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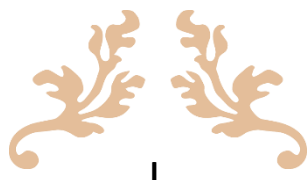
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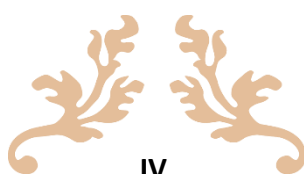
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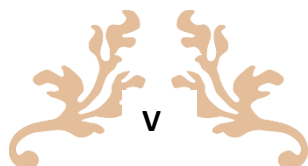
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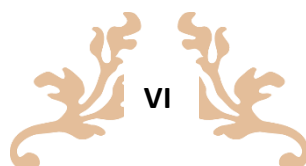
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Female Empowerment in Bingwell Sinyangwe's *A Cowrie of Hope*

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Abstract

Binwell Sinyagwe is one of the African male writers who portray women in heroic and inspiring roles. In his novel *A Cowrie of Hope*, he tackles the issue of female education as an important means to achieve female empowerment. He insists on the fact that education paves the way to financial freedom which in its turn is power towards self-realisation. In the light of the womanist theory, which carries the idea that women, in a responsible and peaceful manner can empower themselves, this article examines strategies for female empowerment as seen in *A Cowrie of Hope* by Binwell Sinyagwe

Key words: education, courage, empowerment, subjugation, women.

Résumé

Binwell Sinyagwe est l'un des écrivains africains qui dépeint les femmes dans des rôles héroïques et inspirants. Dans son roman *A Cowrie of Hope*, il aborde la question de l'éducation des femmes comme un moyen important pour parvenir à leur autonomisation. Il insiste sur le fait que l'éducation aplanit le sentier vers l'autonomie financière. Cet article examine les différentes stratégies proposées par l'écrivain Zambien pour conduire à l'autonomisation des femmes.

Mots clés : éducation, courage, autonomisation, assujettissement, femmes

Introduction

Women's problems in many societies are seen as an injustice to humanity and a fierce struggle is directed towards that injustice by individual women, international organisations, feminist groups and many non-governmental organisations. Through movements of protest, writings, conferences and rallies, a keen attention is being given to the issues of women, the majority of whom is leading miserable lives, because of the dictates of the societies in which they live. Binwell Sinyangwe as a literary luminary does not stay away from that struggle which opens people's eyes on the way the marginalization of women is a destroyer of the happiness of many children, men, families, nations and humanity as a whole.

In fact, Binwell Sinyangwe as many other writers, exposes the daily lives of rural African women, who struggle to be seen as humans just like men, in societies where they are considered less human than their male counterpart. Binwell Sinyangwe thus exposes the seclusion of women to the house chores which do not allow them to show their potentials or discover their true selves.

It is important, at this point, to remark that in African societies and also in African literature, values of courage and determination are mostly attributed to men, given that women are considered as frail and fragile human beings who are unable to stand difficulties and trials. And this type of description is particularly recurrent in literature produced by male writers. In the same perspective, Ayélé d'Almeida (2013, p.13) writes: "until recently male writers did not undertake dynamic representations of women but instead projected of the latter the images of subordination".

However, more and more writers like Flora Nwapa, Chimamanda Ngozi

Adichie, Neshiani Andreas are beginning to portray a different image of women in their literary works. This is the case of Binwell Sinyangwe, whose novel *A Cowrie of Hope* casts a courageous rural woman in the role of a "superhuman female" (E. Ohaeto, 1987, p. 214)

In *A Cowrie of Hope*, through the story of a widow who battles with poverty and the dictates of her society, to send her only daughter to school, the writer exposes how the social organization in most African societies, hinders women's efforts to stand as independent human beings. He also reveals the strategies women in patriarchal societies should adopt in order to fulfil their aspirations.

In the light of the womanist literary theory, this work seeks to show how women should set themselves free, as well as the future female generation, from patriarchal subjugation. Womanism according to M. E. M. Kolawole (1998, p.24) is: "totality feminine self-expression, retrieval, and self-assertiveness in positive cultural ways. It combats the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that women of colour face. It is a global ideology for African women which embraces racial, gender, class and cultural consciousness".

This implies that the womanist theory advocates the fight of African women for their self-realization and for the welfare of children and men as well. In the context of this work, the Hudson Weem's concept of womanism will enlighten the analyses. This theory considers woman in the following aspects: who she is, how she functions, how she is viewed and how she works in the world. The theory will be helpful because it encourages "self-definition, mothering, respect of elders, genuine sisterhood, values family and is male compatible". Hudson Weems (2022, p.11).

The work is structured around two parts. The first part examines how defiance can be used as a weapon for women's self-fulfilment and the second part analyses the aesthetics of courage and determination of women as articulated in *A Cowrie of Hope*.

1. Defiance as a Weapon to Self-fulfilment

"Nobody can destroy you unless you give the person a helping hand and offer yourself up to destruction. For anybody that wishes to destroy you needs your permission, your consent and your assistance." Ogochukwu promise (2009, 152) This saying which encourages people to give a certain esteem to themselves and not to act all the time according to what others say and think about them, is what we are going to use as a starting point to our journey of analysis of Nasula and her strategies of counter attacking the codes of her society which seek to reduce her to a shadow not a full human as shown in the following extract. In fact, Nasula realises that she lives in a society which considers her as a person who should only live to fulfil the desires of others. That subjugation of Nasula can be read in the following extract:

Nasula had not forgotten, she will not forget, how could she? They have turned her into a servant, a slave in a chief's palace. They had turned her into a stream in which to wash and kill the stink of their humanity. They had made her look like a non-human, a doll without thoughts or feelings of her own. Winelo and his relatives, Winelo, her late husband. (Binwell Sinyagwe, 2000 p.6)

The above extract reveals Nasula's awareness that she is treated less than a human being just because she is a woman living in a male-centred society. The narrator's insistence on the fact that she had not forgotten the ways she was treated by her husband

and his people is not to be taken for granted. It shows that Nasula does not see the way she is treated as simple and natural as the majority of women who fear to assert themselves. Her refusal to take the way she is treated just passively is expressed as follows: "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. (ACH,p.4)

That is the reason why Nasula develops strategies to gain control over her own life and that of her daughter. Firstly, she rebelled against remarrying her brother-in-law after the death of her husband. "After the burial, the news was broken to her that Isaki Chiswebe would be taking over as her husband... she refused to be married to Isaki. (ACH, p8). Nasula's refusal to remarry her brother in-law differentiates her from the other women of the rural area in the nineties who are educated to be docile and to accept everything their society imposes on them, because it was taken for granted that women are like kids and so could not have a say about things concerning their lives.

But Nasula decided to violate that code of conduct of her society and stand for her welfare and freedom. But her rebellion or her refusal to abide for the dictates of her society and marry her brother-in-law, Isaki, will not go without consequence:

Isaki and his father had spat on the ground, they had swept a finger across their necks and pointed to the sky and said she, Nasula, although she had been wife to the late winelo, had stopped being one of them like the other people married, and to be married, into the Chiswebe family. They would not help her even if they found her dying (ACH, p.16)

It is important to note that their threat does not bend Nasula's daring

spirit. She decides to fight for her freedom and the future liberty of her daughter, and nothing will discourage her from keeping to her vision and attaining her goal:

She too had vowed never to befriend any of them and chosen to perish with her poverty rather than accept a forced marriage and the wealth her dead husband had left her. She would not marry a man as lecherous as Isaki Chiswebe who already had three wives and had divorced the gods new how many times before. (ACH, p.16)

Nasula's decision not to marry her brother-in-law after the death of her husband challenges the patriarchal norms of her society, and makes her an unsubmitive and defying woman. She is aware that many sufferings of the majority women come from the fact that they are trapped in the self-serving patriarchal laws, due to which, they are only shown the road of marriage by their parents not that of education for their self-fulfilment. Her awareness that the fact that she did not get schooling contributes greatly in making her a dependent human, pushes her to develop a particular interest in school education. Nasula's view joins the idea that: "the female child should not be eternally dependent on marriage as an answer to all her needs" (M. Razinatou, 2011, p.174) Nasula's determination to fight all the stumbling blocks on her way for her daughter's success in life is appreciated by the narrator as follows: "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." (ACH, p.16)

But though she does not have anybody from whom she can easily get money for her daughter's schooling, Nasula's fighting spirit and burning

desire to give the latter a better life different from what she is undergoing will not die. Thus, her rebellion and fighting spirit moved her from standing against the setbacks put before her as a woman by her family to denouncing theft and corruption which are main issues hindering the development of people and societies in Africa. Having failed to raise money from her small jobs and from her in-laws for her daughter's schooling, Nasula decided to go to the city market to sell the only bag of beans she has for living, but as misfortune trails her, everything will not happen as she programmed.

Her beans are going to be stolen from her. But Nasula, will neither abandon quickly and go back to the village nor cry in self-pity. She will not listen to the external voices which tell her: "Take my advice, go back to the village quickly. I know what I am talking about. Lusaka is a place of madness and Gode is a terror. I wish you well, good-day". (ACH, p.115) Nasula will not listen to those voices which tell her that there is nothing to do to change her life course and that of her daughter.

Her moto is 'up to death' and she will struggle to gain control over her own life and also empower her daughter with education which she is convinced is a key to her future liberty. So she armed herself with courage and self-reliance and is ready to fight any obstacle on her road. Thus, when she is told that Gode who stole her bag of beans is a very dangerous person, she pondered on it as follows:

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. A cold wave swept through Nasula as she imagined facing the man who had stolen her beans, as he, in a furious mood, wanted to kill her. She knew there was nothing she could do in her own defence. But she had journey to travel and the

passion within her drove her onward, and urge her to find the man who had stolen her beans.”(ACH, pp.114-115)

In this excerpt, one can read that Nasula is a determined person and is ready to defy everything on her road even death itself, though she is a woman and cannot physically stand and fight the evil man, she is determined not to let him go free, she will find a way to get either her beans or the money for it from that thief.

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 more firmly, now with both hands, in a sad coil, seething and trembling, her eyes tightly closed in prayer. ”(ACH, pp.127-128)

Seeing that Nasula, an uneducated, miserable woman is struggling with wind and waves to empower her daughter with education, one is tempted to say that, the writer has created her to tell women who are in the situation of Nasula that if they aspire to put an end to the statu quo and the stereotyped view of women in African societies, they should dedicate themselves to empower the women of the future. The ‘Nasulas’ of today should prevent the ‘Sulas’ from going through the same hardships. Nasula is an epitome of those women who struggle to the last drop of their blood to see a positive change in the future generations of women. Nasula nearly was killed by Gode as she was trying all her best to expose that thief to the world.

She finally succeeded in exposing him to the police. Before Gode’s fury, Nasula did not run away or start crying

in self-pity, she stood up to him. She knew it was her battle and she is going to face it up to death. She is ready to walk on any stumbling block and attain her self-realization and that of her daughter.

As we can read in the following Akan proverb, “If you get your bundle ready, you will be helped to carry it.”(K. Gyekye, 1996, p.48) She is relieved as police will help her take back her beans or money for it. “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. Relief trickled into her. (ACH, p.128)

Nasula did not let her bitter experience in the hands of Gode discourage her, she clung to him, until fate turns to her advantage and they were both brought to the police-station. But unfortunately for Nasula, all the police men are not trust worthy, and Nasula will once again encounter misfortune as a police man disappoints her to the benefit of Gode.

‘I’m sorry, madam. It will be difficult to help you. This man denied ever having seen you or taken any bag of beans from anyone. I personally don’t think he is the kind of man who would steal a bag of beans, and not from you. I think you are just mistaking. Nasula sensed something. She went out of the building. Standing in the mute hopelessness at the veranda of the police-station building, she saw Gode Silavwe, in the driver’s seat of his car, give the police officer money in several notes and then drive off. (ACH. p.131)

The corrupted policeman will transform Nasula’s happiness into another painful experience which she has to arm herself with courage in order to be able to continue her journey to self-assertedness. Once more, Nasula’s defying spirit push her to overlook the orders of the police man

at the desk and move upstairs in search of the police commander. Where she will finally get a solution to her problem.

From her family to the public sphere, Nasula refuses to let things be. She kills fear, docility and passivity and armed herself with rebellion and determination and finally is able to send her daughter to school. The fact that Nasula was able to reach her ambition after resisting adversities like to obey the patriarchal dictates and let fear of theft and police corruption kill her ambition, shows that defiance and resistance to adversity are strategies to self-fulfilment in Binwell Sinyangwe's novel *A Cowrie of Hope*.

2- The Aesthetics of Courage and Determination in *A Cowrie of Hope*

The Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary defines 'courage' as "the ability to do something dangerous, or to face pain or opposition, without showing fear" (A.S. Hornby, 2000, p.266); and 'determination' as "the quality that makes you continue trying to do something even when it is difficult" (A.S. Hornby, 2000, p.318). As could be inferred from the above two definitions, courage and determination are important qualities that condition self-development in life.

In *A Cowrie of Hope*, Binwell Sinyangwe has created a female character who embodies the values of courage and determination. Nasula, a poor widow living in extreme poverty with her only daughter, is the channel used by Binwell Sinyangwe to prove that it is possible for women (even illiterate women) to have dreams and to fight to realise them. The following description of Nasula's living environment in the novel shows how precarious the widow and her daughter's situation is.

The hut sat askew, helpless on the earth like an abandoned child, alone, away from the other homes of the village. Old, and sodden with shame from

dilapidation and squalor. Everything about the dwelling, from its crack-ridden floor to its sagging roof and the dearth of its contents, told a rending story of poverty. (ACH, p.3)

What is quite impressive is that, it is from this poverty and precariousness that Nasula finds the source of motivation to fight against all odds for her daughter's future. And to achieve this end, Nasula finds only one way: education. For her, it is essential to give her daughter the opportunity to continue her studies and become an independent woman.

As woman, Nasula has been exposed to various forms of abuse, first by her husband and then by her in-laws after his death. Then, trying to find the source of her misfortunes in life, she realises that it is because she has entrusted her life to a man that such things have happened to her. As put by the narrator: "This was the price she was paying for having placed her whole life in the hands of a man, for having forgotten to hold her destiny in her own hands, even as she had been married" (ACH, p.10).

Nasula didn't want the same thing to happen to her daughter, so she decided to do everything she could to give her a brighter future through school education. Nasula's firm decision was strengthened by her meeting with a group of young girls who were running a campaign to raise awareness on women's issues:

She had not forgotten and should 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. (ACH, p.8)

This meeting changed Nasula's vision for her daughter forever. These young girls were a great source of inspiration for her. As a rural woman, she now knows that it is possible for a girl to fulfil her potential not only through marriage and life as a housewife, but also as an educated and well-placed woman in society. It is therefore not surprising that Florence Abena Dolphyne (1991, p.50) writes:

In urban centers however, where the presence of successful professional women makes obvious the value of women's education, many parents now give every opportunity to their daughters to continue with their formal education to whatever level they are capable of.

Coming back to Nasula, after meeting with these young girls, Nasula decided to remove any obstacle in her path in order to get her daughter educated. As pointed out in the first section, she refused to submit to the traditional law which bounds her to remarry into her late husband's family. In fact, according to their tradition, Nasula should marry Ishaki Chiswebe, her husband's younger brother who, with the complicity of his father-in-law, has stolen the inheritance she received from her husband.

Nasula vehemently opposed this and it brought her the scorn of her in-laws; for since then, they have refused to engage with her in any way. They have even refused to help her send her daughter to school. But Nasula had the courage to prefer her dignity in her poverty, even if it meant turning her entire in-laws against her.

This sequence of the novel revives the subject of the vulnerability of widows in African societies. Once a woman loses her husband, she becomes a vulnerable being at the mercy of her in-laws, who treat her as

they please. she is very often stripped of her inheritance and ultimately thrown out in some cases, she is also forced to submit to rites and ceremonies that take no account of her state of mind and have no regard for her dignity as a human being. In Nasula's case, as the narrator indicates, her father-in-law and brother-in-law have dispossessed her of her inheritance.

What was the use? Was the man who was given to read the words the deceased has written even allowed to finish reading? How they frowned upon everything and tore the paper on which the words were written to pieces. How they took away everything from her except what was on her body. How they threw her out of the house and sold it, leaving her to spend nights at the bus station with the child before she found money for her travel and returned to the village. (ACH, p. 10)

Reflecting on the issues related to widows in African societies, Eunice Ngongkum quotes Teddy Kuyela (2014, p.140) as follows:

In most of the African society, widowhood represents a 'social death' for women. It is not just that they have lost their husbands, the breadwinner and supporter of their children, but widowhood robs them of their status and confines them to the fringes of society where they suffer discrimination and stigma. [...] Widows are generally trodden upon, poor and least protected as their lives are determined by local, patriarchal interpretations of tradition, discrimination and stigma

It is clear from this quote that widows are victims of emotional, and psychological depression in the name of traditional practices. They are discriminated, humiliated and isolated from the society.

These analyses are supported by Modupe Mary Kolawole (1997, p.157) who finds that “the plight of widows in many parts of Africa is an example of cruel tradition carried out by men and women in the conviction that they are tools of keeping tradition alive.” It is then possible to say that by putting this female character in this situation and allowing her to refuse to conform to customs, Binwell Synagwe is trying to urge African women to have the courage to choose what is good for them.

Despite her refusal to remarry her brother-in-law, Nasula is not blinded by her hatred of the family. When she could no longer provide for her daughter’s schooling on her own, she went back to the Chiswebe family to seek help, because as she reflected: “they must face the truth that Sula was their own blood and that the child herself had put in too much, seeing how far she had gone, to be neglected by them. They must see that the child was too intelligent and committed to her schooling to be wasted” (ACH, p.16).

At this point, Nasula showed diligence, as underlined by Modupe Mary Kolawole (1997, p.93): “traditional African women symbolize self-reliance and diligence” Nasula's journey to her in-laws is full of symbolisms. It is a demonstration of her courage and determination. The journey itself was a long solitary journey on foot through forests and footpaths from Swelini (her village) to Mangano (her in-laws village)

her step had been quick and strong when the air had been wet with mist and dew and she had been fresh. Now she was tired, hungry and thirsty. Her step was slower and weaker. Still, with the tenacity of a cheetah and the determination of a tortoise, Nasula tackled the distance steadily, surely, alone. (ACH, p.19).

This passage shows that Nasula has to face hunger and thirst and tiredness on her voyage. When she finally reached Mangano, the village of her in-laws, she was quite surprised to find that the all-powerful Ishaki, who was supposed to help her pay Sula's school fees, had been completely diminished by illness. The author used this travel episode to prove that the decision Nasula made some years earlier not to marry Ishaki when her husband died was the right one, because Ishaki had caught a strange disease that he had passed on to all his wives.

This would also have been the case of Nasula had she married him. “she only watched the sick man and reeled with horror at the thought of what would have been, had she agreed to marry Isaki after the death of winelo” (ACH, p.27). and the narrator continues:

“Nobody had told her, but she knew. She could tell what it was, the disease that had afflicted Isaki and his three wives. It was the new, unmentionable disease of the world that came of the flesh, the one that make you thin before taking you, the disease of today.” (ACH.p.40).

It is clear from these extracts that Isaki is HIV positive and that he has transmitted the disease to his wives. B. Sinyagwe shows here that it is possible and important for women to be courageous in making right choices for themselves.

Beyond this interpretation, it is also possible to say that the very fact that Nasula agreed to return to the same people who had robbed her of her inheritance a few years earlier is an act of bravery and intelligence to be applauded. this shows that Nasula knows her rights and does not hesitate to claim them. The author shows that women must not remain inactive in the face of the challenges they encounter in life. They must stand up and fight for what is rightfully theirs.

Nasula then returned empty-handed from her trip to Mangano. She was devastated because she had lost one of the surest ways of financing her daughter's schooling. But far from being helpless, Nasula, on the advice of her best friend, Nalukwi, decided to go to Lusaka to sell the only bag of beans she had harvested from her field last season. Nalukwi proposes:

I heard you mention that you depend on the beans which you harvested in February for your relish and that you used them to exchange for cassava for *nshima*, and a few other things, she said. 'How much of your beans harvest remain? Beans are very expensive in Lusaka a this time of the year, there are few kinds available, especially the type that you grow here in Mbala; the yellow and white beans. Even if you have just one bag, i twill give you the one hundred thousand kwacha that you need to send the child to school (ACH,p.53)

It should be noted that, at this point that, in order to ensure the survival of herself and her daughter, Nasula undertakes farming activities. As Dolphyne points out, "Farming is a major activity of women living in the rural areas. Most of the women have small farms on which they grow staple foods and vegetables primarily for feeding the family but they sell the extra produce to supplement the family income". (A.Dolphyne, 1991, p.50) So; hard work in the fields is the preserve of Nasula, therefore, it came as no surprise when Nasula agreed to go to town to sell her labour in order to raise funds. But Nasula's journey and stay in the city will prove to be a real misadventure, and her only weapons will be her courage and determination.

In fact, as pointed out in the first part of this work, when Nasula went to Lusaka, her bag of beans, her daughter's last hope of going to school, was stolen and she was forced to return home, once again empty-handed. It

was with a heavy heart that she undertook the return journey. But in the car that was taking her back to her village, she had the courage to confront the driver and the other passengers, in the middle of nowhere and in the dark of night, to make her way back to Lusaka, because she was convinced that as long as her goal had not been achieved, she should not give up the fight.

She had made up her mind without knowing it. Now she just acted. Rigidly obeying her impulse, enthusiastically; without equivocation. She jerked to her feet and mumbled an excuse to other passengers on the same seat (...) Before the women could answer and give her way, she had squeezed passed into the main aisle and was hurrying towards the front of the bus with so much force and disregard for the world around her that everybody noticed and watched in amazement. (ACH p.108)

Nasula had set her mind on returning to Lusaka to find the thief who had stolen her bag of beans. Nasula's resolve was rewarded in the end. And B. Sinyagwe rewarded her because in the end, Nasula was able, despite all the viscissitudes, to catch the thief, bring him to the police and take back her money. Nasula's courage and determination have enabled her to achieve her goal, because the novel ends on a positive note, with Sula leaving her mum for school with all the supplies she needs.

Conclusion

This novel by B. Sinyagwe is essentially about the difficulties faced by women in African societies. As much as he exposes the problem, he proposes the solution. This study has examined the different strategies that women can implement in order to achieve female empowerment today. Binwell Sinyagwe has deliberately created a strong

character in Nasula who has been able to achieve her goal in life, not without obstacles.

This makes a change from the tradition of writing by African male writers, who have always presented women as poor victims whose fate can only depend on that of men. In Nasula's case, we clearly see a woman who, because she has been a victim of her marriage, has decided to face life head on and overcome whatever situations come her way.

This is a very dynamic and positive portrayal of women in fiction. This study has demonstrated that beyond this description of the main character, the author seems to suggest that the ultimate way for women to achieve female empowerment is through nothing other than education as underlined by Chinyere Nwagbara: "Empowering (African) women through education, whether formal or non-formal is apparently the best and only authentic way of uplifting womanhood as well as achieving balanced development of the society. As we are in the 21st century, the challenges ahead are numerous and only an educationally balanced society is in a position to embrace these challenges. (C. Nwagbara, 2003, p.82)

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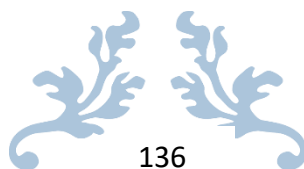
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