

A Beautiful Side of an Ugly Incident: Non-hegemonic Masculinity as a Benefit of Covid-19 Pandemic in *A Plague of Many Colours*

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Abstract

During the Covid-19 pandemic, virtually all families in human society got trapped within closed spaces where they existed as though they were in prisons. These seeming prisons coupled with the fear and tension caused by the presence of the coronavirus brought untold hardship upon human beings and plunged people into troubled situations which have been the focus of many scholarly expressions. But are troubled situations the only impact of the Covid-19 pandemic? This study attempts to answer this critical question using hegemonic masculinity as a guide, but prefixing “hegemonic” with “non” to maintain a clear direction. The study concludes that there are positive impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and specifically identifies “non-hegemonic masculinity” – a situation in which men retain their status as men but do not suppress or subjugate the women in their lives – as a positive gain that resulted from the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequent lockdown.

Key Words: beautiful side, ugly incident, non-hegemonic, masculinity, Covid-19 pandemic

Background

Barely a year after Covid-19 pandemic – an ugly incident – began to ravage the world, Nadia Anwar predicted that literary writers will certainly draw from their personal experiences and the experiences other members of their societies had during the Covid-19 pandemic to make their literary expressions, and that one of the most obvious impacts of the pandemic, “[s]ocio-economic instability, will most commonly be reflected in their writings” (“Literature in a Post Covi-19 World” 7). Not long after Anwar’s prediction, the nature of the Covid-19 pandemic, the rate at which it spread, and the devastation and confusion it brought upon societies attracted the attention of literary writers and they made efforts to creatively depict an aspect or aspects of the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, Margaret Atwood and Douglas Preston, Rody Doyle, Jodi Picoult, Gary Shteyngart and Lauren Beukes have represented aspects of the pandemic in literary works.

Due to the traumatic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and the natural human sense of sharing in one another’s devastations when such devastations are of high magnitude, and are sweeping and overwhelming, most of the scholars who have considered representations of the Covid-19 pandemic and most of those who have made critical opinions on the Covid-19 pandemic have focused on how the pandemic devastated societies, exposed structural and organisational lapses in human societies, and created challenges that people may have to battle with for a long time. For instance, Julio Torales, Marcelo O’Higgins, Joao Mauricio Castadelli-Maria and Antonio Ventriglio jointly wrote about the Covid-19 pandemic and

focusing on how the pandemic affected the mental health of a lot of people in the world, they explained that the pandemic has caused “emerging health issues” (Torales et al. 1), and that such health issues caused by the pandemic “may evolve into long lasting health problems, isolation and stigma” (1). Similarly, Yesim Tozan wrote about the Covid-19 pandemic and focused on the lapses in the world health care systems, especially in the health systems of developing countries. For Tozan, the pandemic dealt with societies by revealing that there were “deep inequalities across and within countries” (Tozan 3), and that a lot of countries lacked the ability and the preparedness to carry out “coordinated actions from central to local levels” (2).

There are a few scholars who have focused on the positive impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on human beings. However, the attention of such a few scholars have been on how the lockdown experience impacted human societies on a macro basis – how the generality of human beings has been positively impacted; not on a micro basis – how the smaller units that make up human societies have been positively impacted. For instance, Glenn Geher argued that there were some positive gains of the Covid-19 pandemic and presented the positive gains to include increased sense of community life, increased empathy among people within and across societies, and improved creativity among people in societies; and Amanda Bates agreed that the Covid-19 pandemic had positive impacts on people and argued that the Covid-19 brought improved hygiene, digital transformation, and change in fitness habits in the world. Similarly, Rebecca Shaw presented the positive impacts of Covid-19 pandemic to include renewed focus on the conservation of nature, high reduction in carbon emission, and increased use of high technology and virtue events.

The present study attempts to agree with Glenn Geher, Amanda Bates, and Rebecca Shaw that the Covid-19 pandemic and the consequent lockdown which became the only visible solution to the entire world did not only bring negativity but also presented human beings with some degree of positivity. Therefore, the present study focuses on one of the good sides of the Covid-19 pandemic that have so far been captured in creative works. It deviates a little from most previous studies to look into positive impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the minute but very important aspect of human life at the micro level of human society. Precisely, the present study focuses on a turn in the male-female power relations that occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic and explores how such turn in the male-female power relations is capable of repositioning families and by extension the human society. The study is, however, limited to the positive impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic as represented in Mngumber Vicky Sylvester’s *A Plague of Many Colours*.

Summary *A Plague of Many Colours*

A Plague of Many Colours is a statement on the various facets of the Covid-19 pandemic. It draws attention to the nature and ravaging impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, it dwells very much on how restrictions in the form of complete lockdown was employed as the only visible solution towards curtailing the Coronavirus and how the lockdown rules were

observed in African societies and most particularly at homes with husbands and wives locked in restricted spaces.

One appreciable aesthetic quality of the book – *A Plague of Many Colours* – is the fact that events are arranged in somewhat progressive manner: presentations begin with the description of the coronavirus as a cause of restriction in African societies, and progress into an expression of the trauma which the restriction caused African people, and then progress into an expression of the good side of the coronavirus and its consequent lockdown which is subtly presented.

Although every expression in *A Plague of Many Colours* draws attention to an aspect of the Covid-19 pandemic, the various aspects of the “ugly incident” which the world witnessed are presented in various genres. This perhaps, points to the uncoordinated atmosphere which the pandemic threw the world into. Hence, *A Plague of Many Colours* is an assortment which comprises short stories, essays, poems, and articles, all of which address one subject matter.

Theoretical Framework

Insights are drawn from the concept of hegemonic masculinity as expounded by Robert Cornell in the analysis of representations in the present study. In Cornell’s explanation, masculinity is a social construct which creates inequality by providing privileged spaces for men and by presenting men as humans who are different from women by lacking feminine qualities such as vulnerability, empathy, and tenderness. It is through the expressions of men in their privileged spaces and attempts to exhibit qualities that must not reflect femininity in any way that masculinity promotes aggression, dominance, and suppression of emotions and other supposed masculine qualities. But masculine qualities are expressed at various degrees by men in patriarchal societies; hence, Cornell identified four types of masculinity: hegemonic masculinity, subordinate masculinity, complacent masculinity, and marginal masculinity.

Hegemonic masculinity is the strongest of the types of masculinity Cornell identified: it is “the form embodying male domination and exercising power and authority over women (and other men), with the consequences of oppression, violence and privileges” (Fernandez-Alvarez 49). In other words, hegemonic masculinity implies the expectation and practice of what it means to be a man in a patriarchal culture which promotes masculinity. It, therefore, means that the man whose expressions and general practices fall within the purview of hegemonic masculinity enjoys the privileges that a patriarchal society must have constructed for him; hence, he dominates women in any way possible and at any given time in order to retain positions of authority and lordship over women.

To direct the focus of the present research towards identifiable elements, incidents and expressions which differ from the expected expressions and practices of hegemonic masculinity, the prefix “non” is used with “hegemonic”. Therefore, non-hegemonic masculinity is used to designate occurrences and responses of men which result from the

spread of Covid-19 pandemic and which are not in consonance with occurrences and responses that can best be described as hegemonic masculinity. Therefore, any instance in which a man shares his hegemonic power willingly or in which a man is unable to enjoy his privilege of expressing himself without being questioned or in which a man takes the position that patriarchy prescribes for women is described as an instance of non-hegemonic masculinity.

Coronavirus as an Ugly Incident: Aloneness, Pain and Trauma in Lockdown

As an ugly incident, the pandemic made the African continent to be overwhelmed and made its people to be traumatised in the manner Boniface Oyugi explains. One of the most traumatised Africans is the speaker in “Africa Where Are Thy Powers?”. The speaker’s trauma is in his voice: he does not even know whether to address the Coronavirus as a friend or an enemy; hence, he calls it “[a] friend” (Okafor 85), and an “unwelcome visitor” (85). As a traumatised person will do, the speaker emphasises the reasons for his trauma and consequent quiver: “Thy peace is stolen” (85), “... thy children die in their numbers” (85). Similarly, the speaker in “The Unwanted Guest” recounts how the pandemic has gripped the entirety of humanity, including those to whom people who are scared ought to run: “... the fingers of Imams and Pastors crossed” / “All mouths muted to avoid judgement” / “All hearts in fear of death” (89). Usually, in reactions and responses of human beings to crisis, people “turn to religious leaders for guidance” (Doehring 9). But in the event of the Covid-19 pandemic, Imams and Pastors do not know what to do or what to say but only remain mute for fear of attracting God’s punishment.

“The Land is Virused” sums the troubles that the Covid-19 pandemic brought upon the world thus:

Our air is fouled
So full of these death, and
Cries of help and agony
All across the globe (Chilekezi 91).

Perhaps, with the feeling that the description in the excerpt above does not properly capture the devastation that the Covid-19 pandemic brought upon humans, the speaker laments that there is “weeping” (91) and describes the coronavirus as “fleeting fire of disease, spreading fear across the globe” (91).

A common response of human beings to issues that have overwhelmed any human society is restriction of movements and interactions among people, and this may come in the form of self-imposed restriction, curfew, partial or total lockdown depending on the nature of the trouble in human society and how powerless the leaders of the society are in the face of the trouble. Traumatized and overwhelmed, complete lockdown becomes the ultimate visible solution that leaders of human societies could think of during the Covid-19 pandemic; hence, in order to contain the virus and allow it to leave after it has had a field day, the entire human

society was “caged” (Sylvester 96). This caging of people in the entire world – the complete lockdown – brought additional pain to the problem that was being caused by the virus itself, and therefore, increased the devastation of the pandemic. The persona in “The Estrangement”, for instance does not lament of the virus itself but of being alone in the mind because his son has been kept away from him and from other members of his family.

As a matter of fact, whatever form the restriction in human society takes, restriction comes with things that include missed opportunities, unhealthy coping mechanism, limited interaction with people and environment, all of which result often from fear of whatever trouble is ravaging human society, the hunger to see the end of the restriction, the effort to live on without any health challenge after the restriction, and consequent compliance to restriction rules. The fear the Covid-19 pandemic instilled in people ensured reasonable compliance to the lockdown rules; hence, the persona in “Another Lockdown Morning” plays alone in a golf course where she probably played with friends before the pandemic, while the persona in “Covid Days” and her friends only “dash in and out” (Olutimi 111), when stepping out becomes imperative.

Obviously, in light of the above, lockdown which was used as a method of curtailing the coronavirus – Covid-19 – added to the troubles that the Covid-19 pandemic brought: the lockdown caused aloneness, loss of playing times, limited interactions among other things. However, the lockdown also brought some good benefits to the people who were locked in certain limited spaces. Such good benefits result from how men who were confined in specific spaces with their wives adjusted to cope in their confined spaces and the position they consequently took in their confined spaces.

Non-hegemonic Masculinity as Gain in *A Plague of Many Colours*

As already highlighted, the patriarchal culture provides men with undue advantages they have over women. Such advantages include undue lordship of men over women which conversely subjugates women in somewhat legitimate order. For instance, in a patriarchal culture, the man is the lord of the society, the lord of the home, and the lord of the woman – his wife. This lordship, he exerts in various ways including unrestricted access to the body of his wife who must not object to his advances. However, the Covid-19 lockdown reduced such powers of men and they have to negotiate with their wives in order to have access to their bodies. Hence, a persona negotiates with his wife to have access to her body and, after giving insight into the reason he has to succumb to negotiation, states thus: “[n]ow a man must negotiate to eat the food he has long paid for” (Sylvester 98).

Interestingly, it is apparent that the Covid-19 pandemic presented women with the platform to remind the men in their lives of how valuable they are and prepared the ground for them to compel the men in their lives to value them. This is simply because women know that the patriarchal culture with its hegemonic practices has no value for women. Therefore, the persona’s response is forced by his wife’s careful refusal, an attempt that is meant to try her man’s patience and make him realise that he has since failed to value her because he has a lot

of distractions from other women outside the home. This careful refusal by a woman, an attempt to humble the man a little, which the persona's wife happily expresses as an attempt to make men to "forget patriarchy and worship at the altar of feminism" (89) is meant to be greeted with scorn in a patriarchal society which often ensures that "men are in control" (Sultana 1).

If patriarchy is in place and hegemonic masculinity is practiced, then the man will have the privilege of staying out in places of choice and that of returning home at whatever time he wishes. During the time the man stays out, he eats whatever pleases him that he can afford while the woman – his wife – is condemned to eating whatever is available at home however bad or unpleasing it may be to her. This show of superiority is part of a man's exercise of his dominant "power and authority within the family" (7). The Covid-19 lockdown took this privilege of men away and this gladdens one of the speakers and she states thus: "Husbands who steal out of the house / To eat shawarma, pizza, and grilled chicken / Now grate their blunted teeth on toughened hide" (Sylvester 100).

The dominant nature of hegemonic masculinity often translates to lack of respect for women, especially for the body of women who are usually considered "the object to satisfy men's sexual satisfaction" (Qasim 383). The Covid-19 lockdown brought about increased respect for womanhood in general and for the body of women in particular. Hence, the refusal of the wife of the poet persona to willingly submit herself to her husband immediately he makes advance is greeted with a plea and diplomatic approach geared towards pacifying her. And in addition to pleading and being diplomatic, the persona becomes very careful of how he addresses his wife for fear of her denying him access to her body. He expresses how tactful and respectful he has become with his wife when he states: "I increase my diplomacy as evening descends, fear of a careless word / That may deny me of nirvana at the crest of the night" (Sylvester 101). Perhaps, the persona has searched his mind and has realised that his wife picked little offences from the words he must have uttered to her. In a patriarchal culture with a hegemonic order, the man would have been angry with the woman, but the persona who has become non-hegemonic questions himself, searches his mind and becomes diplomatic.

Silencing women and overshadowing their perspectives and feelings in any form are strong features of hegemonic masculinity. As a matter of fact, one of the undue advantages men have over women in a typical patriarchal society is that men have a privilege of overpowering women to the extent that the woman's voice will not be heard as Fatima S. Jange explained. These strong features of patriarchy are reversed and a woman is seen freely expressing her emotional feelings and inviting her husband to make love to her when she needs to be touched and caressed. The speaker puts the woman's attempt to get her husband to touch her thus: "The Hunter has become the hunted/I spied madam rumbling into the house and acting strange/.../But I could see the fires of it being flung my way" (106). This act reverses the seeming exclusive right of men to initiate lovemaking in a home; and very significantly, the woman attempts to initiate lovemaking with her husband when her husband, the man, is not

in the mood for such, but when she is in the mood. This the husband expresses by stating “I was not in the mood for seduction” (106).

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic, no doubt, caused panic, pain and trauma in countries of the world and kept families in close spaces with limited interactions. Above all, these problems devastated families in various societies; however, strict adherence to the rules of restriction (lockdown) put some anomalies right within families. Precisely, the power relation between husbands and wives were corrected to a point where reasonable level of equality can exist and to a point where families can exist better and happier. This point where reasonable equality can exist is depicted in *A Plague of Many Colours* as a situation where a man can act as the “man” and head in a family without being dominant (hegemonic) and a woman – a man’s wife – can act as a woman by being complementary but expressive, free, and happy.

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