

INTERROGATING OBNOXIOUS WIDOWHOOD PRACTICES AND THE SCAPEGOATING OF WOMENFOLK: UCHE AMA-ABRIEL'S *A PAST CAME CALLING* AS PARADIGM

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Abstract

*There is no gainsaying the fact that many cultures in Africa are imbued with one form of prejudice or the other against women. Widowhood practices which encapsulate the rites performed for a woman after the death of her husband as enshrined in the different cultures of Africa are among the prevailing prejudices that have consistently impinged on the dignity and rights of womenfolk. Whereas the concept of widowhood essentially emphasizes the state of being a widow or widower, in most cultures in Africa, widowhood practices have become the exclusive preserve for widows, with associated elaborate and often gruesome guiding regulations, and not for widowers for whom little or no mourning rites are prescribed. This unfortunate trend does not only dehumanize and subjugate women to untold and unimaginable predicaments, but also institutionalizes their plights in our various cultures, thus marking them out as both socially and culturally endangered species. Through qualitative research approach and critical textual analysis, therefore, the study interrogates widowhood practices and the scapegoating of womenfolk in various Nigerian cultures, using Uche Ama-Abriel's *A Past Came Calling* as Paradigm; and highlights the various dimensions of dehumanization and scapegoating to which women are subjected as a result of obnoxious widowhood practices. Hence, clutching tenaciously onto obnoxious widowhood practices which impede than facilitate meaningful rehabilitation of widows in our society and consistently portray us in a bad light is utterly unacceptable. The study is essentially envisioned as a timely clarion call for proper reorientation of the society's psyche on the obnoxious widowhood practices, at a time when the commitment of all sundry is diligently employed in galvanizing and engendering not only ethical and political, but also socio-cultural transformation in the nation. This reorientation of psyche, if properly imbibed, will not only engender the auspicious wellbeing of widows in their rehabilitation as individual members of the society, but also the wellbeing of the society at large, and the advancing of its development.*

Introduction

The fact that every enduring marriage ultimately ends with the death of either of the man or woman or even both cannot be overemphasized. However, the death of a spouse in itself may be the most extreme of life's crisis. The reason for this is not far-fetched; it naturally severs most of the deepest emotional bonds established in a lifetime. It cannot be gainsaid too that the impact of the death of a husband tends to be more overwhelming on the woman than on the man when he loses his wife. This, invariably, results from the enormous psychological trauma of such tragic a development on account of the harrowing experiences that await her as couched in widowhood rites, especially obnoxious widowhood rites. In the study of "Widowhood among the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria", Korieh explains these rites as sets of expectations regarding the actions and behaviour of the widow; including actions by others towards the widow; as well as the rituals performed by or on behalf of the widow from the time of the death of her husband. This has, therefore, formed a significant aspect of most of the cultures in Africa, including Nigeria. However, while it may be argued that some of these rites have their merits, which is also dependent on the very society involved; it is quite instructive to note at this inception that it is the obnoxious aspects of these rites that actually form the focus of the author in this paper as shall be unfolded in due course, especially with regards to the selected reference text.

Scapegoating: A Contextual Perspective

The term scapegoat commonly refers to a person who is *unfairly* blamed for problems or some sort of misfortune. Scapegoating, therefore, simply means the act of singling out of someone for undeserved negative treatment or blame as a scapegoat. The widow obviously is the scapegoat in the context of this study and she is scapegoated the very moment she starts receiving various degrees of taunting accusations, on losing her husband, from family members of her late husband, for having a hand in the death of their brother. Writing on "The Emotionally Disturbed Child as the Family Scapegoat" in 1960, Vogel and Bell, as relatively old as their study appear, have noted that the phenomenon of scapegoating is as old as human society. The scholars cite instances from James Frazer's records of public scapegoats from ancient times, both human and otherwise; where the phenomenon is seen as a process by which the evil influences of a society, tribe, village or town are embodied in a visible form or are at least supposed to be loaded upon a material medium, which acts as a vehicle to draw them off from the people. The Old Testament atonement ritual as recorded in Leviticus 16: 8-10, seen as the

origin of this act, corroborates Vogel and Bell's observation above as a goat used in the ritual was symbolically laden with the sins of the people and sent into the wilderness to be destroyed. Verse 26 of Leviticus is also careful to call the *medium* scapegoat (New Living Translation). Hence, the scapegoat, as obtained during this period, functions simply to effect a total clearance of all the ills that have been infesting the people. However, Leviticus' account of the act was a rather sacred injunction by God Almighty to absolve men of their depravity and sin and reconcile them back to himself, their Maker. Who then can question the authority of God Almighty? However, God also demonstrated his dynamic nature when such ritual was no longer necessary to fulfil its purpose, as he did not only have to jettison it but in fact abolished it to find for Himself a perfect alternative in Christ Jesus, to propitiate once and for all, for the sins of men.

Widowhood Rites and the Manifestations of the Act of Scapegoating of Womenfolk

The concept of widowhood as already stated emphasizes the state of being a widow or widower. However, in most cultures of Africa, widowhood practices have become the exclusive preserve for widows, with associated elaborate and often gruesome guiding regulations. Widowers on the other hand have become but sacred cows, for whom little or no mourning rites are prescribed when they lose their wives. Hence, these reactions, as Fasoranti and Aruna (1) affirm, are culturally determined, as each culture determines the rationality of practices regarding a given situation. Widowhood practices have therefore turned into a very unfortunate trend by which the womenfolk are not only dehumanized and subjugated to varying untold and unimaginable predicaments, but also a means by which their plights have become consistently institutionalized in our various cultures, thus marking them out as both socially and culturally endangered species. In the light of the above, and having explained scapegoating as the act of singling out of someone for undeserved negative treatment or blame as a scapegoat, and further identified the widow as the scapegoat here, it becomes necessary to examine the various dimensions by which womenfolk, as represented by the widow, are scapegoated through widowhood practices. These include:

- i. Accusations of involvement in their husbands' death
- ii. Being compelled to swear an oath to prove their innocence
- iii. Scrapping of the widow's hair

- iv. Being compelled to lie on the same bed with the corpse of the deceased
- v. Being compelled to drink the water that is washed out of the deceased's corpse
- vi. Banning from inheriting the dead man's property, and sometimes forced to go, especially when she has no male child
- vii. Being compelled to wail continually for a considerable period of time
- viii. Being required to eat from broken plates and cook with broken pots
- ix. Being forced at times to abide by the levirate tradition of being remarried by a relative of her late husband, among others.

As Chukwu-Okoronkwo notes:

One of the horrendous nightmares that may confront a woman at the death of her husband in various African cultures is the oftentimes scandalous accusation from the deceased husband's relations of having a hand in the man's death irrespective of how peaceful they might have lived, especially when the woman had not been in good relationship with them. (72)

The implication of the above is that the very moment a woman loses her husband, she starts receiving various degrees of taunting accusations from the family members of her late husband, for having a hand in the death of their brother. Yet, death is often known to result from a number of factors including diseases, illnesses, accidents, afflictions or attacks and of course old age; but it does appear as if these realities are not taken into consideration in dealing with the widow when death comes knocking. When such a situation arises, therefore, such a widow is oftentimes made to swear on a juju, lie on the same bed with the corpse of her late husband or even be subjected to drink the water that is washed out of the husband's corpse, as "unhygienic" as this appears, or the scrapping off of her hair during this period (Kunhiyop 261). Other actions in line with the above experience as Fasoranti and Aruna reveal include barring the widow from sitting on anything that may afford her any form of comfort; thus compelling her to sit on bare floor or a mat at best but definitely not on a stool or a bed (68). In some Yoruba communities, as the researchers further reveal, the widow is expected to eat from broken plates and cook with broken pots, though the practice is not exclusive to Yoruba communities alone; and all these actions are taken in a bid to make the woman prove her innocence. In addition, the reality of the mandatory expectation from the

widow to continually wail at the death of her husband is common in most cultures of Africa, with the duration of such wailing marking the only significant variation. At times too, such widows and even their children are deprived of enjoying their husbands'/fathers' properties and inheritance as in-laws and relatives of the deceased take over such properties and inheritance; worst still, if she has no male child. The widow's dressing pattern is also affected during this period as she is not expected to wear what she would ordinarily like to wear. She is expected to wear a pensive look besides being clad in black attire when she appears in public; and in some places, she is degenerated to wearing what would pass for rags. However, there are more far-reaching effects of these dehumanizing acts on the widow both physically and psychologically which she may never really overcome or outlive. Society, therefore, owes this set of particularly disadvantaged group of women a great deal of compassion in order to enable them to cope with the situation they find themselves rather than do anything that would exacerbate their situation.

A critical consideration of the foregoing only reinforces the sheer negation of the common principle of justice by this act of scapegoating of women through obnoxious widowhood rites. What then is this justice? It is simply considered as fairness in the way people are dealt with. Rawls, in his *A Theory of Justice*, sees justice as what should be the first virtue of social institutions, just as truth in relation to systems of thought. He maintains that "a theory however elegant and economical must be rejected or revised if it is untrue; likewise, laws and institutions no matter how efficient and well-arranged must be reformed or abolished if they are unjust" (3). Rawls apparently demonstrates his conscious understanding of God's heartbeat as traced in the earlier historic account of scapegoating mentioned above. His position here is unequivocally apt to the 'institution' of the obnoxious widowhood rites in the way they had made scapegoats of widows in the society. Temisan's dilemma in *A Past...* evidently portrays this reality; and she is not oblivious of it. Under the horrendous pressure of the weight of her in-laws' accusations and maltreatment in the face of their brother's (Temisan's husband) rather sudden death, she agonizingly queries her late husband whom she feels has abandoned her to her fate: "Were our fates reversed, would my people have made you go through what your people made me go through? (*A Past...* 49). The paper's philosophic stance, therefore, which is anchored on Rawls belief that "each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override" (3), is that the liberties of equal citizenship in a just society are not negotiable. After all, what is good for the goose is also good for the gander as

the English adage says. If it was necessary for society to approve the option of a substitution to comfort a man and douse the impact of the grief of her wife's bereavement; rather than hatred, malice, suspicions, condemnation, neglect and all sorts of inhuman treatment and ostracism which widows usually experience in the name of culture at the death of their husbands, there is a need for care and affection from society to them in order to cope with the tragedy in which they already find themselves.

Widowhood Practices and the Complicity of Womenfolk against Themselves

The reality of the complicity of womenfolk against themselves on issues relating to widowhood practices and the way they have been scapegoated all along cannot be overemphasized. This may have prompted the very salient observation from Emery that "women do not have a unity of interests", which thus predisposes them to being "complicit in practices that are harmful to other women" (27). In his paper, "Breaking the Yoke of Patriarchy," Oyeweso further corroborates Emery's observation above with the report that some analysts posit that women are their own worst enemies. In the light of the above, it is quite unimaginable how society has so warped the consciousness of womenfolk against themselves by the instrumentality of the *Umuadas*, through whom the ordeals associated with widowhood practices are mostly perpetrated. The irony, however, according to Chukwu-Okoronkwo, is that these women who spearhead the administration of these obnoxious widowhood practices are themselves women and perhaps potential widows, who will in turn be subjected to such rituals (71-76). Although these women gain such position of power to do what they do by their position as supposed custodians of culture, Emery thinks it is imperative to work towards transforming how these women conceptualize their powers as to condition them towards investing such powers in finding less harmful widowhood practices that nonetheless maintain their symbolic function in our culture.

Interrogating Widowhood Practices and the Scapegoating of Womenfolk: A Past Came Calling as Paradigm

There is no gainsaying the fact that widowhood practices which encapsulate the rites performed for a woman after the death of her husband as enshrined in our different cultures in Africa are among the prevailing prejudices that have consistently impinged on the dignity and rights of womenfolk. Widowhood, as defined by *BBC English Dictionary*, is the state of being a widow or widower. It could, therefore, be interpreted as the state of mourning the loss of one's

husband or wife by death. In most cultures in Africa, however, widowhood practices have turned out the exclusive preserve for widows with accompanying elaborate and often gruesome guiding regulations, and not for widowers for whom little or no mourning rites are prescribed. This section of the study, therefore, uses Uche Ama-Abriel's *A Past Came Calling* as paradigm, to interrogate widowhood practices and the scapegoating of womenfolk in our various cultures.

Synopsis of *A Past Came Calling*

A Past Came Calling re-enacts the emotion-ridden and tension-soaked confrontation between mother and daughter – Temisan and Rosemary. Both are circumstantial victims, severely damaged by unhealed wounds from their past-wounds that perhaps could never heal again, as primarily triggered by the unbearable pressure from a custom-sanctioned experience in which Temisan found herself. The experience is that of the retrogressive barbaric mourning tradition of her late husband's people – the culture of widowhood rites – which she must perform to absolve herself of the accusation of causing the death of her husband who had passed on in his sleep. This is against the belief that it is only a man whose wife is a witch, or whose wife sleeps with another, that would pass away in such manner. Dispossessed of every single property they had acquired during their union, Temisan is thus consistently hounded in such nerve chilling ordeals to publicly confess to killing her husband by his relatives.

However, her elasticity of endurance soon becomes over-stretched, as she flees in the dead of this particular night, with her 6 months old baby, just two days before another ordeal of the “verdict of the dead” – a process of some inexplicable demonic means whereby a corpse is made to rise up in search of the one thought responsible for its death. She is not ready to hang on and watch them do such thing to her late husband. Nonetheless, the burden of the innocent child strapped to her back as she flees becomes even more horrible and hounding on her as it relives in her every memory of her husband's family members' monstrous images. She has to make a clean break by shedding everything that connected her to them. So does she abandon her innocent child, without the least thought of what would befall her in the numbed state she, as the mother, found herself. Such is the circumstance in which mother and daughter are caught up in a vicious circle triggered off by cultural obligation.

When grown Rosemary, Temisan's abandoned daughter, eventually confronts her with the reality of the whole situation, she can only confess that

for the wicked, retrogressive and barbaric mourning tradition of her husband's people, she would never have gotten to that brink of insanity that propelled her to that senseless reaction that woeful night. With Rosemary's sordid experience in the play, therefore, a symbol of ruin of the result of that singular act of abandonment: raped, abused, decadent and infected by the AIDS scourge, it is only obvious that there are far more implications to the issue of widowhood practices than could just be imagined.

Widowhood Practices and the Manifestations of Scapegoating of Womenfolk in *A Past Came Calling*

A gender-analytical interpretation of the status of widows and the related problems encountered by widows in contemporary Nigeria society only reveals how age-long patriarchal social structure functions to oppress widows – a particularly disadvantaged group of women. Otherwise, why would a woman immediately become a primary suspect for her husband's death, as portrayed in *A Past...* for no just reason despite the trauma of her unfortunate experience?

In rueful reflection, Temisan informs her daughter, Rosemary, how rosy their marriage had been before her husband's death:

Temisan: Ours was the yardstick with which happy marriages were measured... Never a cloudy day... It was too good to last. (7 – 8)

However,

Temisan: Like a bolt out of the blues, the cold merciless hands of death descended one night and snatched my knight away. I was numb with shock. (8)

One is only left to wonder how such avowed rosy marriage relationship would suddenly turn into such scandalous suspicion of 'murder' at the death of one partner – the husband at this instance. What an irony? Temisan's numbing shock is only a prelude to the series of worst ordeals that await her. She further discloses to Rosemary:

Temisan: Like a pack of wolves, my furious in-laws descended on me. I had killed the goose that laid the golden egg and so, pay I must.

Rosemary: It was a natural death, wasn't it?
Temisan: No one would believe that. Only a man whose wife is a witch, or whose wife sleeps with another would pass away in his sleep. From dusk to dawn, I was hounded to confess to killing my husband, so his wandering spirit would find its way back to the world of the gods. Every inhuman treatment imaginable was meted out to me. Every single property we acquired during our union was "inherited" by his brothers a week after his death. (8)

Temisan's traumatic experience does not stop at that: (...*covered in ashes. Her hands, blackened with layers of dirt. Totally alone in her solitude and misery, head on her palm, face tear stricken, she gazes listlessly into nothingness...Very forcefully, the door swings open. Two men and two women rush in. The men are armed with whips. One of the women bears a large cup and the other holds a twine. Pouncing on her, they drag her around the room, screaming and begging*). (9 – 10)

FEMALE 1: (*Slapping her*) As we bury my brother, so your peace will be buried.

OTHERS: Amen!

FEMALE 2: His restless spirit will haunt every male in your family and cut them short in their prime.

OTHERS: Amen!

MALE 2: (*Spits on her*) Say amen!

FEMALE: (*Grabbing her ear and twisting it*) Stubborn witch, confess or die! (*The men attack her with blows, legs, and whips...*)

MALE 1: My brother did not die a natural death.

FEMALE 1: Your harlotry sent him to an early grave.

FEMALE 2: Husband killer!

FEMALE 1 & 2: Witch! Witch! Witch!

FEMALE 1: Mourn! Mourn the man whose life you cut short...

ALL FOUR TORMENTORS: Louder witch! Louder!
Mourn, mourn your husband!

FEMALE 1: You loved him, didn't you? Prove it then,
drink the bath water of your husband's
decaying body. (11)

Therefore: (*Ranting and raving all the while, one of the men grabs her legs and pins her to the floor. The others grab her hand and twist them to the back... the woman with the cup beckons to the other who immediately descends on Temisan and tries to pry her mouth open. Like one possessed of the devil, Temisan struggles to escape them and keep her mouth shut. She fails. Gulping and coughing, she downs the bath water of her husband's corpse. Their faces aglow with sheer satisfaction, they shower more blows, and insults on the helpless woman even as she wrenches her guts out in her desperate bid to rid her stomach of it's[sic] disgusting content*). (13 – 14)

What a cruelty? The big question is, does Temisan really deserve all that treatment for losing her husband? Where actually did she go wrong? What was it that she was supposed to do that she did not do? Could she actually have pulled back the hand of the clock on her husband's death that fateful night?

When Rosemary, contemplating on such monstrous treatment that is meted to her mother, seeks to know if her father's death was not natural, Temisan's response is quite unequivocal: "No one would believe that" (8). Reason! ... the outrageous belief that: "Only a man whose wife is a witch, or whose wife sleeps with another would pass away in his sleep" (8). Hence, all the imaginable inhuman treatment – dehumanizing, degrading and mind bending – meted out to Temisan on account of the death of her husband, even the dispossession from her of every single property they had acquired together during their union just a week after his death, all in the name of the tradition of widowhood practice, when all she just needed was love, support, protection, or even pity, amounts to nothing but sheer overwhelming scapegoating of the woman. How apt this is portrayed in these mind blowing interrogations by Temisan to her dead husband!

Temisan: Were you watching from the side line as
your people accused me of killing you and
made minced meat of me? ... for something
I knew nothing about... (48 – 49)

Wait a second...Were our fates reversed,
would my people have made you go through
what your people made me go through? (49)

Again, Temisan's answer to the latter inquiry is unequivocal:

Certainly not. (49)

The reality of the crux of the matter from the above scenario only reinforces as earlier observed how age-long patriarchal social structure functions to oppress widows. Ahonsi sees this structure as invariably promoting "male domination and female subordination" (qtd. in Awuor 10). Ordinarily, if it was the man that had lost his wife, frantic efforts would immediately follow to offer him a substitution to comfort him and douse the impact of the grief of such a bereavement.

Temisan captures the sheer injustice of the above scenario in this manner:

Temisan: (*Voice dripping with sarcasm*) Men should
 be treated with kid's gloves. (49)

Therefore, the reality of the situation in which widows find themselves as represented in *A Past...*, and in the light of this discourse, aptly illustrates gender inequality. Hence, widows are maltreated, disempowered and exposed to other forms of injustices not meted on widowers. Consequently, the death of a husband which is a natural phenomenon and a devastating natural tragedy as portrayed in *A Past...*, has been turned into an agonizing and dehumanizing cultural tragedy for Temisan.

The Need for Reorientation

In the light of the foregoing manifestations of scapegoating of womenfolk as portrayed in *A Past...*, there is the need for a reorientation of the society's psyche on the obnoxious widowhood practices. It is high time the society stopped clutching passionately onto obnoxious widowhood practices which, as Chukwu-Okoronkwo opines, rather portray Africans as barbaric and uncivilized "in an age of vast sociocultural advancement" (75). This is largely because generations of intimidated women have not only continued to suffer but also died in silence and sent to their untimely graves by cultural and

traditional injustices (Okoye 240). Hence, rather than hatred, malice, suspicions, condemnation, neglect and all sorts of inhuman treatment and ostracism which widows usually experience in the name of culture or tradition, Babangida aptly captures the heartbeat of this study with her passionate caution that the widow “needs every care and affection from society” to be able to cope with the tragedy of the loss of her husband (7).

Conclusion

Unarguably, this study has critically examined widowhood practices and the scapegoating of womenfolk in various cultures, using Uche Ama-Abriel’s *A Past Came Calling* as paradigm. The study strongly believes that African cultures should be dynamic; and dynamic enough to actually serve its dynamic role to improve the common good. Hence, clutching tenaciously onto obnoxious widowhood practices which impede than facilitate meaningful rehabilitation of widows in the society and consistently portray Africa in a bad light is utterly unacceptable. There is a need to consistently organize public-enlightenment campaigns on the negative effects of obnoxious widowhood practices and the need for their complete eradication. Government and non-governmental organizations are enjoined to carry out massive education of women on both their human and legal rights, especially in the rural communities, as education portends a veritable instrument of bringing about change to obnoxious widowhood practices. Women on their own part are enjoined to shake off the social construct which has consistently conditioned and predisposed them to believe that passivity, abnegation and submissiveness, even in the face of injustice, are the true mark of femininity. They must wake up from their age-long cultural slumber and reject all forms of cultural and traditional injustices.

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