

CHAPTER FOUR.

As an African, I know that stories had been part of African life from the past. I recall with warmth the memories of my grandmother who used to tell us stories every night before we went to sleep. It is out of stories where I was motivated and encouraged to face life situations. I therefore align myself with Elen Kuzwayo who said;

“Africa is a place of story telling. We need more stories never mind how painful the exercise might be. Stories help us to understand, to forgive and to see things through someone’s eyes” (Kuzwayo cited in Bosman and Peterson:1996:7).

As a narrative researcher, I agree with Kuzwayo because as people share their stories, no matter how painful that might be, healing takes place at that moment, when they are allowed to share their painful stories, all they need is someone who would listen and receive their stories. Stories are part of a process of letting out some of the problems that troubles our souls. It is important to use therapy as a way of dealing with our problems. Therefore this section deals with stories of co-researchers. The main focus is to explore their painful stories of oppression, and integrate them in the therapeutic process of healing.

In the light of how widows are treated, we now venture to hear their suppressed anger and feelings. In order to deal with their anger, I will share two stories of widows who experienced oppression, rejection and isolation by their own in-laws. I will use interview materials of two widows who are middle aged, and the third widow will have passed through the process of oppression and isolation. To protect their own integrity and dignity, and in respect of the Human Rights Charter, I will not mention their real names, but will give fictitious names. Therefore it is important to note the following;

1. My co-researchers are quite clear of the process of research. And the outcome of their stories especially how they will be used in this thesis.
2. They know that their stories will be used to educate other people.
3. The following questions were asked in order to journey with my co-researchers, widows who were oppressed by families, culture and rituals.

Then the questionnaires will be as follows:

1. Would you mind sharing your experience of pain and treatment you received after the death of your partner?
2. What role did you in-laws play during this difficult time?
3. After you underwent the process of mourning, did you consider remarrying? If your answer is yes or no, please share further your reasons.
4. How did you encounter God during those difficult times?

STORY OF REGINA

I want to introduce to you Regina, she is 56 years old. A domestic worker who was widowed two years ago (2003). As the progress of interview continues with her, the slogan, or the repeated phrase that came to my mind was, "*Speak now or forever hold thy voice*". Yes, to a certain point, remember I have not experienced this myself.

This concept reminded me of the marriage ceremony African people use. I sensed that she couldn't wait to tell her story. Her voice was so powerful, and I believed she felt so

strong as she shared her story. Therapy begins as she shared her painful story with me. My role as a Pastoral Counselor was to receive her story as she shared it painfully with me. We greeted each other, then I asked my first question:

Pastor: During your mourning period, would you mind sharing your experience after the death of your partner?

Regina: I felt so lonely and isolated. People were afraid to talk to me, they were also afraid even to shake hands with me. I don't know who told them to react this way, but that is the situation I faced after the death of my husband. I remember attending a mother's day service at our church. There were refreshments prepared for the occasion. We formed a queue in order to get food. I joined the line and all of a sudden everybody in the queue left and joined another queue. I realized that people were afraid to come into contact with me and this made me angry and rejected by the community, especially members of my church.

What a traumatising situation, especially in the church. After all the treatment I got from people is that I felt rejected, isolated and emotionally abused. That's all I can say.

Pastor: Well I sensed some anger in your tone, will you mind if we explore it?

Regina: Well I suppressed it because my community expected me to behave like a good woman. (silence) if you react, they label you. People are so cruel you know, it's like you are no longer a human being. You know, do you understand?

Pastor: Yes, to a certain point, remember I have not experienced this myself.

Regina: That is true, but life is like hell.

Pastor: Well, let's explore the issue of marriage now. After you underwent the process of

mourning, did you consider marrying again.

Regina: (Pulled a deep breath), then she said, “I didn’t want to remarry, but my in-laws insisted that Gab’s children needed a father figure, and that lobola has been paid. Senzo, Gab’s brother was given me as a new husband (go tsosa motes), meaning he continues to revive his brother’s family. So he did return with me to Gauteng, but the arranged marriage didn’t work out. I felt I’d betray my husband, but these were his people and I believed that it’s a way of life he would understand my position. Maybe I didn’t know that to be a woman means that you are treated like property. Senzo was unemployed, and myself as a domestic worker, I didn’t earn much, I decided to move on with my life. I accommodated him into our home but I struggled to love him.

Pastor; I kept quite, but listening attentively.

Regina; (she continues). The hardest thing for me was testing HIV positive last year. Surprisingly I was not sure which of that two passed this disease to me. I was angry with the death of my husband, and that’s not an easy emotion to endure. Knowing Senzo probably has it too, is a big concern, but I haven’t told him because it would cause further problems.

Pastor: I sensed that Regina had a lot to say, and she needed an opportunity like this to talk. Then I asked, how are your in-laws treating you now?

Regina: Ooooo.. I really don’t know how to put this in words. My in-laws are very cruel. I’m telling you! (She paused) Gabriel has been sick for some time, though I never expected TB (Tuberculosis) would take his life. Even his family knew that their son was sick. But the moment he died, they told me straight in my face, that: “*o mmolaile, ko a*

ileng teng o tla mo latela”, this is a Tswana word literally meaning that “ you killed our son, and wherever he went you will follow him”

Gab's funeral was very painful, but the drama was still to follow. When we returned from his rural home, where he was buried. I was shocked to see that the sofas and electric appliances were emptied from the house where we lived in Soweto. I knew it was no robbery, Gab's family had apparently arranged for the goods to be collected. I was angry, because I wondered what these people expected their son's children would survive. (She paused). This is what they did to me. I couldn't call the police because I was too grief stricken. by losing my husband...that I loved so much.

Pastor: As Regina related her story, I could sense the anger within her. She bottled her sorrow for too long, because she even told me that it is the first time she is sharing her journey of mourning with someone . The way it was, all she wanted at that moment was to talk and nothing else. That's why I've even given her a listening ear and less talk from my side. Therapeutically I did not want to interrupt her story because I also learned that it has been interrupted by many characters in her life.

Regina: After a year we returned to Gab's home for the memorial ceremony for which a beast was slaughtered, and I officially removed my black mourning clothes (she signed then continues),in that ritual, the diseased knobkerrie(traditional stick) and other tools are laid down on the ground, I was told to step over them so as to see if i haven't slept with any man . Ooo.. what a disgusting public declaration, I obeyed because I needed to complete this ritual.

Besides all they have done, I continued to relate to my in-laws, because my children had

to visit them during school holidays, although I never stay over for longer than few days. I may be an outcast, but I really did try to be a good wife (she nodded her head with tears in her eyes)

Pastor: How did you encounter God in ordinary life situation, especially during those dark days?

Regina: I have trusted God since my childhood. Therefore, in short, I would say God's strength kept me going. Yes there were times I felt empty and lonely, but I trusted God. I prayed without ceasing. I believed that I could not survive without God.

Pastor: Regina's story share some of triple oppression of African women by the in-laws, society and culture. What a humiliating and disgusting element of abuse and oppression. The above story proves a point that the voice of a women has been silenced for too long, and are not audible enough. I have seen many cases where a marriage is arranged without the widow's concern, as it was done to Regina. You are given a husband without any discussing with you, because the family of the deceased son want their grand children to remain within their clan name. It is very sad because you learn to love the man as you continue life with him. The other oppressive element is that, if you refuse to be married within the family, they will take the children away from you as their mother, the furniture, even the house and you will be left alone.

For me this part of widow inheritance and replacement of marriage needs serious attention by the church. A widow is inherited by the heir of the deceased husband as part of his estate, like any other property. In this case a women is not expected to decide. There are cases where a widow is denied a chance to inherit any property that her

husband has worked left, even if they have worked together with the late husband.

Sometimes you even find that it was a women who was working, and the husband was unemployed. According to Christian teachings, the understanding is that the marriage contract is absolutely dissolved by the death of one of the partners

Unfortunately, you find that this is not possible to some families, and that's why we find ourselves in forced or arranged marriages. Mugambi has this to say;

"ties with the Africans did not and could not entirely sever their ties with their kin"(Mugambi:1988:101)

I agree with Mugambi's statement because as Africans it's not easy to cut the relationships we have especially with the in-laws. For an example, if they arrange a forced marriage for you, it is not easy to deny it. This is a challenge that a church needs to take into consideration and challenge this oppressive system.

THE STORY OF KEDIBONE

Let us now analyse the second person who will be called Kedibone. Kedibone is a qualified teacher, and a mother of two boys, aged seven and nine. When I meet her, she was bereaved for three months, her process of widowhood had just began. The issue of grieve was still fresh in her memory. We meet at her home. The reader needs to remember that at an early stage of mourning, a widow is not allowed to travel or visit other people. That is the reason that caused me to visit her at her own home. As we talked, it appears that she looked fine and relaxed.

Pastor: I'm aware that it is only three months since you lost your husband. Will you mind sharing with me the journey of you bereavement as well as the treatment you received

after the death of your husband from you family, friends and in-laws. Once more I will not edit her words- I need to respect the way she explained herself. These people are oppressed and I don't want to violate their vocabulary.

Kedibone:(before she could even respond, she looked me straight in the eyes) My husband, Thuso suffered from a heart attack while coming from work to home. On his way he died. After I received the bad news about his death, I didn't want to talk to anyone. The neighbors started gathering around, offering help I didn't ask for. It was January, I felt cold and my teeth were gnashing. I supposed it was a shock. After a while I felt terrible stomach cramps, then I felt as though my bone marrow was drying up. I thought of the good years we spend together. After all, Thuso's death devastated me (she took a deep breath, then tears rolled down her cheeks), it was a time that I desperately needed sensitive, loving and caring people around me. Unfortunately no one seemed to know how to help me deal with my grief, well after all, I received a lot of support from family, friends and church people. But after the funeral everybody disappeared. No one came back for a visit. They treated me differently, life changed, although ...(she pulled a deep breath), to be fair, you have to ask yourself: Is it me? Am I overreacting because of my bereavement or what?

Pastor: I realized that she was getting confused. Not completing sentences. She needs good care.

Kedibone Sometimes you want to be alone- but it seems every one was fussing around me. I remember one of the family members said: "she is going to be sick. Lt's take her to the doctor! And we better insist that she eats - she will waste away, we cannot afford

another death.

People needs to know that we all take death in a different ways. Everybody said I was Strong, perhaps because I am not the person who cry once experiencing death. But for Thuso I was weeping inside, even while I went through motions as daily chores. Yet no one asked me " How do you feel?"

Pastor: Well, it is difficult if people don't know what your needs are. Now would you now tell me how your in-laws are treating you?

Kedibone: Coming from the Christian family, where African traditions are not followed zealously, there was no pressure for me from my in-laws. I didn't even have to wear black. But at the same time I was told to behave because I'm still mourning. There were rituals performed on me, and I changed my daily ordinary life style. For an example I was told not to shout nor raise my voice. I was told to make sure that I'm home before sunset. They were extremely helpful. I did not experience a lot of oppression. My in-laws said to me I now know my status and that I should respect myself. One could sense that they wanted me to observe the rituals because I'm an African.

Pastor: After you underwent the process, did you consider remarrying? If yes, or no please share further your reasons.

Kedibone: I'm not sure of what my in-laws would say, since I've stated a new journey of widowhood. Marriage again hasn't crossed my mind yet. But I feared the impact of my husbands death on the children, and how I would cope as a single parent. And there are financial burdens to bear. I'm expected to work and take care of the children, you know. I think I won't marry, she said. I'd keep comparing Thuso with any other man I meet.

Besides , I'm terrified of becoming a widow again. Due to that I no longer consider it .
Widowhood isn't easy, but you have to swallow it, bitter as it is.

Pastor: During this difficult times, How did you encounter God, especially in ordinary life- situation, especially after the death of your husband?

Kedibone: I was angry ay God. I even asked God, why do you do this to me? As a Christian I found in God comfort. Slowly but surely the Holy Spirit began to be the best comforter I ever needed. Slowly I began to learn to look beyond my immediate situation to God's ultimate purpose for my life, and doing so I'm beginning to heal.

Pastor: My research lead me to understand the struggles of support that is needed by widows at this time. With Kedibone's story I noted attentively as she was talking. People came around, yet most of them did not know what to say to her. As she said that. This I believe is the great challenge to all pastoral care givers, and to the church at large. It is time for the church to establish a support group for widows experiencing pain and oppression . As Hinga says

"I argue that women should take up the personal challenge themselves, and become as it were, pastors unto themselves, as well as pastors of the church itself, by pointing out where the church errs and fails in its mission of liberation to the downtrodden, and the creation of a just and fair society. Women can be pastors unto themselves by supporting one another , unequivocally when tragedy strikes, and above all by being of good counsel with one another in order to help other resist abuse and violence, when it threatens them or help each other heal when actually hit with violence and oppression" (Hinga, cited in Waruta & Kinoti: 2000;139)

I agree with Hinga's statement that women needs to be empowered so as to uplift each other in times of needs. But it is also difficult at the time of death. The struggle women experience is painful.

THE STORY OF SBONGILE

The third co-researcher, Sbongile is aged 35, married to Sizwe, four years ago. Songile is "a house wife", and Sizwe was self employed as ataxi owner. They were blessed with one daughter aged nine.

During the interviews, we followed the same pattern. Greeted each other, and shared some jokes, then I asked;

Pastor: I'm sure you are aware that I'm during a research about the struggles of widows after death? Then would you mind sharing you experience of treatment you received especially after the death of your husband, especially your community, friends, family, in-laws, and the church.

Songile: I would say I mourned inside. I didn't wear black mourning gown because the moment Sizwe died, I was immediately thrown away from our home. My in-laws took my one and only child away from me. I was left alone. Actually everybody treated me differently. Some of the people I knew did not even care to greet me, they were even afraid to shake hands with me.. Mind you I wasn't even wearing black, but for the simple fact that I'm a widow, people treated me differently. I went to church after three weeks of my husband's funeral, as the Sunday school teacher, two ladies came to me and told me that I must stop teaching immediately. This made me feel oppressed, marginalized and rejected. To this day I don't know who send the two ladies to me but I got the message

loud and clear.

Pastor: it is a painful experience neh, Let's talk about it if you don't mind. And what role did your in-laws play during this difficult time?

Sbongile: Gone are those days when my in-laws used to sing, "*umakoti ungowethu*" (The daughter in-law is ours). They chased away, accusing me of killing their loved son. My in-laws told me straight in the eyes that, what brought me in their lives is no more, therefore I should go. I was never given a chance to grieve the death of my husband. They hate me! That I know.

Believe me when I say to this day I don't know where my husband is buried. They took my one and only daughter away from me.

Pastor: My goodness, it must have been bad. Now tell me, would you be allowed to remarry, especially your in-laws?

Sbongile: At this pointing time, I don't care what my in-laws would say about remarrying or what. The experience left me emotionally scared, and I don't think that I will ever marry. I'm scared.

Pastor: as I was attentively listening, to the widow's stories, I learned the following. It was difficult for the to put a painful story into words. Some were even scared to share because of the stigma they were stigmatized and discriminated against. Their rights has been violated. The past part of their lives have fountains of tears, a lot of abuse, discomfort and hatred.

It is the oppression of, and devalued humanity of women that has evoked the outcry and challenges by feminism. This challenge is legitimate especially if one takes into

considering what it means to be human and belong to the body of Christ. Oduyoye comes closer to the pain of a woman when she says: *“Feminism has become shorthand for the proclamation that the women’s experience should become integral part of what goes into the definition of being human beings. It highlights the women’s world and her view as she struggles side by side with the man to realize her full potential as a human. Feminism, then emphasizes the wholeness of the community as made up of female and male beings. It seeks to express what is not so obvious, that is that male human being is a partner with female human being, and that both expressions of humanity are needed, to shape a balanced community within which each will experience a fullness of being* (Oduyoye;1986;34)

I have also learned that widows are struggling i.e, struggling for liberation, dignity and for peace of mind. Besides the good constitution of South Africa, women are still oppressed. Therefore for the sake of the widows safety and security, I would advise men to start making wills and write letters which can be left with their lawyers. Let me give an example:

“In case of my death, please do not harass my wife. She is the mother of my children, and the women I love. I chose her and love her. Please let me rest in peace and honour my wish.”

I believe that if a wish like this is left behind, then this ungodly madness of mistreating the widows will be avoided and the deceased will also rest in peace.

Summary FIVE

This chapter has helped women in black to share their painful experiences during their moment of loss, and how to cope with it. I agree with Bernstein when she says that:

“Loss cannot be ignored, for it won’t go away. Each loss must be faced, grappled with, and managed, then we can survive. Celebrate existence and deal effectively with each new experience (Bernstein:1977:2). The next chapter will help us find a new model and a way forward of further dealing with this issues of rejection, isolation and triple oppression experienced by widows.