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Widowhood practices in Nigeria and the psyche of the woman in Ben Igwe's *Against the Odds*

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Abstract
One of the obnoxious patriarchal practices that tend to enslave the African woman is widowhood practices. A woman who loses her husband to death is treated like an outcast to the extent that she sometimes becomes neurotic. She suffers deprivation, lack and oppression in the hands of her in-laws who dispossess her of all that she had laboured for with her husband. In Ben Igwe's *Against the Odds*, this paper observes that the widow who undergoes depravity degenerates to the point of lunacy; and she suffers mockery from her kinsmen and women. Using the feminist theory that encourages women to be strong and assertive, and the psychoanalytic approach which concerns itself with the psyche of the human mind, this paper condemns widowhood practices as it enslaves the woman. The Covid-19 pandemic that led to the worldwide lockdown took a toll on the widow who becomes helpless and vulnerable. The paper concludes that widowhood practices should be abolished completely as this is a patriarchal agenda to enslave the woman; because men who lose their wives do not undergo any ritual or maltreatment. Some aspects of style are also explored which are recurrent motifs in the novel to drive home the message.

Key words: widowhood, patriarchy, enslavement, woman

1. Introduction

Widowhood practices is an age-long practice which has been so entrenched in some traditions despite the negative effect it has on the victim – the woman. What makes the practice so obnoxious is the fact that it is only women who undergo the rituals of widowhood despite the fact that both men and women lose their spouses. This is based on the belief that women are usually accused of being responsible for the demise of their husbands, in order to inherit his wealth, therefore, these practices are enforced in order to traumatize the woman so that she will lose interest in the husband's property and just be left alone to be alive with her children, if any. The woman suffers from accusation, maltreatment, dispossession, enslavement, poverty, lack, depravity and ostracism: these factors either drive the woman to her early grave or to insanity.

Using the feminist theory that encourages women to be strong and assertive, and the psychoanalytic approach which concerns itself with the psyche of the human mind, this paper condemns widowhood practices as it enslaves the woman. The paper concludes that widowhood practices should be abolished completely as this is a patriarchal agenda to enslave the woman; because men who lose their wives do not undergo any ritual or maltreatment. Some aspects of style are also explored which are recurrent motifs in the novel to drive home the message.

2. Feminism and psychoanalysis

Feminism is a theory that encourages women to assert themselves positively in the society by rejecting domination and striving for relevance. Helen Chukwuma in "The Identity of Self" defines feminism to mean a

> rejection of inferiority and a striving for recognition. It seeks to give the woman a sense of self as a worthy, effectual and contributing human being. Feminism is a reaction to such stereotypes of women which deny them a positive identity. (ix)

Akachi Ezeigbo in *Gender Issues in Nigeria* argues that feminism "is ideologically designed to liberate and emancipate women worldwide from oppression, ignorance, poverty and self-immolation" (1). Rosalind Delmar in "What is Feminism" defines feminism as "an active desire to change women's position in the society" (13). In the same vein, Paul Clarke and Andrew Linzey in *Dictionary of Ethics*, *Theology and Society* argue that feminism as an ideology is an affirmation of women's equivalent value as persons with men and a rejection of sexist ideologies that inferiorize women. They add that as a movement feminism is an organized effort to transform the cultural and social systems that perpetuate women's subjugation to men (377).

Psychoanalysis theory is apt for this paper because the female character degenerates to neurosis which is a component of the psyche. Linda Davidoff argues that "psychology is usually defined as the science that focuses on behavior and mental processes" (6). Charles Bressler notes that psychoanalytic criticism is "the application of the methods of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis to interpreting works of literature. Because this approach to literary analysis attempts to explain the hows and whys of human actions" (179). Jo Nash argues that "Psychoanalysis is a specific form of talking therapy, grounded in a complex theory of human development and psychological functioning". Judith Gardiner opines that feminist psychoanalytic critics accept Freud's theory "provisionally as accurate portraits of the ways in which patriarchal social relations damage women psychologically" (117).

Therefore, feminism and psychoanalysis theories are apt for this paper because the widow in the text under discussion who initially degenerates to lunacy eventually liberates herself from inferiority, oppression and poverty and strive towards achieving individuality for herself and her son, Jamike. Hence, her son's transformation from a local village boy to an international personality whom the whole community reckoned with.

3. Widowhood practices as a patriarchal agenda of oppression in *Against the Odds*

In this novel, we meet Uridiya, the widow of Nnorom who is described by the narrator as still mourning her late husband. The African woman is made to mourn her husband by dressing in black clothes for a particular number of years, depending on the society. The narrator tells us that "she looked pitiful in the black mourning outfit that consisted of a loose blouse, a single wrap-around loincloth, and a head-cloth of the same fabric knotted loosely at the back of her neck" (1).

The widow is not only compelled to dress in a particular clothing to mourn her husband; she is equally dispossessed of her property. This practice is based on the belief that the woman is only one of the properties the man owns, therefore, she has no right to inherit her late husband's property, rather, she is to be inherited by the husband's relatives through levirate marriage. M. Jane Young and Kay Turner note that "Remarkably, the idea of women as property of their husbands has been used to justify levirate, especially the continued procreation of a man posthumously" (70). The narrator goes further to elaborate on the requirements of widowhood practices thus:

> The black two-piece mourning outfit with matching head-cloth was Uridiya's attire for one year during the period tradition required that she mourn her husband. A merciless haircut

> compounded her miserable condition. Her head was shaved to the bare shining skull. The duty was dexterously performed by widows from the kindred who themselves had been through the same rite. They shaved off her hair with a piece of broken bottle or sometimes with a locally made razor. It was done to perfection and, her head polished with palm kernel oil, shone reflectively. (4)

These reflect how women have become agents of patriarchy, thereby making women to oppress women. Romanus Aboh notes that "women sometimes play dominant roles in the debasement of other women" (110). For the fact that the older women have undergone these widowhood rites, it becomes a generally accepted norm despite the psychological effect it has on the widow. Aboh notes further that "Gender identities interweave at multiple layers of subjectivities; the woman can be her own oppressor just as the man can be his own subjugator" (123). Since the widow is considered as one of a man's possession, she is confined to silence and slavery. She does not have a say even on matters that concern her directly. Elechi Amadi in *Ethics in Nigerian Culture* affirms this practice as he argues that

> In ancient Nigeria a wife was regarded as the husband's property. The man paid a certain amount as bride-price, and the woman became his….She bore his name, and her children belonged to him….In ancient Nigeria, a widow suffered much during the mourning period, which usually lasted for about a year. She was not allowed to do her hair, wash her clothes, or even bathe regularly. In extreme cases she was buried with her husband. For men who lost their wives, on the other hand, there was hardly any recognized traditional period of mourning. A widower could, in fact, marry another wife within a matter of weeks after his wife's death. (75)

Uridiya is silenced by Akudike, her late husband's brother who has dispossessed her of all her inheritance. She explodes "This is the way they shut me up in this compound. I have no say, not even to tell you that Jamike is my child without a rebuke from those who own me" (28). The above assertion re-echoes the concept of the woman being considered as a property of the kindred. Her fundamental human rights are trampled upon, thereby consigning her to silence, docility and passivity. Adebayo Aduke considers all these as "patriarchal wrongs". She questions

> What practices still infringe on women's ability to achieve selfhood and boldness in defining their being on their own terms and not on the terms imposed by the patriarchal society. Among these wrongs are inadequate educational and political opportunities, lack of financial autonomy, oppressive dictatorship of the father, forced marriage, levirate, genital mutilations, male appropriation of the female body, dowry system and inhuman widowhood rites among others. (2-3)

3.1 Widowhood practices as a patriarchal weapon of dispossession

The maltreatment of widows in the society has become a norm to the extent that people look forward to dispossessing them of their inheritance. They do this without any form of guilt, but to inflict more pains and agony on the poor widow who is already in grief over the loss of her spouse. In the primary text under discussion, Uridiya's case is not an exception.

> Villagers who took advantage of Uridiya would attempt to rob her of farmlands as well as the fruit trees that sustained her. They harvested her oil bean tree in the early hours of the morning before she woke up, carried away her breadfruits when they fell and no one was watching. They would not leave a widow alone to have breathing space until she started to

> behave like a lunatic with a sharp abusive tongue, spitting out curses on them and their children. (4)

The people of Aludo are intentional about dispossessing the widow of all she has laboured for with her late husband. Egbung in "Reinventing the African Woman" argues that "The traditional woman's occupation was farming, trading and other means of livelihood which made her economically independent" (8). Uridiya's misfortune in Aludo is a common practice in almost all African societies. This is because in Africa, no man dies a natural death; something or somebody must be responsible. In most cases, the wife of the deceased is always the accused, hence, the maltreatment and dispossession of the widow's property is to make her helpless and traumatized. The narrator notes that

> Uridiya Nnorom, a widow in the village of Aludo in Igboland in Eastern Nigeria, suffered the fate of a widow. The condition of the widow in the village in the 1950s evoked sympathy and pity. Her life was a struggle. Suffering was her lot and endurance her virtue. Because most people did not care about her, she went about her harsh living saying as little as possible. Widowhood leaves little for words. Resignation to the will of the gods and protection by the spirits of her ancestors bespoke her condition. Widows in the village most often were helpless. (4-5)

Apart from the fact that the widow is the first suspect when her husband dies, members of her husband's family see it as an opportunity to unleash their venom on her; especially if she was not the desired choice of a wife for their kinsman, so they join forces with outsiders to dispossess the widow of all she has laboured for with her husband. The narrator paints the picture thus

> Widows in the village most often were helpless. This is the reason malevolent persons would pounce on a widow's farmlands, fruit trees, or domestic animals such as dogs, goats, sheep or her fowls, attempting to dispossess her. Ironically, it was the close relatives of the widow's deceased husband who were the first to try to disinherit her, especially if her children were minors. (5)

This dispossession is intense if the widow refuses to be inherited by the husband's relatives through levirate marriage. She is made to suffer in penury with her children. Itang Egbung in "Levirate Marriage in Ray Amadi's *The Trials of a Widow* and Akachi Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* notes that "Levirate marriage is one of the agenda by patriarchy to limit and confine the African woman and prevent her from achieving selfhood, sexuality and individuality" (75).

3.2 Depression as a factor leading to lunacy

Uridiya is considered as a lunatic by the villagers because she keeps to herself after her husband's death. Silence leads to depression, and depression is a factor that can lead to lunacy. The narrator notes that "widowhood leaves little for words" (4-5).

In trying to avoid people whom she views as her enemies, and not talking to them, she ends up talking to herself. And talking to oneself is an attribute of lunacy. Everybody in the village is a suspect, so she pronounces curses on everybody, born and unborn who wishes her evil.

> Her temper was short. Quite easily she would call out all the evil spirits of the land if provoked, especially by relatives of her deceased husband who took advantage of her. She would put a

> curse on everyone who abused her or plan to do so….May all the evil things you wish for me follow you, your children, and your children's children, both born and unborn. May evil visit you – reincarnation after reincarnation. May you be cursed, not me. You say I am a lunatic, wait till you see what a lunatic can do. (1-2)

Uridiya suffers from depression and lunacy because she has been disconnected from the forest that acts as a source of food and medicine. Traditionally, people depend on herbs from the forest to cure their ailments. This disconnection makes her vulnerable. God'sgift Uwen et al argue that the forest is a source of food, traditional medicine and site for ritual performances (11). The traumatic experience of firstly losing a husband, and secondly; suffering from dispossession drives her into neurosis. She now lives in a world of her own not minding what goes on around her in the physical world. Walking naked round the village means nothing to her.

> Before her mourning outfit became regular wear, she used to sometimes
> walk around bare-bodied to the waist, her flat breasts pendulus and her one-piece loincloth knotted firmly with a cloth string around her waist. Above the cloth and below an exposed navel were many rope-like ring of red and black beads that adorned her hips and swung with the undulating movement of her buttocks when she walked. (5)

Uridiya's experience in marriage before and after the death of her husband is huge enough to drive her to madness. After being married to Nnorom for almost 20 years without a child, with pressure coming from relatives on the need for a second wife; then fortune smiles on her and she becomes pregnant with her only son. Two years after the birth of her son, the husband fell down from a palm tree and dies. The psychological and traumatic effects are enormous. "Fate, however, was cruel to Uridiya and the baby, for her husband, Nnorom, died just two years after her son was born" (6). Childlessness alone can lead a woman to mental derangement, this point is buttressed by Aondofa Kwaghtser as he notes that "Childlessness can steal joy in the family as it poses an overwhelming effect on the mental state of couples". Fate finally smiles on Uridiya and Nnorom and they are blessed with Jamike their son.

Uridiya sees herself as ill-fated and cursed, these leads to depression, silence and soliloquy.

> Some days, though, Uridiya would walk along the road silently, say nothing to people she passed on the way. If Uridiya were greeted while in this mood, she would mutter a response to herself, saying, "How can you greet me when you too are in the plan to have me dead". She was suspicious of everyone. When she walked along the village dirt road in silence, Uridiya was in her own world (9).

Jamike is all Uridiya has and she works hard to cater for his needs, on the other hand, Jamike also supports the mother in his own little way as a child. The joy of having a child after 20 years of childlessness spurs Uridiya to do all within her powers to cater for his needs after the demise of her husband. She is not so particular about the sex of the child, but the feeling that she has overcomed barrenness. Ugochukwu Asogwa, Chiemzie Atama, Asadu Mariagoretti and Doris Melugbo in "Bouncing Baby Boys but Crying Baby Girls" argue that "Although, there is a growing preference for male child among women, this preference is not born out of the need for lineage perpetuation, as is the case with men, but for the purposes of status enhancement and maintenance". With the birth of Jamike, Uridiya's status has been enhanced from a barren woman to a fruitful woman. The narrator tells us that "Jamike had to learn fast. Having lost his father very early in life, he had to come to manhood faster than his age-mates if he and his mother were to survive in the widow's harsh environment" (13).

3.3 Determination and assertiveness as a bane of oppression and depression

In the novel, Uridiya rejects self-immolation and inferiority; and determines to train her only son to any level of education she can afford. She refuses to allow her widowhood status to deter or limit her. “But Uridiya, a woman of determination, had sworn that Jamike would attend school whenever she could afford to put him there. She always said that since she did not know her ABCs, her only child must go to school to learn them” (13). She transcends the traditional configuration of a widow and aspires to be a contemporary single mother who knows the value of western education. She knows that through education, her son will achieve all that she could not. Egbung in “Literacy and the Girl-Child Empowerment for Sustainable Development” argues the “Education is an investment that when properly utilized can empower, liberate and embolden; on the other hand, the lack of education exposes one to exploitation, oppression, ignorance and poverty” (10). Jamike who has studied the environment and has seen what the mother is going through, makes the mother proud by performing brilliantly in school. “Jamike proved brilliant in primary school” (22). Agnes Offiong et al note that having environmental knowledge produces environmentally responsible behaviour in students (251). Although Uridiya finds it difficult to pay her son’s school fees, but with determination and resilience, providence makes a way for Jamike. The village headmaster takes over his training. “Jamike could not have finished primary school were it not for the village headmaster, Mr. Ahamba, who took over the payment of his fees” (23). Uridiya and her son Jamike brace the odds and emerge strong and victorious.

4. Conclusion

Some aspects of style have been deployed by the author to drive home his message. The essence is to show the extent to which the female character has been subjected to suffer. A motif is a recurring phenomenon that is often repeated in a literary work. In the novel, there is a recurrent lunatic motif. Uridiya curses and abuses everyone who sees her as a lunatic. “May you be cursed, not me. You say I am a lunatic, wait till you see what a lunatic can do” (2). “They will not leave a widow alone to have breathing space until she started to behave like a lunatic with a sharp abusive tongue, spitting out curses on them and their children” (4). “Uridiya cursed along the village road whenever she was aggravated. Because of that, the villagers said she was on the verge of becoming a lunatic” (6). “No, she would protest, I am not a lunatic. I am never one to talk too much. You turned me talkative after my husband died” (6). The psychological and emotional trauma she goes through since she has been dispossessed of her farmlands and fruit trees; and oppressed by her in-laws and the community since the loss of her husband drives her to neurosis.

Using the feminist and psychoanalytic theories, this paper has attempted to interrogate the danger of widowhood practices on the psyche of the woman; the negative effect it has on her and the concomitant interplay of these effects; and the doggedness and resilience of the widow who transcends her disadvantaged position and aspires to be the cynosure of the community.

This paper has explored the one-sidedness of the patriarchal society where the woman is compelled to observe the vicious mourning period when she loses her spouse, whereas, the man does not go through any ritual. The paper has also argued that widowhood practices is a patriarchal agenda to oppress and dispossess the woman of all she has laboured for with her husband. The paper has also explored a recurrent motif of lunacy used by the writer to drive home his message.

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