REPRESENTATION OF MALE HEGEMONY IN CHELUCHI ONYEMELUKWE-ONUBIA'S *THE SON OF THE HOUSE*

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Abstract

A literary text is capable of generating multiple meaning. While the reviews of Cheluchi Onyemelukwe-Onubia's The Son of the House had revealed the interpretation of the text through the lens of the Nigerian Civil War, violence and love; the present study subjected The Son of the House through the issue of Male Hegemony with the objectives of exploring how male hegemony was depicted in the text and how women enabled male hegemony. It adopted Sandra Bem's Gender Schema theory as its theoretical framework, and the methodology, which is qualitative, involved the exploration of the characters in The Son of the House and how they foregrounded themselves in male hegemony. The analysis followed the tenets of Gender Schema theory; the influence of culture in perpetuating the dominance of one gender over the other and the internalization of constructed gender roles which placed one gender at a superior position than the other. The findings of this research were that patriarchal systems created room for male hegemony to thrive, which placed women in a disadvantaged situation while being subservient to the dictates of the patriarchal environment they are inhabitants of. Also, as women continued to internalize this dominance of men over them, they viewed other women who do not conform to such treatment of their persons as deviants while enabling and elevating the subjugation of women as their default setting. This study concluded that there is an imbalance of power with the construction of gender roles, aided by customs and traditions. The people in power made rules and policies that were to the advantage of the male gender, and they

were not ready to discuss the possibility of creating a level playground for both genders.

Keywords: Male hegemony, Patriarchy, Construction, Gender roles, Culture, Customs.

Introduction

Male hegemony as explored in *The Son of the House* is rooted in patriarchy, which demands subservience of women to men. Hegemony is the dominance of one group over another, often sustained and fueled by certain norms and ideas. Dominance is the condition of exerting influence on a person, or group of persons. It is also the ability to control and influence. The definition of these two terms show they go hand in hand. Sanday (2001) writes that male dominance as a term evolved in the 12th century as a label to depict the unequal relations in terms of power between men and women. It can be said that this approach to relations concerning gender is part of a long history of thoughts regarding the political relations of sexes. Hegemony as represented in gender roles establishes how males and females express themselves in a society. These gender roles have their foundation in cultures and traditions set in place by the society. Boys, from an early age, are made to believe that they are the heads of their homes and should not help out in certain chores reserved for females, such as; cooking, washing and sweeping. Females inhabiting an environment that upholds these roles usually internalize them without much ado. Apart from the chores, females raised in this kind of environment also see themselves as mothers, wives and, in many cases, as a combination of mothers and wives. Their roles consist mainly of nurturing their children, nurturing their husbands, picking up after their children and their husbands. Subsequently, these constructed roles based on gender play a huge imbalance of power in a society that is highly patriarchal. Patriarchy is a system in which men control all aspects of life, from economics to politics. Thus, patriarchy has its roots in male hegemony. Male hegemony in a patriarchal society refers to the fact that men make the decisions in their families and their society. Male hegemony comes to light as

the men in a patriarchal society believe that they must be in control always and, with this belief, they will do anything to dominate women; oppress and subjugate them.

The opinion that women's roles are to reproduce and serve the men in their household which is largely propagated in the society is deeply rooted in patriarchy. This reduction of a woman's worth to reproduction and servitude is also deeply ingrained in the patriarchal structure of the society which is supported by customs and traditions. Thus, the oppression and subjugation of women are glaring in a male dominated society. This study, therefore, explores male hegemony by looking into the representation of the African woman as the oppressed and subjugated gender and how women are also the enablers of this said male hegemony.

A patriarchal society fosters superiority, which is exacerbated by the fact that male hegemony is deeply rooted in cultures and traditions. Male hegemony is centered on men's superiority and women's inferiority. Cheluchi Onyemelukwe- Onuobia's *The Son of the House* is a new text, and thus there have been little or no critical works on the text. The present reading, therefore, attempts an analysis of male hegemony in the text by showing how male hegemony is portrayed by drawing out instances of its depiction in the text. This study, apart from analyzing the text by exploring how male hegemony is represented in the text, will, by way of being objective, show how women are enablers of male hegemony and the representation of the said enablement while using Gender Schema theory as an anchor.

Literature Review on *The Son of the House*

Cheluchi Onyemelukwe-Onuobia's *The Son of the House* is the winner of the 2020 Society for the Promotion, Revitaization of New Nigerian Generations in Writing and Literature Prize for Literature and the 2021 Nigeria Liquified Natural Gas Prize for Literature. With limited reviews and critical works on this text, relevant works on male hegemony and patriarchy will be reviewed to buffer and cushion the literature review of this text which will follow afterwards. In "Patriarchy, Male Dominance, the Role and

Women Empowerment in Nigeria", Ashinyabola (2005) argues that dominance is reserved for the man in the family who automatically becomes the head of the family and it is with this role he controls the labor force, productive resources, and reproductive capacities with the notion of superiority and inferiority in mind, which is legitimized by differences in gender and generation. Ashenafi (2020) argues that the main foundation of oppression for females in Africa is its patriarchal structure. Giving instance from Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*, Ashenafi (2020) establishes that women are depicted as properties to be acquired if a man has the means for this acquisition. Further exploration of Ashenafi's critical work reveals his claim that a patriarchal woman is one who has internalized patriarchy and approves of male domination. In her dissertation, "Structures of Female Oppression in Selected African Novels", Udenweze (2009) analyzes male hegemony from selected African novels from the angles of domestic violence and religion. The conclusion reached is that the subjugation of the average Nigerian woman is rooted in patriarchy.

In his paper, "Modern African Poetry and the Issues of Gender: The Nigerian Literary Scene", Bamgbose (2012) argues that "Single Girl" by Binta Mohammed depicts the undesirable position of a woman in the Northern part of Nigeria aided by religion. Studying the poem, he explains that a woman even while single is not free from the shackles of male domination. The undermentioned paragraph deals with reviews on *The Son of the House*.

Essien (2022) in "Let's Tell This Story Properly: A Review of *The Son of the House*", opines that Onyemelukwe-Onuobia tells the story through the change of essential rules in culture and traditions, superstitions, the inequality of gender, class divisions and domesticity exemplified in the modern world. This reviewer further explains that the different themes the novel holds enable one appreciate the resilience of women, like Nwabulu, and understand the actions of women like Julie to devise a scheme in which they emerge victorious in a game with life. While *reviewing The Son of the House,* Stha (2021) contends that a major issue in

the book is the exploitation of young girls. The text portrays the culture of exploiting young girls for labour in Nigeria in exchange for money to be sent home to their parents. Other themes explored are insecurity, rape, victim blaming, poverty and education. Ijalusi (2021) contends that Onyemelukwe-Onuobia, being a lawyer, uses her experiences in her areas of focus, which are health, gender violence against children and women, and other social issues, in projecting her ideals in the novel. Her experiences are evident in the story as she expressively portrays them. She also opines that Onyemelukwe-Onuobia's style of narrating is exquisite and also makes mention of things happening in reality which Onyemelukwe-Onuobia draws attention to, such as insecurity in the state and the brutal tradition of marrying the dead. In his review of the text, Ikhide (2019) argues that Onyemelukwe-Onuobia immerses one in the Nigerian culture without shying from the use of particular words and contexts. Also, his take on the book matches that of Ijalusi, in that the novel depicts traditions such as women marrying the dead to ensure male line of continuity. Joshua (2021) also proposes that *The Son of the House* can be linked to many other Nigerian fictions. While many stories on war depict the loss of personal belongings, *The Son of the House* examines the loss of one's being. He explains that Onyemelukwe-Onuobia portrays the psychological trauma suffered by Afam as a war veteran. This stance of looking at the loss of self rather than the loss of belongings makes the text different.

Uduak (2021) explores the way Onyemelukwe-Onuobia tells the story of women's lives, taking into account human flaws as she examines the different types of African marriages. He makes mention of the beauty of Nwabulu's marriage and juxtaposes it with the marriages of other couples in the text. The critical works and reviews explored here have opened up different angles and lens to *The Son of the House*. It further shows that the depiction of male hegemony in the text is a gap that this paper is determined to fill.

Theoretical Framework

The theory on which the analysis of this research is anchored is Gender Schema Theory. Gender Schema Theory was proposed in 1981 by Sandra Bem. The theory stipulates that in a given society, children learn and adopt notions about male and female roles from the culture they are habitants of. Children thus adjust their ways of life to align with the gender roles of their culture from their earliest stages of social development. In "Gender Schema Theory and Roles in Culture", Cherry (2020) notes that Bem suggests that "Freudian theories were focused on the influence of anatomy on gender development. Bem, therefore, proposes that a child's cognitive development combines with societal influences that largely influence the patterns of thought (schema) that dictate "male" and "female" threats" (n. d.). Gender schemas have an impact not only on how people process information but also on the attitudes and beliefs that direct "gender-appropriate" behaviours. Gender Schema, according to Bem, as quoted in Cherry (n.d.), posits that "a child who lives in a very traditional culture might believe that a woman's role is in the caring and raising of children, while a man's role is in work and industry. Through these observations, children form schema related to what men and women can and cannot do" (n.d.). In "Gender, Awareness, Identity and Stereotyping", Zosuls and Ruble (2008) contend that gender schemas are thought to provide an important link between gender cognitions and gender-related behaviours. According to this perspective, once children identify themselves as girls or boys, they selectively attend to, and remember, their own-sex relevant information; and they are motivated to use this information to shape their own behaviours and make gender-related inferences and judgments.

Martin and Dinella (2001) outline two types of gender schema. The first is a general 'superordinate' schema that helps children categorize objects, characteristics, and traits into basic male and female categories. The second is referred to as the 'own-sex' schema, that children use to identify and learn in-depth information consistent with their own sex. These two schema types

let children to process information about events, objects, attitudes, behaviours, and roles and, in turn, categorize these aspects in terms of masculine or feminine, or as similar or different from the child. *The Son of the House* is fraught with male hegemony which emanates through the garb of patriarchy made worse by gender roles enforced by the culture and tradition of a people which makes Gender Schema theory the suitable theory for the analysis of the representation of male hegemony in the text.

Methodology

The methodology adopted for the study of *The Son of the House* is qualitative research methodology. The analysis adopts Sandra Bem's Gender Schema Theory as its anchor and will involve the exploration of the characters in *The Son of the House* and how they foreground themselves in the literary world of male hegemony. The analysis will follow the tenets of Gender Schema theory; the influence of culture in perpetuating the dominance of one gender over the other and the internalization of constructed gender roles which place one gender over another.

Representation of Male Hegemony in *The Son of the House*

The exploration of the representation of male hegemony in *The Son of the House* consists of two parts: depiction of instances of male hegemony and women as enablers of male hegemony. One of the most challenging issues African society faces is male hegemony which is vividly depicted in Onyemelukwe-Onuobia's *The Son of the House*. The major characters, Nwabulu and Julie, and minor characters, Mama Nathan, Mummy and Mama Nkemdilim, experience life in a patriarchal society and these characters will be studied, detailing how they are caught up in an environment that fuels male hegemony made worse by patriarchy. Instances of representation of male hegemony will be explored first, followed by how women enable male hegemony.

Nwabulu is a victim of male hegemony which stems from socially constructed rules. Nwabulu's place in her family becomes inexistent because she is a girl, and Mama Nkemdilim, her

stepmother, has a son who will take over from her father. Although Nnanna, Mama Nkemdilim's son, is still a toddler at the beginning of the text, Mama Nathan refers to him as "Di nwe uno" to show that since he is a male child, even though he is not of age, he still owns the home. Mama Nkemdilim, who takes care of all the children in the household, is not acknowledged as the owner of the house she pays and takes care of. She nurtures and picks up after her children, pays for all their needs and wants as her husband is late, but it is Nnanna who is hailed and seen as the son and owner of their house.

The character Julie is also caught up in male superiority in her environment. She fears that she is almost past child bearing age and without consideration of her worth, gets married to Eugene. She believes that time is running out and at the long run may end up not getting married. She says: I was beginning to be afraid. Afraid that I was an okpokwu, nna ja-anu, the one whose father would marry, the leftover. Afraid that I was useless as a woman, no good to anyone including myself. And now, after my mother's speech, afraid that I would not have what she thought was the best thing that a woman could hope to possess: motherhood (Onyemelukwe-Onubia, 2019, p. 120).

In a patriarchal society, titles of mother and wife are viewed as that which every woman should strive for. A woman's worth is tied to these titles. If she gets married and is unable to give birth to a child, she is scorned by sometimes her family and the family she gained through marriage. It is Julie's inability to give birth for the first few years of their marriage that causes Eugene to verbally abuse her, go back to his womanizing ways and steer clear of her. As the narrator puts it: Eugene became frustrated, then distant. Long gone were the days when he held me and we danced to Bobby Benson's 'If You Marry Taxi Driver', our laughter ringing out at our own silliness. By the time Nelly Uchendu's sonorous 'Love Nwantinti' became the song of the day, love no longer came up in our conversations. Long gone were the days when we went to watch the Rangers play in the stadium. Success, not man or woman, was Eugene's first love. He threw himself into work,

travelling inside and outside Nigeria, pursuing building contracts. Distance meant fewer chances to work towards pregnancy. And when distance did not intrude, lovemaking became work, not pleasure (Onyemelukwe-Onubia, 2019, p. 147).

Julie's mother also believes that a woman's only goal should be marriage and motherhood, which is why she asks Julie to find any man so she can get married and have children. "Find a man, any man, get married, and have children. That is what is most important. So that you can be happy and fulfill your life's purpose" (Onyemelukwe-Onubia, 2019, p. 119). For Julie's mother, the key to a married woman's happiness is children, and it is only when a woman has children that she can be said to have fulfilled her life's purpose. Nnabuzo, Nwabulu's uncle, shares the same idea as Julie's mother. He says, "Why does a woman marry? To bear children. Why did she stay even if her husband was lazy or a wife-beater? For the children" (Onyemelukwe-Onubia, 2019, p. 19). This portrays the major roles assigned to women in a patriarchal society; that of wife and mother.

Male hegemony is also depicted in the text through the actions of Mummy, whom Nwabulu works for as a maid, and the actions of men she works with. Nwabulu says, "Mummy was a civil servant and often complained that moving up the ladder from administrative officer was like pushing a rock up the Miliken Hill. Her boss sent her on errands that his secretary or messenger should run, refusing to recognise her seniority." (Onyemelukwe-Onubia, 2019, p. 31) Here, there is an evident depiction of male hegemony. Mummy's boss refuses to acknowledge her seniority simply because she is a woman. This is his way of exerting authority over her as he believes that her place in his office is the same she occupies at home: servant, meant to be controlled.

Male hegemony is once again portrayed through Mummy whose husband controls and subjects to different verbal onslaughts. She becomes anxious and fidgety because of his actions and transfers her anger to Nwabulu. Her husband verbally nit-picks the slightest of things. She is blamed for not teaching their maid, for food scraps lodged between her teeth, for dusts in

their home and, above all, for not birthing another child. Her husband complains bitterly and still blames her for not getting pregnant. He fails to take into consideration how his actions affect her and that the stress he puts her through is part of what prevents her from getting pregnant. As Nwabulu puts it, "Daddy blamed his wife. I thought that if he would stop his nitpicking even for two months, she might stand a better chance. Even I knew that stress was no helper to fertility" (Onyemelukwe-Onubia, 2019, p. 37).

Julie's father, although an advocate for Julie to be educated, shares almost the same belief as Mummy's boss. Julie's father believes that a woman should know her place irrespective of the things she has achieved. He says, "Plus, did you not raise her to know her place no matter what level of education she attains?" (Onyemelukwe-Onubia, 2019, p.114). For a woman to know her place points towards de Beauvoir's argument in *The Second Sex* as translated by Borde and Malovany-Chrvallier (2011) that a woman acts according to men's perception of her. The place of a woman in the society, according to Julie's father, is in marriage and "husband's house" and while married, the woman must remain submissive and docile at all times. The idea of being superior because of formal education is not a woman's place in the society.

Also, Julie's mother believes that a woman should make herself less for a man. She believes that successful women find it very hard to find a husband and it is this belief that causes her to be critical of her daughter's apartment and car. As the narrator puts it: I knew she did not approve of me, a single woman, living by myself. 'I am not a child,' I reminded her. You are somebody's child until you become somebody's wife,' she retorted. Would it not scare men away, she worried? A single woman on her own, living alone. I followed her train of thought and added silently to myself: a single woman, living alone, making money, independent, frightening to men, fat. (Onyemelukwe-Onubia, 2019, p. 113)

The rejection by Julie's mother of her daughter living alone and buying a car is not out of concern for her daughter's safety, rather it is because of the fact that men will be intimidated by her living in a rented apartment and driving a car while single. Julie's

mother does not acknowledge her daughter's success but instead focuses on reminding Julie that her apartment is too big and her car is too intimidating. All these, she believes, will chase away men and reduce her prospect of getting married.

In *The Son of the House*, a woman is unable to be herself, and this falls in line with Irigaray's (1985) argument of the projection of males on females. Julie's mother believes that a woman as a child belongs to a man and after marriage belongs to her husband. The woman is not to be without socially constructed roles. Most African societies heavily support male hegemony. It is shown in its favor for a male child as opposed to a female. The preference for sons leads to the neglect and dehumanization of females. When Nwabulu gets pregnant and Urenna abruptly rejects the pregnancy, Nwabulu is taken to Nwokenta, and there she faces dehumanization which seems normal from the perspective of the cultures of her people. Nwabulu notes that: The best opportunity for a woman such as I had become was to marry an old man as his second or third wife. This might be a man who had no sons and who was hoping that what I had in my belly was a boy. It might be a widower whose wife had died and who had young children who needed a mother. Or it might be an old man, who simply wanted young blood that would be difficult to get otherwise, and who was not averse to taking the baby as an extra. That way, a child would have a name and some protection from the ignominy of being a bastard. A woman in my situation did not refuse such an offer (Onyemelukwe-Onubia, 2019, p. 79).

Nwabulu's rejection by the father of her baby opens up just an option for her, which is to marry an old man, any old man who is willing to take her in, with the hope that she will birth a son. She is also unable to refuse the offer, as it is seen that the man is doing her a favor. This portrays women's dependence on men to have a sense of belonging and identity.

Dehumanization perpetuated in customs and traditions is also portrayed in *The Son of the House* through the actions of Mama Nathan. Mama Nathan asks for Nwabulu's hand in marriage for her dead son, Nathan. Nwabulu vehemently disagrees, but Mama

Nkemdilim explains to her that it is not a strange thing to do, as their customs approve of it. Mama Nkemdilim tells her: Listen, she said patiently, a trait that was alien to the woman I had come to know. You are a child. You do not know our customs. You do not know that, by custom, a mother or father can get a wife for a deceased son, especially when that son died prematurely, like Nathan, and therefore did not plant a seed in his family. It is particularly the case when it is an only son. The family name, the family line, needs to continue, you see. There are some who do it too when there is no son at all in the family (Onyemelukwe-Onubia, 2019, p.86).

Nwabulu is reminded that this offer is the best offer for her. For her kinsmen, this offer is not strange as it is in line with the customs of their people. The inhumane tradition of marrying someone who is dead just so Nwabulu can have someone to call her husband shows the debasing tradition of her people. When Nwabulu births her son, Mama Nathan does everything within her power to make sure Nwabulu leaves her home, and she succeeds in doing this. Mama Nathan sends Nwabulu out of her house but keeps the baby as the culture of their people agree that a child is his father's and not his mother's. Nwabulu narrates what her uncle told her about the place of a woman in the life of the child she birthed; "In our culture, a child belonged to the father, not the mother. Ezinwa belonged to his father's family… there was no disputing that a child belonged to the father. It did not matter how that came about so long as her bride price had been paid, the child was her husband's" (Onyemelukwe-Onubia, 2019, p. 101). Nwabulu, who carries her child for nine months and births him is not allowed to be with her child simply because her bride price has been paid. Julie, on the other hand, is able to marry Eugene because of his preference for male children. Even her mother notes that a man needs a son. It is because of Eugene's first wife's inability to have a son that her people begs Eugene to take her back, only so she can have a "husband's house" to call her own. A son secures a woman a place in her home.

Women as enablers of male hegemony portray how women enable the dominance of men. They believe that it is a man's world and live their lives based on this belief. Women's enablement of male hegemony can be subtle or even direct in some cases and Cheluchi Onyemelukwe-Onuobia manages to depict the different instances in which women enable male hegemony. A depiction of how women are enablers of male hegemony is seen through the character of Mama Emma. Nwabulu is raped by her husband, Papa Emma, and instead of a fiery attack on her husband for defiling a little girl, Mama Emma pounces on Nwabulu with the thought that Nwabulu seduced Papa Emma. This hate for the victim and not for the oppressor exposes the idea that a man is not to be blamed for any crime he commits, since he is the "man" of the house. Mama Emma pours her hate on Nwabulu and uses a knife to cut her up instead of directing this hate to her husband. In the undermentioned quotation, Nwabulu is blamed by another woman for being a victim of rape: He rolled away, and there stood Madam, a kitchen knife in her hand, her face contorted with rage, looking not at Oga but me. She advanced towards me and struck my shoulder, slicing into it like the neck of a Christmas chicken, red blood spurting onto my wrapper. The knife went up and down quickly, striking, slashing at my arms and hands. I shrieked and Oga moved belatedly, catching hold of Madam's hand mid-air. Unutterable hate shone through Madam's eyes, almost as terrifying as the slashing knife. It electrified my nerveless legs and sent me half-naked to the door (Onyemelukwe-Onubia, 2019, p. 25).

Also, Mama Emma accuses Nwabulu of trying to "steal" her husband instead of fighting Papa Emma for taking advantage of a child in his care. She blames Nwabulu who notes that "My story about what had happened did not fetch me anything other than, 'That is what happens when you try to take another woman's husband'" (Onyemelukwe-Onubia, 2019, p. 26).

When Nwabulu gets pregnant for Urenna, she makes excuses for him even though he denies being the father of her child. He denies Nwabulu because he is an only son and he knows that his parents will believe him rather than believe her. Her speaking up

about her pregnancy will only exacerbate her situation as there is a chasm between them, financially and systematically. It is this inability to speak up and allow herself suffer for an offence committed by two people that shows how Nwabulu supports Urenna's domination of her person.

Mama Nathan enables male hegemony by asking Nwabulu to marry her dead son. She makes use of cultures and traditions to exert male dominance on Nwabulu by claiming that Nwabulu's son is her grandson. The persons that inhabit the society of the primary text are unable to do anything because their customs are to be followed strictly, and because of this Mama Nathan is able to get away with child theft. Julie's mother enables male hegemony through her retort to her daughter that "You are somebody's child until you become somebody's wife" (Onyemelukwe-Onubia, 2019, p.113). This retort claims that a woman is nothing without a man. She also worries that her child is achieving too much which will reduce Julie's marriage prospect. Mama Nathan, on the other hand, praises her husband even though she is a victim of his violent actions before his death. Mama Nathan craves the protection a man gives even though this protection comes at the cost of her life. Mama Nathan craves for the superiority of a man and she sees this as a norm which comes with marriage, which is what a male dominated society causes her to blindly believe. She says of her husband, "When my husband lived, he beat me until my people threatened to beat him up. Yet, when he died, I knew that life was more difficult for a widow than a woman, even a woman who had married a man who beat her" (Onyemelukwe-Onubia, 2019, p.83).

Women in patriarchal societies are asked to endure in their marriages, that it is not a bed of roses; and this advice is given even when a man physically abuses his wife or cheats on her. For Mama Nathan, the physical abuse meted out to her has escalated to the point that her people threaten to beat her husband up. Yet, Mama Nathan still speaks well of her husband and admits that life is more difficult for her after her husband's demise than when he was alive. This shows that Mama Nathan depends on the superiority of the male; this superiority that is caused by socially and culturally constructed rules. Her dependency also enables the continuous dominance of men over women.

Cheluchi Onyemelukwe-Onuobia's *The Son of the House* critically portrays women as enablers of male hegemony through the characters in the novel. She vividly exposes how women are conditioned by the society to view the female gender as inferior and how women support societal cultures and traditions which victimize and debase them.

Conclusion

Cheluchi Onyemelukwe-Onuobia's *The Son of the House* vividly depicts male hegemony. She succeeds in portraying the different ways in which a woman experiences male hegemony in the course of her life. She pens down these characters in her text to drive home the point that women are dominated in the society, and to also portray the different ways in which women are neglected and dehumanized by the society in which they live. These issues are evident in the actions of the characters in the text. Their experiences with male hegemony, the inability for them to break away from it, and also the enabling of hegemony by other women point at the issues she tries to explore in her text. This research provides justification that male hegemony is a discourse perspective in *The Son of the House* as indicated in the way the female characters in the text succumb to socially and culturally constructed roles and rules, thereby causing them to be victimized and debased.

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