The Multidimensionality of Male Characterisation in Contemporary African Female Writings: An Interrogation Of Damilare Kuku's *Nearly All The Men in Lagos Are Mad*

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Abstract
Studies on gender in African fiction have often focused on the struggles of women because of the marginal position they occupy as a group in the African society. Writers like Emecheta, Nwapa, and Aidoo began this tradition in early modern African fiction and it has continued in contemporary voices of Adichie, Attah, Dangareba, Dare and others. These African female writers have sought to advocate for the rights of women in a heavily patriarchal society, but this has also led to the monolithic representation of men in modern African fiction. This study seeks to bridge this gap as it examines the multifaceted representation of male characters in contemporary African female fiction, using Kuku's *Nearly All the Men in Lagos are Mad* as a case study. Using Connell's theory of Masculinities, this study interrogates how Kuku frames her male characters to embody versatile characteristics. The male characters range from the domesticated dad, the elusive lovers, men who suffer from trauma to the men who are marginalised in the society. Through critical investigation, this study analyses male characterisation as a way to deconstruct monolithic male characterisation in the fiction of African female writers. This paper, therefore, seeks to expand the discourse on gender in contemporary African fiction by critically engaging multidimensional male characterisation as a crucial aspect of gender studies in African fiction.
Keywords: African Fiction, Masculinities, Male Representation

Introduction

Gender representation in African fiction has been a crucial aspect of African female writings. "Gender" in this context connotes the experiences of women as Usoro (2024) observes that "when the discourse on gender is initiated, female marginalisation is mostly conjured in the mind of the interlocutors, whether man or woman; national or cosmopolitan; elitist or egalitarian." (p.2). Women issues, therefore, hold a central place in the works of African female authors. Through exploring the relationship between men and women, African female writers examine how women exist in a state of marginalisation as opposed to their male counterparts. Through female characters, African female writers examine stereotypes that limit women, their attempt to break free from societal expectation, the injustice they endure as result of their gender and their resolve to overcome societal constraints. Characterisation in African fiction, therefore, can be viewed as a tool that has been used by African authors to project gender performativity and how these labels of supposed "good" female behaviour encourages their subjugation. Ojaruega (2018) speaks to the reality of female subjugation as reflected in African literature when she asserts that "modern African fiction written by women is replete with narratives of injustice and the loss of human dignity that women suffer at the hands of their male folk simply because of their womanhood" (p.139). Although the reality of female subjugation in the African continent remains true and continues to be reflected in the writings of African female writers, it has led to what Frank (1987) describes as the monolithic representation of men in African women's writing as male characters often fall into the restrictive and stereotypical ideas of masculinities as they are tagged "the enemy, the exploiter and oppressor" (p. 15). This lays out the fact that in African women's writing, there has been a tendency to represent male characters through strict hegemonic masculine framework, cementing the African man into the singular role of the oppressor of women. Musagasa (2022) further entrenches this idea when she comments that

> since the focus of most studies on literary works by African women writers has been exploring how heteronormative masculinities can be toxic to the female subject while paying less attention to the representation of other possible images of male subjects in their work, the impression is that literary works by African women writers are characterised by a monolithic representation of the male subject as villain – the source of misery to women, children, and other nonconformist male (p.195)

A crucial aspect of Musagasa's claim that is worthy to note is that she argues for the multidimensionality of male characters in the works of African female writers. She argues that men exist outside restrictive societal constructs and these "other masculinities" should be engaged in the criticism of African literature. It is critical at this point in this study to take time to examine the concept of multi-dimensional characters. Hulatt and Freitas (2024) define multi-dimensional characters as characters who are "well-developed, displaying a wide range of emotions, motivations, and personal growth, which makes them relatable for the readers." It can therefore be said that a character is multi-dimensional when he/she exhibits varying traits. These characters change, go through internal conflict and are imbedded with different attributes that makes it difficult to be precisely predictable. In African fiction, the reality of patriarchy and its influence on women's writing has made male characters represented to fit into the narrow box of the oppressor of women, making their representation lopsided.

The versality of male characterisation therefore refers to male characters who are complex and possess multiple traits, motivations, and behaviours. In African female fiction, it can be noticed that male representation suffers from one-sidedness. Although it is true that women in the African continent continue to suffer on the basis of their gender and this has been reflected in the writings of African female writers, this has also led to the monolithic portrayal of men by some contemporary African female writers. Coker (2019) describes this phenomenon while examining the portrayal of men in Attah's *Everything Good Will Come* that Attah "seems to single out the male folk, demonizing them all the way", thereby casting "the cloak of invisibility on the male figure." From Coker's critical appraisal of Attah's novel, he accuses Attah of demonising the male characters, making them exist in the background as simply instruments of female suffering and oppression. Lange (2008) corroborates this when he comments that "if today's feminist critics are not willing to look beyond past mistakes, they are preventing themselves from reading and studying literature that would offer new understanding of the sexes." (p.2). It is therefore not surprising when Okon (2001) posits that the "relationship between the sexes have always engendered conflicts" (p.78). Through Lange's appraisal of feminist writers in contemporary African literature, he points out a possible sustained limited understanding of sexes if feminist writers do not look outside the framework of mas-as-oppressor. He advocates for an expansion of binary notions on gender so that new insights can be gained in understanding both men and women.

Kuku is a contemporary Nigerian female writer who rose to prominence with her debut collection of short stories, *Nearly All the Men in Lagos Are Mad* published in 2021. The collection masterfully combines satire and poignant social critique to delve into the intricate dynamics of relationships, gender roles and societal expectations within Lagos, Nigeria's vibrant and bustling economic hub. One of the major focal points of the collection of short stories is how it examines the relationship between men and women, establishing Kuku as belonging to the tradition of female writers whose works focuses on gender relations, especially the subjugation of women in the Nigerian society but Kuku's representation of her male characters expands the purview of male characterisation in the

African novel. In *Nearly All the Men in Lagos are Mad*, the male characters not only fulfil traditional masculine roles but also reveal their vulnerabilities, flaws and internal struggles. By doing so, the author offers a nuanced portrayal that challenges conventional stereotypes and highlights the psychological depth and complexity of her male characters. This study therefore seeks to investigate the multi-layered nature of male characterisation in the selected collection of short stories.

Maculinities in Literature: A Historical Overview

The study of gender in literature often arose as a result of rising feminist scholarship that sought to examine how women had endured years of reductionist portrayal in the works of male writers. Hearen and Kimmel (2006) asserts that "the impulse to develop the field of gender research and women studies has come primarily from feminists. Those making gender visible in contemporary scholarship and in public forums have mainly been women, and the field has very much been inspired by addressing research questions about women and gender relations" (p.53). Hearen and Kimmel's view clearly exposes the fact that gender studies has often been linked with feminists as historically, women were not considered to be full human beings and therefore relegated to the background. Literary representations of women by mostly male authors were filled with stereotypes, reinforcing the gender binary of male versus female. In this polarisation, he is regarded as simply the oppressor of the woman. Pellerin (2016) speaks on the rise of masculinity against the dominant discourse of feminism in gender studies when she states that "the field of masculinity studies emerged in American academia in the early 1990s…It avowed goal was to map out in detail the history of gender that had not yet received the critical attention necessary to be a better understanding of gender relations." (p.3) Here, Pellerin's gives a historical account of masculinity and the reason for its emergence. We can therefore state that the discourse in masculinity came as a result to expand the notion of men as simply the oppressor of women in gender studies.

According to Alsyouf (2018), masculinity develops in three stages and "hegemonic masculinity occupies the third stage of the development of the applications and practices of masculinity" (p.4). Connell (1987) defines hegemonic masculinity as "a social ascendancy achieved in a play of social forces that extends beyond contests of brute power (or physical strength) into the organisation of private life and cultural processes" (p.184). Masculinity is shaped by various cultural, societal, and individual factors. It is constructed through interactions with cultural norms and narratives. Society assigns gender roles, and familiar cultural discourses (stories, ideas, media) influence how masculinity is defined and understood. However, traditional ideas of masculinity, typically linked to physical strength or emotional resilience, are being questioned, and new possibilities are emerging. This shift allows for more flexible and diverse expressions of what it means to be masculine. Overall, masculine identity is not fixed but is complex, constructed through the interplay of cultural norms, societal roles, and other intersecting identities.

In African fiction, masculinities are often represented through the lenses of power dynamics between both genders in relationship. In post-colonial African fiction, it is insufficient to examine gender dynamics in isolation. Factors like race, class, ethnicity, and nationality are crucial in shaping the characters' experiences and identities. Male characters in African fiction are frequently portrayed as navigating power structures, especially through asserting dominance over women. The way male characters wield power in relationships whether through control, manipulation, or negotiation, reveals the underlying themes of authority, agency, and autonomy. Many male characters are presented in a way that shows how they assert dominance over women through manipulation, deceit, or control, reflecting the patriarchal nature of the Nigerian society. Taiwo (2023) says "it allows for a more comprehensive analysis of power dynamics and provides insights into the social, cultural, and political contexts that influence characters' lives and actions" (p.4).

Despite the fact that masculinity is often tied to traits such as stoicism, physical strength, and dominance, there has been a shift in modern masculinity which embraces emotional expressiveness, vulnerability, and equity. Male characters often navigate these conflicting ideals, sometimes adhering to traditional roles and at other times challenging them. This tension between old and new expressions of masculinities reflects the broader societal changes and the evolving understanding of what it means to be a man in contemporary Nigerian society. Contemporary African literature increasingly portrays characters who challenge traditional masculine norms and expectations. According to MenEngage-UNFPA Advocacy Brief, there are numerous factors that encourage people to question their own deeply held beliefs and allow social factors to intervene and challenge masculine norms. One is that rigid gender norms sometimes cause harm and internal conflict; they often oppose deeper human needs, desires, expectations and abilities. This reflects a growing discourse on the fluidity and diversity of masculine identities in contemporary society which has also been reflected in contemporary literature.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework selected for this study is Connell's theory of masculinities. Raewyn Connell (born 3 January 1944), an Australian sociologist developed her model to explore masculinity beyond limiting theorisations of the man as one-dimensional. To her, there is no universal masculinity, but multiple masculinities that vary across time and cultures. Connell claim that the emphasis on internalised norms, attitudes, and behaviours of society obscures structural inequalities and power dynamics that exist among men. Connell (1995) states that, "Masculinities are defined collectively in culture, and are sustained in institutions" (p. 11). Connell is most interested in "collective masculinities," which she defines as "the patterns of conduct our society defines as masculine". She emphasises that not only are there are different types of masculinities in different cultures and periods of history, but also "multiple masculinities" in any particular place and time. At the same time, however, Connell goes to great lengths to explain the active construction of masculinity at the level of the individual. Connell (2015) asserts that "the hegemonic form need not be the most common form of masculinity" (p. 44). This means that masculinities are not fixed, and that significant contradictions exist not only at the level of the collective, but at the level of the individual— for instance, in contradictory desires. In Connell's theory of masculinities, she identifies the ways in which contemporary masculinity is constructed through the following categories: hegemonic masculinity, complicit masculinity, subordinate masculinity, and marginalised masculinity. These categories reveal different aspects of masculine identities and further establishes the idea that masculinity as having a plural expression. Using this theoretical premise, this paper therefore investigates multidimensionality of male characters in Kuku's *Nearly All the Men in Lagos are Mad* (2021)

Analysis

Nearly All the Men in Lagos are Mad is a collection of short stories that explore the relational lives of men and women in Lagos. The stories mostly revolve around love, betrayal, deceit, lust and the commercialisation of sexuality in the urban city of Lagos, also taking into cognisance queer sexuality. The title of the collection exposes the major thematic thrust of the stories – Lagos men who seem to engage in several "mad" behaviours in their relationship with women. The men that we encounter in this text are multifaceted, exhibiting different characteristics that sometimes contrast. This collection exposes Lagos as a fast-paced mega city where the impossible seems to take place. The collection foregrounds the experiences of men and women in relationships in the city of Lagos.

Masculinity beyond Patriarchal Constructs

The multiplicity of masculinities represented in the collection expands notions on masculinity as tied to heteronormative constructs. Kuku engages a long-forgotten aspect of masculine construction; the idea that there are men who exist beyond the purview of patriarchal expectations.

In "I knew You," Sadiq, the narrator, falls in love with a girl he meets while performing at the club and soon, they develop a relationship, but his own emotional state acts as a road block in the relationship. Sadiq suffers from abandonment issues as a result of his relationship with his Algerian father. He recounts this thus "I know I never said much about my father. Let me tell you about him—the bastard. The first thing you should know is that I don't hate him. You have to know somebody to hate them. I don't know that guy. I met him like three times in total, and the last two times, I had to keep him off my mum, you get." (p.162). This parental dynamic ultimately affects him and the way he goes about his relationships, even when he eventually falls in love with Lara. Sadiq questions whether the marriage institution should be a symbol of a happy and healthy relationship. His pessimistic view about love is captured below:

> I remember the genuine love I saw in your father's eyes when you introduced us. Your mother's hug made my eyes water but I hid it well. I kept looking for something that would tick me off. Your sister, Tolu and two brothers Tayo and Tife and their partners were throwing bants and even threw some at me. I was laughing but I knew I never wanted that kind of love. It was too open. Like outer space, like the ocean, endless, without boundaries; so open that I knew getting lost in it was a certainty. And I never want to do that—lose myself to anything. (p.163 – 164)

This fear of commitment continues even after two children with Lara as he does not marry her. Due to his lack of commitment, Lara leaves him and he is heartbroken by her choice. He does not immediately run off to marry another woman because he has come to reject the institution of marriage as a yardstick for love. His character expands masculinity beyond the traditional notions and expectations. It is often expected that men marry women who are submissive in their demeanour and marry as a way to simply tick off the societal expectation of marriage, without the love component. Also, men are often viewed as people who lack self-introspection in how they act out their gender roles because it benefits them. They do not question the institutions and what is expected from them because of the power that these expectations bestow on them. In this story however, Kuku dismantles views about masculinities, crafting this character in the full range of his human emotions such as fear, pity, indecisiveness, rejection of societal expectations and institutions (in the case of marriage now) and a traumatic relationship with his own father which causes him to suffer.

Another aspect of this story that must be mentioned is the narrative voice. It is told through the voice of the man. The story, following the archetypal structure of a man who refuses to marry a woman simply because he does not want to, may project the man as the typical patriarchal man who acts in his selfish interest without understanding how his actions hurts the woman in the relationship he is with. But through telling the narrative in his own voice, we get deeper insights into his own emotional state that informs his decision because to him, "Marriage destroys love, in my experience. I never wanted to gamble what we have by taking us down that route. I wanted to stay still." (p.171) Therefore, Kuku engages the first-person point of view to create an intimate narrative that exposes the man in his full humanity; his fears, his hopes, and his emotional distress.

In "Independence Day," Kuku brings to fore the multidimensional nature of male characterisation. We see two different male characters, Charles who exploits Osa, the central character by raping her after inducing her drink and Lekan, who offers his support so she heals from her trauma and eventually falls in love with her. Charles fits into the expected masculine traits as he is aggressive towards Osa and he suffers no consequences for it. This also shows the extent of patriarchal

domination of men over women as men can abuse the female body as "he didn't apologise, but said he'd be gentler next time." (p. 180) This singular event makes Osa bitter towards men and acts as a source of trauma for her and can be seen in the extract below:

> You stopped wearing makeup and dresses. You turned to baggy tops and jeans to hide your figure. You wore extra shorts over your underwear and under your jeans, and hard-to-unbuckle belts to make it harder for the next man who could try to rape you. You decided you'd kill the next man who tried. By then, you'd become an architecture student and X-Acto knives were part of your tools for school. So, you always carried a set of knives in your bag (p.180 – 181)

Despite this fact, Kuku does not only represent male characters that takes advantage of women but creates other male characters that embody humanistic virtues, and this acts as a way of balancing the narrative, instead of simply showcasing stock images of men in her characterisation and representation. After Osa's rape, she is unable to sleep "for more than four hours each day. After some years, you tried drinking every night, hoping to get some sleep. But alcohol didn't work for you." (p.181). It is in this condition she meets Usifo, who helps her by getting her sleeping pills from the pharmacy he works at. After it is discovered that he had been stealing the medications from the pharmacy he worked at, Osa meets Lekan, who is able to intervene so Usifo does not go to prison. Lekan's character framing is worth of note here. He is kind to his fellow man whom he can get nothing in return from. This shows Lekan as someone operating within the full range of his human emotion such as mercy. When Lekan eventually finds out why Usifo stole the sleeping pills, he offers to pay for Osa's therapy, even though he has not met her. His ability to simply understand the reason for Usifo's actions also points to his complexity as a character. This action reinforces the attribute of kindness that was previously mentioned and is further established in the extract below:

> Lekan who instinctively treated everyone with an amazing kindness. Lekan with his contagious smile and unruly laugh. Lekan the gregarious, funny, and mischievous. Lekan who had the audacity to live with the biggest heart, confident that he'd never let life or Nigeria break it permanently. (p.182)

When Lekan meets Osa, he is careful to wait for her while she heals from her trauma before he makes any move on her. He invites her to watch movies at his house with his siblings so she is comfortable. What can be noticed in this story is that Kuku places side by side two different male characters, further entrenching the idea of the multidimensionality of male characters in the novels. While it was Charles who destroys her innocence and gives her a thwarted view about love, Lekan is able to restore it by ensuring she gets the right treatment and recovers fully. While a man destroyed her self-confidence, another man restored her self-confidence and helped her believe in love again as "you knew something had shifted when one day, you asked Aunty Philo for her eye liner and lip balm ointment because you were going to watch *Breaking Bad* at Lekan's house with him and his cousins. It had been years since you wore makeup, so you no longer kept any…That was when you realised you liked Lekan, and it disconcerted you so much." (p.183)

Kuku engages the multifaceted nature of male characters by putting these two characters in contrast to one another. She does not simply end at the portraiture of a stereotypical man but extends it to capture other kinds of men – the Usifo who steals to help his friend who has PTSD as a result of rape and Lekan who is merciful towards him and to Osa, even though he is yet to meet her in person. She presents a more wholistic picture of masculinity through this diverse representation of male

characters in this particular story. In this story, Osa gets her happy ending as “two years later you married him. Nine years of marriage and a seven-year-old son later, he still looked at you like you were the prize. And at some point, in the middle of it all, you became glad you didn’t die” (p.183)

The Intersection of Masculinities and Economic Realities

Men’s role as head of families are woven around their responsibilities as providers, even though changing economic realities in Nigeria has significantly affected this. Women are now actively involved in carrying the burden of provision. The first story, "Cuck Up" explores the changing economic dynamics between a husband who loses his job and refuses to get another one and a wife who takes on the burden of the home finances while being the sole care-giver to their daughter. It subverts the concept of "man as provider" which men have prided in as one of their primary functions. Lukumon, who is the father/man of the house falls short of this after he loses his job and depends on his wife as she provides and handles the childcare of their daughter. The story begins with an opening sentence that already establishes an unusual dynamic between husband and wife when the narrator states "One night, you will calmly put a knife to your husband’s penis and promise to cut it off." (p.5)

A man's manhood is seen as not just a sexual organ but as a symbol of dominance and without it which the essence of the man is eroded. Lukumon possess the qualities of complicit masculinities as postulated by Connell. While his dominant character traits (as he is not ambitious, hardworking, protective etc.) do not enable him to fit into the heteronormative masculine structure, he still benefits from patriarchy. First, he has been spoilt by his family as "he was the last child and only boy, but their coddling contributed to making him lazy, entitled, and impotent in any adversity." This depicts Lukumon as lacking in the qualities of strength that is often associated with men and it can be traced to his upbringing. The gender dynamics of a male/female child in the African home also comes to play and compounds Lukumon's inability to rise above his challenges. The male child is often valued more than the female child and, in a family, where there is just one male child among females, he is treated like a demi-god. His sisters and mother attend to all his domestic need, shielding him from any real responsibility because he is the only son.

This perpetuates a mentality where he expects the wife he marries to be like the women in his family. She is expected to attend to his every need, and when he fails, cover his failures. Invariably, he does not have to be the "hegemonic man" to get respect, and therefore, becomes complicit- exploiting the system of patriarchy for his benefit while fulfilling none of its demands as provider and protector. While he does not enforce the patriarchal norms himself, he is quick to depend on the ingrained patriarchy in the family system that validates what a man does because he is the head of the house. Lukumon's inability to fulfil his responsibilities is further compounded by his expectations of his wife to provide, even after she losses her job and this is captured below:

> But he lost his job a year after your marriage, and you had to leave your job as a secretary when you got pregnant. The aftermath of Kitan’s birth was tough as you were both jobless, and your meagre savings ran out. In those days, Lukumon sent you to ask Uncle Buraimo for money for food, and to get it, you endured the man bear-hugging you in greeting so he could crush your boobs against his chest. Eventually, you refused to go. It caused the first fight in your marriage (p. 8)

Lukumon's complicity and irresponsibility is further expressed when he encourages his wife to accept Ehi's offer to sleep with him so he gives her two million naira to start a business and gives

him a job in his company. At first, when she meets Ehi and he proposes to help by finding Lukumon a job, he does not send his CV across and this further unveils his laziness. Rather than work, he expects his wife to accept the offer and this is captured below:

> You were still fuming when you told Lukumon about Ehi's proposition. You expected his rage to match yours, thunder to your lightning, but he stayed silent for a long moment... Lukumon stood, grabbed a rumpled t-shirt from the clothes hanger, and pulled it over his head. It was the sign he was going out to play draughts with some of the men in the neighbourhood. He paused by the door, "You're my woman. You will always be my woman no matter what. You understand?" "Yes," you said, even though you were puzzled. (p.14)

The above reflects that Lukumon deviates from the hegemonic male who takes pride in protecting his family. He is willing to "allow" her sleep with Ehi to fulfill his own selfish needs, manipulating her do so by refusing to eat her food, or sleep with her. When she finally succumbs to his pressure and has an affair with Ehi, his pride is wounded, reinforcing his complicity in the story. Even though he does not provide, his ego cannot take it after he pressures Ehi to provide for him and their daughter. He then takes to several vices to deal with his masculine ego after he feels betrayed by Ehi's actions. By exploiting the patriarchal system, Lukumon does not fit into the idea of a man as provider as he duly passes the role to his wife with no consequence, but reaps the benefits because he is still not burdened with childcare or home making.

Complicit masculinities as a key aspect of Connell's theory of masculinities can also be seen in another short story titled "First Times" where Kuku brings to fore the toxic relationship between Idris and Ivie. In this story, Idris and Ivie evolve from teenage lovers to adult lovers, with Ivie bearing the brunt of the relationship financially and emotionally. Again, in this text, the man takes advantage of the patriarchal system that favours him, even though he does not have the attributes of the hegemonic male such as ambition, competitiveness, etc. But being aware of his social position, he is complicit in the structure of society because it favours him as a man and made demands on the backing of this as "he said if you loved him as much as you said, you'd let him make love to you despite your mother's daily virginity tests. He hinted about going to meet someone else to satisfy his needs." Even though Ivie is unsure about sleeping with him, she obliges after much pressure and this is captured;

> It was at a dingy motel in Bariga, manned by a receptionist with a dirty white shirt. The room was at the end of a corridor that reeked of weed. Inside, Idris grumbled, "Can you imagine? This people don't have AC. Only fan. I paid five thousand naira for fan?" You wondered why he was complaining about the money, when you were the one who had given it to him before you got to the motel. (p.90)

Even though Ivie is the one spending the money, she spends through him. While the man is expected to be the provider, Ivie takes on that role but she hides this fact by spending through him. Another example of this can be seen during Ivie's birthday, Idris performs the role of the provider in the open as "he'd ordered extra bottles of champagne and because you were paying for all the drinks, through him of course, you were worried the extra drinks would push the bill over your budget. When you whispered your fears to him, he accused you of belittling him." (p. 95) Ivie's contribution is further silenced in the preceding context. Despite knowing this, Idris still acts in line with Hegemonic

masculine tendencies, even though his actions do not match the expectations of hegemonic masculinity. When Ivie attempts to caution him on the amount of money he is spending, he gets angry, and this is representative of his desire to control a woman who he feels superior to. He holds her accountable for his own feelings by framing her valid concerns as disrespectful to him. Therefore, despite the fact that she is the main provider in the relationship, the power dynamic does not shift in her favour as he still enjoys the benefits of being the assumed provider in the relationship and uses his anger to suppress her when she complains about it. This indicates that despite the fact that there are men who do not possess the attribute of hegemonic man, they still have the ego that makes them angry about their complicity, blaming the women in their lives for their actions.

The Idris's attitude remains the same even when they finally marry, where Ivie continues to bear the financial brunt of the relationship while Idris continues to philander around and this causes emotional trauma for her, a situation that leads her to have an affair with their driver. Through the driver, Ezekiel, Kuku makes a case for the plurality of masculinities beyond hegemonic and complicit which are associated with patriarchy or benefitting from the system of patriarchy. Ezekiel is characterised as being kind, gentle and respectful of Ivie even though she is richer than him. It also shows that the financial dynamics between a man and a woman where the woman is the stronger financial partner can be respectful as

> he was always there. He opened doors for you, not as the driver but as a man taking care of his woman. He always had a cold drink for you for the journey home after work. He offered to pay when you went out which was funny since you had more money than him; but you let him. (p. 104).

When Idris finally finds out about the affair, Ivie quickly testifies to Ezekiel's financial prudence, stating that "he keeps proper records, makes returns, and is on course to make a profit by next year. After funding five or is it six of your businesses, did you ever learn how to make a profit?", (p.107), pitching Ezekiel against Idris who does nothing but spends her money on several business ideas without any profit.

Contentions between Self and Society

One of the ways to establish a character's multidimensionality is to explore the contradictions that exist within them, especially as they go through different levels of internal conflicts and external conflicts. Male representation has often been characterised by emphasising the bad attributes of men but most people are a combination of good and bad. In this sub-section, we explore the male characters through this lens – as people having good and bad attributes that also implicates the tensions between themselves and the society around them.

The men we encounter in these stories often go through different levels of internal conflict, making them dynamic characters. These men simply act out their perceived duties while being entirely different people on the inside. It establishes the idea that people generally are multifaceted, complex and have no singular identity and men are not different in this attribute. In "The Anointed Wife," the central male character is a pastor who engages in sexual affairs outside his marriage. His marriage is where he acts as a husband and a pastor, but he goes sexually wild outside his house. The conflict that exists between a person's desire and social reputation is established in this story. While his wife is aware of his infidelity, she also acts as his accomplice to cover his sexual indiscretions, to avoid the eyes of the audience on him as "the task of being a pastor's wife is multi-layered, like an onion. I have skills and weapons that you would not believe." (p.34) As husband, he is able to escape the scrutiny of his congregation as his marriage becomes a vehicle that legitimises his position in society but this does not absolve him from suffering from lust. Although his pastoral office implicates sexual

discipline, the contention between desire and duty acts as source for internal conflict for Tade, the anointed man.

This is also the case in "Beard Gang" where gay men marry wives in a bid to conform to societal expectations. Despite this, they still go ahead to engage in their secret homosexual affairs. Deborah, the wife of Otunba had

> pointed out the closeted gay and bisexual men in Lagos' high society, and the mostly clueless wives of those who were married. With Deborah, you attended the weddings of those who took wives later, where you gave lavish gifts and danced with some of them, while feeling sorry for all the wives." (p.148)

These wives of these men in the story create a support group for one another as a way to navigate the challenges of being married to men who are attracted to other men and in exchange, live a life of luxury and affluence. Their sexuality defines their masculine experience and it divulges the relationship between men. These men – Biodun, Ifedayo, Julius, Dipo - are aware of the relationship the society has with men of a different sexuality, so they hide their sexuality behind their marriages and engage in sexual relations with one another as "you'd both remembered that night, a year before. Somehow, Biodun had misheard the return date for one of your trips. You'd come home unannounced and walked to your bedroom. You'd found Biodun and Dipo, both naked on the bed." (p.146). Connell identifies these type of men as marginalised men – men who suffer discrimination based on economic status or sexuality. As a way to avoid being discriminated against, especially in a society like Nigeria, they hide. Again, their true wants/desires and societal expectation are in conflict and this leads to internal conflict between these male characters. This also reveals the fact that there are men who suffer from marginalisation in society. The husband tag then becomes a successful tool to navigate the society despite their sexuality. The societal expectations of them and their own reality clashes and this makes them take on a duplicate existence. While they perform masculinity for the society, they are unable to truly live as themselves because of their sexualities. This further Connell's theory of masculinities as multifaceted, not one dimensional. Kuku expresses with this story how multidimensional male characters are. They present a particular set of characteristics on the surface but being aware of the risk of becoming excommunicated from the hegemonic masculine frame, they keep their real desires in the closet.

Conclusion

Kuku's short stories present a multidimensional view of male characterisation, offering readers a complex and nuanced portrayal of male characters in contemporary Nigerian fiction. Her male characters are not monolithic; they are shaped by societal pressures, personal insecurities, and their relationships with others. Kuku in this collection critiques the toxic forms of masculinity that dominate Nigerian society while also offering glimpses of more progressive, emotionally aware male figures. Her work invites readers to question traditional gender roles and consider the possibilities for more authentic and equitable relationships between men and women.

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