

Societal Expectations and Female Self-Assertion in Asare Konadu's *A Woman in Her Prime* and Bayo Adebowale's *Lonely Days*

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Abstract

*In traditional African society, marriage and motherhood are central to a woman's life. Culturally, women are expected to marry and bear children, as it will ensure the community's survival and continuity. This paper examines the experiences of female characters in Asare Konadu's *A Woman in Her Prime* and Bayo Adebowale's *Lonely Days*, highlighting their struggles to assert their independence and self-determination in the face of the stifling cultural norms that seek to dictate their personal choices. The paper draws on feminist concepts like Catherine Acholonu's "motherism," which focuses on the significance of motherhood, particularly for women in traditional societies, and also explores Chikwenye Ogunyemi's "womanism," which emphasizes the importance of African women living life on their terms instead of conforming to societal expectations. The paper concludes that women are vital in society beyond their traditionally designated roles as mothers and wives. Furthermore, the decisions regarding marriage and childbearing ultimately reside with a woman and not society.*

Keywords: *Tradition, marriage, motherhood, womanhood, self-assertion.*

Introduction

In African societies, culture profoundly influences the people's way of life, values, and belief systems. In many rural areas, patriarchal norms dictate roles for men and women, and the power structure tends to favour the interests of men over those of women. As Toyin Falola (2003) observes, "patriarchy has long been established in different parts of Africa, and its manifestations can be found in various aspects of gender relations" (251). The roles of men and women are typically defined within the cultural framework of society. Falola further notes that "men are regarded as the heads of households, while women's

relevance is often limited to their roles as mothers and wives” (252). While men’s relevance is not limited to their culturally assigned roles as husbands and fathers, women’s relevance is often tied to their roles as wives and mothers. Akachi Ezeigbo (2003) notes that, unlike men, “the female is always reminded of her so-called natural roles as a wife and a mother” (xv). Despite the numerous contributions that women have made to the development of society, the culturally designated roles of wife and mother take precedence over other significant ones. Charles Nnolin (2010) similarly observes that in the work of many male African writers, women are portrayed “as mere chattels recognizable only as mothers or wives” (176-177).

In many African societies, cultural norms dictate the lives of women, influencing their expectations and aspirations from a young age. Girls are made to believe that marriage is a vital component of a woman’s life, and they are trained to prioritize the domestic duties or roles of a wife and mother above others. Ultimately, a woman’s success is often determined by her ability to fulfil her roles as a wife and mother.

The cultural expectation that women will bear children has a great impact on the lives of women in Africa. This expectation is rooted in the assumption that a woman is not truly a woman if she is unable to bear a child. In Asare Konadu’s *A Woman in Her Prime*, a childless woman is considered a male because, as the people of Brenhoma say, “there is no difference between a barren woman and a man” (116). This perspective aligns with Iniobong Uko’s (2006) assertion that “womanhood is validated only through motherhood and procreation” (86) in many societies in Africa. Culture, therefore, influences women from an early age to embrace the idea that motherhood is central to a woman’s fulfilment in life. According to Florence Orabueze (2010), traditional norms dictate that “motherhood must be the natural and biological quest of every woman” (87), an idea common not just in Nigeria but across the continent.

This paper, therefore, examines the experience of female characters burdened by the traditional demands of motherhood in Asare Konadu's *A Woman in Her Prime*, and marriage in Bayo Adebowale's *Lonely Days*. This study examines how the female characters in both novels assert their individuality and their right to self-fulfillment, defying the stifling demands of their society. According to Ezeigbo (2012) "the woman must learn survival strategies to be able to overcome the impediments placed before her and live a good life. She has to be proactive and strong" (28). Indeed, the female protagonists in both novels devise strategies to survive and thrive.

The feminist theory is adopted to drive the analysis of the two African novels. According to Akachi Ezeigbo, feminism "posits that women should have equal rights and chances with men in every aspect of human experiences: political, legal, economic and social" (11). The paper draws on two sub-concepts of feminism: motherism and womanism. Catherine Acholonu's (1995) motherism denotes "motherhood, nature, and nurture" (110) and advocates for "love, tolerance, service, and cooperation of the sexes" (111). Acholonu's concept highlights the significance of motherhood and the various ways women contribute to the betterment of their communities in Africa. Womanism, on the other hand, according to Chikwenye Ogunyemi (1985), is a "philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womandom" (72). She further states that the concept highlights the peculiar burden of a woman deprived of her rights by "sexist attitudes in the black domestic domain" (79). Ogunyemi's concept addresses how women contend with patriarchal norms in Africa. Through the lens of Acholonu's motherism and Ogunyemi's womanism, the paper examines the experiences of two female characters as they strive to break free from societal expectations and forge their path within their patriarchal society.

Socio-cultural Expectations, Motherhood and the Female Experience in Asare Konadu's *A Woman in Her Prime*

Pokuwaa is the protagonist of Asare Konadu's *A Woman in Her Prime*. The story is set in a traditional Ashanti village, Brenhoma, in Ghana, where motherhood is highly valued. In Africa, motherhood is widely regarded as a vital aspect of every woman's life. According to Catherine Acholonu (1995), "Motherhood and childbearing are central to the life of African people. It is not an overstatement that motherhood is the anchor, the matrix, the foundation on which all else rests in the African society, and especially the family" (37). Pokuwaa is a woman in her prime who is unable to conceive. Her inability to bear a child has resulted in the dissolution of two previous marriages.

When the novel begins, she is on her third matrimonial journey, desperately seeking a child to call her own. Kwadwo, Pokuwaa's present husband, has already established his virility with his other wife. Konadu's novel reflects the socio-cultural burden imposed on women struggling with infertility, a reality worsened by the widespread African cultural narrative that equates womanhood with motherhood, as Bibi Bakare-Yusuf (2003) notes, places "motherhood as the paradigmatic self-identity of African women" (5). While Yaremi in Bayo Adebawale's *Lonely Days* is compelled by the cultural demand of her society to get married after the death of her husband, in Pokuwaa's case, the pressure is on her to be a mother as Stephen Eugene Wilkinson and Lynn Clark Callister (2010) notes that "motherhood is a primary role for Ghanaian women" (8). Gracia Clark (1999) equally notes that for the Ashanti, motherhood is central to the female gender (717). Pokuwaa is a successful farmer and should be a worthy member of her village, but her inability to bear a child has consigned her to the margins of her society.

Pokuwaa's struggle to conceive is exacerbated by the societal pressure to bear children, as her opportunity to do so dwindles as she gets older. Wilkinson and Callister assert that in Ghana, as elsewhere in the world,

“there are social expectations for women to have children at the right time” (9). Pokuwaa’s prayer to “her ancestors and gods to bless her efforts to get a child” (8) and to “spare her the pain of not having a child of her own” (9) underscores the extent of societal pressure on her. The undue pressure society exerts on women struggling to conceive renders them emotionally distressed as depicted in the novel, and it confirms Orabueze’s position that the “agony of a barren woman is indescribable” (88). The cultural burden of infertility makes Pokuwaa “afraid because of the people of Brenhoma. To them, to be barren was the worst that could happen to a woman. The approach of her time caused her apprehension every month” (34). At this point in the story, Pokuwaa allows herself to be defined by the societal expectation that a woman without a child as her mother tells her is “like any boy in Brenhoma, for there is no difference between a barren woman and a man” (116) and a woman who does not want to give birth is “useless” (116). Pokuwaa’s situation is not one of a woman who chooses not to have a child, but rather one who, despite her best efforts, is unable to conceive.

The author’s position about the relevance of a woman struggling to conceive within a particular social set-up goes contrary to that of Pokuwaa’s mother. Konadu does not portray Pokuwaa as useless because she is unable to conceive, but rather as one of the worthiest members of the community. She is beautiful, industrious, and quite intelligent. She contributes in several ways to the development of her immediate society despite her inability to conceive. The scene where Pokuwaa offers her suggestion through a man in the meeting of the elders, because as a woman she cannot partake, illustrates her relevance to her community as a problem solver. Again, it is quite telling that the authors of *A Woman in Her Prime* and *Lonely Days* are men, not women. The novel highlights the idea that many men like Pokuwaa’s husband do not consider a woman irrelevant in society because she is childless.

The Intersection of Societal Expectation and Personal Choice in Konadu's *A Woman in Her Prime*

After years of fruitless efforts to have a child, Pokuwaa eventually decides to discontinue offering sacrifices to the god, Tano, in the hope of conceiving. Her decision to cease her sacrifices marks a significant departure from societal expectations. Pokuwaa informs her longtime friend Koramoa of her decision:

‘I think I am going to have peace at last,’ said Pokuwaa. ‘I am going to give up crying inside me for that which I cannot get. I am not going to sacrifice anymore.’ Koramoa felt unable to say anything. She looked at Pokuwaa, expecting to see tears, but she saw that she was calm. (111)

Pokuwaa's decision shows her growing self-awareness and determination to assert her individuality. While she does not erase the possibility of having her child, she is no longer open to being dictated to by anyone or society. She certainly no longer cares if she is branded a barren woman. Despite the pleas by her mother and her husband to rescind her decision, Pokuwaa demonstrates her commitment to her decision. She asserts her right as a woman to decide for herself. She tells her husband, “I am not asking you to agree with my decision,” Pokuwaa replied. ‘What I want my own self to understand is that there is a force that knows what is good for me’ (114). Pokuwaa makes it clear to Kwadwo that his position as her husband does not accord him the right to dictate to her. Her actions thereafter show that she intends to stick to her decision:

Going into her room, Pokuwaa took off her clothes and slipped out of the talisman she had been wearing around her waist. A priestess in the next village had given it to her. She opened her brass bowl and took out another talisman. She brought the two into the yard, threw them

into the fire, and sat down to watch them flare up and burn. When she stirred again, the fire was dying down. Inside her, she felt quite calm 'Kwadwo, come, let us sleep,' she said. It was the longest sleep she had been granted for a very long time. (114-115)

Pokuwaa's burning of the talisman is symbolic as it signifies her rejection of societal expectations. This act of defiance foregrounds a turning point in her journey toward defining herself. When her mother reminds her of the importance of offering sacrifices to the gods, she reiterates her decision, "I have stopped the sacrifices. Never again will I perform them. I am taking my mind off the fruitless efforts for a child," (115). Pokuwaa's decision to take her mind off the quest to have a child brings a sort of calmness to her. Ogunyemi argues that when women decide to confront the power structure that subjugates them, they experience a "dynamism of wholeness and self-healing" (72), which is evident when Pokuwaa prioritizes self-fulfillment over what society expects of her. Rather than society dictating to women, Konadu's novel advocates the importance of allowing women to chart their paths and define their roles in society. Rather than exerting pressure on women struggling to conceive, the novel advocates that the people around them should show understanding and offer support, as illustrated in Pokuwaa's mother, Kwadwo and Koramoa coming to "an understanding and acceptance of the situation" (120).

Acholonu in motherism advocates the need for "male-female complementarity in ensuring the totality of human existence" (112), and that is what Kwadwo offers Pokuwaa when it becomes clear she is never going back to offering sacrifices to have a child. Acholonu further states that "when women and men work together in partnership and mutual respect, the equation of life is balanced and order is the result" (114). Kwadwo deepens his affection and respect for Pokuwaa by helping her on her farm, gifting her a whole antelope, and generally

treating her as a new bride, and later on, “for three successive months she had not seen a flowing of her blood” (121).

In conclusion, Konadu’s *A Woman in Her Prime* offers a nuanced portrayal of the experiences of women struggling to conceive in a society where motherhood is highly valued. The novel underscores the importance of allowing women to chart their path and not reduce them mainly to the roles of mother and wife.

Tradition, Marriage, and Female Experience in Adebowale’s *Lonely Days*

In gender discourse, African writers often explore the predicaments of women as they navigate the tension between socio-cultural expectations and their freedom. Women encounter various issues, as seen in the case of Pokuwaa in Konadu’s *A Woman in Her Prime*. Bayo Adebowale’s *Lonely Days* interrogates whether traditional norms can compel a woman to remarry against her will.

Yaremi, the central character in Adebowale’s novel, is a widow who must abide by traditional injunctions to remarry years after her husband’s death. Her right to decide whether to remarry is usurped by the long-held cultural practice of the ‘cap picking ceremony’ in Kufi, which symbolizes a woman choosing a new husband. Like Pokuwaa, Yaremi must abide by the cultural demands of her society.

Tradition and the Predicament of Widows in *Lonely Days*

Adebowale’s *Lonely Days* shows how the rights of women are undermined within the cultural framework that privileges the interests of men over those of women. Lois Tyson (1999) avers that “patriarchy continually exerts a force that undermines women’s self-confidence and self-assertiveness” (85). The traditional patriarchal power structure in the village of Kufi debases widows, aligning with Falola’s assertion that “culture plays a role in many of the experiences of women, as well as the hardship they complain about” (251).

In many societies in Africa, when an individual dies, it is rarely attributed to natural causes. When Yaremi's husband, Ajumobi, dies, she is subjected to intense scrutiny and hostility:

She was scanned by mourners in all directions. All eyes followed every footstep she took with hostile closeness. And all ears listened, ready to catch her every word in a set trap. These were not people merely sitting in silent sympathy in the presence of death, but people who were fully bent on humiliating her and destroying her reputation. (3)

Three other widows suffer emotional distress as they are subjected to harsh cultural practices when their husbands die, a situation that unites them in a shared experience of loss, including "the loss of dignity and status" (21). The traditional power structure in Kufi refrains from subjecting men to the same harsh treatment when they are bereaved of their spouse, as rules are applied along gender lines. Adebowale's novel exposes how culture perpetuates gender inequalities in many traditional African communities. Central to the issues that Yaremi encounters in Kufi is her non-conforming disposition to traditional gender roles. Falola points out that in Africa, men and women are expected to behave in certain ways (252). Tyson states that "traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing and submissive" (83).

Yaremi, however, defies these expectations. She is a successful businesswoman, industrious and assertive. Her two daughters are married, and her son is doing well as a carpenter far away from Kufi. Yaremi is financially buoyant and able to give to everyone. Tyson argues that a woman who refuses to accept a patriarchal gender role is regarded as a "monster" (88) as reflected in the men's response to Yaremi's decision to float the conventional gender roles:

Yaremi had gradually maneuvered her way into a position of reckoning in village affairs, spreading her influence and asserting her personality in pleasant and subtle ways. But such a development had never gone down well with the men of Kufi. They always felt insulted. 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, shy, bashful, and timid. They liked them to hesitate to ask questions and be reluctant to make requests.... The tenant's shaky voice must never get into the big ears of the landlord. Their women were to be manageable and be long-suffering, complacent and apathetic, forever on the defensive. (89-90)

By defying traditional and societal norms, Yaremi demonstrates that women can transcend the confines of patriarchal categorization that restricts them to roles as wives and mothers. Her refusal to conform to the exigencies of traditional norms is not tolerated in her deeply patriarchal society, as Pumla Dineo Gqola (2022) notes, "there is a cost to challenging patriarchy" (130). It is therefore not surprising that the men of Kufi view Yaremi as "one woman who should be kept at arm's length and be dealt with decisively" (90). Adebowale's *Lonely Days* underscores the inherent challenges that women face when they challenge traditional norms that attempt to stifle their right to make their own decisions.

The Intersection of Tradition and Marriage: Personal Choice in Adebowale's *Lonely Days*

Yaremi, a beautiful middle-aged woman, is considered irresistible by some men in the village, despite others' resolve to keep her at arm's length. By avoiding romantic entanglements with the men of Kufi, Yaremi demonstrates her devotion to her late husband and indicates her resolve not to submit to the traditional practice of compulsory

remarriage for widows. According to Helen Chukwuma (1991), “A woman ultimately has to stand up and make a choice and her success and failure in that choice lies with her” (35). However, in many traditional African societies, men often usurp women’s right to make decisions about their own lives. This is evident when the elders decide that it is time for Yaremi to remarry, as captured in the following statement:

Time was ripe now for Yaremi to choose a new cap to wear. Time now for her to cast off the robes of widowhood and settle down finally with a new husband, according to the demands of tradition. “Purification later, for Yaremi,” the elders argued, “but choosing a new cap to replace the old one is now! Now! (107-108)

Adebowale’s novel highlights the gender inequality prevalent in a patriarchal society, where men compel widows to remarry. Penaewazibiou Dadja-Tiou (2022) notes that in *Lonely Days*, marriage is “essentially based on patriarchal assumptions. Only men’s interest is taken into account and women are supposed to be the executors of men’s decisions” (357). Dadja-Tiou’s observation supports Falola’s view that in many African societies, women are required to “accept a husband chosen on their behalf (253). Adebowale’s *Lonely Days* argues that the right to marry or not is solely that of the woman, not of some elders or the dictates of tradition.

Furthermore, the novel critiques the idea of coercing women into marriage, emphasizing that the choice resides with women. As Ogunyemi posits, women should have a clear “understanding of the choices open to them” (65). Yaremi’s rejection of her suitors’ proposal shows her determination to assert the right to make her own decision. She informs one of the suitors:

“And, by the way, Lanwa, you must stop preaching the sermon of our people’s old custom and tradition I

reserve the right to choose the type of life I want to lead. It could be that of a woman deliberately aloof in self-contentment, untouched by the victimization and oppression of the man; or that of a woman sulking the anger of an injury, protesting humiliations heaped on her, over the years by the man Not your business, Lanwa, how I want to live my life.” (103-104)

While Yaremi is not against marriage, having been married to Ajumobi before his death, she insists that any future marriage must be on her terms. This stance is in contrast to the three other ex-widows, Dedewe, Fayoyin and Radeke, who believe that “no woman’s life is ever complete without a man to prop her on in the arduous journey of this world It is the law of nature. A bird does not fly with one arm of its wings” and they also believe that women should “learn to be humble, meek and submissive, and be ready, at all times to accommodate our men” (111). The ex-widows are enablers of the chauvinistic tendencies of men and the cultural practices that demean and subvert the rights of women. In contrast to the timid and weak women, Yaremi stands out as courageous and assertive. Unlike them, she can unilaterally challenge the cultural practice that denies them their right to self-realization. However, Yaremi shows that challenging patriarchal tyranny does not necessarily require a collective effort. Defying traditional norms,

Yaremi turned round and bowed to the elders who sat speechless and overwhelmed. She grimaced at the three widows with a hesitating countenance and began picking her way back to the house, leaving everybody under the *odan* tree gazing in petrified stupidity ... The angry murmur of the crowd followed her, vibrating like the discordant note of a distant music. (116)

Yaremi's refusal to pick a cap amounts to a revolutionary act because no woman has ever declined to do so. As Acholonu notes, women should embrace "new, even revolutionary ideas" (113). By doing so, Yaremi becomes an agent of change, resolute in her determination to break free from tradition.

Her resolve to defy traditional norms of remarriage results in the elders ostracizing and labelling her "an unusual woman" (118). This outcome supports Gqula's view that a key feature of patriarchal ideology is to render anything hostile to it "as strange, abnormal, and illegitimate" (42). Indeed, Yaremi is an unusual woman, remaining undaunted in asserting her right to make her own decisions. According to Ogunyemi, the womanist novel articulates the struggle of a "rebel against patriarchal institutions represented by domineering men" (65). However, Ogunyemi also cautions that "in fighting the establishment, the black woman must not be so mad as to destroy herself with patriarchy" (66). Adebowale's novel reflects the experience of a woman who is determined to assert her identity and break free from the stifling hold of men and tradition. Yaremi, like Pokuwaa, embodies Orabueze's assertion, "It is only by raising her voice in protest that she can gain her freedom" (101). Recognizing the challenges of defying traditional widowhood injunctions, Yaremi is determined to forge her path within her society.

Conclusion

The authors of the two novels examined in this paper are male writers who effectively captured the experiences of women in a deeply patriarchal African society. Notably, their novels reveal a shared disapproval of cultural practices that undermine women's rights to self-realization and self-fulfillment.

The paper examined how traditional society exerts undue pressure on women to fulfill their culturally assigned roles as wives and mothers. Through the experiences of the female protagonists in Asare Konadu's

A Woman in Her Prime and Bayo Adebawale's *Lonely Days*, this paper revealed the various ways society controls women's choices by preventing them from making their own decisions.

Konadu's novel highlights the need for a woman struggling to conceive to resist undue societal pressure and instead explore alternative paths to self-fulfillment. Similarly, Adebawale's work reveals that the decision to marry should rest solely with the woman, free from the influence of domineering men and the dictates of tradition.

In conclusion, both novels underscore the notion that the role of a woman in society transcends her traditionally defined roles as a wife and mother. Asare Konadu's and Bayo Adebawale's works challenge the societal norm of reducing the relevance of women to merely domestic roles. Through the experiences of Pokuwaa and Yaremi, the novels emphasize the importance of allowing women to define their paths and make decisions free from societal pressure.

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