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WIDOWHOOD AND THE DYNAMICS OF SURVIVAL IN SELECTED STORIES IN IFEOMA OKOYE'S *THE TRIALS AND OTHER STORIES*

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Abstract

The paper interrogates widowhood with its attendant ethos, and some mechanisms widows could evolve to survive the rites and the aftermath. The paper notes that in most African societies, women dread widowhood not because of the pain and trauma of losing a beloved one, but the humiliating and dehumanising widowhood practices and other manifestations of violation of women's fundamental human rights. These self-effacing and agonising practices have been seen as a patriarchal conspiracy aimed at relegating the woman, and call into question why widowers are not subjected to the same humiliating and demeaning cultural expectations. It is against this backdrop that the paper examines widowhood practices and the strategies widows should adopt to demystify their ordeals. Through a textual extrapolation of Ifeoma Okoye's The Trials and Other Stories, the paper establishes that widowhood practices are damaging to the feminine psyche and in such circumstances, widows should evolve strategies to question the traditional inequities that reinforce their limitations and humiliation. The paper concludes that the crises and conflicts rocking most African families and societies may assume uncontrollable proportions if some of the negative traditional norms against women, such as widowhood rites, are not reconciled.

Keywords: widowhood, widow, tradition, patriarchy, survival

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Introduction

Widowhood as a construct encompasses both widows and widowers. It is a condition where a man or woman loses his or her spouse through death. In most African societies, when the wife predeceases the husband, the society does not condemn the man if he decides to remarry almost immediately, especially if they had no children together. It is also normal for him to keep intimate relationships with other women even before the late wife is buried. However, if the reverse is the case and the woman's husband dies, the society will hurriedly invoke an erroneous and misleading superstitious belief that a man does not die a natural death. On almost all occasions, the wife is held responsible. And to absolve herself from the allegation, she has to accept to be subjected to a whole gamut of obnoxious widowhood rites aimed at making her die within the mourning period of about one year (Acholonu 97). In other words, "she is indirectly asked why she should survive the man" (Orabueze 111). It is against this traumatic and dehumanising experience that many women dread widowhood. The fact that widowers are not subjected to the same acts or practices attests that the society belongs to men. Women, on the other hand, are compelled or culturally legislated to bear the brunt of this patriarchal conspiracy. Marie-Antoinette Sossou further expatiates:

> The behaviour surrounding mourning is inherently gendered. Rituals are more to do with exalting the position of the dead man than allowing a real outlet for the widow's grief. Women are supposed to grieve openly and to demonstrate the intensity of their feelings in formalised [sic] ways. Far more restrictions are placed on a widow than on the widower. It is widows, not widowers, who must endure the most humiliating rituals in relation, for example, dress codes, eating, personal hygiene and sexual activity. (293)

Sossou's comment is revealing and echoes Mabel Segun's assertion that "the disparity surrounding the sexes is neither a biological given nor a divine mandate but a cultural construct"(301), and, therefore, charges women writers to rise up and "deconstruct gender and the social paradigms that support it" (301).

Christine Ohale is of the view that "the root cause of the problem stems from society's low perception of women as a whole, as women have no right to anything" (3). In addition to the harrowing experience and traumatic pains occasioned by the loss of a husband, a widow is subjected to the most demeaning form of widowhood rites. She is expected to dress in black and have her hair shaved off. According to Maria Umeh, "the act is calculated to make the woman feel ugly. It symbolises the loss of one's beauty; this is to discourage the widow from attracting men" (120). Hannah Edemikpong echoes Umeh when she reveals that "if a widow is seen secretly attempting to attend to her personal hygiene, she might be whipped, spat upon or reprimanded that she is attempting to beautify herself so as to attract men" (4). Buchi Emecheta in *The Bride Price* (1976) clinically describes the tactlessness with which the widow is told of the demise of her husband in the following extract: "Before Ma Blackie could guess that her husband was dead, she was stripped of her clothes and given an older, torn set to put on. A place on the cement floor was cleared for her to sit and cry and mourn for her dead husband" (13). A widow is also made to cry and wail openly, throwing herself to the ground to prove her love for the husband.

In many African communities, the widow is forced to drink the water used in bathing the corpse of the husband. And finally she is dispossessed of every property belonging to the husband, not minding how they were acquired. The worst scenario occurs when the widow is childless or gave birth to females only. This underscores Orabueze's assertion that "the only way a married woman can inherit landed property in the late husband's place…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). Akachi Ezeigbo's protagonist Amara, in *Children of the Eagle* (2005), soliloquises on what could have been their fate if Nkemdiri, the only male child was not there:

> 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 through our father. (14)

This underscores why the inability of a woman to give birth to male children is viewed as a failure of tragic dimensions, as if she is responsible for determining the sexes of the children.

The most traumatic and repulsive aspects of the practice is the levirate tradition where the widow is forcefully inherited by the husband's brother or other relation, in the guise of protecting the woman and her children from starvation. In fact, the widow is seen as one of the properties of the husband to be shared among the relations. If she refuses, she and her children will be left to die in penury, and if she dares to remarry outside the family, she could stand the chance of losing everything including the children. When confronted with this kind of situation, some widows are forced into homelessness and prostitution in order to survive. Kate Millet puts this poignantly when she avers that "patriarchal culture is resolute as a system of power relationships, 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).

Against this backdrop, African female writers have churned out a number of literary works to expose the evils and contradictions plaguing widowhood, thereby raising the consciousness of their women to the depth of injustices meted on them by patriarchy. In addition to being on the side of women, women writers have put their creative vision into projecting the plight of widows and condemning in strong terms the obnoxious and discriminatory burial rites that turn widows to mere foot mats for the men. In their texts across genre, African female writers like Mariama Ba, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Ifeoma Okoye, Akachi-Adimora Ezeigbo and others have explored adequately the realities of these barbaric practices. They do not only expose the injustices against women, they also weave a thread of hope for them by giving them voice and the choice to reject the debilitating tradition.

Literary works on widowhood practices have also attracted serious critical attention. African critics have severally interrogated the institution of widowhood and many seem to have agreed that widowhood, in the words of Pat Okoye, is "the scourge of widows" (14). Going further, E. D Simon and M.I Obeten take a swipe at everything widowhood represents in African societies and see it as an invention of patriarchy to keep the women perpetually subjugated (260-66). Christine Ohale agrees that the root

cause of the widow's ordeal stems from the society's low perception of women as a whole… (3), and sees this as a task on writers to bring to limelight this injustice against women.

However, these situations do not only expose the demeaning practice and its effects on women, they go further to sensitize the widows to muster a formidable voice to speak out against inimical widowhood rites, even if it means taking the law into their hands in order to burst this patriarchal conspiracy aimed at perpetually subjugating them. This position echoes Ifeoma Okoye's comment that women "solving their problems by themselves, if they can, will increase their self-confidence and self-esteem and will help them maintain their dignity" (*The Trials* 2). Through textual analysis of select stories from Ifeoma Okoye's *The Trials and Other Stories*, this paper totally aligns with the vision of Okoye that widows should always think of what to do to help themselves in the face of injustice against them, instead of passively acquiescing to the whims and caprices of patriarchal audacity.

Widows, Widowhood Practices and the Dynamics of Survival

In *The Trials and Other Stories*, Okoye succinctly lays bare the evils and cruelty patriarchy metes out to widows in the name of widowhood rites. She does not only expose this evil, but, as stated earlier, weaves a thread of hope by providing them voice and choices with which to contend the situation. Thus in this collection, all the stories have widows as heroines who strongly resist the antics of patriarchy to browbeat them into perpetual subjugation. Okoye's delineation of characters agrees with her cardinal motivation for writing the stories: "I have written the stories to show that widows can do something by themselves to solve some of their problems. They may seek help only if and when they need it" (2). Laced with suspense, the stories project a new dawn for women and widows, and also empowers them to maximise choices that will enable them speak out against their exploitation.

The Trials and Other Stories structurally contains eleven heart-rending stories of young widows who refuse to be coerced into accepting retrogressive cultural norms, turning what seems to be defeat into victory. The first story is entitled "Soul Healers" and here the heroine, Somadi is accused of killing her husband and, expectedly, is dispossessed of everything by her in-laws immediately after the burial. She is also given an injunction never to set her eyes on her two children again. In all these, it is her sister-in-law Martha, who spearheads the planning and execution of Somadi's ordeal: "Martha was her husband's elder sister. She had supported the idea of taking Ada and KC away from her and had offered to look after them in addition to her own six children. Martha and her siblings had accused her of causing the death of their brother by leaving him. They had taken Ada and KC to punish her" (*The Trials* 9). Martha's action reaffairms Helen Chukwuma's position when she avers that "women constitute institutional and individual cogs in the wheel of marriage as well as funeral rites" (50).

Following the injunction, Martha volunteers to take care of the children, but Somadi occasionally sends money and gift items for their upkeep. However, anytime money and other material items are sent, Martha will share it among her own children, leaving Ada and KC to roam in rags. "She remembered how much money she had sent to Martha through her friend Azu for Ada and KC'S upkeep and how her children had starved all the same. She had sent clothes-dresses, shorts, shirts, pants-but her

children had walked about in rags" (*The Trials* 11). This highlights the dangers of fosterage in the African society, and underscores the fact that the welfare of children can never be guaranteed outside the care of biological parents. The popular Yoruba adage puts it succinctly: "Only another man's son can be sent on an errand with the instructions to return unfailingly, even if it is the dead of the night." Besides this, denying Somadi access to her children amounts to a gross violation of the woman's fundamental rights and an indictment on the society which views women as "other" (Simon and Obeten 260).

Feeling completely lonely and finding it difficult to live without her children, Somadi defies the oppressive tradition and forcefully take her children from her in-laws. "She blamed herself for obeying her husband's relatives' injunction not to see her own children. She blamed herself for abandoning her own children in the face of intimidation" (*The Trials* 11). Somadi's sensitivity here signals a revolt by women against the inhumane customs that demean them and also collaborates Okoye's vision that women should avail themselves of the alternative choices available to them and reject any obnoxious practices that erode their dignity. By resolving to take back her children, Somadi bursts the barriers of subjugation and nihilism and turns her back on oppressive tradition.

The oppressive ordering of society where female dignity, feelings, honour and individualism count for nothing in the face of male chauvinism and societal norms (Chukwuma 45), is also demonstrated in another story entitled "Second Chance." In this story, Ogoli, a young, beautiful and intelligent widow, is prevented from marrying outside the extended family lineage of her late husband. When she insists on the marriage, Agu, her late husband's uncle, insists that her children cannot be raised outside their *Umunna,* which implies that the children will be taken from her. With a mark of finality, he says:

> You won't be taking our children along with you when you remarry…the children are ours and I must make sure you don't take them along with you to your new husband. If it means taking the children from you by force, I'll not hesitate to do it. The children belong to our family under our customary laws and our customary court uphold these laws…I don't think you will let the matter reach the stage of going to court. If you do, I assure you, you'll lose the case." (*The Trials* 74-75)

The major reason for denying Ogoli the right to raise her children outside the husband's extended family is because "the children belong to Anachuna family. We won't let another man bring them up for us, especially the boy who will continue the father's line (75). According to Umeh, "the myth of male supremacy and female inferiority is employed here to maintain the desired social behaviour in women, that is, obedience to authority. In Ogoli's case, tradition is invoked to perpetuate patriarchal power over women in the interest of men" (47).

In African society, the centrality of children cannot be overemphasised. Independent and educated widows, in addition to seeking their own freedom, want to take charge of their children too. This informs why Ogoli asks questions that look more like a revolt: "Why shouldn't I take my children with me? (*The Trials* 74). She protests further: "I can't leave my children behind if I remarry….The customs were wicked. They discriminated against widows and the children of widows. The children had already been traumatised by the death of their father. The customs could cause

them to lose their mother as well" (74). Okoye's message here is very clear. Widows are also human beings and they have the right to remarry. This is why they must speak out when their rights and wellbeing are threatened. Acquiescing passively to an oppressive tradition will continually plunge them into a pitiable abyss. According to Chukwuma, "In a world of diversities and choice, a woman ultimately has to stand up and make a choice and her success and failure in that choice lies in her" (49).

In some African communities, levirate marriage has been a thorn in the flesh of widows. Mariama Ba adequately interrogates this phenomenon in her novel, *So Long a Letter*. In the narrative, Ramatoulaye finds Tasmir, her brother in-law's proposal to inherit her as demeaning and offensive, as she declares: "I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand…I shall never be the one to complete your collection" (*So Long* 58). According to Simon and Obeten, "She thus breaks her long years of silence and speaks against patriarchal injustice and conflicts in her life" (263). This is antipodal to Ogundipe-Leslie's remark that once a woman is married "she becomes a possession, voiceless and even rightless in her husband's family, except for what accrues to her through her children" (68). Also, Idu in Flora Nwapa's *Idu* chooses to die rather than be inherited by Adiewere's stupid brother.

The above tradition is also adequately treated in Okoye's "Strange Disease." In the story, after going through the debilitating widowhood rites, Enu is stripped of the farmlands she tries to secure for her three sons by her greedy and overbearing brother in-law, Onumba. Beside this, Onumba desperately desires to marry her in addition to his two wives. His primary reason for desiring Enu is to acquire the wealth of her husband. Thus, he visits Enu every night and must eat whatever she cooks. Onumba is egoistic, overbearing and selfish, and this is seen in the way he addresses Enu: "That foo-foo is taking you ages to cook. I hope you have enough of it to fill these valleys in my body. …I hope there's enough dry fish in that soup" (*The Trials* 28). Yet this is a man who cannot even provide for his two wives.

Enu does not possess the courage to tell him that she does not want to marry him because Onumba is wicked and he does not take 'no' for an answer. In her wisdom, she devises a smart and unconventional way of turning his request down without spiting him. She pretends she is suffering from a deadly disease. According to Regina Okafor, "Enu cleverly spots her lower part of the body with 'white out' or 'correction fluid', strips naked before Onumba and shows him the white spots. Beset with the fear of contacting the strange disease, Onumba flees from Enu's house never to return either for the 'onugbu' soup or for marriage" (82). By rejecting levirate, Enu 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 (Acholonu 13).

The height of the humiliation meted out to a widow is the forceful insistence that she drinks the water with which the corpse of her late husband is washed. This is adequately interrogated in the title story "The Trials." In this compelling story, Anayo's husband, Zimuso dies, and as is expected, she is accused by her brother in-law, Ezeji, of being responsible. To prove her innocence, the Umuada, led by "Eletty," insists she drinks the water used in bathing the corpse. Pat Okoye reveals that "Umuada are known for being difficult to please and easily provoked….They can be quite demanding, especially during burial ceremonies. Once they have passed

judgement or taken a decision on an issue, they do not relent; any infringement on their decisions has serious consequences and can be lethal" (28). One wonders why women should allow themselves to be used as instruments in the hands of the men to perpetrate evil against other women. Anayo sees this as a serious betrayal on the part of women: "We should be sticking together. It could be one of you next time. We shouldn't let men use us to police ourselves" (*The Trials* 48)

Throughout the story, Okoye shows how patriarchy and tradition have broken the ranks of women, who are supposed to synergise and fight those traditional practices initiated by the patriarchal society to undermine their dignity. In this story, even the educated members of Umuada, like Tope and Oluchi, lose their tongues during Anayo's trial. Anayo's remarks about Tope may be the reason Charles Nnolim may have described feminism as "a house divided against itself." "Even our prating lecturer Tope lost her tongue…tomorrow she'll begin again to talk about feminism and her brilliant conference papers" (*The Trials* 49). Oluchi, Anayo's bosom friend's opinion on the trial is that "it is not easy to challenge tradition" (49). This defeatist stance of even the educated women buttresses Chukwuma's assertion that for some women " …the fear of not belonging, of going against the status quo keeps them quiet, caged in their bitterness and resentment, it takes guts and courage to assert yourself in a society that subjugates you" (52). It is against Chukwuma's assertion that Okoye writes to wake up women from their habitual inertia, by giving them voice and choices to challenge the oppressive tradition. Anayo's overt condemnation of the barbaric tradition and determination not to go through the evil widowhood practices, against the wish of the Umuada and the patriarchy, signals a new dawn for the widows and their outright rejection of a stifling culture. She vehemently tells the Umuada "I will not submit myself to such a trial" (48) and there she stands.

In "Between Women," Okoye comes down very hard on women who are instruments through which widows are oppressed. Like Okoye, Lesli-Ogundipe contends that "women become their own worst enemies and the worst enemies of other women in their effort to please men" (79). Chukwuma also reasons like the above when she asserts that "…it is the women who lend an edge to the maltreatment and subjugation of their fellow women by men" (44). In the story, Ebuka, a widow from a poor family, has to take a menial job in order to fend for her only daughter, Amara. Unlike other stories, Ebuka's albatross is not the usual greedy relatives of the late husband, but Mrs. Edet her employer. Mrs. Edet reduces her to a slave by making her work every day in a week for a meagre salary. Mrs Edet is also temperamental and will vent her anger on Ebuka at the slightest opportunity, especially when she fights with her husband. Ebuka is not allowed to visit and be visited by any relative and, for two years, she has not been allowed, despite many attempts, to visit her five-year-old daughter.

Despite this, Ebuka is hardworking, submissive, docile and very kind to Mrs. Edet's children. The turning point in her miserable life comes when Dorcas unexpectedly visits with the news that Amara is sick and has been hospitalised. Ebuka approaches Mrs Edet and asks to be allowed to travel so she could attend to her sick daughter. Her request is turned down because she has to be around to cook for visitors at the weekend. Okafor in her critique of the story avers: "For once, the employee jettisons the cloak of docility and submissiveness and bravely puts on that defiance,

courage and determination and walks out on Mrs. Edet and her claustrophobic house to nurse her sick child" (82). Okoye's message is that the major obstruction on the path of widow's assertiveness is passive lament, a passivity that astounds even the sufferers themselves (Chukwuma 51). Irrespective of any condition, a widow should see her fate as hers alone, likewise her choices in life.

Sometimes, widows are driven into prostitution and begging because everything they jointly owned with their late husbands has completely been stripped off them by greedy relatives of the husband. The matter becomes worse if a widow comes from a poor family, as in the case of Ebele in "The Voiceless Victim." Widowed at the age of 18 with two children, and practically no education or basic skills, Ebele resorts to begging in order to feed herself and her children. She approaches a NITEL officer, who has been watching her struggling for a space with another beggar, for alms, but the official advises her to find a job instead of begging. This statement suddenly wakes in her some courage and determination to look for a job. Ebele trails the NITEL official to her office and after listening to the pathetic story of this young widow, the official regrets being harsh on her before now and offers her a job instantly. Okoye's message here is that instead of being a cog in the wheel of another woman's path to self-actualisation, women should always do all they can to help other women in such circumstances. The author is simply insinuating metaphorically that women should also be ready to exploit available choices that will lead to their liberation, and not passively acquiesce to the undignified position widowhood and patriarchy have placed on them. This is demonstrated in the boldness and determination of Ebele to find a job and quit begging.

In "Daughter for Sale," Okoye explores a tradition where the female children of the widow are seen as articles for sale and are married off to the highest bidders by greedy relatives, and kept out of the privy of the mother, even when they have not contributed anything in the upkeep of these children. In the story, Mata, whose dream of becoming a seamstress is aborted by her father who 'sells' her to a man in the name of marriage, is now widowed and left with four children: two boys and girls. At a point, the two boys die leaving only the daughters. Uko, her greedy brother-in-law, who is also the only surviving male figure in the family, marries the eldest daughter off demanding for a very expensive bride price without informing Mata.

Following this, Mata vows not to allow Uko 'sell' her second daughter as he did the first. This time, she even threatens to kill him if he tries it. "Now listen and listen carefully, Uko. I am going to disrupt the bargaining this evening. I am going to chase everybody away with an axe. And let me tell you this, anyone who tries to stop me will be a dead person" (*The Trials* 87). Following this threat, Uko is gripped with fear and runs inside his house, as Mata keeps raining insults on him. According to Okafor, "Mata's effrontery, determination, and bravery have won her victory, respect and dignity both for herself and her daughter who is not sold like a commodity. The authorial voice discourages high bride price and encourages mothers to be involved in their daughters' marriages" (85). Through Mata's action, Okoye seems to aver that widows should not be unnecessarily docile and a kind of appendage to men, but should be ready to take the bull by the horns to seek redress for injustices committed against them.

Conclusion

Ifeoma Okoye, in this short stories collection, has shown enormous commitment and boldness in projecting the plight of widows in a male dominated society that views women as vermin. She dramatises the humiliation and trauma widows are subjected to in order to absolve themselves from the death of their spouses, or to prove to the world their depth of love to their deceased husbands. It calls into question the attitude of the society towards women, as widowers are not even suspected when their wives predecease them. Okoye sees this as a patriarchal conspiracy aimed at perpetually subjugating women. It is against this backdrop that Okoye ranges on the side of women and widows by creating heroines who have refused to be docile and to be mere accompaniments to men, and who define their freedom and pursue it relentlessly. Okoye's quest for gender equality, social justice, and dignity for womanhood plays out cogently in this book of short stories.

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