

WIDOWHOOD AS A BLESSING: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF YAREMI'S CHARACTER IN BAYO ADEBOWALE'S LONELY DAYS

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Abstract

Widowhood, whether for the woman (a widow) or the man (a widower) is, under normal circumstances, not something to be desired. It is an 'abnormal' condition or circumstance even though the end of all mortals on earth is separation from one another through death. Humanly speaking, the loss of a loved one is a painful experience even when the deceased has lived "a long and satisfied life", and regardless of the hope of life here after. Widowhood proceeds from marriage. A husband dies leaving a wife (and a child or children) behind, or vice versa. However it happens, it is a deep cut in the life pattern of the couple and family. Expectedly, it comes with both pleasant and unpleasant consequences. This is the paradox. Pleasant consequences

of widowhood revolve around changes in the widow's character and perception. It is these changes that are explored in this study, using the textual analysis method. Analysis of the text under consideration reveals that the authorial voice is making a case for protest over a male-dominated patriarchal society. The feminist movement kicks against social, political, legal, economic and cultural practices that have for centuries hindered women's realization of their productive and creative potentials or capabilities.

Keywords; widowhood, tradition, patriarchy, gender, liberation.

Introduction

In some cultures certain cultural practices attend the death of husband or wife. A widow (er) is made to drink the water of washed corpse of the deceased to prove innocence of culpability in the death of the partner. Such a practice is, of course, apparently fetish and barbaric. It is a humiliating experience and therefore an unpleasant consequence. But as critically assessed in this paper, there are certain benefits derivable from widowhood, the experience of losing a life partner notwithstanding. One of these is the development of a tough will which shows in a rugged mien and the attitude of "never say never". When a widow in particular comes to the realisation that there is no one for her on the left or right, at the back or in front, she is compelled to take her destiny in her hands. She then develops a strong will which results in the "can do" attitude. This is what we see in Adebowale's *Lonely Days* (2010 Rep). Ajumobi, Yaremi's husband, "had left her alone to the wicked world" but "she quickly made a choice" (1). Even as she bears "a

troubled heart " and lives in "deep misery", Yaremi makes effort at consoling herself and moving on with life.

It is a fact that widows share the common sense of loss, most times accompanied by the loss of dignity and status. They often go through harrowing experiences from the rest of society. Some are subjected to inhuman treatment in the name of custom and tradition. Some are taken advantage of because there is no more a masculine shoulder to lean on. Hence some become despondent and objects of pity.

Theoretical Framework

This study finds a theoretical framework in feminism. It is here that one locates Adebowale's portraiture of the radical feminist pitched against the liberal one and the rest of society. Couched in Marxian undertones radical feminism seeks an overturn and overhaul of society to a classless one imbued with equity, fairness, justice and collectivism or communalism. The saying that "Behind every successful man there is a woman" is not tenable to the feminist, particularly the radical specie, who sees tradition and capitalism as the bane of progress and development. (The word "beside" is preferred to "behind"). As Abrams and Harpham (2009) have stated, feminism sprang from "two countries of struggle for the recognition of women's cultural roles and achievements and for women's social and political rights" (110). Feminists are

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revolutionaries of sorts, advocating a change in the status quo ante in sex and gender roles. In other words, they oppose “the prevailing concept of gender- of the traits that are conceived to constitute what is masculine and what is feminine in temperament and behaviour” (Abrams and Harpham, 111). They argue that masculine traits and feminine traits are but “social constructs that were generated by the pervasive patriarchal biases of our civilization” (111)

Adebowale's novella itself can be read like similar texts “in terms of how they represent gender difference and how far they may be said to reinforce or question gender role stereotypes” (Bennett and Royle, 2012, 153). Certain “gender oppositions and hierarchies to be found at work in a text” (155) are recognisable in the work. It is possible to read it “as a dynamic feminist demand for liberation from the maddening claustrophobia of patriarchy” (156). The work under study here has also been interpreted, analysed and assessed as a case study in deconstruction which Bennett and Royle define as “a strategy of disruption and transformation with regard to every and kind of essentialism” (157).

The Dark Side of Widowhood

Someone may observe that perhaps Yaremi in *Lonely Days* would not have braved the odds that came with being a widow if she still had one or two of her own children small enough to give her the troubles such individuals mete out to their parents, particularly single parents. She finished giving birth before her husband passed on. To a large extent, this would be a valid point. After all, many young widows are known to have experienced hell trying to cope with widowhood as they single-handedly cater for themselves and their orphans. But the main religion and even tradition give such widows unfettered chance to re-marry if they know they cannot cope alone. Some of them have made a ship-wreck of their lives due to short-temper and self-conceit. They fail to understand that on the “slippery widows' road”, they “just must learn to take one step at a time; gently, millimetre by millimetre, like the cautious millipede, on this road of life” (*Lonely Days*, 20-21).

Coping with Widowhood the Yaremi Style

Realising that “temporariness of man's passage on earth was a certainty, Yaremi, at once, surrendered herself to the design of destiny and to the agony of

what seemed to her, an irreplaceable loss” (2). She has to contain the inevitability of the “painful finality” of her husband's last moments with her on earth and “remembered images” ((3). She had to contend with “distrustful eyes of sympathizers” and scrutiny “by mourners in all directions... with hostile closeness... in a set-trap... bent on humiliating her and destroying her reputation” (3). Yaremi felt “thoroughly abandoned, like a stone at the bottom of a lake. Silence sank like sad music in her heart, and descended on her soul in pitiable layers”. She has left alone “to sulk the anguish of a private sorrow, secretly”(3). Yet she stood her grounds and braved the odds. In spite of the fact that her days “dragged lazily on, in a haze of solitude and lonesomeness ” and “loneliness had now pitched a tent” in her life (4), Yaremi, Ajumobi's widow, in her fifties had to learn “to prepare heaps and raise crops, all by herself- labouring hour after hour, under the sweltering heat” (5). Now she has to learn to play both roles of wife and husband, mother and father, a status thrust upon her against her wish and desire. Her only ready source of companionship and relief from boredom is Woye, her little grandchild. Her two grown up daughters, Segi and Wura “had given long been away in marriage” (4). Alani her only son lives in Ibadan and rarely comes home.

In spite of her lonely and pitiable condition, Yaremi refuses to despair. The author tells us:

For Yaremi, it was now work, work and work- a workaholic! The will to survive was there, putting determination into her bones and vigour into her nerves. And gradually, she began to accustom herself to the hard fact that she really was a widow (11).

Yaremi has learnt to drive away loneliness and boredom through work on the farm and at home in addition to her main job of dyeing taffeta cloths in indigo solution which products she carries inside “a large wooden tray to the market at Sagbe, three miles away for sale to willing customers” (5). While alive, her husband had helped her do some of her chores. For example, he “had assisted a lot in putting Yaremi's kitchen in good shape. And Yaremi, in turn, had always compensated her late husband with preparation of sumptuous meals, meals to put him in an active mood and keep him perpetually in loin clothes inside her sleeping room – even during

afternoon periods!" (12-13). But it is not to be any more. Such is the void and traumatic experience created by separation through death that it becomes a heavy burden for some widows to bear that they become tragic or fatalistic figures. But not Adebawale's Yaremi in *Lonely Days*. Instead of bemoaning her situation she accepts and faces it with Spartan – like courage. She has adjusted and accepted the reality that "she must be prepared to walk through fire; unscratched; the fire of life!" (16). And "at night, she must withdraw with a loud yawn – veiling all worries of the day in her small anteroom"(17). Yet she does not live in self-pity. She thus develops courage, resilience, and a new character.

Yaremi in finds an antidote; she resolves "to give loneliness a good fight" (31) through work. We are told that "she could do five different woks together" and that work to her "had become medicine against loneliness and frustration; a dose to fight fatigue and boredom with, a cushion for all pressures of daily life" (31). Although her husband, Ajumobi, died a natural death, tongues still wagged and she becomes an object of gossip about the cause of her husband's death. Her name is "linked with the subject of human beings transforming into feathered creatures" (43). To believers of superstition in Kufi nobody has ever died a natural death. This is how the author summarises Yaremi's condition:

Yaremi had become the beginning and the end of all issues, in her own private little world. Her liberty was perfectly intact. Nobody governed her anymore on anything. She retired to bed when she liked, and needed no hurry again to return to the village from the brook. Nobody sat herdown any more to give lectures to, on what should be done or what should not be done. There was no more that strong-arm rule of the man to keep her on her toes, to check her excesses, and to enforce obedience. Yaremi was now completely on her own, and she was so unhappy about it! There seemed to be no sweetness and no comfort in to her position of a women almighty. She, very much, wanted to feel loved again, to feel supported, protected and look after. There really should be some man close by to lean on all the time, a man to pester with demands, to urge with request, to provoke with expensive jokes, and to issue threats and

ultimatums to; a man who would forcefully take over the absolute control of the matrimonial home. But there was no such man anymore, and here now was Yaremi alone in the world, making resolution and taking decision, without reference to anybody. On daily basis she faced the problems of life with no one experienced enough to share them with. And she had to put up with the agony of the constant remembrance of her man who had quietly left her, who had disappeared like a puff of tobacco smoke inside an old man's pipe (47-48).

Packed in the above long passage are the different aspects of a widow's life: near absolute freedom, no marital control or restriction, a teacher and learner role rolled into one; no masculine overbearance; no obedience allegiance, absence of marital checks and balances; absence of 'sweetness' or comfort; absence of being loved, supported, protected and catered for; absence of marital communication and banter; sole solution and decision maker; no adviser or second opinion giver; painful memories and longing. Her life is full of paradoxes. She is as free as the bird in the air, to do what she wants to do, go where she likes and to spend her times as she deems fit. This is apparently a positive side. On the other hand, there are certain vital ingredients of life which are missing without which her life amounts to a tasteless routine and drudgery. Thus, her almost absolute freedom notwithstanding, the absence of a masculine figure to perform certain exclusively male chores or duties has created a void in her life. Even her husband's mere physical presence when alive was a sort of balm, giving her both psychological and physical security. Yet, Yaremi is able to expertly and stoically mix the good, the bad, and the ugly, the sunny and gloomy sides of a widow's life, forging ahead triumphantly. Moreover, she "had her own share of attention" (67) and "what right had a woman" who, during her own time, had been so profusely celebrate?" {67}. No matter what, life must go on. And so, Yaremi "fought desperately to replace despair and frustration with hope and self- assurance" {"70} Even though she occasionally, especially during cold nights, engages in rapturous reminiscences" and clutches her pillow "tightly to her chest for comfort and succour" {"71}, she is determined that no man will take Ajumobi's place in her heart even as she recalls those past moments of conjugal bliss she and her

husband relished. They had their differences quite all right but she understood her husband too well that now he becomes irreplaceable in her life. Thus, her heart closes to any other love overtures as she sees “nobody else in this world quite like him:” (72). Her hope, love, devotion and affection have all gone with him. She therefore rebuffs advances from other men of Kufi village. This resolution bolsters her heart resolve.

In spite of the fact that “there used to be more of tension and outburst here in Kufi, among couples, than anything else “ (86) and she certainly had some of it, Yaremi still cherishes with nostalgia her married status. She had coped very well and so her present status as a “full-fledged” widow is more of an added advantage, a blessing. Little wonder many of the women “secretly envied Yaremi for her acquired liberty and freedom and for what she actually was: a 'comfortable' woman courageously coping with the challenges and disappointment of life_ and so generous to everybody” (89). Instead of placing her in a pitiable position, Yaremi's widowhood shoots her into eminence: “Yaremi had gradually maneuvered her way into a position of reckoning in village affairs spreading her influence and asserting her personality in pleasant, subtle ways” (89).

Perhaps Yaremi would not have attained such prominence if her husband were still alive. Although such painful separation is not to be desired, it has turned to a sort of blessing Had Ajumobi been alive Yaremi would have been the patient, passive, shy, bashful and timid house wife that custom and tradition made her. Of course, most men are bound to resent her present position. She undergoes a drastic transformation, behaving manly in her speech and action, “most times exuding overconfidence and self-importance” (98). Circumstance turn her “more and more towards masculinity” (98). She has “to play man” because what she has contended with and endured since the death of her husband were more than a woman could bear. Despite “the heat , the worries, the pressures of life, the distress and the agony of loneliness “ (99), Yaremi prefers to remain a widow. Members of the extended family would prefer that she remarry “ to cast off the robes of widowhood, and settle down finally with a new husband, according to the demands of tradition” (107_8). Yaremi will, however, have none of this. The other three widows _ Dedewe, Fayoyin and Radeke _may respect tradition and pick new husbands at “cap-picking ceremony”, but Yaremi will not.

Adebowale's Yaremi in is a subtle portrait of a feminist breaking away from tradition. Refusing to remarry in accordance with tradition is a slap on the male_dominated and male _ controlled society in which a woman is seen and made helplessly dependent on a man at every stage and throughout her life. It is also an affront to the cultural practice whereby a widow must remarry, failure to do which she is regarded as abnormal and a misfit. According to Talcott Parson's (1960) functionalist concept of the family, it “provides a context in which husband and wife can express their childish whims, give and receive emotional support, recharge their batteries and so stabilize their personalities” (qtd in Haralambos and Heald, 333). By refusing to remarry, Yaremi has rejected these “basic and irreducible functions” of the husband- wife relationship. Adebowale's views in this respect supports Laing and Cooper's perspectives, which argue that “The behaviour patterns and controls laid down within the family produce the 'well conditioned, endlessly obedient citizen' who is easily manipulated by ruling classes “(Haralambos and Heald, 338). Although she now misses those ingredients of the relationship between the husband and wife, Yaremi is done with the behaviour patterns and controls that inevitably produce a docile and “endlessly obedient” personality. This is a feminist Cum Marxian stance which undermines the “elaborate system of taboos” for women and children, which compel conformity and submission. (Haralambos and Heald, 338).

Adebowale's Yaremi is also an implicit commentary on the ambivalent description of the power of Yoruba women. According to Olateju and Oyeyeye (2005) despite the divine arrangement in which the Creator_ God “ put women in charge of all the good things on earth”, “ attempts have been made to subjugate women” (352). Olateju and Oyeleye further posit that “As mothers, therefore, women are treated with respect and appeased, while as 'wife' they are discussed in critical and contemptuous tones. This ambivalent mystification shows the paradox of women's empowerment in certain instances” (352). It is such ambivalence that Adebowale has reflected in Yaremi's character. While she still nurses feminine longings for her husband's presence and all the masculine strength and weaknesses he represented, Yaremi boldly sets out to deconstruct and violate established gender views:

YAREMI wondered if she was not gradually becoming a man! Strange as that was! Her gait had become restive. Her voice now was authoritative and sharp... There was something really precise, something practiced now, in the way Yaremi moved her body... like a man on a secret mission...

During mealtime, she swallowed slices of fried yam quickly in one gulp, barely pausing between bites, like a man... One day at the ebu, Yaremi poised in a manly way, like a hunter getting ready to load the gun for a night-time expedition... Lately, Yaremi had had to swear oaths and shout epithets, like a man on identified wife snatcher of the village who would not leave her alone (Lonely Days, 98-100).

The almost incredible picture created by the above passage is a tacit deconstruction of the long held view of the man/woman, male/female and masculine/feminine binaries in terms of sex and gender roles. The crux of the deconstruction theory is that man who is male biologically can be feminine. Likewise woman who is a female in terms of physical make-up can exhibit masculine tendencies and qualities (Oakley, 1974). There also seems to be a divine tonic that propels Yaremi to remain as a widow amidst all odds. The reader is told that "Times without number, Ajumobi had spoken to Yaremi in dreams, with soft words serenading her like music, reassuring and soothing her like the sweet fragrance of the fresh morning air" (105). Consequently, "To Yaremi, Ajumobi was always nearby and within air shot-like somebody behind a closed door eavesdropping in the next room" (107). Husband and wife are still spiritually linked. Moreover, Yaremi's resolve to remain a full-fledged widow is also partly in keeping with the old promise she made to him "that day in the deep forest" when he 'shot' his first 'antelope' (104), Ajumobi's death has therefore provided an acid test and proof of their genuine love of each other.

Conclusion

An analysis of Yaremi's character in Adebowale's novella *Lonely Days* has lent credence to the truism

that widowhood is not necessarily an invitation to a state of misery, despondency and hopelessness. It must not be a pitiful resignation to the vagaries of life and society's manipulative and oppressive social system to the perpetual advantage of tradition and the men folk. The widow must not tenaciously and or sheepishly adhere to the demands of tradition.

Adebowale in Yaremi's lifestyle celebrates the cliché that "out of sight is not out of mind" as she still has link with her husband even in death. Yaremi almost succeeds in debunking the claim that no woman's life is ever complete without a man to prop her on the arduous journey of this world" (111). She would rather relocate to her parents' abode and "continue, once more, on a clean state (123) than risk being humiliated and ostracized from her late husband's community on account of refusing to re-marry.

Yaremi's decision and choice is proof that widowhood can be a blessing. The widow can always pick up the broken pieces of her life and make a fresh start, but not mandatorily in a marital status especially if she has gone past the age of fifty.

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