



Examining Underrepresentation of Male Characters in Selected African Feminist Literature

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Abstract

The study analysed the underrepresentation of male characters in African feminist literature. The field of literature has continued to explore gender inequality and feminist perspectives. Although similar research has been conducted, it appears that male characters are often overlooked in favour of portraying female characters, especially in feminist literature. Textual analysis was used in analysing four African feminist texts, two by male authors and two by female authors. A purposive sampling technique was applied in selecting the 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 *Imaginations of Sand*. The study was guided by feminist theory, psychoanalytic feminism and deconstruction theories. Findings indicate that masculinity tends to be portrayed with less emphasis, and male characters are underrepresented, as female characters are often depicted with progressive traits. Therefore, recommendations are made to the Ministry of Education to evaluate novels that focus on female characters and tend to neglect male characters. In addition, feminist authors should address gender issues as relevant to both men and women in contemporary society. The research intends to inform social agents such as governments, educators, parents, and society at large to promote gender equality today.

Introduction

According to Lange (2008), gender is a major factor in people's social lives. This is apparent as early as infancy, when a child is dressed in pink or black clothing and forced to act in accordance with social norms regarding what is acceptable for boys and girls. Depending on the gender of the child, different behaviours are taught. In a society where men predominate, this primarily suggests that men will have more freedom and power than women, who are subordinate to and dependent on men. Because it fosters the idea that these roles reflect a specific gender and results in gender stereotypes, pushing men and women into various roles based only on their gender is harmful.

Gender roles limit how men and women perceive and interpret life by imposing predefined expectations on how each should think, act, and relate. As a result, both sexes are restricted from appreciating opinions beyond those assigned to their gender. Literature would be expected to depict civilisations with these gender disparities if art is a depiction of societal experiences (Pollert, 2005). Although it is challenging to eliminate gender norms from society, some feminist authors have tried to support gender equality. Shefer et al. (2010) contend that since the groundbreaking works of the late 1980s and 1990s, relevant men's studies have become more diverse, fluid, and subtle in their orientation. To understand how certain problematic forms of masculinity continue to emerge and reappear in various morphed forms, analysts from a variety of disciplines around the world have investigated the versatility of masculinity in a wide range of micro-contexts. They have also



investigated the dialectical relationship between masculinity and more general material conditions within societies, as well as masculinities as discursive productions and acts, and they have investigated the intersection of masculinity. Finally, they highlighted the ongoing consecratory nature of subjectivities by shedding light on alternative male subject positions that can point us in the direction of different and, at the same time, more equitable and just ways of being men and women in the various societies that we occupy. They also exposed the benefits and drawbacks of masculinity as performativity.

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. Ifi 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), gender is the socially constructed role that a person is expected to play in a particular setting, and a significant portion of this function is learned through the process of gender role socialisation. Gender role socialisation refers to the concept that individuals receive social signals, either positive or negative, of their supposed gender roles, which form their gender presentation. This has a range of aspects. The first is that people take an active part in choosing their gender identity, given the social pressures on them to behave in different contexts in a certain way. Second, various cultures prefer some ideologies over others, leading to differentials of power.

Grieve et al. (2019) asserted that men must be the primary family breadwinners or providers. Secondly, it is believed that people have an apparently insatiable sex drive. Thirdly, it is expected that men may demonstrate physical strength or endurance, which may involve using violence to manipulate others. Combined, these things appear to cause people to become more aggressive and more likely to use violence as a first response to problems and confrontations. The scholars of feminism have been progressive in analysing different views which relate to the study of masculinity to ensure there is gender equality. Nevertheless, in research studies of masculinity, it is evident that the significance of the studies has not been widely exploited. This has eventually affected the scholarship of masculinity.

There are various outlooks and some inventiveness on feminism, which are aimed at inhibiting the violence of men (Barone, 2007). Among university men and masculinity ideology, the feminists of radical theory are known for fighting against gender violence and other gender issues. With an aim of preventing violence by men and other dangerous actions, universities have come up with chances for group learning, an award for a learning course, legal involvement, and discussion plans to involve campus men in talks that concern their individual roles as men to have a self-change and the whole culture of the university (Harper, 2005). The importance of this initiative is to change how men behave because of traditional beliefs.

This has created evolving chances for men to be able to express constructive masculinity call upon men to condemn and to go against sex abuse and look at those aspects that deal with prejudice (Harris, 2010) and obtain expertise to criticise other men especially because of sexual abuse these instances of men and masculinities in research study, engage in reducing abuse of alcohol, physical and sexual violation and other actions performed by men teenagers which are not right in campus. In addition, McCarry (2007) noted that these instances of critical involvement apply the theory of radical feminism,



which concentrates on men's characters and brings transformation. The scholars of feminism show that the utilisation of the radical theory of feminism leads to contemplation of gender aspects.

Ingrassia (2011) observed that men continually reinterpret what it means to be a man based on the social context of their experiences as they go through life. In campuses or universities, the study of men and masculinity is usually programmed in a specific department, and their developments first target the university men. The critical analysis of masculinity comes from different categories of feminist theory, although at times these categories may not be mentioned. Hence, there seems to be a relation between these feminist theories and men in universities who study masculinity and examine diverse points of view in the study. Hammond (2006) argued that males are more restrained in their emotions, and because of this emotional constraint, they are always less inclined to forgive racially discriminatory events. Hence, men tend to be more competitive.

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. Focusing on boys' and men's subjectivities, perceptions and attitudes, and their shifting and context-specific social constructions, is crucial if we are to discuss in a substantive way gender disparity that empowers men and marginalises women simultaneously. If such a focus is always conducted through a critical and progressive approach that seeks to avoid re-investing the experiences of women, then a focus on men and masculinity will contribute to the larger political project to empower women.

Understanding the dynamic societal pressures and imperatives young men face as they strive to build male identities and achieve masculinity leads to strategies aimed at encouraging young men to cultivate non-violent, non-abusive, less dangerous forms of masculinity in favour of more life-affirming masculinities and life-enhancing to the good of all. Recognising that some rigid formulations of masculinity affect both men and women, thus expands the scope of political and ideological projects aimed at empowering women (Shefer et al., 2010). In addition to this, modern feminist critics need to acknowledge the literary errors they've made in the past and open themselves up to the practice of critiquing texts that provide a fresh perspective on gender. 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.

From criticism of literary plays, Judith Kegan Gardiner develops her gender philosophies on the discrepancies in male and female social interactions. She believes that men and women have different life experiences because of their gender categorisation; therefore, these gender differences should be reflected in their literary works. In her article, "On Female Identity and Writing by Women," Gardiner argues, "in profound and frequent ways, the experiences of women vary from those of men." She explains further that a man is supposed to act in a patriarchal society not like a woman (Gardiner, 1981). Eventually, because of this, each gender ends up adjusting and acting in accordance with the personas that they are expected to present.

These differences in the experiences that each gender goes through become readily apparent in the works of the writers. Character development is impacted by gender, which, in turn, has repercussions on the finished product (Wolff, 1972). The purpose of this research project was to investigate and evaluate the depiction of masculine identity and character development in works of African feminist literature.



The field of literature has continued to address gender inequality and feminist arguments. Although comparable studies have been conducted, it appears that the identities of male characters have often been overlooked in favour of the representation of female characters, particularly in feminist literature. The researcher thus examined how male and female writers presented masculine social expectations, the idea of masculinity, and the underrepresentation of male characters. The research was a critical analysis of male identity in African feminist literature, in four selected African 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 *Imaginings of Sand*.

Shou (2023) conducted a computational content analysis of African anglophone novels, focusing on the ratio of male to female character mentions and the narrative attention given to each. The study revealed that while men still appeared more frequently overall, in feminist-authored texts, their presence was reduced, with longer narrative passages dedicated to exploring female voices. Male figures were relegated to supporting roles, husbands, fathers, or antagonists, without extended arcs of self-reflection. The study concluded that this imbalance served as a corrective strategy to long-standing patriarchal dominance in literature but inadvertently resulted in a new form of underrepresentation. The study presented a conceptual gap since it quantified representation but did not analyse how masculinity itself was constructed when men were sidelined. The current study addressed this gap by exploring the qualitative dimensions of male identity in feminist novels, not just their numerical absence.

Nkosi and Chirwa (2024) examined South African feminist fiction and found that male characters were often depicted only in relation to women's struggles. For example, men were written as abusive partners, negligent fathers, or obstacles to women's self-realisation. Rarely were they given narrative depth or depicted as complex beings capable of growth. The authors argued that this selective portrayal limited readers' understanding of masculinity by confining it to patriarchal failure. They noted that while feminist literature had succeeded in centring women's experiences, it unintentionally marginalised men. The gap identified was in the lack of examination of how this marginalisation shaped the broader discourse of gender identity. The current study addressed this by analysing how feminist writers engage with masculinity beyond portraying men as symbolic foils.

Bako (2025) explored the politics of representation in Nigerian feminist novels and noted that men frequently served as plot devices rather than full characters. The research highlighted how male roles were truncated into archetypes, the oppressor, the absent provider, or the unfaithful husband, while women enjoyed multidimensional portrayals. According to Bako, this strategy strengthened feminist critique but weakened the representation of male complexity. The study concluded that such underrepresentation risked producing a literature of imbalance where men became caricatures. The gap in this study was its failure to connect these truncated portrayals to the cultural ideologies that shape male expectations. The current study addressed this by situating underrepresentation within both narrative strategy and cultural ideology in African feminist texts.

Ese and Nwankwo (2023) examined contemporary Igbo feminist plays and novels, finding that men often appeared briefly in scenes, serving either to introduce conflict or to highlight women's resilience. The study noted that while women's interiority was richly developed, men were scripted as peripheral figures with little emotional visibility. Ese and Nwankwo argued that this imbalance undermined opportunities to explore male vulnerability and redefined masculinity. Their study emphasised the need for balanced representation that critiques patriarchy without erasing male subjectivity. The gap was that while they identified the imbalance, they did not provide a framework for analysing masculinity within feminist narratives. The current study bridged this by providing a structured inquiry into how male identity was constructed despite limited narrative attention.



Adebayo (2024) conducted a comparative analysis of African feminist short stories and noted that male characters were often underdeveloped compared to their female counterparts. They were introduced mainly to set the stage for women's empowerment or downfall, then quickly faded from the plot. Adebayo concluded that this pattern reflected a literary strategy of centring women but also exposed a critical silence around the complexity of male identity. The study recommended a deeper interrogation of how feminist texts might both critique patriarchy and still acknowledge the multidimensionality of men. The gap was the absence of empirical analysis of underrepresentation across multiple novels. The current study filled this by conducting a systematic examination of four selected texts to assess both the presence and depth of male identity.

According to Gond and Yadav (2025), there are disproportionately fewer male characters in feminist works. As compared to their male counterparts in today's contemporary culture, women have now achieved far higher levels of empowerment. The concerns of females have recently received a greater amount of attention. This is especially obvious when considering the manner in which writers deliver their literary works (Gond & Yadav, 2025). There is a tendency in the literary work of feminist writers to under-represent the roles of masculine characters. They place a greater emphasis on females by ascribing to them better gender roles and strong personality features, while males are portrayed as being inferior and are not commonly brought up in the texts. This gives the impression that females are more important.

There is a strong argument that gender is the single most important social problem facing the globe today (Collyer-Hoar, Rubegni, Tomcsyk, Baines, & Gruia, 2025). It has an impact and a bearing on every sphere of our life, including the political sphere, the business world, the religious sphere, and the leisure sphere. Individuals living in the 21st century have the firm belief that any endeavour to be successful requires careful consideration of the gender factor. So, what is gender? In its most basic form, gender refers to the social expectation that individuals of a certain sex should or should not engage in certain behaviours. Every normal human being falls into one of two gender categories: female or male. There is a biological reality about sex, yet it is also sex. In fact, the most obvious distinction between people is their sexual orientation. When we first look at a person, we are quickly able to tell whether they are a male or female, a boy or a girl, depending on how they present themselves to us. The question that has to be addressed is whether or not society ought to make use of the biological variations between people in order to define what kinds of behaviours people should and should not engage in.

In spite of this, this is something that human societies all around the world have been doing pretty much from the beginning of time. Young boys in several African cultures are taught that men are expected to be tough, that they should be able to acquire what they want by any means necessary, and that they should never exhibit any emotion (Sabik & Brown, 2025). These are all lessons that they learn when they are educated to be men. Since you are a male and because it is something that is expected of guys, you need to behave in the same manner. When someone asks why they should or should not do this or that, the fast reaction is usually the same: Females are counselled to be submissive and quiet, to submit to the authority of men, to abstain from climbing trees, and to avoid ingesting certain foods (Laranjeiro, 2025). When a young girl asks why women are not permitted to yell in public or climb trees, a typical answer is that women are not supposed to act in such a way. This is also a common response when the young lady asks why she is not allowed to do these things. To put this another way, society is constantly telling us what we can accomplish and what we are not capable of doing, just because we are female or male.

Lennon-Maslin and Quaiser-Pohl (2024) assert that there is neither a physiological nor an intellectual reason for a man or a woman to perform or refrain from certain activities in many circumstances. This



is true for both the doing and the abstaining of certain behaviours. Climbing a tree is a simple task that can be accomplished by anybody, regardless of their gender or sexual orientation. If a young boy expresses an interest in cooking for himself, there is no rational justification for restricting his access to the kitchen and prohibiting him from doing so. It is a well-known truth that men make up most of the world's most accomplished cooks, sometimes referred to as "chefs." But, in certain other cultures, it is regarded as quite rude for a man or a boy to even set foot inside a kitchen. This is particularly true of Asian societies. In a related vein, some communities do not allow their women to build homes and even forbid them from working on construction sites, whereas in other societies it is the responsibility of the woman to construct the family home.

In addition, some communities do not allow their women to marry outside of their community (Baldwin & Twigg, 2024). When we speak about gender, we are referring to the practice of delegating responsibilities to members of society based on whether they are male or female. In principle, there should not be any issues with employees filling in at various roles on a rotational basis. According to Sarfo, EYendork and Naidoo (2024), there are a variety of settings in which it is reasonable to assume that some individuals will participate in certain pursuits while others will choose to abstain from them. For instance, it is not recommended for a woman who is in the early stages of pregnancy to engage in activities such as hunting wild animals or tending livestock many kilometres from her home. This is because this kind of activity might put the unborn child at risk of being injured. On the other hand, this should not be used as an excuse to claim that women should not go hunting in general for wild animals because it sends the wrong message to young girls. When some people use gender norms as a justification to oppress other people or take advantage of them, the issue becomes much more serious than it already was.

In terms of social interactions, males and females are often kept apart beginning in early childhood (Coyne et al., 2024). Members of both sexes get rigorous training in what constitutes "feminine" and "masculine" behaviour, speech, and attire, respectively, as well as in every activity. Both boys and girls are given instructions on the kind of employment they should and should not undertake, as well as the locations they may and cannot visit. Just because kids are males or girls, they are told what kinds of activities to play and even what foods to consume or avoid eating (Beechey, 2024). By the time a person is in their teens, he or she has learned, via both example and direct instruction by older members of society, what precisely is expected of him or her as a man or as a woman in society. This knowledge is gained by the time the person is in their teens. These gendered roles typically indicate that men should take command and oversee everything, be "tough," which may mean harsh or even cruel, and "strong," which can often mean aggressive and violent. In other words, men should assume leadership responsibilities.

On the other hand, it is typical for females to be expected to exhibit a manner that is gentle and caring, to be subordinate to males, and to follow them without questioning their authority. Even in domains that are accessible to the whole public, such as politics and religion, the gendering of stances may result in some bizarre occurrences. At some places of worship, for instance, it is customary for men and women to keep a respectful distance from one another. There are several religious subgroupings that do not allow women to preach or lead worship services, nor do they allow them to speak in front of groups of people. The field of politics is commonly seen as being one that is controlled by men.

Method

Research Design

This research was based purely on the library. Textual analysis was the method used for analysing the main ideas from the selected feminist texts. According to McKee (2003), 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 *Imaginations 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

The River and The Source has been written by Margaret Ogola, with the perspective of raising the girl child. Akoko is represented as the 'source' of the river, which symbolises other generations that later come from her (the source of the river). Akoko is represented as a strong character who endures hardships and passes on her strong will to her daughter, Nyabera.

It is through hard work and perseverance from Akoko that her grandchildren and great-grandchildren emulate her. This is evident right from the beginning of the novel, when Ogola introduces Chief Odero, who had sired his first daughter, "Later he would say wisely with something of a turnabout that a home without daughters is like a spring without a source..." (Ogola, 1994, p.11)

"... for a home without daughters can never prosper but is faced with eventual poverty and lack of friendships forged in marriage" (Ogola, 1994, p.13).

Similarly, in *The Joys of Motherhood*, the author places the female characters at the centre of the story, while the male characters are underrepresented. The text revolves around Ona, who is portrayed as the only chief's daughter, a strong and hardworking female character.

Likewise, in André Brink's text *Imaginations of Sand*, the underrepresentation of male characters is evident throughout the text, which is based entirely on the family tales that Ouma narrates to her granddaughter Kristen. The author makes the women dominate and places female characters at the central point of these tales.

Gender Roles

An in-depth analysis of the text *From a Crooked Rib*, reveals the oversight of men's responsibilities and determination. They are the ones who take up the responsibility of providing for their families at home. However, the representation of these roles by the male characters has not been well presented. For instance, Gheddi, the cousin of Ebla, faces a hard task every day as he works hard in his shop. It is evident that even when his wife is in labour, he multitasks the jobs at home and his own business.

As usual for Ebla's cousin, he risks his life while trying to smuggle goods to sell in his shop in order to provide for the family. "The main door was thrown open and her cousin came in panting, beads of sweat had accumulated on his forehead. 'What happened?' asked his wife... I ran for my life. They



almost fired at me" (Farah, 1970, p.62). Representation of such hardships that the men go through should be presented with great emphasis, as they struggle to provide for their families.

Discussion

Nuruddin Farah, in his text *From a Crooked Rib* (1970), stereotypes male characters negatively by presenting male dominance over the female characters. Many of today's female authors represent a counter-discourse; i.e., women's discourse and women's discourse. The presumption, as commonly believed, is that these women writers would take revenge on men in their fiction; i.e., they would negatively assess male behaviour, thus pointing out the flaws of patriarchy (and inferring its underlying feminist or androcentric ideologies); In African culture, as well as its negative overtones towards women (Koussouhon et al., 2015).

While looking at men and masculinity, scholars are not only supposed to understand and appreciate the strands of feminist theory, but they should also put into practice the ideologies. This means that scholars need to investigate if and the way in which present masculinity ideologies are criticised and changed by various feminist strands. While applying gender theories, criticising the duties of every man and woman, responsibilities and realising their relation through different notions, gives men and masculinities choices which unstable ideologies cannot. A platform is provided for scholars to consider and practice the views of feminism (Robinson, 2003).

It is notable that the patriarchal system is allowed in some of the African societies, which results in a negative construction of male identity by these feminist authors. However, the authors should not be influenced in accepting these norms in their works. Rather, they should curb these social norms which advocate for gender inequality and present a bad image towards men.

In connection with the negative construction of male identity, feminist authors have presented the societal expectations which restrict male characters to specific social ideologies. In Ogola's text, *The River and The Source* (1994), the author limits male characters to a major role of starting a family. While the female characters are not limited to family responsibilities and progress as they embrace traditional values to modernisation, like getting an education. This clearly portrays the extent to which the male identity has been overlooked because of cultural ideologies. Similarly, Farah, in his text *From a Crooked Rib*, has used religious ideologies such as polygamous marriage, in which women suffer as they end up being neglected by their husbands.

Additionally, the underrepresentation of male characters by feminist writers is evident in the selected texts. Women characters take the protagonist role in Ogola's text *The River and The Source*, and the central thematic issue revolves around women's empowerment. Female characters are more numerous compared to the males. Ogola withdraws the male characters by having them die and being left with the female characters, who eventually play major roles as heads of their families. The female characters are presented as powerful and independent of the male characters. Likewise, in André Brink's text *Imaginings of Sand*, the underrepresentation of male characters is evident throughout the text, which is based entirely on the family tales that Ouma narrates to her granddaughter Kristen. The author makes the women dominate and places female characters at the central point of these tales. The women openly disregard male characters as important members of the family.

The same can be observed in Emecheta's text, *The Joys of Motherhood*, where the male characters, like Nnaife, are disrespected by his wife, Nnu Ego, because of his laundry job. Nnaife is represented as unsuccessful and not hardworking because of his laundry job, which is perceived as a woman's job. The author stereotypes the roles that men perform in order to provide for their families. Ironically, in spite of the female characters such as Nnu Ego being represented with strong personalities of hard work and perseverance, they still depend on their husbands, who are underrepresented.



Conclusion

Feminist authors have placed much emphasis on the female characters and also portrayed the issue of the patriarchal system among the male characters. This results in the display of a negative stereotype of male characters. This is also an influence of religious ideologies, such as Muslim, which permits polygamous marriage and the dominance of husbands over their wives. Though feminist authors aim at uplifting the girl child in society, male identity, on the other hand, has been overshadowed, which is a portrayal of gender inequality in the field of literature.

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