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'A crushing curse': Widowhood in contemporary Anglophone Cameroon literature

Widowhood in contemporary Anglophone Cameroon Literature

Moving from the premise that widows have been at the margins of literary discourse in Cameroon, this paper examines widowhood in contemporary Anglophone Cameroon literature using John Nkemngong Nkengasong's *The Widow's Might* (2006) and Alobwed'Epie's *Patching the Broken Dream* (2012) as the springboard for its discussion. It argues that the factors that influence the lives of widows, especially, the options available to them and the multiplicity of interests touching on their behavior are grounded in socio-cultural parameters that shape communal consciousness. The paper equally aims at showing how these widows attempt to or actually construct new worlds for themselves by resisting such dominant cultural scripts. The paper locates its discourse within the framework of womanist ideology as propounded by Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi and Mary Modupe Kalawole. **Keywords:** Cameroon literature, discrimination and stigma, widowhood, womanist theory.

Introduction

The global focus on women's issues since the 1970s has brought the activities of women within and beyond the family to the centre in the works of Anglophone Cameroon writers like Makuchi, Anne Tanyi-Tang, Margaret Afuh, Eunice Ngongkum, Bole Butake, Alobwed'Epie and John Nkemngong Nkengasong, among others. However, the space occupied by widows in a number of these texts appears to be liminal despite the increasing interest on the fate of this group of women at the local and global levels. As it were, the growing number of widows in the country due to the HIV/AIDS pandemic coupled with the efforts of international and local organizations to foreground their plight, has contributed in no small way in bringing this essential component of the Cameroon woman's materiality to the fore. But while the widow still seems to be at the margins of literary discourse, a few Anglophone Cameroonian writers are foregrounding her plight in their works, portraying the institution of widowhood from a variety of interesting perspectives that necessitates a corresponding critical attention. While it is true that widowhood victimizes the woman, the widow's liminal voicelessness in social discourses seems to suggest that she does very little to respond adequately to her victim status.

Some of the writers like Alobwed'Epie, John Nkemngong Nkengasong and Eunice Ngongkum posit that this is far from being the norm. Writing from different ideologi-

cal positions, they foreground the subject of widowhood as a crucial paradigm in ongoing debates about woman-being in the contemporary context. In their works, essentialist perceptions of widows are interrogated and disrupted in a way that brings fascinating positions to the dialogue on the subject in the modern framework. Interestingly, the fact that these artists are both male and female, underscores the reality that “in the African woman’s quest for a positive and wholesome definition of womanhood and empowerment, the African male is not excluded” (Nwajiaku 56).

John Nkemngong Nkengasong and Alobwed’Epie write against a postcolonial context that tends to assert women’s, and by extension, widows’ rights. In *The Widow’s Might* (2006) and *Patching the Broken Dream* (2012), respectively, these novelists foreground the predicament of young widows. Through setting, plot, characterization, narrative perspective and varying stylistic devices, they explain, describe and interrogate widowhood. Particularly, they lay bare not only the difficulties of its young victims but also show how the latter engage their circumstances and move on to be better or worse off, as the case may be. These works question dominant cultural practices or knowledges that widows live by, locating themselves within not only womanist discursive strategies but also within a postcolonial context that has witnessed significant changes in the situation of the woman as a whole. I argue that the factors that influence the lives of young widows, especially, the options available to them, and the multiplicity of interests touching on their behavior are grounded in socio-cultural parameters that shape communal consciousness; and I further show how these widows resist these dominant cultural scripts to carve out niches for themselves.

I adopt womanism, an ideological praxis hinged on a strategy of reading that considers the woman in the African context as the theoretical framework for my analysis. Womanism’s focus is on the woman in the family and the society, especially highlighting her experience in settings chiefly defined by patriarchy. *The Widow’s Might* and *Patching the Broken Dream* portray widows in a postcolonial context that is largely patriarchal. According to Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1996), and Mary Modupe Kolawole (1998), womanist writings criticize grossly unfair gender arrangements; arrangements drawn from “myths which recommend, prescribe or validate the society’s norms, values, code of conduct, social [...] and society’s sense of identity” (Kolawole 7). Nkengasong and Alobwed’Epie interrogate the marginal and negative images of widows promoted and sustained by patriarchal cultures. They portray these women as capable of redefinition and self-evaluation even in the most tragic circumstances. In this context, men and women play vital roles for, as Charles Nnolim claims, in another context, womanism, “wants a meaningful union between black women and men and children and will see to it that men will change from their sexist stand” (46).

Widowhood: Definition

Widowhood—the state of being a widow—occurs when a wife loses her husband through death and does not remarry. According to Marjo Buitelaar, the word “widow” derives from the Latin, *vidua* which relates to a root meaning, “to place apart” (1). From this root word, widowhood is thus a separation, a placing apart of a wife from the husband through death. The loss of the husband through death generally represents the loss of a partner, a friend and a breadwinner. In most cases, this results in a radical change in the woman’s social status and lifestyle. Margaret Owen argues that widowhood tends to impact more traumatically on the woman, altering forever the way she is perceived and consequently affecting her self-image (8).

Widowhood is a universal human phenomenon shaped by, among others, the culture within which people function. In Africa, in general, and Cameroon in particular, it constitutes a traumatic life event. According to a recent United Nations report on discrimination against women in Africa, widows, irrespective of their ethnic affiliations, are among the most vulnerable and destitute. This situation is fueled by cultural practices/beliefs, patriarchal domination and inheritance laws which militate against the rights of the widow. A number of perceptions of widowhood from different parts of Africa seem to confirm this.

Florence Orabueze, for instance, notes that “widowhood is a word that every woman dreads to mention. In Africa, it brings to a peak all the humiliation, subordination, degradation and oppression which an African woman goes through in her life time. From the time of her husband’s death to the time of her own death, his family and society blame her for the passing away of the much needed male. She is indirectly asked why she should survive the man” (115). For Rose Acholonu, “widows are subjected to a whole gamut of obnoxious widowhood rites aimed at making her die within the mourning period of about one year. Most brothers-in-law are ever ready to disinherit her and [...] drive her out of her marital home” (97). Teddy Kuyela, on his part, observes that, “In most of the African society, widowhood represents a ‘social death’ for women. It is not just that they have lost their husbands, the breadwinner and supporter of their children, but widowhood robs them of their status and confines them to the fringes of society where they suffer discrimination and stigma. [...] Widows are generally trodden upon, poor and least protected as their lives are determined by local, patriarchal interpretations of tradition, discrimination and stigma” (1).

These perceptions of the widowhood landscape in Africa identify two broad defining aspects of the experience, namely, disinheritance/deprivation and mandatory observance of culturally prescribed burial rites which inflect psychologically and physically on the widow. This is the background that generally informs Nkengasong’s *The Widow’s Might* and Alobwed’Epie’s *Patching the Broken Dream*. In both

texts, however, this general picture is reinforced by several modern dynamic socio-cultural parameters that problematize and complicate the widowhood experience of Akwenoh and Diana, the heroines of the texts in question.

‘A deep dark world of anguish?’: Widowhood in *The Widow’s Might*

Set principally in Bakomba Town and Ekaka Village in present day Cameroon, the novel tells the story of Akwenoh, widow of Honorable Makata Mbutuku, Member of Parliament of Bakomba Town, whose sudden death at the beginning of the narrative sets the canvas for the novel’s discourse on the subject. Through plot, setting, characterization, narrative voice and rhetorical strategies, Nkengasong demonstrates how women’s agency in widowhood is particularly complex given the choices, inter-connections, negotiated meanings and social spaces that widows must navigate in this new phase of their lives.

The plot of the novel begins on an ironical note. Honorable Mbutuku informs his wife about his imminent appointment as a government minister. The couple is ecstatic as both share how this piece of news will change their future unaware that Mbutuku will die that same night. In a series of ironical hints, the novelist builds up tension preparing the reader for Mbutuku’s demise and the eventual widowhood experience of his wife, Akwenoh. For instance, we are told that “they went to sleep with promises of greater days ahead, promises of affluence and dignity, promises of health and wealth” (11). Akwenoh’s response to the information is noteworthy: “she wished that what her husband was telling her came out to be true. That was going to mean a change in her status. A minister’s wife! She was going to rise above the ordinary woman in Bakomba and she was going to be the pride of the Global Ladies, an association of women who were married to top civil servants and prominent businessmen and politicians in town” (10). Her dream and waking worlds are invaded by the possibility of a better life. She envisions herself in her new role as the wife who would “by law be the only person to control her husband’s property if he died” (12). These hints, at the beginning of the narrative, establish Akwenoh’s character and prepare the reader for the ironic twist to her fate as a widow. How Akwenoh will respond when she eventually discovers that she is the destitute wife of a parliamentarian constitutes the central issue in the work.

The sudden demise of a husband, as in Akwenoh’s case here, is an unexpected catastrophe that thrusts the widow into a new and problematic status. In addition to the deep physical, emotional and psychological pain that strips her of all self esteem and dignity, she must give her husband a befitting burial and perform the traditional widowhood rites demanded of her. Akwenoh had hitherto looked down on widows and once challenged her husband to marry a widow if he wanted an obedient wife, who condoned poverty. As she squats on the bare floor in mourning, she is unable to come to terms with her new position. Nkengasong’s rhetoric and diction serve

to delineate her emotional trauma and the subject position she must now assume as a widow. "What a cruel world she asked herself? That she will go to sleep happily, rise in the morning happily and out of a sudden her bright promising world is transformed into a deep dark world of anguish?" (21). "What will I do with my life? What will I do with my children?" She continued weeping. 'Now I am a widow too. [...] Where do I go from here?'" (40)

Phrases and sentences such as "her head reeled will pain," "Her husband's death had cut her heart to pieces," "With a heavy heart" and "words cut through her like a razor," among others, continue to highlight Akwenoh's emotional, psychological and physical trauma as she slowly becomes aware of her vulnerability and destitution. All along, her husband's real estate investments (the family house in Salaka Street and the apartments on rent at Awarawara Quarter) and political connections fuel her survival discourse. But as the plot of the novel unfolds, she learns that all of these are lost due to the late husband's murky political and financial past. Caught in this dilemma, she must, to hide her shame, "empty her purse" to give her husband a befitting burial, as Shadrach Ambanasom rightly observes (5). And she does amidst prospects of either giving in to tradition or living in destitution.

The widow's world in this novel is a hybrid space informed by forces of tradition and modernity. These meet, clash and jostle with each other, providing a rich tapestry on which Akwenoh's widowhood trajectory is laid bare. The setting is urban but traditional widowhood rites must be performed. She is expected to formally and openly demonstrate her grief and intense feelings. The cultural context being one that views death as 'unnatural,' she is also expected to mourn her husband in a way that will indicate that she is innocent of his death. She wails loudly and continuously while sitting on the bare floor. The corpse removal and final burial episodes serve to highlight the oppressive world of tradition. Her sister-in-law, Ma Eseke, totally insensitive to her physical and emotional exhaustion, accuses her of not weeping enough because she is looking forward to being a 'happy widow,' enjoying the wealth of her late brother. Even when Akwenoh swears the mandatory oath before the villagers to prove her innocence, this sister-in-law challenges the veracity of her innocence. With the husband buried, Akwenoh's head is shaved; she is given sackcloth to wear for a year and abandoned to hunger and loneliness in a dark room.

Ma Eseke seems to embody the hard stance of tradition; however, some women, like the Global ladies, posit that "the times have changed and some old practices had to be buried" (22). They suggest that a mattress be brought to provide some comfort for the widow. But "as soon as Akwenoh was settled on the mattress, Ma Eseke rose from where she was sitting as if stung on the buttocks by a black ant. [...] She walked over to Akwenoh as if to exorcise some vanity out of her. 'Akwenoh, get up from that mattress.' She screamed. [...] 'I have asked you to get up from that mattress and heap your buttocks on the floor like a woman who has truly lost her

husband” (23). The phrase, “heap your buttocks on the floor,” denotes the widow’s subject position in the context of widowhood. Akwenoh’s refusal to comply elicits the inevitable accusations and threats from her sister-in-law. “[...] You killed your husband in order to enjoy his wealth. You have started enjoying it even when he is not a day old in the fridge. But I will see how far you will go” (23). Ma Eseke’s responses here underscore the disconcerting contradiction that African women, in their roles as mothers, sisters and daughters are the main agents for the perpetration and enforcement of patriarchy.

The widow’s plight is further exacerbated by conflicts over property. Akwenoh is reminded by her brother-in-law, Chief Ekwe, that she is part of her late husband’s assets, all of which now belong to him. When she rejects this levirate posture, Ma Eseke tells her that she doesn’t have any say in the matter because tradition must be upheld. Mbutuku’s family believes that their brother, being a “big man,” left boxes of money which they expect the wife to produce so they could spend it on his funeral. In the context of widowhood in this novel, tradition enunciates a self-serving ethos, drawing from modernity for its own ends. This reinforces Allison Jaggar’s view that “The patriarchal institution is characterized by division, distinction, opposition and dualism” (36). The postcolonial environment that informs the novel is defined by such oppositions and dualisms and is paradoxically the space that equally gives room for the questioning of some of these practices hitherto taken as the norm. Through Akwenoh, Nkengasong posits that even in the most vulnerable of women’s positions in Africa, namely, widowhood, women are not voiceless. They speak and act even if their actions are circumscribed by choices and circumstances that somehow limit their agency

Akwenoh, for instance, draws on existing traditional roles while equally playing on the intersection between the social and the economic possibilities in her setting. Her husband’s briefcase is immediately secured in a room upon his demise and she systematically refuses to give in to her in-laws’ request for money for the funeral arrangements. She reminds them of their traditional role in arranging and organizing their brother’s funeral. She roundly rejects Pa Ekwe’s marriage demand and begins to work out how she will organize her husband’s funeral and fare with her children as a widow. “Chief,” she said, “as far as marrying you is concerned I will not accept. As for my husband’s wealth, I don’t know in the first place which wealth you are talking about. The little that I shall find, if at all I find it, will be used to bring up the children” (31). She looks forward to joining the Association of Happy Widows, geared towards protecting widows’ rights, in the hope of being shielded from the greed of her in-laws.

All these indicate how Akwenoh confronts and negotiates the controlling patriarchal structures in widowhood — structures that seek to exclude and marginalize her. However, her confrontation fails to carry through given the choices made as a young

girl, namely, neglecting her studies for a life of promiscuity. Her self-reflection, narrated through a flashback, elucidates her present circumstances, leading to a better understanding of her immediate predicament. She recollects that “her mother had always insisted when she was young that her education was her best husband. She ignored and went after men. If only she knew the consequences!” (133). Akwenoh can only blame “herself for the present state of affairs. It was the result of the foolish pattern of choices she made as a young woman. [...] She regretted that she did not take interest in her education” (133). Her regrets at not privileging her studies indicate the role of education in women’s empowerment, the weapon that Diana, Alobwed’Epie’s heroine in *Patching the Broken Dream*, uses to redefine herself within these same parameters.

Nkengasong’s exploration of Akwenoh’s limitation does not problematize his feminist/womanist stance in the novel as Blossom Fondo (2010) and Adamu Pangmeshi (2011) have argued. Rather, it can be seen to be situated in a realist and functionalist paradigm that requires an awareness of the environment and the choices that fuel or limit the heroine’s agency.

‘Hideously ugly’: Widowhood in *Patching the Broken Dream*

Unlike his earlier novel, *The Lady with a Beard*, in which Alobwed’Epie deals with a widow in a purely traditional setting, *Patching the Broken Dream* handles the fortunes of a widow in an urban setting much like *The Widow’s Might*. The narrative, told from Diana’s perspective, begins with details of her married life with David. Theirs is a loving relationship in which David is not the typical “African” man. He loves and encourages his wife to pursue higher education even if it would mean she becomes more qualified than he. He takes care of the children, does laundry, brings home a salary, saves money and generally looks out for the wife’s welfare. Diana notes that he was simply “indescribable” as a husband and as a father. While Diana is at the university, for instance, he returns home promptly every evening to see to it that their three “children were bathed, fed and sent to bed on time.” This, she says, is not to undermine her but “to remove every extra strain from” her and make her concentrate on her studies; complete university, then enter a professional school and after a few years, join him in building their dream, namely, having a successful and happy family (7). Even Diana’s mother who thinks David is “spoiling” his wife, is not happy that her son-in-law is “giving a helping hand in washing the children’s dresses, even his” because for her, “domestic work was a woman’s affair” (20). However, it is noteworthy that Diana makes good use of the opportunity given to her. She works hard, completes university and by the time her third child is six months old, she “entered *Ecole Normale Superieure*” (8). This atmosphere of bliss, unlike that of Akwenoh’s in *The Widow’s Might*, prepares the reader for Diana’s eventual response to the demise of her beloved spouse; a response at odds with society’s vision of a young and working class widow.

David's demise through a tragic motor accident plunges Diana into psychological and emotional shock. She loses touch with reality "as a million questions raced through [her] mind and [she] drifted into a world of insensitivity" (72). She attempts suicide, passes out and is hospitalized. Upon recovery, she is psychologically tormented at the thought of her orphaned children, "an eclipsed life without David," his burial and the debts that will accrue from this. However, supported by family, friends and David's employer, she buries him. It is only then that "the full torrent of what [her] new life would be buffeted [her] in the face" (82). Again, unlike Akwenoh who must perform the mandatory widowhood rites, Diana's "tradition forbade [her] from mourning him overtly" (129). Yet she demonstrates an awareness of these traditions and out of love for her spouse, she chooses how to mourn him, "wearing black underwear, for [she] thought it was incumbent [on her] to mourn him in another way—a more liberal way" (130). This liberal vision is grounded in a postcolonial setting that has witnessed an increasing global international action in reducing women's oppression such as The Beijing Platform of Action, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979) and the African Charter on Human and People's Rights (2003), among others. These human rights instruments have had significant international influence on legal and institutional reforms relative to women's rights.

The plot of the novel thus highlights how Diana defies the institutional perception of widows as vulnerable and powerless and shows how she progresses to autonomy and dignity. At home, she schools her children against extravagance while helping her mother and brother-in-law, who live with her, to "fit into the new situation" when they must relocate due to the brazen injustice of an ungrateful landlord, who takes advantage of the fact that she is a widow, to renege on his previous rental agreement with her late spouse. Rather than driving her under, the eviction notice elicits unknown reserves of determination and resilience within her. She successfully manages the leftover money from David's funeral and other funds accruing from the sale of used material from the building project to complete the structure her husband started and moves into the house, even "without doors, windows and some sort of concrete floor" (98). When her eldest daughter passes the entrance exam into secondary school, she borrows money and sends her to one of the best schools in the country while counting on her salary arrears and David's pension and death benefits to pay the loans.

Towards the end of the novel, she turns down suitors the likes of Dr. Maurice, himself a widower, and Peter, not out of what society considers as "impudence, snob-bishness, impropriety" nor for enjoying life as a rich happy widow, as Peter purports. Rather, it is her love for husband and the determination to patch the broken dream they both had, namely, to "keep [their] D identity" (124) that undergird her actions. She even envisages bringing her mother-in-law to live with her so that "they shall

live together in their own way—the way of patching the broken dream” (124). Diana succeeds and is praised by her immediate entourage for this stance as, “She had never thought of becoming famous for mourning David” (136). Through his heroine, Alobwed’Epie foregrounds a culturally relevant and alternative vision of widowhood that is currently gaining ground on the continent. Kenda Muthoni corroborates this when she says that “families headed by widows constitute a large proportion of families in Africa; nearly 30% of adult women in Africa today are widows” (4).

Further, the social networks Diana created before David’s demise continue in some form after his death to help the heroine cope better with the challenges of widowhood. This indicates that the novel is constructed on the womanist understanding that the heroine’s ability to successfully engage the oppressive world of widowhood enjoys the collaboration of a communally oriented ethos, even if at the end, the decisions concerning her life remain hers. These networks include Diana’s friends, Imelda and her husband, Roselyn and her husband, Dr. Maurice who saved her life, the neighbours, workers and her husband’s fellow club members. In negotiating the perception of widows in her context, Diana sometimes uses that view to her benefit, corroborating Muthoni’s view that in coping with their status, widows often use patriarchy to their advantage (6). For instance, she asks for and obtains help and advice from Imelda’s husband; she begs “the workers to treat [her] kindly and fairly, seeing that [she] was a widow” (97). But as time evolves, Diana is wary of depending too much on these perceptions and networks because of the stigmas accompanying young widowhood, namely, being “suspected by married and unmarried women alike, and eyed with voluptuous desires of young fellows and senile dads alike” (117). She gradually moves on to “become a husband to [herself] in thoughts, word and deed” (118). Speaking at a welcome-back home party for her daughter, Dora, the president of her husband’s club, acknowledging her resolve and success says: “you needed to take decisions that only you could take so that if they worked in either way (good or bad) you would hold yourself responsible” (133-4).

Through the use of the first person narrative point of view, Alobwed’Epie allows Diana to write herself into being, thereby stressing her agency in the context of widowhood. It is important to note that of the eight chapters of this fifteen-chapter novel that foreground the widowhood experience of Diana, five are devoted to underscoring how she displays remarkable determination and courage in the face of tragedy. By closing the novel with the widowed heroine’s moral and financial independence—evidence of her construction of a productive widowhood—Alobwed’Epie makes a more womanist statement than Nkengasong about postcolonial widowhood. Diana serves to demonstrate the feminine energies needed to cope in a catastrophic and complex situation. These energies are largely the product of her personality, education and the friendly/unfriendly culture around her.

Conclusion

As narratives of woman-centered experience, *The Widow's Might* and *Patching the Broken Dream*, foreground the plight of their protagonists in an alien and oppressive context, namely, widowhood. Written against a post-independence context that tends to assert women's rights, the works tell the stories of women who find themselves in the unwelcome state of widowhood and are constrained to seek ways to cope with it. They further underscore the fact that the transformations in the socio-cultural landscape influence the actions and perceptions of widows. It is incumbent on the women, the narratives seem to posit, to take advantage of these transformations to enrich and empower themselves. Akwenoh fails to do so and her fate is uncertain while Diana does and secures a future for herself and her family. In spite of the marked difference in response to widowhood which points to differences in ideology, two crucial conclusions regarding widowhood discourses in Anglophone Cameroon literature can be drawn from the two texts.

Firstly and centrally, both investigate how the rhythms and routines of daily life for the heroines are disrupted by crisis — the sudden deaths of their husbands — and how life can and could be lived in the aftermath of such tragedy. The works portray these women making decisions about their own lives; having the liberty to live alone and managing their own affairs. The triumph of such decisions, however, is shown to be rooted in choices made before the tragic incident. Akwenoh's vulnerability is accentuated by her lack of economic autonomy devolving from her rejection of formal education, which in the contemporary context, liberates the woman "unleashing human energy and spirit, critical thinking, the question of authority, challenges to conventional wisdom, and adds new ways of being and doing (Saleeby 7). This is evident in Diana who, thanks to a salaried job, decides to remain unmarried while heading her household. The empowerment that education can confer on the woman in the contemporary context cannot thus be gainsaid.

Secondly, both novels foreground the way in which widowhood transforms the individual woman's relationship to the immediate cultural environment. The positions of the widows highlight tensions between tradition and modernity as well as between individual autonomy and group perception. While Diana is spared the scourge of traditional widowhood rites, Akwenoh undergoes them even if at the beginning, she resists. Diana, on the other hand, must confront society's perception of young unmarried widows in her decision not to remarry. In some instances, both widows uphold tradition especially with regard to mourning their husbands. By this, the novelists seem to posit that this should not be considered as inherently conservative. As it were, women can employ traditional ideals and norms to their own advantage. Akwenoh calls her in-laws' attention to the fact that by tradition, she is only a widow and they must do all to bury their brother. Diana plays on the traditional perception of widows as vulnerable to get the workers on her housing

project to work without cheating her. These relationships and perspectives function as a metaphor for the widowhood experience in both novels.

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