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The Subaltern Status of Nigerian Widows due to Patriarchy in *Lonely Days*

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Abstract

This research attempts to explore the subalternity of Nigerian widows in Bayo Adebowale's *Lonely Days* while employing the feminist lens of Gayatri Spivak. The methodology applied is a qualitative-interpretive by applying the textual analysis model of Catherine Belsey (2013). As portrayed in the selected novel, consequent upon the death of their husbands, the widows of Kufian village of Nigeria face subalternity i.e., dehumanization and speechlessness due to patriarchal oppression. Patriarchal hegemony disallows social mobility of the widows including their right to remarry according to their will. Widows are forced to remarry through a humiliating ritual of cap-picking ceremony. The findings show that females do not have the right to decide about their lives. Those who rebel the patriarchal authority have to face humiliation, confiscation of property, social ostracism, and loneliness. This paper concludes that widows are made victimized, marginalized and voiceless due to oppression caused by patriarchy.

Keywords: *Lonely Days*, Patriarchy, Subalternity, Widows

Introduction

“In the feminist context, patriarchy refers to a system of male power—economic, social, political, material, ideological and psychological—that produces the oppression of women” (Gardner, C.V. 2006, p.164). According to Encyclopedia Britannica (2023), patriarchy is a “hypothetical social system in which the father or a male elder has absolute authority over the family group; by extension, one or more men (as in a council) exert absolute authority over the community as a whole”. The British sociologist and patient’s rights advocate, Beechey (1979) argues “the concept of patriarchy has been used within women’s movement to analyze the principles underlying women’s oppression” (p. 66). The term subaltern literally means “of lower rank”, but Spivak holds that the subalterns do not get a chance to speak for themselves, and are always spoken for and represented by others. They remain marginalized and mute. She holds that subalterns cannot speak because whenever they get a chance to speak, they no more remain subaltern. She considers the women folk of the Third World under patriarchal system as the ultimate subaltern group as she, in her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, says, “The subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow”(p. 83).

Women are physically weaker human beings. Males have usually upper hand in any human society. That is why, females are at the receiving end due to patriarchy. The plight of the women needs to be highlighted for the sake of amelioration. Nigeria is a Third World country and the women, especially widows of the society, face the same dire

consequences at the hands of patriarchal hegemony. Bayo Adebawale, a Nigerian novelist writing in English, has pictured, through his novel, *Lonely Days*, the troubled lives of widows under the grinding stone of patriarchy in the African society, specifically in Nigeria. The lives of the females are made miserable by the males upon the death of their husbands.

Below is the review of the related literature on the novel *Lonely Days* which spots the gap where the current study fits in to add to the already available research work in the present relevant area of research.

Literature Review

Patriarchy has always been one of the foremost agencies causing the plight of women in society. Radical feminism is basing its very existence on the impact of patriarchy. The radical feminists ascribe the bondage of females to the dominant position of males in every sphere of life. The text of the novel *Lonely Days* has been explored from various angles by researchers.

Akujobi (2021) described the plight of the widow's consequent upon the deaths of their husbands. They have suffered immensely. Among them, Yaremi, a widow, has raised her voice against the customs and patriarchy which have caused her a great tragedy in her later lonely days. She has been ostracized and expelled from the community. The widows are unsung casualties, unspoken for. Though the miseries of the widows have been highlighted in this article, but they have not been shown as subalterns, the main focus is on the element of oblivion by other people. Though the widows have suffered a lot still

their miseries and injuries have not been embalmed by anyone through appreciation or by expressing sympathy.

Olugunle (2018) conducted a comparative analysis of the novels *Things Fall Apart* and *Lonely Days*. He opines that domestic violence is a universal phenomenon and exists across cultures, climes, countries, and continents. He further holds that domestic violence entails so many other evils and abuses in the society.

Olugunle (2019) applied Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis on the lead character of *Lonely Days* Yaremi, and finds that the author is optimistic about the future and liberation of the protagonist from the clutches of patriarchy and social oppression.

Olugunle (2019) also concludes that Yaremi has a strong self-determination and ego and never lets herself give in. She uses defense mechanism in case of any psychological demand. She sometimes gets compulsive, repetitive and narcissistic. This article also concludes that Yaremi at times has shown her repressed emotions lying in the unconscious in her conscious actions.

Raimi (2016) approached the text of the novel *Lonely Days* through discourse analysis focusing on the use of proverbs. The proverbs have been explored for the enunciation of the depiction of the plight of the widow, Yaremi, the protagonist. The article explores that the proverbs and proverbial devices depicted the experiences and feelings of the widow, Yaremi. The proverbs work as epistemic violence perpetrated against women.

The above discussion shows that the selected novel, *Lonely Days*, though studied from various other angles, has not been researched from Spivakian subaltern perspective.

The work ascribes patriarchy as the main source of the subaltern position of the women of the Third World. This study adds to the existing human knowledge in the research field by filling in the mentioned gap.

Methodology

This research is qualitative-interpretive in nature. The relevant excerpts of the novel are analyzed through the lens of Spivakian theory of subalternity presented in her canonical essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*. Traditions, religion, superstitions (stereotypes), and sexuality are the agencies responsible for the plight i.e., subalternity of the widows in the novel. However, the current study is delimited to patriarchy as a source of subalternity of widows in *Lonely Days*. The researcher employs Belsey's (2013) model of textual analysis for the analysis and interpretation of the text of *Lonely Days*. Belsey (2013) claims "Textual analysis is indispensable to research in cultural criticism, where cultural criticism includes English, cultural history and cultural studies, as well as any other discipline that focuses on texts, or seeks to understand the inscription of culture in its artefacts" (p. 160). She endorses the right of the researcher to interpret the text from personal standpoint as she says, "Meaning subsists in the relations between people, inscribed in signifiers, sounds, and images" (p. 167). Further, she remarks, "Meaning is inevitably plural" (ibid) by which she means that a researcher has the right to search for new meanings in the text already explored. The method and model employed for textual analysis and interpretation of the text put the researcher in a position to explore patriarchy, a phenomenon of radical feminism, as a factor responsible for the plight of widows in Indian society from a personal standpoint.

The women especially widows in Nigerian society are vulnerable as depicted in the novel, *Lonely Days*. This study analyses the text of the novel to show how far patriarchy is responsible for the plight of the widows in Nigerian society.

Analysis and Discussion of Bayo Adebawale's *Lonely Days*

In *Lonely Days* (2006), patriarchy plays a significant role in effecting subalternity of widows in Nigerian society. The following is the analysis and discussion of the data regarding patriarchy in the novel *Lonely Days* (2006). The relevant excerpts from the text have been selected, and analyzed for exploring the element of patriarchy as an agent of subalternity of widows by employing the Spivakian lens of subalternity as theoretical framework.

Patriarchy has been entrenched in the Nigerian society over the ages. In case a woman fails to obey her husband readily, the following are the consequences to be faced by the wife concerned.

A hungry man is an angry man. Your man will roar like a lion, and growl like a tiger; his bellow will consume you! Men have no patience with silly women like you. Get out of my way! Clear out of my sight!" (Adebawale, 2006, p.19)

The widow Yaremi herself had been an active, agile, and obedient wife; that was why she wanted others to follow suit and be like her. The main reason for her advice and taunt was that the wives were not to be spurned by their husbands, as the men in Kufi village were considering their wives as property and expected total submission from

them. The women in Kufi, Nigeria, were psychologically servile and had accepted the hegemony of the male members of the community never challenging the supremacy of the men.

A widow in Nigerian society is subjected to various kinds of suppression and oppression. Among other oppressions, she is kept deprived of the property of her dead husband by her in-laws. Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Canada (2000) collects information by conducting telephonic interviews which states that though civil marriage entitles a woman to be entitled to property at the death of her husband, but the real situation speaks otherwise. The situation even in this modern era is not satisfactory regarding the property rights of widows. The report says that the reason that traditionally the blood relation is considered more closely related to the deceased than the one by marriage. Hence, the widow deprived. In some cases, the widow is held responsible for the death of her husband. Similar views are presented in the novel regarding the widow's right to property in Kufi village of Nigeria where the relatives of a prosperous man tries their best to find excuses to kill the man, and then grab the property of the widow by holding responsible the widow, based on superstition, for the death of her husband. The people who rob the widow of her property are none other than the family members. Adebowale (2006) has drawn the picture of the fact thus:

Greedy members of an extended family, for instance, might be in a hurry to inherit the cocoa plantation of a successful village member and plot his untimely death with potent juju. Arrogance and self-conceit could engender sudden death

by poisoning, with as little a reason as mere reluctance to prostrate in greetings before village elders! (Adebowale, 2006, p. 45)

The women of Kufi are voiceless in the face of strong patriarchy coupled with severe misogyny through superstitions. The women, especially widows are in no way able to raise their voice for protection of their rights. As per Spivakian theory of subalternity they are marginalized and pushed into the “periphery” or “silenced venter” as the death of husband means total subalternity.

The drunkards of Kufi hypnotically express their expectations and desires which reveals the low and objectified status of women in the Kufi (Nigerian) society. If he (any Kufian) becomes *Baale* (the chieftain) of the Kufi, he will build a big palace with numerous rooms keeping concubines and wives in substantial number which will fight for winning his love and affection. The drunkard ruminates, "My voice will ring loud like thunder as I shout instructions and orders, which must be obeyed, to my subjects" (Adebowale, 2006, p. 58).

Similar were the views of the dead Ajumobi, the husband of Yaremi, as well. He held women in so much low esteem objectifying them and considering them in terms of metals of silver, diamond, and gold. He had no respect for the feelings and emotions of the women. He had lusty and self-aggrandizing motives. Patriarchy was playing havoc with the status of women. Ajumobi in a reverie spurned the older wives when the young one appears. He, according to Yaremi, would say, “I won't touch silver, and I will have nothing to do with the diamond when gold waits patiently for me for a warm embrace

right there on a new *ewe* mat” (Adebowale, 2006, p. 60). Commodification, i.e., objectification of women was a practice in the Nigerian society of Kufi village as another manifestation of patriarchy was in the shape of husbands beating their wives as a routine practice. Wife-beating was a kind of catharsis for husbands to provide a vent to their frustration, i.e., pent up feelings and failure in the face of intense poverty. Wives would not resist or protest against this inhuman practice as tradition had allowed the husbands to inflict this humiliation on one’s wife and the wife must show total submission. The wives were voiceless, they were subaltern. Yaremi only “thought” and did not express herself, as the novel records, “On a couple of occasions, Ajumobi had beaten Yaremi and Yaremi had always wondered who on earth, bestowed this right on her husband” (Adebowale, 2006, p. 65).

The text of the novel further endorses the intensity of patriarchy by hinting at an incident in the area of district Fagotoki where once a man, due to high debt, provided his wife to stay with another person, i.e., mortgaged her till the debt to be paid to the person, and ironically the woman remained with the creditor as his wife forever. The roots of patriarchy are so strong in the Nigerian society that this heinous crime did not create any reverberations in the smooth flow of the social life. So much was the degraded status of women (Adebowale, 2006, p. 79).

Stein (2015) reports for Aljazeera AMERICA that a 17-year old girl was suspected for Boko Haram suicide bomber and was lynched alive by the angry mob in Nigeria, but here in the novel there was nothing that was severe nor Yaremi was a killer, even then Yaremi wondered that all the people were anxiously waiting for an opportunity to lynch

her just for a piece of land or some belongings of her. She thought that people refrained from dragging her due to the company of her grandson, Woye. The writer says:

The whole of Kufi would be on her if Woye should die, and be ready to lynch her, like a self-confessing hag. Those who would lead the attack to lynch were very much around, warming up, waiting for the opportunity which had eluded them when Ajumobi died. (Adebowale, 2006, p. 83)

They, especially the relatives of Ajumobi, had missed an excellent opportunity of grabbing the belongings of the widow Yaremi on the death of her husband. The men of the Kufi were then lurking for some excuse to exploit and usurp the property of Yaremi. The patriarchy is also evident from the fact that wives would be always on the watch to know the mood of the husband without daring to ask what they wanted them to do as Adebowale has put it, “Women of Kufi would spend a long time, each day, trying to detect their husbands' mood, pleasure, and dispositions, to adequately prepare themselves for anticipated resignation or outbursts - whichever one came their way and in whatever order” (ibid). The wives were on the disposal of their husbands. They were to serve them little having their choice in the conjugal relations. They were treated like objects and property. They would always play the second fiddle. Each man would keep more than one wife, and the husband would sow the seeds of rivalry for enjoyment among them for winning the affection of their husband (ibid).

Offiong et al. (2021) report that women in Nigeria are reeling under the harsh version of patriarchy as they are not given any real representation in the affairs of the community.

The voice and rights of the female gender are stifled and confiscated, respectively. They have been kept illiterate and consequently marginalized as the paper cites Oyekanmi (2011) as saying:

The various acts perpetuated under customary laws have frustrated, discriminated, and impeded the social development of women in several communities across the nation. The women have remained poor, illiterate, and marginalized in several situations. (Oyekanmi 2011, cited by Offiong, et al. 2021, p. 85)

Similar situation is pictured in the novel *Lonely Days* by Adebowale (2006) where it is considered a kind of humiliation by the men on their part if a woman has any considerable power in the family or community, and all the forces are in unison to topple the voice and stature of the woman who try to step out of the trodden path. Through the age-old stereotypes the woman's voice is stifled and her influence, if any, restricted. Yaremi is the only woman who steps out of the old rut as she starts to show her influence amongst the women of her locality by helping the poor women through the provision of food stuff and other monetary assistance. As a result, all the men of the community determine to topple her as she is a potential threat to patriarchy. The novelist writes:

No woman of the land had ever been allowed to worm her way into a position of prominence in village matters. Men liked their women to be patient and passive; to be shy, bashful, and timid. They liked them to hesitate to ask questions and be reluctant to make requests. (Adebowale, 2006, p. 93)

The men of Kufi expect total obedience and passivity from the women, and submission to the will of husband. There is no question of equality for women with men as the customs and traditions are against such a conception. Patriarchy is the order of the day, and the women have to follow the dictates of the society determined by the male members of the community. The qualities of women to “to be shy, bashful, and timid” connote the status of subalternity, i.e., the voicelessness and require not to resist or raise voice against the dictates of men and their inhuman treatment inflicted on women. As per the theoretical framework of this study, the women of Kufi, with the exception of Yaremi, are subaltern as they cannot speak. Spivak says that women as subaltern in the Third World are more in the shade of subalternity under patriarchal system.

The levirate custom exists in Brahman Hindu religion as in the novel *Water* and in Nigerian Kufian society as in the novel *Lonely Days*. Sidhwa (2006) made a reference to the same situation of Brahman Hindu religion which says that a widow can ascend the pyre of her dead husband, or she can commit herself to seclusion to mourn the death of her husband and pray for her soul till death. “In some cases, if the family allows it, she may marry her dead husband’s brother” (Sidwa, 2006, p. 136). The third and last choice which is subject to the will of the family has semblance with the situation in the novel *Lonely Days*. The brother of Ajumobi, while exploiting the agencies of custom and patriarchy, claims, “I hope you don't forget, Yaremi, that the custom of the land is on my side. I am Ajumobi's half-brother and so, fully entitled to a fair share of his properties, both human and material” (Sidwa, 2006, p. 101). The claim of the brother of Ajumobi gives testimony to the fact that tradition and patriarchy have a nexus to subjugate and

exploit the female gender in Nigerian society. He boldly and undauntedly reminds Yaremi of the custom according to which she can also be his just like a piece of property. This hints at human commodification in the Nigerian society as the male can make a claim on a female body just like any ordinary object. Patriarchy has rendered the female figure as subaltern and speechless as custom has allowed the male to have that right.

Elochukwu (2021) in an essay argues that in many cultures and ethnic groups in Nigeria widowhood is considered a stigma, and the widow has to undergo various rites. The writer says:

Various tribes and cultures in Nigeria have diverse ways of practicing rites pertaining to burial, but traditions are particularly hard on women. Culturally widowhood burial rites involve varying degrees of physical hardship, deprivation, ritual contamination, emotional instability, and socioeconomic and psychological trauma. (Elochukwu 2021. Para. 1)

The widow has to mourn and wail, to cry at night, to drink the water which is used in washing the corpse, to remain locked up with the dead body in a room, and lastly her head is shaved. The writer cites Arinze-Umobi and Anyogu (2011) who record that in Igbo Nigerian culture the widow has to sleep with the high priest in order to cleanse her of the spirit of her dead husband. The widow, in some cultures, is not allowed to sleep in the afternoon. In some cases, she keeps quarantined for nearly a month at home.

A similar humiliating, oppressive, and victimizing ritual is here in the novel *Lonely Days* to be conducted by the elders of the Kufi village: the cap-picking ceremony wherein upon a woman becoming a widow, a person makes an announcement in the whole village that whoever wants to marry the widow should put their caps in the basket being circulated in the whole village, and in the presence of the whole village the widow is forced willy-nilly to pick a cap and choose her next husband. Previously, many widows have undergone this humiliation with servitude and speechlessness. Three of them- Fayoyin, Dedewe, and Radeke - are explicitly mentioned in the novel.

In the case of Yaremi too, the male elders of the family and community were arranging the same ritual. Some of the members of the extended family demanded that she was not pure and should visit the shrine to get purified and her inauspiciousness was gone. But the elders of the village preferred the remarriage ceremony first. Adebowale (2006) writes, "Purification later, for Yaremi," the elders argued, "but choosing a new cap to replace the old one is now! Now!" (p. 112).

The cap-picking ceremony is the main event in the novel *Lonely Days*, the compliance to which determines whether the widow is a subaltern or otherwise. The three widows are total subalterns as they totally bear the humiliation at the hands of the community, going through the whole ritual in silence not lodging any protest, nor putting any resistance. Adebowale (2006) informs us:

The last cap-picking ceremony took place ten years back when three widows of the village - Fayoyin, Dedewe, and Radeke - had the opportunity - to choose new men to replace their dead husbands. It was, that time, a solemn occasion, devoid of any ostentation and flamboyance. (Adebowale, 2006, p. 113)

The patriarchs of the Kufi village were totally against any such move by a widow which could challenge the authority of the male members as the potential challenge could bring an end to the opportunity for the male members to grab the share of the deceased. The elders of the village had arranged the remarriage in order to claim the property of the deceased on the one hand and the body of the widow on the other. The ceremony would not be a celebrated event but a very plain activity just to hand over the widow along with the property of her deceased husband: a single ceremony for all the three widows.

Patriarchy had so deeply entrenched in the minds of the women of the Kufi village that they never were able to trust in their own abilities for leading a life. One night before the cap-picking ceremony of Yaremi, the three widows had paid a visit to her for counseling and bringing her round to pick a cap like they had. They warned her that life without a man was very tough. They taught her the lesson of subalternity to submit to the will of the men. They said, "Let all of us, women of this land, learn to be humble, meek, and submissive, and be ready, at all times to accommodate our men" (Adebowale, 2006, p. 115). The conventional widows were not able to rebel or resist the traditions being weak and subaltern. They urged her to pick a cap and choose a new husband as life without a man was very dark for them and for her it would be the same. Their subalternity was not in remarrying but in the inhuman way they were put to without their

consent. They could not opt either to not remarry or at least marry out of their own will whomever they liked to. The widows were the ultimate subalterns. They could not resist, nor could they speak against this humiliation and oppression at the hands of the male members of the village community.

Patriarchy and rebellion against the age-old traditions could not go together: one would lose and the other win. All the elders of the Kufi village had made a united front against this valiant and independent widow, the child of Adeyipo village. In the past the people of both the villages, Adeyipo and Kufi, had apprehended that the marriage between Yaremi and a hunter Ajumobi would be a total failure, but everything proved the otherwise. They had an incredibly happy and satisfactory conjugal life. Now as Yaremi was still feeling satisfied in the fond memories and dreams of her husband and she squarely refused to remarry according to the traditions of the village in the very presence of the village elders so she now had a strong hostile community all pitted against her and determined to topple her, force her to toe the line of cap-picking ceremony or otherwise ostracize her from the village. The author says, “Things were reaching an unpredictable dimension now. And from what filtered into ears, a conspiracy was sprouting which might get her ostracised or outrightly annihilated from Kufi” (Adebowale, 2006, p. 127).

Patriarchy was the main hurdle in the way of Yaremi to lead her life according to her own sweet will. The elders of the village, taking the benefit of the traditional stereotypes, were against the decision of Yaremi to lead her life alone without the remarriage. With her son Alani set already the day before for the city with the promise to provide her more money and relocate her once and for all to the city, Yaremi, already in a

swoon, was baffled by the decree of the village patriarchs. This dual misery is described

as:

The shock of Alani's strange reactions was too much for her to bear... The village elders compounded her problem the following day when they announced some punitive measures on the issues at stake: Yaremi had contravened traditional widowhood injunctions and was to be punished accordingly. (Adebowale, 2006, p. 144)

The patriarchy, the village elders, announced very harsh punitive measures against Yaremi for violating the age old humiliating traditional rite of cap-picking, challenging the writ of the male gender. She was to be ostracized from the village of her husband, Kufi, her husband's property confiscated, and she was to be avoided as a leper by the community, for contravening the injunctions of traditional widowhood.

Conclusion:

It transpires from the above discussion that patriarchy is one of the major agencies of making the female gender, especially widows, subaltern in the Nigerian society as highlighted in the novel *Lonely Days*. A woman is highlighted to be just for the service of her husband having neither self-respect nor identity nor the power of decision-making in her own right. Polygamy is common, and husband feels pleasure in sowing the seed of rivalry among his wives. Commodification, i.e., objectification of women, is a practice in the Nigerian society of Kufi village as a manifestation of patriarchy in the shape of husbands beating their wives as a routine practice. The widows are deprived of their

property and belongings and are forced to remarry against their will through the humiliating ritual of cap-picking ceremony. Dedewe, Fayoyin and Radeke have undergone these ordeals before Yaremi. Yaremi was, upon rebellion, boycotted by the elders of the village, her husband's property was to be confiscated, and she was to be expelled from Kufi. On the yardstick of Spivakian theory of subalternity, the widows, with the exception of Yaremi, are voiceless i.e., subaltern, and patriarchy is fully accomplice in their plight.

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