. This shares the perspectives of other young girls about words of wisdom from the father figure in this case. Interestingly, the responses are from both muslim and non-muslim young girls. Whereas Rukia seems to agree with what Jamilah's father says, Lillian on the other hand views some practices as not being fair. This explains the pronounced impact religion and culture have on the children's upbringing and way of thinking. Rukia is quick to understand what is said because of her Islamic upbringing whereas Lillian is still hesitant to follow the words blindly as she is not exposed to the teachings of the Qur'an and Hadith.

The novelist uses the text to guide parents as well as children on how to relate with each other. He discusses issues like cultural diversity, religion, parenting, education, gender roles and rights, marriage, divorce, polygamy, self-identity, self-reflection, seeking knowledge, values, love and affection. He uses the title, metaphors, real life experiences, songs, proverbs, newspapers articles, folktales, Qur'anic allusion and epistles in expounding issues to do with grooming children. This book is therefore one of the few novels that clearly uses Qur'an and Hadith to depict a life of a muslim family. The author provides a list of glossaries to help those who have not been exposed to the Qur'an and this makes it easy for any reader. The simple and clear language used makes the story easy for even the children to understand the content.

However, the novelist is brutally honest about the accident from which the young girl passed. Whereas writing about it means he has moved on, the scene comes alive in the story which can not be taken by the faint-hearted. Secondly, whereas the novella has a mountain of themes and lessons for parents and girl children, their arrangement is not chronological let alone exhaustive. There was no clear link from one particular life lesson to another. Finally,

the responses to the letter end up opening up a debate that will require another response from the father. In particular the response by Jamilah communicates that she has no choice but to agree with what her father has guided on even when she is not in agreement.

### **About the Author**

Ally Nkonge Cheune a.k.a Muswangali was born in Rushozi Sheema. He went to Kabwohe Primary School, Bujaga Secondary School, Kibuli Secondary School, and Makerere University where he attained a BA (Hons) Lit, Ph & RS, PGDE and a Master of Arts in Literature. He is currently a lecturer at the Islamic University in Uganda in the faculty of arts and social sciences in the department of literature, languages and linguistics. He has worked as a secondary school teacher, served as a cultural officer in charge of youth and women. He has written several books in the fields of poetry, creative literature, Islamic religion, marital relationships, Islamic history and wealth creation.

His writing is guided by the teachings of the Qur'an and Hadith and his life experiences. He is a polygamous man with a cumulative of non-break total of 70 years and above in marriage. He has been blessed with mentoring many girls let alone his own biological daughters. He has worked in the ministry of gender which exposed him to so many family-related issues and has taken part in family planning activities. In all his books, he communicates the interrelationship among Islamic religion, African tradition and western culture.