

## **YAREMI'S LANGUAGE OF LAMENTATION, AGONY AND THE WIDOW'S ROAD IN LONELY DAYS BY BAYO ADEBOWALE**

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### **Abstract**

Information is very important in our day to day activities. This information can only be processed through language. Yaremi delves deep into human emotion in her use of language in presenting her lamentations and agonies. Her commendable use of language gives a lot of information about the story in *Lonely Days*. This novel reflects a lot of sensitivity and insight into the phases of life and the ups and downs that women encounter in their journey of life. Nothing is permanent in life besides changes, women who by sheer benevolence rise should not lose sight of the fact that things could change and it really does. This study aims to discuss the roles of African women, Yaremi's language of lamentations, agonies, the widow's road and the background of the story and how they affect the life of Yaremi as a woman in particular and African women in general. A descriptive design method was used in the analysis and Dell Hymes theory of communicative competence propounded in (1966) was used. The findings show that Yaremi lamented seriously about her husband's death and this had some psychological effects on her and other widows in African society. The implications of these findings highlight the need for women especially widows to be determined to face any challenge that comes to them with courage and strength of mind and make sure that their rights are not forcefully taken away from them. Let them assert their rights to self-determination and self-definition. The researcher recommends that women should be left alone to take their decisions as they like and live freely in the society as their male counterparts.

**Keywords:** Yaremi, Language, Lamentation, Agony, Communicative Competence

### **Introduction**

Life is in phases. The phases come out good or bad. In the good ones, we are made happy, but when it turns out to be bad ones, we are made to be sorrowful. When one is sorrowful, it brings about lamentation or agony. Lamentation comes in different forms. We lament when grievous mistakes are made, we lament when horrible things happen to our family members, relations, friends and so on. Lamentation is done in language. That is everything about lamentation revolves round a language.

Language has come a long way right from creation. It is as old as man, who is endowed with the faculty for communication. It becomes necessary for man to improve on it for effective global communication. Ezeude maintains that language is a "fathomless and intangible asset for

effective communication to humanity”. According to Mussan et al (1974), language is “an arbitrary system of symbols which taken together make it possible for a creature with limited power of discrimination and a limited memory to transmit and understand an infinite variety of messages and to do this in spite of noise and distraction”. This assertion indicates that language is as old as man on earth. It has developed alongside man-in-society and man uses it in transmitting and at the same time understanding messages. Man uses language to control the society. In view of this, Halliday (1978) asserts that “language is a social semiotic and as a resource for meaning, it is involved in the process of his social experience”. In other words, language enables us to request, from other people specific behaviors and information that are helpful to us. Moreover, we can provide information to other people so that their behavior could change for our own benefit and for theirs too. Our choice of word reveal us to be members of a particular speech community (learned, illiterate and so on). Furthermore, O’Grady and Archibald (2009) surmise that “language is central to how we deal with other people, and the way we use language says a lot about us”. The emphasis here is on our use of language which says much about us.

From generations, African women use language in their day to day endeavors. They sing in language, they lament in language especially when there is a misfortune. Language has helped them to speak out their burdens and so as to be free or relieved. This is because, the origins of the human race is replete with “male praising remarks or appellations such as man the hunter, man the tool-maker, man the lord of creation and so on”. According to Miles (1989) “our world is the product of male consciousness”. This trend has tended to exclude from the annals of history any image and contributions of women. Yet evidence from different sites throughout all the ages of man indicates women’s critical involvement in all aspects of society. Studies on women by different scholars at different times and places have shown the considerable contributions women have made towards the survival of their families, and societies from one era to another. Yaremi is one of such women who contributed towards the development of her family but luck was against her because her husband died leaving her lonely. This made her to always engage in lamentation and agony that became part of her life’s journey.

### **Theoretical Studies**

This paper adopts the theory of Communication Competence. Communicative competence theory was developed by Dell Hymes in (1966), as a reaction to Noam Chomsky’s (1965) linguistic competence which focused on correctness in grammar; that is, knowing and adhering to the rules of grammar. According to Hymes, having an accurate knowledge of the grammar rules of a language is not enough to make the learner competent in the use of that language for communication. The learner also needs communicative competence which entails knowing what to say, to whom, in what circumstances and how to say it. In other words, communicative competence refers to the language user’s grammatical knowledge of his language and as well as his social knowledge about how and when to use this language to accomplish specific communication goals. Communication competence is also helpful in this study because, it is one who is competent enough in the English language that will be able to allow this language to influence his own language, culture and others. Similarly, Yaremi’s language competence helped in explaining her lamentations and agonies which are processes in Lonely Days.

### **Research Methodology**

The nature of a study determines the research design to be used and the documents to be consulted. This study was largely library-based and depended exclusively on secondary documents.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to:

1. Give brief discussion on the role of African Women.
2. Discuss the background of *Lonely Days*
3. Analyze Yaremi's language of Lamentation, agonies and the widow's road and how they affect her and other widows in Kufi town in particular and African women in general.

### **Conceptual Clarification**

There is need for conceptual clarifications on major terms used in this study. This is to give a clearer picture and understanding of the terms.

Yaremi

She is a strong and energetic woman from Kufi in Yoruba land in particular and African woman in general. She is in her mid-fifties. Although widowed, she copes with life fairly well after the death of her husband Ajumobi. At her age, she could still accomplish a lot of feats: she usually mocks young maidens who walk sluggishly while she takes giant strides. She boasts of her ability to challenge and beat the young women of Kufi in the game of hurrying to fetch water from the brook and getting food stuffs from the farm. She is the protagonist of the narrative. Every event in the narrative revolves around her. She is a dutiful wife and a dedicated mother, she is submissive to Ajumobi but she makes sure that he realizes that she knows her rights. She believes in female emancipation and empowerment. She quizzes Ajumobi on what the relationship between men and women should be like. She engages him in debates on "humility and submissiveness of womanhood, and the arrogance and self-conceit of manhood". She is industrious and enterprising. She goes for what she thinks is best for her and not what is handed down to her. She is a representative of widows and her experiences are illustrative of the experiences of widows in many societies and communities at large. She faces deprivation and discrimination. She experiences loneliness and solitude. Through Yaremi, the author of the narrative asserts that the road to women empowerment may be rough and tortuous but that female empowerment and liberty is a worthy cause. She battles the shackles of traditions and customs; she stands her ground and refuses to be coerced into leading a life that she does not desire. She stands strong to the end. She is also a dynamic character, she fought Ajumobi when he annoyed her. This points out the fact that humans can change and put on undesirable habits when provoked.

### **Language**

Language is the principal method of human communication. It consists of words used in a structured and conventional way and conveyed by speech, writing, or gesture. Bhasim (2020) opines that language is "a formal system that includes sounds, signs, symbols, and gestures that are used as an important means of communicating thoughts, ideas, and emotions from one

individual to another”. It is a medium used to offer shape to our thoughts and ideas, it is used to forge interpersonal relationships both in personal and professional front.

Effective and appropriate use of language matters a great deal in our global world. This is important, so people will not misconstrue or misunderstand what we are trying to convey. Therefore, Bhasim (2020) surmises that “we should make sure that the language we use is appropriate for the specific audience it is intended for, to enable them grasp the intended meaning”. Similarly, language, the high form of human communication has the power to escalate or contain the various shades of lamentation and agonies in different parts of Africa. Wallwork (1971) posits that “language is an instrument of action, of influencing and persuading people, of conveying orders and information, as well as harmonious living both in Nigeria and Africa”. Language helps the society to achieve reconstruction and rebuilding of individual and societal attitudes, values and preferences. There should be transformation from hostility to amicability. Bloomfield (2003) opines that in language, we should search for truth, justice, forgiveness and healing which enable individuals to co-exist and to develop a degree of co-operation”. All these can be achieved through dialogue which is language based.

### **Lamentation**

This is an expression of sorrow, mourning or regret. It is also the passionate and demonstrative activity of expressing grief.

### **Agony**

This is an extreme physical or mental suffering. It is also a generally prolonged pain by an individual because of very harsh happenings in one’s life.

### **Adebowale**

Bayo Adebowale hails from Adeyipo village in Ibadan, Nigeria. He is an astute literary scholar. He has written a lot of texts which cut across the diverse sub-genres of literature. He is a novelist, poet, short-story writer and a librarian. He was a senior principal lecturer in English and former Deputy Rector of The Polytechnic, Ibadan. He is also the Founder/Director of African Heritage Research Library (AHRL), which is the first rural community-based African studies research library in Africa. He is currently an Associate Professor at the Bells University of Technology, Ota.

### **Brief Discussion on the Role of African Women**

For readers to understand the substance of this study and its arguments, it is essential to clarify what the study mean by women. The term women means an adult female human being. It can also mean any female human. Being a woman means tapping into a power that cannot ever be taken away from you, it also means being both feminist and feminine and taking up space. Women mean being able to be assertive, yet kind at the same time ([www.queensjournal.ca](http://www.queensjournal.ca)). Looking at the above words attached to woman like power, feminist, feminine, taking space, being able to be assertive yet kind, suggest that some forms of sanctions are attached to their decisions. It is now time to weave an appropriate discussion of their roles.

African women are strong, this can be seen from the different roles they perform. According to Miles (1989), “they are always busy with food gathering, cooking, child care, pottery, teacher work, making garments from animal skins, weaving grasses, reeds and bark strips for baskets,

fashioning beads and ornaments from teeth or bone; tool-making for a variety of uses, and medicinal application of plants and herbs for everything from healing to abortion”. In other words this evidence points to the fact that women have been active, competent and of course, considerably important in the life and development of their families and societies at large. As the saying goes, “behind every successful man is a woman”. A Zimbabwean proverb also highlights the same view *Musha Mukadzi*, meaning “behind the successful family, there is a woman” (Akintunder, 2005). The above views highlight the centrality of women in all ventures undertaken by men in all societies around the world, particularly in African societies. This study emphasizes that the above roles of African women are not always appreciated which is really bad. The interesting thing in this study is that women’s contributions could not be doubted.

In fact, the world past and present is packed with countless stories of Amazons and Assyrian war queens, female government advisors, “queen mothers and imperial concubines who rose to rule many parts of the world” (Miles, 1989). He explains that “Herodotus has indicated that Queen Sannuramat (semiramis) ruled Assyria for forty-two years during which she irrigated the whole of Babylon and led military campaigns as far as India”. He continues, Tamyris, the Scythian warrior queen and ruler of the Massagetae tribe of what is now Iran, also led her army to victory over the invading hordes of Cyrus the Great, and had the king put to death for the death of her son. In the same vein, Nketiah (2001 and 2005) asserts that “African countries provide ample evidence of women who surmounted difficult barriers in their societies and influenced the life of those societies”. Similarly, Ogbomo (2005) supports the view of Nketiah as he opines that “there were queen-mothers, female chiefs, regents and individual women whose positions and political contributions equaled those of the most prominent males”. As these women perform the above mentioned roles, they use language to give orders and also exercise powers, their feminist and feminine potentials which means that, they were competent in the communicative skills that helped them to give orders and instructions.

### **Background of Lonely Days**

*Lonely Days* is an African Prose and was set in Kufi village. The story opens with a graphic description of how the elements of nature: a shooting star and the go-away-bird signaled the death of Ajumobi, a daredevil hunter and citizen of Kufi. The vividness of the description of the environment is also a symbolic reference and foreshadow of the misery that would envelop Yaremi his widow as she tries to make sense out of the confusion that envelops her after Ajumobi’s death. *Lonely Days* is a story about the unpleasant circumstances which come with being a widow within the context of Yoruba community in south-Western Nigeria in particular and African women in general. The narration of the experiences of Yaremi also becomes a symbol of the terrible experiences that many women go through in different parts of the world after the death of their husbands. The story is mainly about the marginalization of widows and this message resonates throughout the novel. There is a very melancholic and gloomy atmosphere that pervades the novel, from the opening pages to end, forcefully reinforcing the pendency of the sorrowful state of Yaremi.

Yaremi is alone in a world of extreme poverty, living in pathetic and pitiable circumstances. She is also presented as a very hardworking woman, a symbol of the innate resourcefulness that is integral to the life of the rural African woman. *Lonely Days* treats the issue of death by focusing specifically on widows and what happens to them in a rustic, traditionally oriented and very conservative African environment. It shows how when men die, their women are made to go

through horrible widow's rites to prove to all that they did not have a hand in the death of their husbands. While there are widow's rites, there are no widower's rites. Women are often oppressed and subjugated in many traditional societies. Coupled with her sense of loss and loneliness, the widow is deprived of many things. Lonely days decries such practices and advocates for the complete freedom for the woman. The narrative calls on women to assert themselves and live their lives as they want to live it, without fear or anxiety.

### **Yaremi's Language of Lamentation in Lonely Days**

Yaremi says "life is a fire and she sings the song of the hot fire". According to her, I have been blessed and burnt by the fire of life. At this period of my life, the fire of life is not favorable, because of Ajumobi's death. My life has become one of solitude and sorrow.

I have always looked at the league of widows in my village and pitied them, not knowing that I would soon become one of them. Now I know grief, distress, anguish, pains and loneliness just like Radeke, Dedewe and Fayoyin.

Various thoughts assail Yaremi as she sits outside her house watching the moon. She recalls her time with Ajumobi her husband, with tears in her eyes. She remembers the times that she taunted and scolded Ajumobi. She said she had posed in front and of her husband and insulted him, giving him a taste of her tellingly sharp tongue. Her words sometimes exploded on Ajumobi like the hot fire from the mouth of a loaded gun. She recollects times that she earned Ajumobi's wrath by getting his beating. According to her, wife-battering provides an outlet for husbands' sense of powerlessness and frustration. She recalls both the good and bad times that she had with Ajumobi to affirm that life is full of ups and downs and mountains and valleys.

Everything in Yaremi's surrounding reminds her of Ajumobi. The whole house echoes with the memories of Ajumobi. She then takes a journey down memory lane to relish the personality of Ajumobi. She remembers him as a man who carefully loaded his gun before going out to hunt. He was an expert in his field; he usually boasted to Yaremi that he ruled the animal world. According to him, he is familiar with the voices of the wind and the storm, the sigh of the night, and the whispers of dawn. Ajumobi's voice re-echoes in Yaremi's ears. She can feel his touch and his presence in various objects around the house. The presence of rats in Yaremi's kitchen heightens her sense of loss.

Yaremi attests that while other men in the village imposed themselves on their wives, Ajumobi was all loving and affectionate. She laments, when Ajumobi was alive, he used to bring all types of bush meat home to whet-Yaremi's appetite. He took his time to play with her and puzzle her with different hunter's incantations and poetic renditions. She swears never to stop loving Ajumobi, even now that he is dead.

She often tends her husband's grave, out of habit, she tends it at least two times a day. She usually sits alone at the grave very early in the morning and late at night. She communes with Ajumobi about her earthly problems and challenges.

From the above lamentations of Yaremi, through her competence in the use of language, she explains that life is likened to fire. A fire with the capacity to destroy and to purify. She made us to realize that life, like fire is needed but it is full of risks. Life's path is marked with thorns and roses, just like her life. The fire of life that she passes through is a symbol of the tortures, tiring and tasking nature of life and human existence especially that of hers in particular and the

African women in general. For her to say that she didn't know that she will join the league of widows soon means that life is uncertain, it does not deal to every man as he deserves. Life deals out blows even to the wise and kind-hearted. Yaremi suddenly became a widow. It never crossed her mind that she would soon be grouped with the likes of Radeke, Dedewe and Fayoyin. Furthermore, in Africa, because of the male-dominated society and the way they treat their wives, wife-battering is an aspect of life. Yaremi through her use of language recalled times she has insulted her husband while they were together. She also recalls times that she has been beaten by her husband Ajumobi.

Consequently, Yaremi's language reveals that in traditional societies especially, roles are clearly defined along gender lines. The woman makes endless demands, which the man tries to satisfy; thereby his ego is serviced. Certain occupations are the exclusive preserve of the man; one of such is hunting. In modern day times, the demarcations of occupations along gender lines are fast fading away and giving in to modernity. In the same vein, the presence of rats in Yaremi's kitchen signifies the unpleasant effects of Ajumobi's departure. This also ascertains that Ajumobi is greatly missed by Yaremi.

Yaremi also vows to always love Ajumobi, she proclaims that a woman's first husband always remained her best. She cherishes and treasures the memories of Ajumobi. Also Yaremi's use of language exposes that she tends her husband's grave looking for support and succor. She communes with him believing that he can hear her and come to her aid. This was the time when it became very convenient for her to forget the harsh exchange of words and misunderstandings that she had had with Ajumobi during his lifetime, this is a clear indication also that the passage of time had helped to heal some of the emotional wounds that she had suffered at the hands of her husband.

### **Yaremi's Agonies of widowhood in Lonely Days**

According to the narrative, Yaremi swears oaths and shouts epithets like a man, on identified wife snatcher on suitors that will not allow her to have a breathing space. She calls Ayanwale a devil and asks him to stop pursuing her. She announces to him that his talking drum can neither enchant nor charm her. She places a curse on his trade should he continue to disturb her.

She told Olonade that she does not need a wood carver to give her lifeless twin babies. She deflates his ego and declares that he has nothing to be proud of because the images he carves are lifeless, useless and stupid.

Yaremi addressed Lanwa as a crude farmer. She declares to him that she is not a glutton who needs to be fed heavily to become fat. She tells him that she is not ready to be used as a house help, to peel yam, slice banana clips and as a beast of burden to transport farm produce from his farms granaries and silos. She also declared that she is not ready to work like a donkey for any man. She went further to say that she has the right to choose the type of life she wants to lead and that a choice cannot be made for her by tradition and customs.

Yaremi's use of language in the above statements show that the community or her society wants her to remarry since her husband is no more, this is a family pronouncement to her and reflects communalistic nature of many African communities, where family members can take decisions on behalf of one of their members. It is also a reflection of the marginalization of women in traditional oriented communities in Africa.

### **The Widow's Road in Lonely Days**

The widow's road, a narrow river road, at Kufi, is a lonely road and it is a symbol of the harrowing experiences that widows have to endure when their husbands die. The road is also a slippery road and is commonly referred to as "the road of life" (20) by the people of kufi. On this road, it is very easy to trip and fall. Everyone urges the users of the road to be cautious at all the time. The warning to all who tread on the road is to "take one step at a time" (21). It is a road to be marched on gently, "millimeter, like the cautious millipede" (21). It is a road essentially bequeathed to the widows of Kufi by the inhabitants of kufi. Widows can talk and voice their frustrations on this road. They are free to "raise their voice, like birds just released from captivity". It is the habit of widows of Kufi to sing their songs of sorrow as they pass through the widow's road. The widows are united by a common sense of loss and deprivation. The widows on this road look alike because they are all clothed in black garments. The widow's road is now Yaremi's road too.

The widows air their complaints on this road. Their grievances border on their deprivations and oppression by the people of their community who refuse to sympathize with their plight. They are concerned about their unkempt hair and their appearances without their jewelries. They are worried about the gossip that spread about them and the fact that they cannot live their lives as normal citizens do. They are deprived of the pleasures of dancing to the drums. After the widow's songs of lamentation, they express their hope for a better future. They believe that all will be pleasant again, once they cast off their black garments, which stick stubbornly to their bodies "like the ragged robes of a disgraced masquerade" (24). They are hopeful that they will not only dance again but they will also know the other joys of life.

The burdens that widows bear are enormous. Dedewe, for instance usually cries all night "brooding over the humiliation that she suffered at the hands of her husband's relatives" (25). After the death of her husband, she was forced to sit with his corpse and asked to confess her sins. The people admonish her to ask her dead husband for forgiveness. She does not know the offences for which she is to seek his forgiveness. She asks the people and they replied that she has committed "a thousand offences" (25). The people listed the various possible sins that they think she might have committed: adultery, jealousy, the sin of defamation and disparagement, slander, telling lies and insensitivity to her late husband's needs amidst others.

In Fayoyin's case, she is "given libations to lick when her husband died" (26). The rationale behind this is to "purge her of all the sins" (26), which they firmly believe that she has committed. The people did not stop at that, they further summon a barber to scrape away her hair, after they had sprinkled cold water on her head "to soften the texture of her hair" (27). After the barber's "exploits", Fayoyin's looks are completely altered. She now has the "far-away and long-ago look of a mad woman" (27). She weeps until she loses her voice.

The experiences of Radeke, the third widow, are not better than the other widows. Dirges pour out her dry mouth when her husband died. Radeke sings the "widow's traditional song of innocence and lamentation" (28), in which she affirms her love and her devotion for her late husband. When the people hear her song, they declare that what she sings are lies. The people go further to curse the killer of Radeke's husband, whom they believe is Radeke.

According to the above language presented in the text, life is likened to the widow's road. Life on the widow's road is better imagined than experienced. Life is lonely like the widow's road



and also very slippery. Wrong choices cause many to trip and fall in the course of the journey of life. The widows who tread the road are united by the experience of widowhood, which is the denominator for all the widows. They laugh for the same reasons and they are saddened by the same occurrences. Their worries and concerns are the same. Similarly, language is used to also explain the pitiable plight of widows due to societal restrictions. The widows must be clad in black garments and they cannot participate in societal functions, as they should. They look very shabby and unkempt in line with the cultural rules and regulations that forbid them from looking radiant and happy. Furthermore, some other widows were introduced to attest that there are others like Yaremi, who suffer the same fate as hers, in Kufi. Their cases are pathetic. Generally, it relates the humiliation and degradation of women at the death of their husbands. It also highlights the impact of these degrading activities on the widows, it presents the role that society plays in enshrining unjust widow's rites and rituals in Kufi in particular and Africa in general.

### **Recommendations**

Women should be loved because they pass through a lot in their homes during the establishment of the family bond, child bearing and so on. They should be made to be free from making their choices as the matter may be. They should be treated with reverence and pampered even after the death of their husbands.

### **Conclusion**

Language is powerful. It is used to lament and pour out ones agonies as it is reflected in this study. This study presents among other things the roles of the African women, Yaremi's language of Lamentations, agonies, the widow's road, the psychological feelings that came with them and the background of Lonely Days. The study notices that African women face a lot of psychological torture at the death of their husbands. Similarly, the study shows that African traditions and customs showcase that women should remarry after the death of their husbands as husbands are seen as caps that adorn a woman's head and failure to do that brings enmity between the woman and the villagers. At the same time, the study finds out also that African women should be free to make their own choices as they desire. They should refuse to be enslaved no matter the circumstances they find themselves. The findings of this study must be addressed to relevant authorities, such as institutions, administrative ministry of education and policy makers especially on the psychological traumas that women pass through. This is to ensure that they create an enabling environment that will favor African women even after their husbands' death. Language must always remain the channel of communication in all ramifications.

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