

## 6. THE OPPRESSION OF WOMEN IN SELECTED NARRATIVES BY NAMIBIAN FEMALE AUTHORS

Liicka Andima and \*Alexandra Tjiramanga

### Abstract

The oppression of women, especially in African narratives, has been attributed to many factors, culture being the dominant amongst others. Culture and tradition have a variety of notable aspects to offer and there is much to appreciate, cherish and preserve. There are, however, some cultural practices and beliefs that are harmful. They disrespect, devalue, suppress and destroy human dignity. Harmful gender practices such as widow cleansing, girls' initiation and others that marginalize women, are the focus of this study. This paper examines various cultural practices that oppress women as they are reflected in selected narratives of Namibian female writers. After gaining its independence in 1990, Namibia passed laws protecting the rights of women against various forms of oppression. With its history traced and rooted in the old and strong patriarchal norms, beliefs and practices, the notion that men are superior to women still affects women in the modern world. Cultural practices which marginalize women are still in existence, enforced by some of those that feel that they are important and superior. Through different women organizations, Namibian women demand and take the right to speak about those practices. Some have voiced them in writing or speaking out and breaking through the debilitating silencing. In the more formalized political and social field, this can be seen in women's networking through women's movements and solidarity groups, which are working towards equality in civil societies. It is therefore against this background that this study looks at female oppression; on how cultural practices enhanced or fuelled women oppression as well as various forms of oppression as highlighted in the selected narratives by Namibian female authors. They are from the book entitled, *We must choose life* (2008), compiled by Elizabeth !Khaxas, a Namibian feminist. These narratives are a testimony of the courage of Namibian women who express their agony and suffering in their own words.

**Key words:** African norms and traditions, gender issues, female subjugation, Namibia, feminism, inequality of women, sexual slavery, widow cleansing, loss of identity, inheritance, female literature, polygamy

### Background

Many instances of women suffering and oppression are a result of tradition and culture. They feature prominently in many African narratives and increasing attention is being accorded to the mediation of gender relations in contemporary African literature in general. Namibia, too, is not an isolated case when it comes to gender related issues and concerns.

Namibia's rich history and culture is told from the pre-colonial era, at the arrival of missionaries and traders, during the colonial and liberation struggle days and post-independence (Rhode, 2003). In the pre-colonial days, rituals were conducted during weddings, burials, child births etc.

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\*Lecturer, Department of Communication, PoN, (NUST) Windhoek, Namibia

Men went out in fields to hunt and women stayed behind to care for children and prepare meals for their families. Men who hunted more meat were given high respect as they were regarded as 'real' men. Those who struggled received no respect and were often called cowards, and described with words equating them to women (Namupala, 2004).

On the other hand, during the South African Apartheid regime, men suffered both racial as well as sexual insecurities. Working away from their families for long periods exposed men to exploitative and violent relationships. They simply conformed to cultural norms which regarded women as mere property of men, first property of their fathers, then as cattle of their husbands. The colonial administration refused to recognize women leaders and manipulated customary laws to suit their needs (Namupala, 2004). Colonial officials promoted Western patriarchy, which reconfigured power within gender relations. The alliances of colonial administrators and 'traditional' elites contributed to the idea of ancient male traditions within which men were defined as the exclusive holders of authority in the family, the community and the state. Under colonial law, women were classified as minors; they could neither vote nor own land, and they needed their husbands' permission to enter into legal contracts (Becker, 2003).

Furthermore, during the days of Apartheid, men worked as contract labourers in mines and on farms which were far away from their families, thereby leaving their wives and children at their homes in villages. It was the norm that women stayed behind to work in fields, under the authority of male chiefs. From one line of thought, they were kept away from paid jobs as a form of economic marginalization, relegating them to the rural economy only. Men's work was remunerated in cash, gaining much easily appreciated value as opposed to women's daily hardships (Ambunda & de Klerk, 2008).

However, during the liberation struggle, both men and women fought against the colonizer, for their political freedom. Interestingly, the majority of writers wrote about colonial oppression and the women's involvement in the war. Namibian authors such as Linda Shaketange, Libertine Amadhila and Nepeti Nikanor have contributed, through their literary pieces directly to the liberation struggle, looking forward to a future of freedom and independence.

When it gained its independence from South Africa in 1990, Namibia made massive changes which were meant for the betterment and consideration of women's issues. The authorization of affirmative action and the prohibition of discrimination based on sex are some of the issues that received attention at the centre of social transformation. Various post-independence writings by Namibian women came to light, bringing forth their long silence and suffering. Their voices advocate for change, the beginning of a feminist era trying to repaint the picture of traditional women portrayal in the eyes of their own societies and those of the entire world (Ambunda & de Klerk, 2008). Namibia has as well ratified the "Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women" (CEDAW) in 1992. The convention condemns any form of discrimination against women, and states that measures have to be taken to eradicate:

Any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field (Visser & Ruppel-Schlichting, 2008).

Despite the laws protecting the rights of women after independence, the notion that men are superior to women still affects women in post-colonial Namibia. Much of the discrimination against women takes place in their homes by their husbands, families and their communities. These areas of discrimination are usually based on long-standing cultural practices.

The book introduces a variety of factors that lead women into abusive relationship and how they became infected with HIV/AIDS and how the culture of silence surrounding sex and sexuality in their traditional societies contributed to their situations. The narratives depict their struggles, sufferings, dreams and triumphs. The prominent themes in this book are cultural practices such as arranged child marriages, rape and abuse of women and girls before and during marriage, HIV and AIDS, and how using writing as a liberating tool is an act of courage.

Some of the problems women still face in some parts of the country are girls' initiation, arranged or forced marriages of girls, rape before and during marriage, widow cleansing and inheritance issues.

The narratives examined in this study are:

1. *Stolen youth* by Taati Niilenge
2. *My first period* (author unknown, only first name available)
3. *The inheritance of Sofia* by B. Sitali-Mapenzi, et al.
4. *A love slave* by Paula Dikuto

This study supposes that patriarchy still exists in some Namibian societies, especially in rural settings and many women are marginalised by culture and that this is the reason why the narratives take account of the various cultural practices which can harm women physically, emotionally and psychologically. Irrespective of laws in place, protecting the rights of all citizens, women continue to be culturally oppressed as reflected in the selected narratives.

The study informs the Namibian society of the impact that some of the cultural practices and beliefs have on the lives of women. Presented to the education sector, it further advises educators on how to address culturally related issues and handle the girl child in schools, i.e. to be sensitive, as some of girls might have suffered gender-related oppressions. The study will be able to further benefit other literature and gender scholars for reference purposes. The focus of this paper is from a feminist perspective that may add to the studies of women-related issues in Namibia. There are some cultural practices in Namibia that marginalized women and deprive them of their rights. Many women suffer in silence because they are unaware of their rights and have accepted the patriarchal status quo and regard it as normal.

### **Literature review**

Many authors have deliberated on the issues of women and their plight in a traditional African setting. From a literary point of view, early African feminists such as Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa from Nigeria have written about African voices of women in agony. Their works serve as the starting point for the voices concerned about the independence and freedom of African women in general. They wrote novels about the struggle of African women in a contemporary African society and portray the conditions of women in the traditional African setting. Their works promote equality for men and women in the political, economic, educational, traditional and social spheres. They believe that women are oppressed due to their sex and based on the dominant ideology of patriarchy. These female writers, amongst others, fought on behalf of African women through their works, by giving them significant roles which portray women as

paragons of virtue and instruments of honour in the Africa society (Olamide, 2011). Ogun-dipe-Leslie (1994) identifies traditional structures as one of the mountains on the back of an African woman. It is fostered through gender socialisation processes which connect macho strength and heroism to males and associates the traditional roles of wife and mother to women. Ogun-dipe-Leslie (1994) however, argues that African women are seen as oppressed as widely depicted in fiction and other literary works but cultural critics do not look in the right places to get women's cultural acknowledgement. This sentiment is raised through voices like the one below:

Are African women voiceless or do we fail to look for their voices where we may find them, in sites and forms from which the voices are uttered? We must look for African women's voices in women's spaces and modes such as in ceremonies, work songs . . . kitchens, watering sites, kinship gatherings, and women's political and commercial spaces. . . (Ogun-dipe-Leslie, 1994).

Fonchingong (2006) emphasises that traditions, beliefs and cultural practices are central in the gender socialization process. Concretely, he affirms that the educational processes, both in the traditional pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras in Africa all bear traces of the subjugation of the female gender. Justification to this fact can be diagnosed through an analysis of male and female access to education, which culminated through Gathoni in the play by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *I will Marry When I Want* (1980) and Njoroge in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not Child* (1964). Similarly, in Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, Tambu is made to stop going to school when school fees are not enough, simply because she is a girl and her brother is sent to school by virtue of being a boy. Nyamndi (2004) states that the ideal female character created by early male writers such as Elechi Amadi, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and many others, acts within the framework of her traditional roles, such as being a mother and wife. She earns love and respect when she acts within the parameters of her own society and her adaptation to cultural norms and expectations. Furthermore, Nyamndi (2004) highlights that most of the African narratives, especially those written by male authors, fuel oppression. Although they view a woman, especially the traditional African woman, as inferior to her male counterpart, they accorded her respect to a certain extent. Such narratives are evidence that they championed the cause for female emancipation. They lead to empowerment long before the transition of the late 80s and early 90s started for gender equality and female affirmative action (Nyamndi, 2004). Similarly, Olamide (2011) argues that little or no recognition is given to women, thus they have been oppressed, depressed, subjected and neglected. He highlights that pre-literate women suffered the strike of tragedy, as literate men and women do not want to accord them their due recognition.

Furthermore, Ezeigbo (1996) shows that women are often overwhelmed by responsibilities in her life, those created by society and by her. She is expected to perform her traditional roles efficiently; run her home, be a good wife, a super mother and a supportive member of the extended family. This task she has accomplished in a culture where she is taught that she is inferior to her male counterpart.

Hague and Thiara (2009) point out that customs such as paying *lobola* (bride-price paid to the parents of the bride) in many African traditions tend to fuel gender inequality. Negotiations usually involve senior men in the two families who decide what the woman will do and how she will behave. Thus, bride-price can be seen as a symptom of male dominance and power inequality in families as it is a product of men being in the more powerful position in the family. It then leads to men automatically expecting to control their family. By paying *lobola*, she becomes an item that changes owners. According to custom, it causes women to have little power

to influence the custom as they are bargained over and 'exchanged' from household to household by male family members. It may result in a situation where there are few opportunities for the equal treatment of men and women. Rather, the subservient position of the wife is often made worse and greater inequality is therefore frequently caused by the payment of bride-price. Although historically the payment of bride price was a noble idea which was a form of appreciation of the worth of a woman, given to her parents as a thank you gesture and to bind families together, the present day commercialization of *lobola* makes it look evil. For example, *lobola* is often no longer paid in cattle, but household goods or even cash. The better educated a woman is, the higher the *lobola*.

Ngcobo (2003), in her essay entitled "African Motherhood - Myth and Reality", has found that women in the Bemba community in Zambia are made to suffer emotionally. She points out that right from the earliest stages of the marriage; effort is made to distance the young wife from the young husband. As a wife, she is taught not to talk to her husband much. As soon as she falls pregnant, she is supposed to leave her husband to his co-wives. The rationale is that, she got what she wanted and throughout her pregnancy and lactation she no longer needs her husband.

Talavera (2003) relates that some ethnic groups in Namibia prepare young people for marriage with initiation rites that include basic information about sex. The instructions emphasize the importance of dry sex, to enhance pleasure during sex. This however poses danger to the biological nature of the woman. He further indicates that gender roles during the 'elders' era were much patriarchal. Marriages were arranged and girls were often married at a young age, usually shortly after their first menstruation. Therefore, it was not uncommon for husbands to be significantly older than their wives. Men, as heads of the household, were entitled to make decisions about the couple's sexual and reproductive lives. Wives were not allowed to reject their husbands' sexual advances; refusal was seen as justification for a beating. Husbands were formally and informally allowed to have multiple partners, while wives were expected to be monogamous. Jewkes, et al., (2007) argue that children are vulnerable because of some cultural beliefs which create the ideological opportunities for child rape. The high status of men and pronounced age hierarchies lead to vulnerability by reducing girls' ability to refuse sexual advances and fostering male control of women and children. Although communities condemn child rape, perpetrators are not always condemned and are often protected, while their victims are sometimes blamed and labelled. Jewkes, et al., (2007) further present that patriarchal ideals also render girls' vulnerability to be abused through legitimizing displays of male power in private and sometimes public spaces. These acts serve to manufacture gender hierarchies and communication about gender power relations. Child rape is presented as an overwhelmingly female problem. The social context of child rape in Namibia is a feminized blame. This suggests that the prevention of child rape must be intimately linked to efforts to transform the status of women and children in society.

According to Steinitz (2007), the belief in male dominance violates women's rights in many ways, both in society and in the bedroom. Men's control over women's sexuality, for example; men deciding when, where and with whom to have sex, greatly contribute to the spread of HIV. Steinitz (2007) further relates that women are frequently more at risk than men because they do not have the power to insist on having sex with a condom or to enforce or ensure monogamy.

Steinitz (2007) in a book chapter entitled *The Face of AIDS is a Woman*, suggest that gender inequalities, violence in families and in sexual relations, and the increase in female-headed

households must be taken into consideration when analyzing HIV transmission and the long-term impact of HIV/AIDS. Women are especially at risk because their weak social and economic position inhibits them from avoiding sex with an infected partner or demanding condom use.

Edwards (2007) blames women's current economic dependency on the precolonial background. Culture dictates that a man is the head of the household; therefore he is in charge of any decision to be taken in the family. She also indicates that colonialism promoted women's exploitation and posits that post-independence economic policies have failed to address the gender imbalances in the ownership and control of productive assets, hence continuing the trajectory of female dependency that curtails sexual and reproductive autonomy and fuels the HIV spread. In her book chapter entitled "HIV/AIDS, Gender and Sexuality: Socio-Cultural Impediments to Women's Sexual and Reproductive Autonomy", Edwards (2007) highlights how the feminization of HIV/AIDS belies the rhetoric of empowerment. She confirms that gender inequality, female dependency and patriarchal control over women's sexuality are key factors in the transmission of HIV. Because of these factors, HIV/AIDS prevention campaigns based on assumptions of rational autonomous free choice have failed. In summary, Women did not have the opportunity to voice the discriminating and unjust conduct by men and society.

### **Theoretical framework**

Feminism is a world-wide ideology and political movement directed at existing power relations between men and women in patriarchal societies. Being both an activist movement and a body of ideas, it emphasise the need for a positive transformation of society such that women are not marginalised but are treated as full citizens in all spheres of life .African women's writing emerged in the 1970s, mainly set out to address inadequate or negative representations of African womanhood that dominated African literature at the time. Feminists, such as Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Neshani Andreas, Liberthine Amathila and many others, in their writing and in activism, aimed to demonstrate that they were relevant to the African context. They in particular aimed to present that they did not simply seek to emulate their western feminist counterparts. The advocacy in their work was to show that African feminism is not antagonistic to men but challenges them to be aware of those aspects of women's marginalization, which differs from the generalized oppression of all African people. Although agreeing with the politics of feminism, most women writers in Africa have rejected the feminist label while others have to choose between endorsing the label and refuting it (Ngcobo, 2007).

The discussion of this study is angled from a general feminist perspective, and particularly from a stiwanist approach, which is a strand of African feminism. Stiwanism comes from the acronym STIWA - Social Transformations in Africa Including Women. Leslie-Ogundipe, the founding mother of this African feminism, advocates for the corrections of negative aspects of African cultures, without necessarily employing Europe as a model. Stiwanism is designed to discuss African women's needs and agendas in the context of strategies fashioned in the environment created by indigenous cultures. This African feminism insists on the participation of women as equal partners in the social transformation in Africa. Outlining the need for African feminists to be self-defined, the African feminist and critic Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) makes the assertion that the African woman needs to be conscious not only of the fact that she is a woman but that she is both an African and a third world person. As an African, the woman needs to be conscious of the context in which her feminist stance is made. This means that as an African woman, while

pointing out the flaws of her culture, she should be careful not to be seen to be aspiring to westernization at the expense of her own African customs.

*We must choose life* (2008), a collection of narratives from the voices of Namibian female writers presents stories from different women subjected to oppression at the hand of their culture. These voices are directed to a contemporary society to address men and women, from the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial gender perceptions. Applying Stiwanism is therefore appropriate in addressing women oppression in a post-colonial Namibian context as the women's voices advocate for social transformation through their presentation of women's lives.

## **Narrative Analysis**

This section presents the textual analysis of the selected narratives from the anthology *We must choose life* (2008) by Namibian female authors, compiled by Elizabeth !Khasas. It presents three themes of female oppression as they are depicted in these narratives.

### **The Loss of Youth, Education, and Dreams**

The short narrative "Stolen Youth" (Niilenge, 2008) depicts a young girl in a patriarchal society, who is married off at a tender age. Culturally, when an African girl child gets her first menstruation, she is regarded as having matured into womanhood and ready for marriage. She is 15 when negotiations were made by the elders, for her to get married to Enias who is 10 years older. However, she cannot not reject her father's decision because according to their tradition, women and girls are not involved in decision making, even on matters that directly affect them. They will only have to accept and act on what is being imposed on them.

As patriarchy empowers men, it deprives them of their rights and makes them powerless and vulnerable. Wives are demoted to the level of the children and therefore excluded from decisions. In the narrative, without their consent, marriage arrangements are finalized and the father only brings the news to his daughter and wife to inform them of the outcome. An ideal woman obeys her husband and should be submissive at all times. Moreover, from the narrative it is made clear that culture does not allow children to speak or argue with parents. As a child and a woman, she had to be silent and respect the culture. "A child should be seen and not heard," her father says (Niilenge, 2008, p. 21).

The daughter sees Enias and his kinship gathered at her compound and wonders why they were there, not knowing that she is the subject of the gathering. As a young child, who is still growing, marriage news comes as a shock to her. She regards herself as a child, still playing her childhood games and being dedicated to her school work. Culturally, it is a norm and pride for the parents to marry off their child as a virgin. It is therefore important that parents in many African societies arrange for early marriages, an effort to ensure that a girl gets married before she becomes sexually active and indulges in sexual acts before marriage. A woman who involves herself in sexual activities before marriage brings dishonour and shame to her family and community (Anyolo, 2008).

Taati's father says this to his child: "We have groomed you into a good, responsible girl, who can do anything required of a woman. "The time has come for you to take up your role as a woman"

(Niilenge, 2008, p. 21). She pleads with the mother to protect her. But because culture does not allow women to object to men the situation has to be accepted. "That's our tradition, my girl. That is what every girl has to do" (Niilenge, 2008, p. 22). The mother, although she is also a woman, becomes an accomplice to her own daughter's oppressive and forced marriage owing to the way she has been socialized.

Educating a girl child is seen as less of a priority than educating boys. Her most considered role was to be a wife, mother and homemaker. Parents therefore do not see the importance of a girl child to be sent to school and complete education but rather to arrange marriage for her. Even though Taati feels that she is too young to get married; is ambitious, has future dreams and her education is more important to her, it is now all in vain. This is how she moans and laments her despicable situation; "Look at me, I am still a child and I haven't finished school yet. I have dreams. I'm the best at school," she claims. "Silence! You are not to talk back to me, girl. Your place is with your husband. That is where you belong. What nonsense are you telling me about dreams? Your dream should be to take care of your children and your children" (Niilenge, 2008, p. 21). With no choice, she has to go through a painful wedding ceremony, a result of imposed decisions. One's wedding, which must be a mark of one's most joyous moments, becomes her worst nightmare and this is how she recounts it; "I went through the painful wedding ceremony. Painful, yes, that's what I call it, because none of the things performed during that day brought joy to my heavy heart" (Niilenge, 2008, p. 22). Child marriage deprives a girl child of formal education and self-development. Girls that become victims of arranged or early marriages remain trapped in poverty and risk the infection of HIV and AIDS. Marriage automatically imposes the status and responsibilities of an adult on a young girl, thus denying her the protection of childhood by family and community.

The girl is not mentally, physically and psychologically prepared for the responsibilities that marriage brings. She becomes a victim of marital rape and sexual exploitation. She faces a higher risk of contracting HIV and AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, owing to her marriage with an older man with multiple partners and who has had more sexual encounters. The young woman narrates the sad encounters of her first night; how Enias forces himself into her, for his own sexual pleasure and satisfaction. She had nothing to enjoy from this encounter as everything happened against her will. She feels lost and had no one to turn to. She has to endure the pain from different events that she has to suffer at the hand of her own tradition. Her youthful days are no more; she has become a woman, Enias' wife. The painful encounters are reflected in her words as she narrates thus:

"I became the wife and lost my youth." "I will never forget the night when Enias forced himself into me, going on enjoying his satisfaction; and me, the girl child who was no more, bleeding and crying from pain."

"I cried that night. I cried for my youth that was no more, for my fragile little body, still developing. For my friends who I would no longer play with because I would soon be a woman. There will be no time to play. I would have to take care of my husband." (Niilenge, 2008: 22)

The plight that a young woman faces is indeed a reflection of gruesome inhumanity and is representative of what many girls face. In some countries, young married girls after marriage move away from their parents' homes to live with their husbands' families, where they have no friends, no support and little say in their own lives or in the household matters. They are unable to



negotiate or obtain support for issues in their own interest. They are frequently exposed to violence and threats of abandonment or divorce (Iiping, E., 2005).

In this narrative, the young girl relates how marriage brought misery into her young life. She remains lonely even after giving birth to a baby girl, as her husband does not acknowledge the child. She does not receive love from her husband, and to make matters worse, Enias prefers a boy instead of a girl. She feels punished because maybe had she given him a baby boy, it would have been better. Although in pain and loneliness, she finds comfort and love in her baby girl. The scope of her world becomes reduced and limited but at least in her own child she gets comfort: "There was no love from my husband, and I had to spend lonely days sitting with my child, until the day I became ill." (Niilenge, 2008, p. 22).

A young girl who was prepared and looking forward to a promising life is deprived of her childhood. She loses her youth; her rights were violated because she has no voice and power. She is thrust into the full burden of domestic responsibilities, motherhood and sexual relations rather than playing with her friends or dreaming about a career. Abandoned by her husband at the tender age of seventeen, she is infected with HIV and has to get back to her parents' home. Although she watched others play, she could no longer do it as she was no longer a child. She could no longer achieve her dreams, they were shattered and her life was cut short. In an emotive manner, this is how she recounts her misery: "That is why I am lying here now at my parent's house, watching my friends still playing their game; a game that I once was going to win, before my parents and their culture sent me to my deathbed..." (Niilenge, 2008, p. 22). In the end, it becomes evident that the oppressive power over a girl or a woman results in the ultimate power over her life and death.

### **Economic oppression, Sexual Slavery and the effects on women's health**

The story "A Love Slave" takes place in the Kavango region, in the northern part of Namibia. A young woman, Susana recounts how she gets married at the tender age of 17. Being the first child of the family, Susana drops out of school after her mother's death, to take care of her siblings. Death, which leads to poverty, has forced the young girl to give up her education and take up heavy responsibilities of taking care of their home. She marries a man who starts sleeping around and eventually divorces him. She falls sick and is taken to a traditional healer.

The healer offers two options of payment. If they cannot afford to pay 500 Namibian Dollars, their niece should then become the healer's wife. As she is desperate to be healed, she and her family are left with no choice but to trade away her childhood and become the healer's third wife. The healer has taken advantage of the family's economic background and uses it to manipulate and eventually threaten them to secure ownership of the young girl. The healer mercilessly takes advantage and demands: "If you do not have money to pay for the services I have rendered to you, hand over your niece to me so that she can become my wife. If you are not prepared to do this I will send the disease back into her body." (Dikuto, 2008: p. 174)

This is how the girl's childhood is cut for the second time. She suffers a second marital blow and is forced again to take up responsibilities of being a wife in a traditional polygamous marriage at an early age. This deprives her from enjoying her childhood to the fullest and it compromises her biological development.

Many women in polygamous marriages are subjected to emotional and physical abuse. They are powerless and are left without any other choice than accepting the situation. Although she was married, she has not experienced love or affection from her husband, a man who was way older than her. Being far from her family, she feels like an intruder in the healer's home. She does not receive any support from the co-wives because they did not like or accept her. There was nothing about this marriage for her to enjoy. In misery and justifiable self-pity she thus recounts; "His two other wives hated me from the beginning. A polygamous marriage was very difficult for me" (Dikuto, 2008, p. 174). In addition, Susan receives neither support nor love from her healer husband. She was not portrayed as a wife but as a love if not sex slave only. She recounts difficult days of her powerless and hopeless life in a painful marriage.

She always bitterly recites the unfairness of life such that, "For the lack of five hundred dollars, I lost my life for the second time" (Dikuto, 2008, p. 174). When the husband dies, his relatives come and divide his properties amongst themselves. Since she has not given her husband a child, she gets nothing. Her efforts in taking care of this man are not acknowledged. She feels used, useless and deceived. Apart from having been used as nothing else but a sex slave and having been treated inhumanely, she loses everything she needs to survive. Not receiving anything after her husband's death basically nullifies her having been one of his wives and her mere existence. This narrative shows how the oppressive power over a woman equals to the power over her existence.

Furthermore, young girls in some African settings go through painful rites when they grow into matured women. The transition from childhood to womanhood in some cultures puts these young women at risk, leaving them too traumatised and marginalised. This is captured by the narrative "My first period" (2008, p. 14), set in a traditional village of the Caprivi region (now Zambezi region). In the tradition of the North East of Namibia, rituals are performed for young girls to initiate them into womanhood. When a girl gets her first menstruation, a ceremony is arranged, to prepare her for the reality of a cultural woman. She is regarded as matured enough and she can therefore get married.

In this short story the narrator is confined to a hut for days, where she is not allowed to have contact with anyone, except the older women that would come to feed her and give her lessons and instructions on how to handle a man. A man in this context refers to her future husband. She has no right to object any of the instructions, as it is socially or culturally unacceptable. Instructions given include lessons on how to behave around the husband and how to have sex with him. Practically, the young girl is beaten with sticks by these older women, to test or ensure that she was strong enough to stand the toughness of her husband.

The psychological and physical effects on the young girl traumatize her. She recounts as follows: I have horrible memories of the first time I menstruated. I was put in a hut where I stayed alone except for when my grandmother and other women came to visit. They gave me instructions on womanhood, including how to have sex with a man. During the initiation the women also beat me with sticks on my body. ("My first period", 2008, p. 14).

As part of this ritual, the family also ensures that a male relative, who should be older than the girl is arranged to have sexual intercourse with the young girl. It is part of the initiation, to ensure that the girl is well prepared as a woman, to dance well in bed during sexual intercourse. Since it is what the culture compels, the girl cannot refuse this action. "My grandmother requested one of

my uncles, who was twenty years older than me to come and have sex with me to see if I could dance well” (“My first period”, 2008, p. 14).

Such cultural practices put women and young girls in difficult positions where they feel powerless. Their rights over their bodies are not determined by themselves, it is the culture that determines and dictates on what is to be done on them. And all this happens against their will as the girl moans that “I did not want to do this but I had no choice because it is our culture”, (“My first period”, 2008, p. 14).

Although this is a cultural practice that is fully accepted, it is a pure act of rape of a girl child. The male relatives delegated to have sexual intercourse are older and in many cases may have multiple sexual partners. The rite is dangerous and it increases the risk of diseases in young girls as many problems and complications can arise from this act. Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), HIV and AIDS, teenage pregnancies and infant mortality are some of the problems that a young girl may suffer. She was silenced and therefore suppressed as a woman; she could not raise her voice to speak against the practice that was carried out against her will. Most of the women who go through these rituals suffer in silence because if they speak out, they will be socially condemned and bring shame onto themselves and their own families.

As a result of the traumatic events of the ritual, the girl feels robbed of her childhood and her life is shattered. She is hopeless and sees no reason of living as she is forced to leave her education and give up all her dreams. This is how she expresses her misery; “I wanted to kill myself because of what he did to me. Soon after the rape, I left school. A year later I fell pregnant and had a sexually transmitted infection” (“My first period”, 2008, p. 14). This narrative clearly depicts the trauma a teenage girl goes through if forced to engage in sexual activity with a much older adult man for the reason to follow a traditional ritual.

### **Widow Cleansing, Inheritance and Property Ownership**

Inheritance plays a critical role in Sub-Sahara Africa; it is a critical mode of property transfer (Cooper, 2010). In most cases men die first, leaving their wives/ widows behind. The assumption is that all properties the family has gathered belong to the husband and his relatives, so when he dies, his relatives would inherit all properties including the piece of land, even the wife herself.

Widow inheritance and widow cleansing may sometimes in some cultures be used interchangeably. They are however different in terms of their purpose. Widow inheritance being an old custom, is carried out when a relative of a deceased husband inherits the widow. It is an old patriarchal practice whereby several reasons have been advanced on why it has to be carried out.

In most of the Namibian societies where widow inheritance has been practised, it has often been portrayed as an act of generosity in that the widow will have a man to look after her and confer legitimacy in a male headed household. The practice is further aimed at preventing intruders from possible interference with material possessions left behind by the husband; such possessions include land, livestock and children. This is justified on the basis that it ensured that the wealth

does not leave the patrilineal family. Sometime after the burial of the husband, the family, mostly men, gather and decide on who amongst the surviving male kinsman is to inherit the wife (Ambunda & de Klerk, 2008).

When the family is not interested in the widow, or when the widow insists on being inherited, her late husband's family inherits all the properties, including the piece of land. The widow is left with nothing and in some cases chased out of the house or the piece of land the family owned. It is believed that all that is acquired during their marriage belongs to the husband and his relatives. The husband's death brings conflict over the property. The society believes that whatever is in the house or is owned by the family belongs to the man; therefore when he dies, his relatives claim ownership and inherit all the properties. This can be the case even when a wife has worked so hard and assisted in the accumulation of the family wealth. As a result, many widows may not get away with sympathy and understanding. In other works by African authors, especially Mariama Ba, it comes out clearly. In her fictional work *So long a letter*, the main character suffers in silence. When Madou dies suddenly, Ramatoulaye the widow lies helplessly propped up on pillows and watches them storm her house (Ba, 1980).

In the customary law of Namibia, women may not own land. They may gain access to property only through their husbands or fathers. This disadvantages those who are unmarried, separated, divorced or widowed (Ambunda & de Klerk, 2008).

When Sofia's husband dies in "The Inheritance of Sophia", the relatives used tradition with the intention to have access to what her late husband left behind. It is decided that in order to keep the wealth within the family, Sofia has to be inherited by Martin, her late husband's younger brother. The elders, for their own properties' interest, dictate that the two get married, irrespective of the age gap and lack of love. Her father-in-law, Albert calls the family and informs them about his intentions; "Albert: my people, as we've gathered here today, I want you to know that it is the right of my son Martin to inherit Sofia, the widow of my late son Phillipus. "My son died, leaving much wealth which must remain in the family" (Sitali-Mapenzi et al. , 2008, p. 214). After her husband's death, it is expected that the widow accepts to be inherited, irrespective of whether she is happy about it or not. Although Maria, Sofia's mother-in-law knew it was wrong for the family to impose widow inheritance on Sofia, she felt that she could not go against tradition. Women suffer in silence; they are suppressed and made to accept whatever is imposed on them by tradition. When Sofia shows her unhappiness about Albert's decision, she feels that there is nothing to be done to stop it. This is how she expresses it; "But what can we do? I do not have the power to prevent Uncle Albert from forcing Sofia to marry Martin. "He wants Phillipus' property to stay in their family" (Sitali-Mapenzi et al., 2008, p. 214).

While widows are mistreated and disinherited in some communities, in some they are respected and get sympathy from their spouses' families. This however is particularly only a case when they are not suspected or accused of causing their late husbands' death. Sofia was not suspected or accused to have caused the death of her husband but what attracts the interest of the family are the properties left behind.

As women are becoming aware of their rights, they are taking a stand. With education, they are learning to stand up for themselves, to speak up and against all forms of practices that undermine their dignity. They no longer want to be passive and be perceived as mere objects owned by men.

They are becoming voices of their own and the act of writing as witnessed here is a demonstration of the reclamation of women voice and the adamant refusal of domination.

In resistance, Sofia rejected the elders' proposal. She was not ready to marry or be inherited by a twenty year old young man while she was forty years old. Sara, Sofia's sister in-law and the youngest daughter of the family sympathize with Sofia in the sense of sisterhood. She defends her sister in-law by convincing the elders to respect Sofia's will by stating it clearly that Sofia is an older woman and can therefore not marry Martin, a young boy of twenty years. The grandmother, too, decides to stand up against culture and support Sofia. She resists the idea and makes her point that culture should not be used to punish women. This is what she has to say; "Our culture has done a lot of bad things to us women. The time has come for us to also stop these hurtful things. The marriage you are proposing, Albert, is not about love - it is about the property of the late Phillipus" (Sitali-Mapenzi et al., 2008, p. 214).

The agreement is reached and disputes about property sharing are resolved. Although Albert wants all the properties, Sofia equally has the right to keep her late husband's properties. She is given the house and some cattle for her children.

Similarly, in the narrative "A Love Slave", Susana who is married to the traditional healer suffers at the hands of her late husband's relatives. When the husband dies, they take all that belonged to him and left her without anything. Since a wife is regarded as an outsider, she is not entitled to her husband's properties. She is left with nothing when her husband died because he has not given him a child. This is how she expresses it:

"They took everything that belonged to him. I was not given anything because we did not have a child together. I had nothing. I was deceived. No matter how hard I tried to do what was best for that man, his family never thanked me". (Dikuto, 2008, p. 174)

In conclusion, this section shows that various cultural practices carried out by some ethnic communities in Namibia are oppressive to women, making them vulnerable. The analysis also shows that by writing about their experiences under these oppressive customs and rituals, these women in Namibia are standing up to speak up for themselves and on behalf of other voiceless women. The writers address and challenge these humiliating practices, and sensitize the reader on oppression based on culture and tradition.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Changing cultural norms and traditions alone are not sufficient to protect women against harmful cultural practices. Women organizations and other parties involved in educating and addressing the plight of women in Namibia should amplify their efforts to 'walk the talk'. Collections of writings like the one used in this study can therefore be another means to sensitize readers about unjust dangerous customs in society which are practiced on women in the name of culture. Women must be empowered to take ownership of their lives through a variety of carefully selected platforms where women can voice their oppression freely and without fear. Basic legal rights on inheritance and property ownership must be observed and exercised. The literary platform, as exemplified in this study, would indeed be a powerful tool to do so. Education can be strengthened through the school curriculum, to teach young children on cultural practices that should be embraced and those to be shunned. A girl child must be taught to take

ownership of her body and life and this teaching can come through sensitization, of which the use of literature is a good example as this study has demonstrated.

Most importantly, creating women's awareness of their positions in their societies without including their male counterparts will not suffice. It is equally important for the government, organizations and the entire civil society, to educate and sensitize men. Men, especially in the remote rural settings should be taught to develop an understanding that women and men are assigned equally important roles in human mankind. Each playing their roles benevolently/favorably will advance societies, rather than result in stagnation and dysfunction. Traditional practices that discriminate and disadvantage women of all ages in any form should be treated as a matter of urgency and be done away with.

Finally, the study recommends that writers of worth, who are the 'voice of the voiceless' and who champion the cause for social equality amongst the sexes be made more visible at all levels of society. The act of writing in itself is an empowering act. These narratives have therefore qualitatively contributed to the cause of social advocacy. To a greater extent they have successfully managed to present the concerns of the 21<sup>st</sup> century African society and the challenges faced by the biggest group that is oppressed in the world – the women.

#### **Author's Biodata**

Ms A.Tjiramanga is a lecturer at the Polytechnic of Namibia (Namibia University of Science and Technology). She has an M.A. Phil. from the Karl-Franzens University, Graz, Austria. She obtained several online certificates from the University of London and the University of Oregon. Her research interests, among others, are online education in HE, corporate communication, and organizational change. She has developed, taught and coordinated a number of undergraduate and postgraduate courses for the Bachelor of Communication programme and has published moderately. Ms Tjiramanga is part of the ICENAM project team (corpus linguistics) and Change Agent for Community Service in the School of Human Sciences.

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