

Manifestations of Masculinities in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Novels

Initiating a Talk on Black Masculinity Studies

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African literature's indulgence of modern conceptions has been instrumental in breaking single stories about Africa and African writers who are highlighted by the canon of contemporary literary criticism. With the advent of new writers, the field of African literature has become enriched with more thoughts, perspectives, opinions, criticisms, and representations. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, one of the most popular Nigerian writers of recent times, has paved the way for up-and-coming writers to reconsider matters and write about subjects that had previously always been appropriated by white writers to prove their intellectual superiority to the 'othered' writers. It is believed by the renowned critic and scholar Ernest N. Emenyonu that, as the 'most engaging voice of her era', Adichie has 'bridged gaps and introduced new motifs and narrative varieties that have energized contemporary African fiction' (Emenyonu 1). By bringing forward new literary narratives, Adichie challenges the single lens or singular perception often utilized by contemporary researchers and critics in the process of analysing African literature. Although the names of Chinua Achebe, Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o have found their places in the academic curriculum, people are still not sufficiently aware of contemporary African writers who are serious in experimenting with genres and subjects.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is one such writer who has broken the stereotypical representations of the African identity by publishing stories of gender dynamics, power, and culture with which many readers may have been unfamiliar. While her speech 'We Should All Be Feminists' made headlines, not much attention has been given to the fact that her novels also portray manifestations of masculinities. In most of the prominent works of African literature, the portrayals of the dominant masculine figures have been one-dimensional, but Adichie attempts to increase the depth of masculine representations by including figures

of complicit and subordinate masculinities within her literary oeuvre. While analysis of 'Black Feminism' has become a popular topic in contemporary research works, the ideas and representations of 'Black Masculinity' are yet to gain such prominence. The whole notion of blackness has been constructed by white people in their own interests. It is by creating the idea of the 'other' that white colonizers tried to legitimize their superiority and their hegemony over the colonized. In this connection, 'black male gender identities have been culturally constructed through complex dialectics of power' and thus unveiling this complex system can expose the hypocrisy of the white hegemonic structure (Pochmara 12). Adichie initiates a conversation on 'Black Masculinity' by investing her fictional narratives with characters that represent different shades of masculinity. Reflecting upon the depictions of masculinities in her novels *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, it is clear that through her novels she emphasizes the transforming definitions of black masculinity. The trajectory of the notion of black masculinity finds expression through Adichie's literary endeavours as these novels are representative of the stages of its evolution.

Being a social construct, the notion of 'masculinity' changes over time according to the evolution of the culture, the experiences of individuals, and their reactions to situations. By emphasizing the socio-political and socio-cultural contexts, it is possible to trace the story of the transition of the notion of masculinity. Adichie creates that graph, and by analysing which readers were able to decipher what, we can see what led to the changes in the notion of black masculinity and how this change has been instrumental in bringing forth a transformation in black identity. To break free from the single story of black masculinity that focuses either on hyper-masculine traits or on the passive silence of the subjugated, Adichie engages in a dynamic study of masculinity through her characters, who represent several traits, types, and meanings of masculinity. She intends to reveal how the history and politics of the country have shaped Nigerian identities over time, and paved the way for the establishment of several shades of masculinity that were unknown in pre-colonial Nigeria. As 'manhood means different things at different times', it is essential to acknowledge that the dynamics of black masculinity is also a product of colonial history (Lemelle 11). A postcolonial reading of Adichie's works remains incomplete if the notion of masculinity is not taken into consideration.

Adichie's engagement with the questions of black masculinity and its manifestations enhances the argument that African literature is definitely coming of age as it she conveys ideas that are often depicted

only one-dimensionally in earlier writings. Masculinity studies made their way into the field of gender studies in the 1960s, and just like feminism, they were misunderstood as a counter-reading rather than an extension of the arguments of feminism. The theoretical frames of masculinity studies reveal the dynamics of a hegemonic social structure that subjugates both male and female in order to retain its position. The application of this theoretical structure reveals how the literary canon of Adichie is reinforced with characters that show different types of masculinities: literary representations of hegemonic, complicit, and subordinate masculine figures who maintain gender-power dynamics. An in-depth analysis of her strategies for the implementation of complexity in her male characters, and the designing of a complementary structure to contain these, reveal that her narratives show a continuous trend of degeneration in the hegemonic masculine figures. The turmoil of postcolonial Nigerian society is represented with all its complexities and intricacies by Adichie, as she engages in conversations about history, politics, wars, genders, and emotions in her novels.

Nigeria's exposure to colonialism led to the development of new social hegemonies which gave way to the establishment of new power-structures in the society. Precolonial social hegemonies were challenged by the advent of the colonizers who took over the power structures and redefined the dynamics. Within the context of this socio-political aspect of Nigeria, it is possible to understand the dynamic manifestations of black masculinities and Adichie's justifications for the subversion of the existing hegemonic structures. Adichie has challenged the fixity of the hegemonic masculine structures that manifested patterns of white dominance; her counter-structure has the capacity to destabilize the existing structure and drive its gradual degeneration. That is the reason a constant pattern of the rise of subordinate masculinities (which includes both masculine females and feminine males) at the cost of the hegemonic and complicit masculine portraits, can be seen in her novels. Since 'both masculinity and femininity are continuously subject to a process of reinterpretation' for being a part of 'history and culture', Adichie exposes her characters to situations in which they must justify the development of their gendered selves (Brittan 1). She has not limited her literary designs to the depiction of the nature of masculine structure that is at play, rather she has highlighted the intricate complexities of the structure so as to answer how and why this structure functions in the way it does.

Nigerians have come across different interpretations of masculinity, as they went through varied socio-political experiences. Prior to their exposure to colonialism, Nigerians had a traditional gender-power structure with men at the apex of the hierarchy, followed by women, children, and subordinate males (males who do not conform to conventional masculine characteristics and role playing). But with the advent of colonialism, the hierarchical positioning changed so that the colonizer's masculinity rose to the peak of the hegemonic structure, followed by black masculinity, other subordinate masculinities and femininity. So, females remained at the bottom of the gender-power structure. They were the ones who were doubly colonized because of being both black and women.

In the traditional gender-power structure females faced subjugation because of their gender identities and the stereotypes attached to it. But with the advent of colonizers and the implementation of their values within the social structures, women suffered most in terms of gender politics. The emasculation of black males was necessary for the colonizers to 'assert their own masculine agency' and thus they reconstructed the gender-power structures and established their hierarchy through the appropriation of black males (Pochmara 11). This complicated the sustenance of the idea of black hegemonic masculinity in Nigeria, with black males left with the options either to negotiate or challenge. This created figures of complicit masculinity who did not 'openly challenge the white man's status', but aspired to gain that position only to be able to assert their powers over their personal relations (Pochmara 31).

Regarding the exposure of Nigerians to these changing notions of masculinity and the gradual transformations of their identities, Adichie highlights the creation of new masculinities as a product of this process. The placement of subordinate masculinities (which constitutes both feminine males and masculine females, those who do not conform to traditional gender roles) in her stories who experience subjugation initially, only to rise up and subvert the hegemonic structure, reflects her desire to reinterpret power. It is because people 'have been so conditioned to think of power as male, and that a powerful woman is an aberration,' that Adichie finds it reasonable to break that convention and reinterpret power (Adichie 2018, 24). It is through this reinterpretation of the manifestations of power that Adichie provides a subverted view of the history of Nigeria and its transforming gender politics.

In Adichie's literary narratives, the notion of black masculinity is effectively depicted. It finds an elaborate representation of its evolution

from the early days of postcolonial Nigeria to its war-torn history and ultimately political stability. In *Purple Hibiscus* (originally published in 2003) Adichie reveals the politics behind the decline of the hegemonic and complicit masculine figures in the face of subordinate masculinities. It is in the character of Father Benedict that one may find the patterns of the dominant-white masculinity, while Eugene Achike's role can be perceived as an example of complicit masculinity. The advent of whites in Nigeria altered gender power structures owing to the usurpation of the social hegemonic structures and the subsequent process of redefining the boundaries of the structures. In this newly established structure, therefore, the earlier hegemonic black masculine figures either took the subordinate roles or negotiated with power to hold the complicit masculine roles. The persistence of the white masculine ideals led to the creation of black masculinity as the 'other'. Observing Father Benedict's role, it is possible to predict the strategies a hegemonic masculine figure might use to sustain his power. The insistence that the Credo and Kyrie be recited only in Latin, indicated that Igbo was not acceptable (Adichie 2013, 4). Father Benedict embodies the typical tendencies of a white hegemonic figure that imposes language and culture as tools to ensure the sustenance of power. The hegemonic figures feel the need 'to maintain, reproduce, and salvage [their] power relations' only because they are aware of the existence of counter structures that can dismantle their authority (Lemelle 17).

Eugene is yet another figure that seems to echo the Western values that are promoted by Father Benedict, and thus he becomes a bearer of complicit masculine traits. His tendency to negate anything that is pagan and native definitely identify him as 'too much of a colonial product' who cannot abandon the habit of idolizing Western culture and tradition (Adichie 2013, 13). Furthermore, as he 'changed his accent when he spoke sounding British', it can be understood how Adichie forms each layer of this masculine power structure only to show how these structures function through the maintenance of dynamic relationships. In the socio-political context, Eugene was the subordinate male who either had to exist silently at the periphery or negotiate with the hegemonic figure and maintain a comparatively better position in the structure. Eugene chose to stay in an advantageous position by assimilating himself with the dominant culture group and becoming their advocate. Thus his encouraging village people to speak English and his family to abide by the Christian norms at the cost of their native language and culture can be categorized under the behaviour of complicit masculinity. Eugene was aware that 'to be

masculine requires not only self reliance and self control, but control over other people', and he manifested his masculinity over his family and his native community (Brittain 5). In order to reinforce his power in his house, Eugene resorts to violence as that is the only emotional outburst that male hegemony expects of him. Believing in the idea that 'Real men get mad' and 'their madness no matter how violent or violating, is deemed natural' is what leads the dominant males like Eugene to adapt to this 'masculine pretense' (Hooks 7; 6). To guard his vulnerability, Eugene stops showing his softer emotions in front of his family. He is constantly torn between the roles of a caring father and husband and that of the emotionless dominant male of the family. In his constant struggle to live up to the expectations of the role of a hegemonic male figure, one may find the seeds of his downfall. Since the value of men in a patriarchal structure is 'determined by what they do', men like Eugene feel the constant pressure of being productive and not surrendering to passivity (Hooks 11).

On the one hand, the 'black males were expected to perform the hyper masculine role; on the other hand, they were expected to be feminized vis-à-vis white males' and that shows exactly the dynamic position of Eugene in the entire structure (Lemelle 15). Within the family structure, he was the dominant figure but his authority was challenged from time to time by his children, father, sister, and even his wife Beatrice. In these sections of the novel, Adichie's brilliance as a writer is established as she moves beyond the tendency to project a one-dimensional aspect of masculinity. Eugene is shown as the abusive husband and father, on the one hand, and a caring person on the other, who provides for the community.

The degeneration of these hegemonic figures is noticed as the subordinate figures come to the forefront. As Beatrice subverts the structure of oppression that prevailed at home, her masculine traits shine prominently. Beatrice along with Jaja, Kambili, and Ifeoma act as a unit to drive the degeneration of the hegemony of Eugene. 'Being a defiant can be a good thing sometimes' because that allows the margins to claim the central position, and thus catalyse the fall of the hegemonic figure (Adichie 2013, 144). Beatrice's slow poisoning of Eugene, and Kambili and Jaja's continuous acts of defying the norms set by their father, embody the empowerment of the subordinate masculine. Beatrice takes the role of masculine female who takes charge to fight against the structure that subjugates her, and she also ensures the safety of children in the process. So, the primary male duties of being a protector and provider are taken up by Beatrice, Kambili,

and Ifeoma in several instances, while Jaja being the subordinate male figure is shown to gain prominence through his repeated acts of defiance. As 'marginalization is always relative to the authorization of the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group', Adichie equips her characters with enough power to deny the authority (Connell 80).

As a social construct, the notion of masculinity has several overlapping ideas intertwined with it, and Adichie attempts to unveil each of these ideas to show how the changing notions of black masculinity have manifested a dynamic identity for Nigerians. She reveals that 'there are good masculine performances and bad masculine performances' and it depends on time, place, and social situations to decide which traits are to be grouped in which category (Lemelle 15). The history of the establishment of white masculine hegemony, the complicit masculine entities, and the subjection and later empowerment of the subordinate masculinities informed the new black identity. None of these histories can be overlooked if one tries to understand the real dynamics behind the formation of the idea of black masculinity. Until the advent of colonizers, Nigerians were accustomed to a certain type of dominant masculinity which was characterized by the authority of males over females. But with the history of colonization, that earlier notion of masculinity was redefined as black masculinity so as to give authority to the hegemonic position of the white males. This reflects on the idea that 'to understand masculinity, then, is to understand it in social relations of various stakeholder classes' because by analysing the position of these stakeholders the strategies of the structure can be unravelled (Lemelle 16).

In her *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), Adichie shows the elaborate procedure of destabilizing the hegemonic masculine structure by exposing her characters to a war that reveals their vulnerabilities. The 'assertive and virile ideology of masculinity' comes to a vulnerable point when they are challenged by the fatal conditions of war (Pochmara 10). Although their hyper masculine expectations might guide them to manifest their manhood in these situations, and become the ones who protect and fight, Adichie's male characters do not show such tendencies. The representation of 'militarized masculinity' in the popular male-authored Nigerian war narratives was instrumental in making 'women invisible at wartime' and Adichie intends to subvert those biased narratives (Njoku 154). She gives voice to this silent gender group by representing 'women's significant roles as combatants, leaders, decision makers and active participants in war' through the characters of Kainene and Olanna in her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (Njoku 155).

In the face of war and political turmoil, Odenigbo and Richard, the representatives of black and white masculinities, reveal their emotional vulnerabilities. This at once points towards their effeminate tendencies, as in a masculine structure emotional beings are tagged as effeminates. The actions and intentions of both of the male figures, from the beginning of the novel, hint that they are not the typical hegemonic male figures who could subjugate their female counterparts or be concerned about how to retain their dominant positions. As Odenigbo tells Ugwu that 'Sir is arbitrary, you could be the Sir tomorrow' (Adichie 2006, 13), the unconventionality of the character is understood (Adichie 2006, 13). Unlike hegemonic masculine figures, both Odenigbo and Richard were comfortable in sharing powers with their partners. By placing the masculine female characters against these feminine males, Adichie justifies the decline of the structure of hegemonic masculinity. The leading characters of this novel are invested with unconventional traits. As Kainene engages in saving the victims of war and also ensuring the safety of her family, Adichie's purpose in representing 'war narratives (...) through an undistorted gender lens' to 'form a reasonable historical substitute that can feed future generations with unbiased historical knowledge of a heroic past' is clearly revealed (Njoku 158). This obviously challenges the hyper-masculine narratives of war that only celebrate the contributions of men and highlight the victimhood of women.

Adichie's strategy of evolving unconventional female characters who are filled with masculine traits implies that she wanted to show the gradual transformation of black identity in postcolonial Nigeria. These narratives over-write those single perspective tales that depict African females as subjugated and silent beings who are not provided with the proper education and tools required to subvert oppressive gender structures. In the androgynous representation of the character of Kainene, the matured face of African literature comes to prominence. By not allowing the 'sexist male' figures to shatter 'alternative masculinities' in her narratives, Adichie gives space to Kainene's 'androgynous selfhood' and allows it to flourish (Hooks 40). Her intimidating presence and destabilizing gaze are enough to prove her power in the existing gender-power structures. Her 'brazenly red lipstick, her tight dress, her smoking' and her overpowering personality were enough to make Richard feel 'adolescent with her gaze on him' (Adichie 2006, 57; 59). '[T]raditional machismo always included not only dominance but protection and rescue' and Kainene represents that in the story (Lemelle 14). In the face of war, she

becomes the one who provides food and shelter to Richard, Olanna, and Odenigbo. Adichie establishes 'Feminine hegemony' to justify the degeneration of the existing masculine hegemony (Lemelle 14). Olanna's role may be regarded as an aspect of Adichie's strategy as she represents unconventionality by not staying silent about the events that has hurt her dignity. She is bold enough to ensure that there is equality in the relationship that she shares with Odenigbo. Thus, she equals his act of cheating to make him feel the pain that she went through. Adichie creates a new structure of feminine hegemony by giving voice, courage, and power to her female characters.

Masculinity 'is a power relationship (...) pervasive in human interaction' and Adichie invests her stories with these interactions which create, challenge, and destroy the social hegemonies (Lemelle 15). She does this by subverting the conventional notions and paving the way for the development of new ideas. On the one hand, she reinterprets silence and uses it as a tool of power to challenge the oppressive structures, and on the other hand she shows the advent of feminine hegemony as a result of such reinterpretation. Reflecting upon Beatrice (in *Purple Hibiscus*) and Kainene (in *Half of a Yellow Sun*), it is clear how they use silence to destabilize the existing power structures. Beatrice plans the murder of her abusive husband silently, and Kainene intimidates people with her silent gaze, so the application of silence becomes a strategy for Adichie to empower her subordinate masculine characters. Adichie's narratives prove the point that 'where there is power there is resistance and individuals have scripts (that is, tactics) available to them at multiple points in the social fabric "to play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations"' (Lemelle16). Her subordinate masculine characters constantly destabilize the existing hegemonic structure by claiming their authority, and that leads to the complete degeneration of the hegemonic masculine figures.

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