

REVIEW ARTICLE

Women and Socio-Cultural Mores: Depiction of Widowhood in *A Cowrie of Hope*

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Abstract

Widowhood is the condition in which a wife (or a husband) grieves over the loss of her husband (or his wife) in the circumstance of death. In fact, the current paper aims at exploring and analyzing how widowhood is depicted in Binwell Sinyangwe's *A Cowrie of Hope*. In the novel, Sinyangwe criticizes the strange treatment a widowed woman endures when her spouse passes away. The bereaved woman is looked upon as less than human whenever she loses her soulmate. She is seen as a killer, a witch, a prostitute, inter alia. Furthermore, death is perceived as an unnatural event caused by someone, especially a widow who is always accused of being responsible for her husband's demise. As such, she is constrained to go through some rituals involving confinement, levirate marriage, inheritance disentanglement that undoubtedly infringe her rights as human. As far as the methodology is concerned, a qualitative method is used to carry out our research and stiwanist literary perspective is applied as theory to better analyze the selected novel, *A Cowrie of Hope*.

Keywords: Widowhood Rituals, Widow, Stiwanism, Culture, In-laws.

1. Introduction

Literature, as a body of written or oral works, stands for a mirror to reflect and depict what happens in a given society. Corroborating the foregoing standpoint, Wale admits that "in every literary work, the writer always attempts to mirror the society by making his [her] work exposit or reflect the contemporary realities of his [her] society" (*qtd. in* Ouarodima 54). In fact, widowhood, in some cases, renders women to be treated less than human because of its harsh and obnoxious practices in it. Across the world, widows are pitilessly suspected, subjected, evicted, discriminated, objectified, disinherited, defaced, confined, impoverished, stigmatized, among others.

Therefore, in Africa, the spouse's passing on represent a misfortune to those left behind particularly relict women who are doomed to endure pernicious and

inhuman widowhood rituals in the name of culture (Idialu 6; Moussa 272; Cebekhulu 22). In Zambia, widows peak encounter discrimination in inheriting their late husbands' property due to many oppressive customary laws (Kambole 16). That is the reason why the Zambian writer, Binwell Sinyangwe in his novel, *A Cowrie of Hope*, decries the harmful and lethal widowhood practices in Zambia in general and in Lunda community in particular. Notably, the present paper explores and analyzes how widowhood is practiced in *A Cowrie of Hope*, finds out the perpetrators and possible ways out. From the abovesaid overviews, this paper attempts to answer the following questions:

- ❖ How is widowhood portrayed in *A Cowrie of Hope*?
- ❖ Why is it that a woman widow is accused of being

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involved in her husband's death?

- ❖ What is the aim of performing such widowhood practices?

2. An Overview on the Theory

Many critics did handle the issue of widowhood from diverse perspectives and different standpoints. However, the current research applies Stiwanist perspectives as theory to explore the evidence from the selected text. Before deeply going in this theory, it is crucial to provide an overview about the umbrella term stressing on women's issues: feminism. The latter, according to Orginta, originated from France in 1880, England in 1890 and U.S in 1910 (57). It is a theory that politically, economically, and socially advocates gender equality (Sotunsa 34). Markedly, the aim of feminism is world widely to call for gender equality.

Surprisingly, African women recognize that it is only created for western women's purpose. The aforementioned view incites African women to establish their own theories, among them Stiwanism. The latter was neologized by Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie in 1994. Stiwanism is from **STIWA** meaning Social Transformation Including Women in Africa.

Alkali et al. then holds that the main purpose of Stiwanism is to introduce the concept of partnership with men and promote social transformation (242). Jane adds, "With Stiwanism, the feminine gender in Africa regains her place in the society and can play a role in the development of the society and indeed in social transformation (70). Furthermore, in an interview, Ogundipe-Leslie opines that "I wanted to stress the fact that what we want in Africa is social transformation. It is not about warring with the men, the reversal of role, or doing to 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's also in their interest" (*qtd. in* Alkali et al. 242).

From the above view, Ogundipe-Leslie calls on both men and women to collaborate, work hand in hand just for social transformation without gender-based discrimination. As far as the methodology is concerned, qualitative method is used to write this paper. In the light of this, Creswell and Cheryl maintain "...a hallmark of qualitative research today is the deep involvement in issues of gender, culture and marginalized groups" (76).

3. In-laws' and Society's Perception of a Widow

Widows experience victimization, marginalization, traumatization and strange treatment in the hands of their in-laws, friends and community at large (Simon and Mabel 260). In fact, they are the most subjected people and looked upon as ones who do not deserve respect and cohabitation. Worse, they embody negative image in the eyes of in-laws along with the society and are generally suspected of having a hand in their husbands' demise.

Thus, the society holds the view that widowed women are killers, social misfits, outcasts, evil carriers, witches, prostitutes; brief, every evil word is referred to them. In the same vein, Oreh reports that "the widow is seen as an unclean and unholy and as a result of people's perception of widow; certain harmful widowhood practices are meted out to her" (3). To support the aforementioned quotation, Indian people have the tradition of cremating or burning widows alive along with the corpses of their spouses through sati (Auj 92; Adekile 44).

This obviously shows the inhuman treatment of widows that Sinyangwe calls for attention. Nasula, the main character of the novel, endures it as a chattel in the hand of her so-called in-laws.:

Nasula had not forgotten. She would not. How could she? They turned her into a servant, a slave in a chief's palace. They had turned her into a stream in which to wash and kill the stink of her humanity. They had turned her into a hunter's flat stone on white to sharpen their spears and axes... They had made her to look like a non-human, a doll without thoughts or feelings of her own (*A Cowrie of Hope* 6).

However, it is good to recall that the constitution of Zambia stipulates in article 5 that "no person shall be subjected to torture or inhuman or degrading punishment or other like treatment" (17). What is more, even the holy books are against bad treatment towards women in general and widows in particular. The Holy Bible, for instance, warns us in Exodus (22) not to "...exploit widows or orphans. If you do and they cry out to me ... My anger will blaze forth against you, and I will kill you with the sword. Your wives will become widows... (116).

Despite all the above cited warnings, in-laws and society keep hating and ill-treating them without

thinking about the pitiful conditions they find themselves in. The problem is that, this bald perception is instilled in people's minds whereby widows are viewed as less than human and with disdain. Notably, Ndlovu reveals a widow's speech when she holds that "I was like a smelling dog even to my family and even the dishes I was using were washed and kept separately so that other could not use them. Even the bathing dish was not touched by other people" (43). This negative perception creates frustration from the side of the widows. The attitude is worth enough to be considered as a sign of marginalization and dehumanization.

4. Worsening of Suspicion on Women upon her husband's death

Suspicion is defined by the online *Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary & Thesaurus* as "a feeling or belief that someone has committed a crime or done something wrong." In fact, in many African communities, the widow becomes blameworthy of her husband's death owing to it is admitted as something that someone has caused, but not natural. Widows, generally, endure false accusation that they are the ones who murder their beloved partners. This is because in Africa, death is, often, perceived as an unnatural event (273). To corroborate the previous view, there is an African saying "no married man dies a natural death, but at the hands of a bewitched wife" (Adekile 36). The accusation often goes even if the demise is natural and with evidences that are clear and explainable.

Africans most of the time fail to acknowledge such a death. To instantiate the foregoing standpoint, Sinyangwe informs the circumstances in which Nasula's husband, Winelo, dies while asking that "people of the world, how could anyone blame her for the death of a man who had been shot by policemen while he was stealing? She has ever even known, until his death that Winelo had taken to stealing" (*A Cowrie of Hope* 8). However, Nasula is free of guilt because her husband's death is clearly stated; still people incriminate her of being responsible for the death. Correspondingly, in *A Cowrie of Hope*, the in-laws and society continue blaming the innocent widow when the narrator reveals the way they "... they turned against her. Blamed her for the death of the husband" (8).

To gainsay the Lunda people's belief, Sinyangwe comments that "Winelo her late husband. Let his soul

rest in peace. She had loved him even he was dead. He too had loved her and, she was sure still loved her... He keeps her, he feeds her, he buys her clothes..." (*A Cowrie of Hope* 6). Furthermore, Moussa concurs that Nasula can no way kill her husband owing to he is the one who takes care of her and her daughter, Sula (273). The false accusation enforces widows to perform widowhood rituals like confinement, levirate marriage, inter alia.

5. Widowhood Rituals (Practices)

According to George, rituals "refer to a set of actions such as widowhood practices often thought to have symbolic value, the performance of which is usually prescribed by religion or by traditions of community because of the perceived efficacy of those actions" (10). In the light of the foregoing quotation, widowhood practices stand for rules and regulations to perform rituals for any woman finding herself in such a state. There are diverse perspectives concerning the practices. Some perceive the ritual as a way of showing respect for the departed spouse and others think is to prove the widow's innocence in her husband's death. In addition, Oreh posits that "widowhood practices can be seen as a socio-cultural practice encompassing burial rights, mourning rituals, inheritance rights of the widow, her expected behaviour towards others and other people's behaviour towards her arise from the death of her husband" (7).

5.1. Confinement of Widow during mourning Period

Widow's confinement consists of totally restricted widow's movement in a given place in order to mourn the death of her soulmate (George 106). It socially, economically and psychologically affects the widow's life because of being in a lonely environment without well-wishers around her. In *A Cowrie of Hope*, Nasula is confined in an isolated and unequipped hut to mourn Winelo's death. As Sinyangwe notices that "...now that she has been left alone, forgotten by the world" (85). Again, he keeps noting "the world became cold... She was alone in the middle of a plain, a vast expense emptiness and stood apart... Alone, seated on a stool of life and death, her feet partially buried in the sand" (107). The manner in which Sinyangwe repeats the word 'alone' with insistence shows how Nasula, the protagonist, lives a desolate and risky life due to her detachedness from other people and her soulmate. Therefore, the widow's confinement is done just to prevent the widowed woman from bringing bad luck in the community as she is seen as an ill-omened

creature. Yawa is of the view when he avers that “the reason why the widow is restricted to stay in her house is so as to avoid spreading misfortunes associated to death” (qtd. in Tshoba 25).

This ritual obviously violates the right of widows as specified by Charter “any restriction on a widow’s mobility, even where based on custom which continues after 14 th day after the death of the spouse are unlawful and anyone responsible for restraining the widow is guilty of criminal offence” (5). In spite of the foregoing declaration, people still confine the widow without thinking about her grieving conditions. After finishing the ritual confinement, the bereaved woman is constrained to contract a mandatory levirate marriage.

5.2. Mandatory Levirate Marriage

Levirate marriage is another widowhood ritual allowing the late spouse’s brother to marry the widow of the departed man. In many traditional African societies including Zambia, levirate remains an obligation to any widow finishing her mourning term. In fact, when a husband passes on, she, that is a wife, is viewed as a witch, murderer, evil carrier, pariah, etc. Surprisingly, the same people (in-laws) compel the widow to another marriage, how come? Gbaguidi et al.’s view is illustrative when they clarify that there is an inconsistency in people’s belief in which the widow incriminated of witchcraft and the same woman in question is mandated to remarry the late husbands’ brother or relatives (28). This means, following the belief, that the widow is going to kill the whole family of her deceased husband.

Corroborating the above comment, Sinyangwe in *A Cowrie of Hope* reveals how Nasula’s in-laws oblige her to become the new wife of Isaki, the late spouse’s brother. The narrator posits, “After the burial, the news was broken to her that Isaki Chiswebe would be taking over as her husband. She knew Isaki and his ways in things of the flesh very well. She also now knew the Chiswebe family too well to remain married to one of its members. She refused to be married to Isaki” (8). Here, Nasula’s rejection to levirate is worth congratulating because the levir is a seropositive man and the HIV/AIDS is, to the best of our knowledge, an incurable disease.

Mostly, in-laws enforce this union simply by relying on the paid bride price. Scholz and Mayra maintain, “After *Lobola* (bride price) is paid, the wife has no right to return to her parent’s home after his death.

This makes it easier for people like her in-laws to treat her badly” (28). The aforementioned quotation seemingly recalls that one is a wife to the whole family, but not just to her husband. It is worthy to note that marriage remains a legal union but grounded on affection and consent, not on obligation. Ndlovu reports a widow’s assertion by stating that “three months after my husband has passed on, the family of my late husband told me to accept his brother as my new husband. I cried and went to report the matter to my family. They did not give me any support but told me to go back and do as my in-laws say... I went to report this to local headman and he said it is our culture. I had to do it” (44).

There is no doubt the practice infringes the right of the innocent widow just by counting on culture. However, culture is important, it is still very dynamic and that one has to be selective in its application. Though both the Holy Bible and the Holy Qur’an encourages levirate as specified in Genesis (38), Judah said to Er’s brother Onan: “you must marry Tamar, our law requires of the brother of a man who has died. Her first son from you will be your brother’s heir” (185); and in surah 4:19: “O you who believe, it is not lawful for you to inherit women by compulsion”; both Holy books do not make it compulsory, that is to make it happen without the consent of the woman. Then, why the refusal of levirate marriage leads a widow to punishment like eviction, confiscating the late man’s property?

5.3 Widow’s Inheritance

Inheritance can only happen when a person passes away and the asset left, be it movable or immovable, is transferred from the late person to the living or surviving person(s). In the light of this, in many traditional African societies, in-laws remain widows’ obstacles who confiscate and evict them from their spouses’ houses (Sotunsa et al. 51). In *A Cowrie of Hope*, Nasula’s in-laws evict and deprive her of having a share of her deceased husband’s property. Sinyangwe’s view is illustrative when he argues that “her[that is Nasula’s] late husband had left her some money and goods, but hardly before his funeral was over, her in-laws have swooped everything out of her possession and left her to languish with nothing in her hands, alone with her only daughter and child. She had lived like that to this day, poor, parentless, widowed and without a relative to talk to and to whom she could turn.” (*A Cowrie of Hope* 4-5).

The above quotation sheds light on the egocentric attitude of the in-laws who seize everything and let

the widow empty-handed. Thus, making her living condition very pitiful and critical. Most of the time, in-laws rely on the common African saying “a property cannot inherit a property” (Eboiyehi and Akanni 94). This proverb reveals how widows are objectified and they are not respected as human beings.

Notably, Nasula is among the legitimate inheritors as she can inherit her husband and vice versa. In the Book of Inheritance, Hadith 6731, narrated by Abū Hurairah, stipulates that “and whoever (among the believers) dies leaving some property, then that property is for his heirs” (385). Obviously, Nasula deserves to inherit the asset left by the deceased man, but owing to cultural unfairness, irresponsibility of the in-laws and patriarchal domination, she is excluded from the property. Eboiyehi and Akanni confirm that widows are among the vulnerable and poorest people and their rights are denied due to male domination in the society, traditional, customary and religious beliefs (91). In the same fashion, Sinyangwe asserts that “Nasula was poverty... She wore it like her own skin... Nasula has no means and no dependable support” (*A Cowrie of Hope* 4). It is worth admitting that inheritance disentanglement pauperized, makes a widow to be dependent and it endangers her life.

Worse of all, the in-laws fail to conform in accordance of the testator’s left will. To support the foregoing standpoint, Sinyangwe avers that:

When he was about to die- Winelo knew that he was dying and should think of the wife and child he was leaving behind... On the paper the policeman fetched for him from a doctor in the ward, he wrote that for the sake of his child, Sula Chiswebe, his house in Kalingalinga and everything in it that he was leaving behind including the money to the sum of the seven hundred and fifty thousand kwacha, should be given to his wife, Nasula, and that his parent and relatives should share only his gun, his bicycle and his clothes (*A Cowrie of Hope* 9).

6. Conclusion

In sum, the paper explores and analyzes widowhood rituals as portrayed in *A Cowrie of Hope* by Binwell Sinyangwe. In the novel, the narrator denounces the way a widowed woman is treated in Lunda community of Zambia. In such a community, a widow is negatively perceived as a witch, murderer, prostitute, among

many others evil qualifications. Then, she is accused of being responsible for her husband’s demise. Apart from the above circumstances, the widow has an obligation to perform widowhood rituals violating her rights as human like, confinement, forced levirate marriage, inheritance disentanglement, etc. which undoubtedly affect her well-being.

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