

**SOCIO-CULTURAL HARDSHIPS OF CHILDLESS WOMEN IN ASARE KONADU'S *A WOMAN IN HER PRIME*: TOWARDS A REDEFINITION OF THE AFRICAN WOMAN'S IDENTITY**

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**Abstract**

Using the feminist theory, this study highlights the fact that African women are defined by their ability to procreate. Indeed, African societies attaching great importance to children in marriage, consider infertility as a social failure. However, the study argues that fertility should not be a criterion for judging the success of women as it is generally the case in most African societies. The paper therefore calls for a review of attitudes, thoughts and approaches towards childless women whose condition does not deserve all that African society makes them endure.

**Keywords:** social perception, childless woman, victimisation, restoration, identity

**Résumé**

Utilisant la théorie féministe, cette étude souligne que les femmes africaines se définissent par leur capacité à procréer. En effet, les sociétés africaines attachant une grande importance aux enfants dans le mariage, considèrent l'infécondité comme un échec social chez la femme. Cependant, l'étude soutient que la fécondité ne doit pas être un critère pour apprécier le succès de la femme comme c'est le cas généralement dans la plupart des sociétés africaines. Elle appelle donc à revoir les attitudes, les pensées et les approches à l'égard des femmes sans enfants dont la condition ne mérite pas tout ce que la fait endurer la société africaine.

**Mots clés:** perception sociale, femme sans enfants, victimisation, restauration, identité.

**Introduction**

Victimisation of childless African women has been the main concern of many African writers in their various literary discourses. Most childless women have always been oppressed, marginalized and subjugated as a result of the importance attached to children in African marriages. Writers like Sanjo, Ojedoja (2018), Ikeke, Mark. Omorovie (2021), M. O. Ikeke (2021) and Mohamed Fathi Helaly (2016) have portrayed in their works the humiliating and the inhuman treatments inflicted to childless women in African societies. These writers have shown that children are of great importance in African societies and the lack of children in a marriage is deemed as a social failure. Asare Konadu, a Ghanaian male writer has also highlighted this issue in his novel, *A Woman in her Prime*. In fact, this

novel is about the plights and the victimisation of childless women in patriarchal African society. In Asare's fictional Ghanaian society, the childless woman is humiliated, rejected and dehumanised due to her incapacity to meet what society considers as sine qua non condition for any successful marriage. Asare's novel also portrays how traditional beliefs and practices contribute to threatening childless women. The novel also shows how the challenge of these beliefs can be a driving force for some women's self-commitment and self-actualisation. It is to respond to these issues that this article is framed as "Socio-Cultural Hardships of Childless Women in Asare Konadu's *A Woman in her Prime: Towards a Redefinition of the African Woman's Identity*". This study examines and evaluates the traumatic experiences of childless women in their gender-biased societies like that of Asare's fictional society. The paper also seeks to reveal that the society depicted is full of patriarchal thrusts that dehumanise and maltreat childless women for their incapacity of bearing children. Furthermore, this work intends to show how the maltreatments suffered by childless women have become impetus for their self-redefinition. Feminism is the literary theory used to analyse this study. Feminism in this work seeks to educate, inform and enlighten the woman to rise and fight for her right in a patriarchal society. According to Tuttle Lisa (1986: 107), the feminist theory is "the advocacy of women's rights based on a belief in the equality of the sexes". Nnolim Charles (2009: 47) is of the same view when he has it that, feminism "fought successfully for the right of women". This work is divided into three main sections. The first section deals with the plights of childless women in Asare's *A woman in her Prime*. The second section is about assertiveness of African childless women for their liberation and the last one is commitment to the hard work as an impetus for African woman self-redefinition.

### **1. Plights of Childless Women in Asare's *A Woman in her Prime***

Many African societies are grounded in patriarchal values and as a result, women in general and childless women in particular are oppressed, marginalized and subjugated. Childless women are a category of people associated with pains, grief, humiliation and depression due to the traditional beliefs and practices. African societies deprive women in general, and childless women in particular of their inalienable rights. This has been the main concern of the Ghanaian male writer Asare Konadu, who portrays in his novel, how childless women suffer from emotional, psychological and physical abuse, depression and loneliness in the name of cultural and religious practices and norms inherent in Brenhoma, the referent setting. Childless women in this fictional society are discriminated, humiliated and are isolated from the society. They are also subjected to inhuman treatments perpetuated by their society which is dominated by the patriarchal dogmas. This unfair treatment and prejudice stem from the patriarchal nature of African societies which blame every shortcoming in the families on the womenfolk. The image of these childless women is deplorable and they are even subjected to serious oppression. In the view of Nnwankwor Chima (2012: 1), these women "suffer the pains of both cultural and societal injustices which stem from the patriarchal domineering nature of African societies, which all through history have been unfavourable to women".

Brenhma's people consider child bearing as the sine qua non condition of a successful marriage, because children occupy an important place in their everyday life. Ngcobo Laurretta (2007: 533) shares the same position when she says: "Marriage amongst Africans is mainly an institution for the control of procreation. Every woman is encouraged to marry and get children in order to express her womanhood to the full". From this excerpt, it clearly appears that child bearing is of paramount importance in the perception of African people. Asare Konadu expresses the same thing through, Pokuwaa, the protagonist. For Pokuwaa, it is important to have her own children because they constitute security when she becomes old. She, A. Konadu (2007: 13) therefore maintains that:

Then her old age would be doomed to loneliness; no child to care for her, no grandchild to warm her compound and no issue of her blood at all to mourn at her death. She would be buried of course by the relatives and her brothers' children would be there, but there was nothing better than having your own children at your funeral.

The above passage lays emphasis on the importance of children in African marriage. Children secure the future and ensure their parents' welfare when the latter become old. In his article on Nwapa's *Efuru*, Sanjo Ojedoja (2018: 98) discloses that "she was happy, she was wealthy. She was beautiful. She gave women beauty and wealth but she had no child. She had never experienced the joy of motherhood. Why did the women worship her?" Childless women are denied of their womanhood rights and because of this, women sympathise each other. It is out of this sympathy that Pokuwaa's co-wife allows her husband to spend many nights with Pokuwaa. For the latter, this will probably increase Pokuwaa's chance of getting pregnant. Asare Konadu (2007: 17) in the following lines says that "She says she does not mind; he calmly replied. Her only prayer is that this does help you to get a child". Not only is Pokuwaa denied certain aspects of personhood because she is unable to fulfill the role of mother, she is also denied her womanhood. Konadu in his novel, explores the psychological repercussion of societal scorn on childless women. This societal scorn, indifference and isolation towards childless women affect them drastically and provokes in them, terrible feelings of depression and hopelessness. Pokuwaa's marriage with her first two husbands collapses because of the societal mockery and undue victimization from her society. The narrator therefore reckons (2007: 21) that "The thought that she had divorced two earlier husbands because she couldn't have a child with them". The suffering of the childless women is reinforced by the pressures coming from their societies. Pokuwaa's mother who should support Pokuwaa in her childless situation worsens her situation. In the following lines, Asare Konadu (2007: 28) bemoans:

When she sat down, thoughts of Kwaku Fosu, her second husband, came to her mind. She had been fond of that man, but no child, and she divorced him. Her mother used to come and say, 'You see, my child, you should have children. You are my only daughter, and unless you have a child our lives will end miserably.

From the above excerpt, the reader notes that despite the fact that Pokuwaa loves her husband, she was compelled to divorce because of the societal scorn. In addition to this, we can realise that

Pokuwaa's mother always harasses her daughter on the necessity to bear a child otherwise, their lives will end miserably. Childless women undergo different kinds of sufferings and maltreatments from their societies. Facing the same vicissitudes, Nwankwor Chima (2012: 57) in his anguish expresses that: "Happiness does not exist at least not for the childless woman and all our virtuousness is a myth" As if it were not sufficient, Pokuwaa's mother attracts her daughter's attention on the necessity of bearing children as follows "You are my only daughter. My five sons will have children for their wives' families; but the child that you will bear will be my own grandchild, her mother had explained", A. Konadu (2007: 32). For these people, childbearing is of paramount importance in all unions regardless of the social status of the two partners. In her article devoted to this issue, Ngcobo Lauretta (2007: 533) states that: "The basis of marriage among Africans implies the transfer of a woman's fertility to the husband's family group". For people of Brenhoma, marriage is considered as a special and an essential status in the life of any man and woman while children are the adornment of that status. Nwankwor Chima (2012: 19) also has expressed his view on this issue when he has it that "Marriage among Africans is mainly an institution for the control of procreation. Every woman is encouraged to marry and get children in order to express her womanhood to the full". This quotation backs Konadu who thinks that childbearing contributes greatly to the definition of womanhood. This is because of the social importance put on procreation in the African worldview. Children play an important role in African matrimonial affairs and any woman who fails to bear one is subject to societal mockery and isolation. In addition to this, a barren woman's marriage can be terminated at anytime without her consent. Apart from the above prejudices, a barren woman automatically loses her respect, value, and regards even among her womenfolk who should be more understanding and sympathetic. In the same perspective, Nwankwor Chima (2012: 11) has it that:

Without children the value of being faithful wear rapidly thin and the honey in the bowl of marriage drains out very soon like rain from a leaking bucket. The husband, disappointed and frightened becomes bitter, the in-laws and particularly the female among them grow savage. They are ready to throw you out into the street, scornful of your many years of faithfully loving. And all your friends will only look on, some even with approval as your life changes like the story of a discarded apple in some dungheap

From the above excerpt, it is amply clear that children remain the basic and the fundamental reason in African marriage. Pokuwaa's mother (2007: 116) in a conversation expresses that "She (Pokuwaa) is like any boy in Brenhoma, for there is no difference between a barren woman and a man". For Pokuwaa's mother, her unique daughter should necessarily bear children so that at her death, these children could mourn. She says (2007: 116) "I fear there would be no grandchildren to mourn when I die". This unreasonable victimization of the innocent woman deepens her depression and subjects her to emotional and psychological trauma. The bulk of studies on childlessness have observed that children not only bring joy but foster the love between a man and his wife in Africa. In the same perspective, Kalu John (2008: 66) remarks that: "Marital instability is often related to the absence or presence of children from the union". We are informed that Pokuwaa divorced her first

two husbands because of the social pressures as result of her incapacity of bearing children. She has to undergo a drastic change from a powerful daughter to helpless wife. She lacks the natural confidence to defy the society because she fails to be a true woman. Consequently, her marriage deteriorates. Mohamed Fathi Helaly in a similar work devoted to the same issues and quoting Nicole Willey points out “Because Nnu Ego and her culture place a premium on motherhood, she is easily destroyed by her inability to get pregnant and she lives restlessly in Ibuza and is rejected by both the people and the traditions”, W. Nicole (2010: 162). In Brenhoma, the traditions dictate that giving birth to children is a great pleasure for both parents because a baby is the means to fulfill their dream of longevity. According to the traditional and cultural expectations, a woman’s ultimate joy and worth are measured by motherhood. Such expectations represent an unbearable pressure on a barren wife like Pokuwaa. She believes that the only way to be happy is to be a mother. She develops an impulsive desire to be a mother and this desire is stimulated by her vision of the value of children in the future. Pokuwaa is also guided and governed by the norms of the society where children are a source of public acceptance and self-esteem.

Konadu’s main preoccupation in *A Woman in her Prime* is to evaluate and reveal the disastrous effect of childlessness on material life in Ghanaian culture. Pokuwaa agonizes over her childlessness. This situation has affected psychologically Pokuwaa and traumatised her. She is totally lost because of the various pressures she receives from her direct environment. At a given moment, Pokuwaa was deterred because in spite of the different sacrifices she made, her efforts seem to be fruitless. Pokuwaa is blamed for her childlessness, even though at times it may arise from the medical conditions of a man. Brenhoma’s traditional culture attaches great value to children therefore, childless marriage is deemed as cursed and the woman in particular is even labelled a “man” or a witch. Childless women suffer socio-culturally in African societies because of the importance child bearing avails in these patriarchal societies. Pokuwaa suffers psychologically at the hands of her respective three husbands’ families and most importantly at her own biological mother’s hands. African society is built in such a way that every citizen considers child-bearing as the *raison d’être* of any union. However, we join Mohamed Ikeke (2021: 9) in saying that “women should not be seen and treated as simply procreation objects whose cardinal function is child-bearing”. It is the misconception of the woman’s role that makes people traumatise the childless woman in Africa. “A woman without a child for her husband was a failed woman” Buchi Emecheta (1979: 62). This accounts for all the affliction imposed by the protagonist’s society on her. They believe that a woman is to bear children and look after them. That is to say having children in Ibuza is the primary source of a woman’s self-esteem.

## **2. Impact of Traditional Beliefs and Practices on Childless Women in *A Woman in her Prime***

African women in general and childless women in particular are subject to many hardships in African societies due to the social perception Africans have towards them. As vulnerable beings, childless African women face many difficulties as a result of their patriarchal society’s prescriptions. Even today, in contemporary African societies, it is still widely believed that a woman ought to stay at

home, provide for the family and bear children. Women suffer because of the oppressive cultural traditions, many of which still persist in modern African societies. As a result, it is believed that if a woman could not bear children, it was because she was a witch or that she had failed in her duty as a wife. Nyanhongo Mina (2011: 85). In the case of Pokuwaa, we are informed about how she suffers from the various traditional treatments she faced for being unable to bear a child. Pokuwaa in the course of this process consulted many traditional medicine men. For the sake of child-bearing, Pokuwaa consulted Tano, the traditional god in order to have the mercy of this god. The narrator in the following lines reveals that:

On her (Pokuwaa) way down to the river she had been busy with her prayerful thoughts, beseeching her ancestors and the gods to bless her efforts to get a child. She had prayed to God... They could answer her need for a child. The ancestors of her father and mother would surely help her. A. Konadu (2007: 8-9)

This passage helps understand Pokuwaa's toiling and how she thinks her ancestors could help her get a child. She went through many inhuman sacrifices. She made many sacrifices but all these efforts have been fruitless.

At a given moment, Pokuwaa seems to lose hope but still, she realises the crucial necessity of getting her own child in a society whereby child-bearing is the reason-d'être of the marriage. The following passage shows how Pokuwaa suffers by drinking different kinds of traditional medicine vainly:

Rub the leaves in your left hand, and as the juice emerges, rub it on your body. After your bath with the water boiled with the tree barks, drink a cupful of the bath brew, and walk quickly to the house without turning back. All this should be done very early in the morning just as the dawn breaks." A. Konadu (2007: 16)

This passage depicts the pains and suffering Pokuwaa as a childless woman undergoes. Some of the medicine she swallowed can spoil her physical health or worsen her condition as an infertile woman. She even complains later on about the hell she undergoes because of child-bearing: "what luck is mine! People get children without going through half the troubled oath I'm travelling now. I can't sleep, and I am always waiting for the down" Asare Konadu (2007: 22). The narrator (2007: 40) lays emphasis that "The priest said, 'Now, my child, go back home and do as you are told. You will be given another collection of the herbs. Boil them in water and use the water to bath for seven days, and then come and see me". Pokuwaa like other barren women finds herself in a predicament as she has to assume different roles in accordance with the values of the surrounding communities in which she has to live. She gets divorced from man to man because she is not accepted as a wife who cannot produce children. She flees to Brenhoma to start a new life with another husband with the hope of fulfilling her dream. This dream is rooted in the cultural values of her society where motherhood is the primary source of female self-esteem and public status. Pokuwaa's hardship is similar to the one

undergone by Enu Ego in Buchi Emecheta's novel. In his article on this novel, Mohamed Fathi Helaly(2016: 71) highlighting this same issue discloses that:

It details the life of an Igbo woman named Nnu Ego who escapes the shame of a childless first marriage by fleeing to the distant city of Lagos to start a new life with a second husband. That is Nnu Ego is compelled by the tradition of her native culture to move to another society with a different cultural background. Here, the protagonist has to undergo the overbearing patriarchy of both the tribal society as well as the colonial society while she is performing her role as a wife and a mother.

The above quotation sheds light on how African societies inflict pressures on childless women. According to the traditional Brenhoma's society, child bearing is one main trait of a successful maternal life. It is the main trait that allows life to continue between a couple. It is considered as a dream of longevity. It is not only a pleasure but also an obligation. This is why childless women are bound to make sacrifices to meet this social need. Sometimes, they have to go through some treatments which may be lethal to them. "I am a woman, said Pokuwaa. And a woman does want a child; that is her nature. But if a child will not come, what can I do? I can't spend my whole life bathing in herbs" (2007: 114). In this excerpt, Pokuwaa expresses clearly her disappointment as far as the various rites she has been performing. She has been bamboozled and traumatised because her efforts to get her own child become fruitless. She went through many hardships as a result of the patriarchal dogmas governing the society she belongs to. Pokuwaa's journey through life is characterized by a number of continual tragedies that represent the tragedies of the modern African woman in general and the Ghanaian woman in particular. In her struggle, Pokuwaa represents the Ghanaian woman's struggle in defending her female status. Asare Konadu uses his personal experience as a Ghanaian citizen to express his contempt toward female subjugation underscoring the oppressive systems perpetuated by Ghanaian culture. Pokuwaa is imprisoned in the Brenhoma's cultural traditions especially those associated with childbearing. According to the values in Brenhoma, a child is part of a woman's identity and the only symbol of success and self-fulfillment for women. This traditional belief has affected Pokuwaa's psyche in such a way that when she was unable to bear a child, she was compelled to undergo all sorts of inhuman treatments. Pokuwaa has been victim of traditional beliefs of her society. On many occasions, she bathed in water boiled with herbs. Pokuwaa felt at a given moment of disequilibrium because her efforts and sacrifices seem to be vain. She is rejected by her society due to her inability of bearing her own child.

### **3. Assertiveness of Childless Women for their Liberation**

The conditions facing childless women in African societies call for their self-assertiveness and commitment to the hard work as premium condition for their social equilibrium. Pokuwaa in this perspective stands as a role model in the field of women's emancipation. As a wife, Pokuwaa takes a firm resolution to fight for her family well-being. She takes upon her shoulders to meet her family's needs regardless of the hardships she has to face. After passing through unsuccessful rites, Pokuwaa

decides to rebel against the various practices her society imposes on her. She realises that it is high time she built her own world regardless of the pressures she faces.

As for Pokuwaa, her inability of getting her own child should not prevent her from becoming a self-made woman. She decides to work hard in order to get her economic independence. To survive, Pokuwaa must acquire foresight, self-reliance, creativity and flexibility to adapt to the changing realities. She finds herself living with an unsuitable husband and poverty that she has to assume what society expects from her. In his novel, Asare Konadu (2007: 60) underscores this aspect in the following “Her (Pokuwaa) own yams were growing well. She spent time walking among the mounds, uprooting with the care of a herbalist the weeds and climbers which were trying to choke the tender yam shoots. A spirit of hopefulness was abroad in Brenhoma”. She has been able to prove her ability of transforming her environment. Pokuwaa discloses that for a woman to be free in the African patriarchal society; she must disregard restrictive traditional mores, struggle for self-assertion, demand her rightful place in the social set up of her society and have a spirit of independence as well as self-will to survive. In spite of the ups and downs she encounters in her marital affairs, Pokuwaa never relents or resigns but rather she struggles for self-assertion and survival. Her struggle for self-assertion begins when she decides not to undergo the various rites. She becomes a brave and courageous farmer. The narrator substantiates “Pokuwaa decided to use some of these idle days in building a new fireplace for her” (2007: 79). She acquires a new identity different from the one most African women possess. She becomes conscious that the respect of the prescribed laws from her society is no more gold. For a long time, she thought that her joy lies in her capacity of getting her own children. Pokuwaa realises that as a new woman, she does not need to satisfy society’s dictates before being defined as a successful woman.

Pokuwaa realises that the parity between men and women is far from being a reality, because the dominance of men at all levels continues relegating women to the status of second class citizens, objects of enjoyment, making them an orifice of enjoyment in spite of the battles fought today for the respect of women's inalienable rights. She therefore addresses an invitation to a modern humanism where justice and respect for human rights will serve as a lever for the construction of modern civilization. Pokuwaa begins to see things clearly and differently. She begins to notice the predicaments of the woman due to her inability to get her own children. She becomes enlightened and imbued with a revolutionary spirit. She becomes more assertive and refuses to play second fiddle. Modern women in the view of Pokuwaa should see themselves as modern wives who must assert their individuality. At a given point Pokuwaa begins to educate the women by conscientizing them of the need to know their rights which also include serving their husbands. This corroborates Akachi Ezeigbo’s (1996: 37) view when she underscores “women become able to take decisions and uphold them in matters that concerned their welfare”. In the following lines, Asare Konadu (2007: 11) reckons that “I am going to give up crying inside me for that which I cannot get. I am not going to sacrifice any more” Furthermore, she says “I have stopped the sacrifices. Never again will I perform them. I am taking my mind off the fruitless efforts for child”. (2007: 11). Through this novel, the

Ghanaian writer Assare Konadu invites childless women to challenge all that society imposes upon them. Hard work and self-commitment are new tools childless African women should use for their total liberation. Pokuwaa has been able to achieve this thanks to her hard work. The narrator discloses that “She filled her days untiringly with long periods of work on the new farm that Kwadwo Fordwuo had cleared for her, always returning home with bounce in her walk and a cheerfulness that began to surprise people” (2007: 117). Pokuwaa’s hard work and self-commitment began to surprise many people in community. She realises that she does not necessarily need to get a child before being happy. She has built her own world full of joy and happiness. By doing this, she contributes to challenging patriarchal thrusts erected against women folk in Brenhoma. People of Brenhoma could not understand the bravery of Pokuwaa. Women in that society are assigned lesser roles and are defined by their husbands but Pokuwaa decided to create her own identity regardless of the various pressures their society inflicts upon them. She is a reformer and becomes an agent of change by challenging the rules that are suitable for her own purposes. She is the extraordinary woman and endowed with abilities, interests, and desires that may, at times, conflict with the confines and norms of her society. Pokuwaa realises that she is the only one who make and unmake her own happiness. She does not need to satisfy the requirements of her society before being considered as a fulfilled woman. The Ghanaian writer invites African childless women to attain self-realization and self-sufficiency in order to fight against societal norms and laws which have made them someone’s appendage, thereby depriving them of their existence as legitimate individuals in their own society.

As a matter of fact, women of Ghanaian societies have been handicapped because of the limiting effects of patriarchy, tradition and motherhood. In one word, Gera Richard (2018: 26) the same women, perhaps unwittingly, have contributed to their situation by fostering traditions and attitudes which are inimical to their development and humanity progress in society today seems to demand that both factors be taken into account, and that women be reinstated in private and in public spheres as responsible and fully functional humans. The artfully portrayal of the traditional Ghanaian society and the emotion that surrounds the childless woman in Asare’s fictional society aimed at meeting the soul of common reader and create the eagerness to know more about traditional African cultural heritage. In the novel, males are regarded as the ‘child givers’ and any woman who fails to bear children almost has the blame and labelled useless. It is to escape this social disregard that Pokuwaa has resolved to redefine her identity. Pokuwaa has been a successful farmer and industrious woman well reckoned with in the village of Brenhoma from the onset of her marriage to Kofi Dafo but the joy of being happy in her prime denies her as she still remains a barren in the middle of her age. This apprehension of barrenness makes her divorce her first and second husband before meeting Kwadwo Fordwuo who has been there for her not as only husband but also father through his inestimable patience, caressing advices, sympathy and charm, though his fatherhood has been established in another woman. Literature is a window to life and that is the main reason we can’t forget the heart-taken roles of Nnu-ego in Buchi Emechta’s *Joy of Motherhood* and Pokuwaa in *Women in her Prime* in order to exhibit the hindrances women are made to battle within African vicinity. But there is hope

for whenever there is a will there must be way. Pokuwa, having won over her barrenness saves the book from being tragic and gives hope for African women (Donrabort, 2012)

### Conclusion

The analysis of Asare Konadu's *A Woman in her Primes* shows that Pokuwaa is a revolutionary woman who does not completely neglect the tradition of her society and neither is she enslaved by it. Whenever traditional stipulations get hold of her personality, she scoops out of them to adopt alternative means to express her individuality as well as her identity. Finally, this study shows that the childlessness is not a curse nor a crime as it is generally seen in most African societies up today. We therefore call for a review of attitude, thought and approach towards childless women whose condition demands understanding, tenderness and consolation. To achieve this, this study is of the view that literary artists need to establish through their writings, a framework for proper appreciation of childless women in African cultural milieu. Childless women need to be morally and economically strong so that they could resist different barriers and pressures from their societies. Hard work and solidarity are some weapons childless women need to use in order to meet the different challenges childless women face in their daily life

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