

**INTRA-GENDER RELATIONSHIPS AND THE ROLE OF  
WOMEN IN SUSTAINING WIDOWHOOD PRACTICES IN  
NIGERIA: IFEOMA OKOYE’S *THE TRIAL* AS A  
PARADIGM.**

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**Abstract**

The concept of widowhood in the African cultural milieu appears to be that of trauma, peril and dehumanization. This study attempts to interrogate the practice of widowhood in some Nigerian communities using “The Trial” a short story in Ifeoma Okoye’s literary text titled *The Trial and Other Stories* with a view to exposing the faulty frameworks within which cultural norms are established for the widow, and in the process, initiate an intra-gender scholarly dialogue. Using context analysis approach of the qualitative research method, the study presents the opinions of various traditional Igbo women as represented by the characters in “The Trial” to ascertain their perception on obnoxious widowhood practices. The findings revealed that apart from the victim (widow), almost all the traditional women accept the practice as a norm that should be sustained. This makes them to protect the practices rather than protest. The theory of motherism is adopted for the analysis.

**Intra-Gender Relationships and the Role of Women in Sustaining Widowhood  
Practices in Nigeria: Ifeoma Okoye's *The Trial* As A Paradigm.**

The researcher recommends a proper re-orientation to expunge the negative notion from the psyche of women generally.

**Keywords:** widowhood, tradition, women, perception, norm.

## **Introduction**

Widowhood is a description of the circumstances and status of a widow. A widow is a woman whose husband is dead and who has not remarried (Emmanuel Ibezim 167). Justina Okoye describes widowhood as a “state in which excruciating hardship, inflicted by tradition and culture, is assigned to women who lost their husbands” (38). Widows, in parts of Africa, are persistently traumatized for the loss of their husbands. Accordingly, Ezejiofor remarks that;

Widowhood in Nigeria is not only perceived as a state of being but more importantly as an institution... when we take into account the very many rituals and practices together with the regulations and impositions that go along with it, we will find out that widowhood is, more or less an institution... interpreted and understood in the context of the culture and tradition of people which regulate its operations. (140)

Ibezim confirms that “there is hardly any ethnic group in Nigeria that does not subject the widow to one dehumanizing condition or the other. The difference is said to lie in the gravity of the procedure which varies from culture to culture” (167). Okoye also points out that at the death of a man, customary law, in some parts of Nigeria empowers certain male members of the family to inherit the widow of the deceased. In others, sons of the deceased are permitted by culture to inherit their father's wives, not their own mothers. Evidently, the entire concept of widow inheritance according to

Okoye, bounces back on men's consideration of women as property, things and accessories (39). In as much as "those who practice this custom believe that passing the widow from the deceased husband to his next of kin will guarantee the upkeep of the woman and her children and ensure a proper maintenance of the widow" (Omonubi McDonnell 101), widow inheritance is a form of slavery and ultimate in gender oppression (Okoye 39).

It may be necessary to review some widowhood practices in Nigeria at this point. Okoye (42) gives an account of an extinct widowhood practice found in some pre-contact communities. Before the advent of Christianity, a widow's traditional mourning in some communities in South East Nigeria, begins in the night of the burial. She would be compelled to sit on a few leaves spread on the floor as a mat for seven days at the back of the house. The only water she would have access to would be for drinking purposes. At dusk and dawn, she would come out to wail at the loss of her husband, an indication of how much she misses him. On the seventh day, she would gather all the leaves, all the things she used for mourning including the small cloth, she had been tying and proceed for cleansing. At midnight of that day, the *Umuada* (married daughters of the clan) would accompany her to the stream, square, evil forest or a cross road. She would be stripped naked and shaved in all parts of her body after which she would be washed. She would be led to her house naked. In spite of the role of Christianity to curb the excesses of these rites, some of the widowhood practices still persist in the contemporary society.

In most parts of Nigeria, a widow is compelled to shave her hair and clad herself in white or may be black from head to toe, for the mourning period which lasts for six months or one year. It may be

**Intra-Gender Relationships and the Role of Women in Sustaining Widowhood Practices in Nigeria: Ifeoma Okoye's *The Trial* As A Paradigm.**

interesting to note that the widower is not under any such obligation. In addition to being clad in white or black and having shaved her hair, a widow may be required to prove her innocence in the death of her husband. As part of the funeral rites, she is compelled to drink the water used in washing the corpse of her late husband, thereby confirming that she had in no way contributed to his death (Ibezim 169).

The troubling issue however, is the role played by the *Umuada* in enforcing these often traumatic procedures and in upholding the traditional structures which sustain the practices. The query that readily comes to mind is, Why should *Umuada* allow themselves to be used to enforce these subjugative widowhood practices on fellow women especially where there is no similar practice for men? What is their view about the practice? Is it seen as a tradition that should be perpetuated.? Do they truly believe that drinking the water used to bath a corpse is a proper yardstick to dictate a murderer? Do they also believe that a woman (weaker sex) could kill her spouse in a patriarchal society where fathers rule and males matter?" (Chukwu 559). Patriarchal affiliation seem to be very strong and have left lasting impressions on the minds of both men and women that they protect these structures rather than protest. As Toubia rightly observes:

... even the most highly educated individuals become defensive when they feel their culture and personal identity are being attacked... The fear of losing the psychological, moral and material benefits of "belonging" is one of the greatest motivators of conformity. When the demands of conformity conflict with rationality or individual need, denial intervenes as a

mechanism for survival. In this way many women justify their own oppression. (37).

### **The Concept of 'Motherism'**

Catherine Acholonu's most influential work in Women Studies is *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism* (1995), also described as "Africa's Alternative to Western Feminism". According to Catherine Acholonu, the term **Motherism** is:

A multi-dimensional theory which involves the dynamics of ordering, re-ordering, creating structure, building and rebuilding in cooperation with mother nature at all levels of human endeavor. (110-111)

As an African feminist theory, it portrays the relationship of a woman in terms of reproduction and child-care. The main focus of the study is the relationship in the family and duties of a mother in the home. The bond between a mother and her child is emphasized. This is based on the fact that they have an edge over the men by virtue of carrying the child in their wombs for nine months. They are also biologically endowed with breast milk. Motherism advocates "love, tolerance, service and mutual cooperation for the sexes, not antagonism, aggression, militancy or violent confrontation" plus "protection and defence of family values" (111-112). Acholonu is of the opinion that women are not marginalized by men as claimed by Western writers and some African feminists. According to her, Western writers are not aware that Africa is a big continent made up of diverse cultures within its diverse regions. What is practiced in one region could be the opposite in another. She encourages personal upliftment through education and economic independence for women. She believes that a rich and

**Intra-Gender Relationships and the Role of Women in Sustaining Widowhood  
Practices in Nigeria: Ifeoma Okoye's *The Trial* As A Paradigm.**

educated woman who is outspoken, hardworking and fearless can hardly be opposed by any member of the society. Some scholars, however, criticize that the population of the group so described by Acholonu is small and as such, might not rock the boat in terms of female subjugation.

Unlike Radical feminism, which tends to use violent language springing from a radical ideology to antagonize men, motherism and womanism share similar values based on tolerance, mutual cooperation, love and service (Utoh-Ezeajugh 141). African female writers have one common course; to liberate and emancipate women but their methods differ as none of them sticks to a particular conception of feminism. Motherists argue strongly that the greatest power of the woman is her reproductive power and should not be tampered with. To them, African women are only 'faithfully' attending to their naturally ordained responsibilities (Ode 82). Opinions are divided amongst African feminist theorists, whether African women are actually marginalized or not. While one group sees the oppression and the need for emancipation, the other argues that women are rather faithfully performing the obligations legally, religiously and socially assigned to them. This is unlike the Western feminist theorists who have a uniform view that women are oppressed because of their sex and based on the dominant ideology of patriarchy, this view is not challenged by any other theory in the Western society. The issue of disagreement in the African setting, may have attributed to some misconceptions which has made scholars to sing with discordant voices. While some are fighting for emancipation, others are disenchanted with the seeming complicity of women in the obvious subjugation of fellow women. Some scholars, however, criticize Acholonu's theory of motherism,

which excludes urban women and projects rural women as the ideal motherists – innocent, unspoilt, unsophisticated in their world view, their thinking and their ways of life (Ode 102).

### **Widowhood Rites in “The Trial” in Ifeoma Okoye’s *The Trial and Other Stories***

This study raises pertinent questions concerning women's involvement in the subjugation of fellow women especially in situations of widowhood. The text *the Trial* is selected because Ifeoma Okoye seems to portray “the extent to which the so-called custodians of cultural values could go in posing this grave responsibility on the widows and the various strategies contrived by these social actors to rid themselves of this heavy wad of responsibility for manslaughter and gain their liberty from unmerited social sanctions” (Ezeifeke and Ogbazi 4). A number of facts reveal that widowhood is more exerting on women than on men. “Most regrettably, at the instance of death of the man, the wife, left behind becomes a widow. She is then subjected to a universe of vile treatments. She turns out to become the victim of a tradition that denies women of their human rights and inheritance” (Okoye 37). In Nigeria, the Fundamental Rights states that;

every individual is entitled to respect for the dignity of his/her person. Accordingly, no person shall be subjugated to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment. Yet, widows are oppressed, discriminated against, marginalized especially when they have no grown males. This goes to prove why African women writers, in their struggle for women identity and freedom from such wickedness of patriarchy, fight relentlessly to

**Intra-Gender Relationships and the Role of Women in Sustaining Widowhood Practices in Nigeria: Ifeoma Okoye's *The Trial* As A Paradigm.**

collapse humiliation of women, including widows.  
(Okoye 40)

Widows go through debilitating and devastating experience in most African communities. The mere fact that the widow is regarded as the prime suspect in the event of her husband's death attracts a certain opprobrium against her. The widow is hence expected to drink *miliozu* (the water used to bath her dead husband) to prove her innocence. In Opobo area of Rivers State, the widow is submerged in the river, among the Kalabari, she is made to swim across the bottom of the boat; to prove her innocence, while in Ndoni area of the same State, she is thrown across the deceased coffin several times; if in the process her leg strikes the coffin, she is taken to be guilty of killing her husband. (Ibezim 168)

In the process of undergoing in all the widowhood processes, the widow's health is sometimes adversely affected by the socio-psychological trauma to which she is being subjected. Her mental and physical health is affected as Aduke Adebayo asserts in her analysis of Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*, "Ojebet's mother dies during a compulsory seven month period of mourning for her dead husband because she is forbidden to care for herself" (42). The terrible concept of widow inheritance could expose the woman to Hiv/Aids and other sexually transmitted diseases. Disinheriting the widow of her husband's property, cash savings and stocks not only diminishes her ability to fend for her children and herself but also enslaves her to the extent that she becomes a liability to the system. Greed and poverty are often cited as the major reasons for that; as evidenced in the case of Obierika's cousins in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck*. "His cousins, during the funeral, took his ivory tusk, claiming that the trappings of titles

went to brothers and not to sons. It was when they emptied his barn of yams and led away the adult goats in his pen that she confronted them... (203).

Some scholars such as Ezeifeke and Ogbazi (3) have observed that in some cultures, a widow must go down to a stream at midnight for a ritual bathing before she is pronounced clean for men to visit her. African culture, indeed devalues female humanity and lowers the woman's self esteem. The social injustice meted out on women after the death of their spouses would be an anomaly for the widowers. Ifeoma Okoye laments that;

It is discriminatory that widowers don't go through dehumanizing rites and rituals. They don't lose their property or children when their wives die. They easily acquire their deceased wives' property. They remarry without losing their children to anyone. (2)

The strongest asset of Ifeoma Okoye's "The Trial" lies in her characterization of the *Umuokpu* the women's group numbering about thirty. *Umuokpu* or daughters of the lineage are made up of patrilineal relations of the husband; his aunts, sisters, nieces and cousins. This formidable force is reputed to be ruthless and resolute in its decisions even in matters concerning its members. This group is equally "notorious for applying rigidly the clan's traditional laws and sanctions and for being easily offended" (45). This is usually the group that accompany widows to a shrine, stream or a cross road for ritual bathing. They also shave her. In some cultures where a widow is not allowed to leave the house, take her bath, or even brush her teeth, but eats from a broken plate and sleeps on a dirty mat (Ibezim 169) notes that these same women ironically guard and make sure she complies with the tradition.

**Intra-Gender Relationships and the Role of Women in Sustaining Widowhood  
Practices in Nigeria: Ifeoma Okoye's *The Trial* As A Paradigm.**

In “The Trial”, we are presented with the character Anayo who is accused by her brother-in-law (Ezeji) of killing her husband. Eletty, the leader of *umuada*, makes it categorically clear that “it is our duty to find out whether this accusation is true or not” (46). This declaration indirectly depicts doubt or lack of trust on fellow gender. This also confirms the general belief that there is hardly any death (especially of a man) that is accepted as a natural or biological end in African societies (Afigbo 40) and this by implication, makes every widow a prime suspect. *Umuada* treat Anayo with disdain. She is denied of the opportunity to sit down despite her state. She is humiliated. When Anayo explains that she did not kill her husband and avers that whoever is accusing her of such a crime is wicked. Eletty, with her arms akimbo shouts, “Watch your tongue young women... Answer our questions and nothing more. Be rude to us again and we'll deal with your squarely... Now tell us how your husband died. What killed him? Tell us all you know” (46). Before Anayo could get herself together to explain, another woman nicknamed Antelope roars, “Don't keep us waiting, Anayo” (47). As she begins to explain, Eletty reminds her, “Ezeji said you put poison in your husband's food ... and when he ate the food he vomited blood and died” (47). Anayo in anger shouts, “I did not! Ezeji is a wicked liar”. Eletty warns her again “Mind your tongue” (47). Another woman asks, “why should Ezeji accuse you if you didn't do it? Another also wanted to know if Anayo prevented her “husband from helping his only brother financially” (47). Anayo tries to explain that the doctor said he had ulcer but nobody paid heed to her. The leader of the group then declares:

Anayo, Ezeji has accused you of poisoning his brother.  
He brought the case to us. We have our traditional way

of dealing with this type of accusation, she turned to the women, don't we? She asked. Yes! The women shouted in unison. And we must abide by it, mustn't we? Eletty asked. Ye-e-e-s, the women shouted... Later today, she began, 'before your husband's body is committed to our mother earth, you'll go through our traditional trial by ordeal to prove your innocence. If you refuse to do this, we'll ostracize you'. She turned to the women. "Have I spoken your mind?" she asked. Ye-e-s! the women shouted together" (48)

The need for female positive bonding, establishment of a healthy relationship in line with Feminist theories could be seen in Anayo's response.

You are being unfair to me. You know Ezeji is framing me yet you're going along with him. He wants to take over my husband's property. This is not the first time such a thing has happened in this village, we should be sticking together. It could be one of you next time. We shouldn't let men use us to police ourselves. (48)

This is a plea for intra-gender bonding which continues to go unheeded as women allow men to use them as tools against themselves. Ezeji could marginalize Anayo with the active connivance of *umuokpu*. Despite the fact that widowhood practices affect women adversely, fellow women seem to be in full support of the obnoxious practices. Anayo expresses her great disappointment in Oluchi, who presents the lame defense that "it's not easy to challenge tradition" (49). The intra-gender discord appears to exist despite the educational status of some of the women as the educated ones could not make any attempt to defend a fellow woman in

**Intra-Gender Relationships and the Role of Women in Sustaining Widowhood Practices in Nigeria: Ifeoma Okoye's *The Trial* As A Paradigm.**

distress, rather they stayed aloof and allowed themselves to be coordinated by the likes of Eletty. The writer uses Tope's attitude to buttress this point. Tope is Zimuzo's cousin who lectures at the University of Lagos. She has a doctorate degree in Sociology and usually organizes mini lectures for small gatherings of women on the subject of injustices meted out on them by men. "Anayo had expected her to have matched her words with action when the opportunity came. But Tope had watched a fellow woman being humiliated and subjugated, not by men but by fellow women and had remained tongue-tied and manacled" (49).

One would have expected the educated women among the group to support Anayo, to speak out on her behalf, to fight against the dehumanizing and humiliating tradition, but non spoke up. This implies that women are comfortable with the tradition. Anayo's courage, alertness and boldness is commendable as she is fast to observe that Ezeji poisoned the water. His refusal to take a sip and prove his innocence vindicates her. Women should provide "sturdy crutches for one another to lean on in adverse moments" (Chioma Opara 35).

**The Perception of Women on Widowhood Rites in "The Trial"**

The author portrays the ordeal of a widow in the traditional Igbo society. It may be pertinent to note the reactions and perceptions of the women, the worst hit over this custom. Do they see the ordeal as a problem that should be dealt with squarely? Do they see it as obnoxious tradition that should be abolished? or do they feel it is a norm that should be sustained to enable them prove their innocence or checkmate further husband murdering?

Eletty's unfriendliness confirms that Anayo is already condemned. Anayo, though not comfortable with the accusations, verbal abuses and injustice meted out on her by Eletty and her group, realized it was unwise to take the women on, since it was an organized cultural structure. She had arrived in the village from Lagos only the evening before, bringing her husband's corpse with her. She had expected sympathy, empathy and understanding, not insensitivity from her fellow women. She knows very well that Ezeji has never been in support of her marriage to Zimuzo. He had told Zimuzo that "she looked like a woman who would control her husband, a woman who would not let her husband help his relations financially. And when she did not become pregnant two years after her wedding, he had pressed her husband to take a new wife" (47). His accusation is centered on prejudice, hatred and greed.

The murder case is between Anayo and Ezeji, a blood relation of the *umuada* (the adjudicators). This is as good as one becoming a judge over his or her own case. It may be interesting to note that not even a member of Anayo's family is invited into the matter. It will be totally absurd if *umuada* react otherwise. She receives a serious warning from the group leader on the occasion she refers to Ezeji as wicked "watch your tongue, young woman" (46). On the second time, Anayo said, Ezeji is a wicked liar" Eletty also reacts "mind your tongue" (47). The *umuada* have their mindsets which adversely affect their decision and response to the matter. The minds of *umuada* are made up. They summon her just to fulfill all righteousness, otherwise, why will "Antelope" warn her not to keep them waiting? (47), but answer their questions promptly. Another woman also responds that Ezeji could not have accused her wrongly. This also implies that Ezeji is not a liar, that all he has told

**Intra-Gender Relationships and the Role of Women in Sustaining Widowhood Practices in Nigeria: Ifeoma Okoye's *The Trial* As A Paradigm.**

them about the murder case is nothing but the truth. Steamer also wants to know if truly she stops her husband from helping his only brother financially. This is a laid down allegation that probably may have instigated the husband poisoning syndrome.

As Anayo narrates how she was sending money to Ezeji even after her husband had lost his job, Eletty rises and declares;

We've made our decision... As for you to prove your innocence is to go through the trial by ordeal and let me warn you because you 'book women' don't know how potent our traditional rites are if you poisoned your husband you will die within twenty-eight days of going through the trial. No doctor can save you. So don't undergo the trial if you're guilty. You have been warned. You have a few hours to think about this. (49)

One may not expect anything less from the *umuada* who are mere significant outsiders, and do not have any blood relationship with the victim. The bond is unlike that between a mother and child. A mother can stake her life for the sake of her child. Anayo's mother, is described as "a strong and opinionated woman who could be a vicious opponent" (50). What is her view on the accusation leveled on her daughter and the ordeal of drinking *miliozu*? Ironically, there is no significant different between her opinion and that of the *umuada* over this dehumanizing tradition. After narrating the incident between her and *umuada*, Anayo's mother gazes on her daughter and asks, "Anayo, did you poison Zimuzo?" (50). The question is very instructive, it confirms endorsement that a woman may be responsible for the death of her spouse. In uttermost disbelief, Anayo asks, "Mama, how can you ask me such a

question? Do you also doubt my innocence?” (51), with tears in her voice.

She now states her reasons why Anayo should go through the trial. In other words, she, enumerates why the tradition should be perpetuated, the need for a widow to drink *miliozu* to save the integrity of her family. The following expression explains it better;

Everybody will believe you killed him. You will become a murderer in everybody’s eyes. What will your father say in his grave?... You will be ostracized... Nobody will sell any item to you in the market... Do you know what that will do to me and to your brothers and sisters? Your sisters will die as old maids. No man will marry a girl whose sister murdered her husband for fear of his own life. Even your brothers will find it difficult to marry. No woman will accept them. And what about me? I’ll be known as the mother of a husband killer. No... You must go through the trial or I’ll have nothing more to do with you. (51)

*Umuada* had given Anayo time to think about it, but her mother gives her an order to go through the trial. Failure to comply will be terrible, *umuada* will ostracize her while her mother and siblings will disown her. Her mother further threatens to kill herself unless Anayo complies. Apart from Anayo, every other woman in the world of the text share a common opinion that widowhood rite, in line with the theory of motherism, should be faithfully performed as a socio-cultural obligation by every widow. Their perceptions and actions encourage continuity of the tradition. Nobody sees anything wrong with it because it is the tradition. None thinks of the health implications of drinking water used in washing a dead person,

**Intra-Gender Relationships and the Role of Women in Sustaining Widowhood Practices in Nigeria: Ifeoma Okoye's *The Trial* As A Paradigm.**

especially a corpse that had been kept in the mortuary for weeks. What will be the fate of her unborn child? Is it possibly true that women kill their spouses and so must go through a trial to prove their innocence? Should women willingly give in to such dehumanization? These are all indices of intra-gender subjugation and terrorization.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

It appears that women believe so much in patriarchal structures which have the magic prowess of imprinting on their psyche the impressions that may not be easily wiped out by mere verbal persuasions. The belief renders the law helpless, (Gowon Amo Doki 403), since the tradition permits such cultural rites. According to (Korieh 31) the *umuokpu* try to establish the fact that the wife has come from another kindred to kill their relative in order to acquire his wealth. The women encourage spiteful and burdensome widowhood rites even when they will face similar treatments if their husbands die. Ezeifeke and Ogbazi conclude “that the converse terms of ‘widow’ and widower in reference to women and men respectively seem to belong to the set of such polar terms where one of the terms serve only nomenclatural functions’ (3). This is because the widowers are not subjected to such practices and trials by societal norms and value systems as men are completely set free from these degrading and inhuman practices. It is most unfortunate to observe that women are used as agents, to ensure that widows comply with such dehumanizing traditions.

Adequate scholarly attention needs to be re-directed to the sensitization of traditional women and women groups generally. Ezeji, who hides behind the mask of culture, uses *umuada* to achieve his selfish desire to prevent Anayo from inheriting her late

husband's property. When, unfortunately, his plans fail, he screams, "You are all mad... You women are crazy. You should not be here. This is men's business so get out of here" (53-54). At this point, *Umuada*, find their near tyrannical power and integrity being ridiculed. Many of the cultural structures and traditional institutions that pool women together and turn them into puns in the hands of men need to re-evaluated. The existing culturally established terms of reference must be redefined in line with the postulations of African writers such as Ifeoma Okoye who has succeeded in exposing the faulty frameworks sustaining obnoxious widowhood practices using her work *The Trial and Other Stories* .

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**Intra-Gender Relationships and the Role of Women in Sustaining Widowhood Practices in Nigeria: Ifeoma Okoye's *The Trial* As A Paradigm.**

Plays of Tess Onwueme, Irene Salami-Agunloye and Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh”, *Gender Discourse in African Theatre, Literature and Visual Arts*. Eds. Tracie Chima Utoh-Ezeajugh, Barclays Foubiri Ayakoroma. Ibadan: Kraft Books Ltd, 2015, pp. 133-154.