

Levirate marriage in Ray Amadi's *The trials of a widow* and Akachi Ezeigbo's *The last of the strong ones*

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Abstract

This paper interrogates the concept of levirate marriage (inheriting the wife of a deceased) as an age-long practice in Africa in general, and Igbo land in particular with its origin from the Jewish culture and religion. The Jews practised levirate marriage as a way of producing an heir; this is completely different from what is obtainable in Africa. What gave rise to this paper is the extra burden women carry when inherited by their deceased husband's relatives. Using Ray Amadi's *The trials of a widow* and Akachi Ezeigbo's *The last of the strong ones*, this paper notes that while the male writer portrays the practice in a positive light, the female writer rejects it in all ramifications. Applying the qualitative research method, this paper engages in a critical textual analysis of the primary texts, drawing insights from other related literary texts, as well as several other relevant scholarly articles. Adopting the feminist theory, this paper deconstructs and subverts the practice as limiting and asphyxiating to the female gender. The paper concludes that levirate marriage is a patriarchal agenda to oppress, confine and subjugate the woman into docility and subservience and domestic space therefore, African women should reject and resist the practice, and be free to express their individuality and sexuality.

Keywords: Marriage, Levirate, Patriarchy, Agenda, Oppression**Introduction**

African societies have been known to lead a communal life that is accommodating. This communality has helped them to conquer and overcome common enemies because an enemy to one, is an enemy to all. This is what makes them to embrace another man's child as their own because it is believed that a child does not belong to his or her parents alone, but to the whole community, hence, everybody is every other person's keeper. The communality is also reflected in the way they share their farm produce and fruits; this is what Achebe (1958) explores when Okonkwo approaches Nwakibie for some yam seeds to plant in his farm since his father, Unoka, did not bequeath him with any; Nwakibie gives him more than he expected (16). Communality is also exhibited where a newly married woman into a family is considered as the wife of every member of the family, whether male or female; this shows acceptability. Adichie (2006) explores this where Auntie Ifeoma calls Beatrice, her brother's wife, "my wife" (73). These are all positive aspects of communality. However, there is the negative twist to the concept of communality, this is exhibited when a woman's first husband dies and the deceased's brother or relative is expected to inherit the widow. This is called levirate marriage which dates back to the Jewish tradition where a woman married her late husband's brothers up to the seventh in line, because she could not bear children for her first husband (Luke 20:27-38). Ololajulo (2018) in an anthropological study has identified levirate marriage being practised by the Tswana of Botswana, the Luo of Kenya, the Yorubas and the Igbos of Nigeria. He notes that: "Obviously, the most conspicuous defining feature of the levirate practice has been the ascription of paternity of offspring sired by a levir to the widow's deceased husband" (16). This therefore implies that the origin of levirate marriage as practiced by the Igbos has a Jewish origin, but with a patriarchal twist intended to cage the woman who already has children.

The theory of feminism

Feminism is a theory that advocates for the self-assertion of the woman socially, politically, economically, domestically and in all areas of human endeavour. In the context of this paper, the theory encourages women to assert themselves domestically by enabling them achieve individuality. Egbung and Owan (2019) note that feminism is a theory that frees the female gender from ignorance, oppression and exploitation (10). Scarborough *et al* (2021) argue that “The feminist revolution has succeeded in promoting egalitarian view and decreasing the influence of gender traditionalism, but has yet to convince a substantial minority that gender equality should extend to both public and private domains”. Chukwuma (1994) defines feminism as a “rejection of inferiority and a striving for recognition. It seeks to give the woman a sense of self as a worthy, effectual and contributing human being. Feminism is a reaction to such stereotypes of women which deny them a positive identity” (ix). Chukwuma’s definition is apt in the context of this paper since it is patriarchal society’s ascription of inferiority to the female gender that gave rise to levirate marriage. It is therefore pertinent that women break forth from the confinement and liberate themselves from inferiority. In the same vein, Davies (1990) notes that “African feminist consciousness recognizes that certain inequalities and limitations existed/exist in traditional societies and that colonialism reinforced them and introduced others...Importantly, no system should be institutionalized and mandated, and the woman’s right to choose, without censure, should be respected” (8-9). This implies that the woman should not be compelled to marry a man she does not have feelings for, but her right to choose whoever she wants as a husband or a lover should be respected. This is the main thrust of gender consciousness that feminists are advocating. Gender consciousness creates awareness for the female gender to know their rights and privileges. Okereke (2003) argues that:

Gender consciousness creates awareness of all this and informs the primary agenda of feminism, which is the dismantling of the crippling negative configurations of the woman and her positive re-configuration in all of society’s structures. Feminism and gender consciousness have sensitized women to the predicament of their gender and created awareness of their rights, and ignited in them the combative impetus to fight for liberation in patriarchal society and literature (164).

Patriarchal agenda

Patriarchy is a system that thrives on the domination of women, it believes on male superiority and female inferiority. Adebayo (1999) notes that:

It is generally accepted that with few exceptions, contemporary societies all over the world are patriarchal. This explains the universal response to the negative aspects and excesses of patriarchy in form of the various manifestations of feminism. For the women’s Rights Movement in the United States of America and subsequently in other places, patriarchy was synonymous with “rule by men” or “male supremacy” or the “social, cultural, political and economic domination and oppression of women” by men (1).

As stated earlier in this paper, this domination is what gave rise to levirate marriage because the woman is considered inferior, an object and a commodity that can be handed over from one man to another. The commodification of the woman is one of the things Adebayo (2008) considers as ‘patriarchal wrongs’. She considers them as limitations on the African woman. She further notes that

Limitations to the lives of the African woman were and are still numerous; limitations imposed by cultures, religions and male and female mental attitudes. It is these limitations that contemporary female writers expose and endeavor to ratify in their work. What are these wrongs? What practices still infringe on women’s ability to achieve selfhood and boldness in defining their being on their own terms and not on the terms imposed by the patriarchal society. Among these wrongs are inadequate educational and political

opportunities, lack of financial autonomy, oppressive dictatorship of the father, forced marriage, levirate, genital mutilations, male appropriation of the female body, dowry system and inhuman widowhood rites among others (2-3).

The above buttresses the fact that levirate marriage is one of the agenda by patriarchy to limit and confine the African woman and prevent her from achieving selfhood, sexuality and individuality. The objectification of the woman is structured through patriarchal ethos that constitute the hierarchy of power structure, with the woman occupying the lowest rung. Acker (2021) argues that “hierarchical organizations are an important location of male dominance”

However, Gill *et al* are of the view that there is the need to move away from “discussions of sexualization to a more critical and political register interested in a variety of ways in which sex and power intersect” On the contrary, Cruz (2020) notes that the bondage of women through their sexuality has been at the front burner of contemporary scholarship. He argues that his paper “reflects on the contemporary scholarly juncture of bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, sadism/masochism (BDSM) and race”. This paper aligns with Cruz’s argument because levirate marriage is one of patriarchal agenda to dominate and subject the African woman to bondage.

Levirate marriage in Ray Amadi’s *The trials of a widow*

The novel is written by a male author who assumes that levirate marriage is for the interest of the widow, perhaps he is oblivious of the fact that levirate marriage places an extra burden on the widow who struggles alone to cater for the needs of her children. The narrator notes that Egololu, the widow in the novel struggles “to raise her children all by herself” (2). She had three children from Wilfred her first husband, after his demise, as patriarchal tradition demands, she marries the husband’s cousin who gave her five more children, making a total of eight children. Egololu’s suffering alone to take care of her children contradicts Ololajulo’s argument that

The levir in the pre-colonial Igbo society, according to Chioma Korieh, was conferred with the normative role of siring children, if the widow’s family is not considered complete, among other functions such as managing the property held in trust for her minor sons, assisting her by providing labour for clearing, ploughing, planting and harvesting, and contributing to the maintenance of her household (2018, 16).

This paper argues that levirate marriage is a patriarchal agenda to oppress, confine and subjugate the woman into docility and subservience. Although, it is overtly intended to support the widow, it connotes the commodification and inheritance of the woman who must pass from one successor to another. The narrator captures it succinctly

Six years later, she remarried to another man in the village who was her late husband’s cousin. She thought this would afford her with some security, but it was a marriage fraught with distrust, heartache and eventual abandonment. She lived in utter misery until eventually she was publicly disowned by her second husband after further encumbering her with five more children. The man did not even forget to declare that he had no relationship with the product of the union (7-8).

This is a typical manifestation of levirate marriage as a patriarchal agenda to suffocate and frustrate the woman. Ololajulo’s argument that the levir manages the property of the deceased is further flawed as we observe in the novel that, he is rather the one who champions the destruction of Wilfred’s *Obi*; a symbol and representation of a man’s wealth, personality, identity and prestige in the community. The narrator tells us that “the presence of an *Obi* in a compound attracted respect as it announced that the head of that household was a title man” (3). Egololu’s second husband abandoned not only her, but the five more children he made her to have. This is a clear manifestation of abandonment, wickedness and man’s inhumanity to

woman. The author of the novel sees nothing wrong with this because he is also a patriarchal figure, patriarchy confines the woman to the domestic space. Okereke (2018) identifies these domestic spaces to include the kitchen, the bedroom, the delivery room or labour ward, the farm, the stream and the market (169). She notes that male writers consign “female characters to domestic and procreative responsibilities, and robbing them of economic power and western education, in line with their stereotyped roles as dependents, caregivers and baby breeders in patriarchal culture” (168).

Another dimension to levirate marriage is where the widow may not be asked to remarry the late husband’s relative, but she is considered as the property of the family. This implies that regardless of her age, she remains the property of the kindred for as long as she lives. She cannot remarry any man of her choice; if she desires to remarry, it must be a man from the late husband’s family. Igwe (2009) explores this in his novel *Against the odds*; Uridiya is the widow of Nnorom, the husband she has married for twenty years without a child. The family had pressurized him to take another wife, but he stood by the wife, twenty years after, he gives birth to a son, Jamike. And Jamike was just two years when his father died. Uridiya struggles alone to take care of her only child without help from the brother-in-law. Jamike was almost a drop-out from school if not for the timely intervention of the school headmaster. He enquires about the brilliant boy and he is directed to their house; Uridiya cannot take a decision that concerns her son alone, regardless of the fact that she is suffering alone. “Uridiya called on Akudike to come out to see who had come to visit them” (27). The headmaster asks Uridiya if she is the mother of the intelligent boy who is on the verge of being thrown out of school because he cannot pay his school fees; even though he has an uncle who could help. The widow’s response to the headmaster peeves the man of the house; he chided her for attempting to expose his inadequacies as the head of the household. But the assertive woman responds back by saying “Oh, I will shut up. When he asks me the next question, you tell me what to answer. Pardon me, headmaster. This is the way they shut me up in this compound. I have no say, not even to tell you that Jamike is my child without a rebuke from those who own me” (28). The concept of ownership here is predicated upon the bride price paid on the woman which has automatically made her a commodity of the family with or without the presence of her husband.

However, it is not only men who are agents of patriarchy, some women have been recruited as oppressors of their fellow women. The incorporation of women against women is what Boyle (2020) calls ‘honour-based’ violence. She goes further to explain that Gills (2020) argues that honour-based violence expands the continuum of violence against women. “Expanding the continuum in this way means including acts which involve female perpetrators (albeit a minority). But asking who benefits helps to keep the role of patriarchal structures in view”. Mr. Okwu who volunteers to support Egololu present her case in the court; as someone who has been mandated by Egololu’s son who is out of the country with the power of attorney to represent him, is looked upon as a man who has been wooed and bewitched by the widow whose plan is to snatch Mr. Okwu away from his wife. This negative portrayal of Egololu comes from a fellow woman who advises Lucilla (Okwu’s wife) to caution her husband to stop defending the widow (Egololu), as well as open her eyes clearly and read the handwritings on the wall. She uses proverbs to deliver her ill-intentioned message. “we may be gracious enough to allow a neighbor take a few nuts from our bunch, but when that neighbour tries to carry the whole bunch, we must resist vehemently” (62). Ojiaku insinuates that Mr. Okwu spends more time with the widow than he does with the wife and concludes “but she is a woman and your husband is a man” (62). This raises a very fundamental dimension that feminist writers should pay critical attention to; it is no longer men who are agents of patriarchy and oppressors of women, women are now agents of patriarchy and they are oppressing their fellow women. Aboh (2018) notes that “women sometimes play dominant roles in the debasement of other women” (110). The positive impact that Egololu has created in the family of Mr. Okwu that propelled him to stand by her has been jettisoned by Ojiaku whose aim is to create enmity between the two women. Aboh adds that “the woman can be her own oppressor just as the man can be his own subjugator” (123).

Levirate marriage in Akachi Ezeigbo’s *The last of the strong ones*

Ezeigbo is an African female writer who like other feminist writers are strongly against levirate marriage because of the psychological and emotional trauma the widow undergoes. They create female characters

who resist the practice as it cages them and prevents them from expressing their sexuality. In the novel, Ezeigbo creates Onyekozuru who rejects levirate marriage after the death of her husband. Having been prevented as a maiden to choose her husband, the mature and experienced woman now refuses to be compelled to marry Umeozo's son as a second husband.

Some of Umeozo's people were not pleased with my new-found freedom and initiative. They held a meeting and persuaded Udoe, the eldest son of my dead husband to take me in, as tradition allowed. They talked about *Nkushi* and told me Udoe would be my new husband (58).

Traditional African society thrives greatly on female oppression and male superiority; this has been entrenched into the psyche of everybody regardless of the fact that the practice is suffocating. It has become a way of life. Boyle (2020) notes that "The continuum of men's violences allows us to think of violence as being gender based not because of who it targets but, rather, because of how that violence is understood in relation to perpetrators' gender performances".

The payment of the bride price on the woman designates her as a commodity and property that is owned by the family that should be inherited, as long as the bride price subsists. Eshiet (1997) identifies the bride price as one of patriarchy's instrument to confine the woman. He argues that the bride price "ensnares women and keeps them as chattel in a male culture" (22). Corroborating Eshiet's argument, Olufunwa (2008) notes that "The practice of paying bride price, for example, is seen to have an overt, negotiable exchange value, turning marriage, in a fundamental sense, into a commercial transaction" (108). Patriarchy prescribes that the woman should be dominated and subjugated, but feminism advocates for the self-assertion and self-actualization of the woman in all human endeavours. In *The last of the strong ones*, Onyekozuru states

I therefore rejected a husband. Some of them got upset and said that I had done wrong by rejecting their decision. In the end, they told me I was free to have a man of my choice from among the nuclear or the extended family....I could not choose any of them. The thought of taking one of Umeozo's sons as a husband nauseated me. How could I sleep with the son of my dead husband? (58)

The practice of levirate marriage by the Igbo people completely contradicts the intention of the founding fathers of the practice. The Jews who are the initiators of the practice introduced it because the widow could not give her late husband children. In *The last of the strong ones*, Onyekozuru who is expected to choose a second husband from any member of the nuclear or extended family repudiates the practice since she has finished having her children, and therefore does not see the need for a husband. She tells them "...I told them I did not want to have any more children....I repeated that I wanted no more children and stomped off" (58-59). She exercises her feminist right and walks out of a suffocating environment to enjoy her personal freedom.

Since the intention of levirate marriage in Igbo land is not as a result of childlessness as practiced in the Jewish tradition; but a patriarchal agenda to stifle the woman in tradition, and prevent her from achieving individuality and expressing her emotional desires; female writers create female characters who reject it; that is why even when Onyekozuru has informed them that she is not interested in marrying anyone of the men in the family because she is through with childbearing, it did not please them because, they were not happy with her new-found freedom and initiative (59). Elsewhere, this researcher has argued that "feminist writers now create female characters who defy patriarchal expectations of women who assert themselves sexually without feeling ashamed". They warned her, "about the danger of looking for a lover outside the family" (58). Ezeigbo recreates the modern traditional African woman to resist cultural practices that silence her. Egbung (2013) notes that Onyekozuru resists the traditional by levirate, and refuses to be inherited by her late husband's relation (14).

Ezeigbo creates Onyekozuru to reject levirate marriage; even after publicly rejecting the practice amongst Umeozo's relatives, impotent Abazu is still not convinced because he feels with his influence and wealth in the community, Onyekozuru will be cowed into accepting his proposal. The narrator tells us that

“Some months after the meeting with the extended family, one of them paid me a visit in the night... Even then he was a rich man and had some of the qualities that our people respect in a man. He became a titled man too at an age most men still struggle to find their feet” (60). His position and achievements in Umuga community means nothing to an assertive Onyekozuru who has resolved within her not to be inherited by her in-laws. If she must have anything to do with any man, it has to be someone she has feelings for. Olufunwa (2008) acknowledges Ezeigbo’s stance and notes that “Increased assertiveness in women, Adimora-Ezeigbo suggests, is crucial to changing stereotyped notions of women as passive victims of patriarchy” (116-117). Olufunwa (2008) argues that

Abazu’s impotence in the novel influences his relationship with Onyekozuru in a particularly resonant way. He is unable to assert the sexual dominance which culture bestows on him, but cannot accept the compromises his predicament naturally entails and thus seeks to marry her...so that he can pass himself off as a virile without needing to prove it...women are reduced to sexual objects that exist solely for the gratification of men (116).

African female writers are making a conscious effort to liberate their female characters from oppression and silence. Ba (1980) writing from the Moslem society creates a character in *So long a letter* who vehemently rejects levirate marriage. Though she emerges from the Islamic religion that puts women in purdah, Glas *et al* (2021) notes that “certain men and women are inclined and equipped to deviate from dominant patriarchal religious interpretations”. After suffering from betrayal and abandonment in the hands of her husband Modou Fall, and thirty years of marriage with twelve children, Ramatoulaye speaks out against exploitation and oppression when her brother-in-law, Tamsir comes to inherit her as tradition demands. In her letter to her friend which is the crux of the novel, she narrates her experiences in marriage to Aissatou.

The woman is considered as a property to be inherited in a patriarchal African society; the traumatic and emotional pains she goes through is insignificant. This is a woman who just lost her husband and is still mourning him, she is yet to recover from the trauma of abandonment and bereavement, yet another man sees her a commodity to be inherited. That is why Okoye (2009) argues that “Patriarchy as we must know is a system of male authority which oppresses women making them submissive, docile and religiously adherent to tradition and culture which consider them as mere appendages to the society” (334).

Feminist Repudiation of Patriarchal Agenda

African female writers are at the forefront championing the rejection of traditional practices that tend to oppress and subdue the woman. They achieve that by creating assertive female characters in their literary pieces. Egbung (2018) notes that “Patriarchal tendencies which oppress women have given rise to feminism” (1). That is why in *The last of the strong ones*, Ezeigbo creates the feministic Onyekozuru to reject levirate marriage because it is one of patriarchy’s agenda to confine and subjugate the woman. Okereke (2003) notes that “the major agenda of the patriarchal ideology is to keep the woman “in her place”, and ensure the perpetuation of the status quo of male superiority” (64). But female characters are repudiating these patriarchal practices. This is so because Okereke notes that “The feminist ideology seeks to liberate women from the shackles of patriarchal stereotypes by defining them as individuals with unlimited capabilities and potentials like men” (65). The status quo practice of male superiority has been challenged by feminist writers and it has been at the front burner of feminist discourse.

African female writers are speaking back by creating female characters who through their idiolects reject the silence that patriarchy has confined them to. Udumukwu (2007) notes that

Therefore, by writing, African women make not only themselves present, but they use their skills of writing to clear a space for other women to appear and to assert their authority. By doing this the women render their reality as visible to signification. In other words, by writing about their experiences, these women, who have hitherto

been contained in the prison-house of silence, are reconstructed as subjects actively involved in reshaping their situations. (30)

Feminists are re-writing the scripts by reversing all patriarchal orders that stifle and confine the African woman. This is important because awareness has been created about the negative impact these orders have on women; as well as the changes that have evolved over time. Ololajulo (2018) notes that levirate marriage belongs to the past because contemporary society has undergone changes. He describes “levirate as a cultural misnomer and a practice which the people have since abandoned” (89-90). Feminists’ resistance of patriarchal agenda empowers the women to be bold, assertive and free to express their sexuality in a manner that gives them joy and happiness. The rejection is as a result of awareness that has been created by African female writers through their artistic creation. Adebayo (2008) observes that “Up to now, only very few women who recognize that certain negative norms and traditional practices like bride-price, levirate, infibulation, childhood marriage are wrong have passed on to action programmes leading to changes” (30).

The above assertion affirms the fact the levirate marriage is one of patriarchal agenda to keep in the woman in her place as she is considered as a property having been bought over through the bride price. Young and Turner (1993) note that “Remarkably, the idea of women as property of their husbands has been used to justify the levirate, especially the continued procreation of a man posthumously” (70). Ezeigbo empowers Onyekozuru to reject levirate marriage through her assertive use of language “I therefore rejected a husband” (58), and imageries that represent freedom and independence.

In the same vein, Ramatoulaye in *So long a letter* protects her new found freedom by speaking out against any form of oppression in any guise. Having been exploited and abandoned by her late husband. Orabueze (2010) argues that “It is only through her voice raised in protest that she can gain her freedom, her family’s and the entire country’s (291).

Just like Onyekozuru in *The last of the strong ones* rejected the impotent Abazu who came to inherit her, Ramatoulaye likewise repudiates Tamsir who in the company of the Imam and Mawdo, his late brother’s friend comes to inherit what he considers to be his legitimate right. “Usually, it is the younger brother who inherits his elder brother’s wife. In this case, it is the opposite. You are my good luck. I shall marry you. I prefer you to the other one, too frivolous, too young. I advised Modou against that marriage” (57).

Years after, the humiliated woman regains her voice and speaks back in a feminist idiolect spiting tradition and culture. She tells her brother-in-law, “Tamsir, purge yourself of your dreams of conquest. They have lasted for forty days. I shall never be your wife” (58). Ramatoulaye grows from a docile woman to an assertive one; and this is the creation of the writer, who though from the Moslem world gives women a voice. Okereke argues that

Women writers show their female characters growing from using a feminine dialect to using a feminist idiolect. The feminine dialect reflects their submissiveness and inferiority in the incarcerating context of an oppressive marriage, while the feminist idiolect reflects their rebellion and assertiveness when they strike out of the infantilizing male tutelage in marriage into autonomy and multi-dimensional expansion. (173).

And this transformation is usually experienced at the end of the novel where the woman has gained knowledge through her life’s experiences. Okereke (2018) further notes that “This graduation from a feminine dialect at the beginning of a novel, to a feminist idiolect by the end of the novel, usually plots the female character’s growth from a feminine to a feminist consciousness” (173). Adichie also upholds the transformation of women from docility to relevance through her character portrayals. Egbung and Akpagu (2019) argue that “Chimamanda Adichie as a post-colonial African female writer creates female characters who resist imperialistic tendencies and uphold African identity” (4). Therefore, African female writers create assertive female characters who repudiate levirate marriage because it is one of patriarchal society’s agenda to oppress and cow the woman.

One the other hand, Ezeigbo is a female writer who knows where it pinches the African woman, therefore, she creates Onyekozuru who rejects levirate marriage in spite of the pressure and threat she receives from her in-laws. She values her personal freedom as a mature woman who has gained experience having been compelled to marry an old man as a maiden. Onyekozuru displays her feminist stunts and refuses to be cajoled into the practice even from a prominent Abazu. Adebayo (1999) argues that “All versions of feminism assert that women have in the past been surpassed and oppressed by men through patriarchal norms, which have been rationalized as natural” (26). What patriarchy considers as natural is unnatural for feminists, hence the repudiation.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the concept of levirate marriage as a patriarchal agenda to oppress, confine, subjugate, cage, domesticate and make the African woman docile using the qualitative research method. This is achieved by applying a close textual analysis of Ray Amadi’s *The trials of a widow* and Akachi Ezeigbo’s *The last of the strong ones* and drawing examples from other literary texts by African male and female writers. While the male writers promote the practice of levirate marriage as a norm, the female writers through their female characters repudiate it because of the commodification of the woman, and the extra burden it places on her as she is doubly oppressed. Oppressed in the sense that the female character in the texts explored is compelled by tradition to accept levirate marriage; and further encumbered with more children, and thereafter abandoned by the man who compelled her to remarry. The female characters subvert the patriarchal norm through their assertive use of language and imageries.

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