

SEXUALITY, SUBJECTIVITY, AND MOTHERHOOD IN MENGESTU'S *THE BEAUTIFUL THINGS THAT HEAVEN BEARS*

Bekelech Truye^{1✉}, Olga Yazbec²

Addis Ababa University, NBH1, 4killo King George VI St, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia^{1,2}

Article Info

Article History:
Received January 2024
Accepted March 2024
Published April 2024

Keywords:
diaspora literature,
gender, subjectivity,
sexuality

Abstract

This article aims to explore the representation of the female protagonist's subjectivity and sexuality in Dinaw Mengestu's novel *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (2007). This novel has been analyzed from other critical perspectives. However, a post-structural feminist analysis of this novel can shed light on the female character's subjectivity and sexuality, as well as our understanding of womanhood in general. The researchers discovered that the female character in the selected novel is modeled as a person who resists the exclusion of women from knowledge and power in a patriarchal society. She represents a new generation of women who struggle against the subjugation of women. Besides, she resists submissiveness to negative experiences in sexuality. In a nutshell, she is made visible through resilience.

INTRODUCTION

This article intends to make a post-structural feminist analysis of Dinaw Mengestu's novel, *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (2007). Mengestu is a diaspora /Ethiopian writer. The term diaspora is a critical term in this study. It is because this article analyzes a diasporic novel. Diaspora, derived from the Greek word *diaspeirein*, refers to an individual's or community's displacement from their own country and settlement in the host land (Cohen, 2022). Cohen further explains that the word has a Biblical ground that traces back to ancient times. It is mentioned in the Old Testament 250 BC, referring to the scattering of Hebrews due to Divine punishment. It is mentioned in Deuteronomy and Psalms. Diaspieren means 'sowing of seeds'; its equivalent Hebrew word is 'galuth', which means 'captivity or exile to indicate the invasion of Jerusalem by Babylon and the exile of Jerusalem elite to Babylon from 586—530 BC. These uses of the word are associated with Jewish dispersion. In other words, the Jewish experience has become a relevant example of diaspora.

Though various scholars have different ideas about diaspora, Cohen (2022) stresses some characteristics or features of diaspora. For him, the major diaspora issues are dispersal, collective memory, the myth of the original homeland, idealization of homeland, will to return, maintenance of homeland, and ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity.

The novelist Dinaw Mengestu is an Ethiopian immigrant whose mother took him to the United States of America in 1980, when he was two years old, to meet his father, who fled two years ago. Many Ethiopian scholars migrated to foreign countries due to the dictator regime of Derg, which came to power in 1974 during the Ethiopian Revolution. So Dinaw's parents were some of the victims.

Diaspora literature is a type of post-colonial literature. It makes the post-colonial literature extend to broader socio-cultural horizons. Diaspora writers like Dinaw Mengestu produce literary works in which they express their feelings and experiences they have passed through. This type of literature is called diaspora literature (Pokharel, 2020).

Regardless of place differences and language, diaspora theory influences diaspora literature (Rani, 2018). Further, Rani explains that diasporic text deals with 'location', 'dislocation', and 'relocation'. The diaspora sticks between the past and the present and falls into a dilemma, creating a feeling of nervousness. This type of writing focuses on what the authors know in their homeland, i.e. their background and what they experience in the alien land. They neither ignore the past (old tradition) nor stick to the present life. They are torn between the two because they are unable to break the ties. They are always pulled back towards the old values they are familiar with. Diasporic literature plays a significant role in

reflecting the culture and history of nations. It is linked to the reality of people in the diaspora, so it is considered the extension of post-colonial literature in broader socio-cultural horizons (Pokharel, 2020, p. 9).

Diasporic literature, as a whole, revolves around isolation or alienation, moving away from the original place, nostalgia, existential rootlessness, quest for identity, and disintegration from cultural identity. The diaspora community has become alienated from three different perspectives. First, they are detached from the old traditions and values they were accustomed to in their original country. Second, they are unable to assimilate themselves into the new society and culture of the new land in which they are living at present. Third, they are alienated from their own children, who are the new generation with contemporary beliefs and attitudes. Hanif Kureishi, a British-Asian author, says, “The only way I could make sense of my confused world was to write” (Knott & McLoughlin, 2013, p. 145). The diaspora leads their lives in the host land in confusion, so it is through writing that they become relieved.

In this article, the researchers try to explore the female protagonist’s subjectivity and sexuality in Dinaw’s *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*, which is a widely read novel from the twenty-first century. However, it has not been widely studied for issues related to gender, female sexuality, and subjectivity. This article attempts to fill this gap in research. Ethiopian male and female writers explore issues that used to be considered taboos in the past. Furthermore, literary studies have a lot to reveal about women’s desires and selves. It makes the present study relevant.

This research is significant for the following reasons. Firstly, it can serve as a springboard for researchers who want to conduct further research on post-structural feminist analysis of other literary texts written by local and foreign writers.

Weedon (1997) posits that “feminist analysis can help us understand and resist social and cultural practices which throw light on how gender power relations are constituted, reproduced and contested. In the researchers’ view, such understanding can help remove the barrier between women and men in the patriarchal culture and enhance mutual cooperation.

There have been changes in many parts of the world regarding the condition of women in the patriarchal world today. However, a lot remains to be done in order to make women visible in the various social spheres in which they contribute to the betterment of society. Literature can do a great deal in the efforts of women’s emancipation by raising society’s consciousness.

The scope of this article focuses on characterization in *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*. It is neither a thematic analysis nor a study of style/style in the novel. However, such elements may be referred to if necessary to explain or clarify some aspects of the female character's personality.

The objectives of the article are presented herewith as follows. This article aims to critically explore the female character's subjectivity and sexuality in the selected text. Based on this general objective, this study intends to critically examine how the female protagonist's subjectivity is exhibited in the various contexts of the novel. It also examines the female character's interactions with the opposite sex to find out their impact on her sexuality.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The researchers found only a few online studies related to the selected novel. There are not many detailed analyses that are informed by critical theories. Samron Adane's (2012) master's thesis about stylistic analysis of *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* focuses on figurative speech and using words like nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and the like. He examines the linguistic aspects that characters use. He employs the analytical approach that Leech and Short developed. The data he selected are the same, but the theoretical approach he applied makes them different from this study.

Other research related to *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* is Varvogli's (2017) *Urban Mobility and Race: Dinaw Mengestu's The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* and Teju Cole's *Open City*. In this comparative study, the researcher applies a post-colonial theory to examine race issues in the novels. However, the present study applies a different theoretical framework. It is also a thematic study, unlike the present article. This review reveals that *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* has not been analyzed from the lens of post-structural theory.

The researchers also found short essays on content analysis and characterization of Mengestu's novel. No article has been written on feminist analysis of *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*. Therefore, the present article tries to fill this gap.

An essay focuses on the principal character, Sepha, in Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (supersummary.com, 2023) pinpoints that Sepha's failure to succeed and lead a meaningful life is attributed to a "lack of autonomy and agency." Unlike the present article, this character analysis is not informed by a theoretical framework. However, like the present study, it focuses on characterization.

Fardon and Schoeman (2010) wrote an article entitled “A Feminist Post-Structuralist Analysis of an Exemplar South African History Text”. This article applies post-structural feminism to an African school text. The researchers express the advantages of this critical approach, stating that “A feminist post-structuralist perspective offers an alternative paradigm for the study of gender bias in history texts.” They further add that it also “focuses on multiple perspectives and open interpretation, and opens up space for female voices of the past and present.” Fardon and Shoeman (2010) conducted a post-structural feminist analysis of the above text because their goal is “to develop new knowledge for the understanding of gender differences”.

In this article, Mengestu’s *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* is analyzed from the perspective of post-structural feminism. Post-structural feminism is a critical theory developed in third-wave feminism in the 1980s. Concepts such as gender, subjectivity, sexuality, discourse, and power are significant.

Post-structural feminism views gender as “a social construction”. The following quote from Simone De Beauvoir can make this assertion clear. She said, “One is not born a woman. One becomes one” (Beauvoir, 1953, p. 5).

Feminists use the term gender to distinguish between women and men. It is “socially constructed (Mikkola, 2008). Meanwhile, Wooldridge (2015) defines gender as a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences, a way of signifying relationships of power. These ‘differences’ manifest themselves through a set of culturally determined and socially constructed binary distinctions such as public/private, reason/emotion, and autonomy/relatedness, which perpetuate gendered hierarchies to the detriment of ‘feminine’ characteristics. Gender is ‘not static, but [a] contingent and changing social fact and process. Crucially, feminists use gender to investigate power dynamics and social hierarchies. Indeed, they have suggested that gender inequalities, along with other relations of domination and subordination, are ‘among the...building blocks’ on which, to varying extents, the recognizable features of the socio-political world have been constructed. Notably, these ‘building blocks’ are created through discourses that valorize masculinities and perpetuate gender differences and hierarchies (pp. 57-60).

Post-structural feminists also challenge essentialism. These scholars argue that there is no single category of man or woman. The article “Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Sex” (Mikkola, 2008) comments that “Elizabeth Spelman (1988) has influentially argued against gender realism with her particularity argument. Roughly: gender realists mistakenly assume that gender is constructed independently of race, class, ethnicity, and nationality. If gender

were separable from, for example, race and class in this manner, all women would experience womanhood in the same way. And this is clearly false.”

Power can be used positively in contexts where equality and equity prevail. But it can also be used for domination. In colonial settings, it was used to oppress and exploit the colonized people. In Post-Structural Feminism, we use this concept to refer to the empowerment of women. Women acquire the power to resist patriarchal oppression and liberate themselves through education and knowledge. They then get the position of the subject rather than the object of the male’s attention or gaze. This means that they become aware of themselves and are able to make decisions. That is to say, they can exercise agency. Feminists use the concept of power not in the sense of domination but as something that can bring about positive change (Miller, 1992). In this sense, power is related to women’s self-empowerment.

The following important concept in post-structural feminism is discourse. According to stylisticians, such as Widdowson (1975) and Leech and Short (1981), discourse means language use beyond the sentence level. Discourse is a unified piece of text at the spoken or written level. Emphasis in discourse is on language use. Discourse also has a context. Post-structural feminists focus on discourses. Literature is one example of discourse. It is also viewed as communication. Language plays a role in discourse. It is used to mediate reality. Emphasis is, therefore, on the social use of language.

People’s beliefs, values, and customs are worth considering in feminist analysis because they shape the meaning of discourse. So, post-structural feminists focus on these social aspects (Aston, 2016). It means that a literary text, which is also a piece of discourse, should be analyzed in relation to its context.

As mentioned, literature is a discourse involving characters’ interactions. Characters observe the language rules. They know when to intervene in communication when to ask and respond to questions, and when to take turns in interactions. It means that communication takes place in an orderly way. Communications are regulated (Leech and Short, 1981).

The framework of analysis is drawn from the concepts of subjectivity and sexuality since this article critically explores the female character’s subjectivity and sexuality in Mengestu’s *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*. Today, literary scholars are increasingly attracted to issues of gender, female subjectivity, and sexuality. In addition, in their efforts to promote the emancipation of women, female writers have started probing into the inner selves of women (subjectivity) and their private lives (sexuality). A discussion of subjectivity and sexuality follows.

Kristeva, Freud, and Lacan have been influential in our understanding of the concepts of subjectivity and sexuality. Freud views women as passive beings who are not productive. This view is cited in an online article as follows, “women oppose change, receive passively, and add nothing of their own.” (*Freud’s Views on Females and Oedipus Complex: Analytical Essay*, 2022) Similarly, Lacan considers women inferior to men. He attributes the position of “the subject” to man, whereas the woman is “the object” (Daniel, 2009, p. 74).

As a feminist, Kristeva focuses on the challenges a woman faces in the patriarchal society. Post-Structural Feminism acknowledges that there is “male dominance” in the patriarchal culture. This critical trend also asserts that gender is essential in the study of feminism because it helps people to “understand relationships of power” in patriarchy (Mquirmi, 2020). Mquirmi adds that post-structural feminism also maintains that the patriarchal system upholds a “discourse” that “values masculine attributes” and undermines “the feminine ones.” Post-structural feminism, therefore, advocates destabilizing this practice.

The paradigms for analyzing female identity and sexuality in the selected novel evolve from Kristeva’s theories on female subjectivity and sexuality. The theoretical framework also draws on Marcelin, Bell Hooks’, and other critics’ views on gender, identity, and sexuality. Here follows a discussion of female identity.

In her theory, Kristeva discusses the woman’s body. And she attributes importance to the “maternal” and the “Oedipus” in forming subjectivity. She also opposes women’s “discrimination and oppression” of women. For her, these are abuse. She based her argument on Freud and Lacan’s psychoanalytic approach. In her argument, she says that someone’s identity starts to build up at its infancy stage when the child begins categorizing and understanding the patriarchal world, including the authority of the father and patriarchy, which makes the child suppress lots of desires and ideas. Similarly, she points out that someone’s identity develops at Lacan’s mirror stage, where a child recognizes himself as “I”, which helps him to differentiate himself from others (Kristeva, 1980).

Women’s identity does not appear from the vacuum; the family that a woman was brought up in is the context in which women develop identity. As a result, females develop a negative attitude towards their selfhood; society looks at them likewise. So, by hook or crook, their identity arises therein. In a study conducted by Halpern and Perry-Jenkins (2016), it was hypothesized and proven that parents’ behaviors, rather than parents’ beliefs, regarding gender are better predictors of a child’s attitude.

Baso (2011) describes that apart from the influence of ethnicity and immigration, gender is a crucial factor in the development of identity: sex roles have a pervasive influence on every aspect of adult life. They further add that the transition from childhood to adulthood in the context of gender roles is already a problematic rite of passage for females in general. Still, coupled with having to adjust to two contradicting cultural gender roles, it can be quite a daunting or desperate experience. Patriarchal subordination is widespread, and our world is the world of men; consequently, women's identity is affected since they are viewed as inferior to men in the patriarchal culture.

Women are what society expects them to be. Womanhood is an ever-changing conceptualization, but the concept of womanhood is defined by society and cultural biological factors. According to Marcelin (2012), there is a constantly evolving effort to reconcile the dissimilarities of identity reflected through beauty standards, sexuality, and gender roles.

Tyson (2006) explains that our gender plays a crucial role in forming our identity. It applies to both our self-perception and the way we relate to others. Our gender strongly influences how we are treated by others and by society as a whole. The selfhood of a woman can be determined by various factors. First of all, a woman has her own perception of herself. Knowing oneself starts from home. A mother or grandmother imprints a woman's identity from the very beginning of childhood. Beauty, sexuality, and gender roles are the pillars through which identity is reflected. Post-structural feminism attributes significance to issues related to self and identity (Weedon, 1997, p. 20).

Next follows a discussion of female sexuality. According to Freud, the gender difference is a social construction that a child tries to enact in his sexual stages and his behavior toward his parents and others. Sexuality is, at most, influenced by the circumstances in which one is brought in (Kristeva, 2002). Kristeva calls the pre-oedipal and pre-linguistic stages, the time when the child has no idea of sexuality, as "semiotic", and the latter stage, when the child is influenced by society and language, as symbolic. In this sense, it is the language that creates the awareness of the sexual difference in a child. The semiotic stage for Kristeva and the "unconscious" for Freud can never be eliminated. Instead, it is only repressed.

Kristeva (2002) uses Freud and Lacan's psychoanalysis to prove one point, that gender difference is a social construction that a child tries to enact in their sexual stages. Beauvoir (1953) also argues that women are neither inferior to men nor are they born with so-called weak feminine characteristics, and all of this is a social construction imposed by male hegemony on women. Therefore, in both cases, social construction plays a significant role in

identifying oneself. Like Lacan, Kristeva points out that it is language that creates awareness of the sexual difference in a child when the child starts categorizing and understanding the patriarchal world. (Kristeva, 2002).

In most African cultures, for instance, maleness is regarded as superior to femaleness. As a result, males are respected and treated with dignity. On the other hand, females are considered as the second class, and they are perceived with contempt. To ensure and keep the sustainability of men's superior status and women's inferior status in society, several myths have evolved that are blindly accepted and upheld. Before the twenty-first century, sexuality was often shrouded in customary beliefs and practices that sought to make women ashamed of their sexuality. That means female sexuality is dominated by customary beliefs and practices. Before the 21st century, talking about female sexuality was considered taboo.

Thus, female sexuality is something associated with taboo. If a woman shows interest in sexuality, she would be symbolically posing confrontation to manhood. That is to say, it would be like altering her image, which is condemned by both sexes, i.e. men and fellow women. Due to this condemnation and isolation, that woman starts to lose her confidence. This influence directly pushes her from positive to negative, that is, from being a self-conscious, sexually active, and vivacious person to a docile, passive, and easily manipulated one.

In contemporary gender discourse in third-wave feminism, female sexuality has been discerned as a burning issue, and the widespread awareness of the century has forced women to establish and examine ethos, which has credibility and validity in society. Female sexuality, here, is conceived in terms of two points: first, a woman's recognition of her sexual desire as well as her striving to satisfy it. In the second place, being active and self-reliant, she is able to be aware of her potential and identify her selected sexual orientation. In post-structuralist feminism (third-wave feminism), femininity is "redefined", and so "girls, women are viewed as 'assertive, powerful, in control of their own sexuality.'" It has to do with sexual freedom (Brunell, 2023).

Bell Hooks (1981) states that female sexual freedom requires knowledge of one's body as well as understanding the meaning of sexual integrity. Various African literary works portray women who are aware of what they want and identify what is good and bad for themselves regardless of what society stipulates by making apparent changes. Thus, women's self-consciousness, which motivates self-assertiveness, also involves female sexuality. For example, African female writer Ama Ata Aidoo is rewriting the woman's story, recreating womanhood, and reinventing the female sex and beauty stereotypes.

An issue that is significant in post-structuralist feminism nowadays is motherhood. Kristeva discusses motherhood in her theory. Oliver (2010), in the *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy*, explores Kristeva's views on maternity. Motherhood is relevant to this article since the female protagonist in the selected novel is also a mother. For Kristeva, pregnancy and childbirth are the "miracle of love". This miracle, which Oliver cited in her article, "begins by the passion of the pregnant woman for herself."

Kristeva further adds that the mother's self is "destabilized" by the presence of the child in her womb (Oliver, 2010, p. 4). It is also in the womb that the child "thinks, speaks, and lives." In Kristeva's view, motherhood is also essential for women. In this respect, Kristeva says that "without motherhood, women remain extraneous, and, therefore, most likely, paranoid or even hysterical." However, what happens is that passion is replaced with dispassion" through the presence of the father and "the acquisition of language" (Oliver, 2010, p. 5). Kristeva also says that motherhood demands sacrifice. There are challenges that mothers face in raising their children. At this juncture, Kristeva states that, "the ideal mother must turn away from her children to tend her own flowers so that she too can bloom."

METHOD

The section below discusses the methodology of the study. This research is both descriptive and analytical. The study uses qualitative data from purposive sampling to select the literary text for analysis. This article uses qualitative data, which involves subjective interpretation of Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (2007), a twenty-first-century novel, and applies systematic text analysis.

Close reading of the primary data, that is, the selected novel, is significant for identifying the relevant passages in the novel; therefore, profound, intensive reading of *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* has been done before applying the theoretical framework of analysis of the text. Close reading is used to select the relevant passages for analysis. Close reading is essential because literature carries more than one meaning and lends itself to several interpretations. This article presents a post-structuralist feminist interpretation of the selected novel. The researchers selected Dinaw's novel because it is a modern piece of writing published in 2007.

The following procedures are employed to critically analyze the selected text. The researchers collected secondary data and information by reading about post-structuralist feminism from books and internet sources. These sources are used to prepare the review of related literature and the theoretical framework for the analysis. As already stated, the

theoretical framework applies paradigms from post-structuralist feminism related to female subjectivity and sexuality. The theoretical framework for analysis is informed by Kristeva's and other critics' theories on female subjectivity and sexuality. So, the theoretical framework is also informed by critics such as Marcelin, Hooks, and others for critical information on the relationship between female subjectivity, sexuality, and gender. Books, online articles, and theses are also referred to as the review of related literature.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Female Character's Identity in Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*

Identity refers to a person's awareness of self. Judith, one of the female characters in Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*, is like Sepha, a protagonist character. She takes pride in herself. Judith is a single mother, having separated from Naomi's Mauritanian father. She moves to Logan Circle and renovates a rundown townhouse adjacent to Stephanos' apartment. Judith is a "professor of American political history" (Mengestu, 2007, p. 54) who often found herself moving around the country with Naomi.

Judith McMasterson is an educated, well-to-do white woman. Judith was the author of one book and several dozen well-known scholarly arguments. The protagonist, the male character Sepha, describes her: "I had searched for her name at the local library and then again at the Library of Congress. Judith McMasterson. Author of one book, *America's Repudiation of the Past*, and several dozen scholarly arguments that had titles... I read fragments from each one, including several chapters from her book. She was a harsh, passion-filled academic" (Mengestu, 2007, p. 214). Judith has a biracial daughter, Naomi. She also decides to live in Logan, although she has the economic means to inhabit an affluent residential area. Logan Circle, the area where she has come to dwell, is an impoverished place where poor black people live. The narrator Sepha Stefanos puts this saying: "The woman was...with too much money on her hands" (Mengestu, 2007, p. 32).

Sepha's narration shows that Judith identifies herself with the poorer section of society. She also has self-confidence. It is exhibited when Judith does what the others have not done. The house she is now living in has been abandoned for a decade; it has been the house in which the homeless, drug addicts and anarchists live. She has made the renewal only by herself. The narrator describes the idea by saying: "Within a week of Judith's arrival, an army of men descended on the house squad-like formations. There were the plumbers, electricians, the heating guys, the painters, the roofers, and the architect..." (Mengestu, 2007, p. 32).

It can be seen that education is a source of power for Judith. It gives her the power to contribute to the welfare of society. Judith also resists the suppression of women's rights. However, the community of Logan Circle does not encourage her by showing support.

Kristeva (2002, p. 141) states that women are excluded from knowledge and power in the economy of a patriarchal society. Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* portrays the female character as knowledgeable and powerful. Judith has a better opportunity than many women in the patriarchal society because she is well-educated and can afford to live a good life. She has power and a stable identity.

Judith employs several professional workers to renew the house. She has taken the initiative for gentrification. The community has not accepted the so-called urban renewal, though they call it "development". The people of Logan Circle call Judith and others "developers", but they oppose them. Judith is a prominent figure who plays a pivotal role in bringing together the whites and blacks.

Judith tries to show her economic and social power by doing what others have not tried before. It makes her visible. However, the community in Logan Circle looks down on her because she is female. For instance, Mrs. Davis, a stereotypical female character, thinks that Judith cannot get all her money through decent means. She cannot understand that an educated, independent woman like Judith can earn money, achieve financial success, and transform the setting of Logan Circle. Though she is the one to start the change, others have followed in her footsteps, and we do not perceive the destruction of their properties. In the case of Judith, The mob broke her car and stoned her building. A man reported what he had seen: "A group of young men dressed entirely in black threw the brick through the car and house in broad daylight... and walked away, cool as ever" (Mengestu, 2007, p. 284).

Post-structuralist feminists, including Julia Kristeva, urge women to exercise social power. Judith's empowerment is manifested when she exercises decision-making and uses her economic power for the betterment of society.

Judith's subjectivity is made noticeable through education. She is a university professor, so she has put herself beyond the exclusion of knowledge. Kristeva attributes significance to knowledge. Knowledge opens women's eyes to patriarchal subjugation. Knowledge is power for women. It gives them the audacity to fight for their rights.

Judith's economic power in society is shown by altering the scenery of Logan Circle. Knowledge is power for Judith. She is not a passive and submissive character. For instance, she had the audacity to go to the / from the text:

Finally, Judith raised her hand to speak. It wouldn't have been like her to sit passively through any debate. She stood up to address the crowd. "I've only lived in the neighborhood for less than half a year now," she began. "But I share the same concerns as you" (Mengestu, 2007, p. 271).

In the novel, Judith holds the position of subject. She is also resilient and self-confident. She is a history professor who makes her own money and has renewed the abandoned house. The house has been occupied by homeless men, drug addicts, and a small band of anarchists (Mengestu, 2007, p. 31). It can be seen that she has made an effort to bring about positive, significant change in society.

Judith also likes a simple and elegant life. She tells Sepha that she likes simple and elegant things. Though a scholar, Judith does not want to lead a luxurious life. She is also concerned about her self-esteem and believes she is equal to men. Judith stands against women's subordination and subjugation in the patriarchal society. She feels comfortable with identifying herself with ordinary people. Likewise, she attended the community meeting held at Logan Circle and confirmed her support, saying: "...I share the same concerns as you" (Mengestu, 2007, p. 271).

She is proud of herself and what she has done as well. As Kristeva (2002, p. 141) puts it, the patriarchal system excludes women from knowledge and power; however, Judith outshines both aspects. She shows her economic power by reconstructing almost demolished buildings. When Judith introduced herself to Sepha for the first time, she introduced herself by pointing to the house behind her. She did this instead of telling Sepha that she was a university professor. She is humble. She also uses her power to bring positive social change to Logan Circle.

Identity also refers to ethnic identity, which indicates grouping oneself to a particular ethnicity. Judith's ex-husband is African and a Mauritanian. It shows that she likes interracial relationships. To back up this idea, she is the one who first takes the step to acquaint herself with Sepha. She starts a friendship with Sepha only, not with someone else. Judith takes the initiative because she has confidence in herself.

Judith is more interested in African people. When Sepha tells her his cousin's name is "Yodit", which has a similar meaning to hers, she shakes her head and bites down on her lower lip. Judith not only acts but also expresses her feelings in words. She shows her wish by saying, "No, no. That's much prettier than Judith. Much prettier." (Mengestu, 2007, P. 35).

Judith likes Sepha's way of clothing. She appreciates the way he wears and the brand of clothes. How she expresses her admiration displays her deep feelings. In this sense,

cultural globalization is noteworthy in the present era and is Judith's interest. When Sepha wears cultural wedding clothes, Judith has said in appreciation:

When she comments on Sepha's cultural clothes, we see her displaying her conceived set of beliefs and understandings being reinforced through daily practices that is the type of clothes that Sepha has worn on that occasion. When she has perceived Ethiopian cultural clothes, she has been initiated to express her beliefs and understandings. She says, "What a beautiful garment!"

Her use of the word 'garment' struck me most; it was polite, almost formal, as did the word had been inserted into her sentence at the last possible moment out of an instinctive sense of cultural diplomacy." (Mengestu, 2007. P. 34).

According to post-structuralists, language practices produce shared cultural narratives or discourses. Judith expressed her concern toward others' cultures by applying diplomatic discourse. Judith is implementing language discourse and ideology since we live in such a world.

An attempt has been made to show how the female character's subjectivity is represented in the context of Logan Circle. Judith's subjectivity also finds a fertile ground to further blossom in the context of motherhood. According to McMahon (1995, p. 1), motherhood, a potentially oppressive role, provides personal profound meaning that can expand women's subjective outlook on life. In Africa, it is especially closely linked to women's identity. In the selected novel, Judith is a single mother of an eleven-year-old child. As indicated in the theoretical framework, motherhood is essential for women.

The presence of her daughter, Naomi, in the house makes Judith's life meaningful. In her conversation with Sepha, Judith shows how important it is for a man to have a family. It is actually what she has experienced. She is divorced, but she has someone by her side. It gives her great joy to care for Naomi. Judith is not alone. Motherhood is the source of her happiness. If this educated, divorced woman were alone, she might perhaps become hysterical in line with Kristeva's theory.

Raising a child alone has many challenges and responsibilities for a mother. Naomi misses her father, and she resents her mother's divorce. It causes Naomi's temper tantrums in the house. The novel shows that divorce negatively affects children. Naomi often locks herself in one of the rooms, and Judith has to search for her. It upsets Judith. She has to bear all this because raising a daughter in adolescence is not always easy. However, Judith reaps many blessings through motherhood.

Kristeva says that the mother must turn away from her children to tend to her own life so that she, too, can bloom (Kristeva, 1980). Judith blooms by always keeping an eye on her

daughter. In the novel, Judith blooms and shapes her identity by caring for Naomi. She provides her daughter with proper education and her other needs. Likewise, Naomi develops her identity through her interactions with her mother. It must be a pleasure for Judith to see her daughter grow into a girl who has self-confidence and understands the perspective of adults. It can be seen in Naomi's conversations with Sepha. The eleven-year-old girl can discuss various issues with her friend Sepha.

It can be inferred from the story that Judith comes to live in Logan Circle for the sake of Naomi. African Americans dwell in this locality. Judith does not want Naomi to forget her African roots. Likewise, Naomi is conscious of her African roots. The conversations between Naomi and Sepha also reveal this. Naomi is attracted to Sepha because he is Black like her father.

Female Character's Sexuality in Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*

In *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*, a young man abuses Judith verbally in front of his friends because she is a woman. Judith finds this very humiliating. Her being white does not protect her from being mistreated. So, it can be seen that women have been victimized globally, irrespective of geography, status, or color.

Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex* (1953), argues that it is not nature. Still, it is the society that sets the stereotypical attributes of women as inferior and irrational beings, unable to think critically. In patriarchy, women were, therefore, confined to ascribed shadowy domestic or sexual roles. It is because laws are set and formulated by men who dominate the world. Color or ethnicity and class discrimination aggravate the oppression. In Africa, as well as Afro-American countries in general and in Ethiopia in particular, because of illiteracy and male dominance, women are suffering due to a lack of education and knowledge. They have little access to political power and can hardly participate in economic decision-making. Today, African feminists have come to the fore to eliminate the barrier of gender inequality and establish a society in which mutual understanding and cooperation reign. In *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*, Mengestu portrays a female character who, unlike the stereotypical female character, is conscious of self and fights for gender equality. Here is a novel that shows that today, we witness changing images of women in literary texts, even though there is still a long way to go to see the realization of equal rights for women.

Gender and consciousness are two significant factors that influence a person's sexuality. A person's sexuality is partly influenced by society's expectations of females and males. Patriarchy ascribes the position of the subject to man. He is the one who dominates. The

woman is the object of the male's gaze. Kristeva argues that just like the unconscious, which can only be repressed and never be eliminated, as explained by Freud, society is always oppressive; that is to say, the symbolic is the part of language that tries to suppress the desires and impulses of the semiotic aspect of a language (Kristeva, 2002, pp. 17–29).

Likewise, when Judith, the female character in *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*, is harassed by a young man, she becomes frustrated. At this juncture, a strong woman is overcome by emotions and frustration. In line with Kristeva and Freud, the unconscious can only be repressed and never be eliminated. Usually, Judith does not let fear and emotions take control of her. However, the unconscious instantly takes over. So, trembling and crying were her reactions to the harassment instead of confronting the young man who mocked her in front of his friends. Judith expresses her anger towards herself by saying, "I told myself that if I looked determined enough, he could not touch me" (Mengestu, 2007, p. 53).

Kristeva argues that silencing and oppressing women in a patriarchal society is one weapon used to harm women. In this particular instance, we can see that the traditionally oppressive female sexuality resurfaces in the character of Judith. Judith has been exchanging kisses with Sepha. These are kisses that show that each of them yearns for intimacy. The writer of the novel describes this moment as follows:

This time instead of covering her mouth with her hand, she stretched out her fingers and without thinking took off mine. She leaned in just far enough for me to meet her face less than halfway. It wasn't a kiss so much as it was a gentle press, or an extended gaze of lips, full of a sudden, almost crushing tenderness. We held it for as long as we could, three maybe four seconds at most, and then the moment passed." (Mengestu, 2007, p. 87).

The narrator states, "It wasn't a kiss, but a gentle press of lips." Sepha is not motivated to have an intimate relationship with Judith. Many of Judith's acts on several occasions reveal that she wants Sepha to be her lover. But intimacy should be expressed through acts of love. Judith's reaction expresses her sexuality. She is not an active participant in this moment of intimacy. She should openly tell Sepha that she loves him. She wants deep intimacy with Sepha, but she cannot dramatize her sexuality. In other words, though she paves the way, she makes no meaningful acts. Paradoxically, she expects Sepha to make the first move at this moment of intimacy. The introvert Sepha is not motivated by intimacy.

According to Bancroft et al. (2003, p. 10), several researchers have found that sexual dysfunction and distress are widespread among women. Similarly, Hyde and DeLamater (2020, p. 324) note that culture has traditionally placed tighter restrictions on women's sexuality than on men and relics of these restrictions linger today. It seems likely that these

restrictions have acted as a damper on female sexuality. It appears that these repressed restrictions have affected Judith's sexuality as well. She expects that Sepha will dominate their intimacy. However, gender equality demands that men and women have an equal share in making their intimate relationships functional. We can witness here the psychological impact of patriarchy on Judith, who is an educated, emancipated woman. We understand that Judith, as a human being, also has weaknesses.

Based on Kristeva's theory, it can be inferred that Judith's failure to have intimacy with Sepha can show the psychological impact that the patriarchal culture has imprinted in her mind during the latter stage of infancy. The unconscious is seen operating in Judith even though she is bold, determined, and capable of exercising agency, unlike Sepha. Sepha's inability to lead a meaningful life could also be partly attributed to the alienation he experiences in a foreign country. The following section presents the summary of the article.

CONCLUSION

The study reveals that the female character, Judith, is conscious of self. It is dramatized through her independent decisions. She is not submissive to male domination. Moreover, she is not an object of the male gaze. She also has well-set goals in life. Her courage and determination are commendable and make this character visible. In contrast, the male character, Sepha, is shadowy.

Judith's resilience and other qualities are exhibited through her maternal, intellectual, and social roles and intimacy with the male character. The central female character is not a stereotypical, passive character. She is also made conspicuous through self-reliance, courage, and hard work.

This article can show another way of understanding gender relations by doing a post-structural feminist analysis of the selected novel. Female empowerment is a crucial issue in gender studies today. A post-structural feminist analysis of the novel chosen can suggest ways women can be empowered and resilient. Mengestu also demonstrates that education and knowledge empower the central character to resist female oppression in the patriarchal culture peacefully.

Acknowledgments

First of all, I would like to thank Addis Ababa University for the financial and material support provided to me. My gratitude also goes to the reviewers for their constructive comments on my work. I would also like to thank the editorial Board of NOBEL: Journal of Literature and Language Teaching for publishing my article.

REFERENCES

- Adane, S. (2012). *A stylistic analysis of The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* [Addis Ababa University]. https://www.connecting-africa.net/query_2.php?rid=B00040210
- Aston, M. (2016). Teaching feminist poststructuralism: Founding scholars still relevant today. *Creative Education*, 7(15), 2251–2267. 10.4236/ce.2016.715220
- Bancroft, J., Loftus, J., & Long, J. S. (2003). Distress about sex: A national survey of women in heterosexual relationships. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 32(June), 193–208. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1023420431760>
- Baso, S. A. (2011). Gender role and identity. In R. J. R. Levesque (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Adolescence* (pp. 1142–1147). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-1695-2_28
- Beauvoir, S. de. (1953). *The second sex* (H. M. Parshley (Ed.)). Jonathan Cape.
- Brunell, L. (2023). *Third wave of feminism*. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/third-wave-of-feminism>
- Cohen, R. (2022). *Global diasporas: An introduction* (3rd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003256526>
- Daniel, K. C. (2009). *Dialogues between feminists and Jacques Lacan on female hysteria and femininity* [McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts]. <https://dsc.duq.edu/etd/455/>
- Fardon, J., & Schoeman, S. (2010). A feminist post-structuralist analysis of an exemplary South African school History text. *South African Journal of Education*, 30(2), 307–323. <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v30n2a333>
- Freud's views on females and Oedipus Complex: Analytical essay*. (2022). Edubirdie. <https://edubirdie.com/examples/freuds-views-on-females-and-oedipus-complex-analytical-essay/>
- Halpern, H. P., & Perry-Jenkins, M. (2016). Parents' gender ideology and gendered behavior as predictors of children's gender-role attitudes: A longitudinal exploration. *Sex Roles*, 74(September), 527–542. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-015-0539-0>
- Hooks, B. (1981). *Ain't I a woman: Black women and feminism*. South End Press.
- Hyde, J., & DeLamater, J. (2020). *Understanding human sexuality* (14th ed.). McGraw-Hill Education.
- Knott, K., & McLoughlin, S. (2013). *Diasporas: Concepts intersections, identities* (K. Knott & S. McLoughlin (Eds.)). Zed Books.
- Kristeva, J. (1980). Motherhood according to Giovanni Bellini. In *Twentieth-Century Theories of Art* (p. 441). Columbia University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780773596054-045>
- Kristeva, J. (2002). Julia Kristeva in conversation with Rosalind Coward (1984). In K. Oliver (Ed.), *The Portable Kristeva* (pp. 333–350). Columbia University Press.
- Leech, G. N., & Short, M. (1981). *Style in fiction: a linguistic introduction to English fictional prose*. Longman.
- Marcelin, L. H. (2012). In the name of the nation: Blood symbolism and the political habitus of violence in Haiti. *American Anthropologist*, 114(2), 253–266. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1433.2012.01423.x>
- McMahon, M. (1995). *Engendering motherhood: Identity and self-transformation in*

- women's lives. The Guilford Press.
- Mengestu, D. (2007). *The beautiful things that heaven bears*. Penguin.
- Mikkola, M. (2008). *Feminist perspectives on sex and gender*. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-gender/>
- Miller, M. C. (1992). Feminism and pragmatism: On the arrival of a "Ministry of disturbance, a regulated source of annoyance; A destroyer of routine; An underminer of complacency." *The Monist*, 75(4), 445–457. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27903306>
- Mquirmi, N. A. El. (2020, March). How post-structural feminism and its focus on the concept of gender provide an innovative challenge to the status quo within Security Studies. *Policy Center for the New South*, 1–5. [https://www.policycenter.ma/sites/default/files/PB - 12-20 \(Nihal Aicha El Mquirmi\) \(1\).pdf](https://www.policycenter.ma/sites/default/files/PB - 12-20 (Nihal Aicha El Mquirmi) (1).pdf)
- Oliver, K. (2010). *Julia Kristeva's maternal passions*. 18(1), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.5195/jffp.2010.172>
- Pokharel, B. (2020). Diaspora and diasporic literature: Condition to Consciousness. *The Outlook: Journal of English Studies*, 11(July), 86–98. <https://doi.org/10.3126/ojes.v11i0.36363>
- Rani, S. (2018). Theme of alienation and displacement in diasporic writing in relation to Indian writers in English. *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research*, 5(5), 253–256. <https://www.jetir.org/papers/JETIR1805641.pdf>
- supersummary.com. (2023). *Character analysis: Sepha Stephanos*. Supersummary.Com. <https://www.supersummary.com/the-beautiful-things-that-heaven-bears/major-character-analysis/>
- Tyson, J. E. (2006). *Program approaches to the development of sexuality in young adolescent girls* [Tufts University]. <https://www.proquest.com/openview/7fbbc46d94c48b4150a461502366125b/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>
- Varvogli, A. (2017). Urban mobility and race: Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* and Teju Cole's *Open City*. *Studies in American Fiction*, 44(2), 235–257. <https://doi.org/10.1353/saf.2017.0010>
- Weedon, C. (1997). *Post-war women's writing in German: Feminist critical approaches*. Berghahn Books.
- Widdowson, H. G. (1975). *Stylistics and the teaching of literature*. Longman.
- Wooldridge, M. (2015). Poststructuralism and feminism: The interplay between gender, language and power. *E-International Relations*, 1–24. <https://www.e-ir.info/2015/05/22/poststructuralism-and-feminism-the-interplay-between-gender-language-and-power/>