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Change and Continuity in the Funerary Ritual for Widows in Igala Land: A Reading of Mbachaga Jonathan's *Widows' Might*

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Abstract

*This paper is an attempt to x-ray the plights of widows and their rights in the modern societies through drama. It examines widows' sustainability in the current wave of poverty, health challenges, and security facing them and their children. This work also looks at the role of drama in societal development from its inception till date and its relevance's towards curbing the plights of widows. At the death of their husbands, women (widows) do not only experience the psychological trauma, they are left to cater for their children with their rights to the properties of their late husbands denied. Jonathan Mbachaga's *Widows' Might* with widowhood as thematic is used to showcase the plights of widows and steps taken to ameliorate their conditions. *Widows' Might* portrays the obnoxious widowhood practices which debase the women whenever they lose their spouses. The play therefore calls for reorientation of the society to eschew the obnoxious ritual performances that bedevil widows and their children and diligently rehabilitate them. In an attempt not to gloss over some of their plights oral interviews were also used by the author to buttress the facts stated in the play text. Suggestions have been given at the end of this work on positive steps to be taken to extirpate social inhumanity to widows globally.*

Keywords: Widowhood, Drama, Igala, Society

Introduction

The polarity that exists between genders has been the challenges of the advocates of discrimination against women's relegation and sense of inequality. Mostly it is this female-male polarity that is used in most societies to decide the type of work and respect to be accorded to individuals in the society. Female-male polarity represents the traditional model, where differences between (only two) genders are potentiated and exaggerated most commonly these genders is perceived to be different, having separate spheres of influence and very different attributes; at the same time, it is the male side

that is more highly valued. (Ivana 2008, p. 1). This male side or masculinity is expressed through attributes of strength, courage, assertiveness, action, creation and self-confidence, seen as inborn to any human that is recognized as a male in a biological sense (Ivana, p. 2).

Women are subjected to violence, degrading treatments in many societies. Their decisions are thrown aside with a wave of the hands.

Be that as it may, the most affected are the widows who after the death of their husbands are subjected to all forms of oppressions and cruelty by members of their deceased husbands' families. This paper therefore interprets Mbachaga's play, *Widows' Might* in order to explain its depiction of the cruel widowhood practices in Igala land which amount to a form of social and cultural injustice against women. The play condemns cruel widowhood practices and provides measures that could help any modern African society curtail such inhuman treatment meted out to women.

Conceptual Classification of Widowhood

It is highly devastating and traumatic for a man or woman to wake up on a fateful morning to meet a beloved spouse lifeless when the two have lived a very active life together for good number of years. Such a man or woman becomes automatically hopeless to many things around her. Everything around her becomes irritating. He or she will be frustrated, and highly depressed with everything turned upside down. In affirmation Edozie (2010, p. 4) stresses that widowhood is:

A period that engulfs someone with hopelessness, loss of affection, physical ailments, unkempt look, loss of appetite, disrupted sleep patterns, mood changes, obsessive thought and many other ugly situations.

Widowhood is the state of being a widow or widower. It is the state of a woman or man whose husband or wife is dead. It signifies the end of a marriage though differs from divorce. A widow is always lonely when her spouse dies. This mostly occurs when making decisions and at night. Loneliness affects widows especially when they have no children or when their children are young and or, when their children are carried away by their deceased husbands' family members. It is this loneliness and dehumanizing situation that the widow, Ngozi expresses in Nwamuo's *The Substitute*:

Ngozi: Ade, why did you love to do this to me? Why did you leave alone wicked world with children? How on earth am I going to survive with these children with the present situation of things in the country? Go to the village and face community life or stay in town and brace up to the demands of modernity and reality? ... I need an answer to the fire of my mind (p. 50).

The womenfolk are dehumanized and subjugated to varying untold and unimaginable situations because of the practice of widowhood in various cultures.

Widowhood Practices Manifestation of Cruelty in Igala Land

The death of a spouse compounds the cultural demands of widowhood in Nigeria. Many widows are stigmatized, blamed for the death of their husbands and at times displaced from their marital home (Temitayo 2017, p. 1). Temitayo further stressed that in Oyo State the loss of a loved one is always traumatic. Widows live not only with psychological challenges, financial constraints and the burden of raising their children alone, but also with the cultural demands of widowhood (p. 2). Among the Ilaje people of Ondo State of Nigeria, wicked widowhood rituals include sitting naked to wash in a stream, returning home naked after cleansing and in some cases obligation to dress in black. The widows are deliberately made to look dirty and ugly, labelled untouchable defiled and banished from receiving gifts or handshakes. (www.googleadservices.com/pa 2019:4)

In Igbo land death of one's husband is unarguably devastating; especially for young women who are still nursing young children. Widows are forcefully ejected from their home, while others are forced to either sleep with the dead bodies of their late husbands or drink the water used to bathe their corpses to prove that they had no hand in their death. (Ajayi, 2020, p. 6) Ajayi further stresses that the climax of dehumanizing widowhood practices among the Igbo is the disinheritance of the widows by close or distant relations of their late husbands, who lay claim to all their brother's estates, including property and wealth gotten in partnership with their wives. A widow who has no male child or has no child at all is usually at greater risk (Ajayi, p. 5). These forms of practices which are common among the ethnic groups expressed above have led to disinheritance, abuse, impoverishment and trauma suffered by not only widows in these regions but to some areas in Nigeria.

According to Agunwa (2011) cited by Illah (2015, p. 20).

Among a tribe in the old Mid-west (current Edo and Delta States), she (widow) is given a ritual pot to carry on her head.

While

carrying this pot, she is asked to confess her sins against the man...

In another place, before the man is buried, the widow is stripped naked and made to have the last sexual intercourse with the man by lying with the corpse in a room all night

The most hazardous is that in many of these communities, funeral is preceded by an inquest. According to Illah (pp. 20-21), the ritual inquest includes the widow being mandated to drink the water collected after washing the corpse, to prove she had no hand in the death of the late husband.

Customarily, among the Igala of Kogi State, a widow is expected to mourn the deceased spouse for at least the period of three months or one year after which she has to be free. At this mourning period, a widow is confined to a room, dressed in black cloth. She is neither allowed to shave her hair nor plait. She does not cook, go to the market and not even her place of worship if she is a Christian. She can be seen or guarded to her places of conveniences by the oldest woman of the deceased family.

The Igala do not deny widows the ownership rights to her deceased husband's property especially if they have children. A part from that if a widow wants to stay back with the husband's family and does not want to re-marry, she has every right to all that the deceased husband left behind. But if a widow is inherited by a family member of the deceased husband (levirate marriage) she forgoes all belongings of the late husband except children. Such practice is known as "OyaOkpo" or "Oyaugwu" depending on the part of Igala community the practice takes place. If a widow is old and has children grown up enough to care for her, such widow remains in her deceased husband's house with the right to everything that the husband had.

However, one aspect of the practice calls for attention. When a woman is suspected to have hand in the death of her husband, she is asked to bath the deceased under the supervision of other sympathizing women. She is also to offer the deceased husband a traditional cloth "Okpe" (calico) which has to be tied round the waist to prove her innocence to the cause of her husband's death. It is also a symbol of farewell to the husband.

The widow who is being traumatized with the death of her husband is equally expected to feed the family members of her late husband. She is to offer a basin of pounded yam to them. She is never allowed to sleep on a comfortable bed. She has to sleep on mat because, it is assumed that the late husband will visit her and make love to her which might lead to her open confession if she has hand in the death of her spouse.

Apart from being distrustful, some families no longer care for their late brother's children not to talk of the widows. This could probably be attributed to economic hardship, polygamous living or lack of compassion for one another. Some communities in Igala land capitalize on the absence of their late brothers to exploit widows and their children. Rather than care for them, they are adopted as househelps, enrolled in low standard schools. Some widows are even sent packing to their parents with their children after receiving various degrees of taunting accusations from the family members of their late husbands.

Apart from this denial of property, there is also evacuation of children from their mothers, exclusion, sexual assault, being forced to marry the dead husband's relatives and shaving of head to mark the end of mourning period.

This practice has led some women to fabricate false claims especially when their husbands are at the critical stages of illness that, they are indebted in one way or the other. Before the demises of their husbands they either sell out some properties (especially land) or have their bank accounts liquidated (cunning man dies, cunning man buries him).

Drama and Society

Drama is a literary term, is a play, movie performed by actors/actresses and watched by audience. It is also a form of literature that is studied in schools by students. Based on this study, drama has been a form of communication right from the ancient Greece and was part of their festivals, religious rituals, academia, athletic, politics, aesthetics, music, marriage, funerals and poetry. Drama served as a communal mirror to society, reflecting its habits, aesthetic, politics and cultural norm (Kimberly, 2019, p. 1).

From the classical period, drama has been a means of entertainment for various eras. It was a means of uniting people of different backgrounds and religions in the society. It is a tool that helps members of a given society to compare life with life in the scenes, if we put ourselves in the shoes of the

performers. Drama influences our ways of thinking and behoves us to review our experiences on issues raised in the performance.

Through drama the *Trojan Women* by Euripides (415 BC) simply tells the fates of the women of Troy after their city has been sacked, their husbands killed and their remaining families about to be taken away as slaves. Jean-Paul Sartre wrote a version of the Trojan women to further depict the European's imperialism in Asia with emphasis on the theme of existentialism.

Drama has the power to suggest the probability of events which in turn makes the drama seem a true reflection of actuality. (Etherton, 2012, p. 151). This, assertion is affirmed in the plays of Femi Osofisan's *The Chattering and the Song*. John Pepper Clark's *The wives Revolt*, Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband has gone mad Again*, James Ene Henshaw's *This is our chance*, Wole Soyinka's *the Lion and the Jewel*, Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*.

Drama helps to improve our sense of aesthetics and ability to understand people and life situations. Drama encourages the societal ways of thinking, reviews our experiences, principles of life and change for better. Drama is used to assess, judge, correct and pass lasting solutions to the activities of some members of the society.

In the advancement of the role of drama in societal development initiative, drama can be utilised in the palliative health care delivery system in hospitals for patients with life threatening conditions (Amirikpa, 2016, p. 13). Patients, who suffer for what is called terminal illness, may feel unloved, uncared and stigmatized even with their loved ones and abandoned to their fates. Through drama, awareness can be created on submicroscopic infectious organisms that cause diseases in host organisms. Through participatory theatre the spread of deadly diseases like Lassa fever, Ebola, Cholera, HIV/AIDs, Corona virus (COVID-19) and so on, ravaging societies globally can be curbed.

Ngugi wa Thiongo has a clear conception of the impact of drama and the dramatist in society. He noted that art should encourage people to bolder and higher revolve in all their struggles to free the human spirit from the twin manacles of oppressive nature and oppressive man (Gbilekaa, p. 4). Ngugi with his knowledge of Kenya's colonial and post independent days decided to wage war against the oppressive nature of Kenya government using drama as a weapon.

Drama is a veritable tool to be used to grossly reduce the plights of widows in the society. The women themselves are never relenting these days though not only on widowhood but on other patriarchal crimes such as rape and domestic violence that are on the increase the recently.

Synopsis of *Widow's Might*

Mbachaga's *Widow's Might* (2010) is about a widow, Ifeoma. Ifeoma is a young lady who is left with three children to care for by her deceased husband. The family members of her husband want to perform the required rituals and passage rites to appease the spirits of the dead and grant eternal rest to the soul of their brother and son Arinze.

However, for this rite of passage to be effectively carried out. Ifeoma has to drink the water, the husband's corpse was bathed and stripped naked before the elders of the community. As an educated woman, she stands strongly against the obnoxious practice because she did not kill her husband. Moreover, the dead cannot see. Therefore; "the last woman that stripped for you (the elders) is the last as for me, I will not", (Mbachaga, p. 3). Ifeoma refuse to submit herself to such inhuman and archaic patriarchal practices against women.

The women having heard the strong resistance by Ifeoma, joined in the struggle. There is pandemonium in Oboro community as the women will never accept this decade practice. Among the elders too there is division as Ofedili rightly opposed Okafor who accuses the women for being misled. Thus, Ofedili stresses:

They have not been misled by anybody. If anybody is misled, it is a few elders among us because the said tradition or custom is an age-old tradition and practice that has since been abandoned... (p. 2)

The men are left with different opinions whether to send peace delegation to plead with them before they strip naked before the strangers at the market square or not. Efediba cheers the courage of Ifeoma, and tells the crowd that no one should let tradition to destroy the community's peace. Rather tradition should give room for change. The savage and uncivilized law that demeans the dignity of women should be renounced.

Cruelties against Widows in *Widow's Might*

The members of the family form the fulcrum of the “Widows Might”. Most of the characters are faced with the challenges of old practices and modernity in widowhood. With a high esteem as an educated woman, Ifeoma does not want to accept the patriarchal belief that subjects widows to strip naked before the men of the land whenever their husbands die.

The practice of Oboro community for a widow to strip naked is not only uncivilized but offensive which must have to be done away with. The women are not only stripped naked but they are also asked to drink the water used to bath their deceased husbands. Chidima says:

... it is not what any woman should see. I remembered how I felt sick after drinking water used to bath my husband's corpse to prove I had no hand in his death... (p. 8)

Though it becomes controversial among women whether to stand against the tradition that is older than their forefathers or not, the women unequivocally believe that it is better to die trying than to remain quiet. They will do all they can to stop the obnoxious practice that has inflicted more harm than good on them.

The custom of Oboro community requires that Ifeoma (widow) the widow in the play should drink the water that was used to bath the corpse of her husband, strip naked before six elders and also share the husband's property and money. Though she refused, they insisted so that they can feast their hungry eyes and fulfil the desire of their adulterous minds. This practice demeans women in the society.

The women have been forced to the wall so they can now bite. They all came out in solidarity with Ifeoma to move for a change. If it is nakedness the men want, they will jointly strip naked at the market square.

Whatever stand the men take the women will never relent and why must it be women alone Nneka asks:

It is bad and mean. It is savage, humiliating and directed against women if not, why won't you men strip before us women when your wives die so that we may also enjoy the sight of your highly priced manhood dangling between naked thighs (p. 35).

Their move is to set themselves free from stripping naked, intimidation, drinking of water used in bathing their husband's corpses and

other forms of humiliation. This bold step by women of Oboro community completely changed the men into cooks, housemaids, and nannies. At the end of the play the culture of stripping naked before men, sharing of the late spouse's property stopped. Women are given fair hearing and representation during council meetings and deliberations.

Conclusion

Mbachaga has, like in the plays of Atule Emmanuel. Egwu's *Echo of the Voiceless*. Irene Isoken Salami's *More than Dancing*, J. P. Clark's *The Wives Revolt* Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband has gone Mad Again* to mention but a few, used collective action by women to actualize their revolutionary aim against the demeaning of women in our societies in the name of age long tradition.

Relatives of the deceased should learn to love, do well, seek judgement for the fatherless and plead for the widows. They should be truly right with God and be sympathetic with the families of the departed brothers and uncles. Rather than being cruel, members of the departed brothers and uncles should not only assist their fatherless children and widows in their afflictions but constantly visit them and show them love to ameliorate their sad situations.

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