

Surmounting Gender Disparities: A Study of *Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Wizard of the Crow*

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ABSTRACT

This paper entitled, “Surmounting Gender Disparities: A Case Study of *Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Wizard of the Crow*” set to investigate the effects of gender disparities and how these could be surmounted. Wa Thiong'o was chosen as an expert informant whose literary text does not emanate from a void but a reflection of social realities. The observation of characters in his text resulted to the findings that gender disparities embedded male chauvinism caused chronic physical and psychological pains that disrupted family harmony. Further observations revealed that if male chauvinism is deconstructed and individual capacities developed by both men and women, they will both have equal access to social and economic responsibilities. The study found that complementary role in gender as observed in social roles and role switching facilitated tasks and guaranteed individual's protection and security. The study underpinned the need to abandon derogatory patriarchal norms and focus on values that promote positive change. It arrived at the conclusion that nations that yearned growth need to give up chauvinistic preferences and uphold values that promote equality for these are bedrocks of growth that could create visibility even in the global field.

Key words: Gender, Disparities, Surmounting, Complementary, Chauvinism, Global.

INTRODUCTION

This study set to demonstrate that chauvinistic tendencies reinforce gender disparities which do not only strengthen disharmony, but slow down progress and development in societies. Gender { XE “Gender” } is thus given attention in this study because of the controversies embody in gender relationships. Peter Barry in *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* stresses the differences between sex and gender which are most often confused. She opines that sex is usually determined by biology, which is the unchangeable feminine or masculine identity { XE “identity” }; while gender is a social construct that embodies something acquired or learned that is not natural as Murfin Rose and Syprya M Ray also state in *The Bedford Glossary of Critical Literary Terms* Gender therefore could be seen as a social and cultural construct that differentiates men from women. It has posed problems in societies because patriarchal tendencies focus on differences instead of values that could promote equality that can result to sustainable growth and progress { XE “differences” } Feminism plays an import role in reconstructing balance as it combats oppressive and suppressive tendencies. Lois Tyson in *Critical Theory a User-friendly Guide* emphasizes that women are politically, psychologically, socially, and economically oppressed and suppressed by patriarchy consequently, feminist theory as well as all feminist activity are geared towards

change by promoting gender equality. This study as a result investigates the effects of chauvinist's propensities and deconstructs such susceptibilities. It further highlights the importance of complementary roles in gender in a society that is in dire need of peace, harmony and development.

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research method was used to collect data supplied in this study for analyses. Focus was on *Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Wizard of the Crow*. Wa Thiong'o was chosen as an expert informant whose fictional text revealed translated social realities as literature is a reflection of diverse experiences. The feminist theory was further used to substantiate analyses in this work. It was chosen because of its capacity to deconstruct pejorative models and uphold transformative values. The research thus presented and analyzed descriptive data which led to findings in this study.

RESULTS

Gender Disparities

Lois Tyson in *Critical Theory Today* defines patriarchy as “any culture that privileges men by promoting traditional gender roles” (83). Consequently, it is observed in this study that socio-cultural patriarchal models give the male

advantages over the female, which paradoxically are sources of disillusionments that retard growth. It has been further observed through Ngugi's text in context that patriarchy invests power in men and marginalizes women through subtle and concrete manifestations that exist as a form of resistance to its authority. It is a form of colonialism in itself that has both oppressive and suppressive agendas.

Male Chauvinism

Ngugi wa Thiong'o as expert observant reveals In *Wizard of the Crow* that patriarchy is misogynistic as observed through the Ruler's treatment of women. It is found that women's subordination and oppression result to both physical and psychological pains as observed through Rachael, the Ruler's wife and Vinginia, Tajiriki's wife. Rachael is insulted and assaulted by her husband, the Ruler, just because:

...Rachael asked questions about the schoolgirls who, rumors claimed, were often on visit to the State House to make his bed... renew his youth with spring chicken. Imagine how he must have felt about Rachael's attempt to deny him his fountains of youth! How indiscreet and indecorous of her to ask the unaskable! Since when could a male, let alone the Ruler, be denied the rights to feel his way around women's thighs, whether other men's wives or school-girls? What figure of a Ruler would he cut were he to renounce his right to husband all women in the land in the manner of the lords of Old Europe, whose *droits de seigneur* gave them the right to every bride-to-be. (6)

Evidence from the above quotation reveals that patriarchy invests power in the hands of men projecting women's subordination as structural and systematic and not accidental.

It is further observed through Wa Thiong'o's characters that chauvinistic inclinations do not have adverse effects only on women but also on men who suffer severely from their derogatory behaviour. The Ruler's authoritarian attitude leaves him wanting as he too is frustrated by the resistance he meets from Rachael as expressed in the following:

What he yearned to hear was any news of her tears, the one sign that would unerringly point to her breakdown and desire for redemption. But he didn't. It is said by those who hold the fourth theory that Rachael, aware of this insatiable desire for humiliating the already fallen, had sworn that she would never let him see her-abnegation. Her tears had become the battlefield of their wills. This obsession with her tears, claim the creators of the fourth theory, led to the Ruler's strange illness. (10)

Results thus reveal that the oppressive nature of patriarchy meets with a forceful resistance from the women folk that deconstruct male hegemony that leave the men folk in trauma as observed through the Ruler and Tajirika. The Ruler's pain is illustrated in the passage below:

The illness. was born of anger that once welled up inside him; and he tried all he could to rid himself of it by belching. Just as offensive gases of the constipated need to be expelled, thus easing the burden on the tummy, anger in a person also needs a way out to ease the

burden on the heart. This Ruler's anger, however, would not go away, and it continued simmering inside till it consumed his heart. This is believed to be the source of the Aburirian saying that ire is more corrosive than fire, for it once eroded the soul of a Ruler. (3)

Tajirika also suffers from a dreadful disease which demonstrates that chauvinism has only negative impacts as it demolishes peace, harmony, and growth in both the family and nation. Jane Kanyori, on her part takes action to put an end to John Kanuira sexual exploitation as she breaks the silence and decides to impose herself as his legal wife. Kanuira attempt to use his domineering male authority to reject the marriage and to violently send her away only aggravate his frustration and leave him vulnerable.

Deconstructing Chauvinist's Tendencies

Feminism advocates equality which falls in line with The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Marguerite A. Peeters writes out in *The Globalization of the Western Cultural Revolution* that, "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" (74). Irrespective of historical experiences, and the experiences of women in the world of Wa Thiong'o, women are equal to men. In feminism, equality remains a supreme value, not only in connection to sex, but also in terms of equal access to socio-economic and political opportunities. It is observed in text in context that if both men and women develop their individual capacities in unlimited ways to have access to resources social responsibilities, social status and services, possibilities of sexual responsibilities, and power, both men and women will excel in their different tasks in an egalitarian manner as seen through Jane Kanyori in *Wizard of the Crow*.

Further observation reveals that women are not as hysterical and naive as often described by patriarchy. It is found the observation of Kanyori that women can be ethical enough not to disclose sensitive information in their work place as she stays calm when she sees state men like Kanuira committing atrocities. She demonstrates care and caution in the way she carries her duties as she scintillates wisdom by documenting all her transactions with Kanuira. She exhibits intelligence as she keeps lawyers and some security men outside when she visited kanuira. As a result she succeeds to deconstruct male chauvinism and causes a reversal of values as Kanuira becomes susceptible to her instructions. Newland writes this:

The role of women in society is changing all over the world. The highly visible women's liberation movement of the industrialized West finds its muted parallel even in remote rural villagers...

There are shifts and cracks in the bedrock of tradition, tiny compared to its mass; but like changes in the level of wall water before an earthquake, they may portend seismic shifts. (3)

COMPLEMENTARY GENDER ROLES

Peeters avows: "Gender feminists ... do not want to make the role of women strictly and in everything equal to man..."

but to assure women radically equal access to that of men to social responsibilities, resources, services, social status, power and possibilities of sexual orientation" (79). It has been observed in this study that women as well as men are compelled to build up diverse skills so as to encourage role swapping. Therefore, complimentary roles in gender will result to a balance between feminine and masculine power in relation to socio-economic and political affairs; and an equitable distribution of material and financial resources. It is observed in *Wizard of the Crow* that the possibility of gender androgyny which is geared toward promoting equality can ignite transformation. Social roles and role switching in gender are observed as transformative platforms.

Social Roles in Gender

Peeters affirms that "The empowerment of women requires in practice that men change their attitude and shift from domination to shared responsibility. Men must become partners of women by taking up their... responsibilities in family life or the life of the couple" (78-79). It has been observed through wa Thiong'o's characters, that social roles which do not ascribe particular duties to a particular sex will enhance harmony and create a better living atmosphere for the family. This is demonstrated in *Wizard of the Crow* as seen below:

What struck Nyawira when she got home was the tidiness of the house. Kamiti had dusted away all the cobwebs, washed the floor and the walls, cleaned the entire kitchen, and made up the bed with fresh sheets. He had also washed, dried, and ironed the old ones. She was ecstatic after her ordeal at work and at the Mars Cafe. Now she felt embraced by warmth and neatness.

Kamiti had even made a broth of tomatoes and spinach, and all that remained to complete the supper was ugali. In all the months she had lived with Kanuiru, he had never done as much. Even when both had arrived home at the same time after working all day, Kanuiru would always sit down and expect Nyawira to cook, serve him, and wash the dishes.

I will give...you a new name, Nyawira told Kamiti ... Henceforth you are Sorcere of Clealiness."

'...Tea?'

'I will not say no', Nyawira chirped happily.

Kamiti went to the kitchen and put a pot of water on the gas grill. Nyawira watched him go about his work.

'I will now be the talk of the whole region,' she said. (120)

Role Switching in Gender

Role switching in gender requires that both the masculine and feminine genders develop skills individually and collectively such that they are able to protect and defend each other. Observation in this study underlines the need for a balance between the female and male as it is observed through Nyawira and Kamiti thus: "Then she was the pupil and he the teacher. Now they were both pupil and teacher... I was the other Wizard of the Crow...Nyawira explained (722). It was further found that role switching in gender guarantees and an indistinguishable reputation. Agrigaigai Gatherer who

has made many trips to the shrine of the Wizard of the Crow affirms that:

... no human hands could draw the likeness of the Wizard of the Crow. Ask yourselves: Who was the Wizard of the Crow? Was he a man or a woman? Personally I know that he possessed the ability to change himself into a man or a woman or into anything else. He is a whirlwind. He is lightning. He is a thunderstorm. He is the sun and the rain. He is the moon and the stars. How can you draw the likeness of air, breath, soul? The Wizard of the Crow is the being that animated everything, and how can you draw a picture of that?... (569)

Findings in this study thus emphasize the strength implanted in partnership. It is underscored that the transformation of a society can be achieved through shared responsibilities as reflected in the strength of Kamiti and Nyawira who take the identical image of Wizard of the Crow to promote change in their society.

DISCUSSION

The above results reveal the effect of male chauvinism as observed in Wa Thiong'o's text under study. It also highlights the importance of partnership in gender. It has been observed under chauvinistic tendencies that womanhood has been abused as a result of patriarchal norms governing their societies. Women as it is clear in *Wizard of the Crow* are reduced to objects as they must satisfy men's sexual desires. The Ruler sexually defies not only state ladies as a means of exerting his autonomous status, but also school girls. His penetration into school girls is read as a means of keeping women constantly silent and marginalized. This is because these youths are exposed to sexually transmitted diseases, early pregnancies or they drop out from school. These keep them continuously underpowered and voiceless to challenge derogatory male domination, as they remain weak to face any competition to authenticate their self images and identities in a society where everyone is created equal. The Ruler's reaction towards his wife's worry that his sexual abuse of school girls places at stake the future of the nation confirms the assertion that patriarchy is greed in capitalism which has eaten in the roots of social relationships that embody everyday life. The Ruler thinks that it is his prerogative right to have sexual relationships with as many women as he desires, without any reaction or questioning from anybody, not even his legal wife. His authority is backed and protected by laws which are designed to favor men and disfavor women. Rukayat N. Banjo in his article in *The Griot* entitled, "Slavery and the Economics of Sex: A Postcolonial Feminist Discourse of *Dry*" writes that:

Islam ... maintains some of the more rigid patriarchal and misogynistic cultural elements. This is evident in the fact the Qu'ran ...clearly asserts the superiority of males over females and the subservience of women. The Qu'ran (4:34), for example says: 'Men are the protector and maintenance of women, because Allah has made one of them to excel the other, and because they spend (to support them) from their means. Therefore, righteous women are devoutly obedient... As to those women on

whose part you see ill conduct, admonish them... refuse to share their beds and beat them....' In this verse, men are encouraged to beat their wives.... (30)

It is evident from the above quotation that men's oppressive and suppressive behaviors are backed by laws. Kathleen Newland in *The Sisterhood of Man* writes thus, "Laws have often defined women's roles in a restrictive way, reflecting the assumption that women spend their lives in perpetual dependence on fathers, husbands, or other kinsmen" (4-5). It is therefore evident that dependency is a factor that keeps women everlastingly entrapped. The women as a result have to make all efforts to deconstruct dependency in order to break the chain of entrapment.

In the Free Republic of Aburiria, wife beating is a legal practice that celebrates manhood. The women are treated not only as an object, but also as pleasurable tools in the hands of men. Shula Judith Wirringo in her article entitled, "Societal Injustices: Gender Disparity and Reconstructing Female/Male Identity in Bessie Head's Trilogy" asserts that, "women, as a result of their femaleness, become vulnerable and are exposed to more discrimination, violence and social injustice. This implies that gender roles are not given at birth but are socially constructed. They are shaped by the culture of a particular society" (44). This coincides with the Ruler's philosophy which celebrates wife beating in honour of manhood. Tajirika says, "I need to beat my Wife?" (425). He beats his wife at will for no reason other than projecting his manhood. In the process, he inflicts pains on her and disfigures her physiognomy. Banjo writes, "The Nigerian Penal Code of 1969, section 55 (1) (d) support the beating of women for correctional purpose" (31). Wife beating is backed by laws that oblige women to swallow their predicaments and die in silence. It is clearly shown in *Wizard of the Crow* that, "Wife beating in Aburiria after all was so common as not to be noticed. What made for a peaceful home was not the absence of such blows but the ability of a couple to keep the knowledge of the violence within the confines of the wall of their house" (441). Women's subjugation and oppression is ordinary in a patriarchal setting.

John McLeod in *Beginning Post colonialism* declares that Women suffer from double colonization encoded in patriarchal norms and by colonialist representations and actualities. Patriarchy therefore does not only oppress and subjugate women, but also alienates them from decision making in socio-economic and political matters. This as a result leaves not only them vulnerable, but entire members of societies as they stagnate and are not innovative and creative. Eunice Fonyuy Fombebe in her article entitled "Marginality and Gender Relations: Pan – generic Narrative Ethics in Werewere Liking's *Love Across-a-Hundred-Lives*" posits that "... patriarchal version has ... dominant attitude... has marginalized the central role women would have played in nation building, demonstrating some sort of internal colonisation of a people's cognitive knowledge" (88-89). This cannot be disputed as it is glaring through the Ruler's domineering attitude that marginalizes Rachael and frustrates her central role in nation building.

Magdalene Shiri Halle Awa writes the following:

The effect of male oppression on women led to extreme dehumanization of the woman and her female role...

Women were created to complement men, but not to form a woman's world to rival and overthrow that of the man. If men and women respected the way God created them differently from each other yet complementarily they would allow themselves to function in natural roles, giving Christ the chance to use them for the attainment of His creation plan. (24)

Awa's assumption that male oppression leads to extreme dehumanization is indisputable as both men and women suffer dehumanization in the patriarchal process as it has been demonstrated in this section.

The need to deconstruct male chauvinism cannot be ignored since both women and men are left wanting in the process. The women in the text rise against patriarchy using different models. Rachael resists the Ruler by depriving him to find joy in her tears and this leads to his strange illness; Nyawira through her liberation movement, the Movement for the Voice of the People forms a peace and justice committee that check men's excesses and restore peace to the family; and kanyori on her part deconstructs female silence by empowering herself educationally and economically. She outwits kanuiru's whimsical plans and calls him back to authentic reasoning. Female characters in the text under study deconstruct certain cultural norms that keep them entrapped. They empower themselves academically, economically, politically, and reject dependency confirming Newman's assertion of the changing role of women in societies all over the world. The results their actions produce underscores the shifts and cracks on the foundation of tradition which even though are still insignificant will subsequently expand.

In the section which is entitled complementary roles in gender, it was observed and found that partnership and team spirit in gender lead to transformation in both the family and the society. Partnership or complementary roles in gender here do not promote equality that will be as what Peeters describes in the following lines:

... culminate in a situation of complementarity between men and women, that would be respecting their specific anthropological structure. It is geared towards gender balance –Cultural that is a situation of balance of masculine and feminine power and choice of social and sexual identity in perpetual motion, guaranteed by a construct between the sexes. (76)

The feminist's opinion is to promote equality that will not relegate one sex. Equality is not an attempt to transform one sex to adapt the biological qualities of another. Neither is it to supersede or gain grounds over the masculine. Any society that values peace and growth must abandon differences that promote disharmony and slow down development. Care must be taken such that a feminist revolution should not cause an imbalance or identity crisis in the masculine sex. Male chauvinism has illustrated that domination in the lives of couples leave families as well as societies in fragments. Skills are not inborn but developed. So, as Kamiti underscores, there are no specific chores designed for particular sex. He demonstrates his love for Nyawira by going above patriarchy as he deconstructs stereotypes that reserve

certain functions like house chores to women. He takes the responsibility to keep their house clean and in order when his woman, Nyawira is at work. He prepares food for Nyawira and she is embraced by warmth and happiness when she returns home.

Kamiti's actions is contrasted with Nyawira's formal acquaintance, Kanuiru's, which was characterised by arrogance, suppression and oppression as he will always abandon all chores to Nyawira who will have to serve him food and later satisfy his sexual desires. Kamiti's action stimulates a peaceful atmosphere which is a source of power and creativity. Norman Vincent Peale in *The Power of Positive Thinking* quotes a bible verse from Roman 12:2 which reads as follows, "be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind" (16). Kamiti in assisting his partner has succeeded to establish a healthy and happy relationship that can lead to productivity. His example is a call for chauvinist men to renew their minds, give up patriarchy and take responsibilities to ensure the welfare and transformation of both their families and societies from all viewpoints. Deborah L. Best writes in her article entitled, "African Perspective on Gender Development" in *Cross-cultural Psychology: An Africentric Perspective* that:

Aka husbands and wives are together frequently, sharing a diversity task ... because Aka wives and husbands work together and there is minimal warfare... there is husband-wife reciprocity and fathers are particularly involved in childcare.

The Aka's cultural adaptations to their ecological environment have led to uncommon, highly egalitarian gender roles with husbands and wives working side-by-side and father highly engaged with infants. Observations of the Aka contradict the notion of a division of labor based on physical characteristics, such as strength and size. They also disprove the assumption that adult males are not inclined to provide intensive nurturing or care giving for infants and young children ... Aka children do not believe that food preparation and childcare are feminine activities. Indeed boys learn their roles from their fathers who are regular caretakers of infants. Consequently, Aka gender roles and relations are egalitarian and women are held in high esteem. (154)

The excerpt above demonstrates the importance of team spirit in a family setting. Equality is promoted among men and women; and children are brought to take diverse tasks irrespective of their sex. It is shown in the above passage that team spirit reduces conflicts at home and in the societies in general. Like Kamiti and Nyawira, Aka men and women work in partnership. Men are involved in child-care and other house chores while the women are also engage in economic activities that eradicate poverty and misery at home. To promote a consistent egalitarian society that is not gender biased, the Aka people train their children from childhood to be indiscriminately involved in different tasks. Their example as well as that of Kamiti and Nyawira, illustrates that partnership between male and female can results to harmony, progress and transformation. Therefore as Peeters writes, "The agents of social transformation teach men that they

should not feel threatened by the empowerment of women: they should see it as way of improving life in society in general" (79). The need for renewal of mindsets is thus emphasized, such that, men and women work as partners improving lives in societies and promoting growth.

Nyawira and Kamiti succeed in their activities they keep aside differences and incorporate each other's skill. Their world is not that of rivalry where one partner wants to lord over the other. They practice equity and complement each other in their daily tasks. Their expertise in team work gains them an indistinguishable reputation that makes it difficult for them to be easily trapped. They identify themselves as Wizard of the Crow and their name becomes symbolic as reflected in their activities. They demonstrate that men and women are transformative agents that need each other's collaboration. Their identical nature reveals only strength which makes it difficult for them to get entrap in societal intrigues. Not even the supreme power of the Ruler can keep any of them in chain as they both intervene for each other when the need arises. When the Ruler keeps Kamiti, the Wizard of the Crow, in captivity to reveal to him the secret of growing dollars "... like a farmer planting seeds in the ground..." (601), he feigns the illness of words getting stuck in his throat. He is overwhelm with the Ruler's decadence and refuses to be an accomplice. The Ruler who is in dire need of his talent invites all sorcerers in Aburiria to the state house to force words from the Wizard of the Crow's mouth. They cannot perform such magic and the only person who succeeds in such an art is Nyawira who disguises as a limping witch. She demonstrates dexterity, leadership, and authority as expressed in the following excerpt:

'You, listen to me with both your ears,' she said, Jabbing the man's throat with her stick. 'I want to speak to the Devil hiding in your voice box.' Kamiti forced himself to look intently at the eyes of the witch, and he thought he saw or imagined he saw her wink. But the runny eyes and the twitching lips repulsed him. Still, he listened to her intonation.

The body is the temple of the soul
Watch ye what you eat and drink
Greed maketh death greedy for life
Cigarettes arrest life; alcohol holds mind prisoner
The good comes from balance...

She went through the entire catechism, with him now almost suspended in wonder and disbelief. (627-628)

Nyawira in her incantation lures Kamiti to understand that she is a part of him. She recites their catechism to cajole him to cooperate with her. As partners, they understand their language and she easily outwits every other person with her craft as seen in the quote below:

'Now I have ordered the devil in you to speak to me through you,' said the Limping Witch. 'Speak Devil'

'If!' Kamiti barked tentatively, as if challenging her to clear his doubts.

'It is you...' the Limping Witch responded, as if accepting the challenge.

'And I...' he said and stopped.

'Who were...' said the Limping Witch.

'In the prairie...' Kamiti said, then paused.
 'Dancing...' the witch replied.
 'Naked.' said Kamiti, to shock her.
 'Under the moonlight, the way witches do.' she said, as if to imply that he had failed to shock her.
 'Then lead me out of this prison of IF... OH...IF...IF ONLY...' the Devil inside him begging for release, seduced as he now was by the allure of the Limping Witch.

Nyawira courageously plays the protective role of partners to free him from his entrapment. She succeeds in her disguise to remove words from the wizard of the Crow because they have often worked in partnership, thereby mastering their art and understanding each other. She succeeds to run away with the Wizard of the Crow without betraying that they are linked as the following shows:

'We have been told to go to your shrine right now,' A.G. told the Limping Witch. 'You must fully cure him without delay. Then we shall bring you and him back here.' Kamiti could not believe his ears. All his doubts about the witch had vanished. Nyawira has effected a miracle... and it was with difficulty that he held back tears of joy, gratitude, and admiration. (628- 629)

The above excerpt illustrates that the power of two is reinforced through role switching as Nyawira does everything to protect and guarantee the security of her partner. It signifies that protection in the family is not strictly a male responsibility. The role could be played by any, depending on the situation at hand. Irrespective of the fact that Nyawira is a woman, Kamiti follows her instruction as she guides him to escape thus, "Run for it to Maritha and Mariko's place," the Limping Witch told the Wizard of the Crow. "Don't ask any questions. We'll talk later." The Wizard of the Crow got out and ran. (630). Nyawira succeeds to liberate Kamiti from the grip of the Ruler because they believe, trust, and comprehend each other. They deconstruct patriarchal norms that function as barriers and complement each other in their different activities, thereby paying attention to values and developing skills that foster their wellbeing.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that patriarchal tendencies focus on differences that result to physical and psychological pains that disrupt family harmony. It has emphasized the need to promote complementary roles in gender as these increase peace and progress in families and nations. The study thus underlined the importance to abandon derogatory patriarchal norms and focus on values that could improve on the

wellbeing of people and promote growth in societies. Therefore, a nation that desires to project its image globally must ignore chauvinistic predispositions that hamper on peace and development; and pay attention to values that promote equality not only on the perspective of gender, but also in global and local relationships, especially as gender relationships could metaphorically represent the relationships between the weak and the strong in a global context.

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