

CHAPTER ONE.

INTRODUCTION.

As an African women, I have at several times experienced that women of Africa, particularly Black women are oppressed.

More oppressed than men, especially during their process of mourning. Black women of Africa are experiencing what many feminist call “ *triple oppression*”, i.e, of race, class and gender.

Ruether, one of the feminists argues that :

“The oppression of women is the oldest form of oppression in human history. Most cultures have used the fact that a women is a child bearer as a means to subordinate the woman to the man and to deprive her of the leadership possibilities and of course cultural a self development.” (Ruether :1972: 37)

I agree with what Ruether is saying because women have been oppressed for long time before the Europeans and missionaries even came into Africa. Our great-grand-mothers experienced oppression, the same oppression we are experiencing today. By “ *triple oppression*” I mean, being oppressed by women, then by men and then by culture . A good example, is of a black women who is oppressed simply for being a black person and being a women. The other issue African women get oppressed is by a ritual of initiation. I’m aware that in most

African cultures , both males and females go for an initiation . As Mbiti says that:

“Traditional initiation rites in most African societies are very important because they mark the recognized milestone in a person’s journey in life, and as they on passes from one stage to another , each stage is celebrated with special rituals” (Mbiti :1988:116).

On the other hand Phiri suggests that :

“Initiation rite is the stage that marks the end of childhood and the beginning of womanhood and manhood” (Phiri:1998:130)

I agree with both authors but also analyze the oppressive side of these initiation schools .They teach girls to be submissive, how to become a good wife or how you should satisfy your husband sexually and so on. Less is said about how you should take care of yourself, and how your husband should satisfy you sexually too. In short, I would say that the major thing a woman learn at the initiation school is how to make your husband happy. This for me is one sided and it prepares a women to be oppressed. The worst thing is that, if a women fails this teachings that means you are not fulfilling your role as a woman then he will move out to find himself another wife. Boys are also taught how to be bossy and strong at a very small age. Culture contribute a lot in making boys feeling superior to girls. They are never taught how to love, respect and make their wives happy. The school concentrate on the side of making boys strong and girls submissive.

Men can have as many wives as they want. To some this rite of passage is good, but for me this is an element of oppression to girls. Both girls and boys should be taught to respect each other, respect must not be one sided. The reader needs to be reminded of God's image in human beings. In other words, both girls and boys, males and females, are created in the image of God. Therefore God's image is complete in both males and females (Gen 2:7). This passage offers a new look to gender and stereotypes issues. It suggests that culture makes us to believe that women are to be submissive to men. Here the word of God assures us that we are all created in the image of God, hence our process of life contradicts Christianity, its values and principles on how God created us equally. In short, we are both important and equal partners in creation. The most vital question to ask here is, what does the image of God mean to us Africans? In my own understanding, when speaking about the image of God, we do not speak about the physical, emotional, and sexual appearance, but we are also talking about our spiritual being which is what is important to God, than our own thinking and attitudes. Due to what I have seen and experienced about women in Africa and the manner in which they are treated especially after the loss of their husbands. I believe that they are oppressed, I mean more oppressed than men during the loss of their partner. Let me illustrate this kind of oppression by sharing two stories which will help us understand the issue of triple oppression. The two

stories that I will share in the process, have inspired me in such a way that I became curious and wanted to know, and understand more about oppression faced by women. I asked question, what is exactly happening to black women when they are faced with the death of their husbands? I believe in story telling which is so closely connected to African way of life. Story telling is central to the life of people and religion practiced in many communities of Africa. For example Ellen Kuzwayo once said that :

"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" (Botman & Petorsen:1996:7). I agree with Ellen's statement because as an African, she understands the role of story telling, and how it help people to share the process of their joy, sorrow and pain.

I will use the above concept of narrative therapy in order to receive stories of women who are mourning with open mind and heart. Therefore, as a narrative researcher, I believe that as people share their stories, a therapeutic moment will be realized which will lead them towards a healing process.

Let me now share the two stories of women in black, who were mourning for their husbands. And going through an unbearable pain because of oppressive traditional ritual.

THE NATAL STORY.

In the early years of my life, I visited one village in Natal,

where I experienced something shocking and traumatic. I was so traumatized that I became curious to research the issue of women in black. The experience thereof reminded me of the oppressiveness of death towards women. There were seven of us in the taxi, on our way to town, along the road a woman wearing a black mourning gown, because she had lost her husband, pointed her finger up in order to stop the taxi for a ride.

This is a custom in the township. When one seeks to stop a taxi for a ride. As she approached the taxi, a sad thing happened, all passengers went out except the driver and I, for I didn't understand the ritual that made them

to climb off from the taxi. I kept quiet and watched as the lady climbed into the taxi and she went straight to the backseat, after getting in, everybody boarded the taxi again. No one sat next to her because of the black clothes she is wearing. This I believe was a traumatizing experience which isolates and rejects the woman who are wearing black. I soon realized that, that was part of the ritual, that people were not allowed to sit next to women wearing black mourning gown. The journey began to challenge my ministry of caring. This is one of the stories that haunted me into searching for answers of caring for women in black.

The second story will also help into motivating and assisting in the understanding of the triple oppression I'm talking about.

PULE'S MOTHER.

I have known Pule from childhood days, later they relocated and we become neighbors. I have never known his father, although he would mention him in some of our conversations. His father left them for Gauteng to seek greener pastures. Ever since he left, nobody knew his whereabouts because he never wrote any letters nor make any means of contacts with his family. It is about 18 years since he left. The sad part of the story is that on his return to his family he was so sick, and within a few months of his return he died.

The in-laws forced Pule's mother to wear black mourning gown. It is amazing that during his absence, they never cared to assist his family in finding him. The rituals were introduced. She was forced to wear black.

I said she was forced because she didn't want to, unfortunately as a women , she was never taken seriously, and her feelings were never considered , her voice was never heard. What a traumatizing and an oppressive element . Pule's mother was never given a chance to express her feelings nor to make an individual's choice. She was never given a chance so as to find out if it is OK for her to wear the black mourning gown, especially for the man who left her for so many years. It is common that women when they are confronted by the death of their husbands, they are treated as if they are no more human beings. The culture also endorse the process of forcing women to wear black. This process is

excepted as normal, because culture expect men to work away from home and be absent for a long time.

Immediately he dies, the family arranges that he is buried at his own house which he left for years. The worst part is that a women will be forced to wear a black mourning gown for him- a person who brought sorrow into her life. It is worse today because some of them come back only to infect the women with the HIV\AIDS virus.

It is also common that the women is even accused of being the one who have killed or bewitched the husband. Suprisingly, when a women dies it's very rare to hear that men becomes accused for the cause of her death. They will not even force him to wear a black mourning band. These are some of the oppressive elements that needs to be dealt with in caring for the women in black.

Several oppressive elements occurs immediately after the death of a partner. It is worse when it is your husband. The poor women is not even given a chance, especially by in-laws or say a word nor have a contribution in sharing how she would want her husband to be buried. She is seating quietly on a mattress at the floor, burning with anger inside herself as the family arranges for her husbands funeral.

I agree with Hancock & Mains when they say:

"For too long widows lived in a suffocating darkness and

*silence. There are no words with which to name their wounds;
nor ear to hear their cries.”* (Hancock & Mains:1987:4)

Now at least in this research work, we will hear their stories and make sure that their voices are heard. Their cry for help is reaching out and touching our own nerves . If we all read this paper with listening ears , then we will begin to hear their voices. Their voices are a challenge to the church, culture and to pastoral care givers.

If we listen to their stories and voices we will begin to recognize them all around us. We will also recognize that they are people created in the image of God. The way women are treated by their in-laws, the community and the church is totally unfair and oppressive.

For so many years women has been treated as second class objects. They have been unfairly discriminated by class, race and gender. Women were never free in their own country, they are only recognized in terms of men. That’s why when they are married they even carry a man’s surname with them. They are identified in terms of men. Without men next to them they are nothing. This is another element of triple oppression. This I believe, is another way women are oppressed in spite of the black mourning gown. As widows seek to deal with the loss of their husbands, and their loved ones, they become so oppressed, rejected and isolated by their in-laws, family, communities as well as the church at times.

Generally, when African people are confronted by death , both men and women

mourn although in different ways.

For an example, you find that a widow wears a mourning gown or a suit whereas a widower wears a simple black band or a piece of black material on his left sleeve- I'm aware that mourners use different colors, but in this case I will use black as it is common to most Africans, and a black color itself signifies that "*leru le lentsho le wele mo gae*", which literally means that "the black storm has fallen within the family" (idiom expression explaining about death). In this case my topic is more focused on women (widows) and their journey during the whole process of mourning. Later on, depending on the research, I will further develop other elements connected to this topic. My focus on this research is on African women and the oppressive elements of rituals that they undergo after death.

As Africans when confronted by death, in the family, the affected family immediately conducts various traditional rituals to both males and females.

What disturbs me most is that, widows have to undergo a longer process than men with a package of strict rules that needs to be observed. I will share some of this strict rules later, in order to confirm the problem of oppression. I have very strong feelings that this grieving process is oppressive to women, although it can be helpful to some, because it helps them to go through the process of mourning.

Death does not chose as the Tswana idioms will always refer to death as "*ngwetsi ya malapa otlhe*", that is, death is a bride of every family. Therefore the individuals, close friends and relatives who are faced by the situation, are the only ones who understands the pains and dilema that occurred through death.

Kubbler Ross also follow this pain of death by saying :

"Death in itself is associated with a bad act , a frightening happening , something that in itself calls for retribution and punishment" (Ross:1974:2)

I agree with Kubler Ross because when a husband dies, the in-laws suspect that the women killed him. Death becomes a punishment instead of being a closer to the chapter of life. Instead of grieving you are now frightened of other people in his family about his death. Guilt becomes a friend to the widow . Hence the widow is expected to wear black clothes so as to face death, and to separate from her ordinary daily living. She is restricted in such a way that she may lose her job. She is not allowed to go to work until after a month.

Life changes , and new rules are introduced that governs your life. For example:

1. A day before funeral, she wears a black mourning, others use blue green and other colors as agreed by the family.
2. From that day onwards, by sunset she is expected to be at home. She is supposed to light a candle before sunset for at

least a period of a year or more until the end of the

mourning process.

After a year, a ritual is prepared whereby she undergoes a process of cleansing, her mourning gown is burned and the deceased clothes are shared among the family members.

3. She is not allowed to shout nor raise her voice when speaking to people for at least the whole year.

4. She is not allowed to visit friends nor neighbors. Actually, she is not allowed to be seen walking around the village

because traditionalists believe that the people of that particular village will be cursed and drought will affect them and they will be forsaken by their ancestors if they participate with

women in black.

5. By 12 noon she needs to pause for a while and stop whatever she is doing, because it is believed that 12 noon is the time for ancestors to visit the community.

6. In Lehurutshe near Mafikeng, I was told through research that a widow is not supposed to cross in between couples as this will bring bad luck to the couple.

7. In some other villages like Mmakau, Polokwane, KwaNdebele, a woman in black is not expected to go to

church. If it happens that she goes to church, she is not allowed to sing nor sit in front of the congregation she needs to stay at the last pew with her back at the wall. Actually she is not allowed to take part during worship, but the only thing

she can do is to sit at the back, and watch the worshippers as they take part in the service. In other words, no one needs to seat next to any person wearing black clothes because people in villages believes that she will bring some curse.

The above laws and rituals explains how women are oppressed by culture and family. The mother in-law is expected to help the widow to observe these rituals. In other words the system uses other women to oppress women. This kind of living raises a challenge to pastoral care. Our churches ought to be places where widows must find peace and love.

Our churches must be seen as a caring places to all human beings, especially the marginalized, children and the abused.

Jesus did his work of healing by restoring what was broken, healing what is fragmented through the healing community which is the church. For an example Jesus healed a women who was subject to bleeding for 12 years (Matt.9:18-26). This women's life was broken, she was

rejected and isolated, but Jesus her life. We need to analyse the church and it's role among the people and society.

I agree with Mwaura in his definition of the church when he says:

"The church must be a caring institution with the following marks- kerygma (preaching the gospel), koinonia (creating a fellowship with the divine), diakonia (the ministry of loving service -and faith)" (Mwaura, cited in Waruta and Kinoti:2000:87) .

As followers of Christ and pastoral care givers, we are called to take care of those broken hearted, especially the widows.

There is another idiom that adds pain to the journey that a widow has to follow. She is not allowed to remarry as traditionalists believes that *'lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi'*, a *'women's grave is at her in-laws'*.

Imagine if you are young and cannot marry any more, what an oppressive life? I'm

aware that some tribes do allow a widow to marry after fulfilling the process of mourning. Others will ask that she marry within the family so that they don't loose children of the deceased. A widow will undergo another ritual that free her to remarry. The main problem is that men do not go

through many of the above steps. You find that after six months they will ask a men to end up a process of mourning so as to allow him to remarry.

These are a few of the triple oppressive elements that has forced me to research for this topic in order to come with a model for pastoral caring for widows.

Let me also analyze the process or rituals that men undergo after the death of a wife. They are allowed to do certain things because they are regarded as bread winners.

1. After (or before) the funeral a simple black band or a small piece of black material is pinned on his left sleeve as a sign of mourning (Surprisingly I have never heard nor read of a black mourning suit for men).
2. He is allowed to go around the village, mix with friends and families while the women are never given that freedom.
3. He is free to go to church, sit wherever he wants, sing, dance, shake hands or pray allowed as if he is entering the Holy gates of Jerusalem.
4. The process of cleansing is nearly the same as the one for women, but not oppressive to men, as it is to women. While being cleansed he will be facing towards sunset because part of his life in marriage has

come to an end. It also releases him to get married again, hence our culture does not question that process for men.

5. He is also given freedom to remarry as traditionalists believes that "*lebitla la monna le fa thoko ga tsela*", literally meaning "*the grave of a men is by the roadside*". In other words men are allowed to travel and be free. That means they can sleep anywhere they want, with any women they want to sleep with without being questioned. If this is the process, I'm worried because this kind of freedom is dangerous, because it will spread HIV/Aids, and women are vulnerable.
6. By sunset he needs to be at home, although this law will only be practiced for a shorter period to men as compared to women. When one compares rituals of widows and widowers. I realize that there are only two places where they are equal. It is in the ritual of entering into the mourning process and that of cleansing.

Let us analyze the ritual of ending the process of mourning for both parties. The timing for men varies between 3 and 6 months, while for women it can last for a year or more. The idea behind this ritual is to light a candle for the clothes of the deceased until the end of mourning period. At the end, the black band he is wearing round his sleeve is burned, and clothes of the deceased are shared among the family members.

The family will rush the process because they are concerned about the loneliness of the man, and not of a woman, because she is recognized as part of the property of the family. Remember the idiom "*lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi*", which literally means, "*the grave of a woman is at her in-laws*".

The reader is clear that the process is very oppressive and unfair to women. The difficult part we are faced with is that, it contradicts scripture. It is also against the new constitution of South Africa which recognizes people as equal and important.

As a proudly South African woman, I'm aware that we are living in the world that is dominated by men, yet one in which women are beginning

to reflect theologically on their experiences of being dominated and marginalized by men and other women. The process of life is changing,

feminist theology is challenging domination by men and patriarchal structures, for example, there are women who support one another,

through feminist pastoral care theology, who looked at one another as valuable person with their own right. As McFague says that:

Feminists who have analysed the patriarchal model have brought into sharp relief the pattern that, from at least the time of Augustine, has

been the dominant one in the Christian understanding of relations between God and humanity, as well as people with each other.

(McFague:182:149)

I agree with McFague's statement because it is about time whereby both men and women needs to recognize themselves as equal and that they are both created in the image of God.

As a narrative researcher, I will look at the way culture and Christian religion plays a role and influences us to oppress other people. Therefore my research will be divided into five chapters outlined in the following way:

1. Chapter One - Deals with introduction to the problem and the reasons why I was led to this research.
2. Chapter Two - Deals with methodology - using narrative therapy in order to enter the world of women wearing black mourning gown.
3. Chapter Three - I will concentrate on the definition of death, especially the and Africans concept of death and the process of death.
4. Chapter Four - I will deal with stories of women in narrative therapy - using their stories to share their experiences and working on their healing process.
5. Chapter Five - It is a concluding chapter and way forward as well as issues that will emerge out of the research.

SUMMARY

The reader will now realises how women are oppressed by culture,

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other women and even churches. Some religious institutions have created a theology of submission by using the concept of men as the head, anointed by God in order to lead.

I'm sure that the reader begins to understand why this topic is important to be researched. Pastoral care has to engage oppressive ritual elements in the lives of people, bring liberation and healing, that will free both men and women.

As an African I know that story telling plays a vital role in our lives as Africans. I know that stories help us to see ourselves in the eyes of the world. For an example, Africans would use stories to shield people from harm. As Prof M Masango says

"Many boys would listen to the stories to powerful to them"

that would not. And as they listened they would not

"fall prey to evil" (Masango cited in Vertue's et al 1999: 49)

I agree with Masango's African concept of story telling, because

by means of story telling one can find healing and motivation.

It was the time for story telling to be a countered by the

arrival of television and radio.

Muller adds concepts that are interesting and about narrative

approach, he says:

"narrative approach is only concerned with stories as if all that is needed is to collect and re-tell interesting stories" (Muller 1991: 48)

I agree with what Muller is saying because Western concept