



Men as the Victim of Patriarchal System in Ocean Vuong's "*On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*" (2018)

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to find out patriarchal expectation of men which leads men as the victim of patriarchal system contained in the novel "*On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*" (2018) by Ocean Vuong. Descriptive research is used in this research to describe in detail about phenomenon or issue. The analysis has been done using Feminist Literary Theory. The result of this research is men can be victimized in patriarchal system, which is known as a system that benefits men, because some men cannot fulfil the standards of patriarchal system. The standards of patriarchal system are men must be masculine, physically and mentally, and must be heterosexual.

Keywords: Heterosexuality, masculinity, patriarchal system.

A. INTRODUCTION

Patriarchal system, according to Igbelina-Igbokwe (2013:340), is a system in which there are very striking differences between men and women, both in the social and domestic spheres and these differences will only benefit men. Furthermore, Rothman (1996:1243) describes the patriarchal system as a system that requires men to lead both in the household and public sphere. Thus, the patriarchal system will be very beneficial for men. However, the patriarchal system is not just about men being the leaders for women, but there is something called masculinity in patriarchal system. Connel and Messerschmidt (2015:47) argue that masculinity is a trait and behavior that must exist in men. To support Connel and Messerschmidt's opinion, Hantover (1978:185) stated that masculinity requires men to be strong, leading, and have muscular body proportions. Not only about having muscular body proportions, but men under masculinity system are not allowed to show their emotions. As stated by Horrocks (1994:25), men must break down their weakest side, and have to pretend to be strong just to be called a man. Because of this, Hearn (1987:25) in his book entitled "*The Gender Of Oppression*" said that men can be destroyed because of the power they form themselves as a form of masculinity.

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In a patriarchal system and masculinity, a man must be someone who has heterosexual orientation. As stated by Hennessey (2000:943), heterosexuality in patriarchal system is like a norm, which means something that must be normalized. That means, men seem to be obliged to be heterosexual because it is seen as something that men must follow in society, and if a man prefers to follow another sexual orientation, they will be seen as people who violate the norms that have been firmly held by society. Another example of sexual orientation is homosexual. Quoting from the opinion expressed by Whitehead (2016:2), homosexuality is a condition where a man is romantically attracted to the other man. Homosexuality that is not related with patriarchal system and masculinity leads homosexual men to face oppression. As stated by Gilman (1985:414) and Gilmore (1990:414), homosexual men or gay men often have difficulty in daily life because they have to stick to the concept of masculinity. With masculinity, a man can also victimized by patriarchal system.

The issue of men as the victim of patriarchal system can be found in the novel written by Ocean Vuong and published in 2018 entitled "*On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*". This novel exposed how men can be victimized by patriarchal system through the character Little Dog, a Vietnamese-American boy who lives with his mother that strongly believes the ideology of patriarchal system and masculinity.

This research focuses on men as the victim of patriarchal system contained in the novel "*On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*" (2018) by Ocean Vuong. This study will show readers how men are victimized by the patriarchal system through masculinity, which is a patriarchal expectation of men. This study will also show readers how the novel portray Men as the victim of Patriarchal System.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

The analysis will be done using descriptive research. The data that will be used for this study is data in the form of quotes, phrases and sentences found in the novel "*On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*" (2018) by Ocean Vuong. The data will be analyzed using feminist literary theory approach and the concept of victim.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This chapter will discuss the forms of men become victims of the patriarchal system and some of patriarchal expectations toward men contained in the novel "*On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*" (2018) by Ocean Vuong using feminist literary theory.

4.1 The Expectation of Men in Patriarchal System.

The patriarchal expectation of men that will be discussed in this analysis is masculinity. Masculinity views men as strong and leading. Men in the patriarchal system must be masculine so they can fit the standard set by patriarchal system and they do not become a disadvantaged party in the

patriarchal system. In this novel, the behaviour shown by Little Dog as a man according to his mother does not reflect how a man should be. Little Dog who can't be tough and brave like a masculine man often gets criticism from his mother and also from his environment. The masculinity that does not exist in Little Dog makes him a victim of the patriarchal system which includes masculinity. Some of the excerpts below will prove how Little Dog became a victim because he failed to become a masculine man.

“Drink,” you said, your lips poured with pride.
“This is American milk so you're gonna grow a lot.
No doubt about it.” I drank so much of that cold
milk it grow tasteless on my numbed tongue. Each
morning after that, we'd repeat this ritual: the milk
poured with a thick white braid, I'd drink it down,
gulping, making sure you could see, both of us
hoping the whiteness vanishing into me would
make more of a yellow boy. I'm drinking light, I
thought. I'm filling myself with light. The milk
would erase all the dark inside me with a flood of
brightness. “A little more,” you said, rapping the
counter. “I know it's a lot. But it's worth it.” I
clanked the glass down on the counter, beaming.
“See, you said, arms crossed. “You already look
like Superman!” (p.18)

Superman is a fictional character from the DC Comics originating from America. This character is described as a strong, heroic, brave and has a muscular body. Superman seems to be a role model for children, especially boys because of muscular body and bravery Superman has. In accordance with the excerpt above, Rose said that the Little Dog already looks like Superman after drinking a lot of milk. At the first glance, it is perfectly normal for a mother to want her child to grow up healthy by drinking milk. However, seeing from Rose's attitude that she constantly believed the Little Dog had to grow strong by forcing him to drink milk until his tongue went numb, it proves that there is another intention of Rose telling the Little Dog to drink a lot of milk, which is she wants Little Dog to grow up with a strong body. From the use of the word "Superman" in the excerpt above, it shows how Rose really wanted Little Dog to grow strong and brave even since he was young so Little Dog can fulfill the criteria as masculine men with muscular body and become a brave man.

But Little Dog couldn't be the man his mother had hoped for. The character of Superman who is a brave man cannot be followed by Little Dog because he still has fear. Feeling afraid also seems to be prohibited for the people who hold the concept of masculinity. This is also a problem experienced by Little Dog, that he is required to always be brave and not feel afraid.

“You don't need to be scared, Little Dog. You
smarter than me.” (p.98)

The excerpt above seems to forbid him to feel afraid. Instead of giving Little Dog the protection he needed as a child, his mother told him to face his fears. The excerpt proves how his mother strongly holds the concept of masculinity and forces Little Dog to follow it.

The masculinity of a man can also be seen from how they control their emotions. According to Stroebe (2001:1), releasing emotions such as sadness and crying for men will affect their manhood and their masculinity. Thus, crying for most men does not reflect that they are real men and masculine. But humans have their own limits for holding back what they feel. Expressing emotions is a very common thing for every human being, young or old, male or female. One way to vent emotions is to cry. Surprisingly, according to Cornelius (1986:277), crying is better than holding back tears in one's health because holding back tears can be harmful to health if done continuously.

But not everyone thinks that crying is a normal thing to do, especially for those who strongly hold the concept of masculinity. The excerpt below will prove how Rose forbids her son to cry.

“You grabbed my shoulders, your forehead pressed fast to my own. “Stop crying, you are always crying!” You were so close I could smell the ash and toothpaste between your teeth. “Nobody touched you yet. Stop crying—I said stop, dammit!” (p.18)

Crying for children is a common thing to happen. However, unlike children in general, Little Dog was strictly prohibited by his mother from crying because he was getting unpleasant treatment at school. Even his mother did not hesitate to say inappropriate words to her son to vent her frustration. For her mother who strongly believes the ideology of patriarchal system and masculinity, crying for men is something that should not be done because it does not reflect a man. Sparks (1996:402) says that the phrase boys don't cry is closely related to 'maleness'. Thus, men who cry in the concept of masculinity will not be seen as real men.

Rose as his mother did nothing to defend her son even though her son is being bullied. Instead, she pressured her son and told him to stop crying. This happened because Rose saw that men, even a little boy, should not show emotions and cry. This is in line with the concept of masculinity, which views that men should not express their emotions.

“I can't say nothing to stop them. You find a way. You find a way or you don't tell me about this ever again, you hear?” You pulled back. “You have to be a real boy and be strong” (p.18)

Rose has a view that a man must not showing their emotions and having to stay strong even though they are under pressure. This view is the same as the concept of masculinity, which requires a man to be physically and mentally strong. From the excerpt above, it can be seen how Rose doesn't care about her son who has just been bullied. Even though she convinced Little Dog to stay strong and to be a real man, but still, the children need to be protected and

given special attention if they are bullied. Then, from the excerpt above, it can also be seen how Rose doesn't care about the reason why Little Dog cries and seems reasonable to be bullied. The only thing she cares about is how she has to make Little Dog stop crying and has to look strong in any situation.

As a result of his mother's thoughts about how to be a real man, Little Dog enforced to cover up all forms of emotions he feels such as crying and feeling afraid even though as a child, it is very common to feel afraid or cry as a result of these feelings of fear. The excerpt below shows how Little Dog tries to hold his emotions.

The boy, hearing this, pressed his lips to the cold bark to keep from crying. (p.98)

The excerpt above shows how Little Dog tries very hard not to cry. Little Dog's great effort not to cry proves that he actually does cry easily, so he looks for unconventional ways to hold back his tears. This is as a result of the way his mother educated him by using the concept of masculinity in his son who is still very young to follow the concept. As a human being who has feelings, crying is not a taboo thing to do either by women or men.

A man that can also be said as a masculine man is the one who has a muscular and strong body proportion. Frederick *et.al* (2007:2) stated that a muscular body is an important characteristic of masculinity for men. Regarding this, there are men who are categorized as transgender men. That is, men who change their physical appearance and personality as women. Transgender men certainly deviated from masculinity because they behave like women so they are not considered as a man anymore. The excerpt below will show how transgender men face problems in the public sphere because of their choice as transgender men.

There was Marin, who took the bus forty-five minutes each way to work at the Sears in Farmington, who always had gold around her neck and ears, whose high heels clacked like the slowest, most deliberate applause when she walked to the corner store for cigarettes and Hot Cheetos, her Adam's apple jutting out, a middle finger to the men who called her faggot, called her homomaphedite. Who'd say, holding their daughter's or son's hand, "I'm gonna kill you, bitch, I'm gonna cut you, AIDS gonna take you out. Don't sleep tonight, don't sleep tonight, don't sleep tonight. Don't sleep." (p.115)

It can be seen from the excerpt above how Marin, who was born as a man, changes his physical appearance to be a woman and does not look masculine at all. Women are often associated with jewelry and Marin wears jewelry on his ears and neck to show that he is a woman. Besides, changing his physical appearance to women means that he does not have a muscular body. Certainly, Marin's behavior cannot be accepted by society because it doesn't

show Marin's maleness as a man. Therefore, Marin received a lot of threats from people around him. This proves that people who cannot fit the standards regarding their gender will be criticized by society. In the end, Marin as a man becomes the victim of masculinity that exists in patriarchal system.

Rose truly wants her son to have a big and strong body. Certainly, this desire will be a burden for her son because he is still in the process of growing up. But Rose sees that boys at any age must grow strong. It can be seen from the excerpt below.

“Grab your coat. I'll get you McDonald's.” Head throbbing, I dipped chicken nuggets in ketchup as you watched. “You have to get bigger and stronger, okay?” (p.16)

The excerpt above proves that Rose always convinces her son to grow bigger and stronger at a young age. In masculinity, men must have big and strong bodies, and it seems that Rose really wants her son to be able to fit the standards as a masculine man.

Masculinity is everything that has to do with men and has nothing to do with women. Mahalik (2003:3) gives an example by saying that masculine men do not use pink and male movie characters are often exist with the power they have. This is as a result of the social and gender roles assigned to each gender. This happened to Little Dog in the excerpt below

That was the day I learned how dangerous a color can be. That a boy could be knocked off that shade and made to reckon his trespass. Even if color is nothing but what the light reveals, that nothing has laws, and a boy on a pink bike must learn, above all else, the law of gravity. (p.107)

Boys with pink bicycles seem to defy the laws of nature, even the law of gravity because pink is the color commonly used by girls. Auster and Mansbach (2012:2) take an example from how Disney products use bright colors such as pink for girls' toys and dark colors like blue for boys' toys. This causes the color to be gender-typed. The use of the word "law of gravity" which is a bit exaggerated in the excerpt above shows how society will see those who do something a little different from the habit as a very fatal mistake. Certainly, there is nothing wrong with boy, or men using pink, but it would be something wrong if it is associated with the concept of masculinity. Men in the concept of masculinity must look strong, and must show that they are men, and if they wear something that doesn't indicate they are male, for example wearing what women are accustomed to, then they will be labelled as feminine.

Masculine men, besides having a muscular body and being fearless, they must be a leader both in the household and public sphere. Liebman (1971:258) pointed out that to be masculine, a man must be someone competent, independent, and dominant. It means that men must be heterosexual so they can become leader women. Heterosexual is a sexual orientation in which a person has an attraction to the opposite sex. Storms (1980:783) says that

heterosexuality is seen as a norm or something appropriate, while sexual orientation other than heterosexual, for example, homosexuality, is seen as something that deviates from societal norms. Homosexuality is a sexual orientation in which a man likes the same sex. Jagose in her book entitled *Queer Theory* (1996:1) says that homosexuality is something that is marginalized and many people become homophobic because homosexuality is considered very taboo in society.

In this novel, the main character, Little Dog, is portrayed as a homosexual man. Homosexuality is strongly opposed by society, especially patriarchy because it violates the norm.

“You don’t like girls,” you repeated, nodding absently. I could see the words moving through you, pressing you into your chair. “Then what do you like? You’re seventeen. You don’t like anything you don’t know anything,” you said, scratching the table.

“Boys,” I said, controlling my voice. But the word felt dead in my mouth. The chair creaked as you leaned forward. (p. 104)

The excerpt above proves that Little Dog has no romantic interest in women, and it is considered very taboo by the general public, especially those who follows the patriarchal system. Because this is a taboo subject, it certainly takes courage for Little Dog to reveal his sexual orientation.

His mother strongly criticized the fact that Little Dog had been a homosexual since he was 17 years old because Rose thinks it's against the norm. It can be seen from the excerpt below.

“Tell me,” you said from behind the palm on your chin, “are you going to wear a dress now?”

“Ma—“

“They’ll kill you,” you shook your head, “you know that”

“Who will kill me?”

“They kill people for wearing dresses. It’s on the news. You don’t know people. You don’t know them” (p. 104)

Homosexual men, according to a study by Gough *et.al* (1952:250) is often said to be a feminine man and resembles a woman. This is strongly related to the excerpt above. Although Little Dog as a homosexual male does not change his gender to female or become transgender, his mother equates him with a female after his sexual orientation is known. Then, the use of the word "they will kill you" spoken by Rose to Little Dog shows how society hates homosexuals and considers them as a threat even though being homosexual does not threaten anyone's life so they must be killed. Instead of using a slightly more subtle word like “discriminate” or “marginalize”, Rose uses the word “kill” which is a very scary word knowing that being homosexual is a very bad choice.

Homosexuality is certainly not a common thing because people tend to be heterosexual. It is undeniable that society strongly avoids people who decide not to be heterosexual. Not a few people think that homosexuality is a disease. This is also supported by the American Psychiatric Association, quoted by Mendelson (2003:678) which argues that homosexuality is classified as a mental illness. The excerpt below will prove how people hate and avoid those who have a deviant sexual orientation.

A few months before our talk at Dunkin' Donuts, a fourteen-year-old boy in rural Vietnam had acid thrown in his face after he slipped a love letter into another boy's locker. Last summer, twenty-eight-year-old Florida native Omar Mateen walked into an Orlando nightclub, raised his automatic rifle, and opened fire. Forty-nine people were killed. It was a gay club and the boys, because that's who they were—sons, teenagers—looked like me: a colored thing born of one mother, rummaging the dark, each other, for happiness. (p.109)

The excerpt above proves how homosexual men are injured and killed so they become the victims because they choose a sexual orientation that is not related to the patriarchal system, which requires men to be heterosexual. It is also based on people's dislike of their existence, even though they do not interfere with outside life. This can be seen from how they gather in a place that is not mixed with other communities so that they do not disturb other communities. This ultimately proves that men can be a disadvantaged party in the patriarchal system because there are men who cannot meet the standards of the patriarchal system

4.2 The Portrait of Men as the Victim of Patriarchal System

The first portrait of men as victims of patriarchal system is through the some characters of this novel. Little Dog lives with his mother, Rose, who is strongly believes the ideology of patriarchal system and masculinity where men must be physically and mentally strong, and must also be heterosexual. and mother applies the concept of masculinity to Little Dog. Unfortunately, Little Dog cannot follow the patriarchal system standards. This can be seen from how the novel portrays that Little Dog easily express his emotions, and often behaves inappropriately for a man according to Rose. In addition, Little Dog who has a romantic relationship with a man strengthens Rose's opinion that her son does not reflect a masculine man and cannot meet patriarchal system expectations. In this novel, he becomes a victim of the patriarchal system because of decision he made in his life. However, this decision is based on one thing. The main character, Little Dog, chooses to be a homosexual because he has childhood trauma for growing up with a very abusive mother, without a male figure like his father in his life. The other men who are also described as victims of the patriarchal system in this novel become victims because of their sexual orientation. Those who choose to be

homosexual and transgender women get condemned by those who hold the ideology of the patriarchal system.

The second portrait of men as victims of the patriarchal system can be seen from some incidents that related to men as victims of patriarchal system. For example, an excerpt that shows how Marin, a transgender woman, has been threatened for resembles a woman.

There was Marin, who took the bus forty-five minutes each way to work at the Sears in Farmington, who always had gold around her neck and ears, whose high heels clacked like the slowest, most deliberate applause when she walked to the corner store for cigarettes and Hot Cheetos, her Adam's apple jutting out, a middle finger to the men who called her faggot, called her homomaphedite. Who'd say, holding their daughter's or son's hand, "I'm gonna kill you, bitch, I'm gonna cut you, AIDS gonna take you out. Don't sleep tonight, don't sleep tonight, don't sleep tonight. Don't sleep." (p.115)

This quote shows Marin who was verbally harmed because he received insults from those who expected that men should not resemble women.

Another example is an excerpt that shows a group of homosexual men has been threatened by people around them.

A few months before our talk at Dunkin' Donuts, a fourteen-year-old boy in rural Vietnam had acid thrown in his face after he slipped a love letter into another boy's locker. Last summer, twenty-eight-year-old Florida native Omar Mateen walked into an Orlando nightclub, raised his automatic rifle, and opened fire. Forty-nine people were killed. It was a gay club and the boys, because that's who they were—sons, teenagers—looked like me: a colored thing born of one mother, rummaging the dark, each other, for happiness. (p.109)

This quote shows gay men who do not meet patriarchal system standards are victimized and physically harmed because some people do not like their presence as homosexuals.

The following excerpt describes Little Dog who was physically harmed

"Drink," you said, your lips poured with pride. "This is American milk so you're gonna grow a lot. No doubt about it." I drank so much of that cold milk it grow tasteless on my numbed tongue. Each morning after that, we'd repeat this ritual: the milk poured with a thick white braid, I'd drink it down, gulping, making sure you could see, both of us hoping the whiteness vanishing into me would make more of a yellow boy. I'm drinking light, I thought. I'm filling myself with

light. The milk would erase all the dark inside me with a flood of brightness. “A little more,” you said, rapping the counter. “I know it's a lot. But it's worth it.” I clanked the glass down on the counter, beaming. “See, you said, arms crossed. “You already look like Superman!” (p.18)

Forcing Little Dog drink a lot of milk will have an impact on his health in the future. These impacts can be in the form of digestive problems, bone fragility, diabetes, and increasing the risk of cancer. Through this excerpt, it is known that Little Dog was physically harmed.

D. CONCLUSION AND SUGESSTION

It can be concluded that the patriarchal system has expectations of men and they must fulfill these expectations so that they can be said to be real men and avoid oppression. Some of these expectations are, men must be masculine and must be heterosexual. Masculine is all the traits and behaviors that are closely related to men. While heterosexual is a sexual orientation in which a person has an attraction to the opposite sex. In masculinity, men must look strong mentally and physically. But not all men can meet the expectations of patriarchal system. Some men do not have a muscular body and easily express their emotions. Society does not consider men who are emotional and do not have a muscular body as a real man, even though a person's maleness cannot be measured only from how their body looks and how they vent their emotions. In addition, not all men choose to be heterosexual and their decision is highly criticized and despised by society. In the end, they face oppression from their environment for not being able to live up to the patriarchal expectations.

This analysis is expected to provide information to the reader that men can also victimized by patriarchal system. With this, it can be concluded that the fault in this system is the system itself, not the gender involved in the system.

Certainly, there are some reasons or factors why some people prefer to do something that deviates from social norms and is certainly very risky for their life. This can be used as a research topic to find out what factors that underlie some people choosing these deviant things, whether it's the influence of society or the internal problems.

Not supporting anything that deviates is allowed and it is the right of each individual, but getting a safe and peaceful life from all threats is also the right of each individual. It is better to warn those who deviate ethically and decisively than to give them dangerous threats that can harm them.

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