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Widowhood Challenges and Expectations: an Analysis of Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *Seasons of Crimson Blossom*

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Abstract

Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's novel Season of Crimson Blossoms is a powerful commentary on the clash of entrenched cultural beliefs and the individual's impinged rights. It is a narrative rights- taboos, religion and culture. A peculiar reflective critique of the limitations imposed on widows, offering a conflicting portrayal of their desires and the societal taboos standing face-to-face with the pursuit of love and autonomy. Ibrahim unearths some obnoxious cultural and religious practices of Northern Nigeria, where Islamic traditions strongly influence societal norms. Binta's sexual regeneration becomes emblematic of a broader societal transformation, prompting readers to reflect on the complexities of love, desire, and plights of the individual agency in the face of societal constraints. The novel serves as a thought-provoking exploration of the intersections of widowhood, sexuality, and cultural expectations, challenging readers to question deeply entrenched traditions and weigh the resilience of the human spirit in the pursuit of personal liberation and the complexities of patriarchal gender oppression. The author queries societal attitudes towards widows, advocating for the victim's autonomous rights to her sexuality within a conservative cultural framework. The archetypal woman, Hajiya Binta, is a widow in conservative Northern Nigeria who slights societal norms and expectations associated with widowhood. Her transformative journey is catalysed by her unconventional relationship with Reza, a young thug, who challenges traditional views on age-appropriate relationships and the perceived asexuality of widows.

Introduction

Nigeria is situated in West Africa, with a rich embroidery of cultural diversity, encompassing numerous ethnic groups, each with its distinctive traditions and beliefs. This assembly is a reflection of the country's complex history and the coexistence of various communities, such as the Yoruba, Hausa-Fulani, and Igbo, among others (Abalogu &

Ezechi 110). The diverse ethnic makeup contributes to a vibrant range of languages, customs, and artistic expressions, fostering a dynamic and multicultural society. Nigeria's cultural affluence extends to its traditions, ranging from its colourful festivals and ceremonies to unique gastronomic practices, attires, and religious observances. This cultural medley not only shapes the



daily lives of its people but also adds depth and complexity to Nigeria's identity on the global stage. In the northern region of Nigeria, where the novel is set, Islamic traditions often influence societal norms, including those related to sex and relationships (Elleh 70).

Religious influence in northern Nigeria is predominantly characterised by Islam, which plays a central role in shaping societal norms, cultural practices, and individual behaviours. The region is home to a Muslim-majority population, and Islamic principles deeply influence various aspects of daily life, including family dynamics, legal systems, and social interactions (Abubakar 3). Adherence to Islamic teachings often results in conservative values, with expectations of modesty, adherence to religious rituals, and a strict moral code. Religious leaders, such as Islamic scholars and clerics, hold significant sway in the community, guiding both spiritual and societal matters. The influence of Islam in northern Nigeria extends beyond individual belief systems to impact the region's governance structures and legal frameworks, contributing to a unique cultural and religious identity that distinguishes the area from other parts of the country (Abubakar 3).

One of the things that is common in Nigerian society in general is how it places a strong emphasis on family values and community expectations (Bamgbose, 65). Traditional gender roles may be

strictly defined, and there can be societal pressure to conform to these roles. For widows, the cultural expectation of restraint and modesty can be particularly pronounced. In many traditional societies, Ssenyonjo (40) is of the view that widows often face a pervasive stigma that stems from deep-seated cultural beliefs and social expectations. The stigma surrounding widows is often rooted in notions of impurity, bad luck, or associations with the deceased spouse's misfortunes. Widows may be viewed through a lens of vulnerability, seen as individuals who have lost their protective status with the death of their husbands (Samuel, 185). This societal perception contributes to the marginalization of widows, leading to discriminatory practices and limited opportunities for personal growth or remarriage.

The stigma surrounding widows is further exacerbated by traditional customs and rituals that may dictate restrictive mourning periods and behavioural expectations (Ssenyonjo, 42). Widows, as stated by Ssenyonjo (42), are often expected to adhere to strict codes of modesty, refraining from engaging in activities perceived as celebratory or indulging in personal desires, including romantic relationships. The societal pressure to conform to these norms can result in widows being ostracized, and their personal choices may be scrutinized by the community. This stigmatization not only impacts widows emotionally but also restricts their autonomy,



perpetuating a cycle of social exclusion that challenges their ability to fully participate in and contribute to their communities (Wuraola, 381). Wide-ranging, the stigma surrounding widows reflects broader cultural attitudes toward women and their perceived roles in the aftermath of spousal loss.

Against this cultural backdrop, Ibrahim introduces the character of Binta, a woman whose journey becomes a compelling exploration of human desires, particularly the re-awakening of her sexual aura. The narrative unfolds in a society that places strict limitations on the agency of widows, shaping the expectations of how they should conduct themselves. The novel takes a bold and provocative stance by challenging these traditional norms, presenting the portrayal of Binta's emotional and sexual awakening. The introduction of a young thug named Reza into Binta's life becomes a catalyst for her rediscovery of passion and desire. Ibrahim uses this unconventional romance to confront societal taboos surrounding widows and their sexuality, prompting readers to question deeply deep-seated cultural norms.

The exploration of Binta's re-awakening serves as a lens through which Ibrahim critiques the constraints placed on women in conservative societies, particularly widows who are often expected to live a life devoid of romantic or sexual experiences after the loss of their spouses. Ibrahim's portrayal of Hajiya Binta's sexual awakening also

serves as a commentary on the broader issues of gender roles and societal expectations in Nigeria. The novel invites readers to question the rigidity of cultural norms and encourages a more nuanced understanding of women's desires and agency. By addressing the complexities of sexuality in the context of widowhood, Ibrahim challenges the societal taboos surrounding the expression of female sensuality.

Furthermore, *Season of Crimson Blossom* itself is symbolic, suggesting a time of blossoming and vibrancy even in the later stages of life. This metaphorical language conveys the idea that human desires, including sexual ones, are not restricted by age or societal expectations (Chukwuemeka 148). Instead, they can flourish and bloom in unexpected seasons, challenging the conventional narrative surrounding widowhood.

Discussion

Widows in conservative societies, particularly in northern Nigeria where Islamic traditions strongly influence societal norms, often face significant challenges in expressing their desires and re-awakening their sexual aura after the loss of a spouse. The cultural expectations and stigma surrounding widows create a complex landscape where personal autonomy and intimate relationships become constrained (Ssenyonjo, 41). Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's novel, *Season of Crimson Blossom*, presents



Hajiya Binta, a widow, whose sexual troposphere defies traditional norms.

This study aims to unravel the intricacies of Binta's journey, examining how societal humiliations and cultural constraints impact her ability to express and fulfil her sexual desires. By delving into the dynamics of Binta's relationship with the younger Reza, the analysis seeks to elucidate the broader implications for widows in such traditional settings, exploring the tensions between personal autonomy, societal expectations, and the transformative power of love and desire. The central problem to be addressed is how the re-awakening of a widow's sexual aura challenges established norms and contributes to a broader conversation on gender roles, autonomy, and the redefinition of societal expectations in the context of northern Nigerian culture."

Widowhood

Widowhood refers to the state or condition of a woman who has lost her husband to death, and it specifically denotes the period following the death of a spouse. A widow is a woman whose husband has died and who has not remarried (Wuraola, 80). Widowhood is often associated with various cultural, social, and legal implications, and the experiences of widows can vary widely across different societies and traditions. The term is commonly used to describe the bereaved status of a woman after the death of her spouse. Widows may undergo specific cultural or religious rituals, observe mourning periods, and face

societal expectations regarding their behaviour, appearance, and roles in the community. The challenges and opportunities associated with widowhood can depend on cultural norms, legal frameworks, and the support systems available within a particular society (Samuel, 187).

Widowhood and Sexual Abstinence

Widowhood and sexual abstinence are often intertwined, reflecting the cultural and societal expectations placed on widows in various communities. In many traditional settings, the period of mourning following the death of a spouse is accompanied by a mandate of sexual abstinence for widows. This practice is deeply rooted in cultural and religious beliefs, where abstaining from sexual relations is considered a sign of respect for the deceased spouse and a demonstration of the widow's devotion to mourning (Durojaye 178).

The expectation of sexual abstinence during widowhood is often reinforced by societal norms that prescribe specific behaviours and appearances for widows. These cultural expectations may include dress codes symbolizing mourning, limitations on participation in social events, and the avoidance of activities associated with pleasure or celebration. The restriction of sexual activity during this period is part of a broader set of behaviours designed to signify the widow's bereavement and adherence to societal norms.



In some cases, the requirement of sexual abstinence extends beyond the mourning period, and widows may face societal pressure to remain celibate for an extended duration or even throughout their lives (Bamgbose, 66). This expectation can be particularly challenging for widows seeking to re-establish personal relationships or remarry. The intersection of widowhood and sexual abstinence highlights the complex interplay between cultural traditions, societal expectations, and the autonomy of individuals, especially women, within these traditional frameworks. The novel *Season of Crimson Blossom* by Abubakar Adam Ibrahim provides a narrative lens through which such dynamics are explored, shedding light on the tension between individual desires and societal expectations in the context of widowhood. Of all the **widowhood practices**, many are seen to be harmful and against humanity. This paper considers only two.

Mourning Periods and Rituals

Mourning periods and rituals play a significant role in shaping the widowhood experience in Northern Nigeria. Upon the death of a spouse, widows are expected to observe a mourning period, a culturally prescribed timeframe, in the case of muslims it is religious, about 128 days during which they engage in specific rituals to express grief and honour the deceased (Q. 2 verses 234-235). The duration of these mourning periods can vary across

different ethnic groups and communities, ranging from a few months to several years (Bamgbose, 66). During this time, widows may undergo visible changes in appearance, such as wearing specific mourning attire or even shaving their heads, symbolizing their bereavement and adherence to cultural norms.

Participation in mourning rituals extends beyond personal expression to encompass communal activities that involve family members, neighbours, and members of the broader community. Rituals may include communal prayers, recitations of sacred texts, or gatherings where friends and relatives offer condolences (Wuraola, 383). These shared rituals not only provide emotional support to the widow but also serve as a means of reinforcing community bonds and demonstrating collective respect for the deceased (Durojaye, 177). The communal nature of these mourning practices emphasizes the interconnectedness of individuals within the cultural fabric of Northern Nigerian societies.

While mourning periods and rituals according to Durojaye (177) are deeply rooted in cultural traditions, they are also influenced by religious beliefs, particularly Islam in Northern Nigeria. Islamic mourning practices, including recitation of prayers for the deceased and engagement in acts of charity, often intertwine with the cultural rituals observed during widowhood. The integration of religious elements



into mourning periods highlights the intersection of cultural and religious influences, shaping the widow's experience and providing a framework through which grief is expressed and managed within the community.

Whither Remarriage for Widows?

Remarriage according to Wuraola(384) holds intricate significance within the widowhood practices of northern Nigeria, reflecting a complex interplay of cultural, religious, and societal expectations. In many communities, the decision of a widow to remarry is often subject to scrutiny according to cultural norms that vary across ethnic groups. While some communities may encourage widows to remarry as a means of providing social and economic stability, others may impose restrictions, advocating for prolonged periods of celibacy as a demonstration of respect for the deceased spouse.

The societal pressure regarding remarriage is influenced by prevailing beliefs about the appropriate duration of mourning and the role of widows within the community. Some cultures may view a widow's remarriage as a positive step towards her reintegration into society, while others might emphasize the importance of upholding traditional mourning practices, which could include delaying or abstaining from remarriage. Additionally, religious influences, especially within the context of Islam prevalent in northern Nigeria, may guide the

viewpoints on remarriage. Islamic teachings offer guidelines on permissible durations of mourning and encourage the remarriage of widows, emphasizing the importance of companionship and family stability (Wuraola, 384).

In the novel, Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's exploration of the protagonist, Hajiya Binta's, potential for remarriage challenges societal expectations and traditional norms. Binta's journey becomes a process through which the complexities of widowhood and the dynamics surrounding remarriage are examined, shedding light on the tensions between individual desires, cultural expectations, and religious principles in the context of northern Nigerian society.

Theoretical Framework

The theory that was used for analysis is Psychoanalytical Theory. Eagleton (135) believes that psychoanalytic theory, developed by Sigmund Freud, is a comprehensive psychological framework that seeks to understand human behaviour, emotions, and personality development. At its core, psychoanalytic theory posits that human actions are driven by unconscious motives, shaped by early childhood experiences and conflicts. Freud's model consists of three major components of the mind: the conscious, the preconscious, and the unconscious (Bressler 132). The theory emphasizes the role of the unconscious mind in influencing thoughts and behaviours, particularly through mechanisms



such as repression, projection, and sublimation. Central to psychoanalysis is the idea that unresolved conflicts from early childhood can lead to psychological disturbances and impact adult behaviour (Barry, 98). Techniques such as free association, dream analysis, and transference are employed in psychoanalytic therapy to explore the unconscious mind and bring repressed thoughts and emotions into conscious awareness, facilitating personal insight and emotional healing (Dobie 50).

Adam Ibrahim's *Season of Crimson Blossom* could be well analysed through a psychoanalytic theory by Sigmund Freud using the unconscious mind, repression, and sexuality to provide a framework for understanding the complexities of the characters, especially Hajiya Binta. Freud's concept of the unconscious mind suggests that individuals are influenced by thoughts and desires that exist outside their conscious awareness. Binta's sexual reawakening and desires, which challenge societal norms, can be viewed as manifestations of the unconscious forces within her psyche. The novel delves into the depths of Binta's subconscious, revealing suppressed desires that defy the imposed societal expectations on widows.

Repression, a key element of Freudian psychoanalysis, is evident in Binta's struggle to reconcile her desires with societal norms. The cultural and religious constraints of Northern Nigeria create a repressive

environment where Binta's natural human instincts clash with societal expectations regarding widowhood. The novel explores the psychological tension arising from this repression, shedding light on the internal conflicts faced by Binta as she grapples with her evolving desires in the face of cultural and religious norms.

Moreover, Freud's theories on sexuality, particularly the Oedipus complex, can be applied to the relationships in the novel. The unconventional romance between Binta and Reza, with its age disparity and societal taboos, can be interpreted through the lens of Freud's ideas on forbidden desires and societal restrictions. The complex dynamics of power, desire, and societal expectations explored in *Season of Crimson Blossom* align with Freud's psychoanalytic framework, offering readers a deeper understanding of the character's motivations and the intricate interplay between their conscious and unconscious minds.

Empirical Review

Ango in 2019 researched *Enslaved: Passion and Politics* in Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *Season of Crimson Blossoms*. His research discusses the theme of enslavement in Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's award-winning novel. In the first part, it conceptualizes the notion of slavery away from a physical denial of freedom, or a state of being subjected to servitude, to a broader sense which includes psychological encumbrance where ideologies and



emotions yoke the body. In the second part, the paper adopts the postcolonial trauma theory to advance the idea that postcolonial dislocation, fragmentation, anguish, and despair are the literary elements employed by the writer to connect his character's love travails to the wider socio-political problems of Nigeria. It concludes that even though the novel's main subject is passion, its political undertones signify that the anguish of the lovers trapped in their psychological prison is asymmetrical to the anguish of a nation trapped in its neo-colonial quagmire. The gap identified in this research is that it only considered the theme of enslavement and it did not consider the sexual reawakening in the life of the widow. The research under study would consider the reawakening of sexual life portrayed in the novel.

Chukwuemeka in 2019 researched *A Wetness in Dry Places: Sex and Taboo in Abubakar Ibrahim's Season of Crimson Blossoms*. Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *Season of Crimson Blossoms* departs from a prostitution plot to a pornographic depiction of sexual obscenity: the venereal affair between Binta Zubairu, a 55-year-old widow and grandmother, and Hassan Reza, a 25-year-old street gang leader. The study investigates the existential tragedy of sexual freedom by examining the extent to which a sexual relationship that is considered taboo in a given social milieu is a recipe for self-realization. Using a feminist view of existentialism, the researcher demonstrated how the

individual will rise above the conventional, by escaping from being a sexually deprived human to becoming one who responds to the body's need for unbridled sexual pleasure, which constitutes George Lukacs and Arthur Miller's ideas of modern tragedy. While this research looked at sex and taboos in it, the research under study would only consider how the widow gets herself entangled in sexual relationships.

The Reawakening of Sexual Aura in a Widow

Hajiya Binta, a fifty-five year old widow of Zubairu who lost his life during one of the communal crises in Jos ten years back, is a devoted Muslim, a mother and a grandmother who devotes her time to the things of God and her family as she approaches her old age. As a devoted Muslim, she gets the respect of all as a result of her high sense of morality and her enrolment into Madrasa, an Islamic adult class that teaches morality and Islamic injunctions to married or mature Muslim women. Her moral standard is noticed when she rebukes Fa'iza, her niece, over her loose dress and how she wears make-up to school as if she is going to a dance hall. Binta ensures that Fa'iza complies totally with her instructions before leaving the house for school. By this, it means that there are indications that Binta is aware of both cultural and religious laws governing the society and her super-ego is stationed on upholding these societal norms and transmitting the same to the younger generation.



There happens to be a twist in Binta's life when a strong arm clasps her from behind, pressing firmly across her mouth (12). Reza is his name, a thief and a political thug who robs Binta in her house upon her return from Madrasa that fateful afternoon. The thief was so violent that he demanded 'Money, handset, gold' after picking up some valuables from Binta. In that process,

His voice rattled her ear, her heart. She made to move but he held her tighter. His arm crushed her breasts. She realized, even in the muted terror of the moment, that this was the closest she had been to any man since her husband's death ten years before (13).

In a normal circumstance, Binta would not have lustfully thought of the way the thief crushed her breasts rather, her freedom should be her concern. But her mind at that time was so situated that she knew that she was closer to a man and for her uttering 'Subhanallahi! Subhanallahi!' (13) which is an appeal to God for cleansing indicates that her thoughts at that moment were erotic. When he finally got hold of her bag and shoved the money and her phone into his pocket, she properly looked at him realizing that he was in 'his mid-twenties, his lips were dark, and his short, kinky hair was like a field of little anthills' (13).

Having spent ten years without a man touching her in a close manner, the thief's touches on

Binta's body bring to life the ecstasy of feeling like a woman who was dead years ago. As the thief holds her closely, it is revealed that:

His breath on her neck and the heat from his body made her knees weak. She almost buckled several times. He clasped her firmly so that they tottered like an unwieldy four-legged beast. The friction of her rear against his jeans made his crotch bulge and push hard against her (14).

The lines above captured that both Binta and the thief could not resist the intimacy as the sensation from both of them resulted in arousal in them and when she leaned over the bed to get her jewelry as commanded by the thief, according to Ibrahim's account, 'presented her full backside to him' (14) thereby realizing that she is 'not too marish' (14). The moment the thief realizes this, there is a kind of unexplainable affection he has towards Binta and as she notices it, she rebukes him as he comes towards her by calling him "a son."

Both Binta and Reza had two different losses that came to life the day Reza robbed Binta. On Binta's side, was the death of her first son, whom she does not call by name rather, she called him by his gender, 'Yaro' in Hausa language. On the side of Reza was his mother who left his father when he was still a child and decided to go on prostituting. Finally, as the thief lives, he has sown in her 'the seed of awakening that would



eventually sprout into a corpse flower, the stench of which resonate far beyond her imagining' (14).

Relationships between people of different generations are common when it comes to older men having relationships with women close to the age of their children. But, this novel has a twist to this reality, as it presents Binta, an old woman yearning for a boy in his mid-twenties. There is a metaphoric representation of Reza to Binta as she sees him as her first son who died several years ago. The encounter Binta and Reza had was an encounter that reawakened the sexual pleasures Binta desired when she was married to Zubairu. To Binta, Reza is more like a son but what she cannot understand is that, whenever she thinks of him, she always gets moist in her womanhood. The moistening is caused by someone who reminded her of her son giving her a bitter memorial about him. 'And to think that this moistening of her long-abandoned womanhood had been provoked by someone who reminded her of Yaro was an added irritation' (28).

The society Binta and Reza found themselves in is a society that is religious and moral which, therefore, makes their unlawful affair dangerous. Nevertheless, it is through her relationship with Reza that the reader can see the nature of Binta's deepest self, which in Psychoanalysis is conceptualized as the Id which is different from her religious life that is known by people around her. The Id is

the deepest part of the unconscious mind that represents the most basic natural human needs and emotions such as hunger, anger, and the wish for pleasure. Her past experiences, above her cultural learning, place a demand on her senses. The physical contact with Reza only makes her aware of her urge to be with a son she was not allowed to give attention to. The contact with Reza arouses her and wakes her repressed sexual impulses. She thus craves complete fusion with him thereby causing her to shave off her pubic hair after the first time they mate. The narrator explains thus:

When Reza slipped his hand under her wrapper, he discovered, much to his surprise...When he knelt before her, she turned her face away and pressed her thighs together. But once he pressed them apart, gently, and took his tongue to her, she held his head of minuscule anthills and quaked. And because they were alone in the house, because she had always wanted to, because she could not stop herself, she moaned. With his tongue, he unlocked something deep within her. She soared with tears streaming down her face (56).

Northern Nigeria, like most conservative places in the world, is at a crossroads between the waves of



modernity and a deep-rooted culture of the traditional system. Endless arguments about choice and a woman's right to choose have been made by scholars. However, purity and modesty culture sustain the repression of women's sexuality. Underneath the wrestling with choice is the concept of modesty. Sexual reawakening in the widow is also displayed when the narrator explains thus:

Once, after she had told him she had never watched porn, he had come with a DVD of blonde women desperately slurping over manhoods as if sucking the milk of life. Disgusted and aroused, Binta ran to the bathroom to spit and Reza ran after her laughing. As she leaned over the toilet seat, he raised her wrapper and took her from behind. Her cheery laughter rivalled the noises from the video in the living room and was barely masked by the generator, whose metallic drone reached them through the little window high up on the bathroom wall (110).

Reza made Binta do the thing she had never done in her life which was being in a hotel. When her daughter was divorced, Reza could not gain access to Binta's house. This made them not to be meeting for a while but because of the memories the two had, they could not resist it than to plan a meeting at a hotel. This is the ego aspect that springs up. The narrator explains that their

hunger was not of meat but of a different sort:

She barely waited for him to close the door when she covered his lips with hers, pushing him against the panel. Overcoming his initial surprise, he responded with fervour, his hand reaching down to lift her dress over her head. Their tongues intertwined, their bodies entangled, their hands feeling each other's bodies – as if to be sure that in the period of their forced abstinence, they hadn't changed. They moved to the bed and, because she wanted to, fought for it even, he let her sit astride him and ride him, her moans reaching up to the ceiling (144).

The narrative carefully unravels the layers of Binta's desires, passion, and the societal taboos that surround her pursuit of a fulfilling emotional and sexual life. The exploration of Binta's reawakening serves as a critique of the limitations imposed on widows, challenging the stereotype of the asexual and passive widow. Ibrahim's portrayal of Binta's desires and the intimate moments she shares with Reza becomes a powerful commentary on the agency of women, especially widows, in reclaiming their sexuality and autonomy.

Conclusion

In this novel, the exploration of sexual reawakening becomes a powerful vehicle for challenging



societal norms and expectations surrounding widowhood in conservative northern Nigeria. Through the character of Hajiya Binta, Ibrahim navigates the complexities of love, desire, and societal constraints, offering a vivid portrayal of a widow's journey toward reclaiming her autonomy. The novel serves as a critique of the limitations placed on widows, presenting a bold narrative that defies cultural taboos and interrogates the intersection of personal agency, societal expectations, and the pursuit of fulfilling emotional and sexual desires. Binta's sexual reawakening becomes emblematic of a broader societal transformation, urging readers to reflect on the intricacies of human connection, the impact of cultural norms on individual choices, and the potential for personal liberation in the face of deeply entrenched traditions.

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