

Widowhood and Conflict Resolution in Select African Novels

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Preamble

Peace presupposes harmonious existence between the sexes. This is negated in the experiences of women especially widows in the African milieu due to the over-bearing influence of patriarchy, jealousy, greed, hatred and other forms of marginalization meted out on widows. Widowhood has thus generated conflicts in most African families and societies. This is largely due to the erroneous traditional African belief that no one dies a natural death. If a man pre-deceases his spouse, it is the woman that is held responsible, irrespective of the number of children he leaves behind for her to raise. It is against this back-drop that Florence Orabueze argues that “widowhood is a word that every woman dreads to mention. In Africa, it usually brings to a peak all the humiliation, subordination, degradation and oppression which an African woman goes through in her lifetime. From the time of her husband’s death to the time of her own death, his family and the society blame her for the passing away of the much-needed male. She is indirectly asked why she should survive the man” (115). Corroborating Orabueze, Rose Acholonu submits that widows in addition are “subjected to a whole gamut of obnoxious widowhood rites aimed at making her die within the mourning period of about one year. Most brothers-in-law are ever ready to disinherit her and in many cases, may drive her out of her marital home” (97).

Some widows who refuse to go through widowhood rites are severely punished. Helen Labeodan writes about one of these examples. The widow in question is kidnapped, locked up, badly fed and during her incarceration, she is raped by her brother-in-law. She is later thrown into the river as prescribed by the goddess to prove her innocence in her spouse’s death, luckily, she survives these ordeals and is exonerated. Others have been made to drink the bath water used for bathing their spouse’s corpse, while some have been made to swear to their innocence in ancestral shrines. Yet other widows have been made to spend the night/nights with the corpse of their late husband, sitting on bare floor in a corner of the room with shaved hair. The only clothing they are allowed to wear are rags. This self-effacing postures completely dehumanizes women and calls to question the attitude of society towards women who are generally viewed as the “weaker” sex.

Widows in Africa have told bizarre stories of their experiences in the hands of their in-laws, friends and society at large. These stories often border on victimization and betrayal. The experiences are traumatic and damaging to the feminine psyche. They are also gross examples of violation of women’s fundamental human rights and indictment on the society which view women as “other”. The African tabloids are awash with instances of violence and marginalization against women and widows in particular. A case in point is that of Virginia Akobundu recorded in *Sunday Punch* of March 14, 2010 in Nigeria, who suffers physical and psychological victimization from her brother-in-law, due to her refusal to relocate to her home village after her husband’s demise. Earlier she had been forced to live with her four children in their one-room tenement where her husband was buried in the name of tradition and because the latter did not own a house. This oddity raises concern especially in patriarchal Africa where several women-young, middle age and old are fast becoming widows. Dayo Olukemi-Kusa is of the contention that “both sexes need to cooperate in peace and conflict resolution. This is because without peace, the attainment of sustainable human development would come to naught” (206).

African literature is replete with several instances of widowhood and the plight widows suffer, exemplified in the works of male and female African writers, notable among them are John Munoye, Elechi Amadi, Mariama Ba, Akachi Ezeigbo, Flora Nwapa, Chimamanda Adichie among others.

1.1 Widowhood and Conflict Resolution in John Munoye's *The Only Son*

In Munoye's *The Only Son* (1985), the conflict in Chiaku's widowhood is orchestrated by her scavenger brother-in-law, Amanze, who tries to dominate and bstride her life like a colossus. Kate Millet puts this claim in proper perspective when she states that "patriarchal culture is resolute as a system of power relationship, whereby men as a group control women as a group and possess more social wealth, power, esteem as well as control over these resources than women" (22). Concurring with Millet, Allison Jaggar opines that the "patriarchal institution is characterized by divisions, distinction, oppositions and dualism" (36), while Mary Daly adds "all pervasiveness" (326) to the list since patriarchy appears to be everywhere.

Widowed at 18, with a barely six months old baby, Chiaku is abandoned in a dilapidated compound. Munoye writes:

The house in which they lived was a good distance away, in the ancestral compound which belonged by inheritance to the first son in the lineage. The red-mud compound walls had begun to crumble with neglect and were covered in places by lichen and creepers. The house itself was a shanty with a leaky reed roof and mud and wattle walls (The Only Son, 10).

In addition, Amanze took all the fertile lands and kolanut pods, leaving Chiaku with arid lands in order to further impoverish and frustrate her. This calls to mind Madume's greed in Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*. In Ihuoma's case, the malevolent Sea King helps in resolving her conflict (land dispute) by blinding the scavenger, and sending him to his early grave. It is the same patriarchal injustice, that is meted out on the heroine, Onyeje in Bajae James Adie's *Yesterday's Woman*, (2006). As in Ihuoma's example, the law of retributive justice deals a blow on Onyeje's two greedy brothers-in-law as they are banished from the village and died miserable deaths. Chiaku is told that "she herself is a woman, a stranger in the family" (*The Only Son*, 8). What this translates into is that after her husband's death, she ceases to be a member of his family.

Apart from physically dispossessing Chiaku of her late husband's property, her said brother-in-law commits a sacrilege when he batters her with his dry fly wisk. This is Virginia Akobundu's plight earlier mentioned. She (Virginia) is almost blinded in one eye but for the timely intervention of an NGO, known as Widows Concern Organization, headed by Chief George Chigbu, who is helping to bring succor to widows in Nigeria. Chiaku is further saved from brutality by the timely intervention of her son, Nnanna as he tries to defend and protect his mother from his rogueing uncle and his family. It is against this backdrop that Helen Chukuma reasons that "African feminism should be understood in the context of the family, where family transcends the nuclear family of husband, wife and biological children" (109). Again, Mary Kolawole opines that "feminism is at times misconstrued, at other times, it is considered an anathema to the African ... It touches more on interpersonal relationship while probing or attempting to redefine existing roles between husband and wife, mother and son, brother and sister. At the most liberal, it appeals to humanity and humane treatment of women..." (116).

In order to avoid further conflict and marginalization from Amanze, Chiaku relocates to Nade, her paternal home. Her relocation borders on insecurity after Amanze's assault since "security is about the condition or feeling safe from harm or danger, the defence, protection and preservation of core values and the absence of threats to acquire value" (Francis, 2006: 22). Here she is able to live in peace and raise her son in the traditional way. In this respect, Chiaku is like Nwamgba in Chimamanda Adichie's "The Headstrong Historian" who fights and works hard trying to retain Anikwenwa's allegiance to his cultural roots..." (223). Nnanna, like Anikwenwa rejects traditional mores and endorses Western values of Christianity and education. This ideological projection estranges him from his mother and leads to series of conflicts between the duo. Ngugi's stance is aptly described thus:

the coming of Christianity also set in motion a process of social change, involving rapid disintegration of the tribal set-up and the frame-work of social norms and values by which people had formerly ordered their lives and their relationship to others (31).

Nnanna's defection and acceptance of alien values plunges Chiaku into depression. This conflict is resolved when Chiaku remarries Okere, a widower with four children and discovers that she is pregnant. She is thus able to transcend limitations and liberate herself. Irene Adadevoh's submission here is that "despite claims to the contrary patriarchy became the key instrument used culturally to legitimize domination and subordination of women towards gratifying men's wants, needs, purposes and ambitions" (164). Nnanna leaves to Ossa to live with the White Catholic priest, while Chiaku settles down to a new life with Okere who is described as easy-going. The conflicts in their life is resolved amicably.

1.2 Widowhood and Conflict Resolution in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*

So Long a Letter (1981) explores the plight of Ramatoulaye, Modou's widow. Ramatoulaye and Modou had been married for thirty years and blessed with twelve children. Having been victimized and abandoned for her daughter's classmate, Ramatoulaye is further frustrated, deprived and ridiculed in widowhood. Ba's discourse in *So Long a Letter* hinges on Islamic culture. Ramatoulaye recalls that "I live in a monotony broken only by purifying baths, the changing of my mourning cloths every Monday and Friday" (*So Long a Letter*, 8). In addition, she has to mourn her husband for four months and ten days according to the dictates of Islam. She writes her friend Aissatou thus:

I hope to carry out my duties fully. My heart concurs with the demands of religion. Reared since childhood on their strict precepts I expect not to fail. The walls that limit my horizon for four months and ten days do not bother me. I have enough memories of me to ruminate upon. And these are what I am afraid of, for they smack of bitterness... (So Long a Letter, 8).

Edris Makward avers that "... while playing her role as a widow during the funeral of her husband Modou, Rama deplores the coarse attitude and the sheer materialism of her sisters-in-law who treat her and her late husband's young wife equally" (86). Ba writes:

Our sisters-in-law give equal consideration to thirty years and five years of married life. With the same ease and the same words they celebrate twelve maternities and three (So Long a Letter, 4).

In addition to her humiliation, Ramatoulaye's house is "stripped of all that could be stolen, all that could be spoil" (5) by the numerous inlaws and mourners. The women's corner is even noisier, resonating with "laughter, loud talk, hand slaps, strident exclamations ..." (*So Long a Letter*, 6). Monies are contributed for the bereaved wives and Ramatoulaye is lucky to receive the greatest share of money and envelopes, to the envy of her co-wife, but as customary "our family-in-law take away with them a wad of notes, painstakingly topped, and leave us utterly destitute, we who will need material support" (*So Long a Letter*, 7). This dramatic twist underscores the greed, hypocrisy, contempt and victimization with which widows are treated in the Senegalese milieu. This attitude generates conflict and controversies in families. The stand of this paper is peace-building in order to harmonise the sexes.

Ba views widowhood as a traumatic experience for women. This writer encapsulates the fear of this experience thus:

this is the moment dreaded by every Senegalese woman, the moment when she sacrifices her possession as gift to her family-in-law, and worse still, beyond her possessions, she gives up her personality, her dignity becoming a thing in the service of the man who has married her... No sister-in-law will touch the head of any wife who has been stingy, unfaithful or inhospitable (So Long a Letter, 4).

This wicked custom is repressive and barbaric. This is why Rose Acholonu condemns this negative attitude. This critic states:

African culture cannot be allowed to remain static, unprogressive and repressive to womenfolk. Any culture that ceases to grow and change for good, loses its relevance and usefulness to the people and is as good as dead. Ours is a culture in transition and must be purged of all inhuman practices that deny women their rights to full citizens. Therefore, all harmful traditional beliefs, practices and taboos that militate against women's full enjoyment of their human rights, cannot but be regarded as pollutants that must be flushed out of our cultural system now (98).

Helen Chukwuma agrees that “women constitute institutional and individual cogs in the wheel of marriage as well as funeral rites. Ba shows the intimidating phenomenon of mothers-in-law. It was Ramatoulaye’s mother-in-law who made greater demands on her in direct contrast to her father-in-law. In a way, it is the women who lend an edge to the maltreatment and subjugation of their fellow women by men. This punitive tendency is motivated primarily by personal interest which is wholly individualistic and discountenances the other party” (44).

Perhaps more damaging to the feminine psyche is the patriarchal institution of levirate which many widows are subjected to. Mariama Ba, Akachi Ezeigbo, Flora Nwapa as well as other African writers explore this tradition in their works. Tamsir, Modou’s brother’s proposal of marriage is offensive, hence Ramatoulaye declare: “I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand.... I shall never be the one to complete your collection ...” (*So Long a Letter*, 58). She thus breaks her long years of silence and speaks against patriarchal injustice and conflicts in her life. By rejecting levirate, Ramatoulaye asserts her selfhood and debunks Ogundipe-Leslie’s claim that once a woman becomes a wife “she becomes a possession, voiceless and often rightless in her husband’s family, except for what accrues to her through her children” (68). Ramatoulaye settles the conflict surrounding wife inheritance in her life. Chukwuma is of the opinion that the reason advanced for the practice/persistence of levirate is to enable young widows who have no offspring for their late husbands or who had only daughters to have more children by whoever takes her over. This claim is negated in Ramatoulaye’s case since the latter had several sons and daughters.

In a similar vein, Idu in Flora Nwapa *Idu* rejects levirate marriage, after the death of Adiewere due to the fact that she has to be taken over by Adiewere’s useless brother, Isiodu. Rather than subject herself to levirate, she chooses to die. Acholonu’s submission is that:

in Idu’s case, there is more to it, Idu’s death is an act of protest against the traditional practice of wife inheritance, whereby a less than sensible man like Isiodu, is expected to inherit her, his late brother’s wife by right of kinship... Idu rightly regards a marriage with Isiodu as an act which is inferiorating and debasing to her person and worth. There is therefore a marked feminist streak in the heroine, Idu as she challenges tradition and successfully rejects the inferiorized sexual stereotyped role decreed by her society (12).

Idu’s reaction to levirate tradition is radical, perhaps because of the intimacy she shared with Adiewere. In some cases, most widows simply relocate elsewhere to start life afresh, instead of being passed around like cheap commodity in the name of tradition. Acholonu argues further that by Idu’s death, she “rejects the role of a passive perpetrator of a socio-cultural practice that is as inhuman as it is subversive to the essential development of the woman in contemporary Africa” (13).

1.3 Widowhood and Conflict Resolution in Akachi Ezeigbo’s *The Last of the Strong Ones* and *Children of the Eagle*

In Akachi Ezeigbo’s *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996), Onyekozuru marries her spouse out of poverty. This tallies with Belinda’s case in Grace Ukala’s *The Broken Bond*, Chukwuma holds that this type of marriage is often contracted for economic gain. Ogundipe-Leslie adds that the colonial system did not really favour women because this system “negatively encouraged or brought to the fore the traditional ideologies of patriarchy or male superiority which originally existed in African societies” (30).

Widowed at twenty six, after “slaving” for her elderly husband, Onyekozuru learns to relax and delegate farm work to others. Amina Bashir decries the plight of women who are “taught, in the process of being socialized to internalize the reigning patriarchal ideology so that they tend to be conditioned to derogate their sex and cooperate in their subordination” (67). Onyekozuru liberates herself and rejects levirate marriage or “Nkushi” like Idu and Ramatoulaye. She is free to choose her lover, Obiatu and discovers love and sexuality like Janie Crawford in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This is why Bates et al opine that “widowhood, depending on the circumstances may greatly change women’s social role... married generally at a younger age than men, more and more wives in modern times live on as widows. For some women, life without husbands enable them after the first time in adult life to make real choices and take care of their own affairs” (196). Bhattacharji notes that levirate marriage is prevalent in Igboland. Ezeigbo hints on another instance of levirate marriage in *The Last of the Strong Ones*, where Ijeoma wanted Obiatu to claim her in accordance with Umuga tradition of Nkushi.

In the same story, widowhood frees Chibuka from patriarchal domination and voicelessness. Chibueze Orié is of the view that “the summary effect of patriarchal lordship is silencing the woman, muffling or muting her voice or browbeating her to remain voiceless” (160). Chibuka experiences a rebirth and a new lease of life after the death of her difficult and acrimonious husband. Peace and laughter return to her home and even her skin, which had shrunk with farm work, trading and stress from caring for IHEME, her late husband and their six sons blossomed. She is able to relax like Onyekozuru, assert selfhood by rejoining the women’s association, while her sons bring her great joy. She thus transcends immanence. Widowhood helps in resolving her physical and psychological conflicts. This is why Mary Kolawole writes that “most women writers define female consciousness in their works. They have attempted to re-inscribe a new positive delineation of African Womanhood to rectify previous liminality or invisibility of women” (118).

In *Children of the Eagle* (2005), Ezeigbo further interrogates the widow’s predicament in the character of Eaglewoman, the matriarch of the Okwara family. The conflict in Eaglewoman’s widowhood borders on land dispute between the Okwaras and the Umeakus. Land as in most parts of Africa is regarded as a sacred entity. Umeaku had owed the late Ossai, Eaglewoman’s husband large sum of money and since he could not pay, he (Umeaku) had sold the said disputed land to Ossai in lieu of the money owed. The land dispute brings to the fore, the traditional limitations of women in Umuga community, which include the fact that women cannot own land. Amara, one of Eaglewoman’s daughters, views this limitation as retrogressive and notes that “the family has many plots of land in Umuga bought with Papa and Mama’s savings” (*Children of the Eagle*, 144). Amara’s observation underscores the importance and contribution of industrious African women to the economic growth of their families.

Pa Joel, Ossai’s crony helps to broker peace between the two families in the absence of Nkemdiri, the only son and heir of the Okwara dynasty. Orabueze concurs that “the only way a married woman can inherit landed property in the late husbands place in Igboland is through her male children. This obnoxious custom that disinherits a widow does not take into consideration her direct and indirect contribution towards the acquisition of property by her late husband” (113).

The above claim clearly demonstrates Nkemdiri’s importance in the Okwara’s family. Amara puts this in proper perspective when she reasons thus:

sometimes I wondered: what would be the fate of the family property in Umuga if there were no Nkemdiri? Would we be kicked out from our home by greedy relations after Papa died ... What would happen to all the land if this lad did not exist? In Umuga thinking he is the symbol of continuity of the Okwara family tree descending through our father ...” (*Children of the Eagle*, 144).

What Umeaku and others forget is that peaceful co-existence is essential for healthy living in Africa and beyond, since conflict will also generate discord and bitterness. Irene Adadevoh reiterates that “patriarchal culture has failed to confront the very important age-old question of justice, peace and development which all human beings strive to achieve” (169).

Apart from the land dispute, Eaglewoman recounts the widowhood rites/practices she was subjected to by Umuga community:

... his death exposed me to the sharp tooth of Umuga’s unkind customs directed against widows. I tasted the poison of malice brewed by his envious and greedy relatives. I was humiliated, browbeaten and pressured to perform the three-day ritual lament at cockcrow, after the burial. Thank God for your intervention – you and your sisters – after the first day. It saved me from howling like a hyena for three days (*Children of the Eagle*, 129).

More remarkable is the callousness meted out to Eaglewoman by fellow women in the name of tradition. She had to feed the women for over two weeks, while some “tucked away their three meals each day at our expense” (29). This is similar to Ramatoulaye’s plight in *So Long a Letter*. These women (Umuada) insist that the food must be of high quality and quantity and often threatened to desert the funeral rites/ritual sessions. “Umuada is the association of daughters which is supposed to cater to the overall wellbeing of women” (Bhathacharji, 132). Here, these women in a dramatic turn try to emasculate Eaglewoman. Their aims and objectives of female bonding, economic, social and familial well being of women is negated in their activities during funerals as they allow greed and selfishness to defeat their purposes.

In addition, Eaglewoman is confined to one year of mourning and during this period, she develops severe knee pain that threatens to cripple her. Perhaps, this is why Ogundipe-Leslie contends that “women become their own worst enemies and the worst enemies of other women in their efforts to please men. This is typical of the psychology of servitude, the constant desire and anxiety to please the master until constant failure produces a dialectical and revolutionary change in the servant” (79). On his part, Franz Fanon describes psychological oppression as the worst form of oppression. In order to ensure peace and in performing the funeral rites of Ossai, Eaglewoman has to acquiesce to the women’s scheme of things. By so doing, she helps in resolving conflicts and warding-off evil eyes from her children.

Conclusion

Patriarchal domination, cultural practices/beliefs, inheritance laws etc are some of the problems mitigating against the rights of women in Africa especially widows. Most widows in the continent have suffered different forms of victimization from in-laws and the community at large. They have been subjected to injustices in the name of widowhood as exemplified in this paper. These obnoxious practices are not only traumatic but depressing. These practices are also examples of gross betrayal as well as violations of women’s fundamental human rights, hence this paper advocates the eradication of widowhood culture from African milieu.

With the timely intervention and help from NGOs, widows can be saved from frustration, oppression and imminent deaths. Various governments should pass laws in favour of women especially widows in different parts of Africa where they are marginalized. The World’s Widows’ Day, the first of its kind held on Thursday, June 23, 2011 is a further development which will help widows share experiences globally and improve their well-being. Families and the society at large should encourage widows to be physically and emotionally stable so that they can cater for themselves and their children.

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