



Gender Inequality and Cultural Stereotypes: A study of Uche Ama Abriel's *A Past Came Calling*

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Abstract

This study examines the role of cultural stereotypes in perpetuating the marginalization of women in society, by focusing on widowhood rites. It analyzes the role of deeply entrenched socio-cultural norms, values and beliefs in sustaining the oppression of women. Also, this study highlights the impact of these cultural stereotypes on women's empowerment as well as their broad implications for socio-economic development and growth in the society. This study also examines certain harmful cultural practices, such as widowhood rites and other gender-based discriminatory practices, that sustain traditional gender roles and inhibit women's empowerment. Through qualitative analysis of the primary data, this study aims to unravel the underlying mechanisms that sustain the subordination of women and propose effective strategies for promoting gender equality. This finds that women oppression is rooted in deep seated norms and values of the society and highlight the need for targeted interventions, including education, policy reforms, and community involvement, to challenge and eradicate harmful cultural practices and promote equality of the sexes for the betterment of the society.

Keywords: Gender roles, Empowerment, Subjugation, Widowhood and Feminism.

Introduction

Gender inequality remains a critical issue worldwide, manifesting in various forms across different cultures and societies. According to Chinyere Okam and Chima Anthony Onuekwe:

All over the world, gender stereotyping is a common place. The man is the macho, strong dominant and aggressive; and the woman is stereotyped as weak and subservient... Thus men fight, compete, prove to be knowledgeable, earn money, provide and protect women in order to maintain their masculinity and match up to the "approved" model (Okam and Onuekwe 202)

Despite significant strides in advancing women's rights and achieving gender parity, deeply entrenched cultural stereotypes continue to perpetuate the subjugation and marginalization of women. Emeka Emelobe says that "since recorded history, women in Nigeria have been associated with mythical and other societal stigmas that have assumed the status of stereotypes that pass as common sense. Such stereotypes are used to prescribe and restrict their activities in the society that in turn, appear to legitimize patriarchy" (Emelobe 529). By stereotypes, we are referring to conventional or formulaic conceptions or images, which according to Rabichev Renata, provide a platform where certain groups in the society are "categorized and represented in a generalized manner" (104). It is most common to find stereotypes in rumours, stories, legends, myths and folktales among others. Rabichev argues that stereotypes have become tool, "to perpetuate certain ideologies in the society through the reading, explanation, anticipation and prediction that it generates" (Rabichev 104) such opinions, however, are often erroneous because those who anticipate or predict the behavior or abilities of others may not have had the opportunity of relating or engaging with the people they classify. One important fact, as Jordan notes, is that stereotypes are unable represent truth rather, they fit into political ideology.

These stereotypes, rooted in historical and societal norms, not only influence individual behaviors and attitudes but also shape institutional practices and policies that disadvantage women. Lending credence to this assertion, Okam and Onuekwe observe that the subjection of women to numerous harmful cultural practices in patriarchal society is a way to validate the stereotype of male superiority. According to Okam and Onuekwe:

Virginitly testing is another form of sexual violence against women. It is a huge sensitive subject not only related to sexual behavior of a person but is intrinsically associated with far more complex questions of gender, sexual intercourse or not. The test involves an inspection of a female's hymen, on the assumption that her hymen can only be torn as a result of sexual intercourse. Because of the patriarchal basis of most societies, the concept of virginitly in girls came to be laden with notions of purity, honour and worth. According to patriarchal constructs of female identity, a woman is a man's possession who has the right to decide when and with whom she can have sex. Thus, the huge importance of virginitly for women was one of the ways of gaining control of the sexual behavior of women...It is not known in any culture that the male counterparts are tested for virginitly prior to marriage. Hence, the practice is seen as sexist, perpetuating the notion that sexual intercourse outside marriage is acceptable for men, but a taboo for women and suggesting that women's sexual activity should be subject to public knowledge and criticism, while men's should not (Okam and Onuekwe 206-207)

Marriage is also another cultural practice, that is also used to legitimize several forms of sexual violence against women. Okam and Onuekwe say that:

The practice of early marriage is found in many parts of the world. Although, this is legal in many countries it is a form of sexual violence, since the young girls involved cannot negotiate sex with their much older husbands as they know little about sex and marriage. They, therefore frequently fear it and their first sexual encounters are often forced. Early marriage is the most common in Africa and South Asia, though it also occurs in the Middle East and parts of Latin America and Eastern Europe. In Ethopia and parts of West Africa, for instance, marriage at the age of 7 or 8 years is not uncommon. The obligation of an under-aged wife to submit to sexual relations and give birth in pains symbolized slavery and such might land her into having VVF an ailment that her husband could ill afford to live with or take care of, yet the exercise of submission is required of her (Okam and Onuekwe 207)

The pervasive nature of gender inequality is evident in multiple spheres of life, including education, employment, politics, and healthcare. According to Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo:

Girls are often prevailed upon by cultural and religious biases to take up arts related courses, while engineering and medicine are viewed as the preserve of the male. Some religious sects argue that women are too delicate and even incapable of engaging in intellectual pursuits or withstanding the rigours of some professions like engineering and medicine. The fact remains that in secondary schools, girls are intimidated into believing that mathematics is a very difficult subject. They are thus discouraged from applying themselves to the mastery of the subject. Usually, one is confronted with the argument that the business of women is to look beautiful to please men, so that they can take care of them and their needs, and give them numerous babies, especially male children who will perpetuate their names (Ezeigbo 51-52)

Even in the workplace, it has now become an incontrovertible truth that the division of labour among the sexes has results into economic inequality and defines professions in accordance with sexuality, especially at it pertains to the traditional role of a man in the private and public sphere versus those of the woman. Okam and Onuekwe say that:

Most men will not approach a lady mechanic for car repairs just because she is female and some women will not also approach a midwife for delivery not just because he is a man but for fear of another man seeing their husband's private property, despite the toll it takes on them. Sexual division of power acknowledges gender power inequalities ascribing to men a sense of superiority, risk taking potentialities and intelligence. It presupposes that men's role is to provide and protect women and children (weaker creatures). While cathexis accounts for the emotional investment and one has in a relationship as well as the social norms men and women are expected to follow. There are many stereotypical beliefs about the differences between men and women based on biological politics and societal constructions of what should be men's and what should be women's including sexual behaviours, attitudes, professions, ownership rights and inheritance. Scientific evidence, however, suggests that although many of these beliefs are,

in fact true, others are clearly false depending on culture and context. (Okam and Onuekwe 200-201).

Women often face barriers to accessing opportunities and resources, leading to disparities in economic outcomes and social status. Cultural stereotypes play a crucial role in sustaining these inequities by reinforcing traditional gender roles and limiting women's potential. For instance, the belief that women are inherently suited for domestic responsibilities and caregiving roles restricts their participation in the workforce and leadership positions.

The aim of this study is to establish the complex relationship between gender inequality and cultural stereotypes, investigating how these stereotypes are sustained and their impact on the lives of women and the girl child as well. By exploring specific socio-cultural practices, values and beliefs that perpetuate gender norms, such as widowhood rites and other gender-based discriminatory practices, this study seeks to unravel the underlying mechanisms that reinforce women oppression. According to Urujzian Vero Ikpris avers that "The persistence of gender inequality in Africa and across the globe warrants a closer scrutiny of gender Ideologies in texts (Urujzian 305).

This study will examine the implications of gender inequality on socio-economic growth and development in the society, stressing the urgent need for a transformative change.

Most importantly, this study will contribute to the ongoing debate on gender equality by proposing strategies for fighting harmful cultural practices and promoting equality of both sexes for the betterment of the society.

Widowhood Rites as a Harmful Cultural Practice against African Women

Widowhood rites, practiced in many African society, frequently place outstanding physical, emotional and psychological burdens on women. These cultural rites, originally intended to pay last respect to the dead and cleanse the widow, often exacerbate the issue of gender inequality, and women oppression. This study examines the various forms of widowhood rites in Africa and its drastic effects on women.

The practice of widowhood rites vary across different African societies, but they share a common purpose as a rite set aside to mourn the dead and cleanse the widow as well. These cultural rites are rooted in patriarchal culture or traditions that see death as a moment requiring strict observances to appease spirits and prevent bad things from taking place. Widows are frequently viewed as potential sources of bad luck, requiring their isolation and purification.

Widowhood rites manifests in various forms which includes isolation and seclusion, ritual cleansing, inheritance and property rights, forced marriage or levirate, public mourning and display of grief etc. According to Samuel Chukwu-Okoronkwo:

One of the horrendous nightmares, that may confront a woman at the death of her husband in various African cultures is oftentimes scandalous accusation from the husband's relations having a hand in the man's death irrespective of how peaceful they might have lived, especially when the woman had not been in good relationship with them (Chukwu-Okoronkwo 72)

Widows are most of the times confined to their homes or an isolated space for a very long period of time, sometimes it may take up to some months or even years. At this time, they are often not permitted to participate in any social or economic activities.

In many African societies, culture demands that widows must go through a form ritual cleansing, which often involves shaving their heads, bathing in specific, or partaking in cultural practices that is harmful to them. For instance, the widow may be forced to drink the water that is used in washing the corpse of her late husband, which is obviously unhygienic. In some other instances, a widow is accused of being responsible for the death of her husband and as a result is often compelled to swear an oath in an attempt to exonerate herself from the accusation leveled against her, sleep on the same with her late husband's corpse, shave her hair. The litany of other woes that she is subjected to is endless.

Widows are most of the times denied the right to inherit their late husband's property. As usual, the property will be inherited by her late husband's relatives, while the widow and her children end up living as destitute.

In some African societies, widows are forced to marry a male relative of their late husband, and this violates their rights in a significant way. Nkiruka Akaenyi says that "Wife inheritance involves the widow being passed down from one male family member to another as if she were a property, which allows for mistreatment and abuse" (Akaenyi 14)

This harmful cultural practice, known as levirate marriage, is practiced with the intention of ensuring the continuity of the family lineage and it is believed that the widow is being taken care of, but the reverse is always the case, as she is being subjected to further abuse.

At the time of mourning their late husbands, widows are always compelled to demonstrate their love for their husbands by publicly wailing in grief, wearing a particular mourning attire without adorning themselves and personal grooming in any form is not allowed.

The widowhood rites have profound impact on African women. The death of a spouse is totally a traumatic experience, but the commensurate burdens of widowhood rites worsen the widow's emotional and psychological plight. Widowhood rites, in the Southern region of Nigeria, especially among the Isiokpo community in Rivers State is a traumatizing experience as seen in the summation of George Tasie:

On a very serious matter such as death, one of the most efficacious means of truth detection as the Isiokpo believe, is to ask the accused to drink a little of the water used in washing the corpse. The guilty it is believed will in no distant meet with death whereas the innocent will suffer no misfortune. Note that this method of truth detection is not exclusively reserved for the widows. ...when the corpse has been washed, attired in the finest clothes and laid out in state, the widow is called upon to sit on a mat by it. With a piece of George wrapper in hand, she wards off flies from the corpse as she eulogizes her deceased husband in speeches and songs. As a rule, until the phase of mourning is over, the widow is expected to eat with her left hand and from disfigured plates or even in extreme cases from coconut shells. The reason is to prevent the hovering ghost spirit of her husband from sharing the meal. For, it is dishonorable for an accomplished man to eat from disfigured plates, much more, coconut shells. The use of the left hand is a show of affront and disrespect all aimed at dissuading the ghost spirit of her late husband from joining the meal (Tasie 158-159)

Widows are subjected to these litanies of abuses and many more. The public show of disgrace, enforced isolation and harmful rituals can be devastating as it can lead to depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress. The culture of widowhood rites involves practices that can ruin a woman's health. Ritual cleansings, especially those involving unhygienic conditions or toxic substances, can lead to serious infections and other health problems. Forced head shaving or other cultural rites that involve physical alterations may be devastating to the physical well-being of the victim.

Widows, who are denied the right to inherit their late husband's property or denied the opportunity to engage in economic activities during periods of mourning often end up being impoverished. This is because, being denied access to financial power or to the property of their late husbands, widows and their children are disempowered and therefore becomes vulnerable to illness, hunger and exploitation.

As part of tradition, widows are always stigmatized and in some cases, ostracized from their communities, because they are being seen as bad omens. This experience is devastating to widows, worsens their situation and limits their access to social support networks.

In recent times, there has been consistent advocacy against harmful widowhood rites. Both governmental and non-governmental organizations, various women's rights organizations in Africa and at the global level, have condemned these cultural rites as human rights violations that exacerbate gender inequality.

Many African countries have promulgated laws with the aim of protecting the human rights of widows, by including constitutional provisions for inheritance and property rights. However, the adequate implementation of these laws in most African countries is fraught with challenges due to deep-seated cultural norms and values and stiff resistance from traditional authorities.

All over the African countries, advocacy groups are tirelessly committed in raising awareness about the harmful effects of widowhood rites and promote alternative practices that recognizes the dignity and human rights of widows. Campaigns are mounted to educate communities, traditional leaders, and policymakers on the need to jettison these harmful cultural practices that jeopardize the physical and mental well-being of widows.

Several governmental and non-governmental organizations provide support services for widows, including counseling, legal assistance and economic empowerment programs. These humanitarian services help widows overcome the challenges they face and rebuild their lives and dignity after the death of their spouses.

Involving traditional leaders and engaging them in a dialogue on reform is important for initiating change. Traditional leaders hold very powerful influence in many African societies, and their support can engender the acceptance of alternative practices and the complete abandonment of harmful cultural rites against widows.

Widowhood rites in Africa, while deeply rooted in patriarchal traditions, poses a significant challenge to gender equality and the entire well-being of women. These harmful cultural practices exacerbate gender inequality and women

oppression, causing significant harm to widows. Efforts towards abolition of harmful widowhood rites is very necessary, with a focus on legal reforms, awareness campaigns, support services, and involvement of traditional leaders.

It is only through a concerted effort in many directions can the human rights, dignity and well-being of widows would be assured and protected as well.

Patriarchal Oppression and Widowhood Practices: A study of Uche AMA Abriel's *A Past Came Calling*

Set against a typical African setting, Uche AMA Abriel's *A Past Came Calling* recreates the plight of a mother and a girl child separated by circumstances of abuse. The play starts with a confrontation between a mother and daughter, both deeply scarred by unresolved issues from their pasts. Following the untimely death of her husband, Temisan was subjected to harmful widowhood practices by her in-laws. Temisan is being physically assaulted by her husband's people who blame her for his death. They accuse her of being responsible for the death of her husband. Here, the troubling issue of subjugation and oppression against widows is being dramatized. Nkiruka Akaenyi says that:

The subjugation of women is pervasive across various communities and ethnic groups in Nigeria, where women are perceived as mere extensions of men, occupying a subservient status. Traditional institutions strongly reinforce gender differences, seeing women as inconsequential, the "insignificant other." This stereotypical view of women, to a large extent, influences the mindset of women, who often internalize and accept this position. Any effort to challenge this norm is met with resistance, with such women being seen as competing with men or trying to disrupt the natural order of things. Consequently, they are frequently labeled as stubborn, out of control, or ill-mannered (Akaenyi 86)

The prevailing cultural perception is that she is a husband killer, and as a result, she is subjected to all sorts of inhumane treatment. The mistreatment of widows is not a theme unique to Uche Ama Abriel's *A Past Came Calling*. In Akachi Ezeigbo's *Hands that Crush Stones*, the playwright denounces the oppressive widowhood practices entrenched in patriarchal society. This harmful practice is also vividly dramatized in Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*, where Ogwoma, the female protagonist, is accused of killing her husband, Adigwu, and is later killed by her mother-in-law using strange powers. In Julie Okoh's *Our Wife Forever*, Victoria, the widowed protagonist, endures severe psychological and emotional abuse at the hands of her in-laws, leading her to lament sorrowfully over her excruciating experiences. She says "I was made to sit on a mat on the hard ground throughout the period. Moreover, my hands were crossed, tied in front of me. That means I couldn't use them for anything. If I had an itch in any part of my body, I called on someone to help me scratch the itching spot" (21). On a different occasion, Victoria cries out "Oh what a life! Suddenly I have become a prisoner. An outcast! I shouldn't go here or there. I shouldn't do this or that! No one should come near me. No one should reach out to me. All types of laws are heaped on me. Just because I am a widow (p.23). All these harrowing experiences by Victoria aligns with the notion of feminists that women oppression is rooted in patriarchal tradition. Ezenwanebe says that:

Women as widows are recreated in the plays as an expendable commodity. If women as wives are twice oppressed, then women as widows are thrice oppressed because they are women, were wives and then widows. I therefore argue that wifehood is the greatest burden of womanhood in Nigeria and the most volatile gender space in dire need of social transformation. When women as wives lose their names and acquired names symbolizing their roles as wife and mother, they lose the right to self-definition (Ezenwanebe 21-22)

The helplessness Temisan faces in Uche AMA Abriel's *A Past Came Calling*, mirrors the struggles of African women, especially widows. When Rosemary, her now fully grown daughter confronts her, Temisan narrates how the blissful marital union with her husband was cut short as a result of his untimely death. Her terrifying experience as a widow is a typical example of the level of abuse African women are subjected to on daily basis as widows in the society. She says:

Temisan: Like a pack of wolves, my furious in-laws descended on me. I had killed the goose that laid the golden egg and so pay I must.

Rosemary: It was a natural death, wasn't it?

Temisan: No one would believe that. Only a man whose wife is a witch or whose wife sleeps with another would pass away in his sleep. From dusk to dawn, I was hounded to confess killing my husband, so his wandering spirit would find its way back to the world of the gods. Every inhuman treatment imaginable was meted out to me. Every single property we acquired during our union was "inherited" by his brothers a week after his death (8)

Temisan is not only psychologically abused, she suffers physical abuse in the hands of her so-called inlaws. The stage direction reads that she is "... covered in ashes. Her hands, blackened with layers of dirt. Totally, alone in her solitude and misery, head on her palm, face, tear stricken, she gazes listlessly into rush in. The men are armed with whips. One of the women bears a large cup and the other holds a twine. Pouncing on her, they drag her around the room, screaming and begging".

FEMALE 1: (Slapping her) As we bury my brother, so your peace will be buried.
 OTHERS: Amen!
 FEMALE 2: His restless spirit will haunt every male in your family and cut them short in their prime.
 OTHERS: Amen
 MALE 2: (Spits on her) Say Amen!
 FEMALE: (Grabbing her ear and twisting it)
 Stubborn witch, confess or die! (The men attack her with blows, legs and whips...)
 MALE 1: My brother did not die a natural death
 FEMALE 1: Your harlotry sent him to an early grave.
 FEMALE 2: Husband Killer
 FEMALE 1 & 2: Witch! Witch! Witch!
 FEMALE 1: Mourn! Mourn the man whose life you cut short...
 ALL FOUR TORMENTORS: Louder witch! Louder! Mourn, mourn your husband.
 FEMALE 1: You loved him. Didn't you? Prove it then. Drink the bath water of your husband's decaying body (11)

The level of dehumanization and bestiality that Temisan is subjected to is opulently described thus: (*Ranting and raving all the while one of the men grabs her legs and pins her to the floor. The others grab her hand and twist them to the back... the woman with the cup beckons to the other who immediately descends on Temisan and tries to pry her mouth open. Like one possessed of the devil, Temisan struggles to escape them and keep her mouth shut. She fails. Gulping and coughing, she downs the bath water of her husband's corpse. Their faces aglow with sheer satisfaction, they shower more blows and insults on the helpless woman even as she writhes her guts out in her desperate bid to rid her stomach of its disgusting contents*) (13-14)

This harrowing scenario above shows how patriarchal African tradition reinforces oppression of women as widows. According to Sam Chukwu-Okoronkwo:

All imaginable inhuman treatment—dehumanizing, degrading and mind bending—meted out to Temisan on account of the death of her husband, even the dispossession from her of every single property they had acquired together during their union just a week after his death, all in the name of the tradition of widowhood practice, when all she just needed was love, support, protection or even pity amounts to nothing but sheer overwhelming scapegoating of the woman (Chukwu-Okoronkwo 59)

In his play, *Aetu* Ahmed Yerima explores gender issues, depicting widowhood practices as an oppressive tradition deeply entrenched in patriarchy, where women are degraded. According to Ezenwanebe "The women as widows are products of cultural degradation" (Ezenwanebe 268). Aetu as a widow in the play under study has gone through much cultural degradation associated with the widowhood rites. Again, Ezenwanebe says that:

Some widows are required to endure harsh rituals, such as sitting in ashes and being confined in the house for months, like Ogwoma in Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*. They may also have to shave their hair, howl for three days, and perform other acts to prove their innocence in their husband's death. For example, in Ezeigbo's novel *Children of the Eagle* (2002), Eaglewoman has to howl for three days to publicly grieve the loss of her husband, Josiah. In the same novel, her daughters protest against the patriarchal myths that underpin widowhood rites (Ezenwanebe 269).

Elechi Amadi's novel *The Concubine* centers around the female lead character, Ihuoma, who remarries seven times, and each time her husband dies. As a result of this, Ihuoma is perceived as a strange woman and a husband killer, reinforcing the superstitious belief that any man who marries her will die before she can have children. In Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*, the main character, Lejoka-Brown, inherits his late brother's wife, Mama Rashida. This culture of wife inheritance devalues women as they are seen as nothing other than mere possessions to be inherited at will.

Having gone through these tortuous experiences, Temisan decides to abandon her only daughter, since she wants to discard everything that would link her to the late husband's as a result of the torture she experienced as a widow in the name of tradition. This action is meant to sever her relationship with her daughter for good. Rosemary was raised in the motherless babies' home, after being rescued by the garbage man. Along with other under-age girls in the orphanage home, she was raped by the husband of the woman that owns the orphanage. Eventually, she ran away from the orphanage home, and live on the streets when she can no longer bear the molestation. As it is expected, life became unbearable for her, and she took to prostitution in a struggle to survive. Then, she became infected with the deadly HIV/AIDS virus. Uche Ama Abriel seems to say in the play, that entrenched poverty, economic inequality, the subordination of women and other forms of structural injustice contribute overwhelmingly to the spread of HIV infection and render current prevention efforts less effective. Young girls like Rosemary struggle to find work because of limited opportunities, and a lack of experience and expertise. They often turn to alcohol, drugs and risky sexual behaviour – which can lead to HIV infection. According to Alexander Irwin, Joyce Millen and Dorothy Fallows “Stopping HIV/AIDS will require exposing socio-economic structures that often curtail people's options for avoiding exposure to the virus and using education, empowerment and social change to loosen these constraints” (Irwin, Millen & Fallows 20).

Uche Ama Abriel emphasizes that when children face overwhelming challenges, their ability to make sound decisions is greatly diminished, leading them to make desperate choices that seem right to them. The conversation between Rosemary and Temisan helps us empathize with her situation, showing that her actions are driven by the desperate circumstances imposed by society, her family, and fate, rather than by her own choice.

In the play, children are depicted in uncontrollable situations that push them into becoming criminals. For a teenager like Rosemary, who has spent most of her life on the streets, criminal behavior becomes ingrained. This underscores the significant influence of the environment on children's growth and development. Rosemary's cruelty is evident in her reckless behavior, such as having unprotected sex despite knowing she has HIV/AIDS. Many children like her are in search of protection, food, and shelter, and some, like Rosemary, may be driven by a desire for revenge against those who destroyed their childhood and innocence.

Through this play, Uche Ama Abriel illustrates the damaging effects of patriarchal values on women and the girl-child. The writer highlights the role of society and government in exacerbating the spread of the deadly AIDS virus. Abriel emphasizes that the neglect of these socio-political issues by leaders will destroy our future, just as it did for Rosemary.

Conclusion

In *A Past Came Calling*, Uche Ama Abriel explores the dire circumstances limit the ability of women and the girl-child to make sound decisions, often as a result of their powerless vulnerable positions in the patriarchal society. Through the characters of Rosemary and Temisan, the play highlights the profound impact of forces from the society and family on the choices of women, forcing them into desperate acts. The portrayal of a girl child, like Rosemary, forced into criminal behaviors due to her environment, underscores the critical role of external factors in shaping her development. Rosemary's life experience, marred by abuse and a struggle for economic independence, starkly reflects the damaging influence of patriarchal values and societal neglect. The play reveals the connection between women's cultural oppression and the spread of deadly diseases like HIV/AIDS.

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