

Women, Marriage and Choices in Olu'Dolapo's *Omolewa*

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Abstract

Nigeria and the African continent at large practice patriarchal system and traditions that have been a criterion of giving an ideal standard of marriage. This view places women only at home, the kitchen and the "other room" (a reference to bed room as stated by Nigeria's current President Mohammed Buhari) that have been so detrimental to most women's wellbeing. Since many women in Africa are not able to prove themselves as capable of self-sufficiency in order to surmount Patriarchy, they become imbalanced both psychologically, emotionally, economically and physically. However, many feminine scholars have emerged in recent times, raising awareness, empowering and mobilizing women to fight against the intimidation and oppression from the opposite sex which has led so many women to make personal choices and especially in how, when and whom to marry. Olu'dolapo's *Omolewa* is considered for the purpose of this paper to bring out the emerging and trending thematic concern about the topic of oppression and intimidation by the

opposite sex. For analysis, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie's Stiwanism is used as theoretical framework to do a deconstructive interpretation of the text. This paper argues that societal, religious or family laws should not bind any woman in a relationship that will deteriorate or even take her life completely. It recommends that women be allowed to make their choices of marriage partner.

Key Words: Marriage, Society, Stiwanism, Other room

Introduction

One of the most delicate choices to make is the one made by a woman with respect to whom she can happily or peacefully spend her life as partner. Many traditions, religions and societal views, though very detrimental to women, have always seemed inevitable criterion for telling the ideal and standards for marriages. In many areas of Nigeria, women are seen as a 'weak and fragile being' that should not pursue serious career which will take them far away from the home, but get married as soon as possible to at least, a potent man. Although, the trend of waiting up for the man to meet all the woman's material needs is gradually changing. In the past, a woman pursuing a career, according to the society, was unnecessary since her place in life would be her husband's home: the kitchen and other room satisfying her partner sexually and at the same time producing children in order to have a place in the home. She is then groomed from birth to meet these standards. Hence, all other expense on her, whether in terms of good education and moral upbringing, is meant for her honour, and betterment in marriage.

We believe that in Africa, societal prescriptions have never been in favour of women. This owes to the fact that the society is built on a patriarchal system. For example, until success in marriage is attained, many women are deprived of the

sense of self-fulfilment irrespective of successes in other endeavours. However, women's utmost anxieties do not end with getting married, they continue with how to make marriages work and most importantly how to be "fruitful". This one-sided construction makes men more advantaged. For this reason, marriages in Nigerian societies mean ultimate achievement for a woman: an acknowledgement from the woman that she now has someone above her, a lord and her superior. A change of family name by the woman to that of the husband own, carrying the man's child(ren), and most importantly, a resumption of her duties in the "official kitchen" are necessary requirement.

A text like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* presents the African traditional woman who must not be seen in the gathering of men but to only appear and remain in the background. This is also the acceptable practice in the Muslim religion's populated Hausa and Fulani society of the northern Nigeria as in indeed many parts of the continent. According to Abdalla Uba Adamu, "Islamicate societies – societies with Islamic social institutions that do not operate with strict Islamic constitutions because of the secular nature of the larger nation-state – nonetheless do not encourage mixed-gender social spaces" (170).

Marriage in a way has become a social tradition through which the emasculation of women is achieved. This probably made Sheila Cronan claim that the freedom for women "cannot be won without the abolition of marriage" (219). Nevertheless, for some women, getting married to a man is a necessary even when they are not in agreement with how it is practised in some societies. They value relationships with men but are careful not to be deprived of their freedom due to societal and gender construct. Feminism and the effort of many liberal feminists have, however, been influential in

changing women's status in the society. Radcliffe-Brown and Daryll Forde describe marriage as "essentially a rearrangement of social structure"(43). This has been a view that has successfully run through most feminist texts, helping women to gain their voices. Nevertheless, concerning the emerging trends of women making choices that favour them in marriages, not much has been explored. However, Olu'dolapo's *Omolewa* employs the leitmotif of marital choice as a narrative trope.

Women Emancipation by Female Writers

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, a former President of Liberia and woman activist, regards empowerment as functional because it is:

The broadening of choices, the expansion of options and alternatives' available to women in determining the course of events, which will shape their own lives and determine their own destinies (3).

This in essence means power to choose the instrument of empowerment that liberates one both as collective group and as an individual. Female scholars are liberating other women from traditional cells and mental imprisonment by starting movements like The Women Liberation Movement (WLM) in the 1960s - a non-governmental organization established to tutor women on the need for education or skill acquisition, and to also empower women to be self-aware about their creativeness. The International Women's Day 2019 theme "Think Equal, build Smart, Innovate for Change" also supports the ideology behind the women empowerment programme as it helps to identify innovative ways to advance gender equality and the empowerment of women. The fundamental assumption of

feminism and feminist criticism in the words of Meyer Howard Mike Abrams is that Western civilization is perversely patriarchal, that it is “male centered and controlled and conducted in such a way as to subordinate women to men in all cultural domain...”(89). The Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN Women, Michelle Bachelet, during the international Women’s Day 2012 states, “When women are empowered and can claim their rights and access to land, leadership, opportunities and choices, economies grow, food security is enhanced and prospects are improved for current and future generations” (online).

As women empowerment becomes women’s collective struggle in Africa against patriarchal dictate and control, there developed organizations by female writers and non-writer to push the course. Women like Ama Ata Aidoo, a Ghanaian author established the Mbaasem Foundation (MF) to promote and support the work of African women writers, the younger Guinean feminist Rainatou Sow founds and direct the organisation, Make Every Woman Count (MEWC) and was named “Inspirational Woman of 2012” by Women 4 Africa – an international organization based United Kingdom. Apart from foundations with focus on the right of women, younger female playwrights like Zainabu Jallo, Olu’dolapo, Bunmi Oyeyemi Julius-Adeoye and novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, express their view through characters that take radical actions to liberate themselves. These writers also seek for the equalizing of the rights between the men and women. For example, Adichie has done this by giving speeches on various current topics relating to women’s issues in Nigeria and across Africa.

The fact remains that empowerment is not new to African women, especially in relation to economic situation. Traditional African women are noted to engage in trade and market

activities. Mabel Evwierhoma is of the opinion that:

Nevertheless, whether hemmed in or not, the African woman is not totally dependent on the man. She engages among other affairs, in economic, social and political responsibilities that grant her some degree of independence. A woman like this in this context may assert her will in refusing to allow socio-psychological limitations to enmesh her (16).

In Irene Salami-Agunloye’s text, this erroneous assumption is highlighted. In one of the essays, it is stated that “from the days of celluloid to date, the representation and packaging of the “weaker” sex, a derogatory term for women, in motion pictures has not changed” (278). This is to say that even in motion pictures, societal perception of women is made vivid. All these are ways to make the woman think less of herself. Irene Salami-Agunloye adds that:

One recent trend in motion pictures has been the so-called masculine world of westerns, gangsters, war espionage and violence. Sadly Nigerians are imbibing this trend. In this motion pictures, women are wives, girlfriends, mistresses, secretaries and harlots, filling in the background to men’s lives but irrelevant to the central action...while the men have always been the hero...(278)

This is to show that, through different possible means and through reflections of women in different spheres of life, they are made to be aware of their place as those dependent sets of persons who must come to realize that the world is actually a ‘man’s world’ as it is usually popularly put.

Stiwanism and Women's Choices

Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie propounded the theory of Stiwanism. Pushpa Naidu and Siga Fatima Jagne suggested that Omolara Ogundipe Leslie got her background of Stiwanism and the urge to write for women since her college days as she attended an all-girls school at the Queens College in Ede, Osun State, Nigeria. One of Ogundipe-Leslie's publications in *The Horn*, a writing group, at the University of Ibadan prompted Siga Fatima Jagne to comment that "her student publications reveal her nuanced attitude to the events of that time and laid a solid foundation for her long struggle for women's right and her commitment to the dual tasks of theoretical work and practical action in advocacy" (321). She is interested in issues relating to gender injustice, women empowerment and social transformation within the African context. She wrote her essay Stiwanism and created her theory in response to Africans who argue that feminism is not relevant to Africa, and Africans who argue that feminism is a foreign or western endeavor that should not involve Africans. "STIWA introduces the concept of partnership with the male and stressed that the African woman needs are rooted in her cultures (242)." Ogundipe-Leslie opines, "STIWA is about the inclusion of African women in the contemporary social and political transformation of Africa. Be a stiwanist" (229). She writes that:

"Stiwa" means Social Transformation including Women of Africa". I wanted to stress the fact that what we want in Africa is not warring with the men, the reversal of role, or doing to the men whatever women think that men have been doing for centuries, but it is trying to build a harmonious society. The transformation of African society is

the responsibility of both men and women and it is also in their interest (242).

This theory emphasizes and advocates for the integration of the woman into the different possible spheres of the society and for the coherence of both man and woman in the society. Stiwanism is concerned with seven principles which are:

1. Resists western feminism.
2. Gives specific attention to African women in this contemporary era.
3. Brings to the forefront indigenous feminism that have also existed in Africa.
4. Believes in both women inclusion and participation in the socio-political transformation of the African continent.
5. Contends with a woman's body, personhood, nationhood, and society and how it operates within socio-economic hierarchies.
6. Is intentionally specific to the individual and collective identity (that is, religion, class and marital status).

This theory is the lens from which an in-depth reading and analysis is done on the play, *Omolewa*. The second, third, and fourth principles are most relevant for the study of the text. In using the second principle, attention would be directed to African women in this contemporary era in the positive or negative sense with regards to their choice of marriage and marital obligation in the bedroom, otherwise referred to as "other room" in this paper. There is a continual struggle of the female to leave those shackles of Otherism that binds her. Women are not only good for sexual objects as insinuated by Mr Mohammadu Buhari, the President of

Nigeria. Buhari used the words “the other room” in 2016, while on an official visit to Germany to state suggest that his wife Mrs Aisha Buhari who was critical of the husband’s opinion has no political opinion and position in the government or in the society, because as wife, her position is his kitchen and the bedroom.

Emancipation and Influence on Choices of Women in *Omolewa*

Olu’Dolapo created in the character of Omolewa, a level of women’s independence as a result of the awareness and empowerment created by different bodies in the society. In contemporary Nigerian society, the choice of staying in marriage or being a full-time housewife is now a popular debate. Women know they have a right to a good life with or without a long-lasting commitment to marriage or any relationship. Several women believe staying in a marriage provides security, while some feel that their daily profession is a guaranteed security. The eponymous character of Olu’Dolapo’s play *Omolewa* is a strong and strong-headed lady that does not believe her age or society should be a determinant to her getting married. Contrary to her mother, she is a graduate, has a good job and is mature enough to get married.

One of the reasons some women strive to be better persons on their own and why they make the choices they make in marriages is to regain their self-worth that the patriarchal society has deprived them. To a large extent, there is “worth-regained” when the woman is hard-working and independent. In the play, Lewa is presented as a very hardworking lady who does not joke with her job. She is focussed and self-willed. Alhaji, her suitor, respects her not only because she is a woman, but, because she is a worker who is not “male-dependent”. This is seen in the conversations between Lewa and Alhaji, between her house-help and the

gate-man and even between Alhaji and his friend:

LEWA: I am just a lady not different from others.

ALHAJI: (Romantically) No, my Omolewa, don’t be flattered, celebrate yourself. At times, I imagine how lucky I am to have you (10).

Lewa is the sort of a lady that does not mix business with pleasure. She does not substitute her work time for her love moment with Alhaji as seen in Alhaji’s expression, “exactly what I said. If not, you would have discarded ... saying you were busy (12).

In other words, from the above conversations, though Alhaji knows Omolewa loves him, he also knows she will not want to be distracted from her work. She would rather “discard” Alhaji to focus on her work than to make him feel he is her entire world. Omolewa is not in any way hypnotized by her relationship so she “discards” Alhaji when busy yet, this makes Alhaji to love her even more. From the words of Medina her house help, it is obvious that Omolewa is a career oriented woman. Medina says “Na wa ooo. This aunty sef no dey rest?” (14).

In essence, she gains more respect not because she is just a woman like any other woman but because she is time conscious, smart, intelligent, independent and dedicated to her work. The conversation above shows that she is emotionally detached from Alhaji when it comes to office work. This alone shows her confidence in her personality and her independence, which in a way earns her more respect from Alhaji her lover and suitor. In recent times, it is not all about going into marriage or finding company. In contemporary Nigerian society, many men now value women’s support for the family financially, materially, and

economically. However, some men still prefer the submissive and dependent woman who will rely on them for all her needs.

The Socio-political Stand and Women's Choice

Like many other social setups, marriage is also a social institution that sociologists see as a union of two or more individuals that is socially backed up by a sexual bond. But in reality, this union exceeds that of just the persons involved in the marriage. For example, in Nigeria, there is an outright inclusion of the families of both persons getting married. In a traditional marriage ceremony most times, the bride is handed over to the parents of the groom who in turn offers her to their son. This symbolizes that the woman is first married to the family of the husband before being married to the man himself. Hence, the burden of the new family becomes her burden. This in a way affects the decision making in the home. A husband might enjoy or endure a particular attitude from his wife whereas his family might not. In the text Lewa having known the tradition which she finds herself, is a bit restrained from marrying Alhaji. Though Alhaji says "Allow me to be me, to show you who I am, to show you the grandeurs of marriage"(71), she fears the possible amendment that usually takes place immediately after marriage and also the alteration of some agreed terms by either of the spouse (36).

Lewa is a symbol of some contemporary women who is not willing to dance to any family tune. Since marrying Alhaji would probably mean marrying his family and becoming completely his, she rather opts for the continuation of their casual love affairs and even prefers to give birth outside wedlock. From this action of hers, one would think that she has no regard for the institution called marriage or the custom of husband and wife.

Contrarily, in the following conversation, it is certain that she values marriage but fears the commitment imbedded therein:

LEWA: Yes, I know. All I want is just to be me. No man, no authority. No man, no command. I live my life the way it pleases me (67).

Lewa wants to be herself without subjecting to any authority or command by a man. While her friend Eliza envies her ideology where she says "I wish I had your guts to see marriage as an invaluable engagement" (67). Lewa's responses to her friend's thought make explicit her fears:

LEWA: No Eliza, don't get me wrong. I am not seeing marriage as invaluable; I just don't see myself in such a lifelong commitment... It is better not to go into it at all than coming out later with lots of regrets... (67).

To Lewa, if Alhaji loves her then he should be interested in leaving their relationship as it is without a thought of extending it to marriage. This will mean giving birth to children outside wedlock which Alhaji strongly kicks against. To Alhaji, their reputations will be at stake if they settle for childbearing outside marriage because no custom in Nigeria embraces that idea. As they converse:

ALHAJI: We can't afford to have a child outside wedlock. It will destroy reputation. We both have reputations to protect.

LEWA: Says who?

ALHAJI: It is religiously wrong; it is culturally bad and socially unacceptable... (70)

The mindset of not bending to any form of the societal rules be it religious,

cultural, or social rules is what made the contemporary woman to launch out into the deep by herself. To get along with the politics of a system that is patriarchal, she strives for education or gets herself busy with what can really earn her respect from her society and independence from the males. Several socio-political issues one is bound to find in a social institution like marriage is the issue of decision making in the home, allocation of roles and the distribution of wealth, who gets what, who rules and who is ruled and also the question of inequality that exists among couples. The play *Omolewa* is like most other texts where a woman is in charge of her world like Lysistrata in the play *Lysistrata*, or in a text where a woman is struggling with fate like Madam Bovary in *Madame Bovary*, or she is being oppressed and depressed as seen in the case of Anowa in *Anowa*. The first scene of the play *Omolewa* refutes the description of a woman as an independent lady who needs a man for survival. The main character Lewa whom the play is named after, portrays independence, self-confidence, and faithfulness to individual responsibility.

One of the principles of Stiwanism is that it believes in both inclusion and participation of women in the socio-political transformation of the African continent. A point is proven in this play that offices are not meant for men alone; but women also can be in a respectable position in the society. From the very description of her office, it is shown as “a beautifully furnished office.” This alone debunks the traditional occupations allotted to women as good for only tailors, traders, farmers, nannies, nurses, teachers and most especially the “other room”. Here is a sophisticated lady, Lewa, in her “office” not as a petty trader in her “shop” selling provisions as the society would expect. Whereas the males pride in their role, the females are mentally enslaved by theirs and are meant to prepare to be a

liability to the husbands they will marry. In other words, the societal opinions about women are infused into the educational sector. In all round, a woman is made to see herself as the reduced version of a man rather than a human on her own. The younger girls therefore grow up with this mentality seeking for a man to rely on.

The politics of being biased with the allocation of occupations based on gender is played out in *Omolewa*. Rita, Lewa’s secretary is a female, while the driver, Kanmi is male. Her house help, Medina, is a female while the gateman, Sikiru, is a male. A woman’s decision on the choice of occupation should be respected rather than judged base on her strength or gender. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that women can be very skillful at doing whatever they engage in. In the first scene of the play, Lewa commends her secretary for typing very fast “How fast? You are incredible, well done. Thanks” (6). The idea that women cannot be good outside the home, the kitchen and the “other room” is not real, though it has always been a societal perception. This type of mentality and allocation of jobs has always conditioned women in the choices they make in terms of marriage. The allocation of roles according to gender can be said to be a way of suppressing or limiting the prowess of the woman in order to save the pride of the man. It is to give men the chance for superiority because a man feels less superior when a woman does the jobs that are said to be ‘manly’. This view also played out in several other texts. Example is found in the Novel *The Robber’s Bride* by Margaret Atwood published 1993, one of the main characters, Roz was scared to drive her own car when Mitch, who was only a new suitor and was without a car needed to go out with her. In *The Robber’s Bride*, it was stated that:

...Roz gushingly urged the car keys on him so he could drive, because a

man being driven by a woman might have felt diminished, she'd read the women's magazine articles about all the ways you could unwittingly diminish a man, it was terrible how easily they shrank, and though she usually liked to drive her own car herself she didn't want to scare Mitch off (152).

Hence, the idea of depriving women from certain jobs is not actually because they are not fit to do those jobs but because it will make them equal with the men or makes a man less respected or even makes the young girl loose a suitor. A common person like Lewa's gateman says "This madam no dey rest? Work, Alhaji, Party, Books, Travel...No man wan marry person like that for this world" (22). In other words, once a woman is well to do, especially a career woman she is seen by some men as a 'goddess' who should not be dared, while some see her as overzealous and full of pride because she might man the home. This is the most reason why the society prefers that the women step down for men even in the area of choosing an occupation or making an opinion in order not to be rejected by men in marriage as Alhaji's friends indirectly hated Lewa and considered her "too vocal" and "can order any man to his feet" (32).

Societal Expectations from the Romantic Relationship Between Man and Woman

To the society, every romantic union between a man and a woman should end up in marriage but to women in recent times, it is not always so. They have their choices to make on whether to approximate the union to marriage or to just maintain the relationship at cordial level. This is not to say that these decisions of theirs are the best. One of the reasons for some women's intimate relationship with a man is not always for marriage but

to be fulfilled sexually. Lewa enjoys her relationship with Alhaji yet fears to marry him. Alhaji tells Lewa of the expectations of his friends from the relationship between him and Lewa. People feel they know and love each other enough to get married yet Lewa tells him "I am not cut out for marriage... I am not like other girls that celebrate marriage at the mention of it" (10). Lewa adds that "you know and I know we are in this for play. We are only having each other for enjoyment purposes" (10). Mabel Ewrierhoma, is of the opinion that:

Nevertheless, whether hemmed in or not, the African woman is not totally dependent on the man. She engages among other affairs, in economic, social and political responsibilities that grant her some degree of independence "A woman like this in this context may assert her will in refusing to allow socio-psychological limitations to enmesh her" (16).

Omolewa, though aware of societal expectations and even pressures from home, refused to be let down. She sticks to her responsibilities. To a large extent, Omolewa is independent of any man because she has all it takes to live happily. But altogether, she cannot do without him for reasons such as to ease stress, to satisfy herself sexually need, for emotional fulfilment and for companionship in the social world and also for a partial completion or complement to her incompleteness. No single human can be entirely complete in herself (49). In this regard, the idea that women can do without a man may be considered fallacy.

Ogundipe-Leslie in her *Stiwanism*, points that the idea is not for women to strive to be without men or strive to be equal with men but she rather seeks for a cooperation of both men and women to build a peaceful society. Lewa on her own

is not avoiding a man but the commitment attached to marriage. She enjoys Alhaji's company and she confesses that but will not seal the relationship with marriage.

Women strive to make out what they want from men by integrating them from their African traditional mentality which insists a woman must be where the society has kept her and a man must rise to his place. This is one reason why Lewa is scared of getting married to Alhaji. Lewa believes that Alhaji is a typical traditional man who cannot cope with a sophisticated lady like her. She tells him "Alhaji, you are a traditional man" (11). She then advises Alhaji to go for "some kind of traditional woman that will obey...and do according to the social norms of femininity" (10). Some men like Alhaji on the other hand, are giving in to the demand of the ladies just to get what they want. Alhaji says he does not deny that he is a traditional man, yet "...people move on. Change is taking place and life is all about choices" (11). Alhaji can be seen as the type of man that Ogundipe-Leslie advocates for in her Stiwanism. Alhaji says "...give me the chance of proving that not all traditional men want a traditional woman" (11). This means that sometimes the traditional man wants an off-traditional lady to complement himself.

Medina, the maid can be seen as a character whose mentality opposes that of Lewa's, her Madam. Medina, sees no reason why a woman like Lewa is yet to marry. She loves Lewa and her ways but she dislikes the fact that she is still single. Medina says "Marry, she no gree marry, me I like her sha...but me I go marry" (15). Though she wants to marry but she quickly notices the re-shufflement that will take place immediately she gets married and she states that her liberty will be truncated. To Medina, no matter the odds, marriage is still the option: "...if I marry, I no fit go out the way aunty dey do...I go marry sha" (15). That is her choice, she knows when she gets married, and she

immediately exchanges it for her freedom as a woman and agrees to get married.

Findings, Conclusion and Recommendation

This paper reflects the penalty attached to some bold steps women take in order to free themselves from societal and marital shackles binding them. There is a place of freedom and there is the place of paying the prize for that freedom. Omolewa shows no interest in marriage yet she decides to keep the pregnancy that results as a result of her liaison. Though she is free from any form of "housewifization", she earnestly desires a child she could call her own. This in a way helps to enlighten the audience that though there is freedom of choice, there are inevitable penalty attached to it too.

The stereotyping of females as independent entities and objects of the "other room" is also debunked in these selected play texts. The character of Lewa ignites confidence in the female reader and makes her have a sense of certainty about her decision. Contrary to the societal view, a woman who is of a marriageable age and yet refusing to get marriage will definitely be stereotyped and ridiculed irrespective of her personal choice.

A person's decisions and choices can either vindicate or victimize her. A woman whether single or married, is a product of the choices she has made. Also, to a large extent, she is a product of the choice her society pushes her to make which is either inline or against her own will. In terms of marriage choices, the society plays a greater part in influencing and shaping the decision of most women. However, there are still some women like Lewa who are less concerned of any form of societal, religious, cultural or parental ideology that Alhaji pushes to her (70).

It is revealed in this paper that comparison can be made between some women who make personal and informed

choice in relation to marriage and the traditional women who do not make contribution in the selection. This is revealed from Alhaji's conversation with Eliza, Lewa's friend (43). The modern woman grooms herself to become her own desired woman and also propose the type of marriage she would want. She then waits for a man that will want who she is and what she will want in a marriage. Just as there is difficulty involved in transacting some goods and the inability to easily get a buyer who agrees with one's terms of exchange by having what the seller also needs, most women also find it difficult to get their choices in marriage. This in most cases has led to delay in marriage of many women.

Since marriage is considered essential in the African society, especially, as it relates to the establishment of the family, there are bound to be challenges while navigating the union. In every human society, there are binding laws else people will live in a state of anarchy with many things falling apart. Apart from individual's apathy, in Africa, when it comes to the issue of marriage, parental, societal and religious views still count. According to Julius-Adeoye et al, marriage "in many countries of sub-Saharan Africa is contracted around three distinctive levels or system (3). These levels are traditional, religious and states or legal marriage. No matter the level chosen by woman, none is insulated from marital challenges. As people strive differently to make success in their marriages, in a spiritual society like Nigeria, many women seek divine intervention to resolve whatever marital challenges encountered. However, some women art of endurance in marriage no matter whatever comes their way. This also in a way has been helpful as it reduces the tension attached to unnecessary anxiety. Another step some women take is to meet different marriage counsellors where they receive insight on

how to tackle cases better or even prevent rowdiness in their homes.

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