

**SOCIETY, CULTURE AND WIDOW
MALTREATMENT IN NIGERIA: AN EXAMINATION
OF ROSE MARY ASEN'S THE WOMAN IN BLACK**

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ABSTRACT

Culture, religion and social norms are major alibis and impediments that have over the years stood against the general well being of widows in Nigeria. Widowhood in Nigeria is a physical, mental and psychological nightmare that most women dread and cannot help but wish away. This paper engages literary – textual exegesis to discuss the vice upon which the sanctity of humanity and fundamental human rights of widows are to say the least grossly violated. It brings to bare the multi – faceted evils inherent in widow maltreatment as is common in Nigeria as captured in the world of the play The Woman in Black. Beyond highlighting the evils of widow maltreatment; this paper challenges these obscure, obnoxious and retrogressive cultural practices contending that they are barbaric, insensitive and anti-

social. The paper submits that widowhood is an excruciating phase of women's lives as such; harmful traditional practices that demean the dignity of womanhood hence should be abolished through social re – orientation and /or legislation.

Key Words: Society, Culture, Widow Maltreatment.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural institutions and products are clearly central to the maintenance of dominant ideologies, and are frequently the locus for ideological struggle in society (Kershaw, 21).

The above quote opens this discourse and forms the foundation for a literary analysis that aims at showing how traditional practices in most African cultures particularly Nigeria are used as tools and social structures to oppress and dehumanize women folk in the event of the death of their spouses. Traditional barriers have been institutionalized through social structures such as the family (marriage, tradition, rites and other practices) which form the bed rock upon which these ideologies are hinged to perpetrate certain practices that are abusive and derogatory to the dignity of widows. It is imperative to state here that widow maltreatment is an ugly trend that cuts across most African cultures, breeding health and psychological hazards on widows. Certain cultural structures and social codes which include social beliefs, behaviours or practices have emerged whose existence can be traced to the general adoption of these social norms by a simple majority of persons that live and interact within a given social milieu. The basic methodology to

be used is textual analysis of the play *The Woman in Black* by Rose Mary Asen using the traditional approach of x-raying themes, characters and so on.

In order to establish a justification for this study, it is imperative to establish the connection between society, culture, and widow maltreatment as this would give an overview of widowhood practices across Nigeria. To this end, the paper is divided into five segments viz: introduction, conceptual framework, culture and widow maltreatment in Nigeria, an overview, play analysis and the way forward which forms the conclusion of the paper.

CONCEPTUAL DEFINATIONS

Culture – as stated elsewhere, refers to the totality of the way of life of a people in a society which is shaped and influenced by their history and belief systems [Mbachaga, 161]. It is in this sense that the word is used.

Widow Maltreatment – these are some negative and inhumane practices hiding under the guise of tradition and culture to perpetrate different forms of oppression and subjugation on widows. This varies from culture to culture and it includes the deceased's extended family.

CULTURE AND WIDOW MALTREATMENT: AN OVERVIEW.

Abuse and maltreatment of widows through cultural and social codes exist and these and is used to oppress and violate

the basic human rights of widows. In this instance, a widow is expected to elicit certain behavior[s] that is harmful to her health, which might lead to death.

It is imperative to note here that, “attempts at looking into widowhood dates back to the early 1990s and have been done largely within the broader context of examining human rights issues from a socio – legal angle (Babatunde, 21).

The reasons for these barbaric practices are not farfetched. This is because, in most African societies/cultures, the wife is usually the prime suspect at the death of her spouse. These practices are therefore perpetrated in order to punish her and/or prove her innocence.

In some cultures, widowhood rites are necessary to separate a wife from the spirit of her dead husband. Most times, the female in-laws, brothers and father in – law could take various actions against the widow. Again, some rituals could be performed by other widows in the family on the recently widowed woman. They do these out of experience and for continuity of tradition due to the indoctrination that the gods will be annoyed if certain rituals are not performed.

To further give vent to the issue of widow maltreatment as it affects women in Nigeria, we wish to quote quite elaborately the work of the inter – African Committee (Nigeria) on Practices affecting the health of Women and Children – (IAC) which has documented several practices across Nigeria. According to them, widows are subjected to one or more of the following degrading actions:

- All hairy parts of her body will be shaved using a piece of broken bottle or any other sharp object.

- She is forced to sit on the bare floor throughout the day taking no siesta while sleeping on a mat at night.
- She eats with her left hand from a broken plate or calabash that will never be washed throughout the mourning period.
- She is woken up in the early hours of the morning (2am) to cry her eyes out in company of professional mourners hired for the job. Absence of tears from the woman is proof of guilt, or being responsible for the husband's death.
- She could be forced to drink the water used to wash the corpse of the man.
- She is made to lie leg – to – head beside the corpse before the final burial.
- She could be made to swear in the name of some idols to prove her innocence, wash in a stream in the dead of the night throwing her mourning clothing's in the river at the end of the mourning period; forced to have sexual intercourse with a stranger while bathing in the river; or feign having sex with an Iroko tree. The belief in these sexual exploits is that the action will finally separate her spirit from the spirit of her dead husband.
- After this period, in some cultures the woman is made to dive under a canoe in the river, making sure that her head does not touch the boat. Any slight mistake on her part earns her a broken skull or neck.
- Forced inheritance or levirate is another plight of the Nigerian widow. At the death of the man, the widow is given out in marriage to a brother (junior or senior), son

or other blood relations of the deceased husband. In some cases she is given a chance to choose a man in most cases she is not left with a choice. She then takes the turn of a junior wife to the existing wife (or wives) of her new household.

- The whole idea of widow inheritance or levirate marriage is based on the fact that under strict customary law, the death of one of the spouses does not necessarily dissolve a marriage whereas in many cultures, the death of the woman terminates the marriage. This is not so with the death of the man.
- In most instances in the death of the man, the relations drive the woman out of her home confiscating all the properties erroneously believed to have been acquired only by the man. Sometimes, she is left alone to fend for the children and begin from scratch. Some widows are deprived of inheriting from their deceased husbands simply because they could not bear male children as if the determination of sex of a child is dependent on the mother.
- Some cultures do not shave the hair of the widow but she is not allowed to either wash or comb her hair during mourning, which could last for a year resulting in dreadlocks (*dada*)
- In some cultures, the widow is expected to use a red piece of cloth at night as though she was using a sanitary pad during menstrual period. This they believe will prevent her late husband from making love to her while she is asleep.

- In contrast to the foregoing, the widower in some cultures is treated kindly because he is allowed to sleep at night between two women immediately after the wife's death or at least with one woman immediately after the wife's death or at least with one after the burial ceremony. A case of what is good for the goose is not good for the gander. (29–30)

It is against this background that the paper therefore x-rays and discusses these practices highlighting the implications of these practices and actions on the widow as captured in the world of the play under study.

SYNOPSIS OF ASEN'S *THE WOMAN IN BLACK*

The play discusses the issue of widow maltreatment and the consequences this breeds. Upon the death of Ochem, his family seizes all his property from his wife leaving her wretched and devastated. Beyond that, she is accused of being responsible for her husband's death. To prove this or otherwise, a ritual interrogation is prescribed by Ochem's family who insist that she masterminded her husband's untimely death. Because she is under the spot light of these obnoxious culture and tradition and being a loyal and faithful woman she undergoes the traditional inquiry. This campaign is masterminded by Enenche, her husband's brother who insists that she would not even see the corpse. As ridiculous as this sounds, the men are bent on carrying out their mischief. However, the women are mobilized by mama Iyabo to come together and collectively fight to stop this trend. The

playwright shows how women are usually treated with disdain; especially when they lose their spouse they are always made to pay and suffer untold hardships.

PLAY ANALYSIS

As canvassed earlier, widow maltreatment in Nigeria is an ugly and despicable practice that has assumed an alarming proportion prevalent in our social space. It has like a plague and canker worm eaten deep into the fabrics of our society. The barbaric and inhuman treatment meted on widows is a shameful and ugly portrayal of our culture and our collective identity as a people. It is an indictment of us, it shows how inhuman, backward and primitive we still are; the socio-cultural conditions in Nigeria are conducive to widow maltreatment.

That a woman loses her spouse is a great psychological trauma already; making her go through further torture as prescribed by many of our cultural practices is evil and unfortunate. What makes it even more worrisome is that no matter the exposure of the people involved, the cultural expectations are followed to the latter.

Our culture and tradition usually believes that women are always responsible for the death of their husbands thus should be punished severely. Sadly, these accusations are baseless and cannot be substantiated. For it derides common sense and logic that a woman will kill her own husband only to end up a widow.

In Asen's *The woman in Black*, it is glaring that the circumstances that led to Ochem's death were self inflicted. If

anyone should be blamed and punished, it should be Ochem himself not anyone else. But true to culture and stereotypical belief/premise that men do not die without their wives' diabolical involvement; Eneh the ever loyal, hardworking, loving and persevering wife is the prime suspect and scape goat.

As soon as Ochem dies the the 'blame game' begins. Without a proper medical investigation into what led to his death to forestall such untimely deaths in the village. Eneh is fingered as the prime cause. What will a wife benefit from killing her husband?

There is a deep seated animosity and suspicion between the widow and the spouse' family as manifested in the sour and frosty relationship that exists between a widow immediately she tragically attains that status. The way and manner that this plan is marshaled out gives one the impression that the plan is pre-meditated and is only waiting for an opportunity to be executed.

Immediately Ochem dies even before his wife leaves for his burial in the village a trap has been maliciously laid for her like land mines. Timi, Eneh's friend who breaks the news of Ochem's death give us insight of the looming Plot against Eneh.

TIMI: Enenche, Ochem's father's brother is leading a campaign that you are the cause of your husband's death and that one of your punishment should be that you will not be allowed to see the corpse. (The Woman in Black, 42).

This accusation is typical of most Nigerian societies where widow maltreatment is rife. Eneh expresses surprise at

this scandalous allegation. In her words, "I killed my husband, a man I loved dearly, what did I not endure in his hands and yet I remained with him?" (42)

One of her neighbours consoles her over her loss but is quick to remind her that her case is not an isolation but a usual occurrence against widows.

The widows who are most times powerless and are traumatized beyond measure get more distraught and frustrated as their tragedy is intensified by such wicked accusations. To prove this, a ritual probe and investigation is normally the next line of action. It is appalling and sad to note that this is the most excruciating and dehumanizing practice widows undergo while still grappling with the loss of their spouse.

In this play, a traditional priest is invited by the family to carry out the traditional inquest and ritual to prove Eneh's innocence or guilt. According to the priest, the first stage is that she has to drink some of the water that was used to wash the husband's body days after he had been buried and this has to be done in the shrine.

She refuses to drink the water because according to her the water has a bad odour but her resistance is feeble and subdued. It is our opinion that women in our society usually have no voice due to cultural and societal dictates where they are expected to succumb to cultural and societal dictates no matter how far reaching, inconveniencing and despicable. A woman who challenges or goes against traditional conventions is considered to have committed a sacrilege thus whatever custom prescribes, they adhere to religiously. Beside

cultural expectations, failure to comply with any of the ritual investigative process is considered as acceptance of guilt.

But in extreme and rare cases if the widow asserts herself and refuses to condescend to the whims and caprices of such obnoxious practices, she is not only considered guilty but often times ostracized by the family who will vow not to relate or interact with her; this to them is a justifiable excuse for neglect.

In the play, Mama Iyabo, Eneh's bosom friend and confidant typifies women who assert themselves taking a bold stand against this ugly tradition. She sees this not only as inhuman but also as a violation of her fundamental human rights hence her vehement and outright refusal to perform the ritual rites during her husband's demise. She declares unequivocally: "...God forbid that I daughter of Oluwoh should drink nauseating concoctions and be dragged from one shrine to the other" (6).

True to our earlier argument, she is left to her fate and neglected by her husband's family to bear the burden of raising up eight children all alone. She comments bitterly; "Abandoned like a sinking boat, I have to struggle alone. Yet when my husband was alive, we did not lack relations and friends...Have you not seen my gains since my husband died? Ashes for beauty, dishonor for respect, insult from younger males...my life's wounds are open for dogs to lick".(49)

At this juncture, it is imperative to note that her husband's family left her to her fate and abandoned her and her children just to punish her for having the effrontery to challenge custom and tradition. She throws more light in this regard. "The whole family declared me unfit to associate with because I refused to

under go the traditional rites to prove that I was not the cause of my husband's death." (16). For daring to challenge tradition she was declared a *personae non grata*.

We want to categorically state here that most of the ritual exercises carried out are very harmful to the physical, mental and psychological health of widows. Such ugly and bestial practices are appalling and detrimental to their well being.

Confiscating the deceased property and widow is another prominent form of widow maltreatment that is prevalent in many Nigerian cultures and societies. This is a clear case of wickedness and covetousness.

Mama Iyabo who is an experienced widow so to speak having gone through very bitter experiences during her husband's death gives some pieces of advice to Eneh on what to expect from her in-laws and how to tackle them.

Mama Iyabo: I came to give you some advice based on my experience. When my husband died, his relations came and carried away everything from the house. All my treasured marriage gifts from my family and the property I and my husband laboured hard to acquire were carried away. I was left penniless and had to start from the scratch with my children because even my husband's entitlement in his working place were claimed by his elder brothers". (42)

This is a familiar and common scenario in our societies today. Eneh is not surprised or taken aback by this disclosure since she is aware it is a common practice sanctioned by culture and society.

She replies thus: "I know that is the common occurrence. My neighbor lost her husband last month and already the

husband's cars and buildings have been taken away from her "(39).

Even if the property and assets are as a result of the collective effort of both couples, custom believes that they are the exclusive preserve of the man.

A whole lot of dubious and callous dimensions are usually introduced when a woman is widowed. The family of the deceased can go any length to torture, frustrate and humiliate the widow. Often times than not, it is a good opportunity for vengeance for real or imagined hurts inflicted on them by the widow while her husband was alive. Eneh tells Iyabo "The situation can be more terrible. When my mother's sister lost her husband, his relations claimed she was not married to the man."(39). clearly, we observe here that; the intent here is nothing but to punish and subject the widow to undue psychological trauma.

It beats our imagination as to the heartlessness and insensitivity of culture and the deceased family who start scrambling for his property immediately he dies. This leaves more to be desired as one wonders if they were patiently waiting for his death as they scavenge on his assets and property not minding if he has a will. It is our submission that not only is this inhuman but a criminal infringement on the rights of the widow and children. One of the people sent from the village for this dishonorable task in the play shamelessly remarks "we have been sent from the village to bring Ochem's belongings."(44) Mama Iyabo irked by this does not hide her disgust and anger as she queries: Could you not wait for her tears to fall first?(44). The confiscation of the entire assets and

property is similar to freezing the account of a company or an organization. The welfare of the immediate family is not put into consideration. Often times, no matter the wealth of the deceased; his death herald's untold hardship and deprivation for his family.

It is imperative to state that covetousness exist in different fronts viz; sexual, psychological and emotional. From the heated argument that ensued between the men over who to marry Eneh we discover that they all have a penchant for marrying widows; basking under the facade of culture as an alibi to perpetuate their in - ordinate sexual lust and desires.

CONCLUSION

This paper has looked at the issue of widow maltreatment as captured in Asen's *The woman in Black*. We wish to reiterate our earlier stance that widowhood practices as witnessed in Nigeria leaves serious health implications as well as indelible marks on the psyche of widows. Society and culture are usually prejudiced and have a stereotyped mentality against widows. Even after a widow is vindicated and does not die as expected, she remains a subject of community gossip and is treated with disdain and contempt. What could be more traumatizing than this?

THE WAY FORWARD

In other to checkmate and mitigate widowhood practices in Nigeria, this paper submits among other things:

1. That a holistic cultural and social re-orientation is needed by all and sundry to nip this ugly trend in the

bud. As such, there should be enlightenment campaigns to the general public in villages and towns alike discouraging and condemning all forms of widowhood practices that have proven inimical to widows' general wellbeing.

2. Women should be encouraged to know and exercise their fundamental human rights thus asserting themselves if need be and reject all forms of oppression, injustice and manipulation under the guise of culture and tradition.
3. Women pressure groups, human right groups, religious bodies etc should as a matter of urgency fashion out radical and proactive strategies aimed at ridding society of some of these obnoxious laws, beliefs, prejudices and stereotypes that encourage widow maltreatment.
4. Since this malaise is a deep rooted socio-cultural problem, a social re-engineering is urgently needed. All socio-cultural conditions that abet harmful and negative widowhood rites should be abolished through legislation.
5. Women should be encouraged to be financially independent. Their over dependence on men is a fundamental factor that makes women susceptible and vulnerable to untold hardship in the event of the death of their spouse.

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