

WHEN CULTURE KILLS: PATRIARCHY, BRIDE PRICE AND TRAGIC WOMANHOOD IN ZULU SOFOLA'S *WEDLOCK OF THE GODS*

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Abstract

These researchers examine the complex interplay between patriarchy, cultural tradition and the female experience in Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*. Grounded in African feminist theory, this study will interrogate how practices such as bride price and forced marriages serve as tools of control that restrict women's autonomy and reinforce practical authority. Through a critical literary analysis of the text, this paper will highlight how cultural expectations not only suppress the desires of women but also contribute to tragic outcomes when those expectations are resisted. The central character's fate is read as a symbol of the broader struggles faced by women trapped within rigid social structures that privilege, obedience and male dominance over individual choice and emotional fulfilment. By exposing the tensions between cultural loyalty and personal freedom, this study argues that Zulu Sofola challenges the romanticization of tradition and instead reveals its capacity to inflict psychological, emotional and even fatal harm on women. This research will ultimately contribute to ongoing scholarly discussions around gender, power and cultural reform in African societies. This researcher employs the content analysis approach to qualitative research.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Female, Marriage, Domination, Freedom.

Introduction

In *Wedlock of the Gods*, Zulu Sofola offers a powerful and harrowing depiction of deeply rooted patriarchal norms and the treatment of women as property through the custom of bride-price, which sustains the cycle of female suffering and tragedy within the often-oppressive African cultural foundation. Across African communities as Zulu Sofola's play illustrates, customs regarded as sacred frequently impose both physical and emotional harm – especially on women who attempt to exercise control over their bodies and desire. At the heart of this tragedy lies coerced marriage, facilitated by the tradition of bride-price which objectifies women as negative assets and strips them of agency and consent (Rosemary Asen 2017: 32-44), Donatus Emenike and Success

Ifeyinwa Asuzu 2024: 124 – 148). Though the play is deeply embedded in a particular rural Nigerian context, its criticism of patriarchal authority and the cultural idealization of bride price resonates with wider discourses in African feminist thought. This thematic concern has been examined by scholars such as Maureen Ngozi Ndu and Victoria Omari Ohiero (2023: 131 – 150) who contend that women in such cultural settings are often perceived and treated as tradable goods within male-dominated systems.

In the same vein, Rosemary Asen (2017: 22-44) highlights how excessive bride price traditions result in oppressive and involuntary marriages for women such as Ogwoma, the protagonist in Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*. Additionally, Donatus Emenike and Success Ifeyinwa Asuzu

(2024: 124 – 148) point to cultural practices such as arranged unions, son preference and widowhood rituals as sources of harm and gender-based violence against female characters.

Zulu Sofola's dual identity as both a feminist and a cultural conservative is deliberately grasping at meaning, which is key to the story's emotional depth and thematic depth of the play. As Ajima M. Olaghere (2007:8) observes, Zulu Sofola aims to reform cultural norms through traditional channels rather than dismissing them entirely-promoting thoughtful transformation over complete Western assimilation. This perspective enables the play to examine patriarchy and the institution of bride price from within the cultural framework, revealing how women are entrapped by the very customs that profess to revere them. This study investigates how patriarchy and the custom of bride price function in *Wedlock of the Gods*, to construct a narrative of tragic womanhood. It first examines how patriarchal ideologies and male supremacy infiltrate familial and marital structures within the play. Subsequently, it analyzes bride price not only as an economic driver but also as an instrument of female subjugation and social control. This paper examines how Zulu Sofola's feminist intervention-though grounded in cultural tradition ultimately exposes the limitations of customary practices in protecting women's autonomy. In this way, this study adds to the more extensive discourse on African feminism and positions literature as a powerful vehicle for cultural criticism.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

African feminist literary criticism is rooted in the authentic experiences of African women, challenging patriarchal dominance and the enduring effects of colonialism, and cultural traditions that marginalize women. It diverges from Western feminist discourse by challenging Eurocentric paradigms and foregrounding African cultural realities and gender-specific experience. Prominent theorists such as Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, Florence Stratton, Carole Boyce Davies and Chioma Opara advocates for literary analysis based on indigenous lens for interpreting feminist writings. Molaria Ogundipe Leslie's concept of STIWA (Social Transformation in African

Including Women) promotes a feminism rooted in African realities, combining respect for cultural heritage with a push for progressive change. It highlights the significance of women's collective wisdom, spiritual agency and immediate socio-political relevance. Florence Stratton and Carole Boyce Davies highlight the critical need to rectify the historical erasure of women's voices in African literary studies, encouraging female writers to share their own truths and reshape a tradition moulded by male-centred criticism. In a related vein, Chioma Opara's *Femalism* reads the woman's body and experiences as representing African national struggles, societal wounds and processes of cultural restoration.

Conceptual Foundations and Methodological Insights in African Feminist Literary Studies

African feminist theories insist institutionalized gender inequality is perpetuated through cultural norms like bride price, widowhood rites and marriage customs. Ogwoma's economically driven force marriage in *Wedlock of the Gods* illustrates how bride price becomes a mechanism of patriarchal dominance offering female ground for feminist interpretation. Tradition, within African feminist discourse is understood as both repressive and redemptive. Interpretive frameworks seek to mediate the disconnection between formally educated women and rural cultural legacies a concern raised by Zulu Sofola who warns that elite women may internalize patriarchal narratives and estrange themselves from grassroots female communities.

A Critical Reading of Female Oppression Through Cultural and Patriarchal Institutions

Following the theoretical frameworks of Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie and Florence Stratton, Zulu Sofola emphasizes the centrality of women's voices, asserting that the female protagonist must narrate her own journey, encompassing both her suffering and her acts of resistance.

OGWOMA: It was I who hated you and your son. My parents pushed me into this. God has delivered me and I will leave your house for you (16).

OGWOMA: No, it is not the way others are given away to their husbands that you and father threw me away to Adigwu for

money, you and father were so hungry and threw me away to a man I hated (18).

OGWOMA: Now, you can go and tell them that their plans will fail. Tell them that I will be buried alive before I become Okezie's wife. They will see fire from me. Tell them that God will continue to fight for me and that my God is not asleep (22).

Through her emotional self-awareness and her refusal to conform to levirate marriage, Ogwoma in *Wedlock of the Gods* reasserts control over her life's narrative and challenges imposed cultural roles.

According to Zulu Sofola, African traditions contain socio-cultural and historical dimensions that women can strategically engage for empowerment. In *Wedlock of the Gods*, the depiction of ritual, spiritual beliefs and communal leadership presents a dynamic context in which Ogwoma either draws on or resists these elements to claim autonomy:

OGOLI (to Anwasia): A girl from a good family, a child with proper home training, does not receive men while the spirit of her dead husband still wanders in the bush. This shameless dog has enticed my son into an abominable act, and I cannot walk on the road (23).

ANWASIA: Nne, Ogwoma and Uloka are not children (23).

OGOLI: Uloka knows that every well-trained son ought to know. She was given to a man as a wife. That was not enough to put an end to her hunt for my son. She will not let her marriage stop her. Her husband died, but rather than wait and let his spirit return to the world of the gods, she has enticed and dragged my son into an act of death (23).

OGWOMA: I did not entice your son (23).

Ogwoma is portrayed as a symbolic figure representing women who challenge patriarchal system. Her forced marriage, status as a widow, unconventional pregnancy and eventually downfall expose the perils of imposed conformity

and reveal the ethical failure of tradition when it lacks justice.

In *Wedlock of the Gods*, Zulu Sofola brings African feminist literary criticism to the forefront as a theory both shaped by local contexts and geared toward transformation. The play offers a platform for interrogating how patriarchal norms, bride price and tradition exert control, while demonstrating how women's voices particularly in the face of tragedy-confront and destabilize these forces:

OGWOMA: You do not understand how my heart beats. Because you were not tied like a goat and whipped along the road to a man you hated, you are not able to understand what my heart tells me (9).

ANWASIA: Ogwoma, our people say that a man's daughter is a source of wealth to him. Your parents needed the money for a very expensive sacrifice for your brother whom sickness almost killed. You should have been happy your money saved the life of your own brother (9).

Zulu Sofola presents the concept of bride price as a mechanism for patriarchal control. Ogwoma's forced marriage to Adigwu stems not from mutual affection but from her family's desperate need for money. In doing so, the play criticizes the way this cultural practices strips woman of autonomy and reduces them to transactional assets an overt form of gender-based marginalization.

Tradition in *Wedlock of the Gods* functions more as an immutable authority than a flexible social structure. Zulu Sofola presents a world where disobedience is met with punishment, Ogwoma suffers not for ethical failings, but for transgressing sacred cultural expectations like arranged marriage and widowhood observance:

NNEKA (to OTUBO): Odibei wants to kill me and my daughter (49).

ODIBEI: Cows have tails and the blind man has his stick, but with nothing you will walk into death swollen stomach and leaking through both ends (49).

NNEKA (to ODIBEI): You will be buried alive from your shoulders down

and with your mouth you will eat the flies that swarm on your head (49).

OTUBO: Nneka, this is shameful. What will your children say? (49).

ODIBEI: Her harlot will not say anything. Never before has it been heard that a woman in mourning becomes pregnant for another man (49 – 50).

NNEKA (to Otubo): My daughter has been accused of everything. It is Odibei who created the lies and it is she who carries them about. No one knows a child better than the mother. I know Ogwoma something causes the smoke. The owl never hoots in broad daylight (50).

In Zulu Sofola's view, this compelling drama exposes how entrenched traditions ranging from female seclusion and dowry-based marriage to patriarchal boy girl preference and societal scapegoating interlock to sustain a cultural system that institutionalizes gendered violence.

The harm inflicted on Ogwoma is not merely the result of personal actions but is carried out collectively by the community through the enforcement of ritual norms. Odebei, the mother-in-law, emerged as the embodiment of tradition someone who weaponizes cultural ceremonies to uphold patriarchal control. Ogwoma's defiance of prescribed mourning and her denial of widow inheritance elicit unanimous disapproval from the elders' assembly. This moment exemplifies how patriarchal power manifests through collective ritual affirmation.

Ogwoma's experience reflects more than a sale-it is a transfer of ownership. This is underscored by her recurring statements, which reinforce the lack of agency in her marital arrangement:

OGWOMA: No, it is not the way others are given away to their husbands that you and father gave me away to Adigwu. No, mother you and father were so hungry for money that you tied me like a goat and throw me away to a man I hated (18).

In spite of her entrapment within patriarchal

tradition, Ogwoma exhibits bold resistance. Her concealed relationship with Uloka, culminating in pregnancy, positions her as an emblem of feminist resistance. Motivated by a personal claim of love, her actions challenge the collective will of the community-an individual insurrection against normative boundaries. However, Zulu Sofola challenge this act of resistance as a doomed misjudgment. Though Ogwoma's emotional resolve is rendered with empathy, the play ultimately upholds the primacy of cultural tradition over individual desire. Her defiance is not undone by personal vice, but by the rigid permanence of cultural codes –tradition serves as both a marker of belonging and an instrument of punishment.

The women in *Wedlock of the Gods* function not as disruptors of patriarchy, but as its defenders. Elizabeth Omoruyi (2019: 13 - 25) term "womanpressionism" aptly captures Zulu Sofola's depiction of women as perpetuators of each other's marginalization, rather than as advocates of collective empowerment. Both Odibei and Nneka illustrate how women can become instruments of patriarchal control using ceremonial and supernatural means to suppress Ogwoma's bodily autonomy. Odibei's invocation is timely.

ODIBEI: Cows have tails and the blind man has his stick, but with nothing you will walk into death swollen-stomached and leaking through both ends (49).

Demonstrates how women uphold and enforce destructive customs. Their harshness stems from cultural obligation rather than individual malice.

Nkechi Judith Ezenwamadu (2018: 1287 – 1293) challenges Zulu Sofola for sustaining patriarchal ideologies regarding sexuality, even as she interrogates cultural norms. The play condemns Ogwoma's sexual freedom but normalizes men's infidelity, reflecting a gendered imbalance in moral judgements. Nkechi Judith Ezenwamadu continues that Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* does not fully endorse women's sexual autonomy, rather it reinforces patriarchal double standards by penalizing female transgression while excusing male dominance in matters of sexuality.

Conclusion

Wedlock of the Gods offers a piercing indictment of how deeply ingrained cultural systems can conspire to erode individual rights and privileges particularly for women. Through the tragic trajectory of Ogwoma, Zulu Sofola exposes the violent intersections of patriarchy and bride price systems often romanticized as tradition but which in practice, operate as mechanisms of control and subjugation. In the play, culture is not merely a backdrop; it is an action force that shapes destinies, legitimizes oppression, and ultimately, sanctions death in the name of honour and communal order.

The tragedy in *Wedlock of the Gods* is not merely personal-it is systemic. Ogwoma's fate exemplifies how women's desire, bodies and choices are routinely sacrificed at the altar of cultural continuity. Bride price, as depicted in the play is not a benign cultural practice but a transactional tool that commodifies women stripping them of autonomy while reinforcing patriarchal authority. Zulu Sofola does not just

lament this condition-she dramatizes its lethal consequences, allowing the audience to witness how love, freedom and even life are forfeited when tradition becomes tyranny.

This research has illuminated the complex ways in which cultural practices, when left unquestioned, can perpetuate violence under the guise of social order. Zulu Sofola *Wedlock of the Gods* remains hauntingly relevant, reminding contemporary audiences and readers that culture is not static nor sacred when it inflicts harm. As long as patriarchal values continue to masquerade as cultural preservation, and as long as practices like bride price remains tools of coercion rather than celebration, the tragic womanhood that Zulu Sofola dramatizes will persist. *Wedlock of the Gods* is not just a play about the woman's suffering – it is a broader commentary on how societal norms, rooted in patriarchal and legitimized by tradition, can have fatal consequences. Zulu Sofola challenges us all to question the values we inherit and to reckon with the cost of cultural allegiance when it is blind to justice, equity and humanity.

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