DOUBLE STANDARDS FOR THE SEXES IN THE WORKS OF SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR AND IHECHI NKORO

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Abstract
Previous studies in the area of women and gender studies have dwelt on oppression of women in the society and suggested ways to overcome it. However, the double standards on which oppressive behaviours toward women are based, as mirrored in literary texts, have not yet been adequately explored. The present study therefore, sets out to examine double standards in the societal values used in determining the worth of women and men, married or unmarried. The paper examines how internalised cultural self-worth of male and female members of the society play out consciously or unconsciously in influencing their views and actions as well as how these work against the interests of women. The works of two female authors, namely, Les belles images *by Simone de Beauvoir, a European, and* Ma vie m'appartient by *Ihechi Nkoro, an African, are chosen for the investigation. This is considered a vantage point from which to explore established conventions and how these reinforce female oppression in both societies. The study draws from feminist principles in carrying out the analysis of the selected works and points to ways that oppressive double standards can be undermined, resulting ultimately in a reduction of oppression against women.*

Key words: *Double standards, sexual freedom, social conventions, female oppression, marriage, child bearing.*

Introduction:

In many societies, social life and behaviour of people are governed by norms and rules, formal as well as informal. Criteria or standards used to evaluate and regulate women, most times, differ from those used for men. Pilcher and Whelehan (34) observe that instead of having "a single standard for all, there exist two-fold or 'double standards,' one relating to men and the other to women." Such double standards benefit men but are detrimental to the well-being of women.

Nawal El-Saadawi, a well-known Egyptian writer and activist who is dedicated to promoting gender equality, strongly denounces double standards in her writings. As Suwaed (243) points out, El-Saadawi holds that in certain societies, "there are two measures for honor and morals, one for women and one for men. Thus, women are punished for deeds men commit freely. Moreover, men take pride in the numbers of their sexual encounters," yet that is not applicable to women with

multiple sexual partners. When women have more than one sexual partner, they are seen as wanton, resulting in strong criticisms and oppression.

Double Standards in the Sexes:

One of the female writers who protested against double standards way back in the 18th century was a radical feminist named Catherine Macaulay. In 1790, she wrote a work titled *Letters in Education* wherein she argued that the apparent weaknesses of women are not natural, but rather the product of societal mis-education According to Walters (30) "Macaulay also attacked the sexual double standard, insisting that a single sexual experience does not transform a virgin into a wanton."

Pilcher and Whelehan (35) point out that within the sexual cultures of young people, the reputation of a girl can be tarnished merely by insinuations about her sexual morality. In contrast, a boy's sexual exploits usually have a way of enhancing his reputation in his immediate environment. In other words, society condones men's prolific sexual activities while women who engage in the same activities are viewed much more in a negative light.

Simone de Beauvoir captures this view when she says:

> *La situation patriarcale a voué la femme à la chasteté ; on reconnaît plus ou moins ouvertement le droit du mâle à assouvir ses désirs sexuels tandis que la femme est confinée dans le mariage : pour elle l'acte de chair, s'il n'est pas sanctifié par le code, par le sacrement, est une faute, une chute, une défaite, une faiblesse; elle se doit de défendre sa vertu, son honneur ; si elle « cède », si elle «tombe », elle suscite le mépris ; tandis que dans le blâme même qu'on inflige à son vainqueur, il entre de l'admiration. (149)*
> *Patriarchy has destined women to chastity; it recognizes more or less openly the rights of the male to satisfy their sexual desires while women are confined to marriage: for a woman, sexual intercourse, if not within marital bond is a fault, a fall, a defeat, a weakness; so she must defend her virtue, her honour; if she "succumbs", if she "falls", she will be looked down on; while within the blame that is inflicted on her lover, lies admiration. (Our translation)*

De Beauvoir highlights the huge difference in the resulting consequences for a man and a woman who engage in sexual relations. While the woman is regarded as a "loser", the man receives unuttered praise from the society and is admired as a "conqueror."

Due to this, young girls, from early on are made to believe that women are valuable only if married. Added to pressure from the society that women get married is the negative view of women who are either unmarried or without a male lover. On the contrary, men's social worth is not dependent on their marital status; they are regarded as responsible and independent individuals, whether or not they are married. Both texts under study are replete with instances of double standards in this and other aspects.

In Nkoro's *Ma vie m'appartient*, a character named Enyidiya educates her daughter Ezinma that an unmarried woman is valueless in the society. In her words, "une femme célibataire est maudite chez nous," [a single woman is accursed in our society]. Due to her mother's influence, Ezinma grows up believing that a woman's worth is attached to her being married. She fears growing up without finding a suitable man who would make her his wife. Consequently, at just sixteen years, this view pushes Ezinma to abandon her secondary education and marry a man who already had three wives and ten children. Ezinma contrasts her choice with that of her cousin Chika:

> *Chika, je sais bien que tu es plus âgée que moi mais moi, je ne veux pas devenir une vieille fille comme toi [. . .] Peut-être tu ne sais pas que tes parents sont extrêmement genés, car à 35 ans, tu es toujours célibataire. [. . .] Tout le village se moque de tes parents, de tes frères, de tes soeurs, de tes oncles, de tes tantes et de tes cousins. [. . .] Je t'avoue que mes parents sont heureux parce que je serais bientôt une femme mariée. (2)*
> *Chika I know quite well that you are older than I am but I don't want to become an old girl like you . . . Perhaps you don't know that your parents are highly disturbed that you are still single at 35. . . The entire village is making a mockery of your parents, your brothers, your sisters, your uncles, your aunties and your cousins. . . On the other hand, my parents are happy that in a short while, I will become a married woman. (Our translation)*

The prevailing view that a woman only has worth when married moves Ezinma's parents to accept that she marry a man who is more than three times her age! As Omari & Senkoro (124) assert, the African society places so much value on marriage . . . unmarried ones are scorned or humiliated." As Ezinma says, neighbours and other villagers already mock Chika who is 35 and unmarried.

Ironically, as exemplified in the selected texts, the widespread view of attaching the worth of an individual to their marital status applies solely to women. Men are not under any pressure to get married, neither does their worth or social status reduce because of remaining single. Members

of their families are not mocked or talked down on because of having an unmarried male relative. For instance, Chinedu, the older brother to Ezinma is unmarried and lives at home with his parents, yet the parents do not put any pressure on him, nor do they demand that he get married. The author uses this instance to condemn the double standards in societal values that favour only men, but are disadvantageous to women.

Double Standards and Ageing:

Double standards are reflected in the different ways that men and women undergoing the ageing process are treated. As Pilcher & Whelehan (35) put it, the society has different standards for men and women as they grow older, and older men are at advantage. Ageing reduces physical beauty and attractiveness, the qualities for which women are valued in most societies. Ageing hardly poses any threat to men as the societal standard for their acceptance is not physical beauty but economic status. According to Omari and Senkoro (126), "while a woman's beauty is directed to her face, [and body] . . . man's attractiveness is not on his face but his money." The evaluation of men is based on what they are able to do economically.

Consequently, on realizing that their partners are growing old and becoming less attractive, men often abandon them and go for younger women. This is applicable both to the real and fictive worlds. Young women (because they themselves are brought up in society where double standards are present), easily accept older men as lovers because of their financial buoyancy.

De Beauvoir captures this in *Les belles images.* Gilbert Mortier, a fifty-six year old man abandons his fifty-one year old lover, Dominique, for Patricia, a beautiful young girl of nineteen. Gilbert's motive is revealed as he speaks with Dominique's daughter, Laurence:

- Je suis amoureux d'une jeune fille.
- Comment ça?
- Amoureux. Comme : amour. D'une jeune fille de dix-neuf ans.
  Ce n'est pas si rare, aujourd'hui, qu'une fille de dix-neuf ans aime un homme qui en a plus de cinquante.
- Alors?
- Alors nous allons nous marier. (46)

- I am in love with a young girl.
- What do you mean?

- In love. Yes in: love. With a young girl of nineteen.
  It is not so rare these days for a girl of nineteen to be in love with a man of over fifty years.
- So?
- So we are getting married.
  (Our translation)

Gilbert's choice of words underscores the fact that it is not uncommon to see young girls fall in love with men who are much older than they are. "It is not so rare, these days, for a girl of nineteen to be in love with a man of over fifty years." The picture that de Beauvoir paints of relationships between young girls and older men in *Les belles images* is very similar to that of Nkoro in *Ma vie m'appartient.* Both of them present very young girls in their teens who willingly marry, or accept as lovers, men who are already in their fifties because they are financially stable.

Gilbert wants Laurence to understand that Dominique is no longer young enough for his taste and standards. He tells her: "Votre mère [. . .] se rend très bien compte qu'une femme de cinquante-et-un ans est plus âgée qu'un homme de cinquante-six." (47) [Your mother . . . very well knows that a woman of fifty-one years is older than a man of fifty-six]. Gilbert projects the point that at fifty-one years, Dominique is 'older' than he is, although fifty-six himself!

Gilbert's infidelity and betrayal cause Dominique much pain and a feeling of emptiness, making her vulnerable to societal disrepute and mockery. In a society where a woman without a man has no worth, the breakup with Gilbert results in enormous social disadvantages for Dominique. The thought of losing her lover overwhelms Dominique and makes her express her grief to her daughter:

> *Socialement une femme n'est rien sans un homme. Même avec un nom une femme sans homme, c'est une demi-ratée, une espèce d'épave [. . .] Je vois bien comment les gens me regardent: crois-moi ce n'est plus du tout comme avant. (142-43)*
> *Socially a woman is nothing without a man. Even with a name a woman without a man, is a half-failure, a kind of wreckage . . . You think I have not noticed the way people look at me lately? Believe me it is no longer what it used to be. (Our translation)*

Societal double standards strike Dominique a double blow. First, she loses her lover because of advancing age. Second, the society mocks and ridicules her for not having a man. On

the contrary, Gilbert is neither affected by advancing age nor by breaking up with Dominique. This is because societal standards do not evaluate men using their physical appearance nor are they criticized for not having female lovers.

With Gilbert gone, Dominique loses security, respect, and prominence, as well as the social and financial stability he brought Dominique. This leaves her feeling empty, abandoned, insecure and worthless. Societal standards make Dominique's concerns legitimate for she realizes that Gilbert is not easily replaceable. She refers to other men who show interest in her after Gilbert abandons her as "de petits arrivistes" [small opportunists], because they lack the financial status she desires.

Gilbert's social and financial status means so much to Dominique and she swears to get him back at all cost: "Je le reprendrai. D'une manière ou d'une autre. [. . .] Je le reprendrai ! De gré ou de force. [. . .] Je ne serai pas une femme plaquée. (51) [I will get him back. One way or another. . . . I will get him back. Willingly or by force. . . . I will not be a jilted woman.] In her attempt to live up to societal expectations, Dominique wants to regain her relationship with Gilbert, for without a man by her side, hardly can she be accorded dignity and respect!

Dominique's comments that "socialement une femme n'est rien sans un homme" and that "Une femme sans homme, socialement c'est une declasée" (178) [socially a woman is nothing without a man], [without a man, a woman loses her social class] show that she has internalized societal values which equate women to nothing when husbands/lovers are absent in their lives. The breakup with Gilbert would ultimately lead to the loss of her present social and financial status.

The word 'socialement' [socially] is of great importance because it shows that Dominique's fears do not stem from within, but rather from without. Her deep-seated fears following the breakup with Gilbert result from socially constructed standards of her society, which hold that a woman must have a man otherwise she would be considered "une demi ratée" [a half-failure].

Laurence, having internalized societal values that women are worthless without husbands/lovers advises her mother to accept other men in Gilbert's stead,: "Remplace-le tout de suite: il y a assez de types qui te font cour. Pars en voyage. [. . .] Débrouilles-toi pour l'oublier. (51) [Replace him immediately: there are enough men courting you. . . . Go on a trip [. . .] There must be something you can do to forget him and move on with your life.] This view is in opposition to what de Beauvoir presented in another texte. As Ejechi (102) puts it, "characters are not bound by any socially established conventions, they neither allow themselves to be guided by social conventions nor religious rules."

Speaking about patriarchal ideology that requires that an 'ideal' woman have both a career and a home, Tyson (89) opines that "the woman on the pedestal is the woman who successfully juggles a career and a family, which means she looks great at the office and over the breakfast table, and she's never too tired to work to fix dinner, clean house, attend to all her children's needs, and please her husband in bed." In other words, to be a successful woman, one must have both a career and a family, or as in Dominique's case, a career and a wealthy lover.

Dominique had both a man and a career and felt fulfilled until the breakup. "C'est grâce à Gilbert qu'elle [Dominique] est devenue cette femme tellement sûre d'elle." [It is thanks Gilbert that she [Dominique] developed confidence in herself]. However, with the breakup, Dominique becomes socially relegated. This clearly demonstrates how double standards are oppressive to women, making advancing years, a factor that no human has control over, to be a threat to the security and happiness of women.

Another example of double standards is the case of Monsieur Langlois whose wife jilted and moved in with another man. Langlois suffers no disadvantage from the breakup; he continues to enjoy respect from his friends. Families and neighbors still invite him to their parties and he honours those invitations without any feelings of inferiority that he no longer has a wife. No negative comments are passed because of his singleness; neither does anyone look down on him.

Here again, the connection is obvious between the societal values of the people presented in the selected works. Nkoro's characters uphold the view that a woman without a man has no worth as do de Beauvoir's characters. It is therefore safe to claim that the double standards that exist in Europe and those in Africa are closely related when it comes to how women are regarded in their relationship with men, as presented in both texts.

Childbearing and Societal Expectations:

In Africa, especially in rural communities, childbearing is considered a must for every marriage. According to Mbiti (133), "for African peoples, marriage is the focus of existence. Marriage and procreation in African communities are a unity: without procreation, marriage is incomplete." This view is well represented by Nkoro in *Ma vie m'appartient*. Before her marriage, Ezinma abhors her cousin's lifestyle and as a result asks: "Tu as une belle voiture et une maison très jolie. Mais à quoi sert tout ça sans mari ni enfants?" (2) [You have a beautiful car and a lovely house. But of what use is all of that without a husband and children?] As it is with many societies, Ezinma's view is that every woman should be married and have children. Women who are unable

to bear children despair because they are treated as failures, and worthless individuals in the society.

Thus, after six months of marriage and Ezinma is yet to show any sign of pregnancy, she becomes the victim of scorn and ridicule by her co-wives. They say: "Il parait que tu n'as pas honte. [. . .] Il y a déjà six mois que tu t'es mariée et tu n'es pas encore enceinte, qu'attends-tu?" (43) [It appears that you are not ashamed. . . It is already six months that you got married and you are not yet pregnant, what are you waiting for?]. Amidst this crisis, one would expect that Ezinma would run to her husband for succour, but that is not the case. Uchenna gets impatient with Ezinma and criticizes her for not conceiving. "Ezinma, tu ne m'as pas démontré que tu es une femme ces six derniers mois" [Ezinma, you have not showed me in the last six months that you are a woman]. Unfulfilled expectations make Ezinma sad and depressed and her co-wives ensure that they constantly remind her of her inability to conceive.

Mockery and ridicule from Ezinma's co-wives is a form of intra-gender conflict. As the analysis shows, not only do men criticize their wives for not bearing children, but fellow women also do, thereby perpetrating oppressive behaviours against fellow women. Established cultural values that women imbibe, right from infancy are responsible for women's oppressive behaviours towards fellow women that are either unmarried, or married but childless. In order to bring about the desired change, feminists suggest consciousness-raising, which will help women to understand that rather than contribute to the suffering and oppression of their female counterparts who are unmarried or without children they should be supportive of them.

Due to equating womanhood with the ability to conceive and give birth to children, Ezinma becomes so unhappy and depressed when she is unable to "prove" her womanhood by conceiving. She earnestly desires to meet up with societal standards that make having a husband and bearing children the most important things for women. As Enyidiya puts it, "J'ai un mari et des enfants. Ce sont ces deux choses qui comptent pour une femme [. . .] On ne respecte jamais une femme non-mariée"(13). [I have a husband and children. These are the two things that count for a woman . . . An unmarried woman is never respected].

The statement "on ne respecte **jamais** une femme non-mariée" [An unmarried woman is **never** respected] applies only to women. In the texts under consideration, nowhere is it implied either overtly or covertly that a man loses respect because of being single or married but without children. On the other hand, there are multiple examples applicable to women. Whether married or unmarried, society accords respect to men, whereas in the same society an unmarried woman would

be insulted, jeered at and robbed of her dignity and respect for not being married, or for not having children after marriage. Ogbenege (241) condemns the representation of women in some texts where they are made to bear the brunt alone, with their husbands or partners totally free of blame. Sometimes, the condition of married women without children gets worse than that of single women because, as Enyidiya points out, men marry strictly to have children. "Est-ce que tu ne sais pas qu'un homme épouse une femme essentiellement pour avoir des enfants? (14) [Do you not know that a man basically so that she can bear him children] This view is oppressive to women since it results in grief and sorrow when they are unable to conceive and procreate.

Even when a woman does have children, she can hardly be regarded as successful if she has no male child. In eastern Nigeria, for example, women do not have inheritance rights, and that is the kind of society that Nkoro portrays in her work. At the death of Ezinma's husband, she gets no share from all his wealth because she has no male offspring. Olachi, her co-wife tells her: "Ezinma [. . .] tu vois maintenant que chez nous une femme qui n'a pas un fils pour un homme n'est qu'une visite usée chez l'homme" (67) [Ezinma . . . now you know first-hand a woman who fails to produce a male child is a visitor who has overstayed her welcome]. Thus in order for a woman to feel safe and settled in the home of her husband, she is under obligation to bear a male child, a requirement that she has no control over. For men, no prerequisite of that nature is needed to assume any role or responsibility in his immediate or extended family. By virtue of being born a male, an individual has rights to inherit his parents' property; conversely, a girl is denied all rights to inheritance because she is a female.

Double Standards in Family Roles:

During marriage ceremonies, wives are advised to obey their husbands, embedded in the advice is the threat that they can be beaten up if they disobey. Here again, double standards play a negative role, and that is what Nkoro condemns in *Ma vie m'appartient.* On the day of Ezinma's marriage, the father tells her:

> *Ezinma, écoutes-moi bien. Dès aujourd'hui tu appartiens à Uchenna. Tu sais bien que ton mari a déjà trois femmes et dix enfants. Tu dois respecter toute la famille. Si ton mari te reproche ne retourne pas chez moi. Même s'il te bat, restes chez lui car tu lui appartiens. (32 & 33)*
> *Ezinma, listen to me very well. As from today, you belong to Uchenna. You know very well that your husband already has three wives and ten children. You must respect the entire*

> *family. If your husband criticizes you, do not return to my house. Even if he beats you, remain in his house because you belong to him.*

As shocking as this advice may sound, this takes place not only in the fictive but in the real world. Women are told to obey their husbands to the letter, even in very dire circumstances. They are never expected to return to their parents' house, not even when there is constant domestic violence. For some women, being married off is as good as being sold off, with their husbands being their masters and they, serving as slaves. In a way, the society lauds men who rule their households with iron hands, giving them credit for being "real" men. Again, the double standards are oppressive to women in this regard for they give men freedom to beat up their wives under the slightest provocation.

Another negative effect of double standards is the existence of traditionally established roles that place men above women. A day old male child is treated as superior to his own mother. Because male children in the family are considered superior and are given preference over their sisters and mothers, they imbibe that view and arrogantly underrate women, because beginning from childhood they are made to believe that women are inferior. For instance, Okechukwu, a boy of 5 years in *Ma vie m'appartient* exercises his superiority rights when he chooses a portion of the kolanut before his own mother!

A female character named Odoziaku expresses her disapproval of this shocking reality when she says "La coutume est parfois étrange, c'est difficile à croire que le petit Okechukwu qui n'a que cinq ans a le droit d'être servi la noix de cola avant sa mere." [Sometimes, customs are strange, it is difficult to believe that little Okechukwu who is just 5 years has the right to be served cola-nut before his mother]. Feminists insist that a change should be brought about; children should be helped to understand that male/female relationship should not be considered in terms of superiority/inferiority, as both sexes have complementary roles in the family circle. As highlighted through the characters analyzed, whether a man is married or not, whether he has lovers or not, people accord him dignity, honour and respect. The single man receives the same treatment as his married counterparts.

Due to double standards, men are judged differently from women. This makes female characters resort to living an 'inauthentic life,' because what they desire to do is against what society expects of them, even though their male counterparts have unlimited freedom in those areas. For instance, in *Les belles images*, Laurence has a lover without the knowledge of her

husband. When the secrecy of the extramarital relationship with Lucien is threatened, she quickly puts an end to it. Although against her will, Laurence breaks up with Lucien in order for the clandestine relationship to remain unknown to her husband. On the contrary, male characters like Gilbert in the same novel are seen enjoying sexual freedom to the fullest. Men take as many lovers as they want with the knowledge of their wives, yet they suffer no negative consequences because they are men, a feat that is impossible for women living in the same society.

Conclusion:

Given all the points that the study has brought to the fore, it is safe to conclude that double standards affect different aspects of women's fflife, and negatively so. They make it difficult, if not impossible, for men and women to be evaluated with the same yardsticks. Using multiple examples from the texts selected for the study, the study demonstrates that men 'enjoy' a measure of freedom from which women are completely shut out. Consequently, men freely engage in certain acts and get praised, but women get punished for doing the same things.

Furthermore, double standards make it possible for men to remain single if they so desire and still be given due respect and consideration. No one puts pressure on them to get married, neither are their relatives ridiculed. On the contrary, women are constantly under pressure from society to get married and raise children before they are considered worthy of dignity and respect. When they are unable to meet up with such expectations, they are considered as useless and irresponsible, their families become objects of ridicule and harsh criticisms. Oppressive double standards are also responsible for the fact that women are denied many 'privileges' that men enjoy, and are considered inferior to men.

As a way of undermining the system of double standards that are oppressive to women, both de Beauvoir and Nkoro create young characters with parents who are willing to educate their children from early childhood not to treat girls with disrespect. Portraits are painted of young girls who are assertive and unwilling to give up their rights because they are girls. A strong desire to change the status quo moves Laurence in *Les belles images,* to allow Catherine her daughter to do things that she herself was denied while she was growing up. In her words:

> *Non, jamais! Je ne me laisserai pas manipuler. Non! Non! Non. Pas Catherine. Je ne permettrai pas qu'on lui fasse ce qu'on m'a fait […] Catherine : au contraire lui ouvrir les yeux tout de suite … Je ne veux pas qu'on la prive de s[a liberté]. (180-181)*

> *No, never! I will not allow myself to be manipulated. No! No. Not Catherine. I will not let her endure the things I endured. On the contrary Catherine would have her eyes open right from now. . . I do not want anyone to deny her of [her freedom] (Our translation)*

As the excerpt above shows,, double standards continually exert forces that rob women of their freedom, undermine their self-confidence and assertiveness, asl exemplified in the selected novels. As the study shows, gender issues affect how members of the society behave, men and women alike. Thus, by presenting characters analysed in this study, both authors mirror the ugly side of double standards of the sexes in the society as well as suggest ways that this can be overturned..

With a determination as strong as that expressed by Laurence in reference to what she wants her daughter to become in *Les belles images*, parents can inculcate in their girl-children the right values and the needed confidence, thus equipping them to cope with life's challenges. Furthermore, parents should also help the boy-child not to see his sister or other girls as inferior to him, but as colleagues, as playmates, as equals. Since gender roles are learned, with constant efforts they can also be unlearned and undermined over time. When this is done, it would ultimately result in a conducive atmosphere for all members of the society.

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