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INTERROGATING MASCULINITY IN FEMINIST FICTION: A STUDY OF MALE REPRESENTATION IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *DREAM COUNT* (2025)

OLUWATOYIN, Adam Olamilekan

University of Ilorin

Abstract

Feminist writers and critics have consistently engaged with and condemned toxic masculinity, a theme frequently reinforced through the character sketches of the male figures and their devastating behavioural effects on women. The general contention in most feminist discourse is that man is the archenemy of woman, a binary opposition that has generated an unending debate in gender studies. Unarguably, we live in a world that valorises patriarchy, where men's perspectives typically dominate. However, Adichie's men particularly in Dream Count (2025) are primarily depicted through the restricted lens of the female characters, creating a single-narrative fixated on masculine flaws. This study adopts a qualitative methodology, drawing on Afro feminisms as its theoretical framework, to examine masculinity and the portrayal of male characters in Chimamanda Adichie's Dream Count (2025). The study agrees that men exhibit the full spectrum of masculine toxicity, but also contends that feminist writers are more preoccupied with the castration of men rather than redeeming masculinity. The study concludes that the onus of gender reconstruction must be shared through intentional, localised efforts. It

calls for a conscious intervention by women principalities who are strategically in a position to re-socialise their sons, brothers, nephews, and cousins by instilling new, equitable values during the foundational stages of gender construction.

Keywords: Masculinity, Feminism, Characterization, Women-principality

Introduction

The intersection of gender, literature, and culture has been a productive site of scholarly inquiry, particularly within the domain of African literary studies. In the Nigerian context, the question of how masculinity is constructed, performed, and critiqued in fiction has gained renewed urgency in recent decades, propelled in large part by the emergence and consolidation of a vibrant tradition of female authorship. From Flora Nwapa, Nigeria's first published female novelist, through the womanist writings of Buchi Emecheta and Zaynab Alkali, to the internationally acclaimed feminist fiction of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Lola Shoneyin, Yejide Kilanko, Chika Unigwe, and Damilare Kuku, Nigerian women writers, critics, theorists have consistently and increasingly engaged not merely with the subjugation of female characters, but with the very ideological apparatus that produces and sustains masculine dominance in their societies. The portrayal of male characters and masculinity by these writers therefore constitutes a literary and sociocultural phenomenon deserving of rigorous academic examination. If masculinity is a learnt social script not a biological mandate, then the woman has a lot to play on what becomes of a man. A man's growth and early development from infancy to adulthood takes place in environments largely managed by women such as mothers, grandmothers, sisters, and female teachers—women are, essentially, the primary co-authors of the masculinity script. Women principality holds a tremendous amount of agency in deciding what behaviours are reinforced, what emotions are allowed, and what responsibilities are modelled for young men. Most women excuse a son's lack of emotional literacy "boys don't cry" or domestic contribution "that's women's work" out of love and male preference, blind to the reality that they are not nurturing a boy; they are actively modelling and reinforcing the patriarchal script that will later damage his partners, his children, and himself. This dynamic exposes a profound generational paradox: women often demand emotional and behavioural accountability from their husbands that they simultaneously fail to cultivate in their sons. Due to cultural pressure, mothers frequently grant their male children a form of patriarchal privilege during childhood. Consequently, when these boys mature into adulthood and enter marriages, they merely execute the deficient masculine scripts that their own maternal socialization left uninterrupted. They lack the emotional

bandwidth and partnership skills their wives now desperately seek. The woman, as a wife, is left to deal with the exact lack of responsibility and emotional distance that she, as a mother or sister, may have inadvertently helped create in another man. It is a sad irony that the qualities a woman seeks in her life partner are the very qualities she may have been culturally conditioned to suppress or excuse the absence of in the male children she raised. This domestic cycle mirrors the structural reality that behavioural outcomes cannot be separated from their formative environments; metaphorically speaking, one cannot harvest water from a desert. This intergenerational link between maternal socialization and male behaviour brings to mind the profound observation of Efu Nyaki, who noted that half of the world is comprised of women, while the other half consists of the children they raise. Hence, the flaws observed in adult male cease to be spontaneous individual failings; instead, they are revealed as the direct fruits of a social system that women themselves participate in cultivating.

The portrayal of Masculinity and male characters by Nigerian female novelists is not merely a matter of aesthetic preference or narrative strategy; it is a direct literary response to demonstrable social and cultural realities. In the Nigerian society, as in many postcolonial African contexts, masculinity is a heavily regulated cultural institution. The concept of the “Big Man” a male figure defined by material accumulation, sexual access, communal authority, and the subordination of women and weaker men organises social hierarchies at the local, national, and institutional levels (Chitando, Mlambo, Mfecane, & Ratele, 2024). This ideology of hegemonic masculinity, to use R. W. Connell and James Messerschmidt's (2005) foundational framework, does not simply describe how men behave; it prescribes how men ought to behave, and it disciplines those who deviate from its norms through social stigma, violence, and cultural marginalisation. Nigerian female novelists have documented and critiqued this phenomenon across a range of narrative modes.

The Evolution of Gender Narrative in African Literary Canon

The early canon of African literature, often referred to as the male-phallic phase was dominated by male voices and perspectives. In these works, women were often relegated to myopic, passive roles; they were background figures, moral compasses, objects of desire, or victims. Their identity was frequently defined solely by their relationship to a male character as a wife, mother, or daughter. This created a distorted narrative that failed to capture the complexity and humanity of African women. Nigeria's literary history has been decisively shaped by a masculinist

tradition. The foundational texts of Nigerian literature in English most notably Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Amos Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard* (1952) centre male protagonists whose identities are constituted through physical prowess, communal authority, emotional stoicism, and patriarchal dominance. As Razinat Mohammed (2017) observes, these pioneering texts effectively established a literary grammar in which the “greatness” of a novel was indexed by the physical and social power of its male hero, while women occupied peripheral, decorative, or instrumentalised roles. Achebe's Okonkwo, in particular, has functioned as what scholars describe as a paradigmatic case study of hegemonic masculinity within African fiction — a character defined by his fear of appearing weak, his repression of tenderness, and his absolute identification with patriarchal authority. This figure has cast a long and generative shadow over subsequent Nigerian writing, and it is precisely against this shadow that third-generation Nigerian female novelists have positioned their own, more complex, and frequently subversive, representations of maleness. The entry of women into Nigerian literary production was itself an act of resistance. The rise of prominent women writers like Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, and later, the generation including Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was a turning point on the literary landscape and radical intervention. Their writings were explicitly designed to rebuild the distorted images, rewrite the narrative, projecting female characters that are: Taking control (of their economic, emotional, and political lives), Navigating complex realities beyond the confines of the home, making choices, facing consequences, and ultimately taking charge of their own lives and stories. However, just as the early male writers failed to portray women in their full complexity; contemporary feminist writers are often depicting male characters with a stereotypical focused critique, leading to a space where masculinity is under dark scrutiny. The earliest female novelists wrote primarily to recover the female perspective systematically occluded by their male predecessors, and their critique of masculine power was largely conducted through the experiences of suffering female characters. However, as the tradition matured and as feminist and postcolonial theoretical frameworks became more deeply embedded in African literary scholarship, a significant shift occurred: Nigerian female writers began to turn the analytical gaze directly upon the male subject, interrogating the very construction of maleness as an ideological project. This shift is neither peripheral nor incidental. It reflects a deepening of feminist consciousness from a politics of female victimhood to a structural critique of the gender system as a whole, encompassing its

damaging effects on men as much as on women. Adichie articulates this understanding explicitly when she argues that masculinity, as conventionally constructed, functions as “a small cage” that constrains men's humanity, fosters emotional fragility, and perpetuates inequality for all genders (Nwosu, 2020).

Earlier studies on Masculinity and Portrayal of Male Characters by Nigerian female novelists are hereby reviewed: ~~includes:~~—Kiritu, Mwhihia & Mwangi (2025) investigate the underrepresentation of male characters in African feminist novels, the study contends that there is a systemic marginalization of male figures, noting that male characters are fewer in number and often lack voice compared to their female counterparts. Tobalase Adegbite O. & Aikabeli Lucky O. (2017) contend that Ezeigbo repositioned masculinities by subverting gender privileges from male characters; exposing their flaws and vulnerability. Shober (2009) while examining male characters within marital contexts, posits that male partners in African women’s writing are often portrayed as agents of normalized violence, whose authority is socially protected through silence. The critic contends further that feminist panacea to this unhealthy act is usually through symbolic removal (death), narrative erasure, or social irrelevance. Boehmer’s (2005) intervention does not support the demonizing of men but she sees no wrong in men becoming socially irrelevant and narratively displaced as women writers reclaim the narrative space. This study agrees that the culture of silence by women in a toxic and unhealthy marital space perpetuate and exacerbate patriarchal woes and hinder their voices. However, resolving patriarchy with death is radical, extra-judicial and unafrican. From the foregoing, it is observed that the male characters are shunned from narrative empathy and often portrayed with systematically dented moral profiles, while masculinity is reimagined primarily through the subversion of dominance and the public exposure of vulnerability. This reflects the contemporary feminist’s writers’ strong violent representation of male characters which ironically perpetuates another gender inequality and power imbalance in a subversive way. Writers such as Damilare Kuku’s *Nearly All the Men in Lagos Are Mad*, Buchi Emecheta’s *Second class Citizen*, Chimamanda Adichie’s *Dream Count* are dissecting the performance of manhood, exposing its fragilities, toxicity, and immaturity. Nwachukwu and UnekeEnyi articulate this pattern as thus:

Adichie in her *Purple Hibiscus* creates a warped, despicable millionaire, Eugene who is finally destroyed by his wife; it is also why she in her *Half of a Yellow Sun* emasculates an otherwise vibrant Odenigbo and denies him activity in war which is essentially, male provenance (48).

Nwachukwu and UnekeEnyi argue that the feminist agenda seeks to uproot patriarchy and plant matriarchy; this agenda ultimately subverts and reverses traditional gender roles observed in Adichie's characterization. This paper submits that male flaws are centred in most feminist writings; by portraying men primarily through the frustrated, disappointed, or critical lens of the female protagonists, these authors reverse the historical pattern. The man is no longer the default universal subject; he is an object of observation and, often, a source of the central conflict. Nwachukwu and UnekeEnyi argue further that

Nigerian feminists claim that they also take care of male issues. Ironically, central to their initial grouse was that males took care of female issues, you cannot understand the female sensibilities, they complained. Feminism cannot cater for men's issues. It is only a movement of the supposed hunted who turns around to savour the fruits of the imagined hunt, becoming the de facto hunter: where they seem weak. They feign weakened and overused by males: where they have strength, they bully the men (our emphasis) (49).

However, this paper posits that feminism can be liberating for both men and women and calls for Feminist discourse that, therefore, transcend the blind demonization of the man and strategically shift its focus to the foundational stages of male socialization, recognizing that man often has little initial say in the patriarchal script he inherits. As a pragmatic strategy, it is substantially easier to train the son than to correct the husband. The purpose of calling for a reconstruction rather than pointing finger at the flawed masculinity is neither to diverge from the reality of toxic masculinity nor to subvert the fact that these projections are direct reflections of patriarchal society. In parallel, this study is not an attempt to save man's neck from the feminist pyre by denying culpability. Instead, this study serves as a crucial call to action for both men and women to jointly examine the societal strictures that perpetuate or instigate this masculine toxicity. Following Foluke Aliyu's (2013, 2016) submission "...that focus [should be] not on the demonization of man, but on the obliteration of structures that allow the subjugation and marginalization of the woman", the focus must shift: instead of merely castigating man as an individual villain, attention must be redirected to obliterating the established social systems and cultural allowances that enable and even encourage these erratic, harmful male behaviours. By focusing on the structural roots of patriarchy, we can move beyond binary critique toward a collaborative model for genuine reconstruction.

Patriarchy vs. Matriarchy; Men and Women in the Crossfire of Gender War

The adoption of a feminist theory to examine masculinity is a conscious decision; one would think we are not going to get an objective and holistic review of the topic sentence as it is mostly suicidal to view the concept of masculinity through the lens of feminism. On the contrary, there are feminist theories that recognize man as a complement of woman not her enemy. So these theorists see the need to carry men along in their quest for the obliteration of oppressive patriarchal power dominance. Critic such as Foluke Aliyu envisaged the complementarity relationship between the two genders in her postulation of African feminisms, she submits that the two sexes are beneficiaries and victims of oppressive structure which is also an index to the belief that men are not enemies of women “African feminisms conceives of the relationship between genders as complementary. Men are not seen as adversaries. Instead, the focus is on changing societal structures that perpetuate inequality. Afro feminisms promote a non-confrontational approach towards men” (2016:88-91). Aliyu calls for obliteration of oppressive structures, culture and norms perceived to be oppressive; a socio-cultural framework that engineer violence against women, shifting the focus from individual male culpability to the overarching structures that condition male behaviour. This negates the opinion upheld by Nwachukwu and UnekeEnyi in their attempt to call for the destruction of feminism where they contend that “feminism is a hunter’s match which has no egalitarian purpose and outlook but is rather toned to promoting and advancing Matriarchy, particularly in the Nigerian and the African space... (42).

Several of these younger writers are unstinting in their attempt to castrate the males. Adichie's (2006) heroine kills her husband whom Adichie infested with religious fanaticism and impulsive tyranny; she leaves the fire-spitting Odenigbo at the end of her novel, a mere ash of the old fire while Olanna retains her strength and matures as the war progresses to its sad end (Adichie 2007). What is more, Adichie recommends retaliation against male infidelity as though two wrongs could ever make a right. Olanna methodically sexes Richard in her apartment as a retaliation for Odenigbo's sexual intransigence with the village girl, Amara. To this extent, rather than being conciliatory, Adichie is unabashedly pensive and combative. (45).

It is noteworthy that, Afro feminists strongly frown at Adichie’s resolution in *Purple Hibiscus*. Aliyu contends that the approach adopted by Beatrice to end Eugene’s perpetual violence and abuse is “Unaffrican”. The critic submits that killing one's husband is considered scandalous and extrajudicial in African cultures “We do not kill our husbands”, she posits that “The act of killing one’s spouse negates African culture, particularly Igbo philosophy in which the text is

conceptualised. Igbo philosophy preaches moderation, especially where there is another culturally acceptable alternative [to extrajudicial]. (p117). She posits further that:

Afro Feminisms entails the assessment or explication of feminist themes in texts from the viewpoint of African concepts of feminism and gender. It is expected, therefore, that feminism will be on both male and female characters. This results from African cultural conception of the relationship between the genders as complementary and which also includes the male in its feminism. The men are not regarded as the enemy; it is the structures in the society that need to be changed. One implication of this is the fact that women can be instigators, beneficiaries or victims of an oppressive system...Afro feminisms does not emphasis gender matters only and so, permits the inclusion of other variables that shape human life such as race, ethnic group, and class. It allows for the incorporation of other socio-economic and political challenges confronting both the woman and the man (137).

Akachi Ezeigbo lends her voice to the women's struggle through snail sense feminism. She offers a cautionary approach to patriarchy and a non-militant feminist struggle that recognizes a man as a partner and carries him along in the struggle against patriarchy. She uses the snail metaphor to call for a non-confrontational, diplomatic, conciliatory approach to patriarchy. With its lubricated tongue, the snail manoeuvres its ways around any obstacle. By being non-confrontational, Akachi like Aliyu seeks to keep men at the table and engage them as allies and partners in obliterating the oppressive patriarchal structures. Akachi describes this mechanism of strategic caution as follows:

The snail is a master strategist... When confronted with danger, it withdraws into its shell and waits for the danger to pass. But it is always on the move, although its movement is slow and imperceptible. The movement may be frustratingly slow, but the snail always reaches its destination (27).

The emphasis on men's inclusivity by both critics (F.R Aliyu and Akachi Ezeigbo) completely negate Nwachukwu and NnekeEnyi's submission that Feminism is an hunter's match out for men which has no egalitarian purpose and it is toned to promote matriarchy. Substituting matriarchy with patriarchy would be scandalous and ridiculous; feminism should seek to liberate the society including man, making the struggle a shared concern that calls for the co-operation and complementarity of both genders.

Are Men's Stereotypical Characterizations an Exaggeration of Reality?

The fact that no fiction is exclusively fictitious, implies that no fictional work is ever devoid of real life experiences. Fiction mirrors and reflects our reality and human dynamics "Why was a

novel a metaphor for unrealistic, anyway? Novels had always felt to me truer to what was real” (*Dream Count* 82). Writers consciously portray flawed and toxic masculinities to reflect social realities. However, when juxtaposed with their female counterparts, the male characters often border on an intentional exaggeration of stereotypical masculinity; a deliberate aesthetic choice used by the author to escalate structural gender conflicts.

—Adichie adopts an allegorical representation in sketching the male characters; they are labeled “The Thief of Time” and with traits of narcissism and manipulation to reduce male figures to universal symbols of patriarchal toxicity. The experiences of the four female protagonists expose men who embody these uniform defects. This deliberate replication of flawed masculinity in *Dream Count* reinforces a critique of gender dynamics that is characteristic of contemporary feminist literature. In Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2004), the character of Eugene Achike; a university-educated, wealthy, and publicly admired figure embodies what according to Ojebode (2024), “a militarised variant of hegemonic masculinity”; behaviour such as domestic violence, religious fanaticism, and absolute patriarchal control are presented as coherent expressions of male identity shaped by Nigeria’s postcolonial, catholic, and military-political culture. Adichie’s characterization is notable for its refusal to rely on flat, unidimensional condemnation: Eugene, for instance, is depicted as a psychologically complex character caught between the contradictory masculine scripts, the colonial “Big Man”, the devout Catholic patriarch, and the traumatised survivor of a military-era in Nigeria each of which compounds his violence and forecloses his capacity for intimacy. This textured approach to male characterisation reflects a sophisticated literary engagement with the social production of masculinity, not its mere denunciation. *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) features the revolutionary intellectual Odenigbo, who betrays his partner through sexual infidelity. The deliberate aggregation of masculine flaws across both individual texts and the broader Adichie canon is not incidental, it is a constitutive feature of her feminist representational strategy.

The sketches of Male Characters in Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie’s *Dream Count* (2025)

To consolidate her feminist narrative, Adichie makes a deliberate formal choice: she portrays her male characters exclusively through the mediated perspective of her female narrators, systematically denying the male figures access to interiority, stream of consciousness, or self-articulation. The narrative privilege of psychological depth and of being known from the inside is reserved for the female characters. All male characters — Darnell, Chuka, the Englishman,

Kwame, Zikora's father, the Thieves of Time, Kadiatou's father, and others are introduced and sustained entirely through the interpretive frame of the novel's women to further buttress the theme of masculine failure; a recurring motif in most contemporary feminist writings in Africa. Adichie's comment on this formal decision illuminates both its purposefulness and its representational consequences. When asked in a book talk and reading at Sixth & I in Washington, D.C. (2025) whether *Dream Count* could have sustained a single point of view, she responded:

Would *Dream Count* have worked from a single point of view with one of the characters as the main narrator that sustains the entire novel? Did you consider this at one point in the process?"

She responded "No, and No" and further elaborate that

I think it would be an entirely different novel because I think you now in storytelling, point of view really does matter because point of view limits what we can know, what the reader can know so I think if you have one person who is telling the story of other people, your ability to get into the motivation of people is limited. We observe people do things and we kind of imagine their motivation and we sometimes we give people motivations that are in fact not true-I mean I've heard people talk about why I do something and I'm thinking that's not why at all.... I did want to have a multiplicity of voices.... (CNA_ Book Talk and Reading at Sixth & I in Washington, D.C.)

This authorial self-reflection is revelatory in its implications. Adichie explicitly acknowledges that a single point of view limits the reader's access to the inner motivations of characters and yet, despite adopting a multiplicity of female voices to grant her women characters' interior depth, she simultaneously withholds any equivalent access to the inner lives of the novel's men. The narrative architecture of *Dream Count* (2025) is thus organised around an asymmetry: readers are granted the thoughts, desires, fears, and contradictions of the female narrators while being permitted only to observe the external actions and behaviours of the male characters. The interpretive burden of assigning motivation to the men falls entirely upon the women who watch them; women whose relationship to these men is frequently defined by disappointment, hurt, or contempt. What results is what Chinonso (2025), in a critical review of the novel in the "Lagos Review", identifies as

A Narrative Style where readers can "see" the thoughts and motivations of the female characters and narrators, but only the actions of the men in their lives. What results is a

masterful steering of a judgmental outcome devoid any opportunity for empathy or balance and the creation of the archetypal asshole (Chinonso, 2025).

Chinonso's dissatisfaction with the author projection stems from the author bias, single-narrative, one-sidedness- a position she unapologetically affirms. When Adichie is confronted with this charge of one-sidedness, her response is characteristically unrepentant:

The whole point of a novel is one-sidedness. I mean the novel put you in the point of view of one particular person but it also made me think about how I think there is still that abiding idea that somehow we kind of need maleness and men for kind of full legitimacy... these are the women's stories and this is what their stories are. (CNA_ Book Talk and Reading at Sixth & I in Washington, D.C.)

Adichie's defence is intellectually coherent within the parameters of a strictly partisan feminist project. Yet it is precisely here that this study registers its most substantive objection. Literature, at its highest ambition, is not merely a vehicle for ideological advocacy; it is a comprehensive mirror, a mediator of the full spectrum of human experience across all genders. A novel that deliberately engineers the male subject as unknowable and knowable only through the distorting lens of those he has wounded may produce powerful catharsis and legitimate feminist testimony, but it forecloses the possibility of achieving what literature has historically aspired to: in this context, redeeming and portraying an ideal masculinity and male characters that are worthy of emulation. Both women and men's fiction must speak and preach about the legitimacy of both maleness and femaleness to avoid counter alternating ideology and subversion of prevalence oppressive structures, oppression and inequalities will still linger if patriarchy should usurp patriarchy in retaliation; we are not at war with each other and pitching both genders against each other would be a doom to humanity. Furthermore, Adichie's own widely acclaimed TED Talk 'The Danger of a Single Story' offers an inadvertent critique of her own representational strategy in *Dream Count* "show a people as one thing, as only one thing over and over again and that is what they become" Undoubtedly, most feminist writings are preoccupied with depicting the negative side of masculinity so, when feminist writing persistently rehearses a single, unvarying story of masculine deficiency, it risks naturalising that deficiency; stripping man of the dignity and complexity that genuine human representation demands, and denies young male readers the possibility of alternative models.

The cumulative portrait of manhood in *Dream Count* is one of unrelieved moral failure. To an extent, Adichie dehumanizes her male characters by denting their moral uprightness and

unapologetically expose their vulnerabilities. Adichie introduces Francois, the restaurant owner, initially as protective of Kadiatou “The owner, Francois, barked at anyone who did more than leer, one who brushed her hip, and another who grasped her arm as she placed down a glass”(193) only to subject him thereafter, to the same predatory logic he had appeared to police. The scene of his assault on Kadiatou is rendered with vivid, devastating specificity:

He pushed her against the table, saying, “Just a little, just a little, be nice to me.” Surprised, she looked at him. Then came the stark startling clarity that he intended to hurt her. “No sir, no sir,” she said. Not like this, she wanted to add. Not like this. The shock of his heavy alien weight. He was so heavy, like a giant bag of cassava pressing and deflating the breath from her. Why did he not ask her, why treat her as though she was not worth asking? (193)

The narrative logic of this sequence, the protective male revealed as predator functions as an instructive emblem of the novel's broader representational strategy: no male character is permitted to sustain a positive valuation. The conversion of François from protector to assailant implicitly communicates that male kindness is always already potentially instrumental, always a concealed prelude to violation. This study submits that such a generalisation, however emotionally compelling, is not only formally reductive but ethically problematic: it strips individual men of the human possibility of sincere, disinterested care, and it deprives the novel's moral architecture of the complexity that genuine literature demands. Men can be humanly kind without ulterior motive or the expectation of sexual reward; women can receive men's kindness without being positioned as naive victims of a structural trap. Certain male characters can be deployed to negate toxic masculinity and portray as an ideal masculinity that could serve as a model for reconstructed masculinity in feminist writing, an approach mostly blown away in artistic anger and feminist rage. Chuka could have been spared of the feminist whip, he is everything Chiamaka wanted and could not get in Darnell. Chuka is introduced through Chiamaka's admiring appraisal with striking precision:

There was a leonine quality to him. You noticed him; he subdued space. It surprised me that he needed to be introduced to anybody at all. He had an unusual self-possession, as though he would face emergencies with genuine calm. He was nine years older than me but seemed even older; not aged but vividly grown up, like an adult archetype, so courteous and proper, so sensible. He must have been a prefect in secondary school, the kind liked by both students and teachers... (65)

Chuka represents everything that Darnell, the novel's most prominent male figure conspicuously lacks: emotional maturity, relational competence, self-possession, and genuine consideration for others. He is, by the novel's own internal logic, the embodiment of what a reconstructed masculinity might look like. Yet Adichie ultimately denies Chuka the narrative centrality that would allow him to function as a genuine counter model to demonstrate, within the representational economy of the novel, that masculinity is not monolithic, that alternatives exist, and that those alternatives are not merely theoretical. This is a significant artistic and political missed opportunity: certain male characters could and should be modelled as exemplars of an ideal masculinity, capable of providing both a redemptive path for men who seek to retrace their steps and an aspirational image for young male readers seeking models of dignified manhood. The moral asymmetry in Adichie's characterization focuses exclusively on male flaws while providing a shield for female characters who engaged in similar or different forms of transgressions. The male characters are depicted as lacking in moral and social values; they are reduced to a betrayer, rapist, liar, racist, boring and bush, an accidentally wealthy, ill-educated man, man with repulsive lascivious smile, long elephant fingers, craggy face. Amadou- a convicted drug dealer, he did not tell Kad that he was married and has two children but his love for Kadiatou is true to earth and genuine, "...He has his faults, but he cares about Kadi," Chiamaka's acknowledgement that Amadou's care about Kadiatou is immediately confronted by ~~over with~~ Zikora's critical remarks. "Yes, he cares so much about her that he secretly used her bank account to move drug money. She has to stop discussing the case with him" (289). This instantly overrides any genuineness or sincerity, and Amadou is transformed from a flawed lover to a dangerous criminal.

A man with Amadou's history will see this only as an opportunity to make money. And he'll lie about it. They're all the same. They will lie about everything. Sometimes it doesn't even make sense, the kinds of things they lie about. Chia, just like your Englishman forgetting to tell you he was married. (289)

Rather than merely sermonizing societal ills, Adichie weaponizes male characterization to expose deep-seated cultural anxieties. Positioning Philippe as an embodiment of Eurocentric alignment and African self-hate, Omelogor states: "Later I told Philippe I had nearly sacked him because I will not have African self-hate in my house." (261). Belema's husband serves as indictment of patriarchal entitlement. As an economically dependent spouse who inflicts physical abuse, his character demonstrates the destructive nature of unchecked male dominance: "He's

still jobless! ... I was the one feeding him and he was beating me. At least if you want to continue beating me, then you should be employed (263). –In Darnell, Adichie sketches a portrait of narcissistic intellectualism; a man whose mastery of abstract concepts contrasts sharply with his total lack of empathy and interpersonal connection. This emotional deficiency becomes the central friction in his relationship with Chiamaka. Adichie uses this dynamic to deliver a cautionary narrative regarding the perils of sacrificing female agency and dignity to appease male ego, as observed when she states;

In some ways it's less about Darnell; it's more about the idea of women accepting a certain kind of...being in relationships in which their spirits are reduced and also finding ways to themselves to justify why they remain in those relationships... It is advisable for one to prioritize one's happiness and safety. If the person we claimed we love.... (CNA_ Book Talk and Reading at Sixth & I in Washington, D.C.)

The text exposes various institutional abuses through other characters such as the Englishman, Zikora's Father; who moved in with his second wife because he thinks a son needs his father more than a girl "He needs to see me every morning when he wakes up. Boys can so easily go wrong, girls don't go wrong, he told her mother"(150) depicting typical the patriarchal romanticization of the male heir . Others are the thieves of time, Kwame, Zikora's first Love; the predatory priest-professor, and a violent campus chaplain. They all represent the multifaceted moral and ethical failures embedded within the social production of masculinity.

On the other sides are women like Hauwa, Omeleghor and other women who were granted moral immunity; despite being unconventional in their indulgence. They are pictured as being phenomenon and shielded from all amoralities. Their feminine flaws are balanced with thoughtful motivation, community outreach or certain exceptional spirits sketched as a survival mechanism against the corrupt patriarchal systems. It is unfair that the moral police targeted only one thief when Literature happens to be the moan of the oppressed, a reflection of the abject truths of human existence- It reacts and responds to all; Literature must remain untainted, free of discrimination and inbuilt with purity to exorcise the society of vices. It must apply its moral standard universally and shun double standard requirements of one part. Adichie posits that:

Stories die and recede from collective memory merely for not having been told. Or a single version thrives because other versions are silenced. Imaginative retellings matter. Literature does truly instruct and delight—or at least it can. Literature keeps the faith and tells the story as reminder, as witness, as testament. Stories help us see ourselves and talk about ourselves (411).

Paradoxically, while this assertion emphasizes literature's role as an unbiased witness and a repository of collective truth, the narrative execution in *Dream Count* (2025) risks compromising this ideal by treating gendered morality asymmetrically. If literature is to truly function as a gateway to conscious self-reflection, it must depict human flaws universally rather than shielding female characters from amoralities. To achieve the egalitarian world championed by progressive African feminist theorists, writers must avoid replacing patriarchal bias with matriarchal dominance, serving instead as ethical architects who apply these narrative standards evenly across all human experiences.

Conclusion

Through the foregoing analysis, Adichie's male characters in *Dream Count* emerge as a compound product of two distinct pressures: the grotesque horror of patriarchal reality in a Nigerian social context, and the artist's feminist indignation at that reality — an indignation so thoroughgoing that it ultimately forecloses any representational generosity toward the male subject. Ultimately, this article while contending that the tendentious approach of contemporary feminist writers subverts their roles as reformers, pathfinders and conciliators, there is no balance in the portrayal of male characters. In the same vein, women are primary co-authors of the gender script a man imbibes during his formative years. However, the narratives often overlook the principalities of women as significant agents in reinforcing or dismantling patriarchal expectations. At this critical time where gender war is accelerating, the role of literature becomes even more urgent in diffusing the social tension. This paper calls for a pragmatic shift in feminist strategy from executioners to reformers: one that re-frames the approach to overcoming of oppressive patriarchal norms and redeeming toxic masculinity as a collective responsibility, focusing on the strategic, proactive, and conscious re-socialization of young male relatives as a more efficacious intervention than solely setting the pyre on fire for the adult man.

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