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In the name of war: Hypermasculinity in Elma Shaw's redemption road

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Abstract

The paper examines hyper-masculinity in West African war literature. Masculinity, hegemonic masculinity, and hyper-masculinity are all recurrent themes in Social Sciences and other fields of study but not so much in Literature. The disparity between the war history of West Africa, the few literary works on conflicts in West Africa, and the dearth of literary studies on Africa's war literature underscore this study. Elma Shaw's *Redemption Road* is one of the very few war novels on Liberia's civil war that spanned from 1989 to 2003 and cost the lives of over 250,000 people. Through the frameworks of postcolonialism and hypermasculinity, this paper analyses hypermasculinity and gender relations in Shaw's post-colonial war novel. The geopolitical struggles of the post-colony, the emblematic dichotomies of feminine and masculine, and their implications on gender relations in war discourse are centralized. The study demonstrates that faulty childhood context, faulty governance, poor coping strategies, and the fear-loaded cultural oppression of males to show manliness culminate in the trials of men in this fictional post-colonial Liberia. These tensions exacerbate the chaos of war as they render the conflict setting a ripe fodder for violent gender relations. They also engender the inexplicability of femininity in masculinity discourses for the only reason that females are the litmus for the test and measurement of masculinity in many patriarchal cultures as demonstrated in the novel. Thus, the paper reveals insights into why male characters become hyper-masculine in the novel. This revelation facilitates a better understanding of gender issues in war contexts. The conclusion to the discourse is that in fictional war-torn Liberia, excessive masculinity is not a masculine nomenclature but a colonially influenced gender coping parading that has lasting negative implications on gender relations.

Keywords: Gender; Femininity; Masculinity; African Literature; Women; War; Men; Hypermasculinity

1. Introduction

Considering the numerous pockets of conflict that continue to ravage the African continent, the literary shelves seem not to have captured Africa's war experiences adequately. Few African war fiction authors like Elma Shaw have made a conscious effort to draw literary attention to how war affects many facets of life such as love, family, parenting, and identity among others. Literary discourses on the conflicts on the continent can help understand armed conflicts and their gender implications. They can open the doors wider for other researchers to examine other war literature. Such examinations would advance the display of war's ravaging effects on society, the brutalities involved, and the harrowing outcomes of war. Essentially, as explicated in this study, war discourses showcase the colonizing effect of conflict on all classes of society; on women and children, and especially on men as well [1]. Thus, this research adds to the dearth of literature on studies in the field of war literature and postcolonial gender studies. It examines the implications of armed conflict on masculinity, the degeneration of masculinity, and souring gender relations in Elma Shaw's *Redemption Road*.

Redemption Road has received very minimal literary attention for the many angles of the 14 years of Liberian war that it presents. The war, which sprouted out of colonial influence, was ethnically and violently stimulated. It claimed about 250,000 lives and displaced some 500,000 Liberians [13,33] It is believed that true reconciliation and rebuilding can be

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attained only when the *Americo-Liberians* and indigenous Liberians mend the political gulch between them by fostering a cohesive identity [22]. Parkin's submission directs attention to the colonial impact on identity in the post-colony. In this case, two major Liberian identities are created by the independence of Liberia in 1822; Americo-Liberians and indigenous Liberians. This division undergirds the war whilst situating it at the doorstep of colonialism and its negative impact on human condition. Whilst the Americo-Liberians who returned from slavery feel alienated from the Liberian society and want to claim a lost heritage, the indigenous Liberians seek social justice as rightful heirs of the Liberian heritage. The two identities clash for political power because "our inclination to act well towards others, whatever its source, tends to be confined to those with whom we share a common identity" and those who look different [30,31]. In a Liberian society that is already patriarchal, seeing others who look different as inferior may be ideological. It may lead to the exhibition of an assertion of a superior identity and resistance of the tag of an inferior. It may also spike a show of extreme and violent masculinity" [30,30]. Thus, through the postcolonial and hypermasculinity frameworks, this study explores hypermasculinity, otherwise known as extreme masculinity, and its implications on gender relations in Shaw's war novel.

The Liberian civil war tale has not made impressive inroads in terms of literary criticism on hypermasculinity and the postcolonial subject. For instance, Shaw's novel has been examined from the perspective of justice as a path that an individual must take irrespective of the strands of "neo-colonial legal or political structure" in her fictional Liberia [31,4]. Shaw's women in the novel are likened to ways by which Judith Butler and Jacques Derrida epitomize how the female body and the family shift in frame from individual to collective action outside legislature with the argument that "when institutions fail, individuals can take action" [31,4]. Shaw's representation of masculinity and hyper-masculinity in the fictional Liberian war in *Redemption Road* is explored in this paper to reveal a better understanding of the relationship between hypermasculinity and gender relations in the text beyond symbolism but concerning colonial influence. The female factor in the postcolonial masculinity and war equation is given sufficient attention in this study with respect to the argument that there is a probability for critics to carry out men's studies and studies into masculinities without paying attention to females as though they have no role in the scrutiny [9].

2. Theoretical Base of the Study

Though postcolonialism can be viewed from three key perspectives; Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi K. Bhabha, this study adopts the Said point of view. This choice is appropriate because whilst Bhabha and Spivak look at hybridity as decentralization of postcolonial discourse and identity respectively, Said posits that cultural definitions such as what it means to be masculine and its excesses in the post colony are heavily dictated by Western ideologies left behind after colonialism [27]. This is particularly applicable in this study because the identity groups in Liberia were defined by the colonialists, those who returned from slavery came without their Liberian heritage of communalism which was the hallmark of the indigenous Liberian. As such the Liberian conflict was all about asserting leadership identities as decoupled colonial subjects. Historically, the cultural description of governance, power, and masculinity in postcolonial African literature draws from the power and authority that colonial masters wielded over their subjects.

According to Connell's theory, masculinity refers to social and cultural roles, personality traits, and behaviors, such as aggression and dominance, which are deemed acceptable for males in a social context [20]. More recently, masculinity has become a contested concept in which competing representations of manhood are embedded in categories of power, such as gender, class, and ethnicity [8;29]. Hence, to uphold the stereotypical invulnerability stature, when masculine ideology becomes over-valued by a man, hyper-masculinity may occur [19; 18; 32]. Hypermasculinity is thus defined as:

- HM (hypermasculinity) is a personality construct that occurs primarily in males, in which stereotypically "macho" traits are held up as an ideal. Hypermasculine males exhibit extreme and exaggerated forms of masculinity, virility, and physicality [32,354].

The concept of masculinity in this discursive is therefore drawn from the Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell's theory of masculinity which posits that:

- To speak of masculinities is to speak about gender relations. Masculinities are not equivalent to men; they concern the position of men in a gender order. They can be defined as the patterns of practice by which people (both men and women, though predominantly men) engage in that position [7,1].

2.1. The Text

Elma Shaw's *Redemption Road* is a fictional narrative on some of the atrocities that occurred during the Liberian civil war that spanned from 1989 to 2003. It centralizes the female character, Bendu, and the male character, Cobra, also known as Moses Varney. In the text, Bendu Louis is separated from her family when she goes to visit her grandmother in Somerville, away from Monrovia. Shaw sets up the conflict with the war breaking out just when Bendu decides to return to her parents. Cobra and his men conscript Bendu and several other females. He offers Bendu to Samson, his second in command, as a war wife. At the rebel camp captured men and women were beaten and beheaded without thought. The men rape, beat and kill the women they conscript just as the slave masters did on the slave ships in the slavery era. When the war ends, Cobra, now Moses Varney seeks a wealthier life through drug trafficking in Monrovia. When his paths cross with Bendu, animosity spikes and Bendu decides to get Varney incarcerated. The masculine ego of the latter is ruffled, and he unleashes physical brutalities on Bendu who fails to get Varney arrested. Soon it is announced that Varney is murdered by an unknown assailant.

The ensuing discourse interrogates the quest for masculinity leading to hypermasculinity in the novel and the resultant effect on gender relations in the war narrative. The interpellation of how the pursuit of masculinity overly preys on womanhood and femaleness to deteriorate gender relations in war is problematized in this discourse with the view of conceding a better interpretation of postcolonialism, hypermasculinity and gender relations in the environment of war.

2.1.1. The Discussion: Masculinity, War, and the Post-colony

Shaw's war novel reiterates the fact that masculinity is a conscious social identity construct that is determined by power roots such as ethnicity and gender in the framework of power and war. Her meshing of the complexity of gender formatives in the context of the Liberian war proffers the fact that to comprehend masculinity in the African war context, there is the need to find synergies between historical antecedents, gender, ethnicity, and the economic and governance structures of the nation-state. In the case of gender, for instance, there is a need to broaden our view to envelop the idea that it is a product of a massive social structure and not merely a quest for personal identity [6]. In other words, masculinity is a composite by-product of a plethora of factors that cover a wide spectrum of social expectations of being male and manliness [3].

Social gender expectations on males can be so high that sometimes "masculine norms tend to discourage the display of vulnerabilities" hence aggression often becomes a vent for masqueraded vulnerabilities in the process of gender performance [36, 230]. Consequently, men who fall short of the dominant construct of masculinity begin to feel oppressed by the hegemonic local norms [16]. In the study, "Dude, You're a Fag", masculinity is secured by denying any semblance of softness, emotion, femininity, or any characteristic associated with women [26]. Thus, in their bid to repel the sense of oppression because of their feeling of vulnerability, such men exercise excessive machismo on females to emphasize their relevance and status [15]. This study also equates hypermasculinity to machismo. It perceives hypermasculinity as "the exhibition of stereotypically gendered displays of power and consequence suppression of signs of vulnerability" [36, 7].

In Shaw's fictional patriarchal African context power in whatever form; economic, political, cultural, etc. is integral to the status of a man and performance of masculinity as Connell posits earlier. Shaw portrays the implications of hypermasculinity as remnants of the struggle for and to show possession of power and attainment of masculinity. She pegs the beginning of her fictional Liberian war on the fringes of power search by postcolonial subjects. This pursuit becomes an expression of masculine onset echoed in the dissatisfaction of the rebel group regarding the economic distribution of the national wealth. Their argument was that some tribes have been neglected in the economic governance process. The result is the unleashing of violence and bloodshed as evident in the cry of the women in the novel:

- They wept for their babies, their lost futures, and their lost dignity. It was a haunting echo of past laments and a plea for the situation at hand. It had been four years since Charles Taylor was elected, and new rebels had been fighting government forces and terrorizing citizens in Lofa County and other places for the last two of those four years now. Everyone feared that without international action, the violence would soon reach Monrovia. No more, the women begged that day. Please, stop this war... [33,29].

By interrogating economic power play in the socio-cultural masculine nomenclature, Shaw reiterates the intuitive forces that propel males to go to the extreme to violently claim an identity in the world of masculinity. This is not to say, however, that there were no females in the fighting ranks. Instead, the focus of this paper is to look at the malefactor in hypermasculine spaces and the impact on gender relations. This focus limits the discussion to Moses Varney and his men defying the ruling government as rebels in demand of a share of economic and political power and the resultant

effect of their actions on females such as Tenneh, Siatta, Bendu, and Agnes. By gender relations, the argument that masculinity thrives on femininity is reiterated in this study. The gender relations interplay emerges because even in the masculine world of power struggle and war, the need for females as complementary to the gender equation is unavoidable [33,7]. This explains the conscription of females like Bendu, Rossetta, Josephine, and Tenneh during Shaw's fictional Liberian war. Thus, through the war's impact on Bendu and the other females, Shaw also demonstrates the implications of masculinity and hyper-masculine power on gender relations. She presents males who are power hungry and those who are power drunk in war and the females who are caught in this web of violent hunger and war drunkenness [12]. Her depiction of the sexual and physical abuse and the traumatic bedrocks of socially constructed machismo in war speaks to the notion that sex and muscular strength mark sturdiness in masculinity and hypermasculinity during armed conflicts. Cobra and Samson become postcolonial vessels for asserting the rule of obeying what a man says before complaining. This is epitomized in how Samson smacks Bendu's hands into submission with his gun when the latter resists conscription. Tenneh's recount of how she was gang-raped by fighters at the mere age of twelve is also evidence of hyper-masculinity vented by Cobra's exuberant aide de camp. Her experience reminisces the devouring of the innocent African continent by the imperialists and the sexual abuse of her women in the slave trade of the colonial era. In either context, females experiencing hypermasculinity become indispensable to male attainment and show of masculinity.

It is a masculine show to beckon a female into sex. However, when a female is humiliatingly and aggressively forced as Tenneh was at a tender age in the novel, that is seen as excessive masculinity and it calls for reprimanding. As Agnes reiterates in the novel, sometimes the greatest pain is when it is inflicted by people one knows. Tenneh may not have known the men who raped her, but she draws attention to how war could make a mother disown the child of her womb to save herself and her son as Africa did metaphorically to her children many years ago during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. In this instance, Tenneh's mother is ready to do anything to save her baby boy because he possesses the genes of manhood. The gender conflict sparked between Tenneh, and her younger brother may never be resolved but the one between a mother and her daughter may never heal either as Tenneh reiterates "You betrayed me, Mama. You whom I expected to protect me. You were the one who gave me away" [33,26]. The cry of the *Americo-Liberians* for acceptance is echoed in Tenneh's words. In the quest for men to show masculinity, women become weapons of war who bear the brunt of hypermasculinity as depicted in the Tenneh gang rape. Tenneh's relationship with her brother, men in general, and her mother, especially, may be ruined for good. Shaw, therefore, posits rhetorically whether the gully between Liberia's ethnic divide can ever be mended for true peace to prevail in Liberia and by extension, the rest of the continent.

The key perpetrators of hypermasculinity against women in Shaw's *Redemption Road* are Cobra, the rebel leader later known as Moses Varney (Cobra), Sampson his aide in camp, and others unnamed. Hypermasculinity by these males is triggered by poverty which is also the main reason behind the fictional Liberian war. The lack of resources because of ineffective and biased political and policy decisions leads to dissension amongst the tribesmen of Varney. It is acknowledgeable that firstly, human development and maturation are linked to context and secondly, hypermasculinity is a result of the "exacerbation of normative challenges and competencies due to larger sociopolitical processes (i.e., racism, sexism, ethnicity) and/or lack of resources and low resilience leading to unsuccessful coping with these exacerbated challenges" [36, 3]. Without qualms, these sociopolitical processes are glitters of colonialism. The assertion places a premium on Liberia's postcolonial socioeconomic, geopolitical, and cultural context as integral to the definition of masculinity and the expression of it, by leeway, hypermasculinity. The fictional Liberian setting is torn apart by factions with opposing governance ideologies, Western capitalism against indigenous socialism. The men battle it out and vent their frustrations on the women and children. In the end, lovers like Bendu and Jonah have their dreams violently curtailed.

In the sense of context, Shaw does not only premise Moses Varney's manhood ideologies, masculine tendencies, and hyper-masculine behaviors on faulty postcolonial political and economic governance, and masculine definitions. She brings to the fore Varney's childhood development and maturation as an important context that speaks to his adult perception and performance of masculinity. Varney's childhood is colored by the sudden death of his parents at a mere 11 years of age. According to the text, after living in Monrovia with his uncle and two sisters living elsewhere with an aunt, "Varney knew all too well what it was like to be young, displaced, and unemployed" (33,13). His view of manhood emanates from not wanting to be like his uncle who feared his wife and watched on whilst he was kept away from school and maltreated. Like Okonkwo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* who did not want to be a loser like his father Unoka and therefore turned out to be excessively masculine, Varney also turned into Cobra, as the name imputes, and thus excessively masculine as a show of manhood when he becomes an adult. Shaw, therefore, presents the significance of childhood experiences in the construction of manhood and masculinity to the exhibition of offensive hyper-masculinity in adult life [4]. The death of Cobra's parents and the troubles he endured were a time he did not like to think about but one that changed the course of his life. His background, consequently, becomes a pivotal leitmotif that underlies his show of extreme masculinity. His hyper-masculine tendencies corroborate the assertion that adverse childhood

experiences (ACE) may also contribute to hostile effects on gender relations [17; 19; 27]. He would, hence, resist any action that has a semblance of female defiance and disrespect to him as a MAN. The weight of history, rooted in colonial impact on Liberia, on Cobra's shoulders speaks to the claim that context shapes character [36]. Therefore, family dysfunction is one of the traits of ACE [4; 37]. In the novel, Varney's hypermasculine predispositions include grabbing the knife from Bendu, tilting war a victim's head, and sawing it at his throat as if he were nothing but a goat [33,32]. Hypermasculinity becomes a shield behind which Varney hides his fear of failure and other masculine vulnerabilities.

In the case of Varney, whilst his uncle's wife stirs his dislike for women challenging him, the hardships of his general childhood also make him excessively aggressive in any situation that may impoverish him. Shaw, as such, proves a direct link between indigenous culture and postcolonial context to individuals' meaning-making processes and the resultant identity formation. This viewpoint is literarily applicable to both Okonkwo and Cobra. Okonkwo's father was poor and owed everybody, so Okonkwo grew to ensure that he was wealthy and influential [27]. Similarly, Varney, after losing his parents experienced poverty in a home where his uncle's wife starved him before a powerless uncle. However, whilst Okonkwo is valorized by Achebe for his ruthlessness towards all, Shaw chastises Varney for the same and suggests the need for narratives to criticize insecurities in masculinity. Varney's childhood home feeds his insecurities. It becomes a dark part of his life and a condition he never wants to experience again. The result is his decision to fight the government for a claim of national wealth and later to drug traffic for wealth, power, and a show of masculinity. This implies that in postcolonial fictional Liberia, the lack of resources and the constant desire to survive is Varney's resilience and coping strategy which is vented as hypermasculine behavior. Materialism becomes a benchmark for masculinity [3]. This revelation resonates with Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland*, where the family unit is an integral part of the "enforcement of standardized identities" such as manhood, masculinity, and hyper-masculinity [14, 5]. Often, A child who sees a lot of poverty in his childhood may end up easily getting violent, especially at anything that prevents him from overcoming poverty as epitomized by Varney. Wealth in Shaw's novel becomes synonymous with masculine power and authority.

The destructive effect of a faulty childhood context and its resultant breeding of hyper-masculinity is also depicted in the novel when Cobra becomes Moses Varney with an enduring identity after the war. The impact of the destruction of his childhood innocence is evident when he indicates at a point that he didn't want to be in the bush anymore. He discloses a once hopeful future after studying Business Administration at Liberia University with the view of becoming a labor lawyer someday and not a "damned fighter" [33,14]. This sad revelation underpinned the effect of postcolonial government policies and broad social and cultural influences on colonially influenced capitalist masculine character and identity formation. It defies the mere symbolism of faulty childhood growing into a violent adult. It leads to the realms where the psychological view of the world as a bowl of misfortune that must be met with all violence and aggressive insurrection takes precedence in Varney's thought. This superior thought is enacted in his hyper-masculine determination to do anything to stop anyone who dares to cross his path, as Bendu does, in his bid to claim and live his aspired masculine personality. Varney's exaggerated sense of masculinity drives his self-defense and coping schemes often epitomized in his propensity to engage in violent offending.

Violent offending builds up into the war in Shaw's novel. It is sparked by bad government policies and the feeling of injustice and inequality amongst a section of the imaginary Liberian society. Without a fair share of economic and political power, Varney and his male cohorts feel less masculine. In the absence of the colonial master, living in affluence and authority positions males in post colonies as the new bosses. Hence any form of deprivation warrants rebellion. Consequently, The rebellion later referred to as revolution and the atrocities committed; cold blood killing, raping, impregnating, abandoning women, and beating and molesting women, are all excessing from failed coping strategies and symbolisms of the colonial slave master. This explains why armed conflicts prove to be one of the fertile grounds for breeding hypermasculinity as Varney retorts: "No one's innocent here. I gave you to one of my fighters, so what? You're still alive" [33,99]. From this pronouncement, wartime in the fictional post-colony sounds synonymous with hypermasculinity. The retortion attests that hypermasculine characters view violence as manly and demonstrate the attitude that violent aggressive aberrance is an acceptable expression of masculine power and dominance [39;253]. In this novel, extreme masculinity is used as a weapon to resist bad governance.

The symbiotic relations between masculinity and femininity compel Shaw to reveal masculinity through the suffering of females in the novel. Hence, the author affirms the souring pattern of the use of women as weapons of war. Shaw disputes hyper-masculinity as normative behavior. She instead, presents it as a coping strategy for contextual stressors or an individual's perceived stress and vulnerabilities or threat. These stressors propagate some fear that births extreme violence such as rape and physical abuse [5]. Thus, in the case of Moses Varney, we learn later in the novel that he did not set out to be a rebel leader, a killer, or a drug trafficker. We learn of his initial ambition of going to school as a better way of living [33,166]. His recall of the humiliating early ages of his life when he had to steal and eat the leftovers of strangers still hurt him because it scratches his masculine identity. His desperate efforts, even after the war to lay an economic claim through drug trafficking and killing of anybody who stood his way to masculinity explains Varney's

attempt to hold on to social status and recognition. It attests to the claim that “...individuals who lack orthodox skills to enhance their self-esteem may use coercive strategies including violence to achieve power and status” [2, 253]. Varney therefore communicates a desperate effort to be wealthy, powerful, influential in society, and therefore masculine. For this reason, women like Bendu must be made to fear him, a reason for his ruthlessness.

In all its essence, excessive masculinity is measured by the impact on their objects. Shaw describes the impact of hypermasculinity on women during war as a “collective pain that had gathered in the depth of their [war affected females] souls” [33,17]. Bendu describes her experience at the Duluma Camp, where the rebels and their conscripts lodge, as a place of darkness and gloom that so many endured [33,201]. The use of darkness and gloom typify images of fear, torture, and death spewed from the vents of exaggerated masculinities against females and vulnerable men. Bendu’s description lends credence to why critics find a moderately strong correlation between hypermasculinity and violence against women [24; 18; 34]. Some features of hypermasculinity include:

- Calloused (insensitive) attitudes toward sex, and women, the attitude that intercourse with women is a source of male power and female submission, and that sex are acceptable without empathic concern for the female's subjective experience; violence is manly, the attitude that violent aggression is an acceptable expression of masculine power and dominance; danger as exciting, the attitude that survival in dangerous situations is manly; and toughness as emotional self-control, the belief that anger is the only legitimate male emotion, and that expression of emotions, particularly 'feminine' emotions such as sensitivity and empathy, are a sign of weakness [39,12].

In the case of Samson, another hypermasculine character in Shaw’s novel, we do not know much about his upbringing and therefore cannot relate his hypermasculine tendencies against Bendu to his background. Instead, his quest to win approval from his master, Cobra, drives his violence. In a fictional African setting that expects a man to have control over a woman to become masculine, Samson’s incessant raping of Bendu, the violent smashing of her hand, and unrelenting beating were all efforts to prove manliness and control to his rebel leader, Cobra, and cower Bendu into submission to his masculinity. Parallel to the slave-era imperialist landscape, the violent show of force against women signifies Samson’s masculine maturation. Note that Cobra is not only a master but a hero to men like Samson in the novel. It is only conducive that Samson hero-worships Cobra because often men who want to be branded masculine would habitually exhibit hero-worshipping behavior with the view of mirroring the purported lead as an ideal character to be emulated [5]. In many cases a successful emulation connotes attainment of masculinity [16]. This explains why each effort by Bendu to contest Samson’s masculinity triggers excessive masculinity [hypermasculinity] from him as a means of identity defense. Consequently, whilst Cobra’s heroism is emblematically linked to violence, Samson’s hero-worshipping manifests in violence to please his master and hero and invariably, satisfy his quest to be extolled as a good protégé of hyper-masculinity. The aggrandizement of rebel leaders in Shaw’s war novel speaks to the fact that the pursuit of wartime acceptance and survival largely fuels Samson’s perception of hyper-masculinity as ideal masculinity.

The use of masculine force against women in whichever way is not only a symbol of hyper-masculine intrusion and oppression. It is also the fulcrum of the conflict of the novel. As depicted in *Redemption Road*, the application of brutish force to obtain power is the major catalyst of the Liberian civil war. Forced sex, is thus presented as a potent hypermasculine tool in Shaw’s illusory war text. It is used to establish strength, dominance over women, and the objectification of women. The symbolisms are as depicted when Cobra gives out Bendu as a war wife to Samson the rebel whilst Bendu was in captivity in Duluma. Cobra’s concern for Samson was for him to preserve some strength for the battles ahead and not use it all to have sexual pleasure with Bendu and to fight to subdue her. The masculine quest to show strength motivates hypermasculinity and foddors the use of women as sexual objects and weapons of war [38; 1; 2]. Consequently, with all ruthlessness, Samson “pushed her (Bendu) onto his filthy mattress, tore off her clothes, and began to rape her [33,62]. Hypermasculinity comprises of callous (insensitive) attitudes toward sex and women [39]. It comes with the brashness that sexual intercourse with women is a source of male power and female submission, and that sex is acceptable without empathic concern for the female's subjective experience. Consequently, Samson rapes Bendu without empathy. Like Ugwu in Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* who rapes the bar girl during the Biafra war because his peers dare him [11], Samson needs to prove his masculinity to his master and his rebel peers in the Duluma camp during the Liberian war by being vicious with Bendu.

Violence has been analyzed from several perspectives such as from the psychoanalytical view as in Freud's Oedipal drama, (Lafrance); biological theories which identify the hormone testosterone as the catalyst for aggression in males [12; 25] and homosocial behaviors which explain the competitiveness among men [16; 13]. From the literary perspective, Shaw adds to the academic literature on hypermasculinity and violence by stretching Connell’s masculinity theory to assert hyper-masculinity as a demonstration that the fear of oedipal failure as a psychological issue sometimes generates fear in men and violence, usually, against women. Shaw shows that fear is one of the key stimulants of

exaggerated masculinity or hyper-masculinity. She reveals that fear may emanate from the perception or imagination of losing respect amongst peers or status in society. According to the narrator, Varney is respected by many after the war, he is respected by his new companions in his exosystemic context who give him illegal contracts. To him, his comrades learning that he was being hunted down by a woman was an embarrassment that made him gulp alcohol in frustration [33,76]. In the era of slavery, a subject who embarrassed a master was severely punished to deter others thus Varney must punish Bendu as a deterrent to others like her. Varney sees his new identity [a respected man] as a means of erasing his war-time identity [as a war rebel] and opening a hopeful page as a successful drug baron, a counterpart of a successful slave Lord in the colonial era. The last thing he needed was for Bendu to call the police on him. It is the fear of Bendu, a female he once had absolute control over, instigating his arrest, prosecution, and incarceration for war crimes and illegal drug trade that drives him to recapture and physically abuse Bendu in Monrovia after the war:

- Do you have any idea of the kind of trouble you've got me in? Varney quickly covered her mouth with the duct tape and ordered her to stay down. He took the gun out of its ankle strap, sat up, and pointed it at her... the cracked gun on her skull echoed in the car. Blood streamed down from the wound just above her left ear, and she struggled to stay conscious [33,93]

The sense of vulnerability is evident in an anxiety-propelled fear in a male character who is overly desperate to save his reputation and masculine identity in society [23]. It has the propensity to also make such a person hyper-masculine [32]. Excessive force and use of strength, strangulation aimed at getting Bendu, a female, to kowtow, and any violent means available are some of the strategies used by hyper-masculine Varney when he suddenly finds out that some people lurking in a distance on the dark beach may have seen him wrestling with Bendu. Fear and anxiety heighten hypermasculinity in Varney against his victim, Bendu, after the latter screams for the attention of any available passersby:

- She screamed at the top of her lungs, and he lunged at her, grabbing her by the throat and covering her mouth with his hand. He looked around and noticed first one candle, then another flickering in the distance. Damn! Had those lights been there before? ... He pressed her close to him, tightened his grip on her mouth, and quickly forced her in the direction of the lagoon. [33,96]

In the Duluma Camp, anxiety-propelled fear is a sign of masculine vulnerability that precipitates hypermasculinity. Such violence is evident when food becomes scarce and the fear of losing the fight due to shortage of resources becomes eminent. With this eminence, the doors on the defenselessness of Cobra and his men would gradually be opened. There was, therefore, an urgent need to act to avert the show of their susceptibility that would lead to the loss of their masculine identity. This affirms the assertion that "masculine norms tend to discourage the display of vulnerabilities" [36,7]. Vulnerability is haram to the imperialists and their successors like Varney. To disperse the possibility of feeling vulnerable and fear of losing power over the women and subjects in the camp, Cobra, urges his men to use violence to tame their subjects, mostly women, into obedience:

- Commander Cobra and his men would discipline their fighters, gang rape women, and torture their prisoners of war right in the middle of the camp in the burned-out concrete building that was known as the oven [33,117]

There are many ways of stimulating hypermasculinity in the novel. One of them is drug use. In the colonial era, whilst the colonial master thrived on alcohol, Varney depended on both liquor and hard drugs for hypermasculine stimulation. Thus, to assert his value in terms of manhood and masculinity, as it was in the days of Duluma, and to scare Bendu off his back, Varney resorts to his old catalysts; alcohol and drug abuse, which he uses as stimulants of hyper-masculinity. Accordingly, at the point when Varney seizes and tortures Bendu on the beach, the narrator indicates that Varney was getting so intoxicated after taking a long drag on his joint [33,99] and throughout the night, whilst quibbling with Bendu, Varney sniffed cocaine [33,100]. Recalling her ordeal at Duluma, Bendu also indicates that alcohol made the male fighters extremely violent. She explains that the violence was always worse when Samson, the fighter she was forced to perform wifely duties to, was drunk or high on drugs:

- As the war continued, food eventually became scarce, domestic violence was commonplace, and from time-to-time Commander Cobra and his men would discipline their fighters, gang rape women, and torture their prisoners of war right in the middle of the camp in the burned-out concrete building that was known as the oven. The screams of fear and agony were terrifying, and each episode would send the camp's civilians into hushed and depressing existence for days [33,117].

The terrific unleashing of violence against women and children and others in the Duluma camp emphasizes claims made to the effect that hypermasculinity comprises calloused (insensitive) attitudes toward sex and women. Hypermasculinity comes with the attitude that intercourse with women is a source of male power and female submission, and that in the realms of hypermasculinity, sex is acceptable without empathic concern for the female's subjective experience [39].

Shaw's war novel *Redemption Road* transcends the symbolism of gender violence. Shaw also employs gender ideologies in her explication of tethering ways in which masculinity and hyper-masculinity sever gender relations in their psychological roots. The portrayal of unrequited love between two of her characters; Bendu and Calvin attests to the long-term psychological effect of hypermasculinity on gender relations. This effect undergirds Bendu's insouciance in Calvin's yearning to date her. The strain caused by vicious masculine oppression seems to have drained her knack to love a man again. This is especially, after the cruel death of Jonas, her fiancée, and Benji, her brother at the hands of soldiers who stormed their home, and the death and abandoning of her grandmother and her daughter which she blames on the rebels. Bendu's Duluma camp experiences of ferocious horror at the hands of Cobra, Samson, and others such as presented by the narrator have traumatic footprints on her mind: "Cobra grabbed the knife from Bendu, tilted his victim's head back, and sawed at his throat as if he were nothing but a goat. The blood gushed out and splashed all over Bendu and she screamed and screamed until there was nothing but blackness" [33,32]. The near-death experiences Bendu has with Varney after the war also attest to an excessive show of masculinity that scars her memory and relationship with Calvin as another man:

- He raised his weapon and hit her in the head with it as he shouted with a rage that came from deep within his belly... The crack of the gun on her skull echoed in the car. Blood streamed from the wound just above her left ear, and she struggled to stay conscious [33,93].

Even though Bendu knows too well that Calvin is not too happy with her decision to just be friends, she shows no readiness to change her position but rather hopes that Calvin would come to terms with it. Bendu explicates a clear example of how the expression of excessive masculinity can mar gender relations irreparably. A similar picture is painted when Rosetta passionately expresses her intention to kill right away, the person who killed someone she loved. Her pain emanates from her anger over her husband's death during the war. The fighter who killed Rosetta's husband is denoted in the masculine pronoun 'he' to signal the strain in gender relations between Rosetta and men, especially violent men.

Excessive masculinity has the propensity to destroy the bodies that express it [35]. Hence, by the end of the novel, Shaw ensures that all the men who begin the story with flying inflated masculinities are deflated as a way of implying that the flaunting of manhood, masculinity, and hyper-masculinity may destroy cross-gender relations but invariably, it also ends up oppressing and ruining hypermasculine subjects [the males themselves] and not their objects [the females] only [20]. Thus Cobra, Samson, and their accomplices all disintegrate by death or flee into thin air. The auras of manliness, masculinity, and hyper-masculinities around them all dissipate by the end of the story. They pay a soaring price as they travel into the webs of masculinity. Eventually, the mess they cause with their quest shrivels the very masculine prominence they endeavored. Conversely, Bendu and all the females who suffer the extravagances of the males not only survive but reclaim their self-worth. They conquer the traumas of the war except for the development of abhorrence for men. By ending the novel on this note, Shaw deploys literature as a vehicle for the scrutiny of soaring gender relations. Through the suffering of females like Bendu in the novel, Shaw demonstrates that a better approach to understanding gender relations and subjectivities is theorizing the male characters as much as the females. She draws attention to a social construct of masculine identity in crises. An identity modeled on the colonial understanding of masculinity and an identity that emanates from the anathema of any semblance of weakness where failure is intolerable.

3. Conclusion

By centralizing the implications of masculinities and their excessiveness in the novel, Shaw contributes to mapping a critical literary path that revisits colonial definitions and their implications on the understanding of manhood, masculinity, and hyper-masculinity in the post-colony. She draws attention to the importance of childhood and family experiences to adult gender relations. The wantonness of hyper-masculinities often driven by sheer voluptuous desire, avarice, reprisal, and reckless show of force emulated from the colonial master as ideal masculinity is critiqued in the postcolonial war novel. Writing from the feminine perspective, Shaw also challenges the valorization of slave-master-style manhood, masculinities, and hyper-masculinities of the colonial era evident in the commodification of females and the exertion of physical force on them in the novel.

Shaw ends the story with her females who are objects of masculine excesses as assertive young women who travail the traumas and scars of exaggerated masculinity. These women become symbols of feminine resistance whose triumphs disperse the very authorities that manhood, masculinities, and hyper-masculinities seek to gather. The survival lessons derived from the hypermasculine experiences of the females, instead of breaking their resilience, transpose them from victims of hypermasculinity to survivors of the horrors of hypermasculinity. In the wake of survival, Bendu and the other female survivors also grow braver and wiser. Their post-war disinterest in men epitomizes the breakdown of healthy gender relations.

Compliance with ethical standards

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