



Reconstructing Masculine Identity in Feminist Literature: A Critical Analysis of Four African Feminist Texts

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Introduction

When males continue to be seen as dominant in society, it is possible that they will never be able to accept seeing themselves in a new light or even embracing change, since they would believe it is pointless (Lange, 2008). As a result, this brings up a societal issue, namely, the gender inequality that is widespread.

In various historical and cultural situations, different masculinity constructs are used. Masculinity can be regarded as a socialisation-related byproduct, since they are cultural construct; they are not just applicable to males but also women because they regularly exhibit behaviours that are seen as “masculine” in certain historical and social situations. Amadiume (2015) argues that certain Gnobi women in Nigeria have authority that is greater than or equal to that of males. Amadiume revisits her claim that the traditional African woman was not marginalised in physicality, Choices, and Globalising Neo-Colonial Enchantments: African Matriarchs and Mammy Water, where she accuses colonialism of establishing power systems and gender hierarchies.

According to Connell (2005), men will only adhere to the standards of masculinity in accordance with their demands to achieve prestige, position, and other forms of respect. Males should adhere to the notion of masculinity by learning to regulate their own emotions since other people may get the impression that they are emotionally fragile.

Abstract

Despite literature studies on gender inequality, the issue of masculine identity has been left out and thereby creating a negative stereotype of the male characters. Therefore, this study is a reconstruction of masculine identity in feminist literature. The study focused on four African feminist texts: Margaret A. Ogola’s *The River and the Source*, Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nuruddin Farah’s *From a Crooked Rib*, and André Brink’s *Imaginings of Sand*. The purposive sampling technique was used in selecting the texts. Textual analysis was applied in analysing the core ideas. Theoretical framework included: feminist theory, psychoanalytic feminism, and deconstruction theories. The findings indicate that masculine identity has been influenced by cultural norms. On the other hand, feminist authors have represented male characters based on the presumed expectations of how a man should behave, rather than their self-identity, which they are willing to display as individuals with diverse life experiences. Hence, feminist authors need to reconstruct gender issues in their writings. This will result in the creation of literary works that advocate for gender equality. The study will inform social agents such as governments, educators, parents, and society on the need to promote equitable gender representation in feminist texts.



As an African feminist writer, Salami (2019) develops an interest in shaping African masculinity; how African people are represented in literature. She defends Odenigbo, from the novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, as a romantic hero as spectacular and lusted after as Don Juan, Heathcliff, and Romeo. Contemporary debates point to a growing interest in the portrayal of masculinity in culture, from the political environment to family life.

In Minna Salami's analysis of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, she complements Odenigbo as a lead character whose physical looks attract women. Yet even though Odenigbo has made women's pulses race, the impact it has had on the image of romantic heroes is, for the most part, overlooked. Olanna neglects Odenigbo, the most memorable character in the work, while most of the characters in this text have primarily and unsurprisingly endeavoured to grasp the female lead character (Uwakweh, 2012). The underrepresentation of masculinity in feminist writing is singled out for significant criticism by Minna Salami.

Despite literature studies on gender inequality, the issue of masculine identity has been left out, hence creating a negative stereotype of the male characters. Therefore, this study is a reconstruction of masculine identity in the selected four African feminist novels: Margaret A. Ogola's *The River and the Source*, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nuruddin Farah's *From a Crooked Rib* and André Brink's *Imaginations of Sand*.

The purpose of the study of masculine identity was framed as an attempt to interrogate and historicise masculinity, subjecting it to the same scrutiny that feminism had applied to femininity and women's lives (Knutsen, 2025). This involved examining the cultural, social, and political dimensions of male identity and highlighting how masculinities are constructed, reproduced, and contested within various institutions and discourses (Adisa et al., 2021). In doing so, the field emphasised that masculinity is neither fixed nor neutral, but deeply embedded in systems of power that define gender roles and societal expectations (Bell, 2024).

A thorough examination of most feminist works reveals that masculine characters are grossly underrepresented in such works. Yet in comparison to the female characters, the male characters in these literary works are limited in number, they are seldom presented with achievements, and most of the time it is the female character who takes on the role of the protagonist (Knutsen, 2025). This continued underrepresentation of male characters in literature perpetuates gender inequality, which exists not just in society but also in literary works. So, this is an issue today that has to be addressed since it poses a problem for people. In addition, the expectations placed on men by society produce a standard that ultimately compels men to conduct themselves in a specific manner (Olufemi-Dirisu, 2025).

According to Watson (2021), these feminist authors fail to construct male identity by neglecting to represent the men's experiences in developing societies and their own acknowledged self-identity. Similar to the study of men's masculinity in colleges, men and masculinity do not involve power and gender. Jourian (2018) noted the disconnection of different views of theories in the school of thought on men and masculinity and the notions that show present types of masculinity, gender and race. For example, Jourian (2018) illustrated that the notion of masculinity is still perceived in different aspects, and some of these are current ideologies.

According to Thompson (2016), men will only adhere to the standards of masculinity in accordance with their demands to achieve prestige, position, and other forms of respect in 2006. The French feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir posits that the reason males strive for masculinity is because, in doing so, they construct a notion of gender identity in which they feel they are the saviour, liberator, and benefactor of females.



Mohlala (2019) evaluated masculine identity across African women's novels, applying an African feminist context to map how male characters are constructed, critiqued, or reimagined. The study found that women authors frequently complicate patriarchal archetypes by exposing the costs of masculine performance, emotional isolation, coercive control, or brittle authority, while sometimes offering counter-figures who practice care, dialogue, or solidarity. It is especially useful for its comparative scope and its attention to curricular texts prescribed in African classrooms. The current study borrowed from the literature's comparative frame to keep the four-novel analysis systematic. Its emphasis on curricular canon also helps justify text selection and significance.

Umesurike (2022) analyses Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, arguing that the character Eugene embodies "orthodox" Big-Man masculinity, disciplining family and community through religious and patriarchal authority. The article shows how feminist narration renders this masculinity legible as performance and control, an identity policed by ritual, reputation, and violence, while also opening space for counter-masculinities in the text's younger male figures. This close reading demonstrates how feminist authors turn domestic space into a stage where masculine power is made visible and contestable. These findings support the current analysis of masculine societal expectations, piety, provision, and authority as narrated under feminist critique. The current study applied similar codes (discipline, control, reputation) across the four novels to see where patterns converge or diverge.

A study by Ammann (2021) analysed gender representation in postcolonial African literature and found that contemporary authors regularly critique patriarchal and colonial residues while depicting women as resilient agents navigating family, labour, and nation. For our purposes, the review is instructive where it notes how male characters are re-positioned, sometimes decentered, sometimes morally tested to illuminate the pressure points of patriarchy. This helped in clarifying when "underrepresentation" is a deliberate feminist strategy to redistribute narrative attention toward women's experiences. The current study, in light of this review, treated reduced male page-time not as a defect but as a narrative tactic and tested whether men still carry symbolic weight through plot functions and conflicts. This review also supports coding for scenes that expose colonial and postcolonial pressures shaping male identity

Bongmba (2018) analysed Bâ's novel as a drama where religion and custom legitimise male privilege, especially polygyny and inheritance, while women negotiate ethical agency within these constraints. Male identity is constructed through scriptural citation, seniority, and communal sanction; the text then weighs the moral and emotional costs of those identities for women's futures. The article carefully mapped how male authority was naturalised in family rituals and public reasoning, which was directly operationalised as scene-level codes. In relation to the above literature, the current study tagged invocations of religion/custom as mechanisms that stabilise masculine power in domestic and legal spaces.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist theory was considered relevant to the current study since it informs the variable of underrepresentation of male characters in this study, providing tools for analysing why men are marginalised in feminist literary contexts and how such marginalisation is politically and ideologically significant. Collins (2000) argued that domination operates through intersecting hierarchies, urging scholars to consider how male identity in African novels intersects with race, class, and colonial histories. This dimension highlights how feminist theory also guides the reception and interpretation of texts that marginalise or reconstruct male identity.

Psychoanalytic feminism was considered applicable to the current study as it informs the variable of masculine societal expectations. Benjamin's (1988) account of domination and recognition explains how masculinity is depicted as both expected and contested in African feminist literature. These



perspectives illuminate how unconscious processes and familial structures shape the expectations placed on male characters, how literature dramatises these expectations, and how feminist texts critique them.

The study enabled the researcher to analyse the deep psychological underpinnings of masculinity in the four selected novels, showing how societal pressures on men are constructed, reinforced, and sometimes subverted. Culler (1983) emphasised that multiplicity of meaning allows texts to privilege women's voices while still acknowledging the traces of absent male figures.

Norris (1982) suggested that deconstruction undermines authority, a strategy African feminist writer often employ when marginalising or reworking male roles. Thus, deconstruction complements psychoanalytic and other feminist frameworks by revealing instability in gender categories. Through theorising absence as a form of presence and highlighting the instability of hierarchical binaries, deconstruction allows researchers to interpret why feminist writers minimise or marginalise male identity in African novels.

Method

Research Design

Textual analysis was used for analysing the main ideas from the selected feminist texts. According to McKee (2003) and Barasa (2024), when textual analysis is utilised to gather data from a text, academic interpretations of that text are produced.

Target Population

Four chosen African books made up the target demographic for this research project. Two books were authored by male authors, while the other two were by female authors. Notable books included *The River and the Source* (1995) by Margaret A. Ogola, *The Joys of Motherhood* (1975) by Buchi Emecheta, *From a Crooked Rib* (2003) by Nuruddin Farah, and *Imaginings of Sand* by André Brink (1996).

Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was used to choose the four novels that constitute the core of this research. Purposive sampling refers to judgemental, selective, or subjective sampling, and is based on the researcher's judgement when deciding which units to study, such as people, instances or organisations, occurrences, or data items (Lund, 2012). The literary works that were chosen for analysis are feminist writings which present gender issues, including gender roles, as witnessed in society.

Data Collection Methods

Both primary and secondary sources were used for data collection. The primary sources were from the selected novels used in the analysis, books, articles and journals. The secondary sources included: online documents, published research theses and magazines. The researcher analysed the selected texts in line with the research objectives.

Results

Reconstructing Masculine Identity

It is evident from the texts that masculine identity is consistently represented through the aspect of critique, indicating its association with dominance, violence, and rigid gender roles. The male characters in these works are generally marginalised in number and scope, portrayed as secondary to the female protagonists who dominate the narratives. This is consistent with the assertions by Knutsen (2025) that there is a need to reconstruct masculine identity in order to support gender imbalance within the texts, where female characters are extensively explored while masculine identity remains underdeveloped or negatively framed.



The findings are consistent with the findings of Watson (2021), who noted that men are often portrayed defensively, resisting critique by doubling down on the masculine roles, which further entrenches masculine stereotypes. Thus, these portrayals reflect a broader cultural pattern where masculine identity is not neutral but constructed as a contested identity shaped by power, tradition, and resistance.

Patriarchal Socialisation

Margaret Ogola's text *The River and The Source* depicts masculinity as both a social expectation and a source of tension within family and community life. Male characters are often judged by their ability to provide, protect, and assert authority, reflecting long-standing patriarchal values. Those who conform to these ideals are respected and granted social status, while those who fail to embody strength or authority are considered weak and unworthy of recognition.

In the text *Joys of Motherhood* by Buchi Emecheta, Ona (mother to Nnaife), becomes fascinated with Nwokocha Agbadi (father to Nnaife). He is described as attractive, and this is because of his male dominance. He controls his family with cruelty and tough masculine features.

"For the first time, she realised how attached she was to this man, though he was cruel in his imperiousness. His tongue was biting like the edge of a circumcision blade. He ruled his family and children as if he were a god. Yet he gave her his love without reservation, and she enjoyed it; she suspected, however, that her fate would be the same as that of his other women should she consent to become one of his wives" (Emecheta, 1979, p.13).

Nuruddin Farah's *From a Crooked Rib* concentrates the plot around Ebla's flight and survival, foregrounding the costs of patriarchal bargains while allowing male figures, grandfather, suitors, and employers to appear chiefly as nodes of control. This is consistent with the findings of Obeng and Mensah (2024), who account for men being scripted as custodians of honour and choice within marriage systems, and with the conclusion by Mabaso (2023) that cultural symbolism is often re-scripted rather than erased.

Male Identity in Feminist Literature

Nuruddin's feminist text *From a Crooked Rib*, focuses on Ebla, a female protagonist in the story. The author concentrates on Ebla's life and the hardships she faces as a Muslim girl. The introduction, climax and resolution of the text revolve around Ebla's experiences after escaping from her rural home to her cousin's place (who now had a newborn baby) in the town.

"Ebla could hear the baby crying the moment she stepped into the house. She walked lamely and now she cursed herself for coming to the town" (Farah, 1970, p.47). The author bases his content on the life experiences of Muslim women. And at various stages of the text, he withdraws the male characters. This portrays the underrepresentation of male characters as their role in the story is not evident compared to the female characters.

Based on these analyses, Ogola, Emecheta, Farah, and Brink collectively stage a pattern in which male identity is present as a social requirement, provision, protection, and respectability, but is frequently displaced from the narrative centre. In *The River and the Source*, men are invoked at moments of counsel or crisis, then recede, which frames masculinity as a resource women can tap rather than a viewpoint that drives the story.

André Brink's text *Imaginations of Sand* deprives the male characters of their identity. The men are less represented than the women characters, who are the majority in the text. The female characters overshadow the men by not recognising their identity, which is an underrepresentation of the male characters.



Discussion

Feminist authors have presented masculine identity based on their perception that men should portray certain personalities, such as being violent, tough and having a muscular body. Male characters who appear to be non-abusive and lack a strong muscular body are regarded as not man enough. These feminist authors fail to construct male identity by neglecting to represent the men's experiences in developing societies and their own acknowledged self-identity.

The representation of masculinity across the examined texts reveals a consistent pattern of critique that positions male identity as both contested and constrained. The male figures are portrayed as embodiments of dominance, control, and social rigidity, often serving as contrasts to empowered or self-determined female characters. As Knutsen (2025) notes, such portrayals call for the reconstruction of masculine identity to restore narrative balance in literature, where male characters are frequently underdeveloped or negatively coded. Similarly, Watson (2021) observes that male characters often react defensively when challenged, reinforcing traditional masculine tropes instead of redefining them. These depictions show that masculinity is not an inherent trait, but a socially constructed identity continuously shaped by the interplay of power, culture, and resistance.

The patriarchal structures represented in *The River and the Source* and *The Joys of Motherhood* expose how male authority and dominance are naturalised through socialisation. Ogola's male characters are measured by their ability to provide, protect, and lead, while Emecheta's portrayal of Agbadi illustrates how male dominance is both feared and desired, revealing women's internalisation of patriarchal ideals. This aligns with Obeng and Mensah's (2024) findings that African literature often scripts men as custodians of social order and family honour. Mabaso (2023) further notes that such gendered roles are not always dismantled in feminist narratives but are reinterpreted to highlight their consequences. Thus, masculinity in these works becomes both a symbol of social legitimacy and a site of emotional and moral tension.

Across the works of Ogola, Emecheta, Farah, and Brink, male identity is consistently marginalised, serving as a functional backdrop to narratives of female empowerment. In *From a Crooked Rib*, Farah's near erasure of male characters underscores women's struggles against patriarchal systems, while Brink's *Imaginings of Sand* deprives men of narrative agency altogether, amplifying female voices. This narrative imbalance transforms masculinity from a dominant discourse to a displaced, passive one, an identity defined through absence rather than presence. Collectively, these authors reframe masculinity as a peripheral construct, suggesting that its redefinition in literature is necessary not only for gender balance but also for a fuller understanding of human experience beyond patriarchal binaries.

Conclusion

Feminist writers should balance women's empowerment with critical but fair engagement with male identities, ensuring that both genders are represented as complex social actors within shifting cultural contexts. Authors can promote gender equality by creating works that condemn gender stereotypes. Additionally, males should not be seen as the dominant group in society; they may never be willing to accept change or even view themselves differently.

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