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## UNIOSUN Journal of Law, Development & the Humanities (UJLDH)

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Dear author,

### NOTIFICATION OF ACCEPTANCE OF MANUSCRIPT FOR PUBLICATION

This is to notify you that your article, titled "Deconstructing Symbols of Female Attrition in Heterosexual Marriages: A Literary Perspective", has been accepted for publication in the *Uniosun Journal of Law, Development and the Humanities* (UJLDH) and will appear in Volume II, No. 2.

This decision was taken at the Editorial Board meeting of Monday 14 August, 2017 after due consideration of reports from our peer reviewers.

For further enquiries, please contact 080-58050496.

On behalf of the Editorial Board, please accept my warm congratulations.

For: Professor A. K. Folorunso  
*Editor-in-Chief, UJLDH*

# **Deconstructing Symbols of Female Attrition in Heterosexual Marriages: A Literary Perspective**

## **Abstract**

Much of documented work on gender has tended to proffer solutions to gender imbalance through the adjustment of social policies that are more inclusive of the needs and rights of women, without paying relative attention to the correlating sign structures which drive gendered behaviour in society such as symbols. Therefore, this paper examines the sustained role of symbols as precursors of gender attrition in the heterosexual marriage as portrayed in the lenses of literary texts featuring English speaking Europe and post-colonial African societies; and from three periods in literary history. The texts used as illustration are Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*; Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*; and Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. The Symbolic Interactionist theory of sociology and the Feminist off-shoot of Nego-Feminism are adopted as analytical postures. While Symbolic Interactionism examines the content of symbolic dialogue between individuals in close proximity, Nego-Feminism projects a platform for the understanding, reassessment and negotiation of gender power structures within the heterosexual marriage institution with a view to achieving equity through peaceful and empathic negotiation. The research is expected to act as a launching pad for the review of traditional and obsolete symbols of status in gender role play.

**Keywords:** Gender, Patriarchy, Symbolism, Marriage, Attrition

## **Introduction**

While no definition is broad enough to embrace the definitional parameters of marriage, a commonly quoted one is as follows; "marriage is a union between a man and a woman such that the children born to the woman are recognised as legitimate offspring of both partners" (Kottak, 2008, p.228). But this definition is not nearly universal enough to define the institution, because marriage unions in many societies involve more than two partners. Plural marriages exist where a man weds two or more women and a woman weds two or more men. A closer interpretation of marriage is perhaps *a socially approved union between two or more people within a formally organised, long-lasting relationship based partly on procreation, and is regarded as a permanent institution involving mutual rights and obligations*. Marriage patterns differ from culture to culture, including the heterosexual and homosexual. This paper is focused on the relationship between one man and one woman in a patrilocal arrangement,

which implies that the woman joins the husband in his residence. In this paper, the heterosexual marriage between one man and one woman is exclusively considered. The work employs the qualitative approach in examining the degree of female authority and decision-making in marriages across western and post-colonial cultures, where the marriage involves one man and one woman, as portrayed in selected literary works. The study is launched on the premise that within the marriage contract, the traditional symbols which govern the dynamics of power and authority of the old system continue to influence intra-marital gender behaviour long after the woman's role has changed, following economic and social revolutions in modern societies.

Thus, the paper's aim is to examine the role of symbols as indices of agency of power and decision-making in marital relations; and how unrevised symbols continue to generate conflicts in heterosexual relationships in modern heterosexual marriages. There is no suggestion here that gender inequality is directed only towards the female all of the time (for men also are victims of inequality); however, whenever inequality is mentioned in this paper, it should be understood as that which is directed against the female, unless otherwise stated.

Every culture ~~takes~~ makes recourse to the use of symbols as a medium for representing concepts of social institutions, status, and dynamics of interaction. In general cultural constructs, symbols define assigned gender roles and determine the participation of men and women in all social institutions – economic, political, social, and religious and over time, these roles become ingrained to the extent where they are assumed to be natural, whereas they are cultural constructs (Schultz, Hummel, & Padmanabhan, 2010, Owens, 2002, Ortner, 1984, p.43). Within marital relationships, gender inequality occurs in varying dimensions and degrees, ranging from the psychological to the physical, and encompassing all dimensions in many cases. In spite of the current widespread belief in marital equality, women and men typically experience unequal rights and responsibilities across cultures and although inequalities have declined somewhat in recent decades, they have tended to persist in post-colonial oral cultures within which symbolic modes of communication is greatly valued. Gramsci (\*\*), suggests that systemic inequalities in the marriage institution may be traceable to patriarchal hegemonies which downplay the needs of the female, thereby constraining natural impulses of intellectual, emotional and physical abilities (Holton, 2014:41), in which case the subject's attempts to express these impulses ~~is~~ typically interpreted as deviancy and subsequently results in the subject's conformity in order to gain social acceptance. He describes the establishment of bias in favour of a sexual category as "ideological hegemony" and defines this as a slow process in which consensus is developed between the dominant and subordinate

groups. Consensus may be expressed as the approval by the subordinate group of the symbols, values, opinion, and beliefs of the dominant group. Significantly contributing to the evolution and establishment of patriarchal hegemonic consensus is the endorsement by the religious and educational system as well as the mass media, these being the building blocks of culture. Typically, the subordinate groups may appear to be acting from their freewill, whereas in fact, they reflect a necessity resulting from existing relationships of dominance that crave approval from public opinion and the prevailing culture. A major source of the evolution of hegemonic values is the use of symbolic representation, and is responsible for the slow progress in the search for gender equality (Lombardo, Meier, & EBSCOhost, 2014).  
*way up* Gender equality may be interpreted as a situation in which the social and cultural environment recognises both men and women as having equal values, that is, mutually complementary function within marriage, and provides both with equal opportunities accordingly. In the context of this paper, therefore, marital gender inequality is a situation in which the woman is denied these very rights and opportunities which should endorse her social value within the marriage contract. Inequality is often imposed through the curtailment of decision making by the culture and this results in the stifling of the woman's initiative, leading to mental and physical attrition in a long-lasting relationship.

## Literature Review

Feminists have collectively criticised the marriage institution and identified it as a fundamental site of oppression against the woman, for whom the law provides few independent rights (Chambers, 2008). The stereotypes created for males generally endorse the display of a greater level of aggressive behaviour in marriage than do women but this has been attributed to the gender construction of the culture (UNDP, 2013 and Rosaldo, 1980). Within the marriage contract, stereotypes are the roles of partners that are oversimplified by ideas of the characteristics of men and women (Widiss, Rosenblatt, & NeJaime, (2010) and Stoler, 1977). These stereotypes gradually gain sufficient strength of conviction to evolve into symbols of "natural" behaviour within the marriage. Stratification of the female subsequently arises in form of unequal negotiation and distribution of resources, power, prestige, human rights and personal freedom between the couple and this reflects their positions in the social hierarchy. According to Yaras, S., & Yigit, A. (2017); Forgash, (2009); Mill (1998); de Bouvoir (1997) and Pateman (1988);, among others, symbols of female subjugation within marriage include the white wedding, where the *white wedding dress* symbolizes sexual purity and innocence; the imagery of property and ownership