

Narrative Discourse and the Emergence of a New Rural Woman in Alobwed'Epie's *the Lady with a Beard*

Ophilia Abianji-Menang

Department of English Language and Literature, University of Maroua

Abstract:- This paper explores narrative discourse and the emergence of a new rural woman in Alobwed'Epie's *the Lady With a Beard*. The focus is to show how the text raises awareness on the predicaments of widows in the Cameroonian society. The novel presents some stereotypes of widows as depicted in the society from which it is written and the effects of these stereotypes on widows. However, events in the text show how Alobwed'Epie breaks away from dominant patriarchal ideologies about widows and presents a widow who questions patriarchal canons and overturns widowhood stereotypes. The text also challenges society's opinion about widows by providing new perspectives from which widows should be viewed. The womanist perspectives of Mary E. Modupe Kolawale, Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie and Chikwenye Ogunyemi are used to show that far from being a helpless class of women in society, widows can assert themselves, make choices, inherit, and manage land as well as partake in major socio-cultural, political and economic activities of their communities.

Keywords: narrative discourse, emergence, widowhood, stereotypes

I. INTRODUCTION

A lot of literary and critical material has been written on the subjugation of the woman from past century to the contemporary age. Many have viewed women as a second sex and some more have considered them as doubly or even triply "colonised". While a lot of effort has been devoted and is still being put in place to emancipate the woman from outright suppression, little has been done to salvage the rural woman from the physical and psychological pangs of widowhood.

This paper sets out to evince widowhood not only as a traumatic experience for rural women, but also as a fourth level of female "colonisation" from which she struggles to liberate herself. Fourth level in that, as a postcolonial text, set in the context of a people who were earlier colonised, Alobwed'Epie's *the Lady with a Beard* cannot be detached from the colonial experience which both men and women underwent as a colonised people. The woman who got married was further colonised by her husband, and at the third level by cultural dictates and so, becoming a widow takes her to the fourth level of colonisation. With the coming of colonisation, one would have expected a significant change to the woman's status. If any change at all, it was, to borrow the words of Christine Sylvester, "To convince (African women) to exchange African patriarchal rules for Christian (colonial)

variant (58). Girls went to formal schools but were trained to become good wives for their career husbands. Writers like Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo and Tsitsi Dangaremba portrayed some of such women, who, even after obtaining an education, still obtain and function at the margin of society. In their works, they present a society that is male oriented and the woman is nothing. My argument is that though colonisation came with its own set of values that disrupted the traditional society, these values did not change the condition of the African woman. It rather reinforced the traditional patriarchal context simply because colonisation itself devolved from a sexist premise that had dominated and continue to dominate in African societies. If the woman in the traditional and colonial Africa could be this marginalised what about the widow who is a sub-category of women? What is here plight in a patriarchal society? How is she represented in postcolonial literature? These questions constitute the main thrust of this paper. It should be noted that the widow's position devolves from the general perception of what it means to be a woman in the African context. It is from this premise that the paper identifies widowhood as a fourth level of female colonisation which the rural woman struggles to emerge. Widowhood therefore, is the main thrust of the story which has been well-crafted by Alobwed'Epie to expose the psychological trauma widows go through in Bakossi culture. He adds his voice to that of other prominent African writers like Mariama Ba in *So Long a letter*, Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*, Isidore Okpewho's *The last Duty* to castigate widowhood practices that are so ingrained in many traditional African cultures and questions if being a widow in Africa is a curse. If not, why should a widow be stigmatised? why should a widow wrestle over property that she jointly acquired with her husband? why should a widow not partake in decisions concerning her wellbeing and that of her children?

This paper therefore, examines the various perspectives from which widows are represented in post-colonial discourse following some defined stereotypes that stigmatise them. It is intended to raise awareness about widowhood stereotypes that inhibit widows to fulfil true potentials in land management and inheritance, and increase social consciousness of socio-cultural, economic and political issues that affect the lives of widows as presented by Alobwed'Epie in *the Lady with a Beard*. The novel therefore,

is a representation of what obtains in the Bakossi society with regards to widowhood. Before getting into the analysis, it is necessary to define narrative discourse and emergence, which are the key terms and concepts in this paper.

According to Herbert H. Clark and Mija Van Der Wege, narrative is the story one tells (2015, 407). It is the organization of sequence of events to form a story (Cudden 121). *The Widows's Might* explores the helpless travails of the heroine, Emade in widowhood. Set in the fictional villages of Atieg and Muabag, the narrative space takes us to two Bakossi villages, in the Kupe-Muanenguba Division of the South West Region of Cameroon to expose the predicaments of widows. Emade is stigmatised for being a witch, considered a prostitute who converts other women husbands and almost stripped of her inheritance and property rights if not for her resilience. These stereotypes about Emade are patriarchal ideologies by Bakossi tradition to dominate and oppress the widow. They do not give an adequate impression of who widows are because it is a kind of myth put in place by the patriarchal society, and its agent to oppress and suppress widows. Being a victim to a tradition that conditions men and women's behaviour, Emade is not satisfied with the status quo. She emerges as a new rural widow, who disrupts the social order in Bakossi tradition in inherit, land management, as well as partake in major socio-cultural, political and economic activities of her community. She declines traditional values about widowhood, and lays claims to masculine attributes that earn her the name, the lady with a beard.

Deborah Tannen et al define discourse as, "anything beyond the sentence. It is the study of language used (2015, 1) in a story. This is to say that discourse deals with a writer's use of language to recount his story. According to Clark and Van Der Wege, discourse is the expression, the means by which a story is communicated. They opine that "every narrative has a story (histoire), the content or chain of events (actions, happenings), plus what may be called the existents (characters, items, setting); and a discourse (discours) that is, the expression, the means by which the content is communicated" (2015, 407). To Jonathan Culler, discourse deals with the techniques that a writer uses to write his novel (7). Narrative communicates through language; thus, a writer uses language as a vehicle to communicate his vision through narrative techniques. Narrative discourse as used in this paper is based on the techniques used by Alobwed'Epie in the text and to communicate his vision about widows. Through setting, plot, characterisation, and narrative techniques, the text presents Emade, a widow, who take advantage of her widowed status to better her situation and foster development in her community. The womanist theoretical perspective will be used to elucidate these facts.

According to Lilian Lem Atanga, African feminism/womanism does not focus only on juxtaposing male dominance with female subordination or on fighting battles with men, but it challenges the status quo, describing the ways in which contemporary 'patriarchies' in African constrain

women and prevent them from realising their potentials beyond their traditional roles as hard-working, income-generating wives and mothers (308). Atanga's view falls within the domains of womanism which argues that the African woman expresses her thoughts and feelings within a cultural context. This concept looks at the society, the characters living in it and how their culture can affect their behaviour and opportunities. Womanism takes into considerations specificities that African women face in their context. The family and children are one of those specificities that womanists hold dear and creating space for women to participate in the management of their societies.

Womanists do not negate men, rather, in their quest for independence and freedom they want partnership with the men in order to change them from their sexist stands. To corroborate this view, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in "We Should All Be Feminists" opines that "African Feminists do not hate men." Adichie acknowledges the biological differences that make the sexes distinct but argues that socialization has exaggerated the differences. These distinctive features do not have attributes. The male hormones make the men physically stronger than women. But it does not make the male to be intelligent, creative and innovative than the female, or should that give the stronger sex-male the upper hand to dominate the weaker sex-female. To Adichie, the world has evolved so too our ideas about gender. She advocates a 'different world', 'a fairer world' 'a world of happier men and happier women who are true to themselves' in which the qualified to lead is not the physically stronger person. It is the more intelligent, the more knowledgeable and the more creative and more innovative. She wants a change in attitude and mind-set where we focus on ability and not gender. She believes in the social, political and equality of the both sexes. This paper will agree with Adichie that gender is destructive. It prescribes role of how we should be without taking into cognisance our ability on who we are and cultures build from these thereby destroying potentials that are innate in women and young girls in the name of socialisation roles. The future of women and girls, have been destroyed by these "prescribed roles" of wife, mother, and daughter that only give them a second-class position and limit them to domestic chores and wifery duties.

Womanism therefore, involves re-writing the identities of African women not as passive victims of male dominance and patriarchy, but as active social, economic and political agents in the development of their countries, having their ability to combine some 'traditional' practices as mothers and wife with public roles. This theory is relevant in this paper because our focus will be on the premise that female subordination is rooted in a set of customary and legal constraints that block women's entrance into the public space and hinder potentials that leads to growth. The text presents a widow who challenges cultural norms that inhibit widows' potential and disrupts the hegemony that prevails in the traditional society.

II. STEREOTYPICAL IMAGES OF WIDOWS IN *THE LADY WITH A BEARD*

The lady with a Beard depicts Emade, the heroine, as an extraordinary and charismatic female character from which the title of the novel is derived. Emade is a village widow, “who, like other men and women of the Bakossi community, is a victim of enslaving and unbending traditions that conditions men and women’s behaviour and lives” (Djockoua 9). With the death of Emade’s husband, the men of Atieg think that they will take advantage of the position of her house, which is out of town to coerce her into having sexual relationships with her. When their attempts fail, they resort to tradition to creating problems with her over inheritance. Although Emade is stigmatised as a widow, she stands her ground and challenges those cultural practices and stereotypes that inhibits a widow’s progress in her community. She does so by claiming male attributes, a beard, a symbol of strength, courage, vigour and virility which are masculine considerations and respect. Through various ritual related to marriage, invocations, birth and death, involving songs and recitations, narrations and drum communication, that are reserved for men in the Bakossi tradition, Emade breaks away from patriarchal norms and mores that push widows to marginal positions in which men, tradition have placed them. In the social, economic and social sphere of her community, Emade vocates for change in gender roles wherein the qualified are to lead not gender. To her, culture is not static. It should change with the changing times. She intends to recreate a safe and equitable community where boys and girls, women and men will benefit from their rich culture based on potentials and not gender. She does so by proving herself as an adept of Bakossi culture in various rituals related to birth, marriage and death, songs, and drum communication by claiming a dual nature to the admiration of both men and women.

In Atieg, the loss of a husband means loss of social status and self-esteem for the widow. Emade’s late husband was a notable in Atieg village. For this reason, he occupied the first compound to the entrance to the village, and also explains why the Hammock for the incarnation of Muakum was built at the grove behind his house. Emade’s authority and power as a notable’s wife died with her husband so, she cannot occupy the entrance to the village- the place of authority which is preserved for men. In Bakossi tradition, the entrance to the village is synonymous to power and authority. Figuratively, it represents the social status a man occupies in society, while the centre represents the space women occupy. The space is not physical but metaphorical. It shows how the Bakossi society is concerned with social status and its vision about gender relationships. The death of Emade’s husband has dethroned her, as a result, she has to leave the place of authority and power to the centre where she has no authority.

As seen above, widowhood robs the widow of her social status and confines her to the margin where she suffers discrimination. Emade’s situation is aggravated by the fact

that she has no son, neither is there a successor in the deceases’ family to succeed him and inherit her. The Chief and his councillors automatically constitute the decision-making body and will social power over Emade. They control her actions and decide where Emade, and her daughter, have to live because, “in a village where men incarnate Muankum, a woman (especially a widow), could not occupy the first compound-the entrance to the village” (17-18). The narrator voice here depicts the Bokossi community as a patriarchal society that has a clearly defined social structure in which the widow is totally subjugated to male authority and the female child is not valued. Where the man is the head of the family, the widow is bound to suffer economic, social and psychological hardship because the widow cannot decide. The text highlights this idea of male dominance in the novel wherein, the chief and his councillors do not only occupy leadership positions but they also constitute the decision-making body while Emade is side-lined as an outsider. The widow is not given the opportunity to express herself and assume her role as the next of kin in the absence of her husband.

To justify the above mention view, the narrator, uses Munge as his centre of consciousness to express his point of view about gender issues in this fictional society, “I remember very well when Nye Emade’s husband died twelve years back. Ntuba was just four months old. The chief and his councillors wanted to move her to the village because, in a village where men incarnated Muankum, a woman could not occupy the first compound- the entrance into the village” (17-18). Munge’s discourse has cultural overtones. It is replete with gender terminology such “a village where men incarnated Muankum...,” “all the girls born and married here...”“it was inappropriate for a widow...to occupy the first compound...” to show how sensitive this community is to gender issue. Munge gives the origin of Emade’s problems from an eye witness point of view and makes her narrative realistic. Her point of view however, portrays that the widow is disadvantaged by her gender while maleness is socially esteemed.

The widow is silenced in the traditional social structure by not giving her access to the law and myth making group of society, since decision making in the Bakossi society is the prerogative of men. This stereotype is tied to the traditional belief of inheritance and landownership where the widow and her children are seen as chattels to be inherited. An object cannot be part of the decision-making body that will decide her fate; hence she is silenced. Therefore, gender determines a woman’s status, her role in domestic and private spheres. Her discourse also reveals that the chief and his councillors have legitimate power over Emade. Their power has been legitimised through laws, rules, norms, mores, habits and mannerisms which the Bakossi people have accepted as “natural” hence, their tradition.

Power within the Bakossi society is attached to decision-making. Refusal to give Emade a voice or access to

decision making is intended to render her powerless and relegate her to the back ground where her influence is not felt while the men maintain their hegemonic position over land and inheritance. From the cultural perspective this may be to protect the widow but from the womanist perspective, it portrays that widows are indirectly excluded from participating in decision-making over inheritance due to the patriarchal tradition of that community thereby reinforces customs that discriminate against widows. If power involves making decisions, then we understand why men refuse to give widows access to decision making. This is therefore one of the major forms of oppression against widows in the cultural milieu.

However, Emade, challenges the status quo as she resists such power which refuses to give her a voice. She stands her grounds and assumes her position as the next of kin. She mesmerises the councillors whenever they invite her to the council until, the village succumbs to her decision and they move the grove behind her compound to the chief's compound. Emade breaks away from male defined canons about widows, and put masculinity and patriarchal traditions to question as she asserts her identity and personality and fights for change. She advocates for gender equality and women's socio-political leadership in her community. She is out to promote political and social representation of widows and women as a whole in public decision making. She takes responsibility over her late husband's property symbolised by the use of the possessive pronoun "my compound". She boosts social change for widows in her community and challenge institutions that take decisions on behalf of widows/women. She deviates from communal norms that oppress her and adopts an individual lifestyle to safeguard her interest. Lombe, a character on the novel, describes her here as a boulder. The boulder image symbolises the trauma widows go through in the name of custom and tradition and attests to her predicament in widowhood. Widowhood experiences have solidified and transformed Emade to the extent that she cannot be moved by neither the chief nor his councillors not to talk about the women. The inability of the chief and his councillors to win Emade over inheritance makes her to be looked upon as a witch by her womenfolk. This leads to another prominent stereotype about widows as witches and sorceress.

Emade is looked upon in the novel as a witch (18). The women attribute the failure of the men to defeat her over the issue of inheritance because she is very strong in witchcraft. Eduke contends that if the women want to tackle Nye Emade's problem, they should fortify themselves because Nye Emade is not an empty woman. She is full to the brim, "she who wants to fight a lion must have claws and fangs" (17). The lion symbolises the power of the witch which Emade is supposed to possess. Any attempts at fighting her fail because Emade is a new widow (18). The widow is victimised and stigmatised as a witch in a context of male dominance. The men's powerlessness before Emade over inheritance can be understood only in the light of

witchcraft, especially when we recall that Atieg is a typical example of traditional masculine society. The mystical aspect of the widow is brought out here. Chinua Achebe demonstrates this mystical image of the widow in *Things Fall Apart* through the widow, Chielo, the priestess of the oracle of the hills and caves. She is feared even by Okonkwo because of her magical power.

The presentation of Emade in the novel, as a witch is a reflection of how the widow is often depicted in most African societies and in post-colonial literature. It is believed that widows possess evil magical powers and practice witchcraft that is why they are often portrayed in fairy tales, legends, myths and nursery tales as witches or sorceress, hag, and harridan (Owe, 153). The stereotype of witchcraft makes widows to bear all kinds of insults from society including sexual harassment.

Widows are also seen as objects to gratify men's sexual desires. They are hardly described in positive terms as someone worthy of respect. Widowed women endure derogatory words and names in traditional context. The language used in different regions of the world to describe widows bear testimony to this. In Bangladesh and in India for instance, widows are called vulgar names such as *rand*, *randi* and *raki* to mean prostitute, harlot and whore –someone who is easily available. Widows are also called *daken* to mean witch or sorceress. A widow is also named *ghoosane phirnavalli* or one who moves around. Describing a woman as being mobile is tantamount to calling her loose (Owen21). Such negative indexing stigmatises the widow and has serious effects on her. Wherever they find themselves, they are harassed by men. The widow in *The Lady With a Beard*, is portrayed here as an object of sexual gratification. Mboke's narrative voice delineates that widows are considered prostitutes who covet other women's husbands in an attempt to survive (19). Emade confirms this view as she recounts her ordeal in widowhood to the tapper. She tells him that since her husband died, she has not been in harmony with her people. "Not because I offended them but because of my occiput" (116). She has refused to have sexual relations with the men, "When my husband died, the men tried to use the position of my compound in the village as a way by which they will be putting down my occiput. I told them no, and my no stood" (26) The people of my village thought that with the death of my husband, I shall become an elephant killed at the crossroads, but I refused to be one (116). Her narrative exposes the sexual trauma widows go through from men. This resonates with Elechi Amadi in *the Concubine* wherein Madume thinks that Emenike's death will cause Ihuoma to become loose so that he can easily have sex with her.

The vulnerability of the widow to the sexual advances of the men folk is here captured in imagery by a defiant Emade. Terms like, "my occiput," "I told them no, and "my no stood," "I refused to become an elephant killed at the crossroads," reinforce her challenge to sexual harassment of the widow. Death here is portrayed as a symbol of

defencelessness and marks the beginning of a widow's ordeals in widowhood. It renders widows helpless and exposes them to the whims and caprices of the men, captured here in the image of an elephant killed at the crossroads. The crossroad image beautifully captured, exposes the victim status of the widow who is the prey of the entire village, men and women alike. Emade's speech equally reveals that widowhood is not a crime hence, she refuses victimisation and intimidation from her community for fighting for her rights. She claims ownership of what rightly belongs to her that is why she "wins in every case" and is still alive. Hunze, a character in the novel, validates Emade's claim when he reveals that "I don't see them (men) feigning herbalists and looking for herbs and stray goats around her house these days" (18). This corroborates Simone de Beauvoir's position that humanity is male oriented. The man sees the woman not in relation to himself but as an object of sex (16).

What widows go through as elaborated in the paragraphs above is evidence that widowhood does not only stigmatises the African widow but also exposes her to sexual abuse. As noted earlier, the widow's position devolves from the general perception of what it means to be a woman in the African context. Calixthe Beyalla argues that, the African woman faces three types of battle. First, she has to struggle because she is a woman. Next, she has to assert herself as a black woman. Finally, she has to struggle for social integration. She is without doubt, the human being in the world with the greatest problems. And at the same time, she carries a lot of burden. (Fatunde 70). To Beyalla's three dimensions of the women's plight could be added a fourth-widowhood. As a woman loses her husband, the widow becomes an object of ridicule in the hands of her in-laws (men and women) and society at large. Their humanity is not respected as such, they have no right to be cared for and supported by their family and community.

Emade deconstructs the prostitute image of the widow by having control of her sexuality. Mboke admires her courage and insults the women who conspire against her. She argues that; "Nye has been a widow in this village for the past twelve years. Can any woman here say that (in spite of her compound being isolated) she has contested her husband with her! Can any woman say (that Nye Emade is a widow) she has cupped her hands before her supplicating for help!" If men-mongers, husband snatchers connive to do such an illustrious lady you follow them sheepishly (19). To prove her point, while the other women are returning to their huts, she goes to Emade's house to report the conspiracy. Mboke's questions to the woman attest to the fact that Emade has been an exemplary widow. For twelve years she is well known and respected for maintaining her dignity in spite of her widowed state. On the contrary, the "men-mongers" and "husband snatchers" are women whose husbands are still alive. In admiration for her dignity, she describes Emade as an "illustrious lady" (19). Just like Mboke, another admirer describes her strength to nine women put together, "if she were not nine women put together, she would have abandoned

this village by now (due to challenges in widowhood). Big goat, big rope, God does not give a person the load she cannot carry. The Daughter of the deity-of- Kupe-and- Muannenguba is up to the task" (15). The image of nine women put together symbolises her strength as justified by the load of widowhood. These women sympathise with her and also make us feel and sympathise with her plight.

Emade's rebellious point of view against forceful imposition of tradition is reinforced when she refuses that her sister, Ahone, should not assemble the village to judge her problem with the women because it will be making the culprit the judge, "this time it's not the men but the women" (26). To her, it is a minor problem to handle, "when male-rain fell on me did I wear a raincoat? Now it is female-rain, shall I bother myself? As the file wears out the cutlass so do the cutlass wear out the file. Atieg men and women take turns to wear me out we are all in the cauldron" (26). The "file" and the "cutlass" here represent the cruel social environment the widow finds herself in, she must develop a strategy to survive as symbolised by the "cauldron". She defeats the women just the way she did to the men which earns her the name- "the lady with a beard". Her rebellious attitude to succumb to the demands of her community, causes her ostracization from all women groups and activities. She liberates herself from forcefully imposition of patriarchal stereotypes by detaching herself from a society that oppresses widows. Emade is out to effect social change by empowering herself through confidence and autonomy. She is determined to unfold the voice, space and choices of women within the socio-cultural environment. Emade casts out the coat of tradition and opts for an individual life style. Her ostracization from Atieg, causes her to move to Muabag with her sister, Ahone, where she will exhibit her prowess in the cultural domain.

The text reconstructs the widow's image and presents as an ideal woman who creates an identity for herself through her personality. Her traumatic experiences in widowhood makes her undergo a transformation that enables her assume a male nature which, of course, contradicts her female nature which is the main cause of conflict between Emade and her society. She debunks negative images about widows by protesting against forced prostitution and repressive cultural principles. The text presents a widow unchained from the bondage of male chauvinism and rise above her position as a woman and takes important decisions. She is not in harmony with her people her because she refuses to have sexual relations with them. She does this by refusing traditional stereotypes about widows as sex objects and prostitute. These pejorative images of widows as 'prostitute,' 'witch' or 'sorceress' are a terrible stigma and shame on widowhood that produces severe depression in millions of women and sometimes leads to their suicide. Widowhood affects the widow's relationship with friends, family members and society. The widow is seen otherwise by in-laws and her natal family. Family members see her as a burden and her friends consider her a threat to their marriage and will encourage their

husbands to keep a distance while single ladies see her as a threat.

Atieg, as seen above represents the patriarchal structure that stigmatises widows and bring shame on widowhood through pejorative images of widows as ‘prostitute,’ ‘witch’ or ‘sorceress’. While Muabag is a place of refuge for the widow and offers her the opportunity to exhibit her potentials by questioning gender dynamics in her community. Just like Atieg, the Bakossi tradition of Muabag village is patriarchal. Songs, dances, drum communication and other rituals associated to birth and death are performed along gender lines. There are songs and dances that are reserved for women and men. Drum communication in Bakossi tradition is the sole prerogative of men.

Culturally, Emade makes her influence felt at Muabag, her village of refuge when her half-sister, Mechane, dies. She dismantles the patriarchal hegemony that has entrapped women for so long in her community by playing the drum not only announcing death but war. “Death” and “war” symbolically represent Emade’s determination to wage a war and put an end to gender-based tradition that discriminates against women and hamper women’s growth and development in society. She declines her feminine role assigned by the patriarchal culture and lays claim to masculine attributes. According to Emade, “women who guard the village entrance must not only understand, but must also knowhow to play the drum, not the drum announcing death but also the drum announcing war” (35). When her sister, Ahone scolds her for playing the drum, she justifies her action by asking, “how many men are in this village? All the people of this village are gone to the bush. How do we get to them if we rely only on men playing the drum? (35). These questions raised by Emade are pertinent especially in the current dispensation of armed conflicts in most African communities where men and young boys have been killed in their numbers and some have fled to the bushes. If women do not assume certain roles that are reserved for men, what will become of our tradition, especially in those areas mostly hit by these crises? This is what Emade is fight against. Emade questions the supremacy of the men in playing drums. To her, woman and men are both upholders of tradition. Certain rights should not be reserved to a particular gender, rather, she clamours for the switching of gender roles. She is against gender inequality and debunks gender roles that define men and women into masculine and feminine while advocating for complementarity in roles. Gender inequality here is seen as a hindrance to community development wherein women’s potentials and talents are least exploited because of cultural barriers. She assets herself as a woman who has the same skills, talents and potentials as men that could be exploited for the development of her society.

Emade destroys the myth about women being contented with the status quo and struggles over male domination. She tells her sister, Ahone, “if you look around, there are no men to lead us. We have to assume the position

of a man” (42). There is the reversal of value and feminine strength has given way to masculine. Emade does not only make arrangements on how to bury her sister, but she actually assumes the position of a man in deciding where her sister will be buried. She changes the Bakossi burial rites of burying the dead behind the house in a grave dug by men, “Emade pegged the grave in the middle of the compound and stated digging. To her “If a woman digsa grave does she remain in it?... “If a woman lays corpse in the grave does it jumpout?”(43). Emade even threatens the men when they continue opposing her, “let me see one of you wound the face of the earth by scratching it for a grave anywhere else in this compound... (46). She had pegged the grave with great craftsmanship and was digging it like a professional” (44). The authorial voice in describing Emade’s art of digging the grave is one of admiration. Comparing her skills to that of a professional is indicating her physical traits and characteristics are masculine. She assets herself as a “female/male that is endowed with masculine skills and potentials that her society should benefit from. Emade’s reasons for burying Mechane in the middle of the courtyard is justifiable. This is to preserve the land for her late sister’s daughter, Wobe, and to keep away grabbers from owning the land, “the grave in the middle of the courtyard is the sure guard of the compound” Nobody will like to build on a non-relative’s grave (48).

While Adamu Pangmeshi considers Emade as a failed heroine, George Ngide Ewane depicts her as a social misfit who is out to destroy the Bakossi social order. However, the text acknowledges her as a widow, who successfully guards the entrance to the village and preserves the Bakossi culture through various rituals related to marriage, invocations, birth and death, involving songs and recitations, narrations and drum communication, Emade proves herself an adept of culture.

In Bakossi tradition, the totemic cloth is a symbol of male power and authority. Together with blankets and wrappers, they are essential elements used during burials to ensure the peaceful transition of the death. During her sister’s burial ritual, Mechane’s son-in-law provides the blanket but a pig and the totemic cloth are not available. Emade supplies them to the dismay of the men. She performs the burial rite of her sister, a rite that is reserved for men, “return to your forebears in peace. When you arrive, identify yourself with this cloth (*abad d’eesake*) which the deities left with us as a sign of solidarity and oneness with the underworld. Let it be the bridge between us” (54). She creates harmony between the living and the dead symbolised by the totemic cloth. My Okore, Mechane’s son-in-law, testifies that “a mysterious sensation took grip of him” (54) when Emade handed the totemic cloth to him. An elderly woman standing explains the significance of what Emade has done to Wobe, “she has formally introduced your husband to the ancestral family of the underworld. Your father did not do it. He couldn’t because he had no totemic cloth.

The totemic cloth was handed to Emade by her late father. Though he had only female children, he succeeded to free his daughters from the bond of patriarchy. Being a “father ideal,” a womanist, who had vision for women, he acknowledged the equality of both sexes and made Emade the successor and spokesperson for the Ngome family. Emade’s father advocated for social change and his womanist outlook influenced and shaped Emade’s view about gender issues. Through socialisation of the girl child, Emade learns behaviour that is appropriate for members of her community irrespective of the gender. As the spokesperson of the Ngome family, it is on this grounds that she performs the *Kad* giving ceremony, a ceremony that is purely a male affair.

Drum communication in Bakossi tradition is solely reserved for men. Drums, the rhythm they produce and the dance they provoke in the Bakossi tradition depends not only on the occasion but also on whether the performer is male or female (Ewane 475). There are songs and dances that are reserved for men and women while drumming is a man’s thing. The *ebenzu* is a man’s dance while *Mbesu* is a woman’s dance. At the funeral vigil after Mechane’s burial, people are itchy to dance but the men cannot play the drum well and women cannot sing the eighth song. Emade declines her feminine role assigned by the phallo-centric culture and puts on her masculine nature to play the drum. She takes the lead drum, teaches the two young men how to play the accompanying parts. As the music explodes in them, the people danced as they had never danced before. She then plays *ebenzu*-a men’s dance. Emade perfectly fuses the *Ebenzu*-the men’s dance and *Mbesu*-a women dances, in a mysterious way that it makes it difficult for people to identify the dance (60). They equally play the drums so exquisitely well that neighbouring villages vibrated with the rhythm and most people dance in their sleep (60). Sango Mesumbe’s (the old man’s) bones creaked as he rolled on his bed enjoying the music. The rhythm was vibrating with power and taking possession of the living and the dead (60) to the extent that people thought they heard the voice of their departed ones in the cacophony of spirits dancing. In the morning, not only the people of Muabag, but those of neighbouring villages came to find out about the exquisite drummers. This reveals that the drumming and the fusion of the dances were so professional to the extent that it had a mystical effect on both the living and the dead. Emade’s expertise in drumming sends shocking waves to Sango Mesumbe who compares her expertise only to the great artist, Sango Ngole who thrilled them and made them dance all night long (60). Emade succeeds to make the drums talk, penetrate the nerves and possess the mind. Her expertise does not only unite the body and the soul, but also the living and the dead. And from that fusion, dance comes” (63).

Emade’s professionalism in drumming during the *Kad-giving* ceremony makes her to win the admiration of both men and women. During the *ahieg* ceremony, four elderly men walk up to Emade to play the drum for people to dance.

The men’s drumming lacked the cadence of the night following the burial. They were beating a tattoo instead of playing the drum so, people could not dance. The boys with whom Emade had played the drums before were itchy to play but they could only play the accompanying parts. They hadn’t the exquisite magic touch that made the drum zoom with enchanting life. The elders for once resonate with Emade that gender is destructive; “if the hammock gets bad don’t we cross the river on stepping stones?” (68) They recognise her ability and potential in drumming and change their mind-set on gender issues. They acknowledge shifting in gender roles and conclude that people are not only expected to dance because the tattoo beaters are men. They solicit Emade, the exquisite drummer, to play the drum. She takes the lead drum and makes it to speak. It spoke to the living and the dead in a compelling tone” (68). The text reveals that, “she made the lead drum speak to the living and the dead in a compelling tone, and the compound vibrated with sweet and powerful music as if some witchery was implanted in the drums” (68). The drumming produced sounds of whirling storms which were inexplicable, interlaced with voodoo shuddering of shoulders and mysterious shrieks of joy that took possession of all and sundry. The euphoria in the drumming makes Ahone, Emade’s sister, who had been her gender equality ideology, Sango Mesumbe, and other old men to join in the dancing to the satisfaction of the women as they ululate: “If hens crow instead of cocks, the world will still break” (68). We are mere women but the world is singing our praises. You have won the laurels of honour” (65). The women’s ululation is proof that the text acknowledges that men and women have same attributes irrespective of the gender.

In Bakossi tradition, succession is equally based on gender. Male and not female children succeed their parents. A lineage ends when there is not male child to succeed the father and continue his lineage. This is marked by the ritual of closing the door and throwing the key into the bush. This is a Bakossi ritual that symbolises the end of a family lineage. Emade also modifies this ritual. Her aim of modifying this ritual is that Mechane’s family is not extinct so long as her daughter, Wobe, and children are still alive. Female children have equal rights to inheritance as male hence, a man or woman’s lineage should not end because he has only female children. To ensure continuity in her late sister’s lineage, she modifies the ritual of closing the door and throwing the key at the door and not in the bush as tradition demands. She buries her late sister in the middle of the compound, blackens her grave, personally makes a ten-foot-high heap of stones on it so as to deter idolaters of their sister’s land (51). Emade’s decision to blacken the grave of her sister boosts social change as she leaves an indelible mark at Muabag. Women take her for a heroine and when she returns to Atieg, she receives a heroine’s welcome. We are told that her achievements at Muabag made the women of Atieg to forget about their dispute with her and for days they feasted with her. The fact that the same community that had ostracized her gives her a heroine’s welcome back to

Atieg, because of her achievement at Muabag, shows that this community and the world are clamouring for change in gender roles. They have come to the realisation that gender is really destructive and impedes a woman's progress.

Emade is a true representation of the kind of woman that Chimamanda N. Adichie admires. She has the strength, courage and intelligence of men to create and innovate which qualifies her to lead and move her community forward. Like Chimaamanda Adichie, she wants a change in attitude and mind-set where focus is on ability and not gender. She believes in the social, political and equality of the both sexes. Alobwed'Epie, through his representation of Emade, uses her dualism to dismantle the binary structure of power by integrating collective and positive identities of women in rituals because such rituals are inherently phallogocentric. Like Chimaamanda Adichie, the text through the presentation of Emade calls for the reformation of gender role. This is evident in the text where in masculine attributes are used to describe Emade's art and ability in pegging the grave, "she had pegged out the grave with great craftsmanship and was digging it with the mastery of a professional" (44) playing the drum, "they play the drum so exquisitely well" (44), "the exquisite drummer" (60), "dexterous drummer" (65); and in laying the stones, "the stones were painfully laid, as if by a bricklayer" (86). Emade matches in to a position of visibility by asserting herself as a "woman man".

Suffice it to say that the description of Emade in the text is mythical. She is vividly captured in symbolic terms, "She is the lady with a beard, "slaughterer-of slaves", "lion of the unbroken tradition", "widow of the upstream python"(12).She is the "Daughter-of-the-dreadeddeity," "the daughter-of-the-deity-of-Kupe-Muanenguba" (15). The "spoon-that- stirs-steaming-broth," wife-of-the-incarnator-of-Muankum" (65). Her strength is described as that of "Nine women put together" (15).These are appellations that exemplify the trait of her character. The use of strong animal images like the lion, python, and elephant are tropical animals that the dominate the animal kingdom shows her as fearless and defiant. She defiles the men openly by destroying patriarchy from its roots. She tramples on traditional values that distinguishes males from female and establishes the norm. She promotes political and social equality for men and women in her community.

From this perspective, we notice that masculinity and femininity in literature are culturally loaded terms with no one on one relation. It includes all the values that society or culture attaches to being woman or man. Simone De Beauvoir contends that, "one is not born a woman. The terms masculine and feminine are used symmetrically as a matter of form, as on legal papers" to her, the two sexes are different but socially they are equal because all of them are human being. To her, every female human being is necessarily a woman unless she shares in the mystery and threatening realities known as femininity. Emade is not an ordinary woman. She rejects the femininity that represents only the negative and defines her by

limited criteria. She identifies herself as a woman/widow who wants to complement the man in order to form a useful combination. Through Emade, the author puts masculinity and patriarchal traditions to question as the widow asserts her identity.

III. CONCLUSION

Having examined the stereotyped images given to widows in *The Lady with a Beard*, we realise that the marginalisation of the widow is as a result of existing cultural values against widows which make them subject to male domination. This reveals that the Bakossi society, like most African society is patriarchal and the place of the widow within this scheme is subordinate. Internationalisation of this inequality remains common in African customary law wherein women have no right to inherit from their husbands as shareowners of marital property. This shows that it is a male dominated culture in which male privileges are endorsed and control the treatment of the widow. Emade, has responded to these stereotypes positively by emerging and creating an identity for herself. She debunks gender biases and inaccurate pictures of African widowhood. Emade gains recognition by empowering herself, socially, culturally and politically. The text expresses Alobwed'Epie womanist stands as he believes in the emancipation and empowerment of the widow in the cultural context. The text draws our attention to women's subjugation and helps to change people's consciousness towards gender issues, especially societies consciousness towards widows. The text portrays Emade as a widow who aims at freeing herself from traditional female and gender roles which are oppressive and advocates a just society in which freedom flourishes. Emade, uses her status as a weapon to rehabilitate and restore the image of the African widow. Emade says no to oppressive customs and traditions by refusing to be "an elephant killed at the cross-roads that men draw knives to butcher". She rejects her femininity and develops a male nature to the point of digging graves, playing the drum and participating in certain rituals that are reserved for men.

WORKS CITED

- [1]. Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann, 1958.
- [2]. Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. "We Should all be Feminists." <https://www.harpercollins.co.uk>, 28th March 2020
- [3]. Aje-ori, Agbese. "The Portrayal of Mothers-in-law in Nigerian Movies: The Good, the Bad & Oh, So Wicked!" *Films in African Literature Today* 28. Ed. Ernest N. Emenyonu. London: James Currey, 2010, 84-105.
- [4]. Alobwed'Epie. *The Lady With A Beard*. Yaounde: Editions Clé, 2005.
- [5]. Amadi, Elechi. *The Concubine*. London: Heinemann, 1966.
- [6]. Atanga, Lilian Lem. "African Feminism?", *Gender and Language in Sub-Sahara Africa: Tradition, Struggle and Change*. John Benjamins's Publishing Company, <https://benjamins.com>, catalog, 27 March 2013, 3 February 2020.
- [7]. Ba, Mariama. *So Long a Letter*. London: Heinemann, 1981.
- [8]. Clark, Herbert H. and Mija M. Van Der Wege. "Imagination in Narratives." *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. 2nd Ed. Vol. 1, eds, Tannen, Deborah, Heidi E. Hamilton and Deborah Schiffrin. New Delhi: Blackwell Publishers, 2015.
- [9]. Cuddon, J. A.A *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.

- [10]. Djockoua, Manyaka Toko. "Naturalism, Ritual, Technique, and Being in the Postmodern Novel: A Comparative Study of Ernest Hemingways *The Old Man and the Sea* and Alobwed'Epie's *The Lady With the Beard*." *Emerging perspectives on Alobwed'Epie*. eds, Agbor, Sarah Anyang, Manyaka Toko Djockoua and Stephen Ambe Mforteh Newcastle:Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018, 5-18.
- [11]. Driesen, Jean. *Widows in Rural India*. London: London School of Economics, 1990.
- [12]. Ewane, George Ngide. "Dynamic Organicism and the Traditionallmagination in Alobwed'Epie's *The Lady With a Beard*." *Mediterranean Journal of Social Science*. Vol 2 (3) 2011, 472-478, 10th April, 2020www.mcser.org.
- [13]. Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin Foreword by Jonathan Culler, Ithaca. New York: Cornell University Press, 1980.
- [14]. Fatunde, Tunde. "Calixthe Beyala Rebels Against Female Oppression." *New Women's Writing in African Literature*. No 24. Ed. Ernest Emenyonu, Oxford: James Currey, 2004, 9-76.
- [15]. 9-76.
- [16]. Keeseey, Donald. *Contexts for Criticism*. 4th Ed, New York: Mcgraw Hill, 2003.
- [17]. Kolawole, Mary E. Modupe. *Womanism And African Consciousness*. Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 1998.
- [18]. Marger, martin N. *Social Inequality: Pattern and Processes*. California: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1999.
- [19]. Ngongkum, Eunice. "A crushing Curse: Widowhood in Contemporary Anglophone Cameroon Literature." *Tydskrif VIR LETTERKUNDE. A Journal for African Literature*. 53(1). Ed. Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi, 2016, 138-148.
- [20]. Okpewho, Isidore. *The last Duty*. London: Longman, 1981.
- [21]. Owen, Margaret. *A World of Widows*. London: ZED Books, 1996.
- [22]. Pangmeshi, Adamou. "Failed Heroines: The Paradox of Female Liberation in John Nkemngong Nkengasong's *The Widow's Might* and Alobwed'Epie's *The Lady with a Beard*." *Emerging perspectives on Alobwed'Epie*. eds, Agbor, Sarah Anyang, Manyaka Toko Djockoua and Stephen Ambe Mforteh, Newcastle:Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018, 77-89.
- [23]. Potash, Betty, ed. *Widows in African Societies, Choices and Constraints*. Stanford: Stanford U P 1986.
- [24]. Peak, John and Martin Coyle. *Literary Terms and Criticisms*. 3rd Ed, New York: Palgrave, 2002.
- [25]. Showalter, Elaine. *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on women, Literature and Theory*. London: Virago, 1986.
- [26]. Simone De Beauvoir. "Women and the Other," *Literature in the Modern World: Critical Essays and Perspectives*. 2nded, Dennis Walder, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, 280-284.
- [27]. Sylvester, Christine. *Producing Women and Progress in Zimbabwe*. Postsmouth: Heinemann, 2000.
- [28]. United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, "Widowhood, Invisible Women, Secluded or Excluded," Women2000, January 2020.