



## Aspects of Female Struggle in Binwell Sinyangwe's *A Cowrie of Hope*.

N'guessan KOUAKOU,  
Enseignant-chercheur,  
Ecole Normale Supérieure (ENS) Abidjan.  
docbeniansou@yahoo.fr

**Abstract:** Binwell Sinyangwe's *A Cowrie of Hope* exposes the plight of Gambian women enmeshed in the trap of patriarchy and the struggle they initiate to free themselves from this suffocating system. These struggles are epitomized by Nasula, an illiterate woman who shoulders the burden of resistance. In his will to contribute to the building of a genderless society which empowers women, Sinyangwe makes this female struggle result into success. This paper scrutinizes this struggle in a Marxist Feminist perspective.

**Key words:** Marxist Feminism, struggle, education, victory, patriarchy

**Résumé:** *A Cowrie of Hope* de Binwell Sinyangwe retrace la détresse des femmes Gambiennes prises au piège du patriarcat et les luttes qu'elles initient pour se libérer de ce système suffocant. Ces différentes luttes sont incarnées par Nasula, une femme illettrée qui porte le poids de la résistance. Dans sa volonté de contribuer à la construction d'une société sans genre, Sinyangwe fait aboutir ce combat à la victoire. Cet article analyse ce combat dans une perspective féministe marxiste.

**Mots clés:** Féminisme Marxiste, lutte, éducation, victoire, patriarcat.

### Introduction

Most African post-independence literature bears the hallmarks of protest. This protest engages the great majority of writers and characters in struggles which ultimately aim at demanding what they deem necessary for their daily survival. With the economic hardships of the nineties and their lots of privatizations, structural adjustments and subsequent redundancies, African countries have been turned into quagmires wherein the somewhat dormant protests come back to the fore and one witnesses the burst out of struggles wherein suffering masses demand for the betterment of their somewhat suffocating life.

*A Cowrie of Hope* by Binwell Sinyangwe spotlights such a struggle whereby Nasula, a female character, has decided to challenge an entire tradition and individuals she considers as obstacles set up to encage her freedom and prevent her from tasting the sweetness of life. The titanic struggle Nasula engages goes beyond her personality and becomes that of all the women and downtrodden whose sin is their sex. Her struggle is therefore motivated by patriarchal considerations and bridging the gap between rich and poor. What is the core of this struggle? After scanning her fight, the reader realizes that it is a threefold one: the refusal to be an



inherited spouse, the struggle for her daughter's school and the struggle over her sac of beans which leads to an epic victory. Given that the heroin is a female character, our study is backed by Feminism, an approach that calls for changes in the social, economic, political or cultural order, to reduce and eventually overcome discrimination against women by empowering them. Marxism as a theory which empowers poor people also underlies this study since in Marxist parlance any struggle is apprehended in the frame of class struggle.

### **I. Fighting Against the Patriarchal Order**

Belita Bowa or Nasula is a bush woman who could have lived an anonymous short-lived life if she had not decided to challenge her parents-in-law, even a long established and well-rooted system. Indeed, in the Gambian society which serves as backcloth to Sinyangwe's novel, it is common practice to register the widow and her children on the list of goods to inherit. Gambia seems to apply an old capitalist legislation which aims at perpetuating women as private properties of males. The oppression of women is based in the historical status of women as private property, and their unequal relationship to men in the institution of family (Bowens Tyneisha and al., 1974: 28). But when it comes to the turn of Nasula to be inherited, she refuses. This section scrutinizes the motivations and aftermaths of this refusal.

In the nineties and their bulks of pains, Belita Bowa is married to Winelo Chiswebe, a man with a rich and respected, even feared background. From their marriage was born a beautiful girl. Sula, the name her husband has found for the baby somewhat relates to fatality, as it means 'let things be' (Sinyangwe, 2000:4). In the wake of Sula's birth, Belita Bowa becomes Nasula, a name that means the mother of Sula. As a consequence, she becomes the mother who must let things be or happen the way they are ordained, whatever the outcome. Yet, Nasula has a rebellious nature which prevents her from blindly and dumbly accepting things. This is observed at the death of her husband. Indeed, she is still mourning when the news was broken to her that Isaki Chiswebe would be taking over as her husband. Actually, the attempt of her in-laws can be apprehended in the frame of the Zambian customs. According to these customs, when "an elderly woman becomes a widow, the status accorded to her late husband is assumed by another man, probably a senior male relative of the deceased" (Taylor, 2006:114). This practice is accepted by everybody since it has been enforced and transmitted from generation to generation. Taylor informs us that in accordance with the Zambian culture, girls must kneel, never stand and even refrain from eye contact with their in-laws. In a word, women are

subordinate to men. Nasula refuses this subordination and decides to have eye-contact with men and raise to their level. In short, she claims her freedom as a woman and full human being. And the only key to freedom is education and not marriage or men as it is believed by everybody. In her youth she has made a fatal mistake by naively resorting to marriage as a way out of poverty. As a matter of fact, the premature death of her parents and subsequent precocious orphanage with poverty as her identity and food will turn her into a willful victim in the hands of Winelo Chiswebe, a rather raw and careless husband. Instead of providing her shelter, comfort and helping her forget the premature death of her parents, this marriage leads to more sorrow and humiliation. Her husband often publicly abuses her and even treats her as an unfaithful prostitute who is ready to yield to the more offering man. And yet, Nasula is a faithful woman who does not care about material possessions as it is the case with the woman of her generation. In light of the preceding, it will be a suicide to once more get married in the same family which has rows and matchless disrespect in the genes. What is more, women's rights are a luxury they cannot grant to their spouses that they consider as mere objects of collection and decoration. Furthermore, Isaki the would-be new husband proves to be a matchless womanizer and a great sower of sexually transmitted diseases.

The refusal to get married with Isaki could have opened a window on Nasula's freedom. It could in fact be a way of breaking the fetters of male chauvinism and noxious tradition. Unfortunately, the Chiswebe are a rich and respectful family feared by everybody. Their social status has made them so capricious and dictatorial that they cannot allow a peasant who stinks poverty from afar spoil their reputation. So they react punitively to Nasula's subversive behavior. The only way they have found to display their tyrannical power is to accuse her of being responsible for Winelo's death despite evidence that he has been gunned down by the police for stealing. Their accusation is based on the view that Winelo turns to stealing in order to meet the soaring needs of Nasula. They even go so far as saying that since Nasula is a prostitute, her child is a bastard who does not deserve the smallest penny from her late father. As a consequence, they become stone-hearted and dispossess her and her mother. They even pounce on the money left by Winelo.

How they turn against her. Blamed her for the death of the husband. People of the world, how could anyone blame her for the death of a man who had been shot by policemen while he was stealing" (Sinyangwe, 2000: 8). How they took away everything from her except what was on her body. How they threw her out of the house and sold it, leaving her to spend nights at the bus station with her child before she found money for her travel and returned to the village. (Sinyangwe, 2000:9-10)

Nasula's rebellious nature turns out to be the source of her current difficulties. It also turns out to be the root of her salvation as AIDS will devastate the in-laws. The refusal to get married to Winelo questions the very foundation of society, particularly patriarchy, a system of inequality and domination that victimizes women. "Patriarchy is a pervasive social system through which men deny women all rights to social properties and politics. Therefore, men use their authoritative position to keep women under domination and the inferiority state (Aguessy, 2014:75). Nasula's determination to stand ground to levirate confers on her the characteristics of a strong and revolutionary woman. She has broken the bondage to tradition and opens to emancipation (Aguessy, 2014:76). With Nasula's feisty nature, the author resolutely engages in Feminism in its tendencies which advocate that gender oppression will be overcome with the end of capitalism and class society, and also that alliances between women's movements and working-class struggles with the goal of overcoming both patriarchy and capitalism (Motta et al. 2011:5). By tearing asunder the reputation of her in-laws, Nasula somehow breaks the backbone of patriarchy. There is thus ground for saying that Sinyangwe implicitly preconizes radical feminism, a feminist trend that views 'men's domination of women as the result of the system of patriarchy, which is independent of all other social structures'(Freedman, 2001 :5). The collapse of such a structure requires female solidarity. That partly explains why as the firebrand of the feminist struggle, Nasula is often helped by Nalukwi who acts as a foster parent who combs the whole city and mobilizes people to stand as Nasula's parents during Winelo's funerals. Moreover, "without her and her tenacity and strength, Nasula would have been harangued to her own death by the Chiswebe family over the death of Winelo Chiswebe" (Sinyangwe, 2000:43). When later on Nasula and Sula are thrown away like rotten fishes Nalukwi uses her connections to find Nasula piece work that provides her with the necessary money for her bus fare to Senga Hill. This underscores the existence of a pristine female solidarity in struggles.

Nasula's refusal to get married to Isaki is somehow a veiled political project to restructure social conventions that sideline and rag women to the point they lose their identity. True enough, Sinyangwe does not proceed to a full-blow history of women rights violation; he yet draws the attention of his readers on the plight of women under a corrupt patriarchy which lags far behind African country in matter of women rights. In so doing he removes the frontier between fiction and reality. No wonder "the characters are described to the extent that they look real and act in accordance with what happens in our society" (Cosmas, 2012: 48). Taking this society as backcloth to the novel, the writer places responsibility for the present "state of the nation" on the indigenous rulers and on many gross flaws of leadership, and he draws attention to the plight

as well as the failures of citizenship and to personal and familial relationships (Gagiano 2015:.88). This idea is somehow highlighted by Taylor in the following: “Although women and men have distinct roles as well as a number of shared roles and responsibilities as coequals, in the majority of contexts women are but a mirror image, a relatively powerless reflection of their male counterparts. In short, all aspects of life -family, social, economic, and legal—in Zambia and in Africa in general are simply harder for women than they are for men (Taylor, 2006:111). Sinyangwe is therefore advocating for the respect of women rights. To this end he empowers some ladies who fuel the struggle for women rights by telling to Nasula and others sharing her predicament the necessity to get educated. There are thus grounds for saying that *A Cowrie of Hope* grounds in basic woman rights.

In a few words, the congenital poverty and hardships Nasula lives cannot be divorced from the Gambian social and economic realities of the nineties. The greatest lesson she draws from her plights is that education is the key to freedom and happiness. No wonder she engages in a titanic battle to guarantee Sula’s education.

## II. The Struggle for Sula’s Education

Nasula’s endeavor parallels the struggle to wriggle her daughter out of the hardships bestowed on her by fate. Convinced that without education, women are woeful and vulnerable beings in the hands of men, she decides to wend her way to freedom by investing in Sula’s education. Notwithstanding, such an investment is fraught with obstacles that could be assimilated to unmovable rocks. Nasula’s struggle to overcome these obstacles is manifold and can be construed as a scheme to free women and empower them. This section pores over the core of this struggle and its outcome.

The author brings to the fore the efforts made by Nasula for the schooling of her cherished girl by first showing the efforts in the form of a sacrifice. Even though it is not a self-denial in the Christian sense, Nasula’s struggle is akin to a self-sacrifice. Nasula sacrifices her somewhat useless life to chart the way to a bright future for her daughter. As a matter of fact, when she sends Sula to primary school, she is obliged to deprive herself of what can on the spot make her life tasteful. In a society where women run after clothes, Nasula chooses to have no clothes but rugs. She decides to taste life only the day Sula’s education brings profits. Her child’s education

is thus perceived as a long run project that must not abort mid-way because of poverty. Her conception of education as the surest key to freedom is captured in the following:

She understood the importance of education and wanted her daughter to go far with her schooling. She understood the unfairness of the life of a woman and craved for emancipation, freedom and independence in the life of her daughter. Emancipation, freedom and independence from men.”... “What she had seen and heard and gone through along their pathways, had awakened her to the indignities and injustices of a woman who could only put her life in the hands of a man, and to the possibility of a good education giving to a woman independence and freedom. (Sinyangwe, 2000: 5-6)

At school, Sula is victim of mockery because she is the only child bearing the smell of poverty. In addition to her clothing and poor-quality food, “her school bag is a gaudy affair made of old, different coloured materials which Nasula had sewn together in desperation and it was the source of much laughter and scorn (Sinyangwe, 2000:73-74). When Nasula is informed of the mockery, she is taken by shame and, shocked, she breaks down and weeps like a mournful widow. So, in addition to material sacrifices, Nasula has to suffer psychological violence. This suffering is heightened when thanks to Sula’s excellent results she must leave her home village for the city in order to register for Grade Ten.

Despite her being illiterate, Nasula is a far-sighted woman who is highly proactive. In order to send Sula to St Theresa Girls Secondary School after primary school, she tries to anticipate by turning to agriculture. She first works for other people. Yet, her slaving proves fruitless as everybody takes the bad harvest resulting from the unprecedented drought as a pretext to avoid paying her. Actually, those are the nineties where money has become a hen’s teeth (Aguessy 2014: 74) and honesty a social vice and even weak persons turn into vultures to prey on weaker ones. Fed up with this modern slavery, Nasula decides to create her own farm. Yet, owing to her poor background, she cannot benefit from the legal loan granted by the fertilizer. She consequently resorts to Pupila, a usurer who borrows from the fertilizer and lends her two pockets of fertilizer and on credit “half of a small-size pocket of seed maize” on the condition that she gives back “five and a half bags of maize altogether (Sinyangwe, 2000:39). Unfortunately, there were the nineties and their oodles of droughts and subsequent poor agricultural harvest. As a consequence, Nasula’s slogging does not produce the expected results. In lieu of eleven bags, she harvests only six bags of bad grain and the heartless Pupila takes five and half a bags, leaving her only half a bag. Despite the loss she resorts to Pupila again for the same deal. Unfortunately, the deal results in naught. Yet, Nasula remains stuck to Sula’s education like a drowning person would do with a lifebuoy. She will be more unwavering



in her position thanks to the encounter with some educated ladies who pledge for girls' education and women rights.

The faces and voices of those young women of good education and good jobs in offices who came to Kalingalinga shanty compound, where she lived with Winelo, to talk to the women of the compound about freedom of woman. What they said about the importance of knowing how to read and write and of having a good education, what they said about the rights of a woman, the need for a woman to stand on her own. (Sinyangwe, 2000: 8)

Nasula's determination to educate her daughter is a metaphor of education in Africa where women are brought to the fore in matter of education and society perpetuation. This idea is underscored by Aguessy as follows:

It is no doubt that the Zambian writer, not only is he repositioning woman in general and the African woman in particular in her traditional role, that is ensuring the education of her children, but also is pointing out that a woman is the pillar of the society. As for Sinyangwe no society, community can be constructed without woman's contribution. For the writer, a woman who will educate the society must be, first of all, educated. A woman is the cornerstone in the edification of her community. It is in fact, what Nasula has understood when she engages in the fight for Sula's education. As the saying goes, 'to educate a girl is to educate a whole nation' (Aguessy, 2014:79).

After the failure to raise money by toiling on the farms of other villagers and by investing in her own farm, Nasula decides to resort to her in-laws who live in a remote place. Given her destituteness, she cannot afford taking a car and so she travels on foot. The trekking is not an easy one and looks like an ultimate sacrifice as exemplified in the following:

The woman walked. She walked and walked, along a meandering footpath. Grains of sand in size and colour brought to her mind the sight and smell of roasted finger millet. The forest on both sides was dense, full of virginity, and a still silence as uncanny as that of the land of the dead. In the ghostly womb of untampered nature, the woman walked the distance to Mangano. Alone, unescorted by man. Nasula was courage (Sinyangwe, 2000: 14).

Interesting enough is the fact that the forest she crosses during her travel is dense and full of virginity. This implies that Sula's future, despite the hardships of the moment, is like a virgin page. Nasula must consequently endeavor to write in the best future.

After a long and difficult trip she arrives at Mangano where she has rendezvous with despair. Once at Mangano, she realizes that her efforts are useless. Indeed, her once so powerful and well-off in-laws are so poverty-stricken that they are reduced to mere ordinary and starving people. What is more, the family is devastated by AIDS and poverty is so rampant that all its members, including their dogs, are reduced to mere bones. Owing to the prevailing poverty, Nasula wends her way homeward empty-handed. Yet, in the author's will to make her achieve

her goal, he organizes his novel so that on her return, she meets an old friend, namely Nalukwi. After listening Nasula tell her plight, she urges her to go to Lusaka and sell her only sack of beans so that she can send Sula to school. By once more proposing a solution to Nasula's troubles, Nalukwi registers on the narrow list of "exceptional individuals who keep the flag of human dignity flying against all odds" (Giacomo, :7). Once more, Sula's fate which has temporary gone beyond the control of her mother is brought under control.

In a handful of words, Nasula tries hard to send her daughter to school. Yet, as there is no easy way to freedom anywhere everything seems to put a damper on her dreams. The trip to Lusaka advised her by Nalukwi will confront her with the urban thieves over whom she will have an unprecedented victory.

### III. The Epic Victory<sup>1</sup>.

Nasula's struggle to send Sula to school leads her straight to Lusaka where she expects to sell a sack of beans which will provide her with the amount of money necessary for Sula's school fees. Notwithstanding, as if she is betrayed by fate, the only source of hope will be robbed by a white-collar robber. Instead of accepting the doom and go back to her village as she is advised, she combs the city until she finds out the robber. This brings about an ultimate struggle in the furtherance of which Nasula wins a victory over Gode, the epitome of the exploiting class.

Before realizing that the city is a locus of immorality, Nasula's sack of beans has been stolen by Gode. Nasula is thus enmeshed in a sinister web of trickery finely woven by Gode. As the thief is feared by everybody, Nasula is kindly advised to go back to her village and forget about her sack of beans. She is already midway when she decides to make the pendulum of history move her own way. To this end she banishes defeat from her basic vocabulary in order to make her sacrifices yield profit. It is helpful to note that despite the meaning of her name, Nasula is shaped so that she never accepts defeat. Instant defeats turn out to be postponed victories over the odds of life. Instead of merely letting her dream of dreams perish in the hands of a white-collar hooligan, Nasula comes back to Lusaka in order to engage in the final battle, even if it must lead to bloodshed or death. This temerity goes with some unthinkable sacrifices. As a matter of fact, she will experience the throes of hunger and unwanted fasting. She will also brave all the thieves and robbers by sleeping in the open, with cardboards serving as mattress and bed. After spending a full week without bathing she turns into a stinking being like a pig.

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<sup>1</sup> Term borrowed from Yélian Aguessy, in *A woman's combat for formal education* in Binwell Sinyanswe's *A Cowrie of Hope*,





Luck will help her in her determination to come out of her economic turmoil and ensure a bright future to her daughter by randomly meeting Gode, the very one who has annihilated all her efforts to send Sula to school. When she asks him to pay for her beans or give them back, Gode replies that he has never met her and consequently he owes her nothing. “The mixture of scorn and insolence in his attitude is as painful as it is insulting. It revolts Nasula and anger gives her courage”(Sinyangwe, 2000; 125) instead of weakening her. So she engages in a physical battle with Gode.

You will not go anywhere until you give my bag of beans or the money for it, she cried out. Then gripped by a sudden fit of madness, she stepped forward and threw herself at the man, grabbing both lapels of his jacket in her hands and burying her head in his belly and perfume. ‘Give me my bag of beans or the money for it! Or you will have to kill me here and now.’(Sinyangwe, 2000: 125)

The sudden attack makes Gode stagger backwards and lean against his car. Hurt in his male pride and frustrated in his manhood, Gode reacts with an unprecedented violence which shows that in addition to being a white collar hooligan, he is no choirboy. He has no respect for human rights, and much less respect for women that he looks down as second zone subjects. He decides to give to this bush woman who has just soiled her reputation and torn to piece his clothes an exemplary lesson:

Swiftly, his hand big and strong, he pushed against her chest with the fingers touching the lower part of her neck in a warm, moistened curve. Pushing her backwards with heavy, violent force, she felt herself crash to the ground with a dull thud (Sinyangwe, 2000: 126).

In the furtherance of Gode’s reply, Nasula falls down in a faint. She is revived by a last energy driven by her decision to prevent Gode from feeding on her sweat and blood and definitely compromising Sula’s education. Despite her efforts to stop Gode, he starts driving, thus seriously jeopardizing Nasula’s life. Fortunately enough, Nasula “is courage” and as such, she cannot let anybody, be it a highway criminal, dash to pieces her dream of dreams. Consequently, in a last and risky effort, she grabs the handle of the moving car, thus drawing the attention of everybody, including a policeman who stops Gode in his killing impetus in the nick of time. This policeman who is not yet in the pay of Gode drives Nasula, together with her hangman, straight to the police station. But, once more, fate seems to defeat her because the older policeman who receives them is not worthy of the name. Indeed, he is so corrupt that he feeds on the garbage of society. In fact, he is “some living symbol of a shameful disease” (Sinyangwe, 2000: 138), one of the tapeworm shamelessly called police agents in the pay of Gode who behaves as a god. Indeed, suffices it to delete “e” at the end of his name to have god.



Gode's bad track record is known to the station. Nevertheless, each time a victim reports to the police, he is repudiated like a tramp to be trampled on and Gode is left free, in exchange for banknotes. In the case of Nasula, even without giving the floor to the plaintiff, Gode, who makes a thoroughly falsified account of events, is freed by his accomplice of policeman, the latter arguing that Nasula is but a mere liar who has no evidence. Giving money to the policeman sounds the death knell of the policeman as it reawakens Nasula's untamed rebellious nature. Now convinced that the police officer is but a personified garbage dump, she decides to report the matter to the big boss. After a hard race involving her and the policeman, she finally randomly meets the police boss. The boss who is fed up with his agent's shameful and discrediting behavior summons him and after a brief discussion, he orders him to go and take back Gode. In front of Samson (the police boss), Gode recognizes he has taken and not paid Nasula's beans. With an authoritative voice, Samson orders Gode to pay more than the initial price of the beans, for damages. He goes further by sending Gode to prison and suspending the immoral policeman. The imprisonment of Gode and the suspension of the rotten policeman foretell the eradication of the plague of society. For Nasula it is a victory that Aguessy assimilates to the epic victory of David over Goliath. Nasula's victory is the symbolic victory of all the women who silently suffer from the iniquities of patriarchy. By endlessly struggling for her rights as a female, she questions the very foundations of society that does not care about girls' education, fearing they would compete and bypass men when their rights are at stake. The prevalence of reality observed in Sinyangwe's novel is a sign that by writing Sula's future Nasula by the same token writes the future of all the suffering and illiterate women of her generation. The severe setbacks she suffers are thus the necessary sacrifices for the birth of a new society definitely cleansed of capitalistic tapeworms. As a true Marxist, Sinyangwe 'accurately represents the real world, with all its socioeconomic inequities and ideological contradictions, and encourages readers to see the unhappy truths about material/historical reality, for whether or not authors intend it they are bound to represent socioeconomic inequities and ideological contradictions if they accurately represent the real world (Tyson, 2006: 66).

### **Conclusion**

*A Cowrie of Hope* is a hopeful work which can be considered as an appeal to all the suffering and victims of injustice to turn calamity into hope. This hope is born through the struggle of a single indigent woman who, against all expectations, succeeds in turning her upmost dream into reality. Her victory over the upper class is symbolized by the imprisonment of the sadly renowned Gode, a man who has built his wealth on the sweat of the indigents. This imprisonment, together with the suspension of the rotten policeman who acts as his accomplice

and the collapse of the Chiswebe dynasty are manifest signs of Sinyangwe's will to deconstruct the existing rotten or decaying society whose foundations lay on the sweat and blood of the proletariat. This deconstruction foretells the birth of another society with a human face.

True enough Nasula is not socially and politically empowered, yet she is a reliable agent of change since her victory over Gode, which is that of all the suffering women, will have long term consequences and these are projected in Sula's education for freedom. The whirlwind in which she is hoisted represents but obstacles to collective freedom. Nasula is, as would say Paglia talking about Hilary Clinton, 'blazing a trail for ambitious women who come after her'(Paglia, 2008 : 1). Through education, Sula will have the necessary weapons to put off the blinkers of patriarchy, shoulder the emancipation of women and consequently act as one of the corner stones of the coming society. *A Cowrie of Hope* is therefore infused with a revolutionary project.

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