

## THE DARING PROTAGONISTS IN ODAFE ATOGUN'S WAKE ME WHEN I'M GONE AND AKIN ADEBOWALE'S THE LONELY DAYS

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### **Abstract**

The Nigerian fictional writers have displayed remarkable artistic skills in over half of a century. They have helped amplify some of the cultural injustices that have remained endemic in the country. Some of these include the unfair treatment doled out to widows and orphans. Odafe Atogun and Bayo Adebowale in *Wake Me When I'm Gone* and *Lonely Days* respectively have utilized female protagonists of valour who are determined to obliterate all injustices meted out to widows and orphans in their fictional domains. While Atogun's female central character, Ese, is determined to tackle the ill treatments of widows and orphans, Adebowale's female protagonist Yaremi's interest is only in the fight for a fair treatment of the widows. The Socialism Feminism literary theory is the literary instrument of interrogation of these novels. In conclusion, the two novelists ably and skilfully use effective plot developments to score vital points that female personalities in fictional and real Nigerian societies can radically and positively bring about changes that are profound.

### **Introduction**

The Nigerian novelist in a little over half of a century has handled multiple issues within the domain of fictional realities. The preeminent stature of the Nigerian fiction writers within the continent of Africa is certainly not in doubt. They have followed closely Charles Larson who in citing Collins has given an approximate definition of a novel as "a piece of prose fiction that has realistic characters, that deal with man in social relations usually in a more or less contemporary setting" (7). Thus, the novelist of Nigerian extraction has therefore, used the fictional narrative as a vehicle to bring to the fore issues that are culturally contemporary like the oppression of orphans and widows in most Nigerian communities. These vulnerable individuals have been marginalised using the instrumentality of the cultural rules as reasons for such; unlike in civilised climes where these disadvantaged personalities are pampered by the culture and institutions of government.

From the foregoing, some novelists from the country have included protagonists in their plot developments who are desirous of bringing about positive changes in the status quo. These are fictional characters who writers imbibe with sufficient courage to confront oppressive cultural habits existent in their fictional spaces. These characters don't mind the punishment that they stand to face in their fights to liberate the widows and orphans from the shackles of odious traditional laws. It is these central protagonists that will be the focus of attention in this research.

However, in discussing the activities of these advocates for egalitarian societies for all including the orphans and widows, an appropriate literary theory is a necessity. This will provide an anchor in the discussion of the selected novels for this academic paper. After all, the renowned literary critic Eustace Palmer holds the opinion that a "theory can help bring out the concerns, the relevance, and therefore, even the quality of a particular work" (Palmer, 3). It is in the light of the above that every criticism of a literary text should adopt an appropriate literary theory as its working tool. It is this that assists the literary critics in the navigational exercise expected of them. Felista Akidi possibly agrees with this when she observes that the literary interpretation of a novel can have "multiple interpretations that are caused by culture as well as time and place" (Akidi 299). For her, culture becomes an integral component in the literary criticism of a novel. It is this cultural imperative that will assist in the choice

of a comprehensive literary theory for this paper. The views expressed by the scholars of the Chicago School of Critics also reinforce this choice. Charles Nnolim quotes them thus; “there are many critical approaches to literature, each of which exhibits the literary object in a different light, and that the only rational ground for adhering to a particular interpretation rather than others in a given literary work is that particular interpretation’s superior capacity to give us the special kind of insight into and understanding of that work” (Nnolim, 8). It is on the basis of the above that the Socialist Feminism theory will be the literary theory of choice for this research. The reason being that it possesses the principles that are superior to others in addressing the noble roles played by the major protagonists in Odafe Atogun’s *Wake Me When I’m Gone*, and Wole Adebowale’s *Lonely Days*.

The socialist feminism theory seem very ideal for the evaluation of these two novels considering the radical dispositions of the protagonists in them. The theoretical approach is perhaps a combination of two theories; Socialism and Feminism; two that carry out only the burden of agitation against oppression but also canvas for an egalitarian society for all regardless of class and gender. It is the view of class and gender. It is the view of the proponents that in life, both men and women should playing field for both genders (thoughco. com). Ese and Yaremi share from the above postulation. It must not be forgotten that this theory became popular in the 1960s and 1970s with Mary Wollstonecraft’s “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman” published in 1792 foregrounding it.

The kernel of the theory is the liberation of women by working to end both economic and cultural sources of women’s oppression (wikipedia.com). It is also believed that this theory “broadens Marxist Feminism’s argument for the role of capitalism in the oppression of women” (wikipedia.com). The advocates of the socialist feminism theory see “Women’s liberation as a necessary part of longer quest for social, economic and political justice” (wikipedia.com).

It however draws various inferences from the Marxist theory especially in the aspect of historical materialism. It was in 1972 that a defining movement was established for the theory with the publication of “Socialist Feminism: A Strategy for Women’s Movement” by the Hyde Park Chapter of Chicago Women’s Liberation Union. The Notable names associated with this association included: Susan Davis, Deb Dobben, Robbin Kaufam, Tobey Klass and Day Creamer. In conclusion, the view expressed by Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy that social feminism theory is all about “Women who saw the root of sexual oppression in the existence of private property and who envisioned a radically. Transformed society in which man would exploit neither man nor woman (wikipedia.com). By extension, man as a representative of all human cultures and traditions should not oppress the vulnerable ones especially the widows and the orphans in the Nigerian society.

## II

The duo of Odafe Atogun and Akin Adebowale most likely belong to the generation of novelists regarded as new Nigerian writers of fiction. They may not be popular amongst literary critics of the Nigerian novel. This does not deny them their rightful positions as skilful creative craft men who have addressed some germane socio-cultural issues prevalent in the Nigerian space. Adebowale’s *Lonely Days* even though has been considered a must read for students preparing for the Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination, organized by the West African Examination Council, his other novels like: *The Virgin*, *Out of His Mind*, *A New Life Village Harvest* and *A Night of Incantation*, have examined various challenges of daily living within the corpus of the Nigerian nay Yoruba culture and the fiction. Odafe Atogun’s first attempt at prose fictional enterprise, *Taduno Song* has helped define the literary trajectory that he has become associated with, that of a radical writer who fights societal injustices using works of fiction. Like Franz Kafka and George Orwell, he has adopted a style of writing that remains captivating and suspense filled. His second novel *Wake Me When I’m Gone* differs from the established literary tradition of the earlier novelists like: Buchi Emecheta, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Kaine Agary, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, Flora Nwapa and others who have thrown up female characters who suffer from economic deprivation and pitiable socio-culturally induced prejudices. Atogun presents in this novel, a female protagonist who all women should celebrate due to her achievements in her fictional societies.

Atogun in *Wake Me When I'm Gone* predictably commences this adventure like story with a bleak portraiture of the central character, Ese. Her melancholic state of being begins from the angle of a widow who has lost her young husband, Tonto. His death, even though extremely painful, is aggravated by the fact that she was initially advised not to marry him by her parents. Therefore, as a widow, at the age of twenty four and a victim of an "act of disobedience" (Atogun, 6), her journey in life is heading towards the praecipe. Adebowale in *Lonely Days* adopts a similar emotionally tinted technique of having a female protagonist, Yaremi that is also a widow. Ese and Yaremi bear a commonality in love; both have lost beloved husbands in their prime. As expected, Yaremi's loss is followed by a prolonged traumatised session. Thus, the loneliness of a widow whose children are in far away cities creates a situation that the novelist exploits in a fascinating display of literary craftsmanship. The writer describes her dejectedness in the following words' "But loneliness had now pitched a tent, and had become to her, a deep black colour like the night: eternal night, thick and tangible, with no glimmer of light and no trace of life" (Adebowale, 4). She however has a vocation like Ese. Ese as a trader fights boredom with her business engagements in the market place. Yaremi's skill as a dyer of fabrics becomes her instrument to fight loneliness. On one dyeing session she sings a song that celebrates fire as an appropriate metaphor for life:

"Life is hot  
hot like fire  
Life is fire" (15)

Yaremi needs the tonic provided by a song like this to "walk through fire, unscathed, the fire of life" (16). For Yaremi and Ese, life is similar to a furnace that helps mould their destined revolutionary personalities.

Atogun creates a fictional selling locale called the Main Street Market where Ese begins to manifest her leadership skills. In this physical space, her positive abilities are not appreciated. As a woman undergoing moments of grief, she is castigated by her fellow traders and considered as "an outcast" (10). The seemingly negativity attached to her personality propels her to be a deviant to primeval traditions. This some female individual enjoys the "exalted status" of a communal gathering being convened by "the chief ..... to read out the rights and obligations to Ese, who lost her husband months ago" (14-15). It is these duties and correctness expected of her as a widow that marks her trajectory on the path way of oppression that she is destined to confront; the tenet of which includes the widowhood practice that mandates a widow to remarry within six months after the death of her husband or forfeit the custody of her children to her late husband's brother. In Ese's case she has only a son, Noah, who she is to lose "his custody to his eldest paternal uncle" (15). In addition to the punishment for the widows, the orphans of the community "are believed to be evil children responsible for their parents deaths" (18) and should be treated as out casts. These twin communal evils remain the targets of dislocation by the female protagonist in *Wake Me When I'm Gone*.

Adebowale creates a fictional homestead, Kufi, where Yaremi the female protagonist exercises her revolutionary antics. This environment, like every rural community in Nigeria, harbours hunters, farmers and craft men. This society is similar to the domain of Ese, a society where widows are culturally marginalised and oppressed. The novelist makes this very obvious in the designation of "The Widow's Street" (21) as the major event centre in the novel. The terrain of this arena is vividly depicted by the novelist; it is a difficult footpath that is associated with a "crooked laterite hedges..... slippery and lacerated with gulleys, during rainy season" (20). The difficulties and hazardous nature of this terrain tallies with the traditional injustice, that the major inhabitant of "The Widow's Street", Yaremi is confronted with. This street and its geographical disjunctiveness and characteristics exhibit the correlation that abounds between nature and the experiences of the individual. Along this oppressive road, the widows occasionally bewail their "common sense of loss, which include the loss of dignity and of status" (21). Overwhelmed by grief, "they shed tears for the same purpose and laughed the same hollow laughter with the tip of their tongues" (22). In spite of all of these, the widows are sentenced to the continuous wearing of "garments of black colour, which they wore down to the ankle like a harem of religious devotees" (22). These detestable cultures like the forceful shaving of the hair on the head of the widow and other practices have remained selective because the widowers don't go through these

odious experiences. The novelist dignifies this Widow's Street as a "lonely road – their road" (22). It is certainly lonely because Yaremi like almost all rural widows suffer from loneliness. However, this desolate road becomes the theatre where these oppressed individuals exchange ideas of the things that fascinate them and their common experiences as the perceived murderers of their husbands. In the Nigerian society, most widows are considered as such even when they have no hands in their husband's death.

Adebowale in *Lonely Days* marks Yaremi differently from other widows in Kufi. He presents three other widows who are faced with the protagonist's manners of widowhood punishments. Dedewe, a widow, despite being accused of murdering her late husband, is forced to confess to "the sin of jealousy and to the sin of adultery..... The sin of defamation and disparagement" (26). For committing these imaginary offences, she is forced to spend nights in a dark room with the corpse of her late husband. Fayoun, another widow, is forced to do a libationary ritual, "to purge her of all the sins (the people) insisted she too had committed" (26). Shaving of the hair on her head becomes an additional punishment for her. To humiliate her further, the villagers instruct the barber to "cut the hair down to the roots "and sprinkle her head with wood ash and oil it with paraffin ointment" (27). As expected, these dehumanising experiences create an image of "the far – away and long – ago look of a mad woman" (27). Radeke the third widow's experience is not different. She is made to sing the traditional "song of innocence and lamentation" (28). Not satisfied, the villagers subject her to a session of far reaching curses as the murder of her husband. For these villagers, in reference to Radeke, the curses are, "Forever the killer will be hungry and be perpetually in debt..... She will be ridiculed in public places like a lunatic....." (28 – 29). Yaremi's case is not different from these widows. She is accused of turning "into a hawk and killed her man" (43). In the midst of all of these, Adebowale presents Yaremi as the singular widow who has the responsibility and courage of dislodging and demolishing all of these widowhood practices.

Ese on her part, is offered by the elders and the traditions of her community a lease of escape from the punishment accruable to widows, to marry the aged chief of her community. Her refusal to this option is expected. She becomes "an outcast" (23) for the second time. She is undeterred by the punishment that is in tandem with her refusal. However, she becomes the first widow in this society that is forced to marry the chief. She is offered this 'soft landing' because nature has endowed her with fascinating beauty. The chief desires to make her an additional collection to his already overflowing barn of wives. It is this physical attraction that has placed Ese on a lonely road like Yaremi in *Lonely Days*. On this footpath, she is however alone, unlike Yaremi on the Widow's Street where the human traffic is higher. Ese's travail becomes tailor made by the novelist. Heroines in various societies occasionally confront such challenges and their overcoming of them become moments of spectacular celebrations. But as expected, for every arduous task given to any individual, destiny creates a bulwark and Atogun follows this pattern. The homestead of her community's chief suffers from a hereditary curse; for no child adopted in his family survives after some years. He cannot therefore marry Ese and adopt her son, Noah.

In Kufi, the homestead of Yaremi, the amazon of *Lonely Days* continues to beat the path of self dignity. She is different from most women of her village who frequently compete amongst themselves and engage on loud arguments on ways of "(competing) for affection and love of their men" (86). This standout quality makes her an influencer of the women folk of her village and she thus assumes a prominent "position of prominence in village matters" (89). She effuses a noisy outcry against the dominance of the men in the community on matters of tradition. She unabashedly informs the male jingoists continuously that "she was neither a napkin nor a rag to clean up mess with" and not "a music calabash for the clumsy fingers of drummers" (90). In her proud discernment and carriage, she "(exudes) over-confidence and self-importance" (98). Despite her arrogance and self conceit, many men are still desirous of marrying her as a widow. Despite placing curses on these amorous men to wade them off their intensity of interest on her is not diminishing. It is this persistent desire of these men and the tradition of Kufi that create the conflict which leads subsequently to Yaremi's rebellion in this prose fiction. She must as a matter of tradition, marry each of the men who has openly desired to marry her. Ayanwale the traditional drummer, Olanade the village wood carver or Lanwa the rich farmer. For the time is now ripe for her, "to choose a new cap to wear" (107); to "cast off the robes of widowhood and

settle down finally with a new husband according to the demands of tradition” (108). The tradition of this society is a representation of the Yoruba adage that a husband is the crown that every woman wears on her head (*obiri ni ade ori obiri*). Yaremi is set to resist this aphorism.

Like Yaremi, Ese is operating on the same platform of resistance. Despite the village chiefs’ divine incapacitation, the community’s tradition must prevail that Ese should marry the cursed chief. But she refuses and informs the chief that “I am not going to marry you or anyone else because tradition requires me to do so” (30). She makes the choice of escaping from her anonymous community with her son. She is arrested and suffers from incarceration for a while as expected of most rebellious heroes and heroines. She is alone in her struggle for an equitable society; for all have accepted the draconian law against widows as conventional. The vacuum of support created by the people of her locale is filled by a shadowy character, Kpofe, who creates a scale of balance that mitigates the agony suffered by Ese. His presence creates a “deep breath of freedom” (51) that the female protagonist needs. He becomes the “man of influence at the palace” (51) that is needed to ameliorate Ese’s punishment and free her from incarceration. Kpofe has always paved his access to the abode of the chief with “very expensive bottles of imported whisky” (51) as gifts for him. But the ruler is not actually alone in the enforcement of this obnoxious communal law. The priests of the gods of this environment are in active collaboration with the traditional institution in oppressing the poor widows. The chief priest thus becomes an important personality and head of the judicial arm of this typical Nigerian rural society. This revered individual proclaims that Ese has been “found guilty of refusing to remarry as stipulated by the laws of the land” (44) and the punishment for this is the denial of her custody of her son Noah; he shall be adopted by his eldest paternal uncle. The sudden illness of the chief becomes Atogun’s way of breaking the ice. The “wise men in the land” (62) represent a crucial leg in the government of this village. These men in skilfully using clairvoyance decipher the cure for the illness of the ruler; the law compulsorily demanding that “widows (should) remarry or lose custody of their children” (62) must be abrogated from the statute book. This however tallies with the request and agitation of Ese. This turn of event is attributable to “a great god in heaven” (49). On the basis of this celestial injunction, the priests are compelled to embark on the process of spiritual purification that will obligate this evil against the widows. By extension, the recovery from ill health for the chief is tied to his process. Atogun therefore in a great display of literary craftsmanship unties a knot by bringing together the elements of bravery and celestial. Adebowale in Kufi, the fictional domain of Yaremi, creates an event, the “cap – picking ceremony” (109) where the resolution of the conflict in *Lonely Days* begins. This is the arena where the humiliation of the widow begins; for after this ceremony, a widow must remarry or be ostracised. This is after she must have done the cultural obligation for her late husband’s spirit. At the expiration of this exercise, she is expected to shut of “an old familiar chapter of life and (proceed) on a new unknown chapter” (111). Most times, the widows don’t have any inclination of who their prospective suitors are. But this female protagonist, Yaremi has pre information of who her suitors are; a way that the novelist prepares her for the unexpected rejection of all of them. Surprisingly also, on this special event, only her has to make a choice of a suitor. Thus the novelist’s way of making her, a special candidate for the humiliation exercise. She makes a choice because “it is the law of nature. A bird does not fly with one arm of its wings” (111). Thus “tradition of our people is the guiding light opening one our eyes to many things;” (111), the common people are made to believe. This particular protagonist like Ese is set to resist this nefarious law. On this day of the cap picking ceremony, three symbolic caps representing the three men – Olonade, Ayanwale and Lanwa, are offered on the table for her to make a choice from. In an unexpected display of courage, Yaremi, refuses to pick any after pouring invectives on the personalities represented by each cap. For her refusal to make a choice, she encounters the wrath of the traditional institution of her community. She thus becomes a celebrated champion of the widows who choose to remain unmarried after the demise of their beloved husbands. This same society does not impose the same law on the widowers thereby exacerbating the cultural imbalance of the Nigerian society that has impinged on the freedom of widows. For her direful behaviour, she has to face some consequences. She enjoys the unenviable status of a pariah in Kufi and the men occasionally “mumble words of displeasure to depress her” (117). For her action, she is considered to be “an unusual woman” (118). Not sure that her actions are appropriate, she occasionally questions the rightness of them and she wonders if it is “sheer fool hardiness” and if there “was... any precedence to cite” (124). In these

questions, Adebowale makes the central female character take an introspection of her actions. In a moment of self acceptance of guilt, she attempts to go on exile like Ese.

Ese certainly embarks on another fresh start; an effort to dismantle the obnoxious rule that targets the orphans in her homestead. In this her anonymous community that represents many communities in Nigeria, the orphans do not live in the midst of the rest of humanity. They are sentenced to a permanent abode at the fringe of the town where they cannot mingle with the boys of their grades. They cannot play the game of football with them for being parentless. For Ese, “one day things will change” (74). It is this desire for change for these helpless children that draw her in conflict with the tradition of this community. She also desires that “my son and the poor orphans (should) find happiness” (75). To achieve this, she encourages her son to interact with the orphans in the game of football; “next time play with them” (75). She extends her hand of fellowship to these helpless children by visiting them in the company of Noah. Atogun creates a traumatic experience in the life of the central protagonist with the death of her only companion and son, Noah. In anger and frustration, she throws caution to the wind. In a fit she confronts the chief priest of the community to “go and tell other gods there is nothing anyone can do to stop me. These boys are my children now. They call me mother and I call them my sons. They will live here in my house” (115). For this daring action, her punishment is dealt by hanging. To offer her the chance of continuing with her redeemer role, the novelist creates an escape route for her to go on exile.

For her counterpart in *Lonely Days*, Yaremi, rather than self-exile embraces spiritual solutions. She considers the tradition of her society targeted at widows as “the originators of man’s downfall, the initiators of man’s demotion, who hatched man’s tumble and devised man fumble” (118). She sees these cultural habits as “enemies who derailed man’s earthly agenda, and set man up at the crossroads of life” (118). She seeks the assistance of the spirit of her late Ajumobi, a man while alive is a “tremendous problem solver” (119). She also seeks for assistance of her daughter Segi and son Alani. She refuses the soft landing of relocating to the city with her son. But compulsorily, the punishment for her crime is the forfeiture of her late husband’s properties that she has inherited to the community and proceeds on exile.

Ese unlike Yaremi accepts to proceed on exile to avert the calamities that will accrue to her in the enforcement of the punishment that her offence attracts. In her new community, she encounters similar obnoxious traditional rules against the orphans. Here these vulnerable kids are “treated as slaves” (127). Her appearance in this society has not come as a surprise; it had been prophesied that a liberator of the oppressed would travel through the landscape and a fictional character called mama in this new found land had inherited mansion because “it would be put to its rightful use at the appropriate time” (126). Mama thus bears a semblance of such characters that are present in folktales who remain not only mysterious but play crucial roles in the plot development of some prose fictions. The indomitable Ese knows that the nature of her liberation enterprise is enormous but in total submission, she accepts the fact that “once again, I had found myself in a village where tradition would pit me against the people and the authorities” (127). She realises albeit with difficulty that these people “are averse to change” (128) and that her previous experiences in her home community will be put to good use here. Similar to her previous experience, Ese is provided with allies by Atogun to assist her on this rough road. As expected, the priests of the local deity are very powerful in this community, but the young chief of this society thinks differently. He offers to assist the major protagonist in her struggle to free the orphans from the suffocating culture targeted at them. The chief observes that “when the people cruelly want change and they get the backing of the chief, the priests become powerless” (129). He offers Ese the reassuring promise that “I will conspire with you to promote the changes you want to see and you will get my support and together we can ensure that orphans get the good care they desire” (129). With this backing, Ese goes ahead to provide succour to the orphans and thus violates the laws of this land. The punishment for this is madness, blindness and death; all within eight days. Of course, she survives all of these ordeals after the specified timeline. On the ninth day, “the priests gathered their families and left the village quietly, paving the way for a new dawn” (12). The triumph of Ese frees the orphans from the oppressive laws targeted at them by culture and tradition this brings to conclusion the despicable culture that is “a shame to society, to the human race” (167).

Yaremi in refusing to go on exile as the tradition of Kufi demands fights within the confines of her community to free widows from the shackles of unjustness. Her first rejection of the evil treatment of widows is to yank “off the brocade which for over twelve full months, had hidden the beauty of her smooth skin (and) flung off the hateful robes, which stuck stubbornly to her bosom” (141). These clothes represent part of widowhood practices in several parts of Nigeria. But she knows that she is alone in this fight; to continuously confront this evil law of the Kufi people, she requires “a fresh self of determination” (141). She however does shy away from the obvious knowledge that the days to come will be tortuous for her and therefore, she is prepared for “life’s various new challenges in the days ahead” (141). She girds her loins in preparation for the obvious battles ahead.

### **Conclusion**

Atogun in *Wake Me When I’m Gone* utilizes two settings to enable Ese achieve her two different purposes. In each she succeeds in resolving one tradition conflict. These two locations however remain anonymous to reflect the universality of the issues in contention in the novel. It is the death of Ada, one of the orphans that make her revolutionary beseech and she vows “that not one more orphan will die in this village” (121). The ordinary people see the need for a “revolutionary consequence that is requested to bring about light in this dark society with the support of the chief and the professor. It is the professor who summarises the outstanding and exceptional attributes of Ese as “a very kind and courageous woman... qualifies (revolutionaries) need to make a difference in the society” (189). In Yaremi’s case, Adebowale fails to bring her battle against societal injustices to an end. But highly commendable is the novelist’s insistence on keeping Yaremi in the same community without opting to go on exile. She stoutly decides to face the consequences of her deviance. However, Adebowale ends the prose fiction too abruptly leaving the reader in a quagmire of expectation.

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