

THE 'LANGUAGE' OF GENDER CONDITIONING AS REFLECTED IN LITERARY WORKS

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ABSTRACT: *This study investigates the role of social conditioning in the home in the construction of gender consciousness in children and the perpetuation of a tilted gender sociometry as reflected in literature. Through an examination of the upbringing of children, the study drags the gender debate to the altar of the ancient nature-nurture controversy by investigating, primarily, literary art on whether gender differences are a biological and divine prescription or are a social and psychological construction. The paper, which is based on a study of selected African literary works of art by both male and female writers, explores what it terms 'gender language' which has been used as the medium of instruction in the education of children to accept their socially defined gender paths. In this study, the 'language' of gender should not be viewed as a literal speech or any particular world language but rather as ways through which society attempts to show how maleness is elevated over femaleness. The paper has discovered that what it terms as the language of gender conditioning is subtle, slippery and never fixed but innocently appears in such facets as naming, clothing etc. The paper has also shown that children do not produce but reproduce the cultural heritage bequeathed them by the societies they are born into. For instance, Evans (2003:84) entrenches the same argument when she shows how "socialization about sex were seen as part of a process in which society created particular kinds of boys and girls... basing on their given biology." The paper has, thus, underscored the argument that the home is not an innocent institution since it tampers with the innocent child's malleable psyche so that it fits with the fixed monological gender ideological postures imbedded in that patriarchal culture. In a nutshell, the paper has shown that gender consciousness in children is awakened, among other ways, through naming, preferential treatment of one sex over the other, clothing and other traditions. The paper posits that all these languages' of gender, consequently, create variations of experience for the two sexes.*

KEY WORDS: *Gender, Naming, Patriarchy, Phallogocentric, Feminism*

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study which analyses the patriarchal system's language of control of the 'other' is largely informed by the Feminist literary theory. According to Briggs in Jump (1991:xi), "the project of feminism itself is grounded in the felt difference between the lives of men and women and the

numerous experiences within language, literature and history that bring difference home to us.” In other words, feminism looks at how the world is divided into two worlds - worlds compartmentalized by the *faulty lines* of biology that make one male and the other female. Feminism as a literary criticism is “a branch of interdisciplinary enquiry which takes gender as a fundamental organizing category” (Searing, 1985:3). Although there are various forms of Feminism such as liberal, radical feminism, Western feminism, Afro-centric view etc, all forms are interested in how anatomy can be a marker of cultural, social, economic and other differences between men and women. Feminism in whatever shade or form argues that patriarchy has created a sub-human being in the female by catapulting the male to the apex of the social ladder while at the same time restricting women to the lowest rungs of the same ladder. In other words, the lens of this theory is trained on relations that bind men and women together.

This current study’s quest to discover whether the boy child or his counterpart, the girl child, is born with or without the notion of gender differences, whether their roles are divinely or socially orchestrated and determined which has opened a can of worms in many a social forum is a gender issue which can only be explicated succinctly through the Feminist literary theory which originates from and participates in the larger efforts of Feminism to liberate females from the fetters of patriarchy. There is a chorus of voices that views female subordination to her male counterpart as ordained by God. Rubaya and Viriri (2012) have shown how theologians who have contributed to the debate quote Ephesians 5: 22 which states “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husband... for the husband is the head of the wife...” From this quotation, it appears as if the above Biblical verse appropriates a superior position to the male, making the female submissive. This is indicative of how religion has had a role in cultivating female submission to the man so that she can gladly take pride in occupying what Atwood (1991) quoted in *Jump* (1991:100) calls “the birthing stool”/[maternity ward]. This is the traditional view shared by Queen Victoria who, though speaking from the past, advanced a position that lends weight to the argument above as she believed that males were superior to their female half (Rubaya and Viriri, 2012). She projected this argument in a letter to her own newly married daughter that “the woman’s devotion is always one of submission... [and] it cannot be otherwise as God has willed it so” (Abrams, 1979:1650). If ‘God has willed it so’, then, this seems to suggest that sexual inequality is a divine mandate that should not be questioned. Rigby in Abrams (1979:1652) amplifies the same point when she contends that challenging and disputing gender inequality amounts to “ungodly discontent” and such a view contributes to the nature-nurture controversy by asserting that sexual inequality is part of human nature and not part of human nurturing.

On the other hand, Searing (1985:3) argues that “the inequality of sexes is neither a biological given nor a divine mandate, but a cultural construct.” Her stance dismisses patriarchy which she views as the woman’s enemy number one. The term patriarchy, in the words of Rubaya and Gonye (2011:4) is “grounded within Feminist literary tradition and can broadly be understood

as a cultivated network of power relations that have disempowered humanity's female half economically, socially, politically or in any other facet of life while elevating man to the top of the social ladder." In the words of Lerner (1986:239),

Patriarchy is an institutionalized form of male dominance over women and children, both within the family and in society in general. It suggests that men hold the powerful positions in important social institutions, while women do not...

From this definition, it is clear that for the Feminists, gender is the intersecting point between male and female roles where patriarchal inequality can be viewed as gender-based division of power in which man is thrust into the corridors of power while his female counterpart is elbowed to the fringes of subordination.

METHODOLOGY

Because of the complexity of the issues under study, this article has no single unifying method of data gathering. However, it is primarily a library based research where a number of literary works of art will be explored to help illuminate the various ways through which society shapes gender consciousness in children. The literary works that will be explored include Dickens' *Dombey and Son*, the Nigerian female author, Emecheta's *Bride Price, Second Class Citizens and Joys of Motherhood*, and *Ike's Potter's Wheel*, among others. The sample of writers selected for this study represents both male and female voices as well as European and African views on the subject under discussion. The researcher concedes that information from literary art is 'soft' evidence as it is not based on 'hard' quantifiable data. All the same, literary works of art have been chosen to analyse this social phenomenon because although literature is fiction, Charters (1995:3) argues that "the measure of success for all fiction is how accurately it reflects the life we all live." Rubaya and Gonye (2011) show that literature is dependent for its success on the close relationship between the story and life, what is referred to as verisimilitude. Thus, literature can be used in this research as the world of the fictitious story draws from real life and can not be divorced from the specific historic and social milieu of the writer. Apart from that, Literature as a subject is done through out the whole education system and as such it becomes the window of behavioural change in the way gender relations are perceived.

Although this study is largely document analysis of literary art, some interviews will also be conducted with some families of Masvingo city (Zimbabwe). It is hoped these interviews will aid the researcher discover authentic experiences of children within homes so as to review the verisimilitude of issues dealt with in the chosen primary works of art by relating the real world to the world of fiction. Furthermore, secondary works such as journals, books and others will also be explored in order to do justice to the study. It is hoped that such a fusion of methodologies will help illuminate this complex subject.

FINDINGS

The various methodologies through which gender awareness is inculcated in children will now be illustrated through an examination of the selected prose works and findings from interviews carried out. This paper adopts a thematic presentation of these findings under the following sub-headings:

- a) Preferential Treatment
- b) Naming
- c) Education
- d) Forms of the Novels

Preferential Treatment

Research has shown that gender disparity and the idolization of the boy child have their roots in the socialization process of the newly born children (Rubaya, 2011). The same idea is enlarged by Uwakweh(1998:9) who asserts that

“ Starting from birth, through childhood to adult hood, social expectations for the male and female child differ and grow in ever-widening circles reaching a stage where each child inculcates the roles of their kind.”

Easthope(1986:3) in *What a man gotta do?* also adds voice to this when he argues that “Every society assigns new arrivals [the newly born] particular roles, including gender roles, which they have to learn. The little animal born into a human society becomes a socialized individual in a remarkably short time.” This view shows how childhood is not a dormant period in a child’s life, but a preparatory phase for gender differentiation. In other words, children, whether male or female, are ‘schooled’ in the home, at school and other social arenas, to value patriarchal differences between female and male children at an early age. As patriarchal ‘pupils’, the new citizens are taught how wifehood and motherhood are the pinnacle of the girl child’s attainment while the sky is the limit for the boy child. Thus, these young women and the young men become cultural creations. O’Connell (:76) illuminates our understanding of this view when she argues that

“in a culture that idolizes sons and dreads the birth of a daughter, to be born female comes perilously close to being born less than human... The girl is caught in a web of cultural practices and prejudices that divest her of her individuality and mould her into a submissive self-sacrificing daughter and wife.” This is a loud acknowledgement of patriarchy’s preference of sons to daughters as most societies place a higher premium on boys than in girls. This explains why some interviewees pointed out why the term ‘*mai bhoyi*’[*mother of a boy*] is so common in reference to wives, whether they have a baby boy or girl. The question that begs an answer is ‘where is the baby girl in such terms of endearment? The researcher, a father of three daughters, has also observed how relatives have often asked the question “*chii chiri kunetsa bhudhi?* [*what could be the problem brother?*] in reference to the sonless state of my family. Such statements

are clear testimony of how society celebrates the birth of the boy and dreads that of the girl. As some of these conversations occur in the hearing of children, they can only serve to perpetuate and give life to the patriarchal system.

The preferential treatment of boys to girls is enacted in a number of literary works of art. In Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, the reader notices with horror how Oshia, a young boy, suddenly ceases to see wisdom in helping his sister, Dumbi, in a variety of chores around the home the moment he discovers that "he and his brother Adim were rare commodities" and that he is "worth more than ten Dumbis..."(128). This 'discovery' catapults Oshia into a loafer around the home while the girl child dutifully engages in the work around the kitchen. Before this 'discovery', Oshia uncomplainingly used to do participate in the 'kitchen' chores, but socialization recreates a new Oshia. For instance, when Adaku, his stepmother, sends Oshia and Dumbi to fetch some water, Oshia, without bating an eye declares, "I am not going! I'm a boy. Why should I help in the cooking? That's a woman's job" (128). What is ironical about it all is that the elderly women to reverse this new philosophy in child Oshia do not admonish him for that but just laugh it off, pointing out that he is acting "just as a boy." What we see is how the children are being nurtured and 'schooled' by the older generation to assimilate the capital of the patriarchal curriculum. The painful reality is that women, too, are patriarchy's handmaids in the indoctrination of children with the dogmas that disadvantage half of society. The overarching implication of all this is that such nurturing of children guarantees patriarchy its stability as children quickly imbibe the rigid doctrine and syntax of patriarchy.

In Ike's *The Potter's Wheel*, it is another woman, Mazi Lazarus' wife, who wields the voice of patriarchal curriculum in the home by oppressing her own daughters and making them feel inferior to their young brother, Obu. It is through their mother that the six daughters are socialized into an understanding of the inequalities between sexes in their society. Mazi Lazarus' wife dotes on Obu who is the object of her undivided attention at the expense of the other six merely because he is male and they are female. For instance, when her children Ogechukwu and Obu are fighting, she only intervenes when it is clear Obu is losing the fistfight, yet, she "unconsciously relax[es] her efforts at breaking the two loose the moment she sees that Obu might emerge victorious" (Ike, 75). Such glaring partiality in treatment of one's own children is clear testimony of how "traditional Africa loves the male child" as Okolie (1998:34) puts it.

Apart from that, the birth of Obu, who is the sixth born in a family of seven helps mirror society's preference of the boy child over the girl child. Before Obu is born, Mama Obu is ridiculed for her 'failure' to bear male issues. This explains her huge sigh of relief when the sixth child turns out to be a boy because her "place had been firmly secured; she could [now] sleep in spite of thunder..." (Ike, 9,10). Overnight, she transforms and rechristens herself into '*Mama Obu*', a clear statement that she wants her name to be associated with the boy child and not the girl child. Such metamorphosis is a loaded statement to the older children who can not fail to see how the new baby has elbowed them into second class citizens. This is further entrenched by the

way Mama Obu wheels all the girls to the fields to work, “including even six year old Amuche” (p.10) while nine year-old Obu stays behind to enjoy his sleep. Such action reinforces patriarchy’s elevation of maleness and this preferential treatment of the boy child “created much unhappiness among Obu’s sisters” (60) who can easily contrast Obu’s favoured circumstances on the grounds of his biology and their own second-class treatment. For instance, Ogechukwu’s inner turmoil is reflected when she says to nobody in particular

“There is never anything I do which pleases Mama. There is no truth in anything I say. It’s Obu who does the right things. It’s Obu who speaks the truth. Everyday Ogechukwu is either a wild beast, or a mad woman, or serpent, anything bad. All because that thing with a head like a man and tiny legs like an idol is called a boy. Did I create myself?”

Such a tirade of distress reflects her anguish at being made to feel unwanted by a society that idolizes male anatomy at the expense of the woman. Thus, all this serves to confirm the influence of the home in genderising the new borns.

In Dickens’ classic novel, *Dombey and Son*, the same theme is at the centre of the story in that we see how the birth of the girl child is met with frustration while that of the boy child is with celebration, pomp and fanfare. The girl child in *Dombey and Son* is Florence who is relegated to the fringes of the family set up, assuming a status even lower than that of a servant simply because “girls are thrown away in this house” (p.84). Because of her ‘mistake’ of being born female, Florence endures neglect from her father, Dombey, who coldly rebuffs, shuns and “neglects his daughter [as he] longs for a son...” (p.79). Dickens’ authorial voice can also be heard where he says about Dombey, “His feeling about the child [Florence] had been negative from birth...she troubled his peace” (p.84). To further demonstrate Dombey’s deep-seated resentment of his own blood and flesh, Dickens writes, “... he DID hate her in his heart” (p.308). It is as if Dickens’ use of a capital lettered ‘DID’ emphatically stresses the unnaturalness of Dombey’s hatred of his own child simply because of her biology. All this paints and accentuates a horrendous picture of father-child hatred that is hard to fathom and believe. Dombey is too wrapped up in his son, Paul, whom he showers with all the attention, love and care, sending him to school while Florence, neglected in this cruel fashion, turns to a dog, Diogenes, for love. As readers, we shrink to hear child Florence’s agonized heart rending plea to the dog when she says, “Oh, Di! Oh dear Di! Love me for his sake!”(p.329). The companionship between the dog and Florence grows and the dog itself becomes a symbol of love and comfort. In a very cruel way, this animal-image which Dickens creates reduces the girl child to the level of a dog and, in a metaphorical sense, Diogenes and Florence become one and the same being as they stand for and defend each other. It is through the socializing influence of her father that gender consciousness in child Florence is awakened.

NAMING and CLOTHING

From observation and interviews, the researcher has discovered that naming is a powerful tool that has come to the aid of patriarchy in promulgating and entrenching gender dichotomy among children. As an example, a cursory look at names given to new born children reflects that there are specific names that have been rigidly categorized as ‘male’ and others as ‘female’ (Hornby, 1988). One interviewee expanded this view when he observed, “*My brother, if you are married, then, you will agree with me that your wife and yourself can not name your baby girl Peter or John. Neither can a boy child be Mary, Elizabeth or Jane. Kunze kwekuti muchipenga.*” *Unless you are made.*]]

This points out that the names given to children are not arbitrarily given but convey a specific message. Paterson (1982:54, 5) argues that,

A man’s name [and a woman’s] is of course, more than simply a way of calling him [or her]. It is the verbal sign of his [or her] whole identity, his [or her] being-in-the world as a distinct person. It also establishes his [her] relation with kinsmen.

It can be concluded from Paterson’s assertion that names given to children are a language that can communicate gender differentiation. As an example, data gathered from interviewees who participated in this study has shown that if a parent calling out his/her child who is out of sight and shouted the name ‘*Joseph!*’, it goes without saying that the child is a boy. In the same vein, if the same parent called out ‘*Josephine!*’, then, the child metamorphosises into a girl.

What can be drawn from the two names above is that for some particular ‘male’ names, there are ‘female’ names derived from them. Below is a comparison of some of the popular names:

Male _ Female Equivalent

Paul - Pauline

Joseph – Josephine

Clemence – Clementine

Gerald - Geraldine

(source Hornby, 1988: 1029-31)

Participants argued that this projects the woman as an appendage of the man where **woman** is created from **man** and **female** is created from **male**. The interviewees noted how the names given to children at times help socialize and condition them into an understanding and appreciation of gender differences. “*While Joseph hunts, Josephine cooks,*” observed one participant. Naming, in this instance, becomes a marker and an index of one’s gender identity.

The literary works that have been used for this study also clearly traverse the literary topos of naming and unnamings. For instance, Emecheta in *Second Class Citizens* shows how names play an important role of socializing children into their future roles in society. The name ‘*Aku-nna*’ is quite significant as it unveils this important aspect of the role of naming in gender socialization. Ezekiel, the father, “had named her *Aku-nna*, meaning literally ‘father’s wealth’ knowing that

the only consolation he could count on from her would be her bride price” (p.4). Therefore, straight from birth, this child carries a name that commercialises her as ‘somebody owned’ who can never act independently of the owner – the father, at the same time underscoring marriage as the ultimate goal of the girl. Thus, through the name ‘Aku-nna, the human value of this girl diminishes into an article of merchandise and in a very big way, the name ‘Aku-nna’ seems to conspire against her because nobody seems to be interested in her for her own sake but in the bride price her marriage will fetch. Okonkwo, the father, believes that “the Eze title... could be his as soon as he had sufficient money.” Therefore, for Okonkwo, the bride price is his stepping stone towards a higher social status. However, the absurdity of it all is that the bride price does not benefit Aku-nna who remains “that thing” in their eyes. She is, ironically, the ‘creature’ sacrificed for the benefit of other people. The same view is dramatized in *Second Class Citizens* where Emecheta says about Adah, “Nobody was interested in her for her own sake, only in the money she would fetch and the housework she could do...” (p.13). In short, through the language of naming, the girl child is objectified, commercialized and dehumanized.

Perhaps, this explains why the female persona in a poem titled *Poem about my rights* says (Kidd,H “And still I rise” in Jump

I am not wrong: wrong is not my name

My name is my own my own my own

The two lines above reflect a declaration by the child persona to name oneself and escape being named by others. This is a declaration of intent and self-determination. Unnaming and naming in this case become a search for liberation because names are cages which bar possibilities and potential.

The majority of interviewees in this study also castigated dressing as one subtle way through which gender differences between children of opposite sex are communicated. The voice of clothes in awakening gender consciousness can be seen in how certain clothes are strictly for one sex and ‘never’ for the other. One interviewee aptly observed the role of clothing in the genderisation of children when she said, “*Women wear dresses while trousers are meant for men. If a woman wears a pair of trousers, the name for the trousers changes to slacks. Do you know that blousers are shirts with buttons on the wrong side?*” It is clear that the dress code is not innocent but plays a crucial role in articulating the twin *fraternal* gender paths carved for the two sexes. Such non verbal communication is enough ‘language’ to voice out how women are different from men. Through naming and differentiating clothing for men and women, society is imperceptibly underlining that the two sexes are not only biologically different but society has different expectations of them.

EDUCATION

Evidence of this study reflects that although of late attitudes towards girl education are changing, a good number of people still believe that where resources are inadequate, it is a boy child whose education should be primated because he carries the family name while the girl child should be asked to discontinue as she can easily get married. The traditional view of inferiorising the girl child's education was premised on the *supposed* intellectual inferiority of women compared to men. M'Carthy (1979:1651), for instance, posits that:

"As popularly accepted lore expressed it: Average weight of Man's brain

3^{1/2} lbs, Woman's 2 lbs, 11ozs... A woman who tried to cultivate her intellect

Beyond drawing-room accomplishments was violating the order of Nature..." The

negation of the girl child's educational aspirations implies economic disempowerment. The act of denying girls education while boys proceed is language that is loud enough to communicate gender disparities between sexes. Okolie(1998:33) further substantiates on this issue of educational disparities between the two sexes, when he argues that the "...nature of children's education which, among other things, discriminates between maleness maleness and femaleness appears to create gender chauvinism for the one and inferiority complex for the other." In the end, through education, maleness is esteemed while femaleness is viewed contemptuously.

In *Dombey and Son*, Son attends school at Doctor Blimbers' "as a weekly boarder... during which time Florence would remain at the castle..."(205). The irony of it all is that Florence, the neglected child, is endowed with better intellectual ability than her brother and in the end: "Florence was prepared to sit down with Paul on Saturday night, and patiently *assist him* through so much... (emphasis supplied). This disproves the traditional presumption that girls are made of an inferior intellectual fibre as it is the boy who has to seek for assistance from the girl.

FORMS OF NOVELS

The forms of the novels selected for this study, *Dombey and Son*, *The Bride Price* and *The Joys of Motherhood* are quite significant as they help us analyse the patriarchal system's language of control of the other, what Brant() in Jump (1991:3) calls "the phallogocentric language of divisions, orderings and hierarchies." Through form, we can further note the relegation and discrimination that girls endure.

The title *Dombey and Son* is quite important. It is a misnomer because it gives the false impression that the novel is about Mr. Dombey and his son. Instead, the reality is that the story is not about Dombey and Son, but about Dombey and his daughter, Florence. This is because Dombey's son, Paul, dies at an early age and, so, the novel could have been aptly called "Dombey and Daughter." Shelston (1985:15) subscribes to this view as he argues that,

The ultimate irony, then, is not that Dombey and Son is a daughter after all, but that in the story of Dombey and daughter the most sensitive study is that of the son.

Therefore, even if in reality the relation between father and daughter is the backbone of the whole book, the title misleads the reader into thinking that the novel will focus on Dombey and his son. Thus, the title demonstrates the relegation of the girl into a shadow of her esteemed brother, who is actually dead. Although the boy in the story is long dead and absent, the title ironically reverses this position as it resurrects the dead boy and buries the living girl under the debris of silence. Thus, Florence, the girl child, is displaced into secondary importance by a dead son, as if implying that although he is dead, he is better than a living girl. Thus, the title *Dombey and Son* can only serve to portray how girls are sidelined while boys are idolized.

Apart from that, the fact that the story of *Dombey and Son* begins on the day the son is born shows the importance attached to the birth of boys. Although Florence is already six years old when the story begins, the irony of it all is that the story does not begin until six years old when the boy is born – only to concentrate on him. By employing such a form, Dickens succeeds in demonstrating how the girls are shaded into insignificance by society.

On the other hand, though *The Bride Price* talks about Aku-nna's plight, the title gives precedence to wealth – bride price. The title suggests that the bride price is more important than Aku-nna, yet, without her it can not be earned. By so doing, Emecheta illuminates the plight of the girl child even more as the title helps to demonstrate the commodification and commercialization of the girls as articles of merchandise. Such a form underscores the negation of the girl child.

Discussion

Evidence of this study reflects how children, both male and female, do not produce but reproduce the cultural indoctrination that the older generation hands down to them. It has been shown that gender disparity has its roots in the socialization process. Whether they want it or not, straight from birth, children are caught in a web of cultural practices that prepares them for either subordination or superiority. They are conditioned into consciously or unconsciously acquiescing to a fixed patriarchal viewpoint, a rigid syntax that is subtly passed on through names children are given, the privileges or restrictions they experience in their early lives etc. What is shocking in this study is how women eagerly participate in genderising their new borns as they quietly acquiesce to their children imbibing a value system that ironically disadvantages their sex. One can not escape society's socializing influence because patriarchy's tentacles and fangs are all over the social space. Childhood, then, is not a dormant phase in a child's life but a preparatory period for a phallogocentric future.

This study confirms Burck and Speed's (1995:18) argument that "*whether we are women or men, all the selves we are and could be are organised ...by various layers of the culture in which we live.*" This transforms men and women into cultural creations, man-made creatures, as configured partly by the language of gender. Though their anatomies have been used as markers

of gender differentiation, it is never the faulty of biology that one is born female and another male. Instead, as Camus puts it, men and women should learn to live together at the crossroads that history puts them.

CONCLUSION

This study has articulated and defamiliarised the patriarchal 'language' of oppression of the woman. What this study calls 'language' is not conventional literal speech or a world language system but the various subtle, non verbal ways through which patriarchy communicates gender differentiation as well as help imprint unconscious gender acquiescence in children. The paper has established how the girl child is 'schooled' into valuing domesticity and subservience through the apparent preference of boys to girls which manifests itself in the idolization of the birth of the boy child and the anguish in the wake of the child turning out to be a girl. Naming, clothing, religion and education are some facets of social conditioning which this study has explored in order to show their influence in cultivating male-female dichotomy. All this reflects how the various social arenas such as the home, school, art etc have participated in a struggle loaded against women.

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