

Women, Culture and Ambiguity: Postcolonial Feminist Critique of Lobola in African Culture and Society

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Abstract : Some cultural aspects in the African context have a tendency of uplifting women while some thrust them into the worst denigration scenarios; hence African Women Theologians refer to culture as a 'double edged sword. Through socialization and internalization of social norms, some women become custodians of life, denying aspects of the culture that are against them and hand them down to the next generation. This indirectly contributes to the perpetuation of patriarchal tendencies wherein women themselves uphold and endorse such tendencies to their own detriment. One of the findings of the empirical research study conducted among the Zulu young women in the South African context was that, on the one hand, lobola (the bride-price) is one of the cultural practices that contribute a great deal in the vilification of women. On the other hand, a woman whose lobola has been paid is highly esteemed in the cultural context not only by society at large but also by the implicated woman who takes pride in it. Consequently, lobola becomes an ambiguous cultural practice. Thus from the postcolonial feminist perspective, this paper examines and critiques lobola practice while also disclosing and exposing its deep seated cultural reinforcement that is life denying to women. The paper elucidates the original lobola as a cultural practice before colonization and how it became commercialized during colonial times. With commercialization in the modern world, lobola has completely lost its preliminary meaning and ceased to be a life-giving cultural practice, particularly for women. It turned out to be the worst cultural practice that demeans women to the extent that it becomes suicidal to women dignity because, in marriage, they become objects or property to the men who purchased them. Women objectification in marriage does not only leave them culturally trapped in what was perceived to be a good practice, but it also leads to women abuse and gender based or domestic violence. The research has indicated that this kind of violence is escalating and has become so pervasive in the South African context that the country is rated as one of the capital cities of violence against women in the world. Therefore, this paper demonstrates how cultural practices at times indirectly contribute to this national scourge that needs to be condemned, disparaged and rejected. Women in the African context where such cultural activities are still viewed as a norm are in desperate need for true liberation from such ambiguous cultural practices that leave them in the margins in spite of the earned social status they might have achieved.

Keywords : african, ambiguity, critique, culture, feminist, lobola, postcolonial, society

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