The Widow: Kate Beckinsale's journey into African danger

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Amazon Video and British ITV's new eight-episode series *The Widow*, starring Kate Beckinsale, is a political thriller primarily set in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC, formerly Zaire from 1971 to 1997).

Created by Harry and Jack Williams—responsible for *The Missing* (2014) and other television series—and directed by Sam Donovan and Oliver Blackburn, the mini-series centers on Georgia Wells' (Beckinsale) harrowing efforts to find the truth about her missing husband.

The Widow's earliest episodes are promising. The opening sequence, for example, involves two children who have been forcibly recruited into a brutal militia. They are still children, capable of expressing wonder about the world, but a socio-political nightmare has engulfed them.

For a good part of the series' six-hours or so, the DRC's poverty, political corruption and civil war conditions are present in the foreground—but how accurately or profoundly *The Widow* treats those issues is another matter.

Georgia, living austerely in an isolated cabin in Wales, was widowed when her husband Will (Matthew Le Nevez) was killed in a 2015 plane crash in the DRC.

During a visit to a hospital clinic for a leg injury, she spots someone in a television news report about violence in the central African nation wearing a baseball cap similar to the distinctive one sported by her husband. "The scenes this afternoon in Kinshasa's financial district [Kinshasa is the country's capital and largest city] were ones of chaos and confusion," she hears. "The Democratic Republic of Congo has seen its fair share of political unrest in recent years…"

Central to *The Widow*, which somewhat erratically jumps back and forth in time, is Georgia's life-changing decision to travel to Kinshasa to find out if Will, in fact, is still alive. In the DRC, she meets up with her friend Emmanuel Kazadi (Jacky Ido), who lost his wife in the same plane crash. Also apparently assisting Georgia is Judith Gray (Alex Kingston), the wealthy CEO of a clean-water non-profit.

Emmanuel explains about the DRC's capital: "Only two things are certain in Kinshasa: traffic and power cuts. Well, nobody seems to mind. Sixty years ago, we had trains, roads, steamboats up and down the Congo River full of white people come to discover a world beyond their own, only to return home with their minds no broader and themselves no different, but for their suntan. We were … what's that word we're not allowed to use? … civilized. On the surface, anyway. The truth is that things were probably always rotten. But now we don't lie about it."

Georgia and Emmanuel start tracking Pieter Bello (Bart Fouche), who was seen with Will in the newscast. Horribly, Emmanuel gets blown up by a car bomb intended for Georgia.

The NGO's Judith is clearly hiding something. The official report on the plane crash attributed the accident to severe hydraulic failure. It comes to light that Emmanuel's wife unwittingly carried a bomb onto the ill-fated aircraft. One of the passengers was a leading political opponent of the DRC government.

In the course of the protagonist's perilous journey, she rescues and befriends a former female child soldier Adidja (Shalom Nyandiko), who becomes as committed to Georgia as Georgia is to her quest to find Will. Eventually, Georgia's good friend Martin Benson (Charles Dance) arrives from Britain to help.

Meanwhile the ex-military smuggler Bello, aided by a native mercenary militia, has a local villager gunned down—a man who was helping him operate a swampy coltan mine with an oppressed work force caked in red mud.

Coltan, a dull black metallic ore, is used primarily in the production of tantalum capacitors, present in almost every kind of electronic device. The struggle over coltan, classified as a "conflict resource," is blamed in part for the outbreak of bloody hostilities in the DRC, resulting in large-scale death and destruction. (The Second Congo War, 1998-2003, and its aftermath are estimated to have led by 2008 to some 5.4 million deaths, mostly through starvation and disease, making it the deadliest conflict globally since the Second World War. Another two million people were displaced.)

When Georgia confronts Bello, he tells her that "just about every smartphone, laptop in the world needs a tantalum

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capacitor to run. And if you want that, you need coltan. And it just happens that the world's supply of coltan pretty much comes out of the DRC. I know it doesn't look like much, but there's a lot of money here right under your feet."

Later on, in the same entirely legitimate vein, Georgia says to Judith: "All of these people [in the DRC], they've lost people they love because of a bloody rock that's been dug out of the mud and fought over, died over, just so that we can hunch over our phones." Also feeding off the mine's profits is the villainous Major General Azikiwe (Babs Olusanmokun), who is being driven mad by the ghosts of his many victims.

Does the crazed Azikiwe have something to do with Will's disappearance and the relentless threats to Georgia's life?

The creators of *The Widow* have *some* inkling about the new scramble for Africa. In this, as the miniseries indicates, powerful financial interests are often assisted by corrupt, exploitive NGOs (says Judith to Azikiwe: "It's a callous world out there, Major General. Everyone's out for themselves, skimming off the top. Hands in someone else's pockets. I'm just sick of looking down and finding mine empty. So let's talk about how we make this work.") and domestic political elements sucking the life-blood out of the population. *The Widow* dramatizes the tragic personal dimension of this toxic mix.

There are intriguing possibilities here. How many Western filmmakers choose to set their narratives in a war-torn African country and one in which the conflict over natural resources and the horrors of children as soldiers loom large?

Unfortunately, to too large an extent, *The Widow*'s opportunities, as it unfolds, are squandered by a relatively superficial and impressionistic approach to events and social processes. The series ends up dominated by an acceptance of the global status quo, in which very little of substance is genuinely questioned or probed.

This finds expression not only in *The Widow*'s politically and personally conventional ending, but also in the fact that both its lead characters, Georgia and Martin, have British military-intelligence backgrounds. It's simply (and dangerously) taken for granted in film and television circles these days that such people are on the up and up, that *they* are the ones to be trusted and turned to at moments of crisis.

In addition, our heroine, rather unbelievably, catapults herself into the middle of violence and turbulence with a reckless, gung-ho attitude toward danger zones. This serves to tamp down and distract from the impact of the more revealing goings-on taking place before the camera. *The Widow*'s artificial desire to celebrate "female empowerment" takes its toll, as it generally does.

While the filmmakers are no doubt rightfully appalled by the situation in countries like the DRC, their efforts at muckraking are sporadic and not deep-going. And the problem here is not "white saviorism," as some critics have suggested, but the fact that the series' creators are in over their heads when it comes to present-day economic geo-reality and choose, almost by default, to swallow the official story.

The DRC, one of the most socially unequal countries in the world, possesses vast economic resources including, in addition to coltan, large deposits of copper, gold, diamonds, uranium, cobalt and oil. The country is ruled by a venal clique in Kinshasa, who have become obscenely wealthy by carving up the economic spoils of the Congo on behalf of international banks and corporations.

According to UNICEF, the DRC is now home to one of the largest displacement crises for children in the world. Refugees interviewed by the UN have testified to ongoing forced recruitment, including of minors, and atrocities by militias and paramilitaries backed and trained by the Pentagon and CIA.

According to a study on child labor in the Congo in 2016 produced by Amnesty International, children as young as seven work in the mines even in severe weather and under coercive working conditions and beatings by bosses. They carry back-breaking loads, descend into mines that frequently collapse and work with no protective gear. In addition to toiling long hours, these children are paid $1-$2 a day. UNICEF has estimated there are at least 40,000 children in the Congo living under forced labor conditions. Children also make up a significant portion of the combatants in the prolonged fighting between militia groups.

Washington has had, often violently and covertly, an intrusive hand in Congolese affairs on behalf of giant American corporations. *The Widow* had the chance to take a strong stand on these questions, which are well-publicized, but did not.

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