

## **Chihera in Film: The Subversion of Patriarchal and Customary Laws of Inheritance as Depicted in the Zimbabwean Feature Film *Neria* (1991)**

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### **Abstract**

In Zimbabwe, the notion of “Chihera” conjures up an image of a “super” woman who is “fearless,” “stubborn and arrogant,” “self-assertive,” “insistent,” and “possessive.” In real life, Zimbabwean women whose totem is the eland (Mhofu)—vava Chihera—are known to challenge patriarchal structures and Zimbabwean customary laws that arrogate womanhood to submissiveness, domesticity, docility, and various inferiority complexes. This chapter explores how the feature film *Neria* (1991) creates a typical “Chihera” figure in its central character Neria who contests, challenges, and subverts patriarchal modes of oppressing women engendered by the traditional practice of inheritance. The chapter engages critical hermeneutics to interpret the visual image and character of Neria, as a symbol and metaphor representative of “Chihera” who relentlessly and viciously struggles to claim her property rights and children from the male relatives of her deceased husband. The critical hermeneutics is utilized in this chapter to discriminate between a liberating and incarcerating use of film images: the images that democratize Zimbabwe’s traditional practice of inheritance and those that mystify it; those that communicate openly; and those that manipulate the fissures and “aporias” in Zimbabwe’s laws of inheritance to promote patriarchal self-serving interests. Among other things, the chapter also uncovers some feminine “epistemic vulnerabilities” subliminally constructed in the film *Neria* (1991) so that its major protagonist is made to stand for something else other than herself. The vulnerabilities include (1) the need for the female heroine to constantly explain herself, (2) dependency on male figureheads to validate, license, or support her actions or activities, and (3) sexual vulnerabilities, particularly to seduction or attack by the male gazes. The findings of this study reveal that the symbolic “Chihera” in the film *Neria* (1991) is invested with female agency in fighting patriarchal dictates on Zimbabwean women, yet she depends almost entirely on “father figures” to win her battles against her adversaries which seems to acknowledge that women cannot succeed without relying on men some of whom are involved in frustrating plans to empower women.

**Key Words:** Chihera, Customary laws, Film, Hermeneutics, Inheritance, *Neria*, *Neria* (1991), Patriarchy, Zimbabwe.