

# 'Suspected killer': Tamar's plight (Gn 38) as a lens for illuminating women's vulnerability in the legal codes of Shona and Israelite societies

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The story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38 is one of the most intriguing stories in the Hebrew Bible. While it yields many useful insights into the character of God, the nature of sin and the aspiration of our redemption, it is equally offensive when one looks at it from a human rights perspective, considering, in particular, the vulnerable and defenceless woman, Tamar. Her being returned to her father's house is portrayed as acting in accordance with the law for a childless widow (Lv 22:13; Rt 1:8). However, using the critical hermeneutical lens, it becomes apparent that the real motive that drove Judah to send her away was his fear lest his only surviving son Shelah should share the fate of Er and Onan, whose deaths he plainly attributed to Tamar's doing. As such, Tamar was deprived of the right to marry Shelah as provided for in the levirate marriage law. Using feminist hermeneutics and the comparative approach, this article foregrounds the vulnerability experienced by women, especially when their husbands mysteriously or suddenly pass away. Because of the patriarchal hegemony of African and Israelite societies, childless widows often find themselves ostracised from the same families which they thought they were now part and parcel of by virtue of having married into that family. Much of the ostracism emanates from the fact that they are usually fingered as the prime suspects responsible for having played a part in their husbands' deaths. Hence, the crux of this article is to present the interface between the Israelite and African worldviews, highlighting the parallels between the plight of widows in the Israelite and Shona societies.

**Keywords:** Judah; Tamar; feminist hermeneutics; patriarchal hegemony; childless widows; vulnerable women; Shona society; Israelite society.

## Introduction

'It's never a problem until it's a problem' is an age-old idiom that sums it all when it comes to bride's arrival and becoming part of bridegroom's family in most cultures. As long as the husband is alive and taking care of the family, all is well for most of the wives. It is the sudden passing away of the husband that often ignites controversy in the family with battle lines being drawn between the extended family members and the surviving spouse. More often than not, the widow finds herself being accused of having deliberately contributed to the cause of her husband's death. Hence, this article seeks to interrogate this 'killer suspicion'.

Where such suspicions arise, the widow is often denied certain of her legally accorded rights, whilst frivolous customary rules are invoked as a ploy to ward her off from claiming her due. As a result of being labelled 'killer wives', countless widows have found themselves ostracised from the society, practically banishing them into leading lonely lives as any prospective suitor would be terrified of going anywhere near a woman with a 'death spell'. It is against this background that this article seeks to examine Israelite and African societies, particularly focusing on legal customs that yoke women, especially surviving spouses, to untold sufferings and dehumanising treatment. The first part of this article focuses on the Israelite society using the story of Tamar as a case study. The second part critically analyses the Shona society's cultural perspectives on widowhood whilst bringing to the fore the commonalities between Israelite and Shona people's perceptions on widowhood. While an ancient Israelite widow and the 21st-century widow amongst the Shona people in Zimbabwe appear separated by an enormous historical and cultural gap, we realised that reading the Bible in light of the lived experiences as well as 'reading' lived experiences in light of the Bible is often an overlooked yet critical exercise. In taking this route, there is a renewed connection with the Bible as we meet both the text of life and the text of the book. The concluding section of our article draws from the African women theologians' gendered hermeneutic of interpreting culture.

## The story of Tamar

The events leading to the label of 'killer suspicion' being tagged on Tamar begin to unfold after Joseph had been sold into slavery in Egypt and Judah his brother, apparently with deliberate intent, separated himself from his brothers. He entered into an alliance or at least into friendly relations with some Canaanites. Eventually, he married the daughter of Shuah, a Canaanite (Gn 38:2), and had three sons from her: Er, Qnan and Shelali. Judah married his first born son, Er to Tamar, probably a Canaanite, of unknown parentage. Er, however, perpetrated evil in the eyes of the Lord and was 'put to death' by God (Gn 38:7). In accordance with an ancient custom of levirate marriage, a tradition not founded upon a divine command as such, but upon an ancient tradition, originating probably in Chaldea (Crawford 2016), Judah gave Tamar to his second son Onan so that he could raise seed for his brother. This custom of levirate marriage which appears to have prevailed quite universally at the time and later reflected in the Biblical laws maintained that:

If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead shall not be married outside the family to a stranger, her husband's brother shall go in to her, and take her as his wife, and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. (Dt 25:5)

Refusing to bow to this wisdom of the ancients, Onan decided against raising seed in the name of his brother and so he 'spilled the semen on the ground, lest he should give offspring to his brother'. Such an act was displeasing in the sight of the Lord; consequently, the Lord slew him to death as well (Gn 38:9–10).

Suspiciously conceiving that it was Tamar who was causing death of his sons, Judah decided to send her back to her father's house on the pretext of a false promise to marry her to Shelah, his third son, when he comes of age. Years passed, and Tamar noted that her father-in-law's neglect was deliberate.

In the meantime, Judah's Canaanite wife had died, and Tamar was privy to the information that her father-in-law was going to Timnah for the sheep-shearing ceremony, a time renowned for its drunken revelry (1 Sm 25:2–8; 2 Sm 13:23).

Given that she had already been married off, she was fully conscious that illicit relations with any other man would be considered as an act of adultery (Lv 18:15–16; 20:21). The severity of the consequences is later confirmed when Judah, upon discovering that Tamar was pregnant (supposedly by harlotry), quickly ordered that she be taken out to be burned on the stake (Gn 38:24). Unbeknownst to Judah, Tamar had secretly hatched a grand plan to clandestinely procure at least an offspring from Judah. Looking at Tamar's determination, one could intelligibly assume that possibly she was aware of the extension that could be made to the principle of levirate marriage, that is, the father-in-law could also perform the levir's duty. As testified by Sarna (1989:266), not only the brother in ancient near eastern legal codes could assume

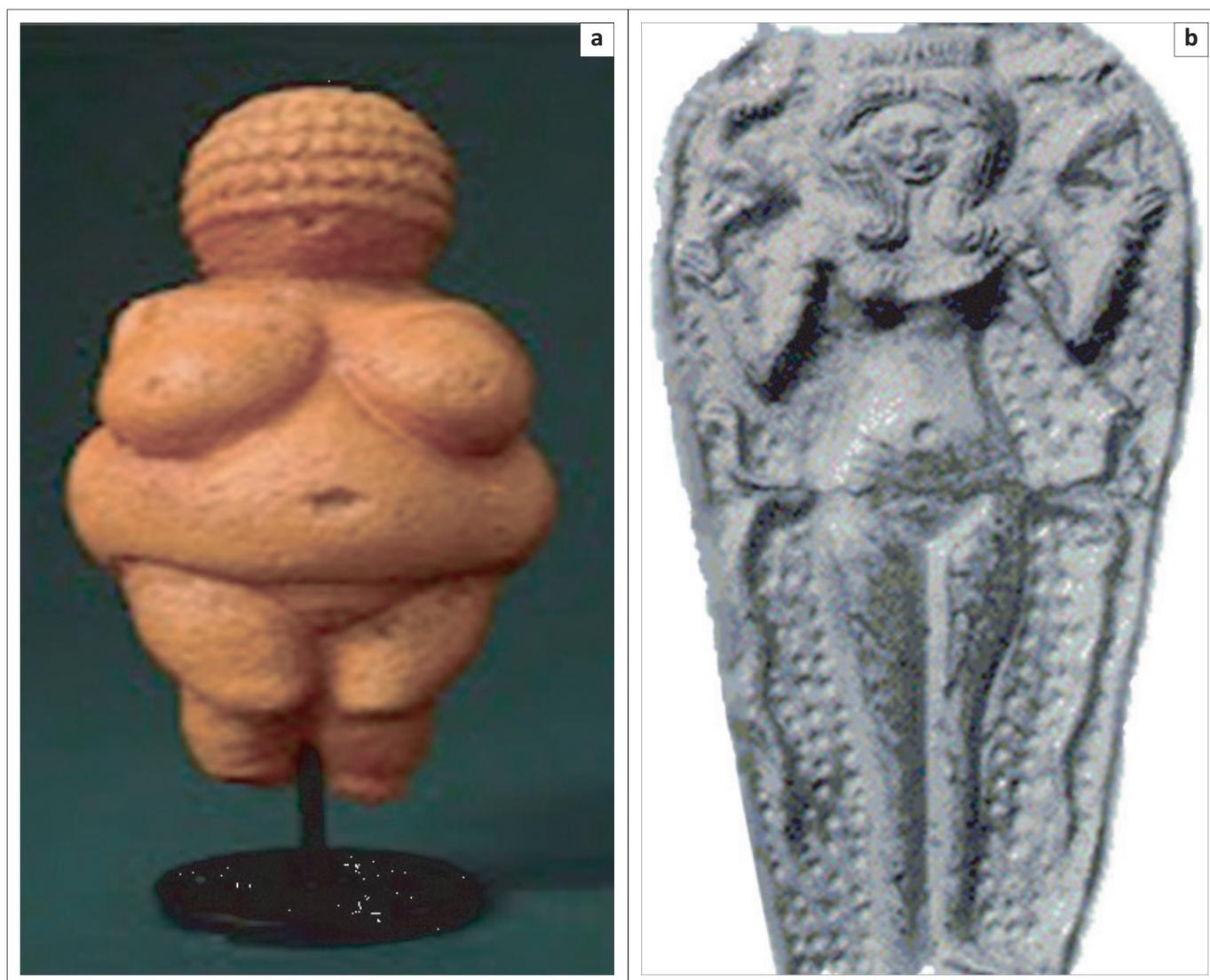
the role of a levir but under certain circumstances, the father-in-law could carry out that task as well. Making reference to Hittite laws of the 14th–13th century BCE, he notes the provision that if a married man dies, 'his brother shall take his wife, then [if he dies] his father shall take her'. Unknowingly, Judah performed this levir's duty towards the 'suspected killer' Tamar when he saw her veiled by the roadside. Because of this carnal encounter, the 'suspected killer' Tamar conceived and bore twin sons, Zerah and Perez, sired by Judah. The second twin, Perez, became the ancestor of King David, and Jesus' ancestry is traced through this lineage.

It is interesting to note that while provision was there in the laws that a father-in-law could perform a levir's duty, the carnal engagement between Judah and Tamar was a once off encounter. Upon realising his 'mistake', which though in the eyes of Tamar and from the perspective of the law was no mistake, Judah is said to have had no further sexual relations with her (Gn 38:26). If purely from the side of the Hittite law there was nothing which hindered Judah from continuing carnal relations with Tamar, and in the absence of any other evidence to the contrary, one is tempted to conclude that the fear in Judah that Tamar was a killer wife/suspect should have held him back.

## A historical overview of the 'killer suspect' mantra

The perception of a woman as a 'killer suspect' is said to have evolved over time. In the ancient world, dating back to the Stone Age period, there appears to have had ample evidences showing that there was generally a holy image of the woman. As noted by Champbell (1977), the woman was viewed as the giver of life, one who gave birth and fed milk. She was as mysterious as the land that produces crops according to certain seasons with all animate things coming out of it and eventually going back to it (Champbell cited in Al-Sudairy 2013). Because she was endowed with the power to create, a woman was therefore viewed as a representative of divine power. As testimony to the fact that women had sacred creative powers, Al-Sudairy (2013) points to ancient civilisations in the Mediterranean world that had left us many mud icons of pregnant women, carrying a child, holding a spike of grain or holding two snakes. This is depicted in the images presented in Figure 1.

Crete Ishtar who was worshipped in northern Arabia and the Mediterranean area is a clear demonstration that some women were conceived as having a sacred status; hence, they were worshipped by both men and women. The sacred feminine could easily be seen from the way a woman was portrayed. She was depicted with a round, curved and voluptuous body. Her identity came to be defined in line with this body and her ability to give birth and nurture creation made her the ultimate icon of worship. Not only did her sacred status draw obeisance from people, she was also a force to be feared, given her connection with the serpent, the representative of knowledge and eternity (Al-Sudairy 2013).



Source: Adapted from Al-Sudairy, H.T., 2013, 'A new reading of the serpent myth in the ancient and modern Arab culture', *Studies in Literature and Language* 6(1), 54–59. <https://doi.org/10.3968/j.sll.1923156320130601.1414>

**FIGURE 1:** Mud icons of pregnant women, (a) carrying a child, (b) holding a spike of grain or holding two snakes.

In the ancient world, it appears as if most cultures associated goddesses with the serpent. In these cultures, not only was a serpent a symbol of sexuality and fertility, it was at times also associated with knowledge, wisdom and eternity (Chakraborty 2017). The association of goddesses with the serpent did not just arise from the need to satisfy human aesthetics, rather it arose from a deep religious feeling connecting the female with the serpent. As illustrated in Figure 2, the Babylonian Ishtar is represented in sculpture wearing a crown with a two-headed serpent and the same applies to the Egyptian goddess Isis, who is presented on a throne of a giant cobra, the holy serpent of the ancient Pharaonic era.

The connection between the serpent and the goddess in ancient civilisations is said to have originated in ancient mythology which connected goddesses with animals and the serpent was one of them (Campbell cited in Al-Sudairy 2013). In ancient polytheistic religions, the serpent was always conceived as the representative of the divine being on earth.

Albright (1966) notes that in ancient Egypt, the serpent represented the goddess Hathor, and the Codex Sinaiticus written around 1500 BCE stands as a witness to the serpent divinity and its status as a representative of gods. The ancients believed in the immortality of the serpent, given the power it has to renew itself by shedding its skin. In the same way, the ancient cultures were also amazed by the woman's monthly cycle as well as the cycle of pregnancy and giving birth, hence in ancient civilisations, the woman and the serpent were closely associated with each other. Both were thus conceived as sacred, as they manifested the mystery of life. This is echoed by Walker (1988) who stated that the:

[S]erpent was one of the oldest symbols of female power. Woman and serpent together were considered holy in pre-classic Aegean civilization, since both seemed to embody the power of life. (p. 387)

A change, however, in perception about the woman as being evil or associated with the evil serpent in western literature and art is arguably traced to the Biblical myth of the fall in



Source: Adapted from Al-Sudairy, H.T., 2013, 'A new reading of the serpent myth in the ancient and modern Arab culture', *Studies in Literature and Language* 6(1), 54–59. <https://doi.org/10.3968/j.sll.1923156320130601.1414>

**FIGURE 2:** (a) Ishtar; (b) Babylonian Egyptian Isis.

the book of Genesis, hovering around at least two figures: Lilith and Eve. In Jewish tradition, Lilith is often presented as Adam's first wife who deserts him. According to one version of this tradition captured in an anonymous Hebrew work written around the 8th century AD, called *Alphabet of Ben Sira*, Adam and Lilith was not a happy couple. Their marital strife is ascribed to the fact that Lilith refused to lie beneath Adam during sexual intercourse, arguing that she was equal to him and eventually deserted him. Another version perpetuating the same idea but though narrated differently is captured in a 13th-century AD Kabbalah text, the *Sefer ha-Zohar [The Book of Splendour]* compiled by the Spaniard Moses de Leon. According to this account, when Eve was created, Lilith found her embracing Adam and she decided to desert Adam because Eve had become her rival (Chakraborty 2017).

Given that Judah hailed from the same tradition in which a woman (Lilith) is held to be the primary suspect of marital strife of the first couple, it does not sound too exaggerated to think that he, just like every other male in that society, had come to regard women as the devil's gateway. It is possible thus to conceive Judah as a victim not only of that tradition but also of a patriarchal religion and society where gender is constructed from an androcentric point of view. The gender stereotype of associating everything negative in the family with the woman, for example, childlessness, petty jealousies, death and other evils, largely informed the position taken by Judah. Coming from such a world, there was perhaps no other way he could have come to understand and accept the deaths of his two sons, Er and Onan, when the woman they both were married to was still alive. Their deaths served to confirm his latent fears that women knowingly and unknowingly play a role in the deaths of their husbands.

As for Eve, though the narrative of the fall does not explicitly suggest any misogynistic feelings against her, its cultural receptions and interpretations by later Biblical scholars and church authorities down the ages, also suggested by Chakraborty (2017), are largely responsible for the cultural construction of Eve as the temptress, the destroyer of man and ally of Satan, the serpent. This finds echo in Higgins (cited in Chakraborty, 2017:157), who avers that the conception of Eve as temptress and Satan being her mentor is based primarily on 'imagination, drawn mainly from each commentator's own presuppositions and cultural expectations' (Higgins cited in Chakraborty 2017:157).

Perhaps there is no better illustration of the misogynistic twisting of the Eve narrative as those which one finds in the comments made by some early Christian scholars. Chakraborty (2017) makes reference to how women were stigmatized as the quintessence of evil, in Tertullian's 3rd century writings where he (Tertullian) orotundly declared:

Are you not aware that you are each an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives on in our own time; the guilt must then, of necessity, live on also. You are the devil's gateway. You first plucked the forbidden fruit and first deserted the divine law. You are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not brave enough to attack. (p. 157)

Similar sentiments were picked up by Irenaeus and St Augustine who viewed Eve as treacherous, leading to Adam's fall. For St. Augustine, there was a certain love for her own power and a certain proud self-presumption which made Eve an easy target of the Devil (Chakraborty 2017). This negative perception about women as associated with the serpent and evil became the object of misogynist fantasy not only in the literature but also in art. Paintings dating back to the Renaissance period often show a serpent with a woman's



Source: Al-Sudairy, H.T., 2013, 'A new reading of the serpent myth in the ancient and modern Arab culture', *Studies in Literature and Language* 6(1), 54–59. <https://doi.org/10.3968/j.sll.1923156320130601.1414>

**FIGURE 3:** Masolino's *temptation of Adam and Eve* (1425).

head. One such painting is that of Masolino (1425) which was placed in Brancacci chapel in Florence. A similar painting was made by Michelangelo (1508–1512), who depicted a serpentine-human figure coiling the tree of knowledge and tempting Eve and Adam, as depicted in the illustration given in Figure 3.

What basically one sees portrayed in the picture is an obvious resemblance between the serpent's head, hairstyle and features of the woman. This resemblance was purposely made as to drive home an idea that the two were indeed a source of temptation and evil.

Because of this close association between the serpent and the woman, what has come to pervade most cultures and religions is the perception that a woman is 'the devil's gateway'. It is most likely based on this perception that the 'killer suspect' mantra attached with women has originated.

Even the Shona society is not spared from the deadly ancient triangle: the woman, the serpent and the Devil as echoed in most of the world's religions and cultures. Below, we proceed to juxtapose the plight of Tamar as discussed above with the life experiences of widows in the Shona culture, emphasising how more often than not, the widow is not only accused of causing her husband's death but she is also blamed for the family's and society's misfortunes.

## A juxtaposition of widowhood experiences in Israelite and Shona societies

As noted by Masenya (2003), in most African societies:

[A] woman's identity is closely linked to her being married to a man. She has power and is valued as part of the community when she is married to a man, much more than when she is not. (p. 122)

The same views are ricocheted by Owen (1996:8), who reiterated the fact that 'widowhood tends to impact more traumatically upon women than men, altering forever the way they are seen by society and affecting their self-image'. The plight of widows in Zimbabwe is not any different from that of widows in other patriarchal-based African communities. Widowhood is a common phenomenon in the Zimbabwean context. A census conducted in 2012 established that 14% of Zimbabwean women were widows (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency 2012). Zimbabwe is predominantly a patriarchal society, and the Shona society which comprises the bulk of Zimbabwean population (approximately 75%) is also patriarchal. As such, widows in the Shona community experience the double jeopardy of marginalisation and gender-based discrimination. Their biological nature of being female exposes them to all forms of oppression and marginalisation, which is compounded by their widowhood status (Chimhandu 2000). Widows in the Shona community have been generally ascribed a socially weak and vulnerable position. Their vulnerability status is exacerbated by discriminatory norms on marriage, property and inheritance rights enshrined in the customary law and government procedures (Human Rights Watch 2017). Reiterating the deep-rooted impact of customary law in Zimbabwe after conducting research focusing on the experiences of widows in the Shona community and the Ndebele, the Human Rights Watch (2017) made the following remarks:

Customary law is a powerful cultural force. It is particularly potent with respect to marriage and inheritance matters for widows, but it impacts a lot of what goes on in the country. Customary law is used extensively in Zimbabwe. The Customary Law and Local Courts Act details [*sic*] the circumstances under which customary law applies. An estimated 80 percent of women in Zimbabwe live in rural areas, marry under customary law, and do not register their marriages. Customary law may hold sway over these women's lives much more than formal, national laws. (p. 17)

The issues raised in the above excerpt are a true reflection of what is pertaining not only in Zimbabwean rural communities but in urban communities as well. Widows in all sectors of life in Zimbabwe have a high likelihood of enduring major infringements of their human rights and dignity. More often than not, if they are young widows who are left behind with only female offspring or worse still if they are childless, their fate tends to illuminate the same experiences that Tamar (Gn 38) had to contend with.

Based on the portrayal of Tamar presented in Genesis 38, it could be surmised that she was a young widow by virtue of the fact that both men she was married to met their premature deaths soon after their marital union. In the ancient Israelite society, young women were usually married off at the ages of 12–16 years. Hence, we can safely conclude that Tamar faced widowhood at a very young age. The plight of Tamar as a young widow finds common ground with the plight of most young widows in the Shona community. Just as Tamar grappled with her widowhood status making her prone to stigma and discrimination, the same pertains for most of the young widows in the Shona community. This *status quo* was corroborated by the research conducted by the Human Rights Watch (2017), which noted that young Zimbabwean widows were much more susceptible to carrying the stigma of widowhood with them for several decades. As Tamar was married off highly likely without her consent, a similar traditional marriage practice *kuzvarira* [pledging/betrothal/marrying off a young girl for cultural, socio-economic or religious purposes] is still practised amongst the Shona. In some instances, the elderly family members, usually the patriarchs, pledge either an unborn or a newly born baby girl. Hence, she would grow up being constantly reminded that 'you're someone's wife'. As soon as she starts menstruating or upon approaching adolescence, she would be sent away to her betrothed husband. This subtle form of child marriage is another factor exacerbating the vulnerability of widows amongst the Shona. Because there are higher chances for underage girls being married off to much older men, it logically follows that they would outlive their so-called spouses. Having been married off at a young age disrupts her education, which further disempowers her socially and economically. Hence, there is a high likelihood that when the husband dies, the young widow would have little or no knowledge about her legal inheritance and property rights.

Clearly, child marriage is detrimental to the widows' welfare because it inhibits their capacity of socio-economic growth and empowerment even when the husband is alive. Although the Zimbabwe Constitutional Court in 2016 ruled child marriage as unconstitutional, it still remains an existential reality amongst most of Zimbabwean communities. According to the current statistics available on the 'Girls Not Brides' website, '32% of girls in Zimbabwe are married before the age of 18 and 4% are married before their 15th birthday'.<sup>1</sup> The worst part of this is the bitter truth that the government has not made any adequate efforts to end this practice. Consequently, the practice of child marriages amongst some traditional Shona communities has turned into another fault line perpetuating the marginalisation and dispossession of widows. This is aggravated by the fact that most child marriages are not registered officially, and being widowed in

an unregistered marriage often obstructs widow's efforts to claim her rightful inheritance.

The Zimbabwean traditional marriage practice whereby the prospective husband pays *roora/lobola* [bride price] to the prospective wife's family has also become another pathway for exploiting and marginalising widows. This is because of the misconception that the payment of bride price reduces the woman in question to a commodity that could be either bought or sold. Such a misguided perspective is often used to validate in-laws' treatment of widow as their deceased relative's acquisition or property. In the traditional Shona society, the practice of *kugara nhaka* [patrilineal wife/widow inheritance] was intended to safeguard the welfare of widow and her offspring, but, unfortunately, in the contemporary society, this has often been turned into a channel for dispossessing widows and orphans from their rightful inheritance. Tamar's ordeal of having to go through a levirate marriage with Onan, the younger brother to her late husband Er, is the same as the *kugara nhaka* practice in the Shona, which is often imposed on several young Shona widows. Whilst in some Zimbabwean sections, the practice of *kugara nhaka* has waned off because of communities' fears of transmission of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), in some pockets, widows are often hoodwinked by their in-laws to choose between being inherited or risk of losing their late husband's property.

Another common trait between Tamar's widowhood experience and plight of the Shona widows is their being forced to observe the dehumanising and restrictive widowhood rituals. Just as Tamar was expected to wear black widowhood garments whilst waiting to be married off for the third time to Shelah, who was still very young then, in the same manner widows amongst the traditional Shona communities are often expected to wear exclusively black mourning garments for a period of at least 1 year from the death of their husbands.

Sometimes this period of mourning could extend to 2 or 3 years. Besides wearing black, widows are also expected to desist from engaging in any romantic relationships until the traditional ceremony of *kurova guva/kudzora mufi/magadziro* [bringing back home the spirit of the deceased/taming the wandering spirit of the deceased] (Bourdillon & Michael 1976; Chitando 1999; Gelfand 1962; Kamwendo & Manyeruke 2017; Mwandayi 2011). It is during the performance of this *kurova guva* ritual that the widow is finally granted permission to remove mourning garments. However, the ritual is often riddled with further abusive and ridiculous acts on widow's part because during this ceremony she is expected to perform *kudarika uta* [jumping over her late husband's knobkerrie]. The act of *kudarika uta* is a procedure whereby she publicly exhibits that she has managed to exercise self-restraint and maintain chastity from the death of her husband to the day of *kurova guva* ceremony. It is believed that if by any chance the widow wandered off the path during the mourning period,

<sup>1</sup>Viewed 22 October 2019, from <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/zimbabwe/>.

then she would trip off and fall over her deceased husband's knobkerrie. If this happens, it is a punishable offence and humiliation for widow's parents and as sanction they would be fined a beast by widow's in-laws. She would also be chased from in-laws' homestead and dispossessed of all that was acquired with her deceased husband. These restrictions imposed on the Shona widows are not different from Tamar's experiences, whereby she was expected to remain chaste for several years whilst waiting for the false promise of being eventually married off to Shelah. When Judah heard that Tamar was pregnant, supposedly through harlotry, he expected her to be humiliated publicly and put to death as was the custom. Although the Shona widows who failed to pass the *kudarikauta* ritual were not put to death, they are subjected to public humiliation, disgrace and ostracism, which all are equally distasteful.

Being falsely accused for causing their husband's death is another common nightmare interweaving between Tamar's experiences and the widowhood journeys trudged upon by several widows amongst the Shona.

Just as Judah considered Tamar as the prime suspect for the death of his two sons, Er and Onan, who were married to Tamar, so are countless widows confronted with the same challenge amongst the Shona.

As noted by the Human Rights Watch (2017), one of the initial shocks harbingering various other shocks to bedevil widows amongst the Shona as well as in various African indigenous communities is the rude awakening to the fact that their in-laws usually accuse them for their husbands' deaths.

This is particularly worse for a young and childless widow, as was in Tamar's case. Such accusations amongst the Shona are usually used to justify the ruthless disinheriting and dispossession of young widows. The in-laws' vantage point is that the young woman has either bewitched or orchestrated her husband's death so that she could recklessly dispose of deceased's property and move on to victimise the next male. This is in the same manner that Judah falsely accused Tamar for causing the deaths of his two sons whilst refusing to acknowledge his sons' wrongdoings which caused their deaths. Often times, widows amongst the Shona tend to be used as scapegoats by their in-laws who are fully aware of their sons' shenanigans culminating in their deaths. In the event the husband had died because of an accident, sickness or other causes, the in-laws would usually be in the denial mode to heap blame on the surviving widow.

Having explored the interconnections between Israelite and Shona widowhood practices, the authors now turn to reflect upon how African women theologians' hermeneutical lens used for interpreting culture could offer some insights into how these two cultural traditions fashion widows' experiences.

## African women theologians' hermeneutical lens for interpreting culture<sup>2</sup>

As tersely noted by Phiri and Nadar (eds. 2006), one of the key features inherent in African women's theologies is:

... [T]heir commitment to 'grassroots' women living in faith communities, this requires that African women become 'bilingual', speaking the language of the academy and that of their communities, not just linguistically but culturally and socially. (p. 6)

The pervasiveness of patriarchy in most African societies has spurred the African women theologians' voices into action. As explicated by Manda (2009:24), 'patriarchy supports gender inequality between men and women whereby power and authority is firmly vested in men'. Granted, patriarchy elevates men to a higher pedestal in the society such that they arrogate for themselves the right to determine the rules of interaction between men and women. Regrettably, the patriarchal mindset hoodwinks most women to accept these often times unfair and unjust norms as their 'way of life'. As has been noted above, the trials and tribulations endured by most African widows are sanitised under the guise of culture. Therefore, there is a need for tapping into African women theologians' hermeneutical interpretation of culture so that wearing their lenses, one could critically reflect on the experiences of widowhood in the Shona community.

In response to the manipulation and misappropriation of culture being used as a weapon to oppress and marginalise African women, Phiri and Nadar (2011) underline the need for critically interrogate these practices by utilising tools from the feminist cultural hermeneutics paradigm. They prompt us to be cognisant of the fact that 'feminist cultural hermeneutics affirms the life-giving nature of religion and culture and rejects those elements that are life threatening' (Phiri & Nadar 2011:83). Consequently, feminist cultural hermeneutics avails a critical lens to be applied on the regularly used catchphrase, 'it is part of my culture' (Phiri & Nadar 2011:83).

Echoing the same sentiments, Adonis (2017:26) adds that women must be 'encouraged to ask questions about their experience of these choices which is often carried out under the umbrella of culture'. Foregrounding the impact of cultural beliefs on African women's lives, Phiri and Nadar (2011:83) succinctly put it across as follows: 'Women's oppression go[es] together with racism, economic injustice and the practice of religious and cultural practices that can be injurious to African women'. In unison with Hooks (2000:27), who underscores the need for feminism to pay special 'attention to the diversity of women's social and

<sup>2</sup>The term African women's theology has been adopted by most African women doing theology, particularly within their umbrella organisation, the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (the Circle) in order to illustrate their distinctiveness from women of other cultures and races doing theology, such as feminist theology done by western upper middle-class female theologians and womanist theology done by Afro-American womanist theologians (see Adonis 2017:10, 45; Oduyoye 1995:4-5; Phiri & Nadar 2006:5).

political reality, especially the women whose social conditions have been least written about, studied or changed by political movements', Adonis (2017:48) proffers that 'women's experiences are as diverse as they are situated and therefore unique'.

One therefore needs to listen to a diversity of women voices from different contexts. Resonating with these views raised by Adonis (2017), our focus in this article is to lay bare the practices which are life-giving and those which are life-diminishing in light of the indigenous Shona people's perspectives on widowhood. The main purpose for such an undertaking is to find ways of contributing towards the process of renegotiating and transforming some of the contentious and harmful cultural perspectives on widowhood amongst the Shona. It is apparent that cultural norms and values are not cast in stone. Hence, perspectives on widowhood which make them susceptible to the degradation of humanity, violation of their rights and being prone to stigma, discrimination and ostracisation need urgent redress.

A pertinent question that one needs to ask is whether the Shona women's experiences of widowhood are similar to that of widowers. Paradoxically, most of the restrictions and burdens imposed on the Shona widows are not applicable to their widowers. For instance, numerous and emotionally draining widowhood rituals, abstinence from sexual intercourse until the performance of *kurovaguva* ceremony for deceased spouse and being forced to marry a male relative of their late husband, especially in the case of young widows, all these do not apply to their male counterparts when they become widowers. Instead, when a man's wife dies in the Shona community, he is encouraged to remarry as soon as possible. Whilst the deceased wife's family might offer *chimutsamapfihwa* [sororate/replacement wife], it is widower's prerogative to accept the offer or not. If he is not interested, he has the freedom to marry woman of his choice (Manala 2015).

Writing within the context of the Sotho indigenous culture in South Africa, Masenya (1998) voices similar concerns in the following words:

In my culture, the death of one's husband is not supposed to release the *ngwetši* (daughter-in-law) to engage in another marriage relationship if she wishes to. As the Northern Sotho proverb goes, *Lebitla la mosadikebogadi* (a woman's grave is at the place/home of her husband), implying that the death of a husband is not supposed to separate a woman from her in-laws. Traditionally and even today in some circles, the deceased husband's brother is expected to take responsibility for the family of the deceased for purposes of carrying on the dead brother's line. (p. 83)

The above citation is a clear testimony to the fact that the ordeal confronting widows in the Shona community is not an isolated case of culturally and gender-based infringement of rights of bereaved women; rather there are several similar experiences throughout African communities as well as in different parts of the world.

Although widows amongst the Shona are usually accused of having killed their husbands and are treated with disdain by their in-laws, contrarily the widower is often enveloped with emotional support by his in-laws and rest of the community. Generally, widowers amongst the Shona do not experience the same kind of stigma and discrimination as suffered by widows. However, it is also important to acknowledge that presently some widowers have been stripped of all their accumulations collected with their late wives because of the selfishness and greed of some in-laws. Be that as it may, the plight of widows amongst the Shona is often worse than that of widowers. Hence, there is a need for rethinking and promptly redressing human rights abuses and infringements suffered by widows during their most crucial period of life so that they have protection and solidarity of their in-laws as well as the society at large. In a study focusing on the pros and cons of African traditional widowhood rites, Manala (2015) made the following similar remarks to the issues raised in the present study:

In many African contexts, particularly in Limpopo [South Africa], one of the woes of widowhood is the demand for the daughter-in-law to remain in her husband's home even after his death. It does not matter how negatively she experienced her in-laws and the community. (p. 4)

Evidently, the plight of widows in Africa raises a clarion call to all those who purport to be advocates of justice, equality and upholding of human rights to stand in solidarity with the oppressed and victimised widows in our midst. Together with African women theologians and all widows in our communities, we must be ignited into action and never tire to evoke the words of the persistent widow in the biblical text who incessantly cried out: 'Grant me justice!'<sup>3</sup>

After reiterating the need to apply the hermeneutics for interpreting the Shona cultural norms on widowhood, below we draw the discussion to a close with some concluding remarks.

## Conclusion

The focus of this study was to foreground the plight of widows in both ancient Israelite and Shona societies. The story of Tamar in Genesis 38 was used as the background to set the stage for discussing the plight of African widows with particular reference to the lived realities of the widows in the Shona society. The article laid bare the negative impact of patriarchal injustices perpetrated against childless widows. It was also noted that some of the human rights violations enacted against widows were sanitised by hiding behind the veil of culture. This aroused countless problems for the widow whose life was already embroiled with turmoil because of the loss of her husband. As rightly noted by Manala (2015):

These problems are, in Africa in particular, exacerbated by widowhood rites that present the widow as someone who is defiled or has bad luck and who should therefore not mix with

3. Drawn from the biblical text about a persistent widow who pleaded 'Grant me justice' (Lk 18:3). This biblical text inspired the title of the book *Grant Me Justice! HIV/AIDS & Gender Readings of the Bible* (Dube 2004).

people, especially women who still have husbands. The consequences for the widow are also more severe if she is suspected of being a witch who killed or caused the death of her husband. (p. 4)

It is anticipated that with enough conscientisation and empowerment, widows would be able to eventually come out of the doldrums of patriarchal and gender-based violence in which they have been caged. It is high time that they refuse to remain 'mesmerized by the great lament of contemporary culture' (White 1997:222). Using the African women theologians' hermeneutical lens to interpret culture, our study arrived at the same conclusion as that of Shumbamhini (2009), who, whilst citing Davies (1993:2), expressed her desires and aspirations for the widows who participated in her study in the following poignant words:

... [T]o introduce them to the possibility of becoming writers and readers who make themselves, and are made, within the discourses available to them; of recognising the interaction between themselves as fictions and the fiction of the culture which is constantly being (re)spoken, (re)written and (re)lived. (p. 3)

Our desires and aspirations for widows in Africa as well as in the rest of the global village correspond to that of Shumbamhini (2009). The main contention of this article is that as long as our African communities continue treating widows in such a manner that their humanity and dignity are trampled upon such as in the case of Tamar and the Shona women discussed above, then 'it is not yet *Uhuru*'.<sup>4</sup> In concluding this study, it seems befitting to cite the issues raised by Shumbamhini (2009) who after having interacted with several Shona widows in her study said the following:

My purpose and desire of this study was to enable the widows discover new ways of authoring their lives through participation in the study as the experts of their own stories ... to see them as participants of the study share in addressing cultural discourses and social practices that promote injustice or that create oppressive situations and deconstruct them ... contribute in transforming our society towards more ethical ways of being ... deconstructing the boundaries set by dominant discourses such as the patriarchal type. (p. 3)

We are optimistic and a plea that the victimisation, ostracisation and violation of widows' rights in the name of religion and culture amongst the Shona and in all human communities around the globe has eventually to become a thing of the past.

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### Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

### Authors' contributions

All authors contributed equally to this work.

<sup>4</sup>The term 'not yet *Uhuru*' has been borrowed from the title of the song 'Not yet *Uhuru*' sung by the South African singer Letta Mbulu, who was expressing the view that independence in its fullness has not yet been realised in some parts of South Africa.

## Ethical consideration

This article followed all ethical standards for a research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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