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Re-evaluation of Widowhood Rites and Widow's Coping Strategies in Adebowale's *Lonely Days* and Amadi's *The Trials of a Widow*.

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Abstract: Widowhood has often been seen as a medium through which women are subjected to oppressive socio-cultural practices, ranging from economic deprivation to psychological trauma. Nigerian novelists such as Bayo Adebowale and Ray Amadi have used their works as important avenues to question and re-evaluate these practices, while also highlighting widows' resilience and coping strategies. This study examines Adebowale's *Lonely Days* and Amadi's *The Trials of a Widow*. From Focu-feminist's perspective, this article analyzes how widowhood is portrayed, the challenges the widowed protagonists- Yaremi and Egolu encounter and the coping mechanisms they adopt. Content analysis approach of qualitative research method is used. The findings reveal that widowhood becomes a space for survival, revolution and redefinition of womanhood. The paper concludes that Nigerian literature provides a powerful platform for re-evaluating cultural practices, advocating gender justice and self-rediscovery.

Key words: Widowhood, Coping Mechanisms, Focu-Feminism, Trauma, Re-evaluation

INTRODUCTION

Widowhood is one of the most painful and life-altering experiences in the lives of women across the world, but in African society, it assumes a more complex and traumatic dimension. In Nigeria, widowhood is not only a private emotional loss but also a public cultural identity shaped by rigid traditions. Manala (2015) emphasized that widowhood is a situation embodied by rituals, forced marriages, harassment, rejection, loneliness and

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poverty, loss of status/identity, anxiety and depression. This gives a negative perception of widowhood in Africa generally. It has been proven that it is an extremely difficult and problematic condition in women's lives. Widows are subjected to practices such as confinement, ritual cleansing, disinheritance, forced remarriage, and social stigmatization (Oduyoye, 1995; Ezeigbo, 2012). In a similar vein, Panaewazibiou Dadja-Tiou (2022) opine that it is often one of the scourges that hinders women from succeeding socially. These practices, rooted in patriarchal systems, transform widowhood into a site of oppression that further marginalizes women in both private and public spheres. Research has shown that in Africa, widows are often vulnerable to socio-economic and socio-cultural abuse (Magudu & Mohlakoana-Motopia 2013). Due to the many proofs of their socio-economic and psychological vulnerability, widows are often referred to as "invisible" (Agboola 2021).

Investigations in Nigerian cultures have also proved that most widows face discriminatory practices that often lead to social exploitation and isolation. This supports Okpala and Utoh-Ezeajugh's (2019) assertion that widows experience some form of dehumanizing experiences in most ethnic groups in Nigeria. According to (Ibezim, 2010) "There is hardly any ethnic group in Nigeria that does not subject the widow to one dehumanizing condition or the other. The difference is said to be in the gravity of the procedure which varies from culture to culture" (167). They are not only deprived of emotional support but are often subjected to degrading rituals, property dispossession and social ostracism (Oduyoye 2021), and all these are often captured in literature. This is the reason scholars such as Nnaemeka (1997) and Uwasomba (2014) have observed that African literature functions as a mirror of the society, offering critiques of oppressive practices while also providing imaginative alternative. In Nigerian literature, male writers like Bayo Adebowale and Ray Amadi have joined in the campaign against the cultural practices that devalue women and at the same time portray female's resilience and strategies for survival. Their works have illustrated how widows navigate oppressive traditions and carve out spaces for resistance and redefinition. This study re-evaluates widowhood in Adebowale's *Lonely Days* and Amadi's *The Trials of a Widow* by focusing on the widows' coping mechanisms. Using Focu-feminist theory, it explores how fictions serve not only as a mirror of cultural realities but also are tools for social critique and transformation.

In Nigeria, widowhood practices still reflect patriarchal dominance despite global advocacy for gender equality and equity. Widows have continued to suffer discrimination, economic deprivation and social exclusion. Existing literary works address widowhood, but there is a need for re-evaluation of how these portrayals not only highlight oppression but also reveal how widows manage to survive through coping techniques, resilience and agency. This work intends to fill the gap by analyzing the representation of widowhood and widows' survival strategies in Bayo Adebowale's *Lonely Days* and Ray Amadi's *The Trial of a Widow*. It also examines the portrayal of widowhood in the texts under study in other to highlight the socio-cultural challenges widows face and re-evaluate their situations and coping mechanisms employed.

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Focu-feminist Ideology on Re-evaluation of Widowhood.

Focu-feminism is propounded by Onyeka Iwuchukwu in 2015. Just like other feminist groups, Focu-feminism identifies with the fact that the social privileges between male and female genders are unequal. It further maintains that the oppression of women is not entirely executed by men, rather women contribute to the maltreatment of their fellow women. Focu-feminist then proposes that there is no way to address the gender issue in Nigeria because of cultural differences. To them, the only approach to liberate oneself is to be empowered hence, they encourage women to embrace self-development and self-liberation.

Furthermore, the gender issue is also applicable in widowhood. In Nigerian society, widowhood is often more traumatic for widows than widowers, and research has also proven it. This is because widows are compulsorily subjected to traditional rituals and practices that are detrimental to them in all aspects. Focu-feminists emphasized that women too contribute to the oppression of widows. For instance, some umuada (daughters of the family) are usually among the people who subject a widow to degrading rituals such as forceful shaving of hair, drinking of water used to wash the husband's corpse, false accusation and even part-take in dispossessing the widow of her husband's property and so on.

It is on this basis that Focu-feminists propounded the ideology of individualism. They urge every widow to be empowered intellectually and financially as well as liberate themselves from any situation that might hinder their progress. They further encourage widows to see widowhood beyond grief, depression and suffering but rather it should be viewed as a transformative phase of life. They urge widows to reassess and redefine their situation from a positive perspective and have a good knowledge of their environment. It is on this note that widows can devise the appropriate coping mechanisms to adopt to achieve their goals. Therefore, in the aspect of coping of widows, Focu-feminists' emphasis on individualism simply means that every widow should put in effort towards their empowerment and liberation.

Review of Some Scholars' Assessment on Widowhood Rites

Usman (2020) in "Challenges of Widowhood Practices and Counselling Strategies for Widows in Kaduna State" examines the difficulties widows face in Kaduna State and how counselling can help them. Two research questions and one null hypothesis were formulated for the study, while descriptive survey design was adopted. The population comprised 796 widows and stratify purposive random sampling was applied to select the respondents. Questionnaire was used for data collection. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the questions, while t-test was used to test the hypothesis formulated for the study. All the tests were carried out at 0.05 level of significance. The findings identified financial difficulty as the main challenge for widows, with the cultural norms being the primary drivers of harmful traditional practices. To address this, the study suggested that

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government, religious leaders and community groups need to work together to provide support to the widows.

Iloka, P.C (2022) confirms that widows in South-East Nigeria, face severe trauma due to a combination of grief and dehumanizing cultural rites. Practices such as being forced to drink water used to wash their husband's corpse, pose serious physical and mental health risks, leading to chronic illness, higher rates of mental distress and even death. Compounded by economic hardship and social isolation, their plight is often ignored due to poverty, illiteracy, and lack of legal awareness. The researcher recommends that the court and legal practitioners should use existing law to combat such human rights abuse.

Agboola, C.A. & Alahirah, A (2024) assert that among the social issues in contemporary Nigeria, the plight of widows remains one of the most overlooked. Their study examines critically the challenges faced by widows, with a specific focus on the Igbo cultural group. It highlights their severe marginalization, especially through being denied their husband's inheritance and forced to undergo dehumanizing widowhood rites like compulsory shaving and public rituals to prove their innocence. Drawing on a historical analysis of secondary sources, the research underscores the urgent need for reform. It concludes with concrete suggestions to policymakers and community leaders to mitigate the suffering of Igbo widows and promote gender justice.

The investigation into widowhood rites in Southwestern Nigeria explores the factors perpetuating harmful practices in the face of modern societal progress. The research identifies a distinct cultural disparity in the treatment of widows compared to widowers, with the former subjected to more disorganizing and traumatic experiences. Analysis reveals that illiteracy, poverty, a patriarchal social order, the economic marginalization of women, religious dogma, and customary inheritance laws are the principal factors responsible. These practices inflict direct and indirect adverse consequences on widows and their children. The study advocates for prioritization of qualitative girl-child education, widespread public enlightenment programs, and vocational skill acquisition for women as critical measures toward mitigating and ultimately eliminating the unjust harmful treatments.

Adeyemo, C (2016). Zoucha, R and Marilyn, R. (2024) from their own perception, posit that detrimental widowhood practices in Nigeria severely compromise women's health and wellbeing, leading to higher rates of illness and death compared to their single or married peers. This integrative review synthesizes literature on these practices and their effects on Nigeria and the US. From the 20 studies that met the inclusion criteria, seven central themes emerged, such as inhumane treatment, poor socio-economic status and psychosocial issues. The review concludes that future research must specifically investigate the manifestation and consequences of these cultural practices within the Nigerian American diaspora to inform supportive interventions.

Dansidi et al (2024) examine the impact of harmful widowhood practices on the academic achievement of secondary school students in Nigeria and its implications for guidance counseling. Using a descriptive survey design, data is collected from a sample of 370 students using a specifically designed questionnaire. Analysis of data, conducted using

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descriptive and inferential statistics (t-test), reveal that harmful widowhood rites play a significant role in undermining academic performance. Key findings indicate that these practices induce psychological and emotional issues such as depression and substance abuse, which in turn foster low self-esteem and increase school dropout rates. The study concludes by urging educational counsellors and stakeholders to implement robust, gender-neutral intervention strategies to support affected students and minimize these adverse academic consequences.

Analyzing widowhood in Southeast Nigeria, Eze, O et al (2024) identify the harmful traditional practices inflicted upon bereaved women as a primary source of their relative deprivation. In this context, a husband's death immediately plunges his wife into a state where she faces inhuman and unjust treatment, deliberately designed to humiliate and strip her of autonomy. Despite widespread dissatisfaction, women rarely challenge them in court. Employing relative deprivation theory and descriptive methodology, the study investigates these practices across five states (Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo). The study concludes that while external interventions have provided minor relief, the deeply rooted cultural acceptance of these practices has prevented their abolition, posing significant challenges to gender equality in the region.

Most of the literature reviewed share similar views that widows are exploited unlike the widowers. Their major objective is to liberate the widows from discrimination and subjugation fueled by patriarchal structures. Not much is addressed, in these studies, specifically on the issues of coping strategies of the widows, hence this research.

Major Challenges Nigerian Widows Experience

False Accusation: Some widows have been accused falsely of killing their husbands. This popular Igbo adage that says, "nwoke nwuo, juo nwunye ya ihe gburu ya," has subjected a lot of widows to oppression. In this contemporary era, some widows are still accused of such. In Adebowale's *Lonely Days*, the protagonist, Yaremi is accused of sending Ajumobi to the world beyond just like the excerpt reveals thus:

> Yaremi's name had always been linked with the subject of human beings transforming into feathered creatures. When the people saw the hawk which perched on the roof of Ajumobi's house on the day Ajumobi died, their suspicion was confirmed: 'this woman has killed her husband! She turned into a hawk and killed her man!' (LD: p.43)

Yaremi has always been allegedly suspected to be a witch. According to Adebowale, the people of Kufi never believe in a natural death. They have the notion that the death of someone is caused by an enemy either within or outside. Even when the cause of the death is obvious, they must pin it to something or someone. In most times, the wife of the deceased is accused of killing her husband that is why Yaremi is accused, and their suspicion is confirmed based on mere natural coincident. Widows are harshly treated as the other three widows in the text confirmed. Dedewe, Fayoyin and Radeke are humiliated for an unverified accusation of killing their husbands. Adebowale uses the experiences of

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widows in the novel to reflect the state of widows in Yoruba land specifically, an ethnic group majorly situated in the south-west of Nigeria.

Intimidation/Exploitation

Due to the vulnerability of widows, some individuals tend to take advantage of them because they think no one can protect them. The widowed protagonists encounter some sort of intimidation or exploitation from their immediate environment. Adebowale, and Amadi expose how Nigerian widows are trodden upon in their works. Adebowale, through the experience of the protagonist, reveals the humiliation of Yaremi because she refuses to pick a cap during the cap picking ceremony used to mark a widow's end of mourning period. The implication of picking a cap during the ceremony is that the widow has accepted to remarry.

Kufi land is a typical patriarchal community where the men of the community are seen to be superior to the women. The women especially widows have no choice than to comply with the dictates of the culture whether detrimental to them or not. In the case of Yaremi, she refuses to be married to anyone after the death of Ajumobi because of the love she has for him (Ajumobi), and she enjoys the freedom she gets as a widow. She insists on overseeing her life and making decisions for herself; hence, she bluntly refuses to consider second marriage. Based on this decision, the elders ostracize her to punish her for challenging them as well as instill fear in other widows who intend to follow Yaremi's line of action. Punishing someone for insisting on making decisions for herself/ himself is a form of intimidation and that is the case of Yaremi. It was the same fear of being humiliated that made the other three widows succumb to the tradition of picking a cap during their time.

In *The Trials of a Widow*, Egolu had a similar experience just like Yaremi. She resists societal intimidation initiated by the men in her community. The elders of Secunda ostracized her for protecting what is rightfully hers, which is her late husband's land. She chased the young men who destroyed her husband's obi out of her compound. The men of Secunda led by Ichie Godspower conspired to intimidate her to have the opportunity to dispossess Egolu of her late husband's inheritance since her and Wilfred's grown-up son, Chidi, travelled abroad for studies. The elders decided to use Wilfred Ikezuagu's land to build a village hall without Egolu's consent. Due to her resistance, they conspire to suppress her by ostracizing her, which they (the elders) know is a grave punishment in their land. Apart from the pains of losing a spouse to death, these are the major socio-cultural challenge Nigerian widows' experience.

Re-evaluation and Coping of Widows in the Novels

The protagonists-Yaremi (LD) and Egolu (TTW) experience oppression and humiliation on different occasions due to their change of status. Adebowale uses Kufi, community as a microcosm to portray the realities of widows in Yoruba land. In Kufi, widows are discriminated against and stigmatized, that is, they use a lonely and bad road path which leads to the village river. The state of the road symbolizes the pathetic situation

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of widows in the community. The society also blames them for the death of their partners. For example, Yaremi is blamed for the death of her husband, Ajumobi. She is accused of being a witch (feathered creature) because her husband died on the fateful day a hawk perched on the roof of his house. The other widows-Dedewe, Fayoyin and Radeke are also blamed for the death of their husbands, consequently, they were severely dealt with by the late husbands' relatives. On the psychological aspect, these women are lonely, depressed and deprived of the social privileges and the right to choice. Widows are compulsorily made to remarry in Kufi at the end of their mourning period and that is the aspect Yaremi frowns at.

In a similar vein, Amadi reveals that in Secunda, it is ideal that a widow, particularly a young one should remarry, preferably within her late husband's family. To them, this is a way to protect the widow from "messing herself with men outside (7)." Secondly, it is also believed that the widow gets assisted by her new husband. Thirdly, the widow can have more children with her new husband, and the children belong to her late husband. However, the tradition permits the man to exit the marriage at will just as it is seen in Egolu's case. Amadi reveals that Egolu's marriage with her new partner was filled with animosity. Eventually the new partner disowned her and the children publicly hence abandoning their children's responsibilities solely on Egolu. The portrayal of these widows' experiences highlights their sufferings and vulnerability which makes them easy to exploit. That is why widowhood is associated with grief. Grief is more seriously caused by socio-cultural challenges than psychological ones.

Despite these challenges, these widows strive to survive. The widowed protagonists of *Lonely Days* and *The Trials of a Widow* –Yaremi and Egolu respectively, decide to change their situational narratives. They changed the perspective of being victims to resilient women who control their situations. For instance, Yaremi redefines her situation from a positive point of view. She begins to see widowhood as an opportunity for transformation and freedom. Yaremi engages in multitasking to cope with depression, a remedy to depression and loneliness. As a result, she becomes more economically empowered mostly through her dyed taffeta business. She could provide for herself and help needy women in her village. This gains her respect and recognition in the village especially among women. Yaremi transforms into a more financially independent, assertive and confident widow. She becomes aware of her worth, personality and environment. That is why she challenges the conventional practice in Kufi- Cap-picking Ceremony, which is a tradition upheld strictly for widows; a traditional practice that denies widows the right to choose and which every widow in Kufi dreads to violate except Yaremi. She challenges the culture by refusing to remarry irrespective of the consequences. She removes herself from the shackles of the tradition that objectifies widows.

Egolu on the other hand solely takes up the responsibilities abandoned by her estranged partner. To cope, she resolved to be resilient and be solely in charge of her life. By so doing, she engaged in religious activities that have positive impact on her such as being punctual to morning mass, engaging actively in religious groups such as Catholic Women Organization, St Theresa and St Ann societies. She is also a member of a social

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group in her community-Egbe Bere Dance Group in Secunda and Ulundi, and she assumes leadership positions in each of these groups, thereby enhancing her leadership skills. Egolu becomes more empowered, assertive and confident. Consequently, she knows her rights and worth in society. She challenges the elders of Secunda's oppressive orders by refusing to apologize and meet their demands. Even when she is ostracized, Egolu maintains her stance to protect her late husband's land at all costs. She breaks the shackles of patriarchal dominance and refuses to be intimidated and silenced. She reports her ordeal to a family friend, Mr. Okwu, her family, Igwe of Ulundi, and even goes to the extent of facing her oppressors in court. These helped Egolu to gain her worth and give hope to vulnerable widows in the community.

Adebowale and Amadi present widows as individuals who challenge and resist oppression. They deconstruct the social constructions of widowhood as a permanent state of victimhood, and their re-evaluation is essential for gender advocacy.

Conclusion

Literature, being the miniature of reality, explores human situation and perception in society. The literary output of Nigerian writers often functions as a critique of societal norms and values that are detrimental to the community, seeking to correct them. Adebowale and Amadi in their respective texts presents the conventional perception of widows as vulnerable and controlled women, who succumb to every dictate of the community even at her own detriment. In both texts, the protagonist-widows experience humiliation and oppression from both men and women of their community. Through the portrayal, the authors criticize the socio-cultural norms that degrade, dehumanize and devalue widows.

In a similar vein, the authors champion the course for the re-evaluation and redefinition of widows in Africa generally by presenting the protagonist-widows as agents of change. Yaremi and Egolu challenge patriarchal hegemony and resist socio-cultural subjugations such as refusing to remarry and Egolu protecting her late husband's land from the elders of Secunda. The protagonist-widows courageously face consequences of their decisions to liberate themselves from oppression. Therefore, widowhood is not necessarily about grief and oppression but also a space for resilience and rediscovery. Adebowale's *Lonely Days* and Amadi's *The Trials of a Widow* portray widows not only as victims but also as saviours and agents. Through strategies such as defiance, faith, endurance, voicing out, confidence and economic stability, widows resist societal oppression and redefine their identities. Furthermore, Nigerian literature serves as a critical platform for re-evaluating widowhood, challenging unjust traditions and advocating for cultural reform.

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