

**WOMEN AS PREDATORS OF THEIR KIND IN *CLUTCHES OF WIDOWHOOD*
BY FELICIA ONYEWADUME**

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Abstract

*It is a dominant belief and a fact that women occupy very important and sensitive position in society to such an extent that their dispositions affect both their families and the entire society. But their emancipation, in as much as it was profoundly believed to be achieved by re-ordering of the patriarchal control over females, yet a critical surveillance of the affairs of women exposes that the so called obnoxious traditions were spear-headed, most surprisingly, not by men but females even against their kind. That is to say that amidst human problems, majority of the female problems and hindrances in life emanate from their kind. An instance is in the women whose husbands died; which up till this 21st century still persists. Widowhood in Nigerian situation is explored by the researcher using Felicia Onyewadume's *Clutches Of Widowhood in Echoes of Hard times* to buttress the fact that women are really the predators of their kind. This will be done from the Feminist point of view.*

Introduction

... For Society to change, female writers insist that external revolution must be accompanied by the woman's personal growth. Women may be the victims of male insensitivity and social intransigence, but often, they are also shown to be victims of their own shortcoming ...
Gloria Chukukere (1995:313 -314)

Feminism as a diverse collection of social theories, political movements and moral philosophies, largely motivated by the experiences of women in terms of their social, political and economic situation, focuses on eradicating gender inequality and promoting women's rights, interests and issues in society. Proponents of this ideology are called feminists, thus, they adhere to the tenets of feminism. These feminists go a long way to emphasize the relevance of women and their unalloyed importance which were suppressed by men and the society at large. Feminists in their bid to project the interest of women, fail to observe the inherent negative traits of women and so, attract criticism not only by the men folk but by their fellow women.

Some critics (male or female) find that some feminists are effectively preaching hate against males, or claiming inferiority, citing that if the words 'male' and 'female' were replaced by 'black' and 'white' respectively in some feminist writings, the texts could be viewed as racist propaganda.

Majority of the female writers assign very glaring characters to females in their works in order to accord importance to them. Most in that trend becloud the negative inherent characters of females and highlight those of men in the feminists wave. The elites feel that they should write and project positivism in the personalities of their uneducated fellows in order to still give credence to their value since they see themselves in a better position. According to Ama Ata

Aidoo:

Naturally, we would have to admit that the realities of our lives are nowhere as harsh as those of our sisters, who, with the most meager formal education or none at all, have to struggle out their lives in deprived rural environments and oppressive urban slums... (517).

Women who have the opportunity of being educated, and more especially, writers, defend their illiterate counterparts in the race of sisterhood and feminism. Whatever inherent negativisms they portray or exhibit are glorified for the purpose of maintaining stance. Female writers usually show concern for their heroines and other female characters in their works who struggle to exist within the confines of their patriarchal society. But *Clutches of widowhood* by Felicia Onyewadume is a scathing attack on the feminist ideas that men in the traditional African society integrate suffering on the women, rather, she emphasizes that the so called women sufferings", especially by widows are meted not by men, but women.

THE AUTHOR

Felicia Onyewadume is a teacher of English language and literature at Queen's College Yaba, Lagos. She bagged her Ph.D. in English, from the University of Lagos in 1999 and has written many creative works. Though not in the category of renowned authors, the researcher finds in her collection of plays, an embodiment of beautiful and realistic artistic competence, and deems it worthy to explore her contents.

In one of her plays, *Clutches of Widowhood* published in a collector's *item-Echoes of Hard Times and other plays*, Onyewadume exposes the unwholesome traditional practices women are subjected to in some communities when they lose their husbands, which, unfortunately are enforced by women on their fellow women.

WIDOWHOOD PRACTICE

Widowhood has been one of the situations that expose women to unimaginable ridicule and humiliation in Africa and particularly in Nigeria with special reference to the Igbo race. Jan Knappert from Congo admits:

Becoming a widow is the worst that can happen to a woman of the Baluba. She is shaved, and has to pay for this in case. Most of her possessions are taken away from her, often even the hut in which she has lived. She has to undergo intolerable 'purification' ceremonies, such as being smeared with a muddy mixture of dung and urine. She will be held liable for her husband's debts, so that often anyone can come along and claim money from a widow. The widows themselves appear to be willing and even eager to undergo these humiliations because this 'purifies'

them from the odious but inevitable suspicion of having killed their husbands (200 - 201),

In the traditional Igbo society, though widows have been intimidated instead of pitied by the culture of their land, the perpetrators of such unimaginable humiliations, unlike the Baluba people of Congo, where the men folk carry out such condemnation were the women folk onto their fellow women. This is what Felicia Onyewadume portrays in the drama, *Clutches of Widowhood*.

CLUTCHES OF WIDOWHOOD

The play centers on a widow - Lilian, whose husband's death and lack of male issue brought about her ordeal in the play. Lilian lived in the United States with her husband and their two daughters when Obiajulu, her husband, who was equally a bank manager died. Lilian stayed with him for five weeks before his death. On arrival to their village, her husband's brother, Isichei, connived with other villagers and buried the corpse of Obiajulu, without waiting for the arrival of his children -Nkechi and Isioma - a Lawyer and medical doctor respectively, simply because they were females.

The play unfolds with Lilian being confronted by the women, popularly called the Umuada (i.e, women of the clan married outside) who do not mind the pitiable state the poor widow is in before attacking her on the traditional stipulations she is expected to toll. Even Isichei and Okocha, her brothers-in-law do not pressurize her to their quest as the Umuadas. Although, Isichei approaches her to persuade her to relinquish her husband's property to one of them whom is expected to marry her, in order to inherit both herself and her husband's property. The same Isichei planned for Obiajulu's burial at the absence of his daughters because according to him in his discussion with Lilian:

....Your girls are your husband's children, yes, but they can't bear his name for long. Once they're married that's the end. They don't belong here, (pg 139).

The picture becomes clearer to Lilian when Isichei asks her to hand over his dead husband's car keys, insurance papers and other property documents to him. Although subtly, Lilian gets the full message and she reckons:

Oh yes. I now understand why you were so much in a hurry to have my husband buried in the absence of his children. Of course, according to your tradition, they're not reckoned with. But you forget the mental torture this will give them for life. You forget how much they loved their father and how much he treasured them (she sobs). (14)

That is the much the men folk in the play meted on the widow. The vast of her agony was instigated and executed by the Umuada as Onyewadume portrays at the beginning of the play, when Lilian still mourns the death of her husband newly buried, before the arrival of her children. The early visit by the entire 'Umuada' leaves Lilian with the greatest shock of her life, as they come and accuse her of killing her husband simply because she fails to cry as loud as a cockerel to awaken the entire villagers as stipulated by custom. The following excerpt emphasizes that:

Leader (of Umuada); My eyes have seen my ears! Our brother is in the cold grave and his wife is

'dry - eyed'. Perhaps she even slept on her bed last night.
Women of Idumu Olise, weep for your dead hero. I say
weep....

(Mouths form in different shapes. Voices rise in mock weeping. Some women actually shed tears in the process. Lilian stands up embarrassed and frightened at the same time).

This does not stop at that because the women have not started dealing with the widow yet. The leader continues:

Leader: Umuada, before I open my eyes take this woman out and put her in the right mood

for this occasion.

(They drag her to the parlour, sit her down on the bare floor, legs spread out. Her hair is loosened roughly. They take off her upper wrappers, earrings etc. They form a circle round her, all seated. She protests at first but later looks on in silence).

Such as mentioned above is a full indication that women are not saints as proclaim by most feminists. Men formulate the traditional laws, yes, but the women folk enforce them on their fellows.

If they had been lenient on their fellows, may be, certain cultural intimidations of women would not be as grave as they are. This act of malicious acts by women goes in conformity with Jan Knappert's assertion in *Myth and Legends of the Swahili* that:

God has made the hearts of women inaccessible [harimu]; this is why they are called women [harimu]. They would not be called women [maraa] if there were no bitterness [maraa] in their hearts. (Pg 45)

The Umuada of Idumu Olise no doubt exhibit the wickedness as affirmed by Knappert. This is seen in their further dealings with the widow, Lilian. The leader of the women pulls her by her ear:

Leader: We are not here for a child's play. Answers the question you are asked. What happened to your husband?

Lilian.: He died.

Leader: (Hits her in the mouth) You are mad! How can the words fly out of your mouth so freely, eh?

2nd Woman: She has no home training. How are you sure she was not the one that killed him?

Leader: (Pushes her by the head) How did he die? Explain what happened to him (127-128)

At this point, Lilian starts crying all over again, asking them the pleasures they drive from torturing her as if the death of her husband is not enough pain. Her agony delights the women in return which makes the leader to state:

Leader: Very good. Now we're getting somewhere. So the death of your husband causes

you pain? Then you must have a terrible way of expressing your pain. When a woman loses her husband in our tradition, her wailing invites his relations to the scene and for 7 days at cockcrow, her cries wake the neighbouring villages or how else would they know that a full-fledged man has departed this world? (128)

The above excerpt shows that women are not their fellows' keeper. Their hearts are more bitter than imagined, which conforms to what Prophet Musa tells the widower in Knappert's *Myths & Legends of the Swahili* that "Women create bitterness both when they are alive and when they are dead" (48).

Certainly, the women of Idume - Qlise's dealings with the widow show to a great extent some level of greed which they have on her, as one whose husband was wealthy, and who had been enjoying the man's wealth alone. The following excerpt shows that when Lilian murmurs to herself that she couldn't believe such maltreatment:

1st Woman: What did she say?

2nd Woman: (Inventively) She said who are you to ask her such a question

4th Woman I think she needs an interpreter. You know she comes from across the Niger and her Igbo dialect is different from ours.

5th Woman: What nonsense is that? What woman lives with a man for 21 years and still can't speak his dialect?

2nd Woman: Ah! But you know she's a teacher. She only speaks 'Oyinbo' (They giggle).

1st Woman: And mind you, she married the man and his money not his language, (more giggling) (127).

Such mockeries from women to their fellow call for search into the hearts of women to ascertain if at all there are drops of fellow feeling in them. What then do the female writers advocate? Equality of sexes, when they themselves have not had unity amongst themselves, no fellow feeling towards one another.

Another female writer, Lao Russel in her text *Love* states that:

There are women who because of their centuries of womens' suppression, feel they have to be dogmatic to make themselves heard. This creates a competitive attitude with their husbands rather than a cooperative and balancing one (95).

The writer, no doubt, indicts feminists in their actions to brace up and project females' interests in all facets. She advocates cooperation and balance in womens' affair with their husbands most especially, to be submissive as has always been known.

On the other hand, it is presumed that women, due to weak nature should always be subdued, as Ethel Johnston Phelps in *The Maid of the North* emphasizes that:

The woman who "wanted her own way" was often made fun of in folktales, for it is an issue as old as human relationships (xiv).

Lilian in the play *Clutches of Widowhood* is made fun of but ironically not by the men folk but by her fellow women, the umuada. Her discussion with her mother-in-law exposes the fact that all women who unfortunately, lose their husbands, suffer same fate in the hands of the 'terrors of women- the Umuada, She tells Lilian:

Liliana, I have been told how stubborn and head strong you were to the Umuada this morning. Do not allow them to be hard on you because you will be the loser. I went through a worse experience than you will ever imagine. (142).

One discerns therefore that no woman in mourning her spouse escapes the intimidations of these Umuada. Why then do the feminists advocate equality when in practice, they do not prove to be their fellows' keeper? This no doubt is the question in the dramatist's mind as she wrote the play.

At the end, salvation actually comes to Lilian but surprisingly, not from a woman but a man. Her daughter, Nkechi , threatens to shoot her uncle 'Isichei', for daring to disinherit them of their property and for burying their father without awaiting their arrival. He runs to the Police station while Nkechi goes in search of him at the Igwe's palace. The Igwe subsequently calls for police intervention. All lodge their complaints to the Igwe, together with the policemen and the townsmen who gathered there. Lilian's own statement needs mentioning. She states:

Your highness, I have had three torturing sessions today. The women they called the Umuada came to my house in the morning. They dragged me out of my room into the parlour where they sat me down on the bare floor, raining abuses on me for not inviting them to our house at cockcrow with wailing. They loosened my hair, pushed me here and there, took off my wrapper. They promised doing all sorts of unspeakable things to me including shaving my hair... (154).

The Igwe feels aggrieved and sympathizes with the widow. Something that is expected from the women - folk is expressed by the male folk, so to say. On interrogating the 'Omu Qdoziobodo", who is the Head of women council in the town to enquire why she should be there and allow such women to women suffering which she should have settled with her high position as the overall head of the women in the town, the Igwe realizes with dismay that even the 'Omu' is equally in support of that custom of widows intimidation. The interrogation goes thus:

Igwe (Addressing the Omu): Our mother, you have listened to what the woman recounted. Does

- our tradition actually stipulate that a widow should go through all these rituals?
- Omu: Igwe, every community has its own culture and tradition
- Igwe: And does our own culture jubilate over the sufferings of widows?
- Omu: Igwe, we all met that tradition. I don't see why it should now change because of one woman, just because she is not one of us.
- Igwe: I will not hear such a statement in my palace. Who tells you she is not one of us? ... She is a human being, a Nigerian and a woman like you.
- Omu: All she is asked to do, I did for my own husband when he died.
- Igwe: And I'm sure you enjoyed it very much?
- Omu: I didn't, but our mothers before us went through the same experiences. They didn't complain. (157-158)

The above expresses womens' hard heartedness to perpetuate sufferings on their fellows, for no other reason than that they themselves suffered. An act of callousness which affirms Knappert's statement that 'women create bitterness'.

The Igwe is not of the same opinion with the entire women, and so, he discusses with the council of elders and comes to the conclusion that on no account should their daughters and wives be subjected to such animalistic tortures when they lose their husbands. Since he has the final say, he wastes no time in giving the verdict as follows:

- Igwe: I know some of you already call me a hard-liner. But I'm sure you've not forgotten what happened when my father died. You and the other elders said my father must be buried with seven human heads like his fore fathers before him. I refused. I told you nobody would be killed to honour my dead father. You insisted it was what tradition demanded but when I asked every Chief to donate one of his sons to be killed, everybody cried foul. I buried my father with no human head. Some of you witch doctors predicted that I will not live beyond seven market days. You know how long ago that was. I'm still alive. I work with God's wisdom and His golden rule that states 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Life itself is dynamic and so should custom and tradition. Therefore we should not be afraid to change any part of our tradition that is retrogressive, especially "the clutches of widowhood". People all over the world are busy planning how to improve their living standard. We must join them. Elsewhere, women are in the forefront in the fight for community development. They build maternity homes, child-care centers and the like through self-help projects. That's the type of thing our Umuada should be thinking of, not how to shave the hair of widows as if they derive special pleasure from humiliating their mates. That and every other thing that debase human beings must stop today unless any one of you convinces me of their benefits to us. I have spoken! (159 - 160)

The above verdict as clearly stated by Igwe emphasizes liberation on the entire people of Idumu - Olise, particularly the women and especially the widows. It is in itself a feministic utterance but surprisingly not from a female character as feminists advocate but from a male character. The question remains why is the Omu not given such role the king performed? She is of course, the head of the women council, whose advice is sought, even by the Igwe, once women issues are concerned, but the dramatist presents her as one who equally fails to administer her divine role appropriately. Even one of the Chiefs, Ozoma, a chauvinist in the play accuses the Igwe of interfering with the women affairs before the Igwe's final verdict.

Ozoma: Igwe, I don't see why we should dabble into women affairs. This case' falls under the Omu's jurisdiction, (158).

But, since the Omu fails to do her work and salvage the women race as expected, she fails woefully in her role. Although she repents at last, after the final verdict when she tells the Igwe:

Omu: Igwe, I was touched when you mentioned how other women bring progress to their communities. I think we can do something like that, so I agree with you. (161).

Yet, she does so when the deeds have been done and the final decision taken. With the above enumerated points, it is clear that not all female writers paint pictures of male insensitivity, rather some like Felicia Onyewadume tends to negate the idea of feminists and that of Gloria Chukwukere in her assertion that:

Female writers acknowledge the importance of wifhood and motherhood in contemporary African society, and so, undertake to explore the psychological trauma engendered by the traditional roles of the educated women. (313 -312).

CONCLUSION

The claim that women writers have particularly been outstanding in defending their sex against patriarchal subjugations is not be entirely true. This is because women writers like Zulu Sofola, Bessie Head, Felicia Onyewadume and others tend to conform with philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 - 1900) who enjoins:

If you are going to a woman to amuse yourself...do not forget to take a whip with you ... they are full of superficialities, petty presumptions; indiscretion and unbridleness (qtd in Omoregbe, pg 173).

Onyewadume, in her presentation of the Umuada, shows that they really need admonitions in all ramifications, and so should by no means be visited unarmed with 'a whip' as Friedrich Nietzsche advocates.

In recognition of the fact that women's liberation movement tries to remove the impression that women are perpetually doomed to play the second fiddle and its fight against modern attempts to keep the woman at the margins of society and rouse her from

the impotence of accepting patriarchy, it is also pertinent that women should equally realize that they constitute a huge chunk of their debasedness by their integral hatred of their female-folks. For instance, the age long war between mothers and their daughters-in-law in the traditional Igbo society., have been a case that has not been resolved and which seems to linger and will continue to exist till the end of life. Education or not, women all over the world have eternal bitterness which constitute them and which fans into more flame whenever they clash, especially with their fellows or mates. This is why envy, jealousy and bickerings are qualities seen more in women to women relationship than women to men.

Although, women can be persistent when they really want to prove their point as we see in Sun Newspapers of May 2nd 2010 where the female senators threatened to bring Senator Yerima to book on account of violating the child rights Acts, section 27 (child trafficking), by marrying an under-aged Egyptian girl, alleged to be thirteen years, which they accomplished, yet it could be discerned that they are equally no angels as their other attitudes to their fellows can spell 'doom' as Onyewadume portrays them in her play - *The Clutches of Widowhood*.

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