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## Textual Analysis of Danai Guriras play "Eclipsed" from the lens of Simone de Beauvoir's Existentialist Feminist Theory

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### Abstract

The purpose of this research is to analyze women's suffrage from marginalization and oppression during the war times. In order to inquire about this, the play *Eclipsed* (2016) by Danai Gurira has been selected. The book talks about the basic rights that women are being deprived of and how they are forcefully accustomed to doing things without their will. In order to conduct the research, the theory of Existentialist Feminism by Simone de Beauvoir has been applied to look at the deprivation of women rights in the play and the principles are taken specifically from Beauvoir's book, *The Second Sex* (2011). The theory talks about the gender inequalities that prevail in society and how men, in several instances from history, have acted superior to women and have considered them as "Others". The methodology that has been used for the analysis is the textual analysis by Bauer. The research is important because it helps to understand a Zimbabwean writer's perspective of Women's rights, which shows how the patriarchal society has engraved the fear of growth into women. The gap of the research is that it is going to bring forward the sufferings of the neglected women of the society i.e the Liberian women. Blacks suffer due to their color and not much light is shed upon their lives. Therefore, this research aims to put black women in focus.

**Key Words:** *Existentialism, Other, Feminism, Marginalization, Oppression, Subject*

## Introduction

The purpose of this research is to explore the play *Eclipsed* (2016) through the application of Existentialist Feminist theory. For human beings, a human's existence is important because it defines his/her individuality and freedom of choice. It shows that a human can decide his own fate and shape his own life, according to his free will. Keeping this importance to exist, Jean Paul Sartre, who is considered as the father of Existentialism gave the concept that "Existence precedes essence" (Sartre, 1965, p. 827-828). By proposing this notion, he emphasized on the fact that whatever a human being is, is the result of his own actions. It is in our hands to choose the good or the bad for us. Moreover, when a human being chooses something for himself, he in exchange makes an example for the other person thus, adding to the fact that along with our own actions, we are also somewhat important for other's existence. Thus, "man has neither a past nor a future; nothing behind him or before him" and is free in every aspect (Tran, 2013). Existentialist feminists, like the Existentialists, believe in the complete freedom to be provided to women. There are socially determined gender roles that suppress the identity of women and cause a sense of alienation and anxiety for them. According to these philosophers, such notions should be removed as they stop women from growing and should move further from the gender-determined roles of society. Beauvoir adopted Sartre's concept of Existentialism, especially his notion of, "opposition between a sovereign self- a subject - and an objectified Other" (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 11). She, in her book, *The Second Sex* (2011) has worked specifically on the treatment of women as "Others" as the alienated ones. In it, the man is the subject who looks for ways to oppress women and the woman is the one who keeps on getting suppressed.

Gurira's play *Eclipsed*, talks about the captivation of black women after Liberia's Civil War and how they are not allowed to escape from the situation of slavery. They are forcefully made to do things, not provided the resources as well as their rights, separated from their families, and used as objects of gratification for the leader of the army. According to Katherine Jean High (2016), in her review of *Eclipsed*, the war is an event that is created by the men but it "completely controls these women's lives" (p. 459). Thus, looking from Beauvoir's theory, these women are under the suppression of men, treated as "others" like objects, and lack the freedom of choice.

The research has an important contribution in the field of study because it takes into consideration the marginalized strata of the world, i.e. black people. An article by Riphagen states that even in contemporary society, the major problem is the inequality between minorities as compared to whites. Many ethnic groups are the victims of racism but the highest-burden that lays is upon the African-Americans. They have been "segregated and excluded" from the rest of the society and the white supremacy has remained persistent even in the 21st century (Riphagen, pp. 97-98). Similarly, black women have also had a history of being victimized by racism. Willingham (2018) states that these women "continue to battle" from the oppression including being "beaten, raped, or shot to death" (p. 77). Another factor that makes this research a significant one is that it explores a very sensitive issue that how women are treated during war times and have to suffer the destruction including rape and sexual abuse. According to K.J Nigh (2016), these topics are "mostly ignored" whenever there is a discussion about the aftermath of war (p. 459). The play specifically sheds light upon such an issue and portrays how women are

forced to lose their identity as well as their basic rights.

### Research Methodology

The study aims to look at the marginalization of Liberian Women during the Liberian Civil War, under the authority of the Commanding Officer. The research will use the method of Textual Analysis for analysis. According to Bauer, et al. (2014) the aim of textual analysis is "to explain the life-world within which the text is embedded" (p. 3). It tries to open up the point of view of the writer that has been "delineated" by the culture or the society (Bauer et al., 2014). The research will analyze the factors involved in the oppression of women during the war, by taking Beauvoir's theoretical framework in view and by focusing primarily on the text of the play.

### Research Objectives:

The research will work on following objectives:

- 1). To address the issue of existentialist feminism in the play.
- 2). To evaluate the "otherness" of the women in the play.
- 3). To analyze the kind of social construct present in the play.

### Statement of the problem:

Women's marginalization is an important issue that has been prevailing in our society for a long time, especially the oppression of black women. These black women have been given less chance to represent themselves and their accounts of history. In this regard, the trauma that these women faced during the wars have not been brought into focus and the history related to their exploitation remains hidden. Therefore, the research focuses on the issue of the oppression of black women by society as well as during the war upheaval.

### Literature Review

The theory of existential feminism has been widely explored by different

researchers. Moreover, the play that is under study has also been analyzed through different lenses. In the research conducted by [Fidah Yusuf, \(2020\)](#), she explored Existentialist feminism in the novel "Cigarette" by Ratih Kumala. For analysis, the researcher used Simone De Beauvoir's theory. The aspect that the researcher pointed out through this theory was to describe the struggle of a woman in her journey towards an independent life. Thus, feminism is a movement that aims to bring and recognize the position of women into exposure. The approach of this research is different from the one being conducted, as it would talk about the free will that is not granted to women to make their decisions whereas in this research the researcher has explained the protagonist's path to independent life. Similarly, in another research, by Rohmawati & Pandin, the researchers used Beauvoir's theory to analyze the role of Indonesian women in the 21st century. According to the researchers, the role of women in Indonesia is still a debatable topic. The men have a feeling of superiority over women by labeling them as "others" as stated by Beauvoir. The population of men in Indonesia is 50.58% and of women is 49.2%, which is almost equal but still, gender inequalities reside in the country ([Rohmavati & Pandin, 2021, p. 2](#)). The research proposes that women were still under some restrictions and prohibitions in Indonesia, 20th century. The current research talks about Liberian women in comparison to this research that highlights Indonesian women.

Beside the theory, the play has been analyzed differently. Firstly, the writer, W.B Chon, in the chapter, *Intercultural Dramaturgy: Dramaturg as Cultural Liaison* ', has talked about Gurira's journey towards writing the play *Eclipsed*. The writer has researched on this play to present it on stage and while researching, states that Gurira had

seen the picture of female fighters of Liberia in the New York magazine and took inspiration from it. She interviewed some women in 2007, who survived Liberia's Civil War and the women were either the peacemakers in the war or the ones who were treated as sexual objects by the militants (Chon, 2017). Thus, the play is made on the real-life experiences of women who are not fictional characters. The play gives us an insight into the history, culture and politics of Liberia. This adds to the significance of the current research as it is based upon real-life play and events. In another research conducted by Fatma El-Mehairy (2016), with the name, *Lara Foot Newton's Tshepang: The Third Testament and Danai Gurira's Eclipsed: A Theatre of War and Hope*, the researcher has talked about the treatment of women as "battlefields" during wars (p. 583). Sometimes during the war, the women become the tool of assault for the men and are treated brutally. In this regard, Lara Foot's Newton's play is about the rape of a nine months old baby by her mother's lover, due to the effects of apartheid and Danai Gurira's play talks about the power used by higher officers on women, in the Post-Liberian Civil war period. For the research, the theory that has been used is the Africana Womanist Theory, which specifically talks about violence against Africans and distinguishes them from non-African women (Mehairy, 2016, p. 581). The research proposes that both playwrights have been able to address those issues of patriarchy and women's subjugation that are considered taboo in society. The research that is currently being conducted has used a different theory for looking at Gurira's play and that is Existentialist feminist theory. Therefore, looking at these researchers, it is evident that the following research is different in the application of the theory. In the previous researchers, Existentialist Feminism has not been used as a source of

analyzing man's superiority in terms of war situations. However, this research provides an opportunity to apply Simone de Beauvoir's principles of women's degradation to analyze *Eclipsed* by Danai Gurira. Moreover, black women, especially Zimbabwean women, have been left unexplored by many researchers and this is also based upon this aspect.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Feminism is the movement that emerged as the women's urge to be equal to men and have their political, economic and social rights. It is a protest against the discrimination present between men and women, with the realization of the inferiority that they have to face under the patriarchal systems. As Jackson and Jones (2018) describe that feminism was brought to "understand women's subordination" and their "marginalization within a variety of cultural and social arenas" (p. 1). It has been divided into three phases:

#### ***i). First Wave Feminism***

The First Wave of feminism started in 1848, when feminists demanded their right to vote in the Seneca Falls Convention. Following that, countries started to adopt this notion and New Zealand was the first country to give this right to women in 1893, with Australia in 1902 and Finland in 1906 (Olson).

#### ***ii). Second Wave Feminism***

The Second Wave was related to overcoming the cultural constraints imposed upon women. The feminists thought that they were confined to homemaking only and needed to be allowed to do different works. Later, they were given equal opportunities and eventually the right to abortion also.

#### ***iii). Third Wave Feminism***

The late 1960's and 1970's, which define the third wave were the years of Women Liberation Movement keeping the fact that earlier movements did not talk about minorities such as blacks or gays or lesbians. Thus, this period was a radical change for

women of all sorts and the early feminist theory was concerned with "causes of women's oppression to overturn the male-dominated social order" (Jackson & Jones, 2018, p. 3).

Feminism is however not just a movement, rather it has become a literary theory, which helps to understand the different works of women describing their experiences and struggles. According to Lisa Turtle (Guo, 2013, p. 453), the aim of feminist theory is "to analyze women writers and their writings from a female perspective". With the passage of time, the theory has extended itself and has been divided into different types/branches including: liberal feminism, radical feminism, Marxist and social feminism, cultural feminism, ecofeminism and existential feminism. This research will take Existentialist feminism for the analysis of the play, *Eclipsed* (2016).

Existentialist feminism and its origins owe much to the theorist Simone De Beauvoir. Indeed it is believed that this type of feminism emerged as a result of her book's publication, "The Second Sex" (originally published in 1949). In this book, Beauvoir has talked about women's degradation by discussing different aspects starting from "biology, psychoanalysis and historical materialism" (Quinan, 2016, p. 1). By looking at these aspects, she has tried to explore the reasons behind treating women as others and how this became universal phenomenon Existentialist feminism works on 2 notions; 1). A woman is defined by the social and cultural constructs of the society 2). Woman as the "other" (Quinan, 2016). Beauvoir has argued in this book that it is not the natural elements that make men superior to women rather it is the social constructs that have created this distinction. Jean Paul Sartre gave the notion of "Existence precedes essence" in his theory of existentialism pointing out that humans have a free will to choose their fate and they cannot

blame nature for whatever they suffer from (Valencia, 2007, p. 20). Taking this notion, Beauvoir tried to elaborate that women require this freedom. According to her, it is an important aspect of a person's existence. However, women are pressed under the pressure of patriarchal systems. Beauvoir believes this patriarchal system is based upon the fact that men and women are discriminated against on the basis of men having more powerful bodies as women. She considered it an unequal phenomena and questions what the criteria for selecting this strength is? On what basis can we say that one genre is more powerful than the other? Women's subordination cannot be based upon such notions and we cannot consider women as weak. According to her, patriarchal societies use these sexual differences as a tool for women's oppression. They consider the bodies of women as weak and not capable of doing much. Thus, the research will take the following variables from Beauvoir's theory for analysis.

**1). Social construct:** Beauvoir (2011) defines this concept as "one is not born but becomes a woman" (p. 330). The roles that are fixed for women are not decided naturally or biologically rather the roles have been constructed by society.

**2). Women as "Other":** Women are differentiated and are considered inferior as compared to men. The men consider themselves as the "Subjects" and as capable of doing anything whereas women as "Others" capable of doing nothing.

**3). Eternal feminine:** This concept is defined as the belief that women will remain women till the end of the world. They cannot be considered as human beings or equal to men rather they will remain women.

**4). Women's Immanence:** This is the concept where women are not allowed to transcend a certain limit or to be provided with the freedom to live their own lives.



**5). Women's alienation:** A woman faces alienation as a result of being labeled as "Other" and being dominated by the males.

#### **Analysis**

Simone de Beauvoir wrote the book, *The Second Sex* (1949), which became the basis of her existentialist theory. The most prominent feature of this theory is the fact that women are in some cases, subjugated by the men and are considered as "Other" in comparison to men who are taken as "Subject". She has been marginalized and subjugated under the oppression of men. The roles assigned to women don't have any biological or physical link; rather society has constructed the role as well as the path for the women, which she is supposed to follow. A woman in this regard is given no choice but to have free will for making choices and according to Beauvoir a change should be brought in this regard. The play *Eclipsed* (2016) describes the same women who have been suppressed. It shows how during the Liberian war, they have been taken as men's possession and abused sexually. They have been taken as captives forcefully and are made to do the tasks for the soldiers as well as the Officers. The following section of the paper provides analysis of the play in the light of Beauvoir's theory.

#### **1). Social construct:**

The roles that have been determined and fixed for women are not determined naturally, rather they have been constructed within society. Beauvoir (2011) has added the famous statement that "one is not born but becomes a woman" in order to validate this point. According to her there is, "no biological, psychic or economic destiny" (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 330) that has been set for women, rather it depends upon society and how it treats women. In the play, *Eclipsed* (2016) the women have been appointed to certain roles such as taking care of the Commanding Officer as well as cooking food

for him. The women who have been kept for serving the Commanding Officer and are so called wives of the officer, have been there since as young as 15 years since they became "women" (Gurira, 2016, p. 16). They are treated as an "object", for what the men crave and in one of the instances in the play, the women can be seen used as a "commodity" and they are "not for one man in particular – they are for everyone" (Gurira, 2016, p. 31). Moreover, the radio reports in another instance, that the African beauties will be entertaining the people the whole night. Thus, the women are for commodification and for fulfilling the lure of the people. Women like "Bessie" have been made pregnant by the officer and an anonymous character "The Girl" is forcefully sexually abused. Describing this situation, one of the critics says, "When they're not submitting to the general's lust, they cook, clean, gossip and bicker" (McNulty, 2016). They live in a place "where they would be passed from soldier to soldier" in order to entertain them (Rooney, 2015). Thus, their bodies are being exploited against their wills and they have been kept to perform the role of entertaining the officer.

#### **2). Women as "Other":**

According to Beauvoir, a man is considered as "the Subject", "the Absolute" whereas a woman is taken as the "Other" (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 26). This dichotomy presents the men as the positive figure and the women as the negative. This states to the fact that in some societies, there is a relationship between the powerful and the powerless, the master and the slave, the superior and the inferior. This relationship is present between men and women where women belong to the "marginalized groups in society" and men as the superior being (Selinger, 2014, p. 3). This slavery is eminent in the play *Eclipsed* (2016) when we see Bessie "washing soldiers' clothes" in spite of her pregnancy, acting as a slave to not only the

Commanding Officer but also to the soldiers (Gurira, 2016, p. 22). The wife Number One, although have the highest rank but is still under the fear of the Officer. Even if someone comes to help her she has a fear that if she will reveal anything related to their miseries, she will be treated very brutally and harshly by the Officer. Thus, the women are subjugated and as Beauvoir (2011) calls it, they are "handicapped" in the eyes of the men (p. 29).

Beauvoir also states that people think women are incomplete without the presence of men, they are totally dependent on men. They do not have any other choice rather to accept their relationship of reciprocity and to surrender themselves in the hands of the men. Maima in the play says that the men are "beasts" and they being the beasts need to be "fed" with the "fresh meat" because if we do not provide them, they will find some other way to feed themselves that can be very brutal (Gurira, 2016, p. 61). Therefore, Beauvoir (2011) says that women accept their being as "frivolous, infantile, irresponsible" as labeled by men (p. 33). In another incident, Maima says that the soldiers and the officers are so brutal that they will "slit" a mother's stomach and take the baby out to see if it is a boy or a girl (Gurira, 2016, p. 58). Such brutality takes the rights of the women away, leaving them no other option other than to surrender in front of their masters. Men consider them as having "natural defectiveness" or an "incomplete man" as stated by Beauvoir (2011, p. 25). They are at the mercy of the men and their fate is in the hands of these men. When Helena hears the story of the white man, Bill Clinton in the play, marrying to a white woman, she says that he could have married the "poor African gal" so that he might have helped her family (Gurira, 2016, p. 13). This points to the fact that women are dependent on men to have a better life. As Rooney (2015) puts it, "their identities, along with their rights, have been

erased". The men have such an authority over women that when they try to enter the women's compound, "fear and anxiety leap into their eyes" and they stand for the men's "choice for sexual service" (Isherwood, 2015).

### **3). *Eternal feminine:***

The concept of eternal feminism takes away women's individuality. Beauvoir in her book, *The Second Sex* has described this concept which according to her emerged from the insecurity and discomfort of men regarding his own birth. Women are seen as the one who gives birth and as an "embodiment of life", thus losing their individuality (Wendykowska, 2012). Beauvoir rejects such notions by saying that these are just the abstract notions constructed by people. A woman is seen as a woman and not a human being, capable of doing things, as Beauvoir (2011) has mentioned that the men think these women are "stealing a place from us" (p. 33). Women in the play have such aspirations which they are not allowed to gain. "The Girl" that is the unnamed character of the play, says that she wants to "be a doctor or Member of Parliament or something" (Gurira, 2016, p. 14). Being a young girl and having basic education, she wants to gain something in life but she has been forcefully kept into the den of Commanding Officers and is being sexually abused by him. Similarly, another character, Maima, seems to be "fighting for freedom" but as Beauvoir puts, their demands are in vain. Women can never be equal to men (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 35). A man thinks he is God, because of his maleness and because he considers himself as the "superior man" (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 257). In the play, the soldiers and the officers exercise their authority over women, "Dey no let me go after de first world war", keeping the girl for many years (Gurira, 2016, p. 13). They have lost their identities and are just labeled and called as "Number One", "Number Two" or "Number Three". One of the wives, named

Bessie, does not leave the officer even when the war gets over because she thinks she is the mother of the officer's child and is responsible to take care of him. Tweedle (2016) watching the condition of these women comments, "It is hard to watch these women with nothing who dream of a life they are denied". Thus, the women have lost their individual sense and way of thinking and are "ranked by number according to their hierarchy within the group" (Rooney, 2015).

#### **4). Women's Immanence:**

Beauvoir described a dichotomy between transcendence and immanence. According to her, transcendence refers to going out of the way and having a dynamic life whereas immanence refers to the basic conditions provided for living. She introduced this term, in order to define what a woman is. The social norms grant men transcendence and place women in positions of constant immanence (Concept of Transcendence and Immanence in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, 2018). So, Beauvoir says that a woman is the Other and the man is the Subject, as it is understood by the people, "men force her to assume herself as Other" (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 37). The girl, Helena in the play dictates her story about how she belonged to the "Nimba Country" and was taken from there, forcefully (Gurira, 2016, p. 15). The women are not even given the basic necessities of life for example they are repeatedly forced to eat cassava instead of any other variety of food and depend upon the men. At one point, Bessie waits for the officer to go for war and then he will be able to bring her a new wig (Gurira, 2016, p. 17), which points out the fact that the accessories that were provided to the women were the looted items of the war victims. Therefore, Beauvoir (2011) says that a man is expected to open the doors of the future for women and "doom her to immanence" (p. 37). The woman has no other option to be submissive

to this future and accepts it as it is, as Rita says that during the war, "I was just another woman to be abused" (Gurira, 2016, p. 64). Then she further proceeds by telling the story of her daughter, who was also taken by the soldiers forcefully, who had ambitions to be a businesswoman or attain something high in life. Towards the end of the play, the officer after misusing the women for his lust and benefit, sets them free. They served him for a number of years, provided him with food, children, lost their family and children, and at the end they were left on their own. Thus, as Beauvoir (2011) says that a man has an aim "to reign over the instant and to forge the future" (p. 100). A woman has no free will to decide her own life. The women in the play enjoy "simple luxuries such as cigarettes or lipstick still in the pockets of the clothes they wash" (Tweedle, 2016). They are forced to wrestle with the "disastrous choices of survival" and accept the fate that has been provided to them with "as much relief as resignation", without raising their voices" (McNulty, 2016).

#### **5). Women's alienation:**

The feeling of a woman that she is not a part of the whole, the absolute and the subject makes her feel alienated. She is considered, as Beauvoir (2011) says, as "an object, the 'Other'" (p. 84). This gives her a feeling that she is a person who is not included in the larger group. The women in the play have not been provided with their basic rights and that is why they are ignorant of the things like education. They are excluded from being part of the educated group. When "The Girl" tells Bessie and Helena about how she has been educated, they think that she is "lying" and is "crazy" (Gurira, 2016, p. 32). They think that reading can make them blind and thus is not a good thing to do. This points to the fact that these women from Liberia are alienated and do not recognize their worth. Beauvoir in the book *The Second Sex* states that the



psychoanalysts have defined man as a "human being" and woman as a "female", if she tries to act like a human being, it is said that she is "imitating" the male (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 85). The men in the play act like beasts who women's flesh to fulfill their lust but still, women need have to surrender before them. She is not considered as a human being, rather she is taken as a commodity as when Bessie sees the peacemaker women talking to the Commanding Officer, she says, "I tink dey witch oh, dey can talk to CO like dey men " (Gurira, 2016, p. 54). The men are the higher human beings and a woman who can talk to them is an unusual woman. These women refer to themselves by their "captor's designation", which is a sign of their "dehumanization" and "an indication of how deeply a sense of self-alienation has set in" (Isherwood, 2015). They, at several places in the play, can be seen standing quietly "at attention waiting to see whose turn it is to be raped" (Dale, 2016). They have been exploited and according to the myths described by Beauvoir, have been turned into that unessential being that can never turn into an essential being.

### Conclusion

To conclude, the research has looked at how the free will was taken away from the women, by not providing them chance to get either education or to leave the camps without the permission of the officers. They were treated as puppets in the hands of the officers. The concept of "otherness" prevails in the whole play, when men have the power and the authority whereas the women are put aside. Their wishes are not taken into consideration. They have been taken captive by the commanding officers and are treated brutally by them. Thus, the instances in the play relate to Beauvoir's theory when she states that women are seen as the "others" as objects in contrast to the "subjects". The

social construct that has been portrayed through the play is that certain roles have been assigned to women and they are not considered as human beings rather they are just judged on the basis of their gender. They are not allowed to cross the limits or the roles that have been set by the officers for them. Therefore, like the existentialists believe in the free will of the human being, such free will should also be assigned to the women and they should be given a space to breathe, to live and to have the path of their own lives.

### Recommendations

1. A focus should be placed upon the marginalized strata of the society and all those people who have faced oppression by other societies.
2. The issues and concerns of the black women should be highlighted in order to emphasize upon the various miserable conditions they go through.
3. Suxh writings, like *Eclipsed* should be used as a source of spreading awareness among the people and bringing their attention towards the issues that women face.
4. There should be more ways through which opportunities can be opened for women and they should not only be confined to the roles that are defined by society.
5. The stereotypes related to women should be brought to an end.

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