

Girl-Child Radicalism: A Revolutionary Response to the Culture of Disinheritance in Clement Chukwuka Idegwu's *Right to be Angry*

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Received: December 20, 2022

Accepted: February 23, 2023

Volume: 4

Issue: 2

KEYWORDS

Disinheritance, African Culture, Radical Feminism, Revolution, Widow, Oppression, Girl-Child

In most African societies, some archaic and obnoxious cultural norms have persisted; they have crept into the modern African society. While most of these cultural practices are unfavourable to some members of the society, especially the widows, fatherless, and the girl-child, a certain class of individuals who reap from these evil practices have for long stood as opposing forces to the voices of revolutionary change who seek to eradicate these wicked cultural practices. This study explores the culture of deprivation and disinheritance in a predominantly patriarchal African society. It also examines such thematic preoccupation as a metaphor for other forms of injustice prevalent in the society. This study employs the radical strand of feminism to explore Clement Chukwuka Idegwu's novel, *Right to be Angry*. Radical feminism as a subset of the feminist theory is based on the idea that women are treated unfairly and oppressed because of the patriarchal grounds upon which society is built. In the novel, the author spreads the gospel of revolution as a welcome panacea to dethrone oppression and eradicate the obnoxious culture of disinheritance. Through the lens of the heroine, the author is apparently on a social crusade to right society's ill. Findings show that the struggle to eradicate the culture of disinheritance and enthrone a better society free from all forms of oppression, does not come easily. This study concludes by underscoring that radicalism and revolutionary consciousness could be the alternative response to injustice and therefore advocates that widows and the fatherless alike should be allowed to share in the inheritance of their bereaved.

1. Introduction

Nowhere in the world have forces of oppression been known to willingly set the oppressed free at any point in history (Affiah, 2012: 284)

Some contemporary African writers seem to bear a mark of ideological commitment. One distinctive mark of such writers is found apparently reflected in their thematic preoccupation; their themes and subject matters often emerge from confronting cultural, social, and political issues in the society. "Art and literature should be for the service of the people and help them in their struggle for a better life, by arousing emotions against oppression and injustice" (Gautam, 2023:90). It therefore becomes pertinent for African writers, writing for the African audience to channel their creative energy towards issues that are most

pressing in the African society. This is perhaps, why Achebe (1964) likens any writer who tries to avoid or deviate from the big social and political questions in the contemporary society to the absurdist man in an Igbo adage, who leaves his burning hut to pursue the rodents fleeing from the flames.

Some of these big issues which the African writer must not avoid are the prevalent issues of disinheritance and property grabbing (amongst other forms of harmful cultural practices and discrimination), especially targeted at widows and the fatherless girl-child. Disinheritance and property grabbing are two harmful traditional practices that are carried out against widows but frequently go unreported. This unlawful and brazen violation of human rights has far-reaching consequences for the women who lost their spouses; leading to unimaginable pain and a quest for justice that often do not see the light of the day. According to Onyeubi (2023):

Losing one's husband is a heartbreaking event. Naturally, it is anticipated that the plight of widows will arouse sympathy from relatives of the deceased, but more often this is not the case. In contrast, widowhood is typically the beginning of a woman's lifetime of subjugation and sorrow in several parts of Africa. From deprivation, psychological and emotional damage, through various degrees of physical hardship, to oppressive and harmful cultural practices (n.p).

As Onyeibu (2023) highlights, most African women are faced with a variety of physical, emotional, and traumatic experiences as a result of the pressures brought on by widowhood. It is appalling that being a widow in certain parts of the African society inevitably opens the door to facing harsh realities. The community's socio-cultural norms and the numerous restrictions put on widows make it challenging for these women to assert their rights or express themselves without feeling intimidated or subordinated. These widows have become subjects of oppression and suppression. In addition, some oppressive individuals who eat from these obnoxious cultural practices do not let light into the darkness.

Idegwu's development in the evolution of the prose genre that largely addresses the struggles of the suppressed and deprived, comes to climax in his novel, *Right to be Angry*. Although set against the Nigerian backdrop, the novel's thematic preoccupation has a universal appeal. Like Affiah (2012), one can aver that Idegwu's novel "obviously attains universality considering its treatment of the issues of oppression, injustice....It also attains universality via prospects it holds for the oppressed" (287). Therefore, with the projection of the radical heroine and her eventual triumph over the forces of female oppression, Idegwu leaves us with the message that a radical feminist stance could be a non-violent alternative to dethrone injustice against women. This is perhaps why Affiah (2012) upholds that: "nowhere in the world have forces of oppression been known to willingly set the oppressed free at any point in history (284). The implication is that the oppressed must fundamentally strive to negate the tendencies of the oppressive social structure. Otherwise, they remain pawns in the hands of the oppressors.

2. Theoretical Framework: Radical Feminism

Radical feminism emerges in early 1968 as a response to deeper understandings of women's oppression. Atkinson (2014) in the presentation "The Descent from Radical Feminism to Postmodernism" upholds that "to speak of *oppression* instead of

discrimination is a significant shift in terms of scope and depth” (1). For Atkinson, we needed a more comprehensive analysis of women’s oppression than the civil rights model. Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*—her structuralist account—gave us a start. On Beauvoir’s writing, Atkinson (2014) avers that:

Beauvoir understands women’s oppression by analyzing the particular institutions which define women’s lives: marriage, family, motherhood, etc. Family law encompasses several institutions but some of us determined that the critical point of entry for women is marriage: this involves a state-governed legal contract. The “family” has no separate contract, although reproduction naturally falls out of the marriage contract under its sub-construct of conjugal rights (1).

Vukoičić (2013), commenting on feminism from a broad lens, sees it as “a contemporary social and political movement, motivated by individual and collective experiences of women, which is based on the claim that a society is based on patriarchal principles, according to which men are privileged over women, which results in discrimination against women in public and private life” (33).

Radical feminism which is a subset of the feminist theory, holds that “patriarchy is the overarching structure that oppresses women due to their sex. Unlike those strands of feminism that sought to address gender inequality through reforming the existing socio-political-legal system (liberal feminism), radical feminists argue that a radical restructuring of society through eliminating male supremacy and challenging social norms is the only way to bring about a gender just society” (Bhattacharjee & Banerjee, 2023).

According to Armstead (2020) Radical Feminist theory was pioneered by Kate Millet. However, she stresses that the movement has stretched well beyond Millet’s works. For Armstead, “Radical Feminist theory centres around the fundamental belief that power within society is inherently unequal” (1). The radical feminists argue that in a dualist system, in which one group always oppressed another, women were the ones tormented by men. Accordingly, she avers that:

These ideas came from women who had experienced the effects of gender-based discrimination their entire lives. The first wave feminist movement, while it significantly improved the lives of women, and expanded their rights, still did not put women on equal footing with men, leading to the second wave in the 1960s (Armstead, 2020:1).

Atkinson summarizes by highlighting that “for the oppressed, *class* awareness is essential for resistance. It is the commonalities between formerly differentiated individuals which form the basis for solidarity and political change. Oppressed individuals by themselves are relatively powerless; together, it is a different story” (2). We can now therefore underscore that, “radical feminism is a tendency to understand the oppression of women on the deepest possible level” (Atkinson 1). Maureen’s mother in Idegwu’s *Right to be Angry* is one of such women and Maureen’s *awareness*, becomes significant for oppressive resistance.

3. Review of Related Literature

3.1. Conceptual Review

In most African societies, when parents pass away, assets are transferred to offspring through inheritance. However, the existing research literature from various Sub-Saharan African societies shows how the prevalent social conventions in the African society

have made widows and orphans particularly vulnerable to losing their rights of access to properties they enjoyed during the lifetime of their husbands or fathers (Ayodele, 2016). He further highlights that:

In few instances when widows are favoured by inheritance distributive decisions, some members of the husbands' family often become aggrieved. Consequently, they raise seemingly justifiable objections. Their reactions to perceived inheritance distributive injustice often manifest in inheritance hijacking practices against widows, who they insist, have got no property inheritance rights. As a consequence of the attendant effects of such alienation from property, the dwindling fortunes of these victims have been linked to economic vulnerability, poverty traps, chronic poverty and the intergenerational transmission of poverty (Ayodele, 2016:116).

In the paper "Disinheritance and Women Development in Igboland, Eastern Nigeria: A Theological-Ethical Study", Silas and Idachaba (2020) harp that the discriminatory cultural practices of the Igbo people of Nigeria should be redressed on ethical and theological grounds. For them, the right for women and female offspring to inherit the property of their parents or spouses upon death, however, is frequently denied in several civilizations, including Igbo land. They argue that the Igbo cultural traditions that encourage or support daughters, women, and widows losing their inheritances do not appear to enhance women's growth on all fronts—physically, cognitively, emotionally, socially, and morally. The Igbo tradition is somewhat discriminating when it comes to women inheriting property. Such oppressive cultural practices regrettably persist despite the global expansion of women's rights, which resulted in the adoption of international and state treaties on women's liberation and empowerment. The paper concludes by underscoring that:

The traditional and religious leaders should arise to effect changes in the Igbo cultural practices and beliefs especially those related to women inheritance rights. By so doing, the status of women economically, socially, intellectually, emotionally and morally will drastically improve thereby enhancing the development and well-being of the women folk and the society at large (15).

As if informed by the above, Idegwu's presentation of the tradition leader—His Highness' character in the novel, is apparently a step in the right direction. Since the issue of disinheritance is more of a traditional/cultural matter, the place of the traditional institutions cannot easily be glossed over in redressing it. Of course in the novel, His Highness came to attend to the revolutionary voices thereby "violating the tradition", for His highness does not see nor attend to people in their mourning clothes (22).

Ifemeje and Umejiaku (2014) while critiquing women's rights in Igbo land, also observe some of the following obnoxious cultural practices that impede women's rights: legalized domestic violence, harmful widowhood practices, wife inheritance, payment and refund of bride price, marginalization of women's rights in dissolution of customary law marriage, female disinheritance, male preference syndrome, female genital mutilation (FGM), and polygamous nature of customary law marriage. The worrisome aspect of this problem according to them is that, "these discriminations appear to be so deeply rooted in our Igbo cultural system, that uprooting same have for decades proved an uphill task" (18).

On female disinheritance, they opine that:

The Igbo customary law is basically patrilineal in nature; and therefore the cardinal principle of customary inheritance is by primogeniture. Land and landed property, devolve under this system on the males, to the exclusion of daughters and wives. Igbo customary law by implication denies the female genders the right to inherit their deceased husbands' or fathers' landed property, thus their inheritance rights are grossly marginalized and jeopardized. In fact, this custom has surprisingly, received judicial approval by our superior courts of record (21).

While Silas and Idachaba (2020) and Ifemeje and Umejiaku (2014) have their works tilted towards only the Igbo cultural practice in the South Eastern part of Nigeria, Ayodele (2016) approaches his research from the cultural realities in Ondo State, South West, Nigeria. Ayodele's study explores the implications of inheritance hijacking practices on widows' wellbeing, especially widows of Ilara Mokin in Ondo State, Nigeria. Through the study, he is able to show that "inheritance hijack significantly weakens widows' economy in Ilara Mokin community" (116). The study concludes by highlighting that inheritance hijacking is a culturally disapproved harmful practice which destabilises the economic security of Ilara Mokin widows and therefore suggests that public policy should equalize gender benefits such that no individual suffers any deprivation of legitimate inheritance entitlement on the basis of gender status.

Accordingly, available data has it that African countries have undeniable evidence that the property of widows and orphaned children has been grabbed or stripped. For instance, majority of Kenyans, like other African communities, are subject to customary standards which are primarily centered on ideas of patrilineal inheritance, especially when it comes to succession rights. As a result, in certain parts of Kenya, a widow's sole option for keeping her family's possessions is to allow herself to be *inherited* by one of her husband's male relatives and thus, be seen as having remarried. This is not different from the prevalent realities in most Nigerian communities. Such wife inheritance is blatantly a violent cultural method of giving widowed households some economic and social support. (Ayodele, 2016, Mwangi, Kiai, & Eric, 2002,).

Similarly, there is evidence that outright grabbing of property from orphans and widows is a serious problem in Uganda too. According to a survey of the widows in Uganda, 22 percent reported experiences of property grabbing or mismanagement of their property by relatives after their spouses had died (Wakhweya et al., 2002, Ayodele, 2016). However, Oleke et al., (2005), in a study among the Langi of northern Uganda contrasts traditional and contemporary norms and practices concerning the support of widows' claims upon their families and communities. It becomes pertinent to observe that while property grabbing constitutes gender-based violence against women, this does not imply that perpetrators are always men. For instance in matrilineal societies in the northern part of Namibia and in Zambia, sisters-in-law are said to be the main perpetrators, although in the event, it may be male relatives who physically remove property from widows and force them out of their homes (Izumi, 2003).

The implication of all these therefore, is that there is a somewhat universality in this obnoxious culture of disinheritance and its resemblance across Africa and beyond. These evil cultural practices should not spread its wings in our modern society.

4. Author's Bio Data

Clement Chukwuka Idegwu, Ph.D, the author of the primary text, *Right to be Angry*, is a renowned literary scholar, poet, and novelist of international repute. He is a lecturer at the Department of English and Literary Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Delta, Agbor, Delta State, Nigeria. He hails from Alihame in Ika South Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria. Idegwu's scholarly research works in the field of English and Literature are widely read in both national and international journals. He is published in *Five Hundred Nigerian Poets*, Volume one, edited by Jerry Agada. He is also featured in the *Best New African Poets 2021 Anthology* edited by Tendai Mwanaka, Balddine Moussa and Lorna Telma Zita.

His published works include: *The Worst Devil on Stage and Other Stories*, 1997; *The Procrustean Creed and Other Poems*, 1999; *Broken Dreams*, 2000; *Lilies that Fester*, 2000; *A Guide to Effective Essay and Letter Writing*, 2001; *Just for Love*, 2002; *Writing for Special Purpose*, 2004; *My Precious Jewel and Other Stories*, 2009; *Mooning Our World*, 2012 and *Right to be Angry*, 2016; *Bath of Blood and Other Stories*, 2017; *The Vale of Tears and Other Stories*, 2021 and *Life is a Tempest*, 2022.

5. Thematic Overview of Idegwu's *Right to be Angry*

The novel, *Right to be Angry* brings to the fore one of the obnoxious practices of disinheritance and oppression prevalent in a society with a world view that has not allowed modern, healthy global values to evolve. Commenting on Idegwu's intent, Masagbor (2016) observes that the novelist shows that with the evolvement of the modern society as well as human values for the better, elements of chance and necessity do force such positive evolution.

The novel revolves around the family of the heroine, Maureen. She loses her father (that is, Maureen's mother is widowed). By the obnoxious custom of the land, the wealth of the family will be passed over to the late father's brothers. The family of the deceased, by implication, is to be abandoned without resources to cater for the children.

This harsh reality of life confronting the family as well as the forces of necessity, set Maureen, Carol, Gloria, Ifeanyinwa and an army of other deprived persons in the society to stage a revolt. They demonstrate in a march through the town to the royal palace in mourning clothes. The palace head eventually listens to the cry from the heart of these young teenagers and accordingly decrees and warns against such evil practices of disinheritance and oppression. Crestfallenly, Maureen's uncles are bathed in their shower of shame.

The success of the revolt did not just only save Maureen and her family. It also ignites revolutionary consciousness among other members of the state and beyond who have been unjustly treated by forces of oppression. From what began like a children's gathering against the culture of disinheritance, Maureen rises to be a heroine and a symbol of hope for the oppressed; a peerless amazon.

Nevertheless, in every struggle to dethrone injustice, forces who feed from such anomalies always try to put a stop to it. Thus, through corrupt manipulation, the heroine is whisked off to the state capital by corrupt police officers who connived with Maureen's Uncles to stifle revolutionary change. She is tortured but her cause is just and her spirit uncowed. The ending of the novel gives a reflection that the struggle for a better society free from all forms of injustice and anomalies does not come easily.

6. Revolutionary Response to the Culture of Disinheritance and Injustice in *Right To Be Angry*

We are bereaved of our fathers, our inheritance and our lives. We are already outsiders in our own homes that were originally ours. There is nothing you will do to us today that will be worse than our current state. It is either we see His Highness or perish with whoever stops us (Idegwu, 2016:22-23).

The issues of disinheritance of widows and the fatherless even though it has received a handful of critical attention, still persist in the African society. Accordingly, this forms the core of Idegwu's novel. Such a literary reiteration on the burning issue is not a senseless effort from the novelist.

Maureen's mother leads us into the issue at hand. She says to Maureen, "Your father's relatives have taken all that your father and I worked for while he was alive....the houses, the farmlands, the cars and many other things....They said they are going to use them to train the children in the family; all the children born into your grandfather's household. The children of your uncles and aunts" (14). While our focal point lies on the thematic preoccupation of inheritance, it is pertinent to state from the outset of this analysis that Idegwu's *Right to be Angry*, is not just a voice against such culture, but a metaphor of other anomalies and injustice that have eaten deep into the fabrics of the society. The narrative ideology of Idegwu can at best be grasped through a peep into the Nigeria society (and Africa at large) where he draws his creative inspiration from. According the novelist:

Right to be Angry, therefore, is my genuine attempt to make sense out of the apparent irrational forces that bedevil our country, Nigeria. I write to expose situations that are really inimical to our individual and collective well-being as a people with a view to changing obnoxious ideas and the acceptance of a positive idea in order for us to move forward and dismantle the barriers that tend to stop us from being fulfilled. This is a choice I have made. It is a path I chose to thread all my life (10).

Given this backdrop, the novelist through of Maureen (the heroine), projects a character armed with the knowledge of the prevailing socio-cultural anomalies as well as the imperative of the gospel of revolution as a welcome response to such injustice. Maureen takes a radical feministic stance to fight the forces of oppression alongside the indomitable army of the deprived. The revolutionary choice was finally accepted by all as a way-forward. As the heroine explains, "we decided to carry it out immediately to prevent my father's self-centred relatives from selling off my father's property. We even made up our minds that if they had sold anything, we would go to the buyer and sing mourning songs for his or her family" (18).

The whole street, having seen the doggedness of these young teenagers, gathered around them. It was unprecedented. Even when Maureen's uncles carried long sticks with the intention of driving them away, the army of the deprived taunted and resisted. They were not giving up until injustice is dethroned. The crux of their revolt lies in their chant:

Leave the fatherless alone
 Leave a poor widow alone
 Allow them to enjoy the little
 The little, just the little
 Their late father and husband
 Left behind before the early morning home call
 If you fail to
 You too will be called home today

And your children will be fatherless
Your wife will be widowed
And we shall celebrate with your house
Welcoming them to our association.
The fatherless and widows
Once more we warn (22).

As they marched along the streets, their numbers increased astronomically as an unending sea of humans joined. Both the young and old followed as their black outfit drew the desired attention (21). The implication of this is that nothing quenches the burning flames of an idea whose time has come. Accordingly, it takes a brave mind to lead a struggle against ugly socio-cultural practices; otherwise, people will continue to swim in their shackles of enslavement and exploitation as a result of the fear of wicked forces that be.

In the novel, characters like Papa Joseph, Elder Gabriel and the government are metaphors of the never ending forces of oppression and suppression of the members of the society who fight their way out to freedom. Their intents are to disinherit and deprive the widows and the fatherless their rights to access what the bereaved left behind. As the narrator asks her mother inquisitively, “what will happen to us, the children of your marriage to my father? What are we going to live on?” (15). In response, her mother says, “they said you and your brothers and sisters should be farmed out. Can you imagine that? They’ve taken our wealth. They still want me to farm my children to them so that they will never grow up to ask questions” (15).

These wicked individuals do not stop at nothing in getting their wicked acts executed. Their mission is to perpetually keep the oppressed in chains and when anyone dares to revolt, their life is terminated in order to end the quest for change in the society. The implication of this as the novel depicts is to make sure that the agents of change “do not spread the disease [of revolution] to the entire state and even beyond” (64). For them, it is like waking up one morning to find out that all the children of the state are with placards in their hands making unnecessary demands, talking about freedom when those who benefit from ignoble acts are not tired (64).

In some African societies, either on the political or socio-cultural scenes, oppressive and suppressive entities do not care what befalls you while they feed from your flesh. The language they understand is radical and revolutionary stance. Otherwise, one remains a perpetual foot mat in their passage. Like the famous Latin, *certanti et resistenti victoria cedit* (which means that victory yields to the one who struggles and resists).

Maureen’s revolutionary impulses and eventual emergence to champion the worthy cause, is likened to the messiah’s coming to save mankind. It is an idea whose time has come. As Maureen reveals, “we never thought of revolting or executing a revolution. All we did was have a spontaneous reactions against our oppressors just to say we were tired of a culture that has wasted many generations of our youths, denying them of the enabling environment to realize and actualize their potentials” (60). Again, one is acquitted with the circumstances surrounding Maureen’s birth and the projection of fate. Her mother was advised by friends to abort her. As she puts it, “if I had listened to my friends who saw things differently then, I would have been finished by now. Who would have led the much awaited revolution that saved my household and others who had been living in bondage? And even those who would have lived in bondage” (28).

The efforts of Maureen in preaching the gospel of redemption serve as a pacesetter for the universal awakening. It is the beginning of awareness and concientization of the people. In the novel, Ijeoma reveals thus:

The widows and the fatherless are revolting everywhere. Our surrounding villages and towns are on fire. According to reports, the widows and the fatherless at Oki, Odogbo, Edekefela, Ukulubu, Ishawgo, Ukuelesi, Rogba-ukukue, Ejemie-Ugoila and other villages in the state are demanding the abolition of the act of disinheritance and other obnoxious laws. Children are all in black, mourning those who denied the fatherless their rightful inheritance among other things....Mothers are on the streets calling for the abolition of laws that dehumanize humans (40).

The revolution has spread across the state like wide fire. Even though Maureen was not physically present in these villages, her radical impacts speak volume. She is eulogized for the shaming of the oppressor, lighting the path of the people's understanding that the first step to freedom is awareness i.e., awareness that one is not free, is the knowledge that there is a need for a change. By implication, to boldly stand for a change is the change itself.

Although Maureen remains dogged in the actualization of the revolutionary struggle, but her shoulders were somewhat too young for such a burden. When she adds up her painful experiences, including the unfortunate death of Carol, her dear colleague in the struggle, she says "I thought of bringing back the hands of the clock, call back the day of our revolution. I wished it never happened" (42). However, on a second thought, she believes that the realization of the struggle lifted the veil of oppression and with determination, she says: "the struggle is my life. There is no going back from seeing the total freedom of our people. Freedom is the word, even if we will spill our blood to ensure it" (61). Accordingly, the struggle births more revolutionists across the nation who will forever follow suit the cause even with their last drop of blood. There is indeed no bus stop to this struggle until all the disinherited and oppressed women are free from the chains of their taskmasters. Apparently, *a luta continua; vitória é certa*.

7. Conclusion

What began as a revolutionary charge against the cultural practice of disinheritance in single family, metamorphosed into a national concern. Through Maureen's characterization, Idegwu is able to draw our attention to the ugly implications of these obnoxious cultural practices in Africa and its resemblance across the world. Accordingly, there is an orientation for the disinherited, making them to see their burden and the need to fight the oppressor in togetherness; thereby bringing to fore the possibility of both old and young people elsewhere to ask for their rights especially in areas where their culture remains a stumbling block to their empowerment.

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