

The Burden of Being a Man: Hegemonic and Disempowered Masculinities in Contemporary African Novels

ONYEASHIE, James E

Department of English
Augustine University
Ilara-Epe
Lagos
James.onyeashie@augustineuniversity.edu.ng

&

ELEYELE, Fatai Omotayo

Department of English
National Open University of Nigeria, Jabi, Abuja
Email: eleyelefatai24@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines the representation of hegemonic and disempowered masculinities in contemporary African novels, arguing that contrary to the longstanding feminist critique of African male writing as uniformly patriarchal, these texts offer complex and often critical investigations into the psychological and social costs of masculine identity formation under postcolonial conditions. Drawing upon Raewyn Connell's foundational theorisation of hegemonic masculinity and subsequent reformulations by postcolonial and intersectional scholars, the paper analyses seven novels: Isidore Okpewho's *The Last Duty*, Sipho Sibiba's *Ngiyolibala Ngifile*, Jamal Mahjoub's *Travelling with Djinn*s, Francis Selormey's *The Narrow Path*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness*, and Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea*. The analysis reveals a central paradox: postcolonial African masculinity is simultaneously hypervisible as oppressive and systematically disempowered by structural constraints including colonial legacy, economic precarity, racialization, and political violence. The paper introduces the concept of "disempowered masculinities" as an analytic category for understanding male characters who internalize hegemonic ideals they cannot possibly achieve, producing shame, rage, and self-loathing. Findings demonstrate that these novels refuse both patriarchal endorsement and simple victim narratives, instead staging the toxic gap between masculine aspiration and material reality. The paper concludes by proposing directions for further research, including comparative studies across African regions, engagement with queer theory, and sustained attention to the relational constitution of masculinities through female agency.

Keywords: Hegemonic Masculinity, Disempowered Masculinities, African Novels, Postcolonial Theory, Gender Criticism

Introduction

African literature has long been engaged in a fraught but productive dialogue with gender criticism. For the past three decades, feminist scholars have compellingly argued that the foundational discursive platform of canonical African expression is patriarchal, systematically representing the female body as "absent" and "other." Critics such as Ojo Ade have gone so far as to declare that "African literature is a male created, male oriented, chauvinistic art," pointing to an "honour roll of our literary giants" including Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Senghor, Soyinka, and Achebe as proof of this phallocentric tradition (Ade 45). While this critique has been invaluable in interrogating the mechanisms of female subordination, it has often failed to recognize what Yomi Olusegun Joseph terms the "several masculinist indicators" within African male writing that "purposely undermine the hegemonic/patriarchal frame of maleness" (Joseph, "African Male Literary Tradition" 92). The study of masculinities in African literature emerges from a longer history of gender criticism that initially focused almost exclusively on the representation of women. Early feminist readings of African fiction, while politically necessary and analytically powerful, tended to position African male writers as homogeneous purveyors of patriarchal ideology. This approach, as Florence Stratton argues, often elided the ways in which African male writers themselves critique patriarchal structures from within (Stratton 12). The theoretical turn toward masculinity studies, pioneered in sociology by Raewyn Connell and in literary studies by scholars such as Joseph Boone and Michael Kimmel, has made possible a more nuanced approach that attends to the multiplicity of masculine positions and the vulnerabilities that accompany even hegemonic forms of manhood.

This paper proceeds from a central premise: contemporary African novels do not merely reproduce a monolithic patriarchal consciousness. Rather, they offer a complex, often contradictory terrain in which multiple masculinities, including hegemonic, complicit, marginalized, and subordinated forms, collide, compete, and at times collapse under their own contradictions. Drawing upon Raewyn Connell's foundational theorisation of hegemonic masculinity and its subsequent reformulations, this paper examines how selected contemporary African fictions stage the crisis, vulnerability, and disempowerment that attend male identity formation in postcolonial contexts. In doing so,

the paper argues that these texts function not as unreflective endorsements of patriarchy but as critical investigations into the psychological and social costs of hegemonic masculine ideals. The significance of this inquiry extends beyond literary studies, as understanding how literary narratives represent male vulnerability and failed masculinity offers crucial insights into the lived experiences of African men in contexts marked by gender-based violence, political instability, and economic precarity.

The problem this paper addresses is twofold. First, existing criticism has insufficiently theorised the distinction between hegemonic and disempowered masculinities in African fiction, often conflating male-centred narration with patriarchal endorsement. Second, and consequently, the specific literary strategies through which African novelists critique, complicate, and at times subvert hegemonic masculine ideals have not been systematically examined. Despite the growing body of scholarship on gender in African literature, the critical focus has disproportionately favoured the study of female representation, often treating masculinity as an unmarked category or as a synonym for patriarchal oppression. Where masculinity has been examined, the tendency has been either to condemn African male writers for reproducing sexist ideologies or to defend them against feminist critique without adequately theorising the complexity of masculine subject positions. This binary approach has left a significant gap: there exists no sustained analysis of how contemporary African novels represent the vulnerabilities, failures, and disempowerments that attend masculine identity formation under postcolonial conditions. The central problem, then, is not whether African novels are patriarchal, but rather how they represent the tensions, contradictions, and failures within patriarchal masculinities themselves. Furthermore, there exists no adequate analytic category within existing scholarship for understanding male characters who, while positioned within patriarchal structures, are systematically denied the resources to achieve hegemonic ideals. This paper addresses that conceptual gap by introducing and operationalising the category of "disempowered masculinities."

To guide the investigation, the paper asks: How do contemporary African novels represent the gap between hegemonic masculine ideals and the lived realities of male characters? What literary strategies do African novelists employ to critique, complicate, or subvert hegemonic masculinity? How do categories of race, class, ethnicity, generation, and colonial history intersect to produce distinct forms of disempowered masculinity in the selected texts? In what ways do female characters in these novels function as

observers, interpreters, or resisters of masculine anxiety and failure? What theoretical insights does the concept of "disempowered masculinities" offer for the study of gender in African literature that existing frameworks have not adequately captured?

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist methodology grounded in the principles of literary criticism and gender analysis. The research design is comparative and thematic, examining seven contemporary African novels selected for their attention to masculine identity formation, their geographical and temporal diversity, and their critical reception. The novels include Isidore Okpewho's *The Last Duty* (1976, Nigeria), Sipho Sibiya's *Ngiyolibala Ngifile* (2016, South Africa), Jamal Mahjoub's *Travelling with Djinn*s (2003, Sudan/United Kingdom), Francis Selormey's *The Narrow Path* (1966, Ghana), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003, Nigeria), Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness* (2000, South Africa), and Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* (2001, Tanzania/United Kingdom). This selection balances canonical and lesser known texts, early postcolonial and contemporary works, and Anglophone traditions from West, East, and Southern Africa. Analytical procedures involve close reading of selected passages, thematic coding of masculine performances and failures, comparative analysis across texts, and attention to narrative strategies including focalization, free indirect discourse, and the representation of female perspectives. The analysis proceeds text by text, examining how each novel stages masculine crisis, before moving to comparative synthesis that identifies patterns and variations across the corpus.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of hegemonic masculinity, as developed by Raewyn Connell, refers to "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell 77). Hegemonic masculinity is not a static set of traits but a relational and historically shifting configuration. It maintains its dominance not exclusively through violence but through the cultivation of consent, making particular forms of manhood appear natural, desirable, and inevitable. Crucially, Connell insists that few men, perhaps no actual man, fully embodies the hegemonic ideal. Rather, it functions as "a normative standard to which men can aspire and against which individual men can

assess their own identities" (Connell 78). The majority of men occupy a position of complicit masculinity, benefiting from the patriarchal dividend without fully enacting the stringent demands of the hegemonic ideal (Connell 79).

Connell and Messerschmidt later refined these categories, acknowledging that hegemonic masculinity operates at multiple levels: the local, the regional, and the global. Local masculinities are constructed in face to face interactions; regional masculinities operate at the level of culture or nation state; and global masculinities emerge from transnational institutions such as corporations, militaries, and media (Connell and Messerschmidt 849). This multi scalar framework is particularly useful for analysing African novels that move between village, nation, and diaspora. Connell's framework distinguishes four categories of masculine position. Hegemonic masculinity is the culturally idealized form, rarely embodied by any actual man but functioning as a normative standard. Complicit masculinity describes the position of most men, who benefit from the patriarchal dividend without fully enacting the stringent demands of the hegemonic ideal. Connell explains that "complicity is not simply passivity or consent; it is an active engagement with patriarchal power that falls short of full hegemonic performance" (Connell 79). Subordinated masculinities include those forms of manhood that are culturally denigrated, most paradigmatically gay masculinities. Marginalised masculinities are those intersected by axes of class, race, and colonial history, such that men who might otherwise claim hegemonic status are denied access to its resources due to their position within other hierarchies (Connell 80 81).

Despite its influence, Connell's model has been subjected to significant critique from postcolonial and decolonial scholars. Sofia Aboim argues that Connell's framework contains a "latent dualist universalism" that struggles to account for the hybrid, plural dynamics of non-Western masculinities (Aboim 52). In Western societies, Connell categorizes black and other ethnic minority men under the rubric of "marginal masculinities," a designation that risks flattening the distinct historical production of racialized manhood under colonialism. This critique is especially pertinent for African contexts, where colonial violence fundamentally restructured indigenous gender systems. As Oyeronke Oyewumi demonstrates in *The Invention of Women*, precolonial African societies did not always organize social life around the gender binaries that structure Western societies. Oyewumi argues that "gender was not a foundational social category

in Yoruba society prior to colonial encounter" and that the imposition of Western gender categories through colonialism and missionary activity was itself a form of epistemic violence (Oyewumi xii).

John K. Noyes extends this critique by arguing that postcolonial theory and masculinity studies have surprisingly little engagement with each other, despite their shared interest in the production of hierarchical difference. Noyes writes that "colonial discourse constructed colonized men as simultaneously hypermasculine, as threats to white femininity and civilization, and as effeminate, as lacking the self-mastery and rationality attributed to European men" (Noyes 471). This double construction produces the specific form of postcolonial masculine crisis that African novels so often dramatize: the colonized and postcolonial male subject is trapped between contradictory injunctions, never able to achieve the stable masculine identity that hegemonic ideology promises. Kadiatu Kanneh makes a related argument in *African Identities*, noting that "the figure of the African man in colonial discourse oscillates between the poles of dangerous hypervirility and childish dependency, neither of which allows for full masculine subjectivity" (Kanneh 89). This oscillation, Kanneh contends, continues to structure representations of African masculinity in postcolonial literature and culture.

This paper draws on Connell's sociology of masculinities, supplemented by postcolonial critiques from Aboim, Oyewumi, and Noyes. The concept of "disempowered masculinities" is operationalized as follows: a male character is categorized as exhibiting disempowered masculinity when he demonstrates internalization of hegemonic masculine ideals, systematic denial of access to the resources required to achieve those ideals, and affective responses including shame, rage, self-loathing, or despair that directly result from this gap between aspiration and attainment. The paper also draws on Yomi Olusegun Joseph's work on African masculinities, which argues that African male writing often contains "revisionist attitudes to patriarchy" and that "the African woman is made to gain visibility and she becomes active on her own social terms" (Joseph, "African Male Literary Tradition" 96). Joseph's readings demonstrate that close attention to literary form reveals critical distances between authorial perspective and patriarchal ideology. In his analysis of Mahjoub, Joseph shows how the novel "unpacks new ways of presenting postcolonial mobility by focusing on the challenges of subjectivity and sexual profiling in Europe,

especially bordering on marginalized masculinity" (Joseph, "Embodying Intersectional Narratives" 48).

Review of Related Literature

Within African literary studies, gender criticism has tended to focus on the representation of women. Pioneering works such as Florence Stratton's *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* and Obioma Nnaemeka's *The Politics of (M)othering* established feminist reading practices that remain influential. Stratton argues that "the patriarchal bias of African literature is not simply a matter of content but is inscribed in the very narrative strategies through which stories are told" (Stratton 23). These studies were politically necessary, exposing the mechanisms through which African male writing often marginalizes or objectifies female characters. However, as Simon Gikandi notes in *Reading the African Novel*, the early nationalist project of African literature was deeply invested in the construction of a decolonized masculine subject, and this investment shaped not only the content but the formal structures of the African novel (Gikandi 56).

More recently, scholars have begun to attend specifically to African masculinities. Egodi Uchendu's edited collection *Masculinities in Contemporary Africa* brings together anthropological, sociological, and historical studies that document the diversity of African masculine experiences. In her introduction, Uchendu writes that "African masculinities cannot be understood through Western theoretical frameworks alone; they require attention to local histories, kinship systems, and the specific legacies of colonialism on the continent" (Uchendu 5). Kopano Ratele's *The World Looks Like This from Here* offers a psychological perspective on African masculinities, arguing that dominant models of manhood in post-apartheid South Africa are profoundly damaging to both men and women. Ratele contends that "the pressure to perform invulnerability leaves many African men unable to seek help, to express emotion, or to form intimate relationships" (Ratele 107).

In literary studies, Yomi Olusegun Joseph has produced some of the most important recent work. Joseph argues that African male writing often contains "revisionist attitudes to patriarchy" and that "the African woman is made to gain visibility and she becomes active on her own social terms" (Joseph, "African Male Literary Tradition" 96). Joseph's

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In African contexts, the colonial encounter fundamentally disrupted indigenous gender systems, producing new forms of masculine aspiration and anxiety. As Olusegun Joseph notes, the early postcolonial literary drive, in its "quest to inscribe an African racial, cultural, and nation(alist) imaginary of difference against colonial heritage, (un)consciously masculinized its discourse in an essentialist mode" (Joseph, "African Male Literary Tradition" 94). That is, the very project of decolonisation paradoxically reinforced a particular, often exclusionary, model of manhood. The postcolonial male subject is thus caught in a double bind: he must perform a masculinity that is simultaneously an assertion of anti-colonial resistance and a reproduction of patriarchal power. Recent scholarship has begun to attend more systematically to African masculinities, but literary studies has lagged behind sociology and anthropology in this regard. This paper responds to that gap by offering a systematic literary analysis of hegemonic and disempowered masculinities across a range of contemporary African novels.

Analysis

The Collapse of Hegemonic Authority in Okpewho's *The Last Duty*

Isidore Okpewho's 1976 novel *The Last Duty* offers a searing examination of hegemonic masculinity under the pressure of civil war. The novel is set against the backdrop of the Nigerian Biafran conflict, a context that strips masculinity of its peacetime illusions and exposes its violent foundations. The character of Toje, a wealthy trader who exploits the wartime economy, represents an attempt at hegemonic dominance through economic manipulation and the sexual control of women. However, Okpewho systematically undermines Toje's authority, revealing his cruelty as born not out of strength but of a desperate need to compensate for failures elsewhere. The female

characters in *The Last Duty* are not passive victims but active agents who perceive and exploit the fissures in masculine authority. More radically, Okpewho portrays male characters who explicitly fail to meet hegemonic standards. The protagonist, Oshevire, is imprisoned and tortured, his body rendered utterly vulnerable. This representation of male suffering directly contradicts the hegemonic injunction toward invulnerability. As Connell writes, hegemonic masculinity is "associated with behaviours that display courage and strength and that include refusal to acknowledge weakness or to be overcome by adverse events" (Connell 78). Okpewho's novel systematically refuses such refusal, insisting instead on the visibility of male pain and defeat.

Subordinated Masculinity and the Politics of Rape in Sibiya's *Ngiyolibala Ngifile*

Sipho Sibiya's post-apartheid novel *Ngiyolibala Ngifile*, translated as *I Will Go Mad and Die*, confronts directly the relationship between violence, rape, and the construction of masculinities in contemporary South Africa. As Sanele Mathews Mthembu argues, Sibiya's novel "links political violence, rape and masculinities to the colonial matrix, while simultaneously pointing to the causes and continuum of these topics" (Mthembu 212). The novel is set in the violent transition from apartheid to democracy, a period in which masculine identity became unmoored from its previous anchors. In this context, rape emerges not as an act of individual pathology but as a technology of masculine assertion, a means of establishing dominance when other avenues of power are foreclosed. Crucially, Sibiya extends his critique to what Mthembu terms the "black bourgeoisie as stakeholders of colonialism, which unleashed violence on black bodies" (Mthembu 215). The novel thus refuses any easy racial binary in which black masculinity is inherently innocent or redemptive. The representation of male characters who commit acts of sexual violence is not an endorsement of such violence but a critical exposure of the ways in which hegemonic masculinity, when stripped of its legitimate foundations, turns to predation as a desperate assertion of control.

Marginalized Masculinity and Migrant Identity in Mahjoub's *Travelling with Djinns*

Jamal Mahjoub's *Travelling with Djinns* shifts the geographic frame from the African continent to the European diaspora, examining the construction of marginalized masculinity in contexts of migration and postnational identity. The protagonist, Yasin, is

a Sudanese British man traveling through southern Europe with his son, Leo. Throughout the journey, Yasin confronts the racialized gaze of European society, which positions him as potentially dangerous, sexually threatening, and perpetually foreign. This experience of hypervisibility as threat constitutes a specific modality of masculine marginalization. As Olusegun Joseph notes, Mahjoub's novel "unpacks new ways of presenting postcolonial mobility by focusing on the challenges of subjectivity and sexual profiling in Europe, especially bordering on marginalized masculinity" (Joseph, "Embodying Intersectional Narratives" 48). Yet Mahjoub's novel complicates any simple narrative of victimization. Yasin is also a figure of cultural hybridity, moving between Sudanese and British contexts with a degree of privilege. The novel thus stages what Aboim calls "the hybrid character of masculinity," refusing to fix Yasin within any single category of marginalization (Aboim 55). The representation of Yasin's internal conflict, his oscillation between assertiveness and passivity, between cultural pride and self-doubt, reveals the psychological toll of navigating multiple, often contradictory, masculine scripts.

Complicit Masculinity and the Burden of Tradition in Selormey's *The Narrow Path*

Francis Selormey's *The Narrow Path* offers what Emma Duncan and Theresah Ennin describe as an exploration of "the images of masculinities presented and show whether or not they follow society's hegemonic model or create their own" (Duncan and Ennin 114). Set in colonial Ghana, the novel follows the childhood and young adulthood of Kofi, a boy navigating the competing demands of traditional Ewe masculinity, Christian missionary morality, and the destabilizing forces of colonial capitalism. Kofi's father represents a form of hegemonic masculinity rooted in customary authority, yet Selormey portrays this authority as increasingly untenable under colonial rule. The father's power is systematically undermined by the colonial administration, the missionary school, and the cash economy. He becomes a figure of complicit masculinity, benefiting from a patriarchal structure he can no longer fully inhabit or enforce. Kofi himself occupies an even more precarious position, internalizing the hegemonic ideal while the colonial context systematically denies him the resources to achieve it. Duncan and Ennin conclude that Selormey's novel reveals "the psychological damage inflicted on colonized male subjects who cannot meet the contradictory demands of tradition and modernity" (Duncan and Ennin 121). The narrative's attention to Kofi's inner life, his fears, his aspirations, and

his disappointments, offers a nuanced portrait of a masculinity in formation under conditions of profound constraint.

Female Agency and Patriarchal Collapse in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* offers a devastating portrait of hegemonic masculinity turned toxic. The character of Eugene embodies a form of colonial masculinity that combines traditional patriarchal authority with missionary discipline. Eugene's violence against his wife and children is presented not as an aberration but as the logical consequence of a masculine ideal that equates control with love. The novel also offers a powerful account of female resistance: Eugene's wife Beatrice eventually poisons him, an act that the novel presents as both tragic and necessary. Adichie refuses any easy resolution, showing Beatrice liberated but traumatized. This complexity demonstrates how hegemonic masculinity, when pushed to its extreme, produces the conditions for its own destruction. The novel's representation of Eugene's collapse is particularly significant: his authority, so absolute within the domestic sphere, is shown to be fragile, dependent on the compliance of those he dominates. When that compliance is withdrawn, his masculinity implodes. Through the eyes of his daughter, Kambili, the reader witnesses the slow erosion of Eugene's authority, a process that reveals the violence at the heart of his masculine ideal.

Postcolonial Manhood and Land in Mda's *The Heart of Redness*

Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness* uses historical allegory to explore the crisis of postcolonial manhood in South Africa. The novel alternates between the nineteenth century story of the Xhosa prophetess Nongqawuse and the contemporary story of Camagu, a South African man returning from exile in the United States. Camagu's struggle is quintessentially postcolonial: he is educated, cosmopolitan, and theoretically free, yet he finds himself unable to fit into either traditional or modern masculine roles. Mda's novel is particularly interested in the relationship between masculinity and land. Under apartheid, black men were systematically dispossessed, alienated from the ancestral land that had been the basis of masculine authority. Camagu's eventual decision to stay in the rural community of Qolorha by the Sea, participating in community development projects, represents a tentative resolution: a masculinity based not on domination or ownership but

on participation and care. The novel suggests that the recovery of masculinity in the postcolonial context requires not the reassertion of patriarchal authority but the forging of new, more egalitarian relationships with community and with the land. Mda's representation of Camagu's journey, his failures and his small successes, offers a model of masculinity that is neither hegemonic nor entirely disempowered.

Silence and Refugee Masculinity in Gurnah's *By the Sea*

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* follows Saleh Omar, an elderly Zanzibari man seeking asylum in England. Unlike the mobile Yasin in Mahjoub's novel, Saleh is immobilized by age, trauma, and his inability to speak English. His masculinity is disempowered not only by racialization but by the specific vulnerabilities of the refugee experience: dependence on the state, loss of professional identity, separation from family, and the humiliations of the asylum process. Gurnah's novel is remarkable for its attention to silence as a masculine strategy. Saleh's muteness, his refusal or inability to speak, is not simply a communication deficit but a form of resistance, a way of preserving dignity in conditions that systematically strip it away. The novel reveals how refugee masculinity is constituted through a series of losses: loss of home, loss of language, loss of status, loss of the ability to provide for or protect one's family. Saleh's identity as a former furniture dealer, a man of some standing in Zanzibar, is systematically erased by the British asylum system, which reduces him to a case number. Yet Gurnah insists on Saleh's humanity, his dignity, and his capacity for connection. The novel suggests that even in conditions of extreme disempowerment, masculinity can find new forms of expression, not through dominance but through endurance and quiet resistance.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis yields five principal findings. First, contemporary African novels consistently represent a significant gap between hegemonic masculine ideals and the lived realities of male characters. Across all seven texts, male protagonists and secondary characters internalize hegemonic standards of invulnerability, dominance, and provision, yet find themselves systematically unable to meet these standards due to structural constraints including colonial legacy, economic precarity, political violence, and

racialization. This gap is represented not as individual failure but as structural condition. The novels demonstrate that the masculine crisis is not a matter of personal inadequacy but a consequence of historical forces that have fundamentally destabilized the grounds of masculine identity. The representation of this structural dimension is crucial: it prevents the reader from simply blaming individual men for their failures, instead directing attention to the social, economic, and political conditions that produce masculine vulnerability.

Second, African novelists employ a range of literary strategies to critique hegemonic masculinity, including focalization through vulnerable male bodies, free indirect discourse that reveals the gap between public masculine performance and private anxiety, the strategic deployment of female observers who read and interpret masculine failure, and allegorical structures that link individual masculine crisis to larger historical processes. These strategies demonstrate that African fiction is not merely reproducing patriarchy but critically interrogating it. The use of focalization is particularly significant: by narrating from the perspective of male characters who are failing, suffering, or in crisis, these novels invite readers to identify with, and therefore to understand, the psychological costs of hegemonic masculine ideals. Free indirect discourse, which blurs the boundary between narrator and character, allows the novels to represent masculine anxiety without endorsing it, maintaining critical distance while offering intimate access to masculine interiority.

Third, intersectional analysis reveals that disempowered masculinities are produced at the crossroads of multiple axes of social differentiation. Class distinguishes Toje's war profiteering from Oshevire's imprisonment. Race distinguishes Yasin's hypervisibility from white European masculine normativity. Colonial history distinguishes Kofi's constricted path from precolonial Ewe masculinities. Generation distinguishes Saleh Omar's immobilized refugee masculinity from younger migrant masculinities. These intersections demand an analytic framework that refuses any single axis of analysis. The novels demonstrate that masculinity is never experienced in isolation from other dimensions of identity. A man's experience of masculinity is shaped by his class position, his racialization, his generational location, and his relationship to colonial and postcolonial history. This finding underscores the importance of intersectional analysis for understanding African masculinities.

Fourth, female characters in these novels consistently function not as passive victims but as active interpreters and at times resisters of masculine anxiety. From Beatrice's poisoning of Eugene in *Purple Hibiscus* to the female observers in *The Last Duty*, women perceive masculine vulnerability and exploit it, critique it, or survive it. This finding underscores the relational constitution of gender: hegemonic masculinity cannot be analysed in isolation from the femininities and non-hegemonic masculinities it seeks to subordinate. The novels refuse any simple opposition between male perpetrators and female victims, instead showing how gender relations are characterized by mutual implication, negotiation, and at times resistance. Female agency is central to the novels' critique of hegemonic masculinity: it is through female characters' perceptions, interpretations, and actions that masculine failure becomes visible.

Fifth, the concept of disempowered masculinities proves analytically generative. It captures the specificity of male characters who internalize hegemonic ideals they cannot achieve, emphasizing the affective and psychological dimensions of this gap. Unlike Connell's category of marginalization, which focuses on structural position, disempowered masculinity directs attention to the subjective experience of masculine failure. The concept also highlights the performative dimension of masculinity: the pressure to appear invulnerable, successful, and in control even when one is none of these things. The novels examined here are filled with men who are performing masculinity, who are acutely aware of the gap between their performance and their reality, and who experience this gap as a source of profound shame. The concept of disempowered masculinities allows us to name and analyse this experience.

The findings demonstrate that the selected novels refuse both patriarchal endorsement and simple victim narratives, instead staging the toxic gap between masculine aspiration and material reality. They represent men who suffer, men who fail, men who internalize ideals they cannot achieve, and men who, in their suffering and failure, reveal the structural violence of hegemonic masculine norms. The novels do not simply reproduce hegemonic masculinity; they dissect it, expose its costs, and dramatize its frequent collapse. This critical distance is achieved through narrative strategies that include focalization through vulnerable male bodies, the representation of female perspectives, and the embedding of individual masculine crisis within larger historical and structural contexts.

The study of masculinities in African literature must remain accountable to feminist critique. The goal is not to displace attention from women's experiences or to celebrate male suffering as somehow more profound than female suffering. Rather, it is to deepen collective understanding of how gender operates as a system, how it produces not only male dominance but also male anxiety, not only female subordination but also female agency. In that deeper understanding lies the possibility of more just forms of gender relation. The novels examined here, in their unflinching attention to the costs of hegemonic masculinity for both men and women, offer resources for that transformative project.

The findings also have implications for the teaching of African literature in university settings. By offering a theoretically sophisticated approach to gender that moves beyond the limitations of both essentialist feminism and patriarchal apologetics, the paper provides instructors and students with analytical tools for engaging African fiction in all its complexity. The novels examined here are not simply objects of analysis but active theoretical resources. They do not simply illustrate Connell's theories; they complicate them, extend them, and in some cases suggest alternative conceptualizations. This suggests that African literary texts can and should be read as contributions to gender theory, not merely as illustrations of it.

The concept of disempowered masculinities itself requires further theoretical refinement. Is the category applicable to female characters who internalize hegemonic feminine ideals they cannot achieve? Does the concept travel across cultural contexts beyond Africa? Comparative research examining disempowered masculinities in other postcolonial and minoritarian contexts would test the concept's utility and limitations. Additionally, further research should engage more deeply with queer theory and the study of non-normative genders and sexualities. Most of the novels examined focus on heterosexual masculinities, but a growing body of African fiction explores gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and intersex experience. These texts offer crucial insights into the construction of subordinated masculinities and deserve systematic analysis. Finally, the relationship between literary representations of masculinity and empirical studies of African men's lives requires further exploration. How do the crises dramatized in fiction correspond to or diverge from the experiences documented by sociologists,

anthropologists, and psychologists? Interdisciplinary research that brings literary analysis into conversation with social science methods would enrich both fields.

Conclusion

This paper has argued for a more nuanced, theoretically informed approach to the study of masculinities in contemporary African fiction. The longstanding feminist critique that African male writing is uniformly patriarchal and phallocentric is insufficient to the complexity of texts like Okpewho's *The Last Duty*, Sibiya's *Ngiyolibala Ngifile*, Mahjoub's *Travelling with Djinns*, Selormey's *The Narrow Path*, Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, Mda's *The Heart of Redness*, and Gurnah's *By the Sea*. These novels do not simply reproduce hegemonic masculinity; they dissect it, expose its costs, and dramatize its frequent collapse. They represent men who suffer, men who fail, men who internalize ideals they cannot achieve, and men who, in their suffering and failure, reveal the structural violence of hegemonic masculine norms.

The paper introduced the concept of disempowered masculinities to capture the specific condition of male characters who, positioned within patriarchal structures, are systematically denied the resources required for hegemonic masculine achievement. This concept emphasizes the affective and psychological dimensions of masculine failure, the shame, rage, and self-loathing that emerge from the gap between aspiration and attainment. It directs attention not to individual inadequacy but to structural constraints, including colonial legacy, economic precarity, racialization, and political violence. The analysis has demonstrated that these novels function not as unreflective endorsements of patriarchy but as critical investigations into the psychological and social costs of hegemonic masculine ideals.

The study of masculinities in African literature must remain accountable to feminist critique. The goal is not to displace attention from women's experiences or to celebrate male suffering as somehow more profound than female suffering. Rather, it is to deepen collective understanding of how gender operates as a system, how it produces not only male dominance but also male anxiety, not only female subordination but also female agency. In that deeper understanding lies the possibility of more just forms of gender relation. The novels examined here, in their unflinching attention to the costs of

hegemonic masculinity for both men and women, offer resources for that transformative project. This paper has contributed to that project by offering a systematic analysis of hegemonic and disempowered masculinities across a range of contemporary African novels, demonstrating the critical purchase of these texts on the structures of gendered power that continue to shape African societies.

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