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Research article

WIDOWHOOD PRACTICES, THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT AND THE PSYCHE OF THE WOMAN IN BEN IGWE'S AGAINST THE ODDS

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ABSTRACT

Widowhood is not only a private experience of bereavement but also a gendered encounter with the social, cultural and material environment. In many Nigerian communities, a widow may be compelled to inhabit restrictive mourning spaces, surrender access to land and household property, endure ritual humiliation and negotiate a hostile network of relatives and neighbours. This study examines how these environmental pressures affect the psyche of Uridiya, the central widow in Ben Igwe's *Against the Odds*. It adopts a qualitative textual method and combines feminist literary criticism with psychoanalytic insights to analyse widowhood rituals, dispossession, social exclusion, trauma, apparent lunacy, resilience and educational aspiration. The article argues that the widow's mental crisis is not presented as an isolated personal defect; it develops within a coercive social environment that deprives her of livelihood resources, dignity, privacy, mobility and belonging. Her farmlands, fruit trees, domestic space and access to the forest are therefore central to the narrative because they connect environmental security with psychological stability. The analysis further shows that women may become agents of patriarchal enforcement when they reproduce oppressive widowhood rites, while family and community institutions normalize the unequal treatment of widows and widowers. Nevertheless, Uridiya's determination to educate her son enables her to resist complete social erasure and to reconstruct a future beyond deprivation. The study concludes that widowhood reform requires legal protection, community education, secure inheritance rights, psychosocial support and the restoration of widows' access to the social and material resources on which sustainable livelihoods depend.

KEYWORDS

widowhood practices; social environment; patriarchy; psychological trauma; dispossession; feminist criticism; conservation of livelihood resources; Nigeria.

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Introduction

Widowhood is commonly described as the condition that follows the death of a spouse, but the term does not capture the unequal social consequences experienced by women and men. In many patriarchal settings, the death of a husband changes a woman's legal, economic, spatial and emotional relationship with her community. She may lose control of the home she helped to build, the farmland she cultivated, the fruit trees that sustained the household, and the social networks through which she previously participated in communal life. Her bereavement is consequently intensified by a hostile environment of suspicion, surveillance and material deprivation. The widower, by contrast, is rarely subjected to the same degree of ritual confinement, bodily humiliation or property dispossession. This imbalance makes widowhood an important question of gender justice, human wellbeing and environmental security.

The environment in this study is understood in an inclusive sense. It comprises the social environment of kinship, customs, institutions and community attitudes; the material environment of the household, farmland, forest and village road; and the psychological environment created by fear, stigma, isolation and insecurity. Built and natural spaces are not neutral backgrounds in Ben Igwe's *Against the Odds*. They shape the widow's capacity to survive, maintain dignity and care for her child. The compound becomes a site of silencing, the village road a stage for public ridicule, the farmland a contested livelihood resource, and the forest a source of food, medicine and cultural meaning. When access to these spaces is withdrawn, Uridiya's mental distress becomes understandable as a response to environmental and social violence rather than as an inexplicable personal failure.

Widowhood practices are age-long customs that remain entrenched in some Nigerian societies despite their damaging effects on women. The practices may include compulsory mourning clothes, shaving of the hair, restrictions on bathing and movement, confinement, ritual testing, forced levirate marriage, and the transfer of property to male relatives. Their severity varies across communities, yet their gendered logic is similar: the widow is treated as a suspect, a dependent or an inheritable possession rather than as an autonomous person. Egbung's (2021) critique of patriarchal limitations is relevant because it shows how social systems confine women to restricted positions while presenting such confinement as normal. In *Against the Odds*, Uridiya is subjected to this logic immediately after the death of her husband, Nnorom.

The novel also links widowhood with family responsibility and the struggle for the freedom of the child. Okereke and Egbung (2014) demonstrate that the conduct of significant others within the family can either protect or violate the autonomy of vulnerable

members. Uridiya's experience confirms this insight: her husband's relatives do not merely fail to protect her; they appropriate the authority of kinship to silence her and threaten the future of her son, Jamike. Her determination to educate Jamike therefore becomes both a maternal obligation and a resistance strategy. Education opens a route away from the social environment that has labelled her useless, mad and disposable.

Existing African literary scholarship has examined women's oppression, migration, exploitation, cultural alienation, educational empowerment, vocality and resistance. Studies by Egbung and Akpagu (2019), Ebingha and Ene (2024), Odinye and Ebingha (2021a), Ebingha and Edung (2025), and Egbung and Owan (2019) show that female characters are frequently constrained by social structures but can also acquire language, education and agency with which to challenge them. Related work on state brutality and trauma demonstrates that psychological wounds are often produced by institutions that deny responsibility for the harm they inflict (Edung et al., 2026a). *Against the Odds* brings these concerns into the intimate domain of widowhood, where customary authority, kinship and communal indifference combine to damage one woman's psyche.

This article therefore examines widowhood practices in Nigeria through the representation of Uridiya in *Against the Odds*. It asks three related questions: How does the social and material environment of widowhood produce psychological distress? How does dispossession transform grief into apparent lunacy? How do determination, education and maternal responsibility enable the widow to regain agency? Using feminist and psychoanalytic approaches, the study argues that Uridiya's mental crisis is socially produced and environmentally intensified. It further argues that the novel's recurrent lunacy motif exposes the cruelty of a society that creates trauma and then mocks its victim for displaying the consequences of that trauma.

Literature Review

African feminist criticism has consistently challenged the assumption that women's subordination is natural, inevitable or culturally untouchable. Chukwuma (1994) defines feminism as a rejection of inferiority and a struggle for recognition, while Ezeigbo (1996) presents it as an ideology directed towards women's liberation from oppression, ignorance, poverty and self-immolation. Delmar (1986) similarly describes feminism as an active desire to change women's position in society. These formulations are especially useful for the study of widowhood because the widow is often placed at the intersection of gender hierarchy, economic dependence and customary authority. Her grief is converted into a disciplinary process through which the community regulates her body, property and movement.

Clarke and Linzey (1996) add an ethical dimension by defining feminism as an affirmation of women's equal value as persons and a rejection of sexist ideologies that inferiorise them. Such an ethical position exposes the contradiction in a society that praises motherhood and marital loyalty while denying a widow the fruits of her labour after her husband's death. Amadi (2005) observes that in older Nigerian settings a wife was often treated as her husband's property and that widows endured long mourning restrictions from which widowers were largely exempt. Young and Turner (1993) likewise note that the conception of women as property has been used to justify levirate arrangements. These perspectives clarify why Uridiya's in-laws believe that they can own, inherit or silence her.

Egbung's scholarship offers a sustained account of the mechanisms through which patriarchal culture limits women. Her study of patriarchal limitations argues that female power is frequently confined to the domestic sphere while public authority remains masculinised (Egbung, 2021). Her earlier reading of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo presents the reinvention of the African woman as a movement from imposed passivity to economic and social agency (Egbung, 2014). Her study of levirate marriage identifies the practice as a patriarchal strategy that restricts women's sexuality, selfhood and individuality (Egbung, 2026a). Together, these studies provide a relevant context for Uridiya's refusal to be reduced to an inheritable extension of her late husband.

Questions of bodily representation are also important. Egbung's (2018a) analysis of fatness as a metaphor for fecundity shows how the female body is culturally interpreted and assigned social value. In *Against the Odds*, Uridiya's body is similarly transformed into a public text. Her shaved head, black mourning dress, bare upper body and later dishevelled appearance are read by the community as signs of widowhood, failure and madness. Yet these signs are not self-generated; they are outcomes of ritual control and material deprivation. The social environment first marks the body and then condemns the marked body as abnormal.

The literature on exploitation broadens the analysis beyond widowhood. Egbung's (2018b) discussion of sexual slavery demonstrates how patriarchal power can appropriate the female body and silence suffering. Ebingha and Ene (2024) show that women in migration narratives may be exploited not only by men but also by other women who participate in oppressive networks. Egbung and Akpagu (2019) similarly connect cultural alienation with psychological and economic exploitation. These studies support the argument that gender oppression is sustained through systems rather than through a single villain. In Igwe's novel, Akudike is a major oppressor, but the wider community, including women who shave the widow's head and neighbours who steal her produce, also sustains the violence.

Education and vocality represent major routes of resistance in African women's writing. Egbung and Okereke (2009) describe education as an equalising force, while Egbung and Owan (2019) argue that literacy can empower, liberate and embolden vulnerable girls and women. Ebingha and Edung (2025) extend this position by showing how educational empowerment can enable women's economic liberation. Odinye and Ebingha (2021a) focus on vocality as a means of self-actualisation in Sefi Atta's women, and Odinye and Ebingha (2021b) examine language and style as feminist extensions in Nuruddin Farah's *From a Crooked Rib*. Uridiya's project of sending Jamike to school belongs to this tradition: although she has little formal education, she recognises education as a means of breaking the cycle of dependence and humiliation.

Other studies illuminate the cultural and linguistic environment within which grief is expressed. Uwen and Egbung (2026) examine the ethnopragmatic meanings of dirges among Erei and Agwagune communities, showing that mourning language

embodies communal beliefs about loss, transition and memory. Etete et al. (2025) explore the conceptual metaphor of death as a journey, a formulation that helps societies speak about separation and continuity. Uwen et al. (2026) demonstrate that personal names can preserve religious and cultural worldviews, while Onuoha et al. (2024) examine the relationship between traditional African Christianity and authorial vision. These works remind the reader that death and mourning are culturally meaningful, but cultural meaning does not justify practices that degrade the living.

Contemporary scholarship on trauma and cultural circulation also provides useful analogies. Edung et al. (2026a) examine horror testimonials and unheard screams generated by state-agent brutality, showing how literary expression can reveal wounds that official narratives suppress. Edung et al. (2025) analyse how algorithmic circulation reshapes Nigerian cultural identity in the global mainstream. Although these studies address different media, they demonstrate that cultural narratives are not static. Practices can be repeated, revised, challenged and circulated in new forms. Widowhood customs should therefore not be defended as immutable simply because they are inherited.

Egbung's work on cultural expression (2018c), racial prejudice and the search for self (2018d), insurgency and transcultural identity (2019), and artificial versus emotional intelligence (2025) further emphasises the relationship between social structures, identity and humane response. Emotional intelligence is particularly relevant to widowhood because the community's failure is not only legal or economic; it is also a failure of empathy. The kinsmen who seize Uridiya's resources and the villagers who ridicule her behaviour refuse to recognise grief as a condition requiring care. The novel's moral force lies in exposing that absence of compassion.

Creative and critical writing on death, suffering and reflection complements this scholarship. Ebingha's (2025) review of Akinrinde's *Deathbed and Other Poems* emphasises deep reflection and meditation on mortality. Egbung's (2012) study of satire shows how literary strategies can criticise social hypocrisy. *Against the Odds* similarly combines pathos, irony and repetition to condemn a culture that claims communal solidarity while abandoning a widow. The present study builds on these strands of scholarship by locating widowhood within the social and material environment and by relating psychological breakdown to the loss of land, home, livelihood, mobility and belonging.

Theoretical Framework

The study combines feminist literary criticism, psychoanalytic criticism and an environmental understanding of social space. Feminist criticism provides the primary framework because widowhood practices in the novel are explicitly gendered. The rituals and losses imposed on Uridiya are not imposed on widowers. Feminism therefore enables the analysis to identify unequal power, expose the cultural language that normalises it and recognise the widow's resistance as a struggle for personhood. The approach does not reject African culture as a whole; rather, it distinguishes life-affirming communal values from practices that convert culture into an instrument of humiliation.

Chukwuma's (1994) emphasis on positive selfhood and Ezeigbo's (1996) concern with liberation are central to this reading. Uridiya initially appears defeated by grief, poverty and social hostility, yet she does not surrender her maternal responsibility. Her determination to educate Jamike is an assertion that the future cannot be monopolised by those who control property in the present. Egbung's (2014, 2021) analyses of female reinvention and patriarchal limitation also support the interpretation of resilience as a process rather than a sudden triumph. Uridiya's agency develops within severe constraints; it does not erase her trauma.

Psychoanalytic criticism complements feminism by focusing on the effects of loss, repression, fear and social injury on the mind. Davidoff (1987) defines psychology as the study of behaviour and mental processes, and Bressler (1994) describes psychoanalytic criticism as the application of psychoanalytic methods to the interpretation of literary actions and motivations. Nash (2018) explains psychoanalysis as a therapeutic practice grounded in a theory of human development and psychological functioning. Gardiner (1985) is especially relevant because she notes that feminist psychoanalytic criticism may treat psychological disturbance as an effect of patriarchal social relations rather than as evidence of women's natural instability.

This distinction is fundamental to the reading of Uridiya. The villagers describe her as a lunatic because she curses, speaks to herself, distrusts neighbours and sometimes neglects conventional standards of dress. A superficial reading might accept the label and treat her behaviour as an individual pathology. A feminist psychoanalytic reading asks what happened before the behaviour emerged. Uridiya experiences long-term childlessness, the death of her husband soon after the birth of their son, ritual humiliation, property theft, social isolation, economic insecurity and constant threats from relatives. Her apparent neurosis is therefore connected to accumulated trauma and an unsafe environment.

The environmental dimension of the framework treats land, household space, vegetation, roads and community institutions as resources that influence wellbeing. Environmental security includes reliable access to shelter, food, livelihood, privacy and supportive social relations. Uridiya's farmlands and fruit trees are not merely symbols; they are productive assets. The forest offers food and traditional medicine, and the compound should offer safety. When these resources are appropriated or converted into sites of surveillance, the widow loses both material support and psychological stability. Offiong et al. (2026) link environmental knowledge with sustainable behaviour, while Uwen et al. (2026) show that natural and cultural environments carry social meanings. The present study extends this insight to the literary representation of widowhood: a damaged relationship with one's environment can deepen emotional distress.

The three perspectives are therefore mutually reinforcing. Feminism identifies the gendered structure of dispossession; psychoanalysis explains the emotional and behavioural effects of repeated injury; and the environmental perspective shows how those injuries are embedded in everyday spaces and livelihood resources. Together, they make it possible to read Uridiya neither

as a passive victim nor as an inexplicably mad woman, but as a grieving person whose mind and agency are shaped by a hostile social ecology.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative textual-analytical design. Ben Igwe's *Against the Odds* is the primary text, while relevant books, journal articles and critical essays provide the secondary material. The novel was selected because it offers a sustained representation of widowhood, property dispossession, psychological trauma, rural livelihood and educational aspiration. Passages relating to mourning rituals, the widow's body, the household compound, farmland, forest resources, kinship authority, public ridicule, Jamike's education and the recurrent lunacy motif were purposively identified and interpreted.

The analysis proceeds through close reading. Attention is given to characterization, narrative description, dialogue, repetition, symbolism, setting and motif. Direct quotations from the novel are retained where they reveal the relationship between social practice and psychological response. Feminist concepts are used to examine power and gender inequality; psychoanalytic concepts are used to interpret grief, suspicion, depression and apparent neurosis; and the environmental lens is used to analyse the material and spatial conditions of the widow's life. The method does not claim to provide a sociological survey of all Nigerian widowhood practices. Rather, it examines how one literary text represents the interaction between culture, environment and the psyche.

Widowhood Practices as a Patriarchal Agenda of Oppression

Uridiya is introduced as a widow still mourning Nnorom. Her appearance immediately communicates the public regulation of grief: "she looked pitiful in the black mourning outfit that consisted of a loose blouse, a single wrap-around loincloth, and a head-cloth of the same fabric knotted loosely at the back of her neck" (Igwe, 2009, p. 1). The clothing is not simply a personal expression of loss. It is a compulsory uniform through which the community identifies, monitors and disciplines the widow. Her body becomes public property, and mourning becomes a visible status from which she cannot easily escape.

The ritual control extends to her hair and physical appearance. The narrator explains that the black outfit must be worn for one year and that a "merciless haircut" compounds her misery. Widows from the kindred shave her head with a broken bottle or local razor and polish the bare scalp with palm-kernel oil (Igwe, 2009, p. 4). The violence is intensified by the participation of women who have undergone the same rite. Aboh (2018) observes that women may participate in the debasement of other women and that gender identities operate through multiple layers of subjectivity. The older widows reproduce the system because suffering has been converted into a qualification for enforcing suffering on others.

This pattern demonstrates that patriarchy is not maintained by men alone. It survives through customs, expectations and rewards that recruit women as gatekeepers. The ritual shaving of Uridiya's head is therefore both a gendered act and an environmental act: it regulates how her body may appear in public space and signals that she has entered a restricted social condition. Her access to ordinary cleanliness, dress, movement and companionship is limited. Amadi (2005) notes that widows in older Nigerian communities could be denied regular bathing, clean clothing and normal social activity for extended periods, while widowers faced no comparable obligation. The contrast reveals the gender injustice embedded in the mourning environment.

The widow's silence is another form of control. Uridiya tells Jamike, "This is the way they shut me up in this compound. I have no say, not even to tell you that Jamike is my child without a rebuke from those who own me" (Igwe, 2009, p. 28). The word "compound" is significant. A place that should provide shelter becomes an enclosure in which authority belongs to male relatives. The phrase "those who own me" shows that widowhood has reduced her from a family member to a possession. Young and Turner's (1993) discussion of women as marital property clarifies the logic of such treatment, while Egbung's (2026a) analysis of levirate marriage explains how the widow may be treated as an inheritable object.

Adebayo (2008) describes inhuman widowhood rites, forced marriage, lack of financial autonomy and the male appropriation of the female body as patriarchal wrongs that prevent women from defining themselves on their own terms. Uridiya's experience gathers these wrongs into one life. She is expected to accept ritual humiliation, property loss and silence because resistance is interpreted as disrespect for tradition. Yet the novel repeatedly distinguishes tradition from justice. The fact that a practice is old does not make it humane, and the fact that it is communal does not remove individual responsibility.

The social environment also intensifies suspicion. In many communities, the widow is presumed responsible for her husband's death and may be forced to prove innocence through ritual. *Against the Odds* does not present a formal trial by ordeal, but the atmosphere of accusation is unmistakable. Uridiya is treated as if bereavement has cancelled her rights. Her husband's death creates an opportunity for relatives to appropriate his property and to redefine her as an outsider. Egbung's (2021) account of patriarchal limitations is reflected here: power operates by presenting the woman's exclusion as a legitimate cultural arrangement.

The hypocrisy of the system becomes clearer when the treatment of widowers is considered. A man who loses his wife is not normally required to shave his head with a broken instrument, surrender his property, remain in black clothes for a year or accept inheritance by his wife's relatives. He may remarry within weeks. The asymmetry proves that the rites are not simply about honouring the dead; they are mechanisms for controlling the living woman. The novel therefore condemns widowhood practices not because mourning is unnecessary, but because mourning has been transformed into gendered punishment.

Dispossession and the Destruction of the Widow's Livelihood Environment

The most damaging aspect of Uridiya's widowhood is the dispossession of the material resources on which she and Jamike depend. The narrator states that villagers attempt to rob her of farmlands and fruit trees, harvesting her oil-bean fruit before she

wakes and carrying away fallen breadfruits when no one is watching. They refuse to give her “breathing space” until she begins to behave like a lunatic and responds with curses (Igwe, 2009, p. 4). This passage establishes a direct connection between environmental deprivation and psychological breakdown. The widow’s behaviour changes after repeated attacks on her means of survival.

Farmland in the novel is not an abstract possession. It is food, income, continuity and the practical foundation of motherhood. Egbung (2014) notes that traditional African women participated actively in farming and trading and could attain a measure of economic independence through their labour. When Uridiya’s land and fruit trees are taken, the community removes the resources through which she might sustain that independence. Dispossession therefore does more than impoverish her; it makes her vulnerable to further control by the same relatives who caused the poverty.

The narrator describes the broader condition of widows in Aludo: “Suffering was her lot and endurance her virtue.... Widowhood leaves little for words” (Igwe, 2009, pp. 4–5). The apparent praise of endurance is deeply ironic. Endurance becomes a virtue only because the community refuses to create justice. The widow is expected to absorb loss quietly, while those who exploit her remain socially respectable. Egbung’s (2012) work on satire helps to explain this narrative strategy: the novel exposes hypocrisy by allowing the community’s own values to condemn its conduct.

The first people to attempt to disinherit the widow are often the close relatives of the deceased husband, especially when the children are minors (Igwe, 2009, p. 5). This detail transforms kinship from a protective network into an extractive institution. Okereke and Egbung (2014) argue that significant others exercise responsibilities that shape the freedom and development of children. In Uridiya’s case, Akudike and other relatives misuse family authority and place Jamike’s future at risk. Their claim to the deceased man’s resources overrides their duty to protect his child.

Dispossession is also connected with levirate pressure. A widow who refuses to be inherited may be denied land, shelter and support. Egbung (2026a) describes levirate marriage as a patriarchal agenda that limits the woman’s selfhood, sexuality and individuality. Uridiya’s refusal to disappear into another imposed relationship leaves her exposed to economic retaliation. The material environment thus becomes a bargaining instrument: access to land and household security may be conditional upon obedience to male authority.

The forest occupies a smaller but important place in the novel. Uridiya’s distress is intensified by disconnection from a landscape that traditionally provides food, medicine and ritual resources. Uwen et al. (2026) show that indigenous communities invest environmental features with cultural and religious meanings, while Uwen and Egbung (2026) demonstrate that grief practices are embedded in local worldviews. In this context, separation from the forest is not merely the loss of a physical location; it is the loss of a familiar system of sustenance and meaning. When environmental access is blocked, the widow’s sense of security and belonging is weakened.

This dimension makes the novel relevant to environmental studies. Environmental injustice occurs when vulnerable people bear unequal burdens or lose unequal access to resources required for healthy living. Uridiya’s gender and widowhood status make her especially vulnerable to the seizure of land, produce and domestic space. Her experience shows that environmental security cannot be separated from inheritance rights. A widow who lacks secure tenure over the home and farmland is exposed to hunger, homelessness, exploitation and psychological harm.

The village road also functions as a social environment. It is where Uridiya walks, mutters, curses and is observed by others. Instead of being a shared communal space, it becomes a corridor of surveillance. Her neighbours interpret her distress as entertainment and evidence of madness. This public gaze reinforces alienation. Egbung’s (2018d) analysis of racial prejudice and the search for self, although situated in a different context, is useful because it demonstrates how social labels can distort identity. Uridiya is labelled a lunatic until the label threatens to replace her history as a wife, farmer, mother and bereaved person.

The physical and social environments therefore work together. Theft from the farmland produces scarcity; scarcity increases dependence; dependence strengthens the authority of relatives; social ridicule deepens isolation; and isolation intensifies suspicious behaviour. The novel presents a cycle of environmental and psychological violence. Breaking that cycle requires more than advising the widow to be strong. It requires the protection of land rights, household security, income-generating assets and access to supportive community institutions.

Depression, Trauma and the Motif of Lunacy

Uridiya is considered a lunatic because she keeps to herself, speaks aloud, curses suspected enemies and sometimes appears in public without conventional dress. The community treats these behaviours as proof that she is naturally unstable. The narrative, however, carefully supplies a history of cumulative trauma. She experienced almost twenty years of childlessness, pressure on her husband to take another wife, the eventual birth of Jamike, and Nnorom’s death only two years later after falling from a palm tree. The loss occurs at the moment when the couple’s long-deferred hope appears secure. The narrator states: “Fate, however, was cruel to Uridiya and the baby, for her husband, Nnorom, died just two years after her son was born” (Igwe, 2009, p. 6).

Childlessness alone can produce severe emotional and social pressure in settings where a woman’s status is tied to motherhood. Kwaghtser (2023) notes that childlessness can have an overwhelming effect on the mental state of couples. Asogwa et al. (2021) further show that the preference for sons may be connected to women’s search for status and security within patriarchal systems. Uridiya’s joy at Jamike’s birth is therefore complex: he is a beloved child, evidence that she has overcome the stigma of barrenness, and a possible source of future security. Nnorom’s death leaves her to protect that fragile future alone.

Her trauma is intensified because mourning is not permitted to unfold in safety. She must grieve while defending land, food, dignity and her child's inheritance. When provoked, she calls upon the spirits and curses those who wish her harm: "May all the evil things you wish for me follow you, your children, and your children's children.... You say I am a lunatic, wait till you see what a lunatic can do" (Igwe, 2009, pp. 1–2). The speech is excessive, but it is not meaningless. It is a defensive language developed by a woman who lacks legal, economic and physical power. The curse becomes a weapon available to the powerless.

Psychoanalytic criticism helps to interpret her suspicion and self-directed speech. The narrator explains that on some days she walks silently and mutters that those who greet her are part of a plan to kill her; "She was suspicious of everyone" and moved "in her own world" (Igwe, 2009, p. 9). Repeated betrayal makes distrust rational at one level, even when its expression becomes psychologically damaging. Gardiner's (1985) feminist psychoanalytic position is valuable here because patriarchal relations may produce the very symptoms later used to discredit women.

The phrase "widowhood leaves little for words" also reveals the relationship between silence and breakdown. Uridiya is denied an audience for grief. Her words are dismissed as curses, and her legitimate complaints about dispossession are treated as evidence of madness. Odinye and Ebingha's (2021a) emphasis on female vocality helps clarify what is at stake: the ability to speak and be heard is part of selfhood. When a woman's speech is systematically invalidated, she may move between silence, repetition and verbal eruption.

The recurrent lunacy motif is therefore a social accusation and a narrative protest. The word appears whenever Uridiya reacts to injustice. The villagers say she is becoming a lunatic because she curses; she replies that they have made her talkative after her husband's death. The repetition forces the reader to ask who is truly irrational: the grieving widow who protests the theft of her property, or the community that steals from her and then mocks her distress? The motif reverses the direction of judgement and exposes collective moral disorder.

Literary studies of trauma support this reading. Edung et al. (2026a) show how testimonies of pain emerge when institutional violence produces wounds that dominant narratives refuse to hear. Although Uridiya's suffering occurs within family and community rather than through the state, the structure is comparable. Authority inflicts harm, denies responsibility and treats the victim's testimony as disorderly. Ebingha's (2025) reflection on death-centred poetry also demonstrate literature's capacity to give form to suffering that is difficult to articulate directly.

The COVID-19 pandemic, mentioned in the novel's wider temporal movement, provides another context of vulnerability. Lockdown conditions intensify isolation and economic insecurity, particularly for people already dependent on informal livelihoods. For a widow with weak property protection and limited social support, a public-health crisis can magnify existing deprivation. The novel's treatment of the pandemic therefore reinforces its central argument: personal resilience is important, but resilience is always tested within social and material conditions.

Uridiya's occasional exposure of her body should also be read cautiously. The narrator recalls that she sometimes walks bare-bodied to the waist, with beads around her hips (Igwe, 2009, p. 5). The community reads this as another sign of madness. Yet her body has already been publicly altered through forced shaving and regulated mourning dress. Egbung's (2018a) work on the cultural interpretation of the female body reminds us that bodies acquire meanings through social codes. Uridiya's appearance becomes a contested sign: for the villagers it confirms deviance; for the reader it records the breakdown of privacy, dignity and environmental safety.

The novel does not romanticise mental distress, nor does it suggest that all troubling behaviour is simply resistance. Instead, it makes causation visible. Uridiya's symptoms are connected to bereavement, long-term reproductive pressure, economic theft, social isolation and fear. A humane response would involve counselling, companionship, medical support, secure housing and protection from exploitation. The community offers none of these. Its failure demonstrates that mental health is shaped by the quality of the environment in which grief is experienced.

Determination, Education and the Reconstruction of Agency

Uridiya's story is not limited to victimhood. Her determination to educate Jamike becomes the most important sign of agency in the novel. She declares that because she does not know her ABCs, her only child must go to school whenever she can afford it (Igwe, 2009, p. 13). This decision is remarkable because it is made within poverty, bereavement and social hostility. She cannot immediately recover the property taken from her, but she can invest hope in a form of knowledge that may enable her son to move beyond the constraints of the village environment.

Education functions as both personal empowerment and environmental mobility. Egbung and Okereke (2009) describe education as an equaliser, while Egbung and Owan (2019) argue that it can protect vulnerable people from ignorance, exploitation and poverty. Ebingha and Edung (2025) similarly connect educational empowerment with women's economic liberation. Uridiya's investment in Jamike is therefore not an abandonment of her own agency. It is a strategic use of motherhood to create a future in which the family can reclaim dignity and social recognition.

Jamike responds to the environment by maturing early. The narrator observes that, having lost his father, he must come to manhood faster than his age-mates if he and his mother are to survive in the widow's harsh environment (Igwe, 2009, p. 13). The phrase "widow's harsh environment" confirms that hardship is spatial and social. It includes poverty, stigma, insecurity and the absence of reliable adult protection. Okereke and Egbung's (2014) analysis of family responsibility is again pertinent: when significant others fail, the child is forced to assume burdens beyond his age.

Jamike's brilliance at school offers the first sustained counter-narrative to the community's label of failure. Uridiya's inability to pay fees does not end his education because the village headmaster, Mr Ahamba, intervenes and takes responsibility for the payments (Igwe, 2009, p. 23). This intervention shows that the social environment is not uniformly oppressive. Individuals can interrupt harmful structures by exercising compassion and responsibility. The headmaster represents the possibility of an ethical community based on care rather than extraction.

The transformation also restores Uridiya's social identity. She moves from being known primarily as the lunatic widow to being recognised as the mother of an accomplished son. Such recognition remains problematic if a woman's value depends entirely on her child, yet within the novel it provides a practical form of vindication. Her endurance, labour and educational vision produce a future that the dispossessing relatives could not prevent. Egbung's (2014) concept of reinventing the African woman is relevant because reinvention here does not erase tradition; it reworks maternal responsibility into a source of public agency.

Uridiya's resilience should not be used to excuse the society that harmed her. Celebrating exceptional survival can become another way of avoiding reform. The novel's achievement lies in holding two truths together: Uridiya is determined, and the environment is unjust. Her success does not make forced shaving, property theft, stigma or psychological neglect acceptable. Rather, it demonstrates what widows may achieve when even limited educational and social support becomes available.

The importance of emotional intelligence also emerges. Egbung (2025) contrasts technological or abstract intelligence with the human capacity to recognise emotions and respond responsibly. Mr Ahamba's intervention is an act of emotional and social intelligence. He sees beyond the widow's public label and recognises the child's potential. In contrast, Akudike and the exploitative neighbours possess cultural authority but fail the basic test of empathy. The novel thus redefines community development as the capacity to protect vulnerable persons and sustain their access to opportunity.

The broader cultural environment is also capable of change. Edung et al. (2025) show how African cultural forms are reworked through digital and transnational circulation. The relevance to widowhood is conceptual: culture is dynamic, not frozen. Harmful rites can be revised without destroying communal identity. Onuoha et al. (2024) similarly demonstrate that traditional belief and Christian interpretation can be critically negotiated within literary vision. *Against the Odds* calls for such negotiation by retaining respect for community while rejecting practices that deny women's humanity.

Language, Style and the Environmental Imagination

Igwe's style strengthens the novel's critique through repetition, irony, setting and bodily imagery. The most prominent device is the lunacy motif. References to Uridiya as a lunatic recur whenever she reacts to provocation: "You say I am a lunatic, wait till you see what a lunatic can do" (Igwe, 2009, p. 2); villagers will not leave her alone until she behaves "like a lunatic with a sharp abusive tongue" (p. 4); and she protests that she was not always talkative but was made so after her husband died (p. 6). Repetition turns the label into evidence against the community rather than against the widow.

The language of ownership is equally important. Uridiya speaks of relatives who "own" her, while the narrative repeatedly describes attempts to dispossess and disinherit. These lexical choices reveal that widowhood is an economic and spatial condition. The conflict concerns who controls the compound, farmland, fruit trees, domestic animals and the widow's body. Odinye and Ebingha (2021b) show that language and style can operate as feminist extensions by exposing patriarchal structures within narrative form. Igwe's vocabulary performs this function by making domination visible in ordinary words.

The natural environment is presented through productive details rather than romantic scenery. Oil-bean trees, breadfruit, farmland, palm trees, forest herbs and village roads are integrated into the household economy. Nnorom dies after falling from a palm tree; Uridiya's produce is stolen; forest access is associated with food and medicine; and the road becomes a place of observation and stigma. The environment is therefore both sustaining and dangerous, depending on the social relations that govern access to it. This representation supports an environmental-humanities reading in which ecological and social wellbeing are inseparable.

Cultural language also preserves communal memory. Uwen and Egbung (2026), Uwen et al. (2026), and Etete et al. (2025) demonstrate how dirges, names and metaphors encode beliefs about death, continuity and identity. Igwe draws on a comparable cultural reservoir, especially in Uridiya's invocation of spirits, ancestors, curses and reincarnation. The language is not decorative; it represents the widow's attempt to summon moral forces beyond a community that has failed her.

At the same time, the novel is alert to cultural change. Egbung (2018c) shows that literary cultural expression can affirm local values while also interrogating restrictive practices. Egbung's (2019) discussion of transcultural identity and Edung et al.'s (2025) analysis of digital cultural circulation similarly show that identity is continually negotiated. *Against the Odds* participates in that negotiation by distinguishing between cultural belonging and cultural cruelty. It invites readers to conserve communal care, responsibility and memory while abandoning rituals that degrade widows.

The narrative's irony is particularly effective. The community calls Uridiya mad, but its own conduct is irrational; relatives claim family authority, but they destroy family security; widows enforce rites on another widow, reproducing the injury they once endured; and the woman who is treated as useless becomes the parent whose sacrifice produces an internationally recognised son. This reversal gives the novel its moral and aesthetic coherence.

Conclusion

This study has examined widowhood practices, the social environment and the psyche of the woman in Ben Igwe's *Against the Odds*. Through feminist, psychoanalytic and environmental perspectives, it has shown that Uridiya's distress develops within

a gendered structure of mourning, dispossession, stigma and social exclusion. Her shaved head, compulsory black clothing, restricted voice and threatened mobility are not harmless cultural details. They are techniques through which the community marks and disciplines the widow's body.

The analysis has also demonstrated that property and environmental access are central to psychological wellbeing. Uridiya's farmland, fruit trees, household space and forest resources sustain life, identity and maternal responsibility. Their seizure transforms grief into economic insecurity and exposes her to further control. Her suspicion, curses, soliloquies and apparent lunacy are consequently linked to cumulative trauma rather than to an inherent female weakness. The recurring lunacy motif indicts a community that produces injury and then ridicules its symptoms.

Nevertheless, Uridiya's determination to educate Jamike enables her to reconstruct agency. Education, compassionate intervention and maternal commitment create an alternative future, but her resilience does not excuse the injustice she endured. The novel ultimately calls for a social environment in which widows are recognised as autonomous citizens with rights to property, dignity, mental-health support, livelihood resources and full participation in community life. Widowhood customs that violate these rights should be reformed or abolished, while communal practices of care, remembrance and solidarity should be strengthened.

Recommendations

First, inheritance laws and customary procedures should be enforced in ways that protect widows' rights to matrimonial homes, farmland, household assets and income-generating resources. Second, community leaders, women's groups, faith institutions and local authorities should conduct sustained education against humiliating widowhood rites and the accusation of widows as causes of their husbands' deaths. Third, psychosocial and mental-health services should be integrated into community support for bereaved persons, particularly widows facing poverty or violence. Fourth, livelihood programmes should prioritise secure land access, agricultural support, skills training and educational assistance for widows and their children. Finally, literary and cultural education should be used to promote critical reflection on tradition, enabling communities to preserve humane values while rejecting practices that undermine dignity, environmental security and social sustainability.

Declarations

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Conflict of interest

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Authors contribution

Both authors contributed to the conceptualisation, literature review, textual analysis, drafting, critical revision and approval of the final manuscript.

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