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## THE BURDEN OF MOTHERHOOD IN BINWELL SINYANGWE'S *A COWRIE OF HOPE*

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### ABSTRACT

*This article aims at shedding light on the theme of the burden of motherhood in Binwell Sinyangwe's A Cowrie of Hope. The protagonist of the novel, Nasula, is portrayed as a poor widow and as an illiterate woman who strives for the schooling of her only daughter, Sula, despite her poverty and illiteracy. She considers her daughter as her cowrie of hope. So, after her husband's death, she struggles alone for Sula's schooling because she perceives its importance. The study has found that she has played her role as a mother, that she has the qualities of a good mother, and that she has the strength that a good mother should have for the wellbeing of her children. Sinyangwe makes her burden light to carry as she effectively contributes to her daughter's wellbeing by struggling so that her schooling should become a reality. She provides her daughter with school fees at all costs because she wants her to be independent from men when she grows up. We have applied to our study feminism, a literary theory which aims at revaluing the image of women, and the Marxist critical approach which focuses on class struggle.*

**Key words:** *burden, motherhood, widow, poverty, strength.*

### RESUME



*Cet article vise à mettre en lumière le thème du fardeau de la maternité dans *A Cowrie of Hope* de Binwell Sinyangwe. Le protagoniste du roman, Nasula, est décrite comme une pauvre veuve et une femme illettrée qui s'efforce pour l'éducation de sa fille unique, Sula, malgré sa pauvreté et analphabétisme. Elle considère sa fille comme son cauris d'espoir. Ainsi, après la mort de son mari, elle lutte seule pour l'éducation de Sula parce qu'elle perçoit son importance. L'étude a découvert qu'elle a joué son rôle de mère, qu'elle a les qualités d'une bonne mère, et qu'elle a la force qu'une bonne mère doit avoir pour le bien-être de ses enfants. Sinyangwe rend son fardeau léger étant donné qu'elle a efficacement contribué au bien-être de sa fille en luttant afin que sa scolarisation devienne une réalité. Elle pourvoit sa fille de frais de scolarité à tous prix parce qu'elle veut qu'elle soit indépendante des hommes quand elle grandira. Nous avons appliqué à notre étude la théorie féministe, une théorie littéraire qui vise à revaloriser l'image de la femme, et l'approche critique Marxiste qui se focalise sur la lutte des classes.*

**Mots clés:** fardeau, maternité, veuve, pauvreté, force.

## INTRODUCTION

Binwell Sinyangwe's *A Cowrie of Hope* deals with the theme of the burden of motherhood through the character of Nasula, or simply the mother of Sula. She is portrayed as a poor illiterate woman who, despite her poverty and illiteracy, strives for the education of her only daughter, Sula, whom she looks upon as her cowrie of hope. She plays her role as a mother, she has the qualities of a good mother, and the strength that a good mother should have for the wellbeing of her children. As such, she effectively contributes to her daughter's education by providing her with school fees at all costs because she wants her to be independent from men when she grows up. The study is articulated around three axes which highlight the burden of motherhood as it is carried by Nasula. The first axis is "The Commitment of a Mother in *A cowrie of Hope*," the second one is





“The intrinsic Qualities of Good Mother,” and the third one is “The Psychological Strength of a Good Mother.”

## 1. THE COMMITMENT OF A MOTHER IN *A COWRIE OF HOPE*

The mother plays a paramount role in the society depicted in Sinyangwe’s *A Cowrie of Hope*. The writer portrays the mother as the most important person in the family or simply as a model for her children. He does this through the character of Nasula, a widow sent away from her marital home by her in-laws after her husband’s death together with her only daughter, Sula. Winelo Chiswebe, Nasula’s deceased husband, is not a saint, as he sometimes abuses his wife emotionally and later on dies at the hands of the police because as the leader of a gang, he was involved in the armed theft. However, before his death, he has taken the necessary precautions so that his wife and his daughter should lack nothing as it is shown in the quotation below:

*When he was about to die [...] he told the policeman who was guarding him in the hospital to give him a pen and a clean sheet of paper. On the paper [...], he wrote that for the sake of his child, Sula Chiswebe, his house in Kalingalinga and everything in it that he was leaving behind, including the money to the sum of seven hundred and fifty thousand kwacha, should be given to his wife, Nasula, and that his parents and relatives should share only his gun, his bicycle and his clothes. (9)*

In the aforementioned quotation, the novelist clearly shows that Winelo Chiswebe has shared his inheritance among his relatives before his death. In the same vein, he deplores the fact that upon his death, the house he has bought for his family in Lusaka is sold, and the money in his bank account is pounced on by his family, reducing his widow and daughter to scarcity:

*[...] they took away everything from her except what was on her body. [...] they threw her out of the house and sold it, leaving her to spend nights at the bus station with the child before she found money for her travel and returned to the village. (9-10)*



Sinyangwe carefully tackles inheritance issues in the absence of knowledge of the law. Nasula is required by tradition to marry her deceased husband's younger brother, Isaki Chiswebe, whom she rejects. She is told that if she wants to benefit from the inheritance, she has to become Isaki Chiswebe's fourth wife and join the family at the farm. Her refusal to play ball confines her a poverty that "She wore [...] like her own skin" (4). Despite that utter poverty, she does not lose hope. She relocates to Swelini, her home village, where she struggles on in her determination to send her daughter to school. The narrator tells us about her in these terms:

*But misfortune had not caged the woman's soul. Poverty, suffering and never having stepped into a classroom had not smoked her spirit and vision out of existence. Her humanity continued to be that which she had been born with, one replete with affection and determination. It was this which fanned her desire to fight for the welfare of her daughter. 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. (5)*

The aforementioned quotation shows that Nasula sees a silver lining in the dark clouds yonder and sees her daughter, Sula, as a cowrie of hope. Sinyangwe thus assigns her a paramount role, as a mother, which is to breed her only daughter alone without the assistance of anybody since her in-laws have taken the money that her deceased husband has bequeathed her and her daughter. Despite Nasula's suffering and the agony of motherhood in her story of hope in the face of hopelessness, *A Cowrie of Hope* explores a widow's struggle in raising her daughter single-handedly. She believes that the child, if given the opportunity, will not only free them from poverty, but will also give her a chance at social and financial freedom. However, a plethora of setbacks seems to put a damper on her dreams, and this tests her resilience. The narrator describes Sula's plight in these terms:



*Sula belonged to the wretched of the earth, [...], one of the ill-fated seedlings of the world, sown at the edge of the cliff of darkness.*

*Sula was a child who had lost her father. Fatherless she was living in poverty with a mother without means or relatives to lean on. Maybe the world saw nothing unusual in all this. But to Nasula, a mother, Sula was different. She was no ordinary child. Even when at her happiest, she still looked solitary as if her mind was preoccupied elsewhere.*

*The child required a delicate hand to guide her from the cliff, on which the death of her father had left her balancing precariously, down to the valley of light and hope below. How was she, Nasula, going to succeed in guiding the little one down to the valley of life, without tripping the child over the cliff? How was she going to manage to straighten the seedling without snapping its delicate stem? (72-73)*

The quotation above shows that Sula needs guidance after her father's sudden death. For Nasula's success in that difficult task to come true, Sinyangwe designs a plan for her for her daughter's future so as to lead her to independence. Despite her illiteracy and hard living conditions, she perceives education as the only weapon to her daughter's salvation. She decides that her daughter should go to school after noticing that some women are emancipated around her simply because they are educated. As a good mother, she senses that education is a good thing for her daughter as it has been for the educated women around her. The novelist portrays Nasula as a heroin who is determined to overcome the rag poverty which was rampant in the Zambian society in the nineties. In the following extract, the narrator reveals the economic hardship and privation in Zambia at that time:

*These were the nineties. The late nineties. They were lean years. They were the years of each person for himself and hope only under the shadow of the gods. No one wanted to give because no one had anything to spare. The rains were bad and so the crops and the harvest were bad too. Without what to sell from the fields people had no money. Even chiefs and headmen*



*who usually had a grain or two more than the ordinary people roamed the land without an ngwee in hands. The days were truly hard. (14)*

From the aforementioned quotation, it appears that the writer depicts the plight of the Zambians which results in the socio-political and economic trouble of the 1990s. It is into such a world that Nasula, who is described as “poverty itself with no one to turn to and nowhere to clap a hand” (90), is thrown. Using flashbacks, the writer takes the reader back to the happier years when Nasula’s husband – Winelo Chiswebe – lived, and juxtaposes it with the present woes. Needless to say, Nasula lives in rag poverty. The novelist describes her social condition in these terms:

*Nasula was poverty, she was loneliness and aloneness. Suffering was her life. She wore it like her own skin. A young peasant woman in her early thirties, beautiful and gracefully built, Nasula had no means and no dependable support. She was the gods’ plant growing on poor soil without tendrils. Both her parents had died not long after she had come of age and had left her with nothing but herself. Her late husband had left her with some money and goods, but her in-laws had swooped everything out of her possession and left her to languish with nothing in her hands, alone with her only daughter and child. She had lived like that to this day, poor, parentless, widowed and without relative to talk to and to whom she could run. (4-5)*

From the above hyperbolic description of her social condition, it is clear that “[...] Nasula comes from what Karl Max termed “lumpenproletariat”, rag poverty which means that she belongs to the very bottom of the class hierarchy” (Aguessy, 2014: 75). It thus clearly appears that Nasula was born poor, which means that she has inherited her poverty from her parents. Despite her critic living conditions, she plays her role as a mother; this has not affected her responsibilities towards her daughter. Through her character, Sinyangwe shows that it is the mother’s role to encourage her children, that is to give them support, courage and hope. A mother who shirks her responsibilities



to her children may encourage them to go on a wayward and destructive path in life. Nasula does not shirk her responsibilities to her daughter. On the contrary, she fulfils them with much devotion as it can be seen in this quotation:

*Her name, Nasula, meant mother of Sula and the meaning of Sula, her daughter's name, was 'let things be'. But Nasula, she who was supposed to be the mother of letting things be, would not let things be over her daughter's schooling. She insisted that her daughter must continue with her schooling and so she told her only daughter and the people she spoke to in search of help with her problem. (4)*

Through the above excerpt, it clearly appears that Nasula is aware of the fact that her daughter works hard at school and needs encouragement from her to continue her schooling. The novelist makes Nasula see the importance of education despite her illiteracy to show that the role of a mother is to see what is good for her offspring whether she is literate or not. In other words, he wants to show that a mother does not need to be educated to know the importance of education for her offspring. He makes her support her daughter in her schooling and insist that she should go far in it and never stop until she succeeds. The narrator tells us about it in these terms: "She wanted her daughter to reach mountain peaks with her schooling and from there carve a decent living that would make it possible for her not to depend on a man for her existence" (5). In this quotation, it clearly appears that according to Nasula, only education can lead her daughter to independence from men in society. "Nasula was determination. She was struggle and sacrifice. Her voice and spirit were not a voice and spirit soiled in pessimism. She would try anything and everything for the sake of her child's future, with faith in the gods" (16).

Sinyangwe sees the commitment of a mother in terms of obligation to help her children develop strong moral principles early in life. The mother's presence and daily guidance in her children's lives therefore helps them to develop positive character traits and good behaviour with love and compassion for other people. That is what the novelist means when he writes:



*The moment she [Nasula] had arrived, buried in a cocoon of her perspiration, Sula, without being told or asking, had bustled about and made her nshima and served it to her with beans and pupwe. These were the ways of Sula, the ways of hard work, initiative and responsibility to herself and other people: intelligence, sensitivity and wisdom. (34-35)*

In the foregoing quotation, Sula's strict and sound upbringing by her mother, Nasula, is highlighted. Sinyangwe thus clearly shows that if a mother wants her children to be responsible, sensible, polite and wise, she has to play her role correctly, because as the saying goes, 'Like mother, like daughter.' It means that children are a reflection of what their parents are. So, Sula is a reflection of her mother, Nasula. The background education that she has received from her mother is sound so much so that she spontaneously acts without being told to act or without asking for permission from her mother to act. Nasula gives her daughter advice after Isaki Chiswebe has died of AIDS as it appears in their conversation below:

*'[...] And do you know where death like the death Isaki died from comes from?'*

*'You know? So you know. It would kill me to see my own daughter and only child running into a death like that out of carelessness. Don't just say "I know". Learn also to be a house with a lock without a key. When time ripens, the spirits will nod and the gods will provide the key and tell you to open the door.'*  
(33-34)

The use of words like "spirits", "gods" and "key" in the quotation above shows that faith is another strength for Nasula. She believes that spirits and gods can protect her daughter so that she should avoid indulging in sexual intercourses to avoid catching AIDS and ending up dying like her uncle, Isaki Chiswebe. As a well-bred girl, Sula promises to take her mother's advice seriously. In addition, Nasula's faith in the gods is mentioned in this quotation: "She would try anything and everything for the sake of her child's future, with faith in the gods" (16).



Another role of a mother which Sinyangwe refers to in his novel is the role of educator. Nasula is portrayed as a woman who has bred her daughter well. According to Mutunda (2017: 107), “The name *Sula*, as explained in Chanda Penda’s *The Encyclopaedia of Zambian Names*, signifies to disregard or forget a wrong that has been committed against oneself or others. *Sula*’s name also signifies “let things be”. So, there is no wonder when *Sula* is portrayed as a well-bred child in the novel. She is an obedient and helpful daughter who emotionally supports her mother in her hard times. In an instance, when her mother tells her about her unsuccessful trip to her late husband’s family to request for her school fees, she does not regret but sympathetically says:

*‘Don’t worry [mother], it’s all right [...]. ‘I will not be the first or the last person to stop schooling because of lack of money.’ [...] we must accept what is happening to us. It won’t help even if we complain and grieve. Who will listen to us?’ (36-37)*

Moreover, *Sula* is a girl who takes education seriously because she believes that only schooling will save her mother and herself from their poverty: “*Sula* [...] was a blessing. She took her schooling seriously and had refused to be weighed down by the severity of their poverty or the reality that she had no father, and that she was a girl, not a boy” (71), the narrator declares. Although Sinyangwe writes that “*Sula* belonged to the wretched of the earth, [...], one of the ill-fated seedlings of the world, sown at the edge of the cliff of darkness” (72), he portrays her as a very understanding girl. Mutunda (2017: 107) substantiates that fact in these terms:

*As her name states, Sula has no nagging demands and does not complain, like other school going children who demand new clothes and nice food. Whenever she is mocked by her peers for bringing poor quality food, she disregards those provocations and teasing and does not report them to the teachers, even her mother; she does not feel offended or take revenge either [...].*

From the quote above, it clearly appears that *Nasula* plays her role as a mother by giving her daughter a sound background education. In addition, she has given her a name which reflects her good behaviour,



not only towards her mother, but also towards the other members of the society at large. Referring to Sula's sound background education, the narrator says:

*Unlike other children in Swilini and the surrounding villages, Sula, from the first day, never complained about what she wore or took to school. She had never demanded anything. When something was needed at school and the teachers told the pupils to ask their parents for it, Sula would not do so. [...] Nor had she ever threatened not to go to school or stop schooling if such or such happened or didn't happen. [...].*

*Sula's school bag [...] was 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. But Sula still carried the bag with amazing confidence and pride – and in patch ridden, threadbare clothes without shoes on her feet.*

*The laughter, jokes, teasing and other aggressive group behaviour fell on deaf ears and never made the girl cry or become angry as would have been expected. People saw this and were struck with admiration. So they talked about the legend and brought word to Nasula, the lucky mother of such a child. (73-74)*

It is clear from the aforementioned excerpt that Sula's human attitude is partly a reflection of her name. Despite all the mockeries that she undergoes at school, she remains a determined, courageous and intelligent young girl who never misses classes and is never forced into fighting. Notwithstanding people's attempt to divert her from schooling, she remains a resolute and focused girl. The novelist makes her appear as a model for the other students in her school and as a girl who heeds her mother's advice with deference. Sula, herself, refers to this fact in these terms:

*The teachers ask them why they cannot be like me. They don't listen. They just want to laugh at me: my clothes, my things. But I always remember what you told me the night before I went to school. You told me that I should only worry about my lessons and nothing else; that I should think of where I come*





*from, and remember that we are poor people with no one to turn to. So I just look at them and try to learn. (76)*

From the quotation above, it appears that Sula is aware of their poor social background and is determined to make things change by sticking to her education. So, in spite of their abject poverty, her dream is big because she knows that only schooling would weed them out of poverty. Considering Sula's personality traits, one may say that there is no wonder when Nasula has seen her as "the *namukokolo*, one that would rise high" (70) in a dream.

The novelist shows that when a mother plays her role well by giving a good background education to her children, they end up having good behaviour towards other people whatever the situation in which they find themselves. Nasula, herself, is an appreciative and a grateful mother. She proves it when her friend, Nalukwi, who has previously advised her to sell her bag of beans so as to raise funds to send her daughter to school, pays them a visit. On that occasion, she does not hesitate to kill a chicken in honour of her friend. As soon as her daughter informs her of Nalukwi's presence, she orders her to catch the chicken in these terms: "'Sula, stop what you are doing,' [...] 'be quick child, chase that chicken and catch it immediately. We must kill it for Nalukwi'" (44). So, to show her gratitude to Nalukwi and at the same time to teach Sula to be grateful, Nasula is ready to offer what she possesses to her best friend as it appears in the following extract:

*'For Nalukwi, even if there had been one, I would have killed it for her. Child, have I ever told you the story of what I went through with you in Lusaka after your father died and how in the end I managed to come back here to the village?'*

*'No.'*

*'I have thought of doing so when you reach the age of eighteen. Now you are still too young for the story. That is why I have never remembered Nalukwi to you. It would have forced me to say other things about my past, things that are not good food for a young innocent minds like yours. For the time being just know that without Nalukwi, you and I might not be here today. [...].'*" (44-45)



When Nasula briefly tells Sula the story of what Nalukwi has done for them after Winele's death, Sula quickly goes and catches the chicken without questioning her mother's authority. This testifies to the fact that she is a well-bred girl. In addition, when the visitor comes to their house, without waiting for any order from her mother, she brings a stool for the visitor and greets her. Through this, the writer intends to instil African values such as group solidarity, communal life, the expression of compassion and gratitude. Although individualism has caused the collapse of those African values in the society depicted in the novel – as it can be seen through the Chiswebes' behaviour towards Nasula and her daughter – the novelist redresses the injustice by showing through Nalukwi's attitude towards Nasula and her daughter that there is still hope for African values.

Through Nalukwi's action and its recounting to Sula by Nasula, Sinyangwe makes Nasula instil those values to her daughter so as to play her role of giving her background informal education. So, since the mother is the most important person in the life of a child, her habits and behaviour become a model for the child. Whatever the child observes from her (her manner, her relationship with others and her lifestyle, etc.) affects his/her character in life. For that reason, a mother should set good examples for her children as she does. In addition, while refraining from telling her daughter the whole story for fear of making her suffer, she proves to be a good and careful mother. Apart from referring to the role of a mother, Sinyangwe also refers to the intrinsic qualities of a good mother in the novel.

## **2. THE INTRINSIC QUALITIES OF A GOOD MOTHER**

A good mother has intrinsic qualities which make her unique. Sinyangwe finds intrinsic qualities in the protagonist of his novel, Nasula. Although widow inheritance is an aspect of African family customs, Nasula chooses to remain single after the death of her husband, Winele Chiswebe, because she has qualities which make her think of the wellbeing of her daughter, Sula, only. According to Mutunda (2017:108):



*Under this practice, when a man dies his wife will be inherited one of his brothers. The widow then becomes the legal wife of the man inheriting her. The widow can raise children through her new husband. All the children the widow already has become the bonafide property of the dead man's brother who inherits her. Although the practice has been criticized for making women properties of men, Mutunda is of the view that widow inheritance or levirate marriage was initially intended as a support system to provide domestic, economic, moral, and marital support to women and to orphaned children who needed to be kept in the family and be taken care of.*

Despite this age-long practice, Sinyangwe approves of the fact that Nasula has rightly chosen to remain single. She refuses to accept her brother-in-law, Isaki Chiswebe, as her new husband to replace his brother in accordance with the Mambwe traditions. As the narrator puts it, “She knew Isaki and his ways in the things of the flesh very well. She also knew the Chiswebe family too well to remain married to one of its members. She refused to be married to Isaki” (8). It should be mentioned that the phrase “his things of the flesh” refers to the fact that Isaki Chiswebe is “a womaniser”. So, by refusing to adhere to the customary practice of wife inheritance, Nasula asserts her own individuality and personal worth, in short, her quality as an emancipated widow. As Mutunda (2017: 108) puts it:

*She is able to see the consequences of such a marriage – especially that Isaki was a womanizer – and cannot accept to be objectified. Nasula is clearly expressing her disapproval of the tradition of widow inheritance. She also criticizes the notion that women are property that can change hands.*

The novelist denounces the fact that Nasula's in-laws grab all the property her late husband, Winelo Chiswebe, has left her and her daughter, with the intention to make her suffer for refusing to adhere to tradition. “However, the protagonist is not moved; instead, she is bold and determined to struggle for her and her daughter to survive” (Mutunda, 2017: 108). In addition, as the narrator says, “Nasula, she who was supposed to be the mother of ‘let things be’ would not let



things be over her daughter's schooling" (4). She wants to make her only daughter's schooling possible by any means she can get because she sees education as the key to success if her daughter is not to toe her own line of suffering. She tells her daughter: "'You must go to school. You can't stop your schooling just like that [...]. Do you not see how we are suffering because I did not go to school? You want your future to be like this?'" (37). Thus, following the advice of her friend, Nalukwi, Nasula decides to take her last bag of beans to Lusaka for sale, so as to pay for her daughter's school fees. The motivation, zeal and perseverance to have her daughter educated are all qualities of a good mother; and they come from her observing other women who are educated and have consequently succeeded in life and now stand on their own. "Nasula's hope [apparently] dashes when a conman named Gode Silavwe, robs her and escapes without paying for the bag of beans which was the only last hope for her to educate her daughter" (Mutunda, 2017: 108). At this level in the narrative, it is clear that through this, the novelist shows that she is a mother of high quality who is keen on making her only daughter succeed in life. Sinyangwe portrays Nasula as a loving and protecting mother for her only child. In other words, she is a caring mother who is ready to make sacrifices for her daughter. Maternal affection is unmatched insofar as a child belongs to his mother whether she is healthy or unhealthy, rich or poor, literate or illiterate. In the novel, Nasula is portrayed as a poor and illiterate woman. The narrator refers to her in these terms:

*Nasula was poor, illiterate and clothed in suffering, but she was an enlightened woman possessed with a sense of achievement. She had not tasted success in her own life, but she wanted her daughter to achieve much. She wanted her daughter to reach mountain peaks with her schooling and from there carve a decent living that would make it possible for her not to depend on a man for existence. (5)*

Despite Nasula's poverty and illiteracy, she is also portrayed as a woman or rather as a mother who has intrinsic qualities. The narrator further refers to her like this:

*Poverty, suffering and never having stepped into a classroom had not smoked her spirit and vision out of existence. Her*



*humanity continued to be that she had been born with, one replete with affection and determination. It was this which fanned her desire to fight for the welfare of her daughter. (5)*

Although Nasula's living conditions are extremely bad, she wants her daughter to enjoy better standards of life through education. Because she loves and cares for her daughter so much, she is ready to struggle so that she should have a prosperous future. As a consequence, she puts her hope in her daughter's schooling after her husband's death.

Apart from maternal affection, a mother can also give up a great deal for the sake of her children. This is known as a mother's sacrifice. A good mother should sacrifice her time, her sleep and her pleasure to ensure that her children are alright. Sinyangwe makes Nasula appear as a prototype of such mothers, as she sacrifices her sleep, thinking about how to find the ways and means of sending her daughter to school. The narrator expresses this fact in these terms:

*The woman was troubled. It was midnight, everybody in the village would be fast asleep, yet sleep would not come for her. Wide awake, her dark eyes open and dry, she stared vacantly at the fire. So it was with her these days. After a hard day of endless pursuit, of searching for solutions to her problem, midnight would find her awake, thinking and worrying, asking herself the question: what shall I do? When desperation gave way to fear, the fear of her daughter's schooling coming to an end, her thoughts would stiffen and she would silently lament: Is this the way things end? (3-4)*

Through the quotation above, it is clear that Nasula worries about her daughter's schooling. This worry is further highlighted by the narrator in these terms: "Sula, her daughter's schooling. That was her worry, the beginning and ending of her problem" (4). Thus, Nasula places all her daughter's needs in the first position. For instance, in the novel, Sinyangwe points out the fact that Nasula used to wear the same tropical sandals. In addition, when she gets one hundred and fifty thousand *kwacha* from Gode Silawwe, the man who has stolen his bag of beans, the first thing she buys at Kampala shopping centre is girls'



travelling bag and a suitcase for her daughter instead of buying new shoes for herself.

Another quality of a mother is to be a protector for her children. The writer shows that Nasula is a protector for her child because she always has an eye on her daughter because she wants her to be safe from any kind of danger. For example, when they go to bed at night, Sula goes out to urinate, but her mother fails to follow her outside because she is tired. However, she provides her with protection from where she is. The following quotation is a proof:

*She knew [...] the reason that [sic] Sula had risen and wanted to stand up and escort her daughter, but she felt numb and decided to give her protection from where she was.  
'Don't go far,' [...] 'just do it near there and be quick, it's too dark.'* (11)

So, a good mother has the responsibility to make her children be secure by giving them physical and emotional support. Nasula loves her daughter as it appears in the following quotation:

*She loved the child with such an intensity that at times the feeling threatened to suffocate her. She did not want Sula to suffer the way she had done as an adult. She was too good-natured, well natured, intelligent and hardworking.* (12)

Sinyangwe has also referred to the strength of a good mother in his novel.

### 3. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL STRENGTH OF A GOOD MOTHER

Sinyangwe's *A Cowrie of Hope* also deals with the themes of perseverance, poverty, and hope. The novelist approves of the fact that although Nasula was born in poverty, she has much hope and determination to climb the ladder out of the cycle of poverty so that Sula should have schooling and be successful in life. The writer deplores the fact that her husband, Winelo Chiswebe, who is paying for their daughter's schooling, is falsely accused of theft and shot dead probably because of his poor standard of living. Since this situation



has caused Nasula to face many obstacles in her struggle to get her daughter's registration fees for grade ten and beyond, Sinyangwe has endowed her with strength. That strength is meant to help her overcome the difficulties that she faces and come out of the situation triumphantly.

The strength of a good mother here involves the mother's struggle for her child's success, the mother's resilience and courage. The persistence Nasula has out of love for her child is extremely sacrificial as Sula is her cowrie (yellow shell used for money) of hope. Her whirlwind marriage with the first born of Chiswebe has awakened her to the bad things that a woman can undergo unless she is educated. The narrator refers to this in these terms:

*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 a woman independence and freedom. (5-6)*

First of all, a mother should set a clear goal for her children and know what she exactly expects from them and explain it to them. This is the case of Nasula in *A Cowrie of Hope*. Sinyangwe makes her tell her daughter what follows:

*'You must go to school. You know what suffering I have gone through because apart from being poor and a woman my parents did not send me to school. I don't want you to suffer the way I have suffered. I want you to grow up to stand on your own feet and not look to marriage or men for salvation. Marriage and men are not salvation but the ruin of any woman who can't stand on her own feet. I want you to go far with your education so that you can support yourself, earn a good living and be free and independent in your life. You must go to school!'* (37)

Through these words, Nasula has set a clear goal for her daughter which is the child's emancipation. According to Nasula, to be emancipated, Sula must go to school. She thinks so because she has



heard young educated women talk about the freedom of the woman, the importance of having a good education, the rights of women and about the need for women to stand on their own:

*She had not forgotten and she would not forget. How could she? 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 the freedom of the 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, and the need for a woman to stand on her own. (8)*

Sinyangwe portrays Nasula as an illiterate widow who perceives the importance of schooling for her only daughter, Sula. According to the narrator, “They [Those young women] were freedom itself. Light and hope. In them she saw Sula her daughter and in Sula she saw them” (8). To achieve her goal, Nasula stands up to a series of difficulties which at the same time inspire compassion and admiration. For example, when she tells her daughter that she must go to school, she wonders:

*But how, mother? Where are you going to get one hundred thousand kwacha from in the little time left before I am supposed to report for school? For how long have you been trying, and where have you not gone and what have not done but failed? Don't you feel sorry for yourself? (37)*

Although Sula pleads with Nasula to abdicate, she does not abdicate. On the contrary, Nasula highly believes that she must fight with the last straw of her blood to send her daughter, Sula, to senior secondary school after the latter has successfully passed her grade nine. Her strong desire to struggle to achieve what she wants shows Sinyangwe's commitment to demystify the wrong assumption that women have no voice, and at the same time, to show that the woman in general and the traditional woman in particular is the true architect of her own destiny. Nasula's will to send her daughter to school in these years of poverty and misery makes her a woman of struggle and





a strong one. Aguessy (2014: 73) corroborates this idea when he writes:

*Despite the condition extremely tight of the “nineties”, Nasula has fought with the last straw of her blood to find the required means for the schooling of her daughter. After the sensitization meeting about how to write and read, and the women’s rights organized by educated women which Nasula attends, she very soon realizes that formal education is the sine qua non condition that will liberate her from patriarchy and poverty.*

Through the hardships which Nasula has undergone, the novelist intends to show that she lives in a society where poverty is rampant. He depicts a society in which women break their backs to ensure that their children are fed and able to receive education. He describes life in that society in these terms: “These were the nineties, the late nineties. They were lean years. They were the years of each person for himself and hope only under the shadow of gods” (14); “These were the nineties, the years when there was a harshness and hardness in the land that had little sympathy for the weak” (30); “The nineties. The years of the rule of money. The years of havelessness, bad rains and the new disease. The harsh years of madness and evil!” (122). It means that times are very hard in the depicted society and that women, like Nasula whose dream is to send her child to school, are bound to become hard workers to succeed.

Given her chaotic living conditions due to her chronic poverty, one wonders, at first sight, whether she can afford the amount of money set by the school. However, she endeavours to reach her goal at all costs because she is a woman full of resilience. So, another strength of a mother is resilience. According Lothar et al. (2000: 858; quoted by Cloete & Mlambo, 2014: 93):

*Resilience is explained as a dynamic process wherein individuals display positive adaptation despite experiences of significant adversity or trauma. This term does not represent a personality trait or an attribute of the individual, rather, it is a two-dimensional construct that implies exposure to adversity and the manifestation of positive adjustment outcomes.*



For Mlambo (2011), “Resilience is the capacity for strategically absorbing disturbance and challenges, and for coping with the complex uncertainties in life, so as to survive and move beyond survival..” “Resilience, therefore, emphasises the strength that the people have rather than their vulnerability, through exploring the coping strategies that they exhibit” (Mlambo, 2014: 39). While dealing with the inner resilience of Sinyangwe’s female character and protagonist, Nasula, in his article, Mutunda (2017: 61) acknowledges that Nasula is a woman of resilience, and that this makes her play a role of model mother and be a symbol of hope. He substantiates this fact in the quotation below:

*She is never discouraged, she continues struggling, hoping she will be successful someday. Her past life and experience never discourage her. Nasula knows what she wants, which is her daughter’s future education and she goes after that, herself not opportuned to go to school. She does not mind what people think and say to discourage her because she knows what she wants. Thus, Binwell Sinyangwe is calling up women to stand up and unite in order to overcome patriarchy and reclaim their rights from men. (Mutunda, 2017: 61)*

From the quotation above, it is clear Nasula is a resilient woman. After passing her primary school examinations with flying colours, her daughter Sula is offered a place at a boarding secondary school, St Theresa Girls, in Kasama. A lot of money is required and Nasula, with not even one coin anywhere in the world, is depressed but stirrings of motherhood drive her on. She swallows her pride, after nine years, and heads for Chiswebe Farm to talk to Isaki, her brother-in-law, and his father about the child’s predicament. She decides to go and confront the Chiswebes although she knows very well that they are wicked people who are not used to helping anybody, as the narrator says:

*The Chiswebes at Mangano farm were selfish beings who loved money more than people. They were rough and glib-tongued. And they hated her for having refused to marry Isaki. But for her daughter, she would go and confront Isaki for money for Sula’s school. Isaki was the one who was in charge of the farm.*



*It was he who kept the money now that his father was getting very old. (12-13)*

Despite the utter selfishness of the Chiswebes as it appears in the quotation above, Nasula sees nothing wrong in paying them a visit because she is a desperate woman. Courage is another quality of a good mother which Nasula has. It is the quality that makes a mother continue trying to do something for the sake of her children even if it is difficult. So, when a mother makes the decision to face pain or opposition without showing fear, it means that she is courageous. As an audacious and courageous woman, she is ready to do whatever she can to reach her goal. The novelist shows Nasula's audacity and courage through her decision as it can be seen through this quotation:

*She had decided and she was ready to fight. She would swallow her pride and brave the tide. She would go ahead and confront the Chiswebes and make them do that which they are obliged to do: produce money for the schooling of their granddaughter and niece, Sula. She had not been herself during the funeral of her late husband and in the years shortly thereafter. She had been too broken and weak for anything. Now she must face the lions and make them see the darkness of their deeds and the light ahead. (16)*

From that quotation, it is clear that the novelist shows that Nasula, the protagonist of his novel, is a courageous woman, ready to venture anywhere for her daughter's welfare. Through her struggle to raise money for the child's schooling, Nasula has suffered a lot, and this proves that she is really a strong woman. In her resilience, Nasula believes that education will bring 'salvation' to herself and Sula. For that reason, she is ready to endanger herself by travelling on foot from Swelini to Mangano at night, through a wild forest. The omniscient and omnipresent narrator tells us about her bravery in these terms:

*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 [a] man. Nasula was courage.* (14)

The repetition of ‘walked’ and the use of words such as ‘forest’, ‘dense’, ‘virginity’, ‘silence’ and ‘alone’ in the quotation above shows Nasula’s outstanding character and the great importance that she attaches to her daughter’s education. Sinyangwe makes her walk from Swelini to Mangano at night so that she can meet the Chiswebes, her deceased husband’s people, to ask for financial assistance for her daughter’s schooling although she inwardly knows that she will get no money from them. The poverty that greets her at the compound of the Chiswebes, a stark contrast of what it once was, thaws her heart. This is a kind of poetic justice which has already passed sentence: “She had come to the hearth of the fallen and dying, where, clearly, nothing existed to fight or fight for” (14). The Chiswebe family has lost everything, including farm equipment and household furniture, to creditors as they have borrowed against their crops which unfortunately could not stand nature’s armoury. Nasula’s father-in-law laments about their inability to cope with the problem that she poses in these terms:

*‘What to do for the child, my grand-daughter, Sula of the rains, wretched world,’ [...]. ‘She has passed very well to go to such a good school, while we have become empty-handed and as good as dead. How unfortunate the child is! What a shame!’* (29).

Returning home empty-handed, Nasula decides to take another gamble for her daughter. She decides against common sense to borrow seed and fertiliser from the shrewd Pupila, hoping to pay him off and sell the excess produce at a profit. But she only manages to pay Pupila his dues and returns to square one. By making Nasula borrow fertiliser and maize seeds so as to grow maize to save money before school starts, Sinyangwe intends to lay a stress on the fact that times are very hard and on the fact that she is a woman full of determination. The writer thus bemoans the capitalistic and cold-hearted nature of the new government, as Nasula nostalgically yearns: “‘They were lucky, those



who went to school in the sixties, seventies and eighties, when education was not paid for and everything needed was provided free” (37).

Sinyangwe makes Nasula try her best for her daughter’s schooling. For instance, after failing in farming, she does not hesitate to do pieces of work for people and borrow money from people. Unfortunately, all these strategies have proved fruitless because of the bad economic situation in the country: “The rains were bad and the harvests were bad too. Without what to sell from fields, people had no money” (14). Despite the bad economic situation in the country, Nasula has to keep on striving to raise the necessary funds for her daughter’s schooling at all costs. That is the only way for her to fulfil her responsibility as a mother. Putting all her faith in the gods of her ancestors, she waits for divine intervention which comes in the form of her long-forgotten friend, Nalukwi. The novelist has recourse to Nalukwi to help Nasula find a solution to the problem. He makes Nalukwi give Nasula a beneficial piece of advice by telling her to sell her last bag of beans so that she can get enough money for Sula’s schooling. Nalukwi gives advice to Nasula in these terms:

*Beans are very expensive in Lusaka at this time of the year, there are very few kinds available, especially the type that you grow here in Mbala, the yellow and white beans. Even if you have just one bag, it will give you the one hundred thousand kwacha that you need to send the child to school. (53)*

The quotation above shows that Nasula grows beans of quality which are expensive. Her friend’s piece of advice is therefore welcome as she can solve the problem of her daughter’s schooling with the income of the sale of the beans. They go to Lusaka to sell the bag of beans which they hope will fetch K120, 000. She is inspired by one female seller who says: “The mother is the one who feels the pain of a new life coming into the world. She must fight on, alone, for something that her children can swallow” (80). The novelist thus portrays her as a hardworking woman whose sole interest lies in her only child’s future which she wants prosperous. So, all the ways and means that can help her fulfil her dream are welcome in her desperate search for



money to make that dream come true. Mutunda (2017: 106) substantiates that fact in these terms:

*Binwell Sinyangwe's A Cowrie of Hope is set in two geographical areas: Mbala and Lusaka. The novel tells the story of a young widowed village woman Nasula, who is desperate to search for money for her daughter's secondary schooling. But Nasula is unable to pay for her daughter Sula's education due to economic hardships. Her inability to support her child's education seems to extinguish her hope. However, a friend, Nalukwi advises her to take her last and only bag of beans to Lusaka – the capital city – for sell, where the much sought-after Mbala beans sell lucratively. Nasula takes off for Lusaka, but in the city, she finds herself exposed to new, and predatory dangers: the theft of her beans – on which her hopes depend and which she retrieves after overcoming a series of tribulations.*

Courage also occurs in the novel when Nasula decides to face Gode Silavwe, a well-known crook, who has stolen her bag of beans at Kamwala market, pretending to be a buyer. Despite her poverty, “She must fight on, alone, for something that her child[ren] can swallow” (80) because “The mother is the one who feels the pain of a new life coming into the world” (80). This justifies the fact that after Gode Silavwe has duped her bag of beans, “[...] she did not want to leave the place which owned the death of her daughter's future” (97). That quotation shows that Nasula is a mother with a heart full of determination. The writer laments the infirmity of poverty through Nalukwi who in bewilderment asks: “‘What bad luck is this, god of mercy?’ [...] ‘Are we not going to be allowed to make any progress, even with the little in our hands, from our own sweat? When we can't borrow or beg, like they who are rich? [...]’” (87). Nasula is determined to deal Gode Silavwe a blow as the narrator laments when someone advises her to go back to her village on the grounds that Gode is terror: “What did it matter if Gode was death itself. The man had stolen her only hope of salvation, which lay in her daughter's schooling. She must look for him and she would pursue him to her death, if that was what he wanted. The pain of her loss called to her



and she would rise to its call” (115). Although “The acceptance of defeat began to creep her” (122) and “She could feel that her strength and will were waning” (122), she resists the temptation and persists.

Nasula’s persistence, representative of the Zambian cultures, culminates when she is forced to sleep in the market stalls, eat once a day, and not bathe to find the man who has stolen her beans. Mutunda (2017: 108) tells us about it in these terms: “Nasula struggles, searching for Gode in the entire market for six days with little food and without any care for her looks. She knows that finding Gode and the bag of beans is the only source of survival for her and her daughter.” Driven on by the resilience that is a preserve of mothers, she catches him and looks at him in his eyes and says courageously: “‘Have I not found you?’ [...]. ‘You thought I would not find you, but I have found you. Have I not found you?’” (124). It is clear that Nasula is ready to fight with Gode Silavwe. She does not fear the man; on the contrary, she openly asks for the return of her bag of beans or payment: “‘You will not go anywhere until you give me my bag of beans or the money for it’ [...]. ‘Give me my bag of beans or the money for it! Or you will have to kill me here and now!’” (126). The fight is so fierce that Aguessy (2014: 81) compares it to an epic fight between David and Goliath in the Holy Bible: “Gode’s violent reaction leads to an epic fight that one would qualify as the fight between David and Goliath in the Holy Bible.” The narrator describes that epic fight as follows:

*Gode Silavwe engaged the engine. [...]. Nasula seized hold of the handle of the rear door and pulled at it. It opened. [...]. Now the vehicle was gathering momentum. The door slept out of her hand and banged itself closed again as she fell slightly behind.*

*But as she opened the door, the seat-belt on that side of the car had fallen out. [...]. She lunged forward and grabbed the belt with her left hand [...]. The car pulled at her with a sudden and violent force. She fell down with equal suddenness and violence [...].*

*There was, suddenly, a deafening noise of whistling and yelling from a terrified crowd warning the driver of the fleeing car*



*that he was going to kill a person. One instant more, and the car would have started pulling her along. But, in the nick of time, Gode stopped the car and switched off the engine. Nasula clung to the seat-belt firmly, now with both hands, in a sad coil, seething and trembling, her eyes tightly closed in prayer. (127-128)*

Through the quotation above, it is clear that the fight has ended with Nasula's narrow escape from death as Gode Silavwe was about to crush her because of her bag of beans. Sinyangwe uses this as means to show to what extent Nasula is ready to sacrifice her life for the sake of her bag of beans and to some extent for her daughter's education. He makes a policeman intervene in these terms: "'Get up,' someone standing nearby said to her after a while. 'It is over and all right, madam, you can now get up.' She looked up and saw it was a policeman in the familiar khaki uniform, holding a gun" (128). Despite the fact that the policeman has teamed up with the crook, Gode, to betray Nasula – for she has got neither the bag of beans nor the money for it after the policeman's intervention – she is not discouraged. On the contrary, she is determined to solve the new problem at hand because she is a woman of resilience.

Sinyangwe further highlights Nasula's courage when after much reflection, she reports the matter to the highest boss of the police station called Samson Luhila who helps her to take her money back. Undeterred, Nasula seeks "[...] the boss of everyone. The one at the topmost" (134) at the police station, and on finding him cries:

*'Help me, I am a poor woman of no means and with no one to turn to. My daughter will not go to school after what has happened if you don't help me. She is my only one and my future. The bag of beans was my only hope of sending her to school and securing her future and mine. My only hope for my only hope!'* (136)

The novelist makes Nasula realise that good men still tread this Earth when the boss of the police summons the inspector responsible for Gode's godfather status and orders him to go and bring him to the





station within an hour – which he promptly does. The top cop commanded Gode Silavwe: ““You give her one hundred and fifty thousand *kwacha*,’ [...]. You have troubled her a lot. Regard the way she is looking. Does it please you to see a mother looking like this?”” (140-141). So, the writer makes Gode Silavwe admit his folly and thus causes the boss of the police to order him to pay Nasula K150, 000 for her beans and her troubles. Apart from his punishment, Samson Luhila suspends the inspector: ““I have suspended you, while the charges against you are investigated, and you are on suspension starting from now”” (143). To approve of the outcome or happy ending of the situation, Mutunda (2017: 108) rightly writes: “Through the help of Samson Luhila, the commanding police officer, Nasula receives double the amount for the bag of beans. After all the ordeals and tribulations, Nasula is finally relieved; her hope has been realised, she will now be able to send her daughter to school.” So, Nasula’s determination, courage and resilience make her dream, which is to send her only daughter to school, becomes a reality.

## CONCLUSION

This article titled “The Burden of Motherhood in Binwell Sinyangwe’s *A Cowrie of Hope*” has dealt with three sections. The first section which is “The Commitment of a Mother in *A cowrie of Hope*,” has endeavoured to show that Nasula has played an important role in her daughter’s life by providing her with a sound background education so that she should be a well-bred girl. The second one is “The Intrinsic Qualities of a Good mother in the Novel,” and it has tried to show that Nasula, as good mother has high qualities which have led her to overcome her poverty, illiteracy and hard living conditions and struggle for her daughter, Sula’s schooling. As far as the third section it is entitled “The Strength of a Good mother in Sinyangwe’s Novel,” and it has portrayed Nasula as strong woman with courage, bravery and resilience who is ready to venture through a dense forest at night and to challenge the thief of her only bag of beans in order to guarantee her daughter’s schooling. Sinyangwe has used flashbacks, juxtaposition, hyperbole, and repetition to convey his message. He has succeeded in impacting his readership by evoking



thoughts, experiences, and emotions of those reading the novel and by calling upon all women in Africa to perform their duties and responsibilities as good mothers. Although this novel is fiction and Nasula succeeds against the odds of her poverty, gender, and illiteracy, Sinyangwe leaves us with no doubt that there are thousands of women who remain trapped in these harsh realities everyday throughout the African continent and beyond.

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