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Patriarchal Structures and Female Empowerment in Nigerian and Taiwanese Novels: A Study of Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and Li Ang's *The Butcher's Wife**

Abiọdun Adeniji
University of Lagos

Abstract
Empowerment has become the buzzword in many discourses about and around women in contemporary times, and patriarchy inevitably becomes the whipping boy on whom the woes of women from Eve to Evelyn are pinned. This archetypal bogeyman has been accused of preventing females from maximising their potentials in many societies of the world today. This paper examines the patriarchal structures in Nigerian and Taiwanese novels which manifestly disempower women, and interrogates the complicity of matriarchy in the debilitation of the female characters in the texts. The thesis of the paper is that the more empowered the female is, the better the society, and this cannot be achieved through the demonization of men but through the collaboration of both sexes.

Keywords: patriarchy structures; feminism; empowerment; novel; Nigeria; Taiwan.

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Abiọdun Adeniji, PhD.
Department of English, University of Lagos, Nigeria.
Phone: +234 802 648 3262; Email: adenijiza@yahoo.co.uk

1. Introduction

Power, the capability to execute political, physical, social, economic, mental and/or spiritual goals and objectives is, in theory, the birthright of homo sapiens irrespective of nativity, gender or filial background. The concept of power above is akin to Thomas Hobbes's definition of power as man's "present means, to obtain some future apparent good" (*Leviathan*, Ch. 10) or Friedrich Nietzsche's "will to power". Most of the extant definitions of power subsume ancillary concepts of authority, control and influence. In essence, men and women exercise some authority, influence or control over their environment in the socio-political and economic spheres of life. This is the conceptualization of power in an ideal human milieu which fosters gender equality.

The modern reality, however, contradicts this ideal. As feminism has successfully demonstrated over the years, the balance of power in many societies of the world tilts in favour of males. Feminists are quick to blame this unfortunate situation on patriarchy, a system of societal valuation of gender activities which valorises the roles played by males while downgrading those played by females. Thus, strength, protection, provision, decision-making/judgement, vision, stability, etc. are all associated with the males in society, while tenderness, pliability, procreation, nurture, home-making are erected as the forte of females. Although all the qualities stated above are sine qua non to a stable and progressive society, patriarchy foregrounds the roles of the males through such structures as religion, education, philosophy, literature, law and other elements embodying the social organism. It subsequently argues that given the high value it has placed on male roles, leadership is the *divine right* of the males. Oyekanmi (2006, p. 84) accentuates the preceding observations in her description of patriarchy as "a set of social

relations with a material base that enables men to dominate women. In other words, patriarchy describes a distribution of power and resources within the family in a manner that men maintain power and control or resources, and women are powerless and dependent on men". The need to empower the females in society is in response to the marginalisation and subjugation concomitant on this patriarchal premise.

Empowerment, in this study, therefore, means creating a viable and workable system that will enable females in society take decisions or partake in decision-making on matters that directly or indirectly affect their own well-being, giving them the power to actualise their dreams and be who/what they aspire to be without being limited by a glass ceiling placed by a male-centred society. According to the United Nations, an important factor in human security is "empowering individuals and communities to develop *the capabilities for making informed choices and acting on their own behalf,*" (Quoted in Hoogensen and Rottem, 2004:157, emphasis added). The latter part of the quoted statement is crucial to the usage of "empowerment" in this paper. In essence, empowerment is the capability of women and girls to make informed choices and act on their own behalf, not men speaking and acting for women on the assumption that men can adequately represent women in social discourse because they are intimately related to them as husbands, sons and fathers. This has been the grouse of feminism with patriarchy over time.

The two novels selected for this study are Chimamamnda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2006) and Li Ang's*The Butcher's Wife*(1986). The former is from Nigeria while the latter is from Taiwan. References will, however, be made to other works of fiction from both countries where necessary. Both novels were written by women and deal with two female subjects from two different cultures who suffer so much

physical and mental torture in the hands of their husbands that they end up murdering them to liberate themselves. Given the peculiarly feminine nature of the subject matter and the importance attached to female empowerment in academic and non-academic circles, feminism will serve as the theory that energises our analysis of the selected texts.

Fauncet defines feminism as a theory that advocates the rights of women.

> Feminism insists that women must have personal autonomy and both the freedom to direct and the responsibility for directing all areas of their lives…It holds that the roles are open to all people and that every woman is entitled to develop her potential fully, (Quoted in Agboro 2001:413).

In the same vein, Tyson describes feminist criticism succinctly as an examination of "the way literature (and other cultural productions) reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women," (1999:82). Although there are various feminisms (Tyson, 1999:83), they all reject the patriarchal marginalisation of women in society, most especially the portrayals of women in literary works as weak, emotional, irrational, dependent on men, while men are depicted as born leaders, powerful, brave, rational and insightful. Given the plurality of feminisms in theory and practice today, the following broad concepts in feminism will guide our analysis of the texts: patriarchy (the sexist ideology that "promotes the belief that women are innately inferior to men," (Tyson, 1999:83); marginalisation (the oppression of women by men through discriminatory rules and practices favouring men over women); othering (the entrenchment of an unfair system of comparison which creates an inferiority complex in women by

privileging masculine roles and characteristics valorising males as the standard against which the female sex is compared as different, substandard or inferior); empowerment; and sisterhood bonding (the strength and elevation which unity and cooperation among women in human communities foster).

Though separated by distance and culture, Nigeria and Taiwan are kindred nations in two respects: both are postcolonial societies; and both are also products of prolonged military rule. Nigeria was colonised by the British who amalgamated the southern and northern protectorates in 1914. She regained her independence in 1960 but her journey into nationhood and democracy had been severally pockmarked by military rules totalling about twenty-eight out of her fifty-five years of independence. Taiwan's mostly Chinese people were colonised by the Japanese from 1895 to 1945 when Japan was defeated by China in the Second World War. From 1945 to 1988, Taiwan was under the military dictatorships of Generals Cheng Yi, Chiang Kai-Shek and his son Chiang Chin-Kuo. Given the similarity in the experiences of both nations in their march towards statehood, it is not surprising that novels produced in these countries have similar subjects.

Essentially, *Purple Hibiscus* is the story of Papa Eugene, a business tycoon and Catholic fanatic who rules his home like a military dictator. He is so despotic that he canes his wife along with his children for disobeying his numerous instructions which are like decrees. He beats his wife so often that she has two miscarriages that almost terminate her life. In the end, Beatrice, the wife, poisons him to death to escape his incessant brutality. *The Butcher's Wife* is the pathetic story of Lin Shin whose mother disappears mysterious after committing "adultery" with a Japanese soldier in the family's ancestral hall. Lin Shin, the daughter, is subsequently "sold" in marriage to

Chen Jiangshui, the butcher who traumatises her until she is forced to butcher him in his sleep.

Both works have been subjected to much critical attention since their publication, but only a few can be considered here. In "A Reformist-Feminist Approach to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus"* Fwangyil laments that: "This novel is … a dramatic indictment of the oppressive attitudes of men towards women and children that they are supposed to love and care for." (2011, p.262-263).Kehinde in "Rulers against Writers, Writers against Rulers: The Failed Promise of the Public Sphere in Postcolonial Nigerian Fiction" interprets *Purple Hibiscus* as a campaign against female marginalisation, adding that the man-slaughtering at the end of the novel is in consonance with radical feminism and an indication that "the direction that the feminist campaign is taking currently is a bitter one, and that a violent alternative is not out of the question" (2010, p. 49). Both critics foreground the brutality that patriarchy inflicts on females without highlighting the empowerment options and possibilities needed to ameliorate the female condition in the patriarchal Nigerian and Taiwanese societies. The same conclusion is applicable to Okuyade's "Changing Borders and Creating Voices: Silence as Character in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus"* (2009), "Beyond the Odds of the Red Hibiscus: A Critical Reading of Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus"* by Oha (2007), and Ogwude's "History and ideology in Chimamanda Adichie's Fiction" (2011).

In "The Dark Persephone Myth in Li Ang's *The Butcher's Wife*" Lin uses the Greek myth of Persephone to explore the mother-daughter relationship in literature. Lin employs psychoanalytical hermeneutics to show "how the marginalised woman could reclaim her own identity in a patriarchal society where the males are the rulers..." (2003:97). Lin's conclusion that man-slaughtering is the act of a desperate woman seeking

emancipation from her male oppressor finds resonance in Chien's "Deconstructing Patriarchy/Reconstructing Womanhood: Feminist Readings of Multicultural Women's Murder Fiction" which asserts that "man-killing has become a symbolic gesture of the victimised women's resistance toward patriarchal domination in cultures which legally sanction exploitation of women" (1995:265).What both critics do not interrogate is the morality and viability of murder as an avenue of liberation or a means of empowering women. This paper advocates a critical look at the structure that sustains patriarchal oppression in human society, not the personalities involved in individual cases of male brutality of females. In other words, if the structure and ideological underpinnings of patriarchy are remodelled, the attitude of the individual operators of the structure/system will also be positively altered. This study, however, agrees with Chien's conclusion that, "The hope of Li Ang [Adichie too] lies ultimately in the reader's understanding of the ugly 'reality' and their awakening to the urgent need to change such a dehumanizing and sexist society" (1995:281). Goldblatt's "Sex and Society: The Fiction of Li Ang" (1990) and Ng's "The Labyrinth of Meaning: A Reading of Li Ang's Fiction" (1987-8) both highlight the marginalisation of the female in the Taiwanese societies. These and many other critical appraisals of Li Ang's novella and Adichie's novel indirectly address women emancipation and empowerment. This paper, on the other hand, directly focuses on female empowerment within the patriarchal structures of the two societies, and it is one of the few comparative studies of Nigerian and Taiwanese prose fictions.

2. Female oppression in the patriarchal family structure

Feminists of the radical hue assert that the family structure operative in most patrilineal societies of the world today is

weighed heavily against the female, and consequently advise women to abjure matrimony. They argue that the patriarchal prescription compelling the woman to leave the comfort of her own family and be inserted into her husband's is unfair because it is psychologically disorienting to the new bride. The disorientation is compounded by the cold reception sometimes given to the bride in her husband's family, most especially the internecine rivalry between the stranger-wife and the husband's family members in their competition for the man's attention (control of his resources, in reality).The feminist sentiment above is, however, a half-truth in the sense that the new bride usually has issues with the female members of the husband's family, most especially the mother-in-law and the husband's sisters who are usually not ready to forgo the privileges they hitherto enjoyed before the arrival of the bride in the man's family. Rarely would the bride have problems with the males in her new home. Secondly, there is a dearth of data accruing from scholarly research evidencing the absence of oppression in matrilineal societies. Some parts of India are matrilineal, and oppression of women is not rare or unknown in those parts. Thus, patriarchy is implicated in bringing the new bride into a new environment, but matriarchy is equally guilty of perpetrating some of the abuses arising thereof.

The "heroines" of the two selected texts are however spared this kind of "female oppression." Beatrice in *Purple Hibiscus* is obviously accepted and loved by her in-laws. As a matter of fact, Beatrice has no mother-in-law, and she has a good relationship with Ifeoma, her sister-in-law and only sibling to her husband who advises her more than once to divorce her abusive husband Eugene. But Beatrice rejects Ifeoma's advice for fear of the odium that the Igbo society of Nigeria often heaps on the divorced woman. Given the man-slaughter she commits later in the text, one wonders if she would not have fared better

divorcing Eugene. Death is so final, whereas there is still hope for the divorcees to come back together in harmonious matrimony. The circumstances of Lin Shin in *Butcher's Wife* are even more favourable. Chen Jiangshui the butcher has no single relation in or around their home in Chencuo. Still, Lin Shin does not escape female oppression by the female inhabitants of the town as subsequent analysis will show. This women-on-women violence is often glossed over by feminists who are quick to blame the women's actions on the ideological indoctrination of the oppressive women by patriarchy.

The most notable physical oppression in the two texts is the male-female kind and the two husbands, Eugene and Chen Jiangshui are completely guilty. A few incidents will suffice. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Eugene whips his wife along with his children for giving Kambili, his daughter, the permission to eat bread before swallowing some drugs to ease the cramps that normally accompany her menstrual cycle (*Purple Hibiscus*, p. 109). This happens on a Eucharist Sunday when they are all supposed to fast till after the service. He also beats his pregnant wife for not being enthusiastic about visiting Father Benedict, the reverend father, after service (*Purple Hibiscus*, p.38). According to her daughter's account, Mama was given about nineteen strokes/lashes/punches *(Purple Hibiscus*, p. 40), and subsequently loses the pregnancy. Even Kambili, the daughter, is not spared Eugene's brutality. He once poured boiling water on her feet for not reporting to him that his "fetish" father, Papa Nnukwu, stayed with them while they visited his sister Ifeoma in Nsukka(*Purple Hibiscus*, p. 201). On another occasion, he punches her to coma for keeping a hand-painted portrait of her grandfather, the same Papa Nnukwu (*Purple Hibiscus*, p. 217). It is not as if Eugene does not brutalise his son, Jaja's crooked fingers are evidence, but he seems to direct the focus of his brutality on the ladies in his nuclear family.

In *The Butcher's Wife*, male to female physical oppression begins with the ill usage of Lin Shin by her uncle shortly after her father's demise. She is immediately turned into a servant "and was rarely given enough to eat…" (*The Butcher's Wife,* p. 10) This state of affairs continues into her teenage years to the effect that " … all those years of being malnourished had given her an underdeveloped figure that made her look like a doll carved out of a piece of wood" (*The Butcher's Wife,* p. 10). Starvation, beating and marital rape become Lin Shin's lot when she marries Jiangshui. The butcher is a sadomasochist, who cannot experience an organism unless his mate/wife screams in pain. His favourite prostitute, Golden Flower, knows this very well and has mastered the art of simulating "painful screams" while she "serves" the butcher. But his virgin wife is new to any form of sexual experience, and has looked forward to some form of kindness before the real act. Instead, her drunken husband pounces on her starving figure, and in spite of her screams of pain, has his fill of sex. Then and only then does he stuff her mouth with pork and rolls off to a sound sleep (*The Butcher's Wife,* p. 13). He does this all the time to the extent that Lin Shin grows to detest his love making. But when she realises that her husband grows more brutal each time she screams during coitus, she cultivates the habit of gritting her teeth in silence throughout the marital rapes. Immediately, Jianshui loses interest in her and goes back to Golden Flower. Consequently, he stops giving her food, and her starvation goes a notch higher. She is eventually forced to beg on the street.

Physical violence is, however, not the only form of oppression suffered by women in the patriarchal family structure. Forced marriage is another oppression foisted on females in the Nigerian and Taiwanese societies portrayed in the prose fictions of both countries. In *The Butcher's Wife,* Lin Shin was sold to Jiangshui by her uncle:

> Lin Shin's uncle had always had plans for her, and if it hadn't been for the other clansmen, he would have sold her on a number of occasions. Now, proclaiming loudly that, like her mother before her, she was in a tearing hurry to get laid, he began to look around anxiously for someone to marry her off to. He finally settled on a butcher from nearby Chencuo. Though approaching forty, Chen Jiangshui had remained single, for no family in Chencuo was willing to let him marry its daughter, (11).

And the term of the "sale" was a simple one: "every ten days or two weeks, Pig-butcher Chen was to send over a pound of pork" (*The Butcher's Wife,* p. 11). This is patriarchal commodification of the female body. In reality, Lin Shin's uncle is no better than a pimp.

There is no evidence in *Purple Hibiscus* that Beatrice was sold or forced to marry Eugene. But in another Nigerian novel, *The Joys of Motherhood* by Buchi Emecheta, another female character Nnu Ego is forced to marry Nnaife. Like Lin Shin, Nnu Ego never saw her intended husband until she is delivered to him in Lagos. Instances of forced marriages in the novels accentuate the undervaluation and othering of females in the patriarchal Nigerian and Taiwanese societies. The ideology that informs the contraction of marriage for females by males is based on the traditional belief that women are really substandard to men intellectually, they are just like children, incapable of making rational decisions on their own. Consequently all decisions concerning their welfare must be taken by men. Thus, in the traditional cultures of Nigeria, daughters are given out in marriage, some in their infancy, especially in some of the Muslim enclaves of the country. Religion, thus, indirectly

reinforces the oppression of women in Nigeria. The same thing obtains in Taiwan where Confucianism and Buddhism tend to validate the othering of females by patriarchy. For instance, the Confucian concept of "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" stipulates that a woman must obey her father as a daughter, obey her husband as a wife, and obey her sons in widowhood; and she is to possess the virtues of morality, proper speech, modest manner/appearance and diligence at work. Lin Shin's uncle's decision to sell her off in marriage without seeking her opinion is based on the authority of Confucius at the demise of her biological father. A careful study of the Confucian concept bares its othering purpose; from cradle to grave, females in the traditional Chinese society are treated as inferior beings and therefore made subject to males, even to their own sons!

Property inheritance is another site of female oppression in the patriarchal family structure. In male-centred societies, only males can inherit their fathers' property. In *Purple Hibiscus*, inheritance is not very contentious because of Jaja, the son of the murdered Eugene. If there had been no male and the two females, Kambili the daughter and Beatrice the wife were the only successors to Eugene, the extended family would have confiscated Eugene's extensive property based on the traditional Igbo inheritance convention that excludes females from inheriting their fathers' or husbands' property. In *The Butcher"s Wife*, Lin Shin's uncle kicked Lin Shin and her mother out of the house built by her late father because they are both females. He and his family moved into the house. The mother and daughter are then forced to live in the draughty ancestral hall all through the cold winter months. It is pathetic that Lin Shin later becomes a servant in her uncle's house, "the very same tile-roofed house that once belonged to her father" (*The Butcher's Wife,* p. 9).

3. Female oppression in the patriarchal legal and economic Structures

Justice is usually symbolically represented by a blindfolded woman holding a sword and a scale. This is very ironic in the sense that females are usually marginalised in the legal structure of most male-centred societies. In other words, unlike what obtains in the modern courts of law where male and female lawyers and judges are active players, traditional legal system in many male-centred societies often excludes female participation/representation. Thus, justice is not always served to women in a patriarchal legal structure because their voices have been silenced or swallowed up by male voices. This is another instance of marginalisation/othering; females who are considered inferior within the social structure are adjudged incapable of giving fair judgement in legal matters. The negative effect of the exclusion of female voices in the patriarchal legal system is graphically demonstrated in *The Butcher's Wife*. True, Lin Shin's mother is caught in the act of sleeping with a young Japanese soldier in the family's ancestral hall. She protests loudly that she is forced to do so out of acute hunger, but is ignored by the clansmen. The author's graphic description of the sex scene buttresses her claim:

> Pinned beneath him [the Japanese soldier] was her mother, whose face, whose haggard face, was flushed bright red and all aglow with a greedy light. She was chewing on one rice ball and clutching another in her hand. Low moaning sounds escaped from her mouth, which was stuffed with food. (*The Butcher's Wife*, p. 7)

The phrase "haggard face" indicates that Lin Shin's mother is worn-out or undernourished. In short, she had not eaten

adequately prior to her tryst with the Japanese soldier. Had a woman been allowed in the subsequent "trial" of the Lin Shin's mother and the Japanese soldier by the clansmen, she would have got off with a mitigated sentence based on the extenuating circumstances surrounding her crime. Instead, the clansmen make Lin Shin's mother to disappear mysteriously while they allow the Japanese soldier to go. Injustice to females in the patriarchal legal structure cannot be worse than this.

Economic oppression is also implicated in the scene above. Lin Shin's mother is forced to yield to the soldier's food-for-sex proposition because she has been economically disempowered by her late husband's brother who ejected her and her daughter Lin Shin out of the property left behind by her deceased husband. The same "uncle" is a prominent member of the clan elders who decide she has to "disappear" for committing "adultery" with the Japanese soldier. Lin Shin is also economically oppressed by her butcher husband for not screaming in pain during their sexual debacles. And when she seeks to empower herself economically by raising some livestock, the butcher slaughters all the ducklings in a fit of rage (*The Butcher's Wife,* p. 119-120). Like her mother, Lin Shin starves for lack of provision, and the husband that should have provided for her not only destroys her means of self-empowerment, but treats her like a whore:

> "When whores want to eat, they have to work. You will to work?"
> "Doing what?" Lin Shin asked, hesitantly, timidly.
> "You just moan a few times, like before, and if I find it satisfactory, well, I'll reward you with a bowl of rice."
> Lin Shin fearfully took a couple of steps backwards. She looked at the rice. With great difficulty, she shook her head. (*The Butcher's Wife,* p. 126)

In *Purple Hibiscus*, it is observable that the economic dependence of Beatrice on her psychotic husband is a major reason why she could not take Ifeoma's advice to divorce her husband and save herself and her children from his demented grip. In contrast, Ifeoma's economic empowerment emboldens her to choose single-parenthood as against being married off to her late husband's junior brother, according to Igbo tradition.

4. Complicit matriarchy and breakdown of sisterhood bonding

Sisterhood bonding essentially advocates the cooperation of females in the society. In other words, women and girls are expected to collaborate with their own in any venture – social, political, economic and filial– involving males and females at the same time. In the two novels under study, sisterhood bonding is upheld in *Purple Hibiscus* while it breaks down in *The Butcher's Wife*. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Beatrice enjoys the cooperation of other female characters, especially the love and care of Ifeoma, her sister-in-law. Even when she confesses to the heinous crime of killing her husband through poison, Ifeoma does not withdraw her support for Beatrice. In reality, the portrayal of Ifeoma in this regard stretches credulity to its breaking point as very few women will, in reality, place sisterhood bonding above a blood relationship. As the saying goes, blood is thicker than water. Sisi is another female character who supports Beatrice to the end. First, she procures the poison that kills her master, Eugene. Afterwards, she continues to visit her mistress even when her sanity gradually breaks down.

Sisterhood bonding, however, breaks down in *The Butcher's Wife*. Unlike what happens in *Purple Hibiscus*, no woman came to the defence of Lin Shin's mother the way Sisi, Kambili and Ifeoma support Beatrice. Later, Lin Shin's uncle's wife uses Lin

Shin as a slave in her late father's house and feeds her starvation ration. She becomes the laughing stock of the neighbourhood women when her first menstrual period catches her unawares and she screams that she is about to die. Her neglect by her aunt is captured in the author's observation: "Usually, knowledge about this sort of biological change is passed on in private from mothers and elder sisters to the younger girls" (*The Butcher's Wife,* p. 10). In marriage, Lin Shin's miserable lot is worsened by Auntie Ah-wang, an elderly neighbour who delights in spreading false rumour about the younger woman, deliberately misrepresenting her screams of pain during intercourse as loud moans of pleasure. This way, she succeeds in making Lin Shin a pariah among the women in Chencuo. And when hunger forces Lin Shin to beg a man for a maid's job, a fellow woman dissuades the sympathetic man from hiring her. These incidents demonstrate the complicity of matriarchy in the oppression of women by patriarchy.

5. Female empowerment in patriarchal societies

Empowerment is first a mental attribute before it becomes a physical accomplishment. In essence, the attitude of the empowered subjects first undergoes a radical transformation before a physical change is noticeable in their conducts. Empowerment could be achieved in various ways, and the most invaluable tool for female empowerment in patriarchal societies is education. With increasing exposure of females to formal education, they will no longer be ignorant of their rights under the law and will be able to enforce those rights. This is demonstrated in *Purple Hibiscus* by Ifeoma, a doctorate degree holder who is empowered to assert her rights and defend her children against patriarchal intrusions. Education will also reduce the economic dependence of women on men, thereby making them less vulnerable economically in the patriarchal

environment. Furthermore, certain aspects of our property inheritance laws should be changed to enable women and girls inherit property left behind by their late husbands and fathers. It is noteworthy that the Supreme Court of Nigeria in 2014 overruled the Igbo customary law prohibiting daughters from inheriting property left behind by their deceased fathers (*Vanguard Newspapers*, 24 April 2014).

6. Conclusion

There is an urgent need to re-examine the patriarchal structures holding women down in the Nigerian and Taiwanese milieus. The fact that such female oppressions exist in novels published by female writers years after the independence of both countries evidence the continuing male-female divide in the two societies, and the attendant disadvantaged position of the latter. The solution is not only in education, but in re-education of the males in the two countries to accept the females as equal partners in the task of family and nation-building. The key word here is collaboration and not demonization of the male by the female. Jaja, Beatrice's son who willingly goes to jail to save his mother from the hangman is indicative of a shift in the status quo and points to such a collaborative future.

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