

Hetero-patriarchy as an impulse of tragedy in Can Themba's *The Suit*

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Abstract

Can Themba's *The Suit* is an enthralling narration that centres on Matilda's retribution for her extra-marital affair. Philemon, Matilda's husband, unearths his wife's secret of infidelity through his old friend, Mr Maphikela and decides to take an act of diabolical revenge against her. He metes out an agonising punishment upon her, which disregards a divorce but ironically inflicts more pain to him as the punisher than it does to Matilda as the victim. This paper sets out to examine Philemon's appalling revenge against Matilda and argues that the requisite is informed by hetero-patriarchal attitudes. The hetero-patriarchal ideas, which often underpin sexist undertones are sought to be explored as catalysts of tragedy in Themba's *The Suit*. Furthermore, the paper is qualitative in nature and collects data from Themba's aforementioned narration, which the study relies on as a primary lens to unmask hetero-patriarchal notions as canons that often contribute to matrimonial complications. Moreover, textual analysis is utilised as a mechanism to comprehend, scrutinise and analyse the data acquired from the purposively selected literary text for this study, which is Themba's *The Suit*. The findings from the paper include the detection that hetero-patriarchy has moulded masculine and feminine societal perceptions and roles where masculinity is exalted at the expense of femininity.

Keywords: Cultural underpinnings, Feminism, Hetero-patriarchy, Masculinity, Tragedy.

Introduction

The first, second and third waves of feminisms have emerged to dismantle, among other things, hetero-normative and patriarchal structures which often subject women to social oppression. These vexing structures are commonly detected in matrimonial affairs where feminist notions tend to clash with cultural assumptions of wives and husbands' roles. Several feminists in the literature perceive marriage as an institution that perpetuates inequality between men and women as favour and authority is given to husbands at the expense of wives (Montle, 2020). For instance, Jeffreys (2008)

notes that wives are traditionally primed to be servants of their husbands and submit under them, and this often escalates to the abuse of the wives who become reluctant to leave the marriages because of cultural obligations. This noted, the study probes into hetero-normative and patriarchal attitudes as roots of tragedy, specifically in matrimonial affairs through the union of the characters, Matilda and Philemon in Can Themba's *Suit*.

Pateman (2014: 2017) asserts that the patriarchal variation "between masculinity and femininity is the difference between freedom and subjection." This patriarchal distinction often features hetero-norms and is, therefore, dubbed hetero-patriarchy, which is the focal point of this study. Scholars such as Montle (2021) argue that patriarchal stereotypes often underpinned cultural conventions occasion the marginalisation of women in socio-political and cultural spaces. Equally important, Raewyn (2013: 253) notes that hetero-patriarchy is a "facet of popular feminist analysis used to explain modern hierarchical social structure, which is dependent upon, and includes, the perspective of gender roles, based on a system of interlocking forces of power and oppression. It is said to be commonly understood, in this context, that men typically occupy the highest positions of power and women experience the bulk of social oppression." It is this institutionalisation of power on the basis of gender that births the problem of this study. This problem is characterised, developed and mirrored in Themba's *The Suit* where hetero-patriarchal notions inspired the tragedy in Matilda and Philemon's marriage.

According to Janson (2016: 9), "not only are heterosexual men given primacy over other gender and sexual minorities, but they also are encouraged and rewarded by a hetero-patriarchal society," and Teresa (2014: 273) adds that "on the microscopic level, heteropatriarchy could be evident in consumption habits and relationships while on the macroscopic level, it is demonstrated by the glass ceiling, marriage, and the legal control over the bodies of women." Hence, the first, second and third waves of feminisms aimed to assert and reassert women's identities in line with democratisation from the 19th century where their demands included socio-political inclusion, equal contract, marriage, parenting, and property rights for women (Wroath, 1998). Notwithstanding these efforts, patriarchal stereotypes are still prevailing and sometimes, engender tragic events as reflected in Themba's *The Suit*. Several scholars have found the enduring patriarchal systems in many societies around the globe as the canons of hindrance and delay for women's liberation especially in the democratic dispensation where the feminists' petition for equal rights garnered plenty of attention (see Montle, 2021 and de Beauvoir, 2013). However, inadequate scholarly attention has been paid to hetero-patriarchy specifically in the midst of patriarchal subscriptions where the element of heteronormativity and its role in patriarchal structures is examined. The study singles out hetero-normativity in patriarchal structures as the gap in the literature. de Beauvoir (2013: 40) asserts that "this system of socio-political dominance [hetero-patriarchy] is said to be reinforced by gender norms, which ascribe traits of femininity and masculinity to people," whereby "cisgender heterosexual men are favoured and are routinely remunerated for presenting masculine traits, and conversely, women and people who display traits deemed feminine receive less societal privilege. The concept implies that historically

this has manifested in economic disadvantages such as unequal pay, or the inability for women to own land" (Deniz, 2013: 98).

This hetero-patriarchy, which is the basic premise of this study, is examined from a literary perspective. Can Themba's *The Suit* is utilised as a lens to crystallise and fulfil the objective of the study, which is to comprehend hetero-patriarchy and its role in marginalising women to an extent of the tragedy. It has selected and given special focus to hetero-patriarchal attitudes amongst other patriarchal notions that vex women and hinder their progress socio-politically and culturally.

Method

This study has employed a qualitative methodology to understand and scrutinise hetero-patriarchal norms through a literary text. Bandhari (2020: 1) asserts that "qualitative research involves collecting and analysing non-numerical data (e.g., text, video, or audio) to understand concepts, opinions, or experiences. It can be used to gather in-depth insights into a problem or generate new ideas for research." Moreover, the study is purely text-based and has adopted a textual analysis, which is a method of describing, interpreting and understanding texts (Caulfield, 2020).

The chosen literary text for this study through a purposive sampling technique in which the researcher relies on his or her sound judgement (Black, 2010), is Can Themba's *The Suit*. The aforementioned narration is chosen out of other literary texts by virtue of its reflection of hetero-patriarchal systems and their impacts on women. Therefore, primary data is collected from Themba's *The Suit* and supplementary data from journal articles and books. The acquired has been critically analysed and discussed through the thematic technique.

Results and discussions

This section of the study presents, analyses and discusses the data acquired from can Themba's *The Suit*, which is the sampled narration for this study, thematically. The relevant themes are generated in line with the objective of the study.

The Suit

Daniel Canodoise "Can" Themba was one of the most decorated African authors. He was born in Marabastad, South Africa on 21st June 1924 and died on the 8th September 1967. Most of his fictional work revolves around Sophiatown, Johannesburg in South Africa. Sophiatown is renowned for its apartheid history where the then ruling government of apartheid in South Africa passed a Group Areas Act which saw the removal of black people residing in the town and ultimately the demise of Sophiatown. *The Suit*, like his other fictional work such as *Deep cuts* and *The World of Can Themba* make allusions to Sophiatown. The town was distinguished by crime, violence and apartheid hardships. The central figure of the story, Philemon is said to go "to the Sophiatown Post Office which is placed on the exact latitude between Sophiatown and the white man's surly Westdene...posted his boss's letters, and walked to the beer-hall at the tail-end of Western Native Township." (*The Suit*: 6). It is further narrated that Philemon "opened the wardrobe door, and as he dug into it, he cheerfully spoke to his wife: Fancy, Tilly, I forgot to take my pass" (*The Suit*: 6). These events delineate the conditions of apartheid, which included the enforcement of black people to carry passes whenever they are in the city. However, the story gives extra focus to the rise and fall of Philemon and Matilda's focus due to hetero-patriarchy.

Several canons of hetero-patriarchy emerge from the foundations of Philemon and Matilda's marriage such as:

Cultural underpinnings

The onset of Philemon and Matilda's love story portrays denunciation to cultural assumptions that are predominately utilised in traditional societies to assert both men and women's (gender) roles within socio-cultural and political dimensions. The cultural notions that emphasise gender roles are sometimes found to be the catalysts of patriarchy. Wood and Eagly (2010) postulate that "gender roles are essential for understanding the work-home interface. They are shared beliefs that apply to individuals on the basis of their socially identified sex, which are the basis of the division of labour in most societies." Moreover, according to Montle (2021), cultural notions have limited women's roles to domestic work; cooking, cleaning, babysitting, gardening and washing. In refutation, Philemon impartially takes part in the domestic duties of the household and this initiative seeks to invalidate the cultural underpinnings that have set limitations and roles for men and women:

He had a trick for these morning chores. While the fire in the old stove warmed up, the water kettle humming on it, he gathered and laid ready the things he would need for the day: brief case and the files that go with it; the book that he was reading currently; the letters of his lawyer of a boss which he usually posted before he reached the office; his wife's and his own dry cleaning slips for the Sixty-Minutes; his lunch tin solicitously prepared the night before by his attentive wife. And, to-day, the battered rain cape. By the time the kettle on the stove sang (before it actually boiled), he poured water from it into a wash basin, refilled the kettle and replaced it on the stove. Then he washed himself carefully: across the eyes, along the nose bridge, up and down the cheeks, around the ears, under, in and out the armpits, down the torso and in between the legs. This ritual was thorough, though no white man a-complaining of the smell of wogs knows anything about it. Then he dressed himself fastidiously. By this time he was ready to prepare breakfast. Breakfast! How he enjoyed taking round a tray of warm breakfast to his wife, cuddled in bed (*The Suit*: 1-2).

The excerpt above points out Philemon's morning ritual where he performed domestic duties in the household whilst his wife would be asleep at the time. However, in culturally-driven societies, it is the wife who is expected to perform domestic duties in the house especially in the morning. Cerrato and Cifre (2018: 2) carried a study on house chores by means of "a questionnaire applied to 515 subjects (63% men) of two independent samples of Spanish men and women without emotional relationship, who lived with their heterosexual partners. As expected, results firstly show unequal involvement in household chores by women and men as it is higher in women than in men, and the perception of partner involvement is lower in women than in men." This makes Philemon's subscription to house chores whilst also being the breadwinner of the house a rare case. It is a norm and commendable practice when a woman performs domestic duties of the household. This is, sometimes, reinforced by biblical scriptures. For instance, according to 1. Titus 2:3-5, "In the same way instruct the older women to behave as women should who live a holy life. They must not be slanderers

or slaves to wine. They must teach what is good, in order to train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, and to be good housewives who submit themselves to their husbands, so that no one will speak evil of the message that comes from God," and 2. 1 Timothy 5:13-15, "They also learn to waste their time in going around from house to house; but even worse, they learn to be gossips and busybodies, talking of things they should not. So I would prefer that the younger widows get married, have children, and take care of their homes, so as to give our enemies no chance of speaking evil of us. For some widows have already turned away to follow Satan." These scriptures appear to encourage women to perform domestic duties in their households and this seems to be institutionalised and performed by many women. In the Heart newsletter (2020), a woman gives an account of her marital life:

I always make sure I don't go to bed until everyone's lunches are packed, their clothes are set out for the next day including my husband's and the house is clean, dishwasher is on and load of washing is on. Sometimes it means I get to bed at 9, sometimes that means I get to bed at midnight, but I always get up early (4.30am with my husband to make his breakfast and coffee) to make time for me to have a hot coffee and do my hair and get a little peace and quiet and meditation and exercise in, and do my face for the day. "A happy mum equals a happy household. Do it even when you feel like not doing it because you'll be happy for it the next day."

Hetero-patriarchy

Despite Philemon's seemingly denunciation of cultural underpinnings that often enkindle patriarchal notions, there are hetero-patriarchal elements that ultimately lead to tragedy in the marital union. Amongst the petitions of feminists in the first, second and third waves, education was one of the bolded demands. According to TheirWorld (2017), "gender stereotypes about the role of women as relegated to the family sphere underpin all obstacles to girls' equal access to quality education. Girls are often socialised to assume domestic and care responsibilities, with the assumption that they will be economically dependent on men. The stereotype of men as breadwinners leads to the prioritisation of boys' education." This manifests in Themba's *The Suit* where Matilda lingers as a housewife and Philemon, the breadwinner. He would leave her behind and go to work:

Matilda, too, appreciated her husband's kindness, and only put her foot down v/ hen he

offered to wash up also.

"Off with you" she scolded him on his way.

At the bus-stop he was a little sorry to see that jovial old Maphikela was in a queue for a bus ahead of him (*The Suit*: 2).

The biblical scripture, 1 Titus 2: 3-5 quote under the cultural underpinnings theme guides women to become "good housewives who submit to their husbands." This perception is commonly held in culturally orientated societies where women were brought up to be good subscribers of domestic work: cooking, cleaning and gardening whilst their male counterparts were handpicked to be educated. Rendo

(2018: i) asserts that “despite decades of progress, girls around the world are still unable to go to school at the same rate as boys due to a range of barriers, according to a new report by the United Nations’ education body, UNESCO.” Consequently, this reduces women’s employment opportunities, thus, cementing hetero-patriarchy. Several assumptions emerged to suggest that financial insecurity often binds women to patriarchal conditions (Radebe, 2012). As a result, the women are impelled to assume the identity of domestic work, which makes them subservient to patriarchy. Even women who, fortunately, manage to secure employment, which qualify them to be independent are still unable to break away from patriarchal structures due to cultural underpinnings that coerce them to subscribe to domestic duties, which according to Cerrato and Cifre (2018), reduces women’s ability to devoted to work and other interests outside the household.

Tragedy

The patriarchal conditions in the marital union of Philemon and Matilda led to a series of tragic events in the story. It is the patriarchal and cultural assumptions discussed in the preceding sections that limit women’s roles in marriages to domestic duties where they are dubbed housewives. Matilda also assumed the role of housewifery and remained in the house as Philemon went to work. This engendered immoral thoughts in Matilda as she gave in to infidelity: “Anyway, it seems there’s a young man who’s going to visit your wife every morning . . . ah . . . for these last bloomin’ three months. And that wife of mine swears by her heathen gods you don’t know a thing about it” (*The Suit*: 2). The housewifery role is one of the reasons that women often point out to explain their involvement in extramarital affairs. The proverb, “an idle mind is the devil’s worship”, which means that loneliness can lead to temptation is found to be in the centre of infidelity. Brown (2021) adds that “some women cheat to avoid boredom,” and a respondent in a Daily sun article by Masipa (2017) buttresses this: “I sleep that with these men [concubines] when my husband is at work.” Matilda also slept with another man while Philemon was at work until his old friend, Maphikela, informed him:

The calm he achieved was tense . . . but he could think now . . .he could take a decision . .

With almost boyishly innocent urgency, he rushed through his kitchen into his bedroom. In the lightning flash that the eye can whip, he saw it all . . . the man beside his wife . . . the chestnut arm around her neck . . . the ruffled candlewick bedspread . . . the suit across the chair. But he affected not to see. He opened the wardrobe door, and as he dug into it, he cheerfully spoke to his wife: “Fancy, Tilly, I forgot to take my pass. I had already reached town, and was going to walk up to the office. If it hadn’t been for wonderful old Mr. Maphikela.”

A swooshing noise of violent retreat and the clap of his bedroom window stopped him. He came from behind the wardrobe door and looked out from the open window. A man clad only in vest and underpants was running down the street. Slowly, he turned round and contemplated . . . the suit. Philemon lifted it gingerly under his arm and looked at the stark horror in Matilda’s eyes. .She was now sitting up in bed. Her

mouth twitched, but her throat raised no words (*The Suit: 3*).

Philemon's discovery of Matilda's extra-marital galvanised him to mete out punishment against his wife. His diabolical revenge disregards divorce but exudes extreme levels of gender-based violence. Matilda's concubine left his suit behind, which the title of story derives from: "A man clad only in vest and underpants was running down the street. Slowly, he turned round and contemplated . . . the suit" (*The Suit: 3*). Philemon afforded the suit human qualities and rechristened it "a visitor" and it played an enormous in the house: "'Ha', he said, 'I see we have a visitor.' indicating the blue suit. "We really must show some of our hospitality. But first, I must phone my boss that I can't come to work today . . . mmmmer, my wife's not well. Be back in a moment, then we can make arrangements" (*The Suit: 3*). Matilda was forced to treat the suit with the same hospitality she would give to a guest. This meant preparing for food it, feeding, bathing and taking walks with it everyday:

"When he returned he found Matilda weeping on the bed. He dropped the suit beside her on the bed, pulled up the chair, turned it round so that its hack came in front of him, sat down, brought his chin on his folded arms before him, and waited for her. After a while the convulsions of her shoulders ceased. She saw a smug man with an odd smile and meaningless inscrutability in his eyes. He spoke to her with very little noticeable emotion in his voice; if anything, with a flutter of humour.

'We have a visitor, Tilly.' His mouth curved ever so slightly. 'I'd like him to be treated with the greatest of consideration. He will eat every' meal with us and share all we have. Since we have no spare room, he'd better sleep in here. But the point is, Tilly, that you will meticulously look after him. If he vanishes or anything else happens to him ...' A shaft of evil shot from his eye . . . 'Matilda, I'll kill you'" (*The Suit: 4*).

Nurturing the suit like a visitor became Matilda's punishment, which subjected her to emotional and psychological abuse. This punishment unveils patriarchal ideals where power controls the narrative. Nuwer (2017) asks the question, if superior was available to women, how would society change? Then, postulates that "strength is one of the few ways that men, on average, exceed the abilities of women – but if that changed, it would in fact be a continuation of the way that male identity and 'traditional' masculinity is already being challenged in the real world" (Nuwer, 2017: 4). In addition, Katz (2017: 8) affirms that "if women were stronger, they would immediately become less subject to male harassment and violence, and rape would go down by orders of magnitude." Philemon's words, "Matilda, I'll kill to you," (*The Suit: 4*) delineate the role masculinity in the execution of the punishment. Furthermore, Matilda attempted all efforts within her reach to earn Philemon's forgiveness:

He returned home for supper . . . and surprise. His dingy, little home had been transformed ,and the stern masculinity it had hitherto received had been wiped away, to be replaced by anxiously feminine touches here and there. There were even gay, colourful curtains swirling in the kitchen window. The old-fashioned coal stove gleamed in its blackness. A clean, chequered oil cloth on the table. Supper ready. Then she appeared in the doorway of the bedroom. Heavens! here was the woman he had married the young, fresh, cocoa-coloured maid who had sent rushes of emotion shuddering through him. And the dress she wore brought out all the girlishness of

her, hidden so long beneath German print. But no hint of coquettishness, although she stood in the doorway and slid her arm up the jamb, and shyly slanted her head to the other shoulder. She smiled weakly. What makes a woman like this experiment with adultery?... "Matilda!" he barked. "Our visitor!" The sheer savagery with which he cracked at her jerked her up, but only when she saw the brute cruelty in his face did she run out of the room, toppling the chair behind her (*The Suit*: 5).

Matilda's efforts to be forgiven ended with disappointments and Philemon continue to enforce the punishment. She even joined a local cultural club for married women to seek solace as "After that first breakdown, Matilda began to feel that her punishment was not too severe, considering the heinousness of her crime. She tried to put a joke into it. But by slow, unconscious degrees, the strain nibbled at her," (*The Suit*: 5). Despite this, emotional and psychological pain as a result of her appalling punishment continued to haunt Matilda to an extent of contemplating to leave Philemon. However, due to cultural underpinnings that often persuade women to endure marital pain and the societal stigma that comes with being a divorced woman, she discarded the idea. Matope et al. (2013: 191) brings forth a participant's remark, "When I go to my paternal aunt to complain about the beatings I get from Musa, she says her husband was and is still no different as he still beats her. My aunt says there is nothing to do once the cows are paid. Society sanctions violence as the community insist he is right." Likewise, Matilda cultural notions held by her mother dispirited her from exiting her abusive marriage coupled with financial dependency on Philemon:

In the bedroom, Matilda said to herself that things could not go on like this. She thought of how she could bring the matter to a head with Philemon; have it out with him once and for all. But the memory of his face, that first day she had forgotten to entertain the suit, stayed her. She thought of running away. Where to? Home? What could she tell her old-fashioned mother had happened between Philemon and her? All right, run away clean then. She thought of many young married girls who were divorcees now, who had won their freedom. What had happened to Staff Nurse Kakile? That woman drank heavily now, and when she got drunk, the boys of Sophiatown passed her around and called her the Cesspot (*The Suit*: 6).

Matilda's punishment ultimately came to a tragic close after her last attempting to resuscitate her marriage. She threw a party where she invited other married members of the local cultural club she joined. However, this did not appeal to Philemon to suspend Matilda's punishment for that day: "Matilda caught the curious look on Philemon's face. He tried to disguise his edict when he said: "Er . . . the guest of honour." But Matilda took a chance. She begged: "Just this once, Phil". He became livid. "Matilda!" he shouted, "get our visitor!" Then with incisive sarcasm: "Or are you ashamed of him?" (*The Suit*: 7). This moment convinced Matilda to believe that there is no way out and consequently, she committed suicide. Despite meting out a harsh punishment upon her, Matilda's demise escalated Philemon's agony: "There she lay, curled as if just before she died she begged for a little love, implored some implacable lover to cuddle her a little. . . just this once . . . just this once more. In screwish anguish. Philemon cried, "Tilly!" (*The Suit*: 8).

Conclusion

The paper has endeavoured to navigate through some of the dynamics of tragedy in matrimonial affairs and specifically examined hetero-patriarchal norms. The findings from the sampled narration unveiled the hetero-patriarchal attitudes as one of the roots of catastrophe, especially in marital unions. It is the cultural, masculine and patriarchal underpinnings that fostered tragedy in Philemon and Matilda's marriage. The paper has argued that the aforementioned canons of hetero-patriarchy has resulted in infidelity and ultimately the death of Philemon's wife, Matilda. As has been shown in Themba's *The Suit* hetero-patriarchal norms are often braced by cultural assumptions that assert wives and husbands' roles where the former is favoured. Matilda thought of leaving her marriage but thought of cultural obligation that binded her to marriage. Further research could aim to establish the manner in which cultural notions are sometimes excused to abuse women. The research would point out the partiality and impartiality of the roles that culture affords to husbands and wives.

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