

## WIDOWHOOD IN *LONELY DAYS*: UNSUNG CASUALTIES

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### Abstract

The concept of widowhood has been a neglected discourse in Nigeria and has not received the adequate attention it deserves through making appropriate governmental policies to protect the rights of widows. Little or no attention has been given to the subject matter in literary studies and this is due to the choice of scholars to focus on other areas of interest in women's affairs than the widow's plight and widowhood in general. However, widowhood is a very pertinent matter in literary texts and is intricately connected to the outer reality. This paper examines and brings to the fore, the precarious experiences of widows in the African society portrayed in the *Lonely Days* from a feminist perspective. In addition, the widowhood situation, and series of events in Bayo Adebowale's *Lonely Days* shall be studied on the backdrop of women's lack of rights, empowerment, and subjugation. Yaremi, the protagonist in the novel, *Lonely Days* is a figure of the inhuman treatment suffered by widows in Kufi land after the demise of their husbands. She is overwhelmed with sorrowful thoughts, but finds solace in the fact that her husband, Ajumobi did not die an abominable death. The findings showed that the success of a woman does not depend on the sustainability of a man.

**Keywords:** Widowhood Practices, Feminism, Women Affairs, Women Empowerment

### Introduction

Women empowerment and fight against injustice to women has been a global case that has been active since the 18th century. It is in that century that women got to realize the injustices against them and began to seek better laws and rules for themselves. It started off as a series of academic debates before it turned to protests, seeking better laws for themselves. This has improved the level of treatment and equality for them, but this gender maltreatment and inequality continues to be a problematic factor in most places, especially in Africa where obnoxious laws are still maintained.

The enlightenment and the women's sudden realization of the importance of the rights of women pushed series of reforms in law making and formation of governments across the world. The realization of the importance of gender equality grew from mere protests to the execution of laws protecting women. However, sadly, the improvement of the situation of women did not affect all the aspects. Munroe in her essay gives a historical look into equal rights citing the importance of Mary Wollstonecraft in the 18th century,

Mary Wollstonecraft is exemplary of those history-making women. Her book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published in 1792, was the first truly feminist treatise acknowledged by the English public. Its continuing literary and historical importance is demonstrated by the many recent critics who have addressed Wollstonecraft's sometimes dated, sometimes surprisingly modern, themes, as well as her unusually diverse writing style. (3)

The quest of these feminists to seek equal rights does not remove the fact of the localization of the aspects of gender rights as different women in different regions seek different gender law reformations. The aspect of change in gender relations that the European women seek is not the same as the ones sought by Africans. Thus, the quest for equal rights and better laws for all gender is localized according to different regions of the world and their customs.

In unveiling some of the repugnant practices against widowhood, one can localize the relevance of this issue and topic in Africa as of now. The Europeans no longer deal with this issue of offensive practices against widows and unfair treatment of bereaved women. It is the African women who must deal with this sort of issue, and aside dangerous and unfair widowhood practices, there are other challenges the female gender encounter in Nigeria. Yakubu states that, "Spousal abuse is common in Nigeria, especially wife beating in polygamous families. The Penal Code permits husbands to use physical means to chastise their wives. Polygamy is practiced widely" (8).

Thus, the Nigerian law system is already lopsided and unjust in the treatment and relation of women. There are many laws against women, and these laws hinder their fundamental human rights and progress in the country. This is the fact that women liberators tackle or bring out forth to the public, especially public officials, to make them become aware of the risk and injustice the women undergo daily. The lopsided Nigerian law system and organization, clearly affects different classes of women. The effect ranges from the most powerful of women to the most vulnerable. The system and organization of the whole process can be traumatizing to the women. Mohammed writes of the situation of Nigerian widows as, "widows in Nigeria endure adverse and traumatic practices that affect their health, well-being, and their rights as women and citizens of the country" (1).

The experiences of these women can be traumatizing and emotional, made worse with the experience of widows in Nigeria. This is the nature of experience represented and chronicled in *Lonely Days*. This paper will study the representation of widowhood in Nigeria as evidently imitated in the text. This study shall be done with a connection to feminism, women empowerment, and liberation.

### **Feminism and Gender Empowerment**

In any situation that gender maltreatment and inequality is discussed in an intellectual setting, feminism comes up immediately. Since the inception of the ideas surrounding "feminism," it has continued to push for the destruction of gender-bias laws and system in the countries of the world. The concept of widowhood leans towards gender bias and inequality due to the reason that it affects the female gender negatively. Widowers do not suffer similar subjugations like their female counterparts. Since widowhood affects the female gender negatively, it is in line with proper intellectual discourse for this discussion to fall under feminism and gender empowerment. In order not to lose focus or miss the point, it will be pertinent to understand the concept of feminism fully and how it is entirely connected to the concept of widowhood.

Feminism has moved on from the movement of emancipation of women to an ideology solid in its bid to push for equal treatment and equal rights of all genders. Although it is not as vibrant as it was in the 19th and 20th centuries, it continues to be a strong ideology that is popular throughout the world. Suaidi gives a short interpretation of feminism as "a collection of movements and ideologies that share a common goal to define, establish, and achieve equal political, economic, cultural, personal, and social rights for women. This includes seeking to establish equal opportunities for women in education and employments" (3).

The concept of widowhood can easily be deduced as the ill-treatment of the female gender and a situation of brazen lack of equality. The unhealthy experiences of widows are predicated on the institution of obnoxious laws, traditions, and cultures within the African society. To understand feminism and gender inequality properly, Millet states that the study of feminism or all forms of gender inequality and maltreatment has to be seen through the lens of patriarchy. To Millet, all faults associated with gender imbalance arose out of patriarchy. He opines:

Patriarchy refers to the role of males in the society in which men take the chief responsibility over the community welfare by and large. The word "patriarch" derived from two Greek words: "patira," and "archy" which means family and rule respectively. "Traditionally, patriarchy granted the father nearly total ownership over wife or wives and children," "classically, as head of the family the father is both begetter and owner in a system in which

kinship is property." This prompts the making of all nature of laws, especially the laws subjugating women. (67)

To women liberators or gender empowerment proposers, patriarchy is a vicious enemy. Many gender-bias laws are rooted in patriarchy which is considered as an enemy of feminism. However, choosing to focus only on patriarchy as the major reason for the cause of these unjust system and law without viewing the wholeness of feminism and the struggle for equality will be limiting the scope of the situation concerned in this paper. Mara in a more generic opinion explains feminism in such a way that it aligns with the situation surrounding the subject matter of discussion. Mira writes,

It will readily be accepted that women and men have not been treated equally and that a woman was not allowed or was not considered capable enough to participate in the various spheres of the society. Feminism is according to my awareness about this fact and a desire to change this state of affairs. This would involve discarding of old assumptions, questioning the pre-defined norms, and inviting new perspectives. It is not possible to define feminism in concrete terms because more than being something tangible it is an ideology and a stance that is taken in favour of a woman. (107)

To Mira, the importance of feminism lies in challenging the status quo in a male dominated society. Situations like widowhood and all the unjust practices that come with it have to be challenged and discarded. It is through feminism and realization of the presence of such injustice that this can be achieved. It is also through feminism that the situation and all the injustices associated with widowhood can be understood.

Given that feminism has been talked about from the historical approach, Halivora delivers a more modern view of feminism. She traces it in history and presents the modern ideology process. She writes of the modern perception of feminism as post-feminism and writes, "post-feminism refers to the perceived failures of the second wave feminism and it continues in fighting for the same beliefs as in the previous waves. However, the movement's focus has slightly shifted; it is less focused on political processes and on laws but more on the individual self" (17). Feminism is also considered as a literary theory on its own by some scholars, for instance, Guo writes, "feminist literary criticism has almost gone through two centuries up to now. This literary criticism based on the reflection of women's situation by themselves in a long term and achievement of their specific and practical action" (3). It is on the backdrop of feminism being utilized like a literary theory that widowhood in the novel shall be established and studied.

### **Widowhood Practices in Nigeria**

Nigeria is a patriarchal country, where laws and systems are made to heavily favour the male population and subjugate the women. The system and processes favouring the men and subjugating the women comes from all angles of the lives of the women. Even in the aspect of women's emotional breakdown and torture, these systems and laws still find a way of getting through to the women.

Across Nigeria, there are systems made to affect the woman who loses her husband. The proponents of these systems may have brought it up for various reasons, but at this present time, these systems are regarded as part and parcel of patriarchy. Odimegwu and Okemgbo write that "in Nigeria, just like other patriarchal societies, women are regarded more as appendages to their husbands. They lack right to ownership of property, they face lots of inhuman traditional practices harmful to their health, such as female genital mutilation and widowhood rituals which both old and young widows are compelled to undergo as part of mourning their dead husbands," (40).

The case of widows is similar to that of other women, where they are disadvantaged by the patriarchal system with laws to subjugate and maltreat them. The women are seen as appendages to their husbands, or at worse, properties, and so they do not have control over how or in what manner their husband's memory is honoured. In most cases, the woman is expected to be the object of severe pity on behalf of the memory of her husband.

George O. Tayo in his own study of widowhood practices in Nigeria focused on Awori sub-Yoruba cultural group as he explores their most noticeable widowhood rites, confinement. Confinement is a widowhood rite that is popular across the country and Tayo presents it in a detailed way. He writes, “during confinement occasioned by mourning and observance of widowhood rites, widows are forbidden from engaging in certain acts and practices which are considered detrimental” (14).

Ihekwaaba and Amasiatu give a detailed presentation of the suffering of widows in Nigeria. In their study, they present different gruesome and humiliating situations in Nigeria, such as proving their innocence by sleeping with the corpse, being part of a ritual to prove innocence and the chasing away of the wife from the matrimonial home. A lot of inhuman actions are carried out by the men and their women enablers. These scholars give a summary of the situation as thus,

Widowhood has a brutal and often irrevocable harsh economic impact on the widow's children, especially the girl child. Poverty may force widows to withdraw children from school, exposing them to exploitation in child labour, prostitution, early or forced marriage, child trafficking, and hawking. Widowhood rites enforced on widows mete out different kinds of losses and inevitably expose them to economic hardships, confinement, and ill-treatment. (7)

These widows grapple with the matter of loss, poverty, and would still be expected to carry out rites and practices enacted for widows. In another instance of these practices against widows, Oyeniya Aransiola and Ayodeji Ige conducted a quantitative study on thirty Yoruba widows, one of whom stated, “I was forced to drink the water used to bath my husband's corpse to prove my innocence of his death” (3). Esosa Mohammed in another survey carried out about practices against widows state, “twelve out of the twenty widows interviewed said as they transitioned into widowhood, they did not get any support from their in-laws” (89).

The fact is that the view of these people that the woman is an appendage of the man, she deserves all that befalls her, especially in the case of her going back to her father's house and not taking anything of her husband's. Nwogu validates this further when she states, “in Nigeria traditional practices have ensured that men retain material, social and moral dominance over women that they are simply unwilling to voluntarily relinquish. Its customary laws on marriage, inheritance, succession and property ownership” (1). Nwogu goes on further to state that this idea of women being appendages to their husbands and properties gives credence to the inhuman widowhood practices in Nigeria, especially in the South East.

### **Widowhood Practices in Bayo Adebowale's *Lonely Days***

*Lonely Days* takes on a different path of story line, choosing to focus on the plight of widows in Kufi. Yaremi is singled out as the central character, or the point of attraction. It is through Yaremi that the widowhood practices in *Lonely Days* are better exposed and explored. Aside Yaremi, there are also other characters that are used to represent these widowhood practices and how they play their roles in the lives of these women.

In this text, different forms of widowhood practices are represented. Through the actions and interactions of the characters, these widowhood practices are made known to the readers. The plot of the text progresses and reflects thoroughly and widely spread widowhood practices in Kufi, the setting of the text.

Yaremi, like every other widow, at first is exposed to the shock and sadness that comes from the loss of a loved one and husband. This is her first experience as a widow. She comes to terms with the reality of her widowhood--the absence of her love and her husband. The text represents it as this,

Now alone in the world, Yaremi was left to prepare heaps and raise crops, all by herself - labouring hour after hour, under the sweltering heat. She had to cut the bushes around the family compound, and appeal to the village men, especially to Uncle Deyo, Ajumobi's bosom friend to assist in mending the leaking roof and rebuilding the falling walls of her mud house. (5)

Yaremi comes to terms with the absence of her husband. For the first time since she had been married to Ajumobi, her husband, she would be needing the help of someone to do things for her. These are things and actions her husband would have done for her if he were alive. Yaremi is in pain due to this, her husband's absence is felt, and she must come around it. This is her first step and introduction to widowhood.

Her sole companion and source of joy missing, she immerses herself in other duties to keep herself occupied. She must take up tasks to fill the day and take the loneliness out of her. Yaremi's daily activities after Ajumobi's passing is recorded as, "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 hard fact that she really was a widow," (11). In another instance, the text also represents the situation of Yaremi and her encounter with loneliness after her husband's demise. The absence of her husband leads to the transfer of most of her time and energy to work. Work becomes a substitute for the family she lacks now. The narrator writes, "work to Yaremi had become medicine against loneliness and frustration; a close fight to fatigue and boredom with; a cushion for daily lives." (31). Yaremi realizes that she is indeed a widow at the moment. Widowhood takes a different and new reality for her. All her life processes and plans are truncated for the kind of life she is to live as a widow. Her life takes on a different structure. The text further elaborates this change in her lifestyle as this,

That was what Yaremi's life had become - now that her husband had died. Hot, fire to be handled with extreme care and caution, lest it burned and consumed everything. Fire up above, fire down below. She must be prepared to walk through fire, unscratched, the fire of life! (16)

The widows just as soon as they had started their lives of widowhood, they do not only come to realize their loneliness, but they also come to realize the ostracising nature of their new lives. The community views them as beings outside the sphere of life of the entire community. It is like being widows have made them different set of humans from the regular humans in the community. These widows get to know each other and share their grief and pain. First, they lament of the loss they experience, the sadness, their new lives. Second, the nature of their new lives is discussed, of the new level of interactions they have with the rest of the community, and how they have come to become *the other*, different from the members of the community. It becomes a new understanding for them that they are on a new level, different from the kind of interaction and relation they had with the community when their husbands were alive. These widows' discussion goes:

Three widows, long before Yaremi, had trudged this road, and had several issues of interest to discuss.

"Our hairs are matted and unkept," they began. "No necklace. No earrings. The world looks at our elongated neck and chuckles." ...

"And we are followed, all the time, with suspicious gaze." (22)

These widows undergo a change in their ways of living and relations with others that they are negatively affected in their minds and daily lives. They take on a new role and position in the community and thus become a set of haunted individuals. Sometimes, they are not seen as the former individual they used to be, they become objects of suspicion and ridicule.

The plight of the widows is further explored as they continue to recount their experience at the hands of the unjust system and laws. It is like in a kind of situation where the society is pitched against them with laws, processes and dictates that hamper their own happiness and growth. The widows in this situation are no longer concerned about growth, they are more concerned about their happiness and their daily lives. These limitations imposed on them greatly affect them. The text recounts another harrowing situation as thus,

Dedewe, for instance, used to cry all night brooding over the humiliation she had suffered at the hands of her husband's relatives ... When her husband died, they had sat her down alone by the side of the corpse which lay on a wooden slab in the inner apartment of a dark room and had asked to confess her sins.

“Confess, confess, confess, confess,” they had told her.  
“Ask your husband to have mercy.” (25)

What can be deduced from the scenario above is the finality of the accusation of people against Dedewe, and like every other widow, Dedewe is accused of killing her husband with certitude and finality by her husband’s relatives. There is no open space left for doubt or an iota of hope of her innocence, she is blamed already for harming the husband without any form of trial. This is the same widowhood practice that other widows undergo while mourning their husbands.

In Dedewe’s experience, there is no free mind, free of bias, to look at the matter on a neutral ground. Individuals, especially men, empowered by the patriarchal laws and system, do not open their mind to the possibility of her innocence; they judge her and hold the opinion they have of her already. This is exactly what other widows in the text and outside the confines of the text go through. They are accused of things they do not know about. A wife is still reeling from the shock of her husband’s death to be confronted with the accusation of having a hand in her husband’s death. This is a bad widowhood practice that has affected widows adversely.

The widowhood practices are not removed from Yaremi, too. She undergoes the same bad widowhood practices as the one her fellow widows encounter. At the time her husband died, strong suspicion began to rise, as usual, that she may have had a hand in the death of her husband. Though, this view is not strongly held, but it still affects the psyche of Yaremi and the way she regards the community after her husband is buried. This experience is captured as this,

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!” (43)

One can carefully detect that Yaremi’s case is similar to Dedewe’s. These women encounter situations of false accusations that seem to have become true in the eyes of their accusers. There is completely no logic presented by these accusers of the assurance of the proof that these widows committed the crime they are accusing them of. There is no logic there at all; the widows are merely accused from speculations and then the accusations are judged as true and valid. This, of course, would be in opposite if it were to be the case of widowers. They won’t be accused in such manner as the text does not present the widowers in the text in this light. Widows undergo all these patriarchal widowhood practices and learn how to cope with them. It takes a while to get accustomed to their new lifestyle as widows, but they would surely have to come to terms with it. Most of these widows do little or nothing to resist these negative practices. To prove Yaremi’s innocence of the crime the people accuse her of, the narrator writes, “but heaven was Yaremi’s witness! Ajumobi died a natural death. He had returned from the farm feeling very tired and had refused his favourite food. Two days after, his condition deteriorated. He was strangely talkative - as if unburdening his mind, his typhoid would disappear” (44).

Yaremi, like other women, is not entirely treated right as a woman. The problem that the women are treated below the level of how they should be treated when their husbands were alive, and it is the same way that it affects their change of status in the community after their husbands’ deaths. As it has been stated earlier in this paper, women are treated like appendages and commodities. This mindset affects how women are treated after the death of their husbands. Yaremi loved her husband and adored him very well when he was alive. However, it did not change the fact that she was mistreated sometimes by her husband. This mistreatment is entrenched in the psyche of the men as women are considered as appendages and commodities. It’s these same men who uphold the widowhood practices to the core and support its continuous existence.

Ajumobi uses his physical power to dominate Yaremi in the marriage. Aside the dominance of Ajumobi in the part of finance and food, Ajumobi sometimes asserts his dominance in the marriage through force and physical power. The narrator writes of it as this, “in Kufi, wife beating was common. It provided outlet for husband’s sense of powerlessness and frustration, in the face of grinding poverty. On a couple of occasions, Ajumobi had actually beaten Yaremi and Yaremi always wondered who on earth, bestowed this right on her husband,” (63).

Yaremi’s husband, Ajumobi, exercises his physical dominance over her that she asks who gave Ajumobi the right to beat her, but no one needs to give Ajumobi the right to beat her, she is seen as an entity below the status of her husband, and so, Ajumobi could as well beat her for correction or in case of any disagreement. This is what the other women in Kufi undergo in their marriages. Women have little or no rights.

The text does not allot space and time for the other women in the text to state their own experience in the hands of their husbands. Nevertheless, Yaremi’s experience serves as the image of the subjugation of the rest of the women. This level of subjugation makes the women not to challenge the status they have been placed because of the loss of their husbands. These women are assigned new, ostracising, and intimidated status and they stick to it with little or no challenge for the system.

In another point of the text, the narrator gives a generic view of the status of women in Kufi. Women are trained to see their lives revolve around their husband and men. The men rule their lives. This perception of women about their husbands leads to the widowhood practices that come up after the demise of the man. Since the man is seen as a higher gender, or the lord of the family, it becomes justified for the practices to continue. The narrator represents it as this,

These women always looked eagerly towards the birth of their next babies which would secure them the enhanced status of wifehood and motherhood. Women of Kufi would spend long time, each day, trying to detect their husband’s mood, pleasure and dispositions, in order to adequately prepare themselves for anticipated resignation or outbursts - whichever one came their way - and in whatever order. (86)

The community accuses the widows of killing their husbands. The same community ostracises them. The men in the community expect them to remarry after mourning their husbands for some time. This remarriage is considered a custom and is compulsory for all the widows in Kufi. The remarriage law, like other widowhood practices in the text, is patriarchal in nature. The woman is not permitted to make a decision of whether to marry or not. It is made compulsory for her to get married. The obnoxious law is made by the men and perpetuated by them still. The men elders of the community present the situation as this,

Time was ripe now for Yaremi to choose a new cap to wear. Time now for her to cast off the robes of widowhood, and settle down finally with a new husband, according to the demands of tradition. “Purification later for Yaremi,” the elders argued, “but choosing a new cap to replace the old one is now! Now!” (108)

It is at this point that Yaremi begins to have problem with the entire community as she goes against the tradition in a firm stand against it. She refuses to remarry as the tradition mandates widows. She chooses to remain single, and this causes the biggest tragedy in the text. She is expelled from the community and suffers one of the worst outcomes of widowhood practices in Kufi town.

### **Conclusion**

This paper looked at widowhood practices in Bayo Adebawale’s *Lonely Days* beginning from introducing the matter of discussion to rounding it off with the thesis of the paper finally dissected and proven. With the qualitative study embarked in this paper, it is noteworthy to state that there are evidences of the presence of events relating to widowhood practices in the text. Widowhood practices in the present Nigeria continues to be a continuous problem to the government and the people.

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