

Gendered Roles of Ritual Performance in Dow's *Far and Beyon*

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Abstract

Rituals performed in different societies express cultural beliefs regarding expected roles of women and men in the society. Bereavement rituals represented in Dow's *Far and Beyon*, like in other African societies, not only depict ritual practices in Botswana, but also communicate the gendered nature of ritual performance. The performance of all rituals in the novel; from funeral to cleansing rituals, clearly establishes cultural stereotypes of gender roles. This paper seeks to demonstrate that in ritual performance, women are assigned tasks that adhere to accepted feminine roles while male characters are assigned masculine roles; as family leaders, medicine men or diviners and indigenous knowledge tanks. The paper posits that these rituals communicate the established hierarchy between sexes and how it pervades ritual performance in the novel. It also examines ways in which the author subverts the gender role stereotypes by portraying deviation from them by some of the female characters.

Key words: Ritual, gendered, ritual, subordination, roles.

Introduction

Rituals performed in different societies play several functions, including as the paper purports, expressing cultural beliefs regarding cultural stereotypes regarding gender roles within a given society. Boys and girls are socialized from a tender age on what they should do and how they should relate to one another. Unfortunately, this kind of teaching does not only restrict women and girls to the private sphere but also affect their participation during ritual performance.

Rituals portrayed in Dow's *Far and Beyon* to a great extent, affirm a gendered performance of rituals in that, all rituals in the novel clearly establish a distinction between what is considered socially acceptable masculine and feminine roles. The paper seeks to demonstrate that women are assigned tasks that adhere to accepted feminine roles while male characters are assigned roles of family headship, medicine men, and seem to be regarded as knowledge tanks both in the ordinary and spiritual realms. However, the paper is cognizant of the satire that underlies the representation of men as custodians of indigenous knowledge, but argues that the novel nevertheless, portrays the subordinate position assigned to women in ritual performance in the text. The washing of hands ritual, the hair shaving ritual and the divination ritual depict gendered roles in *Far and Beyon*.

According to (Titiev, 1971), “in some sense all ritual is gender ritual. As long as people live gendered lives, their experience of the world, and thus of ritual, will be gender dependent, whether or not the rituals they perform explicitly relate to gender. Religious rituals often make gender distinctions in their actions, and many rituals can only be performed by men or by women.” The assertion by Titiev succinctly reinforces the article’s argument that roles in ritual performance are gendered. The norms in patriarchal societies permeate every social gathering and or activities undertaken by both men and women. Gender space between the two sexes is always established, maintained and reinforced by societies.

Theoretical framework

The paper employs the Expectation states theory, which according to (Berger et al 1977), “argues that actors [men and women] use cultural beliefs about status implications of their distinguishing characteristics to organize their interaction in goal-oriented settings.”

The theory further explains how hierarchies are created in small group interactions (with a shared goal) based on status cues (Ridgeway, 1999). The first assumption of the theory is that inequality [between men and women] is thus due to basic evaluative assumptions about women's competence as opposed to that of men. A second and related assumption is that all status assumptions resulting in inequality associate the advantaged group with higher levels of skill or resources (Webster & Foshci, 1988). This Ridgeway (1999) argues, holds men to have higher levels of competence. The third assumption made by the theory is that it grounds hierarchical inequality in the sex categories themselves rather than individual strength, competence. Finally, expectation states theory assumes that gender status beliefs affect performance expectations (and therefore result in inequality) only when gender is salient to the situation/task at hand. Thus, gender inequality will typically not surface except in mixed-sex groups, particularly if they are working on a task that is relevant to stereotypical gendered competence (Ridgeway, 1999).

At the heart of expectation states theory is the concept of status beliefs. Status beliefs are defined as “widely held cultural beliefs that link greater social significance and general competence, as well as specific positive and negative skills, with one category of a social distinction compared to another”(Ridgeway, 2001). Status beliefs arise from repeated interactions among members of different social groups, in which members of one group are observed to have some sort of *structural advantage* over members of another group. That is, they are perceived to have advantages in influencing members of other groups, due to possessing greater resources (such as money or prestige). If such perceived differences are observed across multiple interactions, in multiple contexts, they may become ingrained as a status belief (Ridgeway & Bourg, 2004).

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Analysis of the text

Far and Beyon is a novel set in Botswana which succinctly captures gendered roles in ritual performance and reveals gender hierarchy. In representing ritual performance, Dow highlights separation of roles and in the process shows the oppositional nature of masculinity and femininity. The kind of roles assigned to male and female characters show their importance and

the place their status in the society. One of such rituals is divination, which clearly depicts the cultural belief (as depicted in the novel), that men occupy a higher spiritual position than women.

Divination has a more formal or ritualistic element and often contains a more social character usually in a religious context, as is seen in traditional African medicine. (<http://en.wikipedia.org>, accessed 4/12/20). The ritual in the novel is performed by males who according to (Mbiti, 1969) cited in (Bertus et al, 2011), are “selected human beings, such as medicine men, witches, priests and rainmakers, [who] have the knowledge and ability to tap, manipulate and use these forces. Some use it for the good and others for the ill of their communities. These are men entrusted with indigenous knowledge and are entrusted with finding the cause of diseases, problems affecting individuals and the community, to apply the right treatment and supply means to prevent the misfortune from occurring again.”

It is the position of the paper that women in *Far and Beyon* do not participate in the divination ritual because they are by status, not culturally qualified to handle such sacred ritual reserved exclusively for male characters. At the beginning of the novel during Mara’s son’s funeral, Mara recalls her visit to a diviner to seek a diagnosis of the cause of Pule’s sickness and her family afflictions in general. The diviner, a male, who is the custodian of indigenous knowledge in the field of medicine, tells her:

“I see a thin woman entering your home as if she belongs there, and yet does not quite belong. She must be a relative or perhaps a friend?” the diviner asked with a frown of concentration as he tried to decipher some meaning of the bones. (3)

Mara is asked to throw divining bones and follow the diviner in chanting some words meant to inquire from the bones what her problem may be. According to (Pemberton, 2013), these bones are “ritual artifacts used to invoke spiritual powers and to signal to the participants, transitional moments in the ritual sequence.” One notes Mara’s ignorance of the meaning of the bones because such knowledge is reserved for the diviner who is part of the privileged male domain of the cultural practice. The bones in this case serve as symbols of power, cultural and spiritual resource of knowledge reserved solely for men in the society. After all these according to (Dow 2000:4) “were special bones he [the diviner] had inherited from his great- grandfather. They were bones that had unraveled the problems of countless families and individuals long before the diviner or Mara was born.” This is best explained by the Expectations states theory in its proposition that “all status assumptions resulting in inequality associate the advantaged group with higher levels of skill or resources (Webster & Foshci, 1988).

Dow’s observation on the special bones reinforces the paper’s argument that only men, as reflected in the novel, were privileged to become diviners. Mara relies on the diviner for the diagnosis and possible panacea for her family problems. However, the author seems to subvert the idea of men as custodians of indigenous knowledge by making it difficult for the diviner to specify the culprit behind Mara’s problems, as evidenced by his uncertainty and guess work:

The diviner, looking at the bones addressed Mara: “I see a woman you like and trust. She comes through your big gate.”

"I have only one gate," interrupted Mara hesitantly, not wanting to disagree, not wanting to contradict the bones. For a second she even thought that perhaps she did have a big gate.

"It is a big gate, is it not? Or is it a small one?" the diviner demanded curtly, as if he was a little angry at the interruption.

"Yes," said Mara. It was in fact not a gate at all but a wire mesh fence that had long since collapsed. But yes, the entrance was big enough to pass for a gate. (8)

The failure by the diviner to specify Mara's enemy depicts Dow's transgression of gender role boundaries permeating the society. She is in a way deconstructing or disrupting the status quo: the notion that men are knowledge tanks and women are recipients of such knowledge. The diviner is as ignorant of the meaning of the bones as Mara. When Mara persists with wanting to know who the cause of her problems is, the diviner continues to provide Mara with vague diagnosis of the source of her family afflictions:

"A thin woman of the colour of the bark of the *moretlwa* bush. Dark, but not too dark. She laughs a lot. Yes, I see laughter but it is a sinister laughter. You laugh with her and she is counting your teeth. She plans bad things for you and you are blind to her plans. You have a good heart, a white heart, and a female heart. She has a black heart, a heart that wants to kill. Her heart is full of envy. She has a beige heart." she wants what others have but she covers it with her laughter. You must know who the person is." He looked up to Mara for confirmation. (13)

Mara clearly does not know who the culprit is and tells the diviner that there is no person like that in her life, to which the diviner retorts, "I cannot give you a name although I can see it right here. You will see her when you are ready to confront the truth. Until then you will continue to deny the obvious." (14) One thing is clear: the supposedly knowledgeable male diviner has failed dismally to diagnose Mara's problems but expects the 'patient' to believe his vague diagnosis. When Mara expresses doubt about the accuracy of the diagnosis, the diviner is vexed and in turn blames her for not agreeing with his diagnosis.

Dow also questions the Diviner's ability to prevent Mara's problems from recurring. When Mara asks the diviner if he could counter the evil forces, the diviner asks her to pick the bones and throw them again and ultimately tells Mara:

"You are surrounded by bad luck and ill omens. You need a thorough cleansing. I will give you something to put in your bath, every day for seven days, and then you have to come back for another consultation. You also need something to help with your job. A small herb to sprinkle in your employer's food or tea. Do not put too much or she might taste. And remember, do not use the gate you normally use to enter your employer's yard. I will give you something to sprinkle at the old gate... I will also give you herbs for your family. You must burn them in the house and have the whole family inhale the fumes." (15)

The paper observes that the prescription given to Mara also casts a cloud of doubt over the knowledge of the diviner. At the end of it all Mara is not confident about the potency of the herbs she is given to cleanse her family: “Mara thanked the man and stood up to leave. At the door she looked back at the diviner, took in his ample frame and was disconcerted to see a frown on his heavily bearded face. She had hoped for a look of encouragement.” (15) From the quote, one reads Dow’s doubt about the usefulness of divination, the male character’s ability to diagnose people’s problems, and their ability to solve the patients’ problems, let alone heal their physical affliction. In a nutshell, the diviner fails to prescribe powerful medicine to alleviate Mara’s afflictions.

Another ritual in *Far and Beyon* that shows gendered ritual roles is the hair shaving ritual, which according to (Makgahlela *et al*, 2019:4) form part of cleansing ritual ceremony, which rids the bereaved of defilement and impurity brought about by the death of a family member. Mara’s extended family members gather to discuss the ritual. From the onset, Dow depicts the differential treatment of men and women: women are expected to sit on the floor while men sit on chairs. Women are expected to cover their heads while men leave theirs bare. Dow writes:

Most of Mara’s assembled relatives – seventeen uncles, aunts, cousins, and siblings- were sitting just outside the room, in the shadows cast by the dipping afternoon sun. Once again bare heads were raised and scarf-covered heads sat on the ground. Men do not wear hats in the house or when in a meeting and women do not appear without head scarves at family meetings. But as on the day before, the exception was Mma Bakang with her bandaged leg. But not for long though: a young man came and stood next to her. He said not a word but the gesture spoke volumes: she rolled off the chair, grimacing in pain, and took her place on the ground where her gender belonged...Bare heads high, scarfed heads low. (33&43)

One notes that even the sitting arrangement suggests power dynamics in this gathering. “Bare heads high and scarfed heads low” denote social hierarchy; men occupy the high echelons of power and authority by virtue of their gender, while women assume the subservient position. During the discussion of the ritual one notices the authority assigned to men in guiding the discussions. It is a man (uncle Mmopi) who addresses the meeting first:

“Child of my uncle [Mara], children of my tribe, you whose totem is my totem, today’s job has been finished,” uncle Mmopi began, startling Mara to attention. “It went very well but we must now talk about tomorrow’s tasks so that the task of burying our son must finally be concluded...The ancestors are looking at us and want us to do the right thing. We must agree, so I ask you: who is the razor’s holder?” He looked around as if inviting comments but then went on to ask, “Do we all agree that the hand that must hold the razor is the hand of Maruping. Rra Ranko, the brother to Mara and the uncle to Pule?” Everybody looked around to confirm that they were in agreement and a small bald old man with slits for eyes piped up, “Yes, we all agree. The razor’s hand is the hand of Maruping.” (34)

The paper notes that the role is assigned to Maruping, a man in his capacity as the head of his household, but the actual shaving is done by the wife, who we would agree befits the role of a

care giver: “Mma- Ranko, wife of Maruping, your husband holds the razor, and so you know your job,” a woman said. “Remember Mma- Ranko you will bring a razor, sugar, milk and tea to be brewed tomorrow. Do not forget the beer please.” (35)

The paper further observes that throughout the discussions, women simply chorus in agreement to decisions made by men since the latter hold a position of authority in family meetings. Any woman who attempts to “usurp” the position of men is met with scorn and chastisement, for example, when the meeting discusses whether Pule’s child (born out of wed lock) should be shaved or not and Mma- Maria chips in to provide a solution to the dilemma, she is criticized as being impetuous woman. Dow writes:

“May I say something, older father?” said Mma- Maria, an ample woman with a reputation for being level- headed and to the point. She was a staff nurse at Molemo Government Hospital and was respected for her education and position. Seeking permission to speak showed her understanding of her position... Mma- Maria’s voice was loud and firm. There was silence for a few seconds and a hint of confusion. It was not expected that a woman should take a definite position so early in the discussions. Mma- Maria should have made her point carefully and tentatively and wait for the older men to decide the issue. Her disregard for protocol was however understandable under the circumstances. (40)

Mara, like Mma-Maria usurps the masculine role of making decisions about who should be shaved, thereby transgressing expected gender boundaries of ritual performance:

“The razor faces me and my two children, my uncle. It faces us alone but I want you to also remove the bad luck of death from Nunu my son’s daughter. I know that the child does not have any rights in this family but she is the child of my child and she brought great joy to my son during his last days. You cannot leave her with the bad luck of death. You must shave her head as well. Not to shave her would be to kill her. If you do not shave her head you might as well take the same razor and slit her throat. Please.” (36)

The quote above clearly portrays gendered relationships between the male and female characters in *Far and Beyond*. The passage depicts re-affirmation of gender through ritual. I concur with Mischa (1971:147) who observes that rituals “affirm differences between men and women. They re-establish the characteristics that the religious tradition considers properly masculine or feminine. To be socially accepted a man must often behave in masculine ways and a woman in feminine ways, and this is learned through ritual.” Mma- Maria and Mara are the only women who transgress the gender boundaries, while others simply passively agree to decisions made by men. The duo’s victory lies in the ultimate shaving of Nunu.

The washing of clothes (which is another cleansing ritual), also depicts gendered ritual performance. The performance of the ritual is left entirely to women, since it is traditionally their duty to wash clothes. Dow records:

Mmopi's wife announced the washing of clothes of Pule's clothes. The women stood up to do the job. The men went back to their fireplace and once again, scarfed heads rose and carried their chairs. There was order. An old dance, choreographed centuries ago, was being re-enacted. Had the men carried the chairs, it is quite possible the wives would have been offended. (43)

Once again Dow represents the status quo and then moves swiftly to question gendered roles. She then brings in a scenario that disrupts the gender boundaries by alluding to an incident where a local woman was married to a Malawian man. Her representation of the incident in a way affords the reader an opportunity to get the society's view on gender roles. Dow writes:

Years ago, one of them had come back from South Africa with a Malawian husband who was so in love with her that he helped with all manner of wifely duties, carrying his own chair, helping her carry water and sweeping the yard. Even to this day, the tellers of the story got goose bumps when they thought of that man, bending over with a broom, sweeping the yard. His wife was utterly embarrassed [why?]. Of course he had long stopped that foolishness and had even started to beat her occasionally like most other men. Love had long evaporated, leaving behind marriage. (43)

The paper notes Dow's subversion of gender roles through inversion, and portrays the Malawian husband as performing typically feminine domestic chores. The society views the Malawian man as foolish because she behaves like a "woman" and forces him to behave like other men in the society. The wife is also embarrassed by her husband's feminine behavior, may be because she also has been socialized into gender roles.

Conclusion

The paper has established that roles in ritual performance as portrayed in Dow's *Far and Beyon* are gendered. The ritual performance depicts gendered hierarchy and gendered boundaries that are culturally constructed. The paper hence fully concurs with (Titiev, 1971)'s assertion that "in some sense all ritual is gender ritual. As long as people live gendered lives, their experience of the world, and thus of ritual, will be gender dependent, whether or not the rituals they perform explicitly relate to gender. Religious rituals [and cultural bereavement rituals] often make gender distinctions in their actions, and many rituals can only be performed by men or by women. The portrayal of ritual performance in *Far and Beyon*, the paper concludes, has shown how rituals affirm, establish and reinforce gender roles in the society. The paper has also demonstrated Dow's subversion of traditional gender roles by endowing certain female characters with the nerve to challenge the status quo, by making decisions during ritual performance meetings, a role normally preserved for men.

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