A Cross-Examination of Female Masculinities and Male Femininities in *Mema* by Daniel Mengara

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Abstract

This paper attempts a critical reading of Mema (2003) written by Daniel Mengara. The study draws on insights from language and gender studies, feminism and queer theory to critically cross-examine how female masculinities and male femininities are represented in the novel. It holds the view that gendered identities are socially constructed via speech. This means that language encodes means which overtly mark masculinity or/and femininity. However, it should be noted that neither masculinity nor femininity is an exclusive characteristic of the male or the female sex/gender. In this sense, the role(s) an individual takes on in a given context confers either the masculine or the feminine profile upon him/her. This study concludes that gendered identities as portrayed in Mema are intricate, and that in most cases the portraiture of both sexes counters the expectations of African culture.

Keywords

African culture, female masculinities, gendered identities, male femininities, Mema

1. Introduction

In *Undoing Gender*, the feminist scholar Judith Butler (2004) argues that gender is constituted by social norms. While social norms constitute gender, they constrain and sanction it. This is to say, the norms established by society define what is livable or legal or not for gender. The norms, as it were, dictate the roles a man or woman takes on in society. In this way, while a man is socially expected to play masculine roles, a woman is socially expected to play feminine ones. The social norms also police sexuality or sexual behaviour. Society traditionally expects its individuals to be heterosexual, and anything that is contrary to this is not deemed livable or legal. In addition, the social norms regulate the speech patterns of an individual (male or female). Butler, in her book, cogently calls for the undoing or disarticulating of such social norms in order to enable the individual to fulfill his/her full potential as well as allow for a multiple or pluralistic outlet of gendered life in society. Society and culture are dynamic, so an individual's roles, speech patterns as well as his or her gendered identity (or agency in

Butler's terms) are bound to change with time.

Literature actually serves as the mirror of reality in society (Dooga, 2009). This means that literature reflects social reality the way it is constituted via language in time. Social practices or actions are repeatedly actualized and reproduced into social reality, and this reality is instantiated by the existential dynamics of change and time, which literature effectively captures and records down. It follows from this to argue that literature can serve as an avenue for the realization of the dual role of doing and undoing gender. Gender, *inter alia*, is represented via literature. Gender(ed) representation, as observed by many informed observers in a recent past, has taken a new dimension in contemporary African literature. Unlike in early African literature wherein male and female characters are delineated asymmetrically or in an exclusionary way or in pure or rigid traditional roles which invariably reproduce and reinforce the patriarchal status quo (see Akogbéto & Koukpossi's (2015) study of Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*, for instance), contemporary African writers (male and female) have increasingly re-evaluated gender issues in consonance with the feminist theory and praxis (cf., Koussouhon, Akogbéto, & Allagbé, 2014; Koussouhon et al., 2015a, 2015b; Koussouhon & Dossoumou, 2015). This paper attempts a critical reading of *Mema* (2003) written by Daniel Mengara. The study draws on insights from language and gender studies, feminism and queer theory to critically cross-examine how female masculinities and male femininities are represented in the novel. It holds the view that gendered identities are socially constructed via speech. This means that language encodes means which overtly mark masculinity or/and femininity.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Language and Gender Studies, Feminism and Queer Theory: Subverting Gender Roles, Attributes or Traits

Gender is a categorical concept that cuts across the three distinct but complementary academic fields, viz. language and gender studies, feminism and queer theory. Actually, the term "gender" came to limelight following the rise of feminism in the 1970s (Lakoff, 1975). The seminal works by scholars like Judith Butler (1988, 1990/1999, 2004), Janet Holmes and Miriam Meyerhoff (2003), Jane Sunderland (2006), etc., have provided new perspectives of/about gender.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1990/1999) claims that gender as well as sex is a shifting category. This suggests that gender is not something fixed but something fluid in that it is a performed act in a constant alteration. Gender identity in this sense is not given, but it is rather negotiated by an individual via his/her interactions with others. Therefore, it is right to assert here that an individual is made to perform his/her gender identity in a repeatedly social practice. As Butler (1988, p. 519) notes, gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an

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abiding gendered self.

From the perspective of language and gender studies, feminism and queer theory, there is a close relationship between language and gender: for example, Sunderland's (2006) *Language and Gender: an advanced resource book* indicates this. This perspective holds that language enacts gender via a series of performative acts posited through the gendered stylization of the body (Butler, 1990/1999). The acts an individual (male or female) performs invariably are deemed appropriate or normative when they match societal expectations about gender (Woloshyn, Taber, & Lane, 2013). Feminist and queer scholars use "gender" as a cover term for both masculine and feminine acts, roles or/and attributes assigned to the two sex categories: male and female. In her insightful paper entitled "Language and gender in African contexts", Sunderland (2009, pp. 127-128) is of the view that Africa shares affinities with some Western countries in terms of gender differentiation, amongst many other things. In Africa, gender differentiation is ultimately marked by role assignment, and society has a certain number of expectations as regards this. While men are expected to play such stereotypical roles as fatherhood, husbandhood and leadership, women are traditionally expected to be mothers, housewives and subservient. In addition, the attributes or traits allotted to men and women differ in African culture: men are expected to be strong/potent, intelligent, industrious, courageous, logical, spiritual etc., whereas women are expected to be weak/impotent, dull, cowardly, irrational, carnal etc.

Indeed, the masculine or feminine roles, attributes or traits allotted to the two sex categories are not given. This implies that the gender roles, traits or attributes assigned to men and women (in Africa and elsewhere) are not markedly essential or biological; they are rather social or cultural constructions naturalized with a view to sustaining an established order in patriarchal society. In the seventies, the rise of feminism has brought with it a view that gender roles or stereotypes can be subverted or deconstructed. Since then, patriarchy has been seriously attacked by feminist scholars and/or critics. Patriarchy is essentially a male prerogative. By definition, it is an endemic system that confers all social, political and economic power and dominance to man. According to Asiyanbola (2005, p. 3), a patriarchal society is "a system of social stratification and differentiation on the basis of sex, which provides material advantages to males while simultaneously placing severe constraints on the roles and activities of females". He further notes that a system of taboos or norms is set up to maintain the status quo in patriarchal society.

There has been a fair body of recent feminist literary and linguistics-based research works on the undoing or deconstruction of the patriarchal status quo in contemporary African literature (cf., Adjei, 2009; Kehinde & Mbipom, 2011; Ofosu, 2013; Koussouhon, Akogbéto, & Allagbé, 2014; Koussouhon et al., 2015a, 2015b; Koussouhon & Dossoumou, 2015; Marfo, Yeboah, & Bonku, 2015, etc.). Indeed, these research endeavours have explored some fictional works written by two famous contemporary African writers of English expression: Amma Darko (Ghanaian) and Helon Habila (Nigerian). Daniel Mengara, unlike these two writers, is from a French-speaking country, Gabon (referred to as Ngabon or Ngabone in the fiction), wherein the novel is set. This male Gabonese author is not known to the public

per se, given that there is a dearth of research works on his fictional works. Therefore, the current research seeks to bring one of Daniel Mengara's works entitled *Mema* (2003) to the fore by critically cross-examining how female masculinities and male femininities are represented therein. *Mema* is a story about a woman whose name the novel bears. In the novel, Mema cogently struggles against all the constraints or norms her patriarchal community places on the roles of the womenfolk. This novel, as it were, provides the opportunity for the evaluation of the abovementioned theoretical assumptions about gender.

2.2 Methodology

This paper draws on qualitative research method to critically cross-examine gender roles, attributes or traits in *Mema* (2003), the novel under study. It also combines this method with textual analysis, which consists of extracting some textual snippets from the novel wherein masculine and feminine identities are enacted. The texts are meant to probe the theoretical assumptions about gender drawn from language and gender studies, feminism and queer theory. The theoretical assumptions about gender, so to speak, provide the theoretical underpinnings for the current analysis.

3. Gendered Representations of Men and Women in *Mema* (2003)

To simplify the reading of the gendered representations of men and women in *Mema*, the main gendered characters therein are first described.

Table 1. Description of the Main Characters in *Mema*

Character Name	Sex/Gender (M/F)	Description
Ntsame Minlame (Mema)	F	Protagonist, the narrator's mother.
Sima Okang (Pepa)	M	Mema's husband, the narrator's father.
Elang Sima (The narrator)	M	Mema's and Pepa's son.
Akoure Okang	F	Mema's sister-in-law, Pepa's elder sister.

In *Mema*, Daniel Mengara through the homodiegetic narrator, Elang Sima Okang, depicts both men and women in subverted gender roles, attributes or traits. The qualitative textual analysis of the gender roles, attributes or traits exudes the following.

Table 2. Female Masculinities and Male Femininities in *Mema*

Female Masculinities	Male Femininities
Ntsame Minlame: strong, spiritual, powerful, manly, independent and aggressive. She is intelligent, stubborn, enduring, arrogant, undiplomatic and indiscreet. She is also imposing,	Sima Okang: weak/impotent, carnal, powerless, womanly, dependent and calm. He is also a pacifist.

convincing and open-minded.

Akoure Okang: strong, powerful, manly, independent and aggressive. She is stubborn, arrogant and undiplomatic.	The village catechist: boring in his preaching. He is afraid of preaching the Word of God the way It is to his parishioners. He is often humiliated by Mema.
Women: masters of their households, decision-makers. They control men, their husbands. Women have the power of the inside world. They are discreet and diplomatic.	Men: carriers of empty title of leaders. Men have the power of the outside world. They are docile and are controlled by women, their wives.

It should be clear from the onset that the subsequent discussion is centred mainly on the gendered representations of the female protagonist, Mema (Ntsame Minlame) and her husband, Pepa (Sima Okang). But, the discussion briefly touches on other gendered characters (named or nameless) as they relate to Mema or Pepa. In the table above, Mema, the female protagonist in the fiction is described as strong, spiritual, powerful, manly, independent and aggressive. She is intelligent, stubborn, enduring, arrogant, undiplomatic and indiscreet. She is also imposing, convincing and open-minded. The first lines in the opening of the novel read thus: "I remember. I remember Mema. Mother. My mother. My mother was *a strong woman*" (p. 1) (our italics). Mema's strength is increasingly enforced through time: "It is the nature of things that years should take their toll. But the years did not vanquish Mema, because Mema was *strong*, *a strong woman indeed*" (p. 4) (our italics). This depiction denotes an absolutely unfailing strength, the kind of strength that transcends idealized time. Mema's strength actually instills a fear that pervades her hut and even the whole village (Otongwaku). She is feared by everybody, including her husband. When Mema is angry, her strong voice echoes and this frightens both males and females: "She [Mema] had *the kind of strong voice that could be heard from one village corner to the other. When that voice started to talk, it sounded very frightful to both males and females*" (p. 6) (our italics). Besides, Mema's strength is buttressed by her deep roots in spirituality: my mother. That mother of mine was herself *a strong believer* in things that should not be profaned, in things that should go unquestioned because they were truths that were self-evident and manifest in our surroundings. *She was very deeply rooted in the belief that things always happened for a reason, and that there would always be truths beyond the perception and grasp of humans* (p. 32) (our italics).

It is obvious in the quote above that Mema believes in God, a supernatural power and spiritual things that transcend the grasp of human beings. Her role of a strong believer denotes that she is not a carnal person. In fact, she is represented as an embodiment of moral and spiritual values. This role confers a certain power and intelligence on her. Because of this, she obviously becomes fearless, bold and intelligent.

Mema had *a big mouth* too. And when I say *a big mouth*, I mean she really had *a big mouth*. Not in the physical sense. But in the sense of the things she said, and how she said them. Somewhere in her heart,

Mema always believed she was the most intelligent person in the universe. It was not easy to win a debate against her. *She would always try to convince others that she was right. But she was never easily convinced* (p. 4) (our italics).

Unlike Mema, Pepa, Mema's husband, in the novel, is depicted as weak/impotent, carnal, powerless, womanly, dependent and calm. He is also a pacifist (see Table 2 above). Pepa dies of an unspecified disease when the narrator is still very young. As a result, his presence is faint in the narrator's memory. All the narrator knows about him is what he is told by his mother and other people: the story went that Pepa was a very *calm* and *placid man* with *no real manly power* in our household. My mother, her critics said, ran every single thing in the hut with a heavy hand, and a big mouth. Pepa, I was told, had been turned into *a mere woman* in his own hut. He had become *an empty shell. A soundless tom-tom. A lion with broken legs* who could no longer bounce and pounce. He was thought of as *someone so subdued and bewildered* by the power wielded by his wife inside and outside the hut that *his voice was never heard rising above that of the panther of a woman* that people called his wife (p. 32) (our italics). Consider the role Pepa takes on in the passage above. It is obvious in this passage that Pepa is a tamed man; a sort of man deprived of the notion of masculinity. Pepa's attitude here is not natural at all. He is subdued by Mema, his wife: "*My mother had turned my father into a mere empty calabash using witchcraft*" (p. 33) (our italics). The use of a supernatural power called witchcraft by Mema makes her undo her husband's maleness and as a result she controls his will and manhood. In fact, Mema does not conceit this social practice to the public. Whenever she has the opportunity to exude that she is the one in control, she does so without wasting time. For instance, only men are said to attend *medzo* (meeting or gathering) in the village where they discuss serious issues related to the village life, but Mema often accompanies her husband to such meetings where she misses no opportunity to open her big mouth. She also attends the mud-walled church in the village. There she will impose her presence on everyone, the village catechist included. When the preaching of the catechist is boring and not accurate enough, Mema will step on the pulpit to take over the sermon and preach convincingly using live examples from the daily experience of her people (p. 34). It follows from this to note that Mema is a perfect embodiment of her people's culture, history, lores, traditions, mores and customs. She is a kind of person who often records everything that goes around her and she does not find it difficult to bequeath her knowledge and experience to her children. For example, Mema in the novel recounts her experience of the Second World War (1939-1945) to Elang Sima, her son: white people are really strange people, my mother used to tell me. She thought they were crazy. They could wake up one day and decide that it was time for them to go to war […]. This is how the Fulassi who ruled our land and the Dzaman started to fight a big war against each other (p. 2).

It should be noted that Mema is not formally educated as indicated by her use of expressions like "Fulassi" for "French", "Dzaman" for "German" in the passage above. But she is very unquestionably intelligent. The text above also shows that Mema is mono-parental; she single-handedly raises and educates her children, playing the mother-father's roles. By so doing, Mema negotiates a transgendered

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identity for herself. In addition, she is a caring housewife for her dying husband. When her husband catches a strange disease, Mema does not abandon him. She actually stands by his side to take care of him and equally shares in his lot: my father had spent most of his last years going from one *nguegan* to another. *The sufferings of my mother began when she started to spend most of her time taking her husband to various medicine men and women of our area*. She had elected to try all sorts of medicines. But neither the witchdoctors nor their medicines cured my father (p. 37) (our italics).

It is clear in the text above that all the medicines in the land of Otongwaku have failed to cure Pepa's strange disease. This then makes Mema courageously decide to take him to the village of Okom where lives a fearful witchcraft called *mimbiri*. Her husband's people out of sheer fear of the *mimbiri* witchcraft and doctors quickly oppose this idea and send Mema a delegation to dissuade her from taking their son to Okom. They try to explain the risky nature of *mimbiri* ceremonies to Mema and even draw her attention to the white priest's warning that "the *mimbiri* is an evil medicine, and that because it is evil medicine, he will exclude from his church all the people who go and seek a cure from *mimbiri* doctors" (p. 38). But, as the narrator notes, "My mother did not yield" (p. 37). Obviously, Mema turns down people's pieces of advice and takes her husband to the *mimbiri* camp. It must be noted here that Mema's act exudes love. Though Mema terrifies her man (or husband), she in fact loves him: "*She [Mema] loved him [Pepa] enormously…* Her fights with him had just been her own capricious way of making sure the relationship was one of love, not of formality" (p. 62) (our italics).

When Akoure Okang, Mema's sister-in-law, hears that her younger brother, Sima Okang, has been taken to Okom, she walks with an army of thirty women to wage war against Mema. Mema with the help of her machete scatters all the women (pp. 47-48). After this incident, no one dares to stop Mema from seeking a cure from the *mimbiri* doctor. The role of the *mimbiri* doctor is to prepare and send Sima Okang, Pepa, "to the world of the dead to ask for a cure" (p. 49). Sima Okang is warned by the doctor never to accept the food given to him by the dead. But he does not heed this warning. He accepts and eats the food his dead mother brings to him. This act terminates his life. This portrayal clearly points out that Pepa is carnal, superficial and greedy. While Mema is still mourning her man's death and is getting ready to take the body back to the village for burial, her two daughters fall sick and subsequently die a mysterious death the following day. This makes it three dead bodies on Mema's neck. What a terrible doom for her! Mema blames her husband's family for her doom. She is in turn blamed by her husband's people for the deaths of their son and granddaughters. In this multitude of blames, Mema becomes shattered, expressionless and weak.

Vanquished by the circumstances of her life, my mother did not have much more word to say. She felt in *a mute silence* and never opened her mouth again. The pain had reached the boiling point in her heart and it felt as though her head was going to be *shattered* into thousands of small pieces. Life itself had become meaningless. She was *ready to die*. She wanted to rejoin her husband and daughters in the invisible world of the dead. She was sure she would feel no pain in the world of the ancestors. She no longer had the strength to fight (p. 64) (Our italics).

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The italicized linguistic terms in the passage above show that Mema does possess feminine traits. This observation draws attention to the pendulous nature of gender: gender swings along with context. Mema's shift from the masculine to feminine can be accounted for by her psychological state at that moment. Mema remains in this context for a limited time (a period of one year or so after the deaths of her husband and daughters). She is woken up from her stupor when her husband's people come to claim the two remaining children (boys: Owono Sima & Elang Sima). She quickly puts on her masculinity and shows them her machete. They all flee in panic. That's how she is able to keep her children with her for some time. On the request of Zula Mebiang, the first child (or son) of Akoure Okang, the one who by tradition has the right and responsibility to look after Mema and her children, a *medzo* (meeting) is held to decide on the burning issue on ground, the issue is to take the two boys away from Mema. During the meeting, Mema exudes all-female attributes: she is very calm, not frightening at all. She agrees to let Elang Sima (the younger of her two sons) go to Beyok (the big city) with Zula Mebiang.

For the first time in a long time, my mother did not speak during a palaver. *For the first time*, she did not argue with her in-laws. *For the first time in a long time*, others decide her destiny and the destiny of her children. *For the first time in a long time*, she did not show anyone her machete. *She had simply agreed to let me go to the big city* (p. 92) (Our italics).

The reason why the *medzo* decides that one of Mema's sons should go to the big city is to keep him far away from the reach of the *beyem* (witches or wizards) who want to exterminate Mema's seeds. But, Mema has a hidden agenda; she wants her son to go to the big city and get education. As the homodiegetic narrator emphasizes, she knows that: "With schooling would come power, and with power total protection for her and my elder brother (p. 121)". It follows from this to assert that Mema is open-minded; she is open to modernism, and she wants her son to be her emissary in the city. She recalls this a countless number of time to him: "I want you to be my Osuga Zame" (p. 84), Osuga Zame meaning "the protecting force, the shelter" (p. 121). The old English adage that says that we meet to part and part to meet (Omotoso, 1978, p. 62) actually holds true here. Both the parting and meeting of the mother and her son are charged with mixed emotions: joy and sorrow. Five years of parting have brought much change in the lives of both personae. While Elang Sima goes through Beyok to get the white man's knowledge in school, his mother remarries with a man from another village called Allen. They finally relocate to Allen due to the animosity of Mema's deceased husband's family members towards the man, who is also a clansman. When Mema first visits her returning son in Eboman (the village where Akoure Okang gets married), she actually expects Zula Mebiang to see that she is missing her son, but he fails to do so. So, two weeks later, Mema calls for a *medzo* in Eboman. The *medzo* is meant to put things right. She has come to claim back her son. When she meets Zula's resistance with much insult and disrespect, this is her reaction that ends the meeting: *my mother sprang from her bamboo seat like a famished she-lion. She slapped Zula in the face, causing him to step backward and tumble against his seat*. He landed squarely on his buttocks, causing panic among the

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people who were sitting behind him. "I have had enough!" my mother shouted fiercely. I tell you this right now. I have had enough. I will not take the disrespect of this man anymore. Ah Zula. Are you forgetting who you are talking to? Are you forgetting that I once cleaned shit from your buttocks? Who gave you the right to talk to me with such disrespect? Did anyone say to you that working in Beyok in the white man's world gave you the right to come here and insult me? Today, I will show you all that I am Ntsame Minlame. Upon this, my mother turned towards me and called: "Elang!" "Mema", I responded, trembling. "Get up and let's go!" she commanded. I hesitated, not knowing what to do. I was afraid. I looked at her, then looked at my aunt Akoure. Then I remembered that I had to start crying and roll on the floor. My mother was not deceived. She briskly seized my arm, pulling me from the floor towards her. Zula had finally been helped up. He and his mother advanced, intending to pull me away from my mother. "*Song*!" ["*Cemetery*!"] shouted my mother in a chilling voice that froze Zula and his mother on the spot. *In her hand had miraculously appeared a machete*. The crowd that had gathered inside and outside the kitchen house dispersed in panic (pp. 118-119) (our italics).

4. Conclusion

The qualitative textual analysis of the gendered representations of men and women in *Mema* (2003) reveals characters with subverted gender roles, attributes or traits. In other words, the gendered identities of these personae do not conform to the patriarchal status quo. While women (Ntsame Minlame or Mema, Akoure Okang, etc.) are depicted in roles, attributes or traits stereotypically meant for men, men are delineated in roles, attributes or traits traditionally destined for women (Sima Okang or Pepa, the village catechist, etc.). In addition, most (not to say all) of these characters are represented as transgendering. This is to say, these gendered characters swing pendulously from the masculine to feminine. It follows from these findings to note that gendered identities as portrayed in *Mema* are intricate, and that in most cases the portraiture of both sexes counters the expectations of African culture.

The question that follows suit is: "what implications do the gendered representations of men and women in *Mema* (2003) have for gender in contemporary African society?" The first implication is the creation of a multiple or pluralistic outlet of gendered life in society. That men and women are portrayed in subverted roles, attributes or traits simply serves to disarticulate traditional perceptions and received notions of masculinity and femininity in society. The second implication is women empowerment. It is true that the concept "gender" serves to designate the two sexes: male and female. But the image of one of the two sexes, the female sex precisely, has been debased, demeaned and degraded over time in history. So, empowering women in literature will build their image positively in society. And this will indubitably lead to a social transformation. Consider how Daniel Mengara's (2003) homodiegetic narrator, Elang Sima, a vibrant advocate of female gender politics, highlights the female image and power in the subsequent text: *in public, they [women], as tradition requires, let their husbands prevail as masters of their households*. The lion had to be kept roaring for the sake of

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appearance. *In the privacy of the bedroom, however, women were said to be the real masters of the household. It is in the secrecy of the conjugal room and bed that the real decisions were made, and such decisions, the rumour went, were imposed upon the village by women. Women ran the village but gave the men the false honour of carrying the empty title of leaders of their households in public* […] A man once thought to be untamable would suddenly, after taking a new wife, become as docile as a baby lion. His voice would be heard booming less and less from his conjugal hut, and before long, the only voice being heard would be that of his wife […] *Women had the power of the inside world and men the power of the outside* (pp. 33-34) (our italics).

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