



EXPLORING MARRIAGE AS BOTH IDENTITY AND INJUSTICES IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *DREAM COUNT*

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Abstract

*Marriage is one of the central themes in African writings. Marriage in the society of Africa is often celebrated as it revolves around the life of women, as women are generally viewed through their capabilities and responsibilities of becoming a mother. In the society, a woman's worth is often defined through marriage and motherhood, and her ability to bear children. A woman who is barren is considered to be a total failure. Thus, marriage is often seen as a woman's identity, but behind marriage also lay injustices. This paper aims to explore the theme of marriage and motherhood both as a form of defining female identity and as a source of injustice in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie novel *Dream Count*, through Simone de Beauvoir's Existential Feminist Theory using her work *The Second Sex* (1949). Through Beauvoir's theoretical framework, this paper aims to further analyse the characters' journeys in marriage and motherhood, acknowledging how marriage restricts women to monotonous and confined roles and responsibilities. Subsequently, the paper criticises marriage as a conflicting space which, in one hand, provides an identity for women, and on the other hand act as a tool of injustice and prejudice.*

Keywords

Marriage, Societal norms, Injustices and freedom, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

Born on 15th September 1977, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a Nigerian author and a literary critic. Her writings include short stories, children books, novels and poems. Her debut novel *Purple Hibiscus* earned her the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and Hurston/Wright Legacy Award for the same. Similarly, her other novels and short stories have won different awards, establishing Adichie as one of the finest contemporary writer. Adichie is also an acclaimed global speaker and has delivered several talks, including the TED talk on *The Danger of a Single Story*, which she delivered in the year 2009. Her works have been translated into over thirty languages. She is best known for voicing out for the oppressed and marginalized groups through her writings in a very realistic way, by writing on the current events happening in the world. Adichie, in her work, mainly explores on themes of immigration, marriage, identity, race, gender, relationships, social issues and education.

Set at the backdrop of the COVID pandemic, the novel deals with themes of marriage, immigration, sisterhood, race, class and gender. The novel *Dream Count* is based on the relationship and interconnectedness between four female characters: Chiamaka, a Nigerian writer who travels and lives alone in America as an immigrant and suffers with displacement. Zikora, Chiamaka's best friend, a well-defined and a successful lawyer who suffers from betrayal and desolation; the third character is Omelogor, Chiamaka's cousin, who is also a successful and independent woman; and lastly, Kadiatou, Chiamaka's housekeeper. Kadiatou is determined to raise her daughter well but is, however held back due to an unfortunate event that took a big turn



in her life. Adichie, through the representation of her female characters, highlights the plight of women who are always condemned by the dominant patriarchal system.

Simone Lucie Ernestine Marie Bertrand de Beauvoir (1908-1986) was a novelist, feminist, philosopher, theorist and an activist. Beauvoir is widely recognized as one of the key figures who helped lay down the foundation of the term *Existential Feminism*. While the term is not recognized as being coined by a single person, however it has evolved through Beauvoir's contribution through her seminal work *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is the "philosophical treatise and one of the most important books of the twentieth century, upon which much of the modern feminist movement was built" (Beauvoir, 19). Beauvoir was highly drawn to the philosophy of existentialism and the conditions and struggles of women in the society, who were often constrained by the set societal roles and traditions constructed by the patriarchal system. Thus, through her framework of Existential Feminism, Beauvoir aimed to actively voice her concerns of voiceless women.

Objectives:

- ✓ To explore the theme of marriage as both a form of defining identity and injustices.
- ✓ To examine the socio-cultural settings of marriage in the novel through the theoretical framework of Simone de Beauvoir's Existential Feminist Theory.

Methodology:

- ✓ The paper has been analysed through Simone de Beauvoir's Existential Feminist Theory using her seminal work *The Second Sex* (1949).

Discussion:

"One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (Beauvoir, 18). Beauvoir, in her work *The Second Sex*, critiques the patriarchal society for its nature and for constructing the set roles and duties of women, thereby limiting women's freedom. She is also totally against norms which define women by their relationships with men, and thus she states that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (Beauvoir, 18). Beauvoir argues that women are not biologically born with quality to remain inferior to men; instead, women are taught to respect men and to adapt to and follow the social constructed roles and norms set by the patriarchal society. Men claimed to be biologically and physically superior to women. Beauvoir in her work *The Second Sex* states that:

Man privileged situation comes from the integration of his biologically aggressive role into his social function of chief and master; it is through this function that physiologically differences take on all their full meaning. Because man is sovereign in this world, he claims the violence of his desires a sign of his sovereignty; it is said of a man endowed with great erotic capacities that he is strong and powerful (Beauvoir, 445)

Beauvoir asserts that women are "taught to respect male superiority, she may still believe that man takes the first place and sometimes she fears that claiming it would ruin her family; split between the desire to affirm herself and self-effacement; she is divided and torn" (Beauvoir, 45). Thus, the oppression and discrimination of women did not happen naturally but instead were culturally and societally constructed regulations. Similarly, women in marriage are often tied to her husband as well as to their abilities of reproduction, which often serve as their identity. However, marriage also serves as a tool of women's exploitation and injustice.



Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her novel *Dream Count*, explores the theme of marriage as one of the main characteristics that shape women's identity. Beauvoir statement that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (Adichie,18) aligns with the very socially construct image of women as presented by Adichie in the novel. Beauvoir asserts that the socio-cultural expectation of women is not biologically inbuilt but rather it was forcefully constructed and imposed on women by the patriarchal system. In the novel, it is evident that the female characters are deeply interconnected with marriage as their identity, and this very notion reflects the socio-cultural traditions of the society of Nigeria, which view women's worth through marriage and motherhood. Begum in her work *Feminism in West African Novel* asserts that:

Motherhood is a theme that dominates the writings of many African women writers who pose a question. Are women merely forced mothers or sexual objects. They point out that women's sexuality is controlled by an unbalanced sexual division of labor that manipulates woman's procreative activities on one hand and on the other woman's body presented as a pleasure based on entity that has either been suppressed or repressed (Adichie,69-70).

Thus, Adichie, through the representation of her female characters, wanted to highlight the institution of marriage, which functions both as an identity for women as well as a root cause of exploitation and injustice.

Beauvoir, in her work *The Second Sex* states that "the identity that society traditionally offers women is marriage" (Beauvoir,502), and marriage and motherhood is often linked to the socio-cultural principles and moral ethics of women in relation to their ability to produce children. If a woman, after marriage, is able to produce children, she will be praised, but if a woman is married but is barren, she is considered a total failure and is seen as worthless. In the African society, married women are often expected to bear children. Flora Nwapa in her novel *Efuru* talks about marriage and motherhood and it's important. Nwapa in *Efuru* asserts the "marriage first before anything else. There is plenty of time for other things. Marry now and you will have your children when you are young" (Nwapa,49) since "without a child, your life will just feel empty and meaningless" (Adichie, 57), limiting women's freedom and identity.

A woman with a child and no husband is considered immoral and characterless, since "motherhood in particular is respected only in the married woman; the unwed mother remains an object of scandal, and a child is a severe handicap for her" (Beauvoir, 508). However this has now changed in the present society where one can have children without a husband and no one will raise any question about it. In the novel, Chiamaka discusses this issue and assert that in today's society "a child is more important than marriage. How slippery morality are, how they circle and thin and change with circumstances. Imagine my mother's exploding horror" (Adichie,58), highlighting the changes that have evolve within society.

Women, in the name of traditions and roles which were socially constructed by the patriarchal society, are exploited physically, emotionally and mentally. Women's endless sacrifices are always left unnoticed. For instance, in the novel, the practice of female circumcision is explored through the lens of female character. In relation to female circumcision, Dirie asserts that:

It is simply promoted and demanded by men-ignorant, selfish men who want to assure their ownership of the woman's sexual favors. They demand their wives to be circumcised. The mothers comply by circumcising their daughters, for fear their daughters will have no

husbands. An uncircumcised woman is regarded as dirty, oversexed, and unmarriageable (Dirie,232).

Thus, women, out of fear that they won't be able to get a husband for themselves, end up following the evil tradition of circumcision at a very young age. To young girls, getting cut sounds amazing, since they are made to believe that it is a passage to womanhood, without thinking or realizing the impact of it. The fear of being left out from the crowd if they are left uncut makes the young girls follow the tradition because "if everyone in your culture does it, you should do it too" (Adichie, 136), as young girls hate to be different or separate from others. The impact and effect of circumcision are inhumane and indescribable. World Health Organization states that "the death rate among infants during and immediately after birth were higher for those born to mother with genital mutilation than for those without" (WHO, 3). Left untreated after the cut, many young girls suffered from contagious diseases like HIV, hepatitis and several infections and even end up losing their lives.

Dirie in her autobiography *Desert Flower* states that the practice of female circumcision "has been performed on 130 million girls and women. At least 2 million girls are at risk each year of being the next victims- that's 6000 a day" (Dirie,230) and these are the only recorded accounts. In the novel *Dream Count*, Binta reveals Kadiatou journey and the moments when she was circumcised. She asserts:

Mama held Kadiatou down, pressed firm on the mat, while her aunt NenenMawdo bent between her legs. In NenenMawdo's hand, the razor blade was warm from boiling water. It must have been sharpened over and over to quickly slice through human flesh. Kadiatou felt the metal's warm touch and then she pressure against her skin before the exploding pain. She was shocked that she has been cut, so shock she made no sound. Such painful pain (Adichie, 159).

While Kadiatou was undergoing the process, Binta, on the other hand, cursed her mother for allowing such evil practices to be done on her daughters and further questioned the evil act of cutting a part of female flesh. Adichie, through her characters, wanted to assert female voice, which will no longer be voiceless or remain silent against any danger, harm or injustices done towards them.

Not just marriage, but women reproductive systems as well are often controlled by men. Most women are forcefully impregnated by men, and when women want to terminate their pregnancy, the men rage with anger and end up assaulting and abusing them. Thus Omelogor in the novels states that:

Dear men,
I understand that you don't like abortion, but the best way to reduce abortion is to watch where your male bodily fluids go. Keep your fluids to yourself and do not leave them in undeserving places (Adichie, 297).

The above highlighted that women were not even given the freedom to control their own bodies and reproductive system. Adichie illustrates that the fact that men do not like abortion but still choose to impregnate their wives without seeking consent or any mutual understanding or agreement. On the other hand, women choose to remain silent on this issue because the society and family expectations and because they are taught to "never refuse him, never refuse him" (Adichie, 176) and to always submit themselves to their husbands, even when it means giving up



their freedom and body. This very statement mirrors Beauvoir's Existential feminism. Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* states that women "is a 'slut; open for business' ready and willing" (Beauvoir,39) at any time, and if a women refuses they shall be beaten and abuse by her husband.

Beauvoir's Existential Feminism illustrates the restrictions and injustices done against women because of marriage. Beauvoir critiques the institution of marriage, which chains women, by exposing the institution as a place where women's freedom is limited and constrained. Similarly, Adichie, through her characters and her writings, challenges the institution of marriage, which believes that women's worth and identity solely depend on their marriage and their relationship with men. Adichie further highlight the struggles and plight of married women who, in one hand enjoy the status of being married women- especially a mother, but on the other hand, are exposed to multiple prejudices and injustices as they are victimized by men and socially constructed norms.

Therefore, Adichie urges the women to fight and reject any violence and evil socially construct rule inflicted on them, as they "are not wrong at all when they reject the rules of life that they have been introduced into the world, inasmuch as it is the men who have made these" (Beauvoir 31-32) rules and restriction without their (women's) presence.

Conclusion:

Women are often recognized because of their abilities to maintain relationships with men and because of their abilities to produce children. Though this ability serves and provides an identity and status for women, but it also serves as a tool of exploitation, and most women are often viewed as object for sexual pleasures. Both Adichie and Beauvoir, through their writings, assert that for centuries women have been victimized by men and society. Thus, they insist that it is high time- or rather it is now necessary, to give back women their freedom and allow them to follow their dreams and desires, and most importantly, to allow them to make their own choices without limiting them or holding them back because of some socially constructed norms, because women too, just like men, are human beings and deserve equal freedom and respect as much as men do.

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