



Constructing Nigerian Manhood: Gender Symbols and Tropes in Children's Narratives

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the representation of masculinity in Nigerian children's literature, focusing on how gender symbols and tropes shape perceptions of Nigerian manhood. The study delves into children's narratives to analyze the sociocultural construction of masculinity, highlighting the impact of these representations on the masculinization of the Nigerian male and broader gender politics. The analysis concentrates on three primary symbolic categories: the male body, sexuality, and agriculture, exploring how these elements contribute to the construction of traditional archetypes of Nigerian manhood. By examining how these symbols glorify strength, virility, and prowess and perpetuate a rigid gender hierarchy, the paper discusses the implications of such representations for gender politics in Nigeria. The glorification of physical dominance, sexual prowess, and specific agricultural practices reinforces traditional masculine ideals and contributes to the marginalization of those who do not conform to these standards. The paper underscores the need for alternative representations in children's literature that challenge these restrictive norms and promote a more nuanced understanding of masculinity in Nigerian society. This study aims to contribute to the evolving discourse on Nigerian and African masculinities, particularly in the context of children's literature, and calls for more intersectional approaches to further explore and transform gender dynamics.

Key words: Gender politics, Male body, Masculinity, Nigerian children's literature, Sexuality, Symbols.

1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to examine the symbols of masculinity in children's narratives and the implications these symbols have on the masculinization of the Nigerian male and on gender politics at large. The scholarly representation of masculinity in children's literature in Africa continues to progress slowly (Oyango 2007; Thyssen 2013; Ayodabo 2014; Adjei 2014; Ayodabo 2021). In Nigeria, Ayodabo (2021) has also added to the scholarly discourse through his exploration of Igbo masculinity in Nigerian children's literature. Despite this gradual development, these works provide insightful perspectives on the sociological impact that masculinity has had on the continent. Yet considerable gaps remain in scholarly understanding of the masculinity in children's literature in Nigeria and Africa. This lack of critical attention is concerning, as it has been found, for example, that children's literature is generally prone to imbalance in gender representations, with males being portrayed as brave, resilient, violent, and unemotional while females are represented in a one-dimensional and stereotypical way as helpless queens and princesses and weak, emotional, and passive characters (Nodelman 2). Highlighting the implication of this stereotypical representations, Ayodabo (2021) maintains that:

Children's literature may convey didactic elements, as well as ideals and behaviours that are considered acceptable in the society, including gender behavioural norms. Many children's stories have the potential to shape and affirm gender identities of readers and depict stereotypical images for their futures (38).

Ayodabo demonstrates how gender stereotypes in children's stories serve an enculturating function, promoting the internalization of societal values and roles from a young age. These representations become especially potent when

portrayed as the dominant images of masculinity/femininity, bolstering a gender order premised upon male power and domination (Connell 2005).

In the Nigerian context, we see these dynamics play out to valorize traditional masculine archetypes like physical prowess and leadership, while portraying femininity as nurturing yet inferior (Mberu 2018). Such tropes help (re)shape ideals of Nigerian manhood, codifying privileges and positioning males atop constellational ladders of masculinities (Ayodabo & Amaefula 2021). The lack of alternate, progressive models further entrenches these representations as youth develop their own gender subjectivities and identities.

These complex dynamics spotlight the urgent need for scholarship analyzing representations of masculinity within Nigerian children's texts. As key sites of identity formation and enculturation, such narratives warrant attention in how they symbolically codify ideals of Nigerian manhood from an early age. Examining masculine symbols in this literature - whether embodied through characters, expressed via language and imagery, or conveyed through traditional tropes - can elucidate the sociocultural shaping of masculinities among youth audiences. Furthermore, decoding recurrent symbolic motifs linked to power and domination sheds light on how children's texts play into patriarchal gender politics more broadly.

1.1. Men and Masculinity in the Africa

The last twenty years have seen significant developments in gender studies across Africa, with growing attention on African men and masculinities. A range of seminal studies have made vital contributions to the constantly evolving field of African masculinities research. These have sought to elucidate what it means to be a man in diverse social, cultural, and historical contexts on the continent (Lindsay & Miescher, 2003; Ouzgane & Morrell, 2005; Mugambi & Allan, 2010; Ouzgane, 2011). These studies, amongst recent interventions in the study of masculinity in Africa (Mfecane, 2018; Dery & Ganle, 2020; Ratele, K. 2021) have so far been motivated by the persistent call to explore masculinity from the context of African societies. This stems from the recognition that "there are hierarchies and rankings of power relations between different classes of men in each society" (Ayodabo & Amaefula, 2021, p.2). These power dynamics shape dominant ideals of manhood and masculinity across intersecting axes like ethnicity, religion, class, and locale.

Accordingly, contemporary scholars are moving beyond monolithic portrayals to capture the plurality, fluidity, and hybridity of African masculinities across diverse historical and socio-cultural settings. This more nuanced, context-attentive approach continues to yield important insights into the ongoing construction, negotiation, and performance of masculinities in modern Africa. It is here that my research on symbols of masculinity in Nigerian children's narratives hopes to make a meaningful contribution. By examining gendered tropes and ideals in an understudied literary genre, I aim to elucidate the ongoing sociocultural construction of masculinity in Nigeria from childhood. My analysis of both enduring and emergent symbols seeks to capture plurality amidst fluidity, while considering implications for gender politics writ large. Thus, this work tries to help add to scholarly works on contextual understandings of Nigerian masculinities specifically, and African masculinities more broadly, especially in children's literature.

2. METHODOLOGY/APPROACH

The scope of this study covers Nigerian children's narratives only. The selected texts are Chinelo Ifezulike's *Chima Laughs Last* (2014), Ekpa Anthonia's *Edidem Eyamba and the Edikang-Ikong Soup* (2009), Essien Ako's *The Adventures of Akpan Akan Uto* (2014), Ifeanyi Ifoegbuna's *Folake and Her Four Brothers* (2004), Ikechukwu Ebonogwu's *The Champion of Echidime* (2008) and Through close reading of these texts, this study examines the symbolic representations Nigerian masculinities. Particular attention will be paid to gendered symbols manifested through objects, animals, expressions of male sexuality, depictions of the male body and related tropes. By exploring these symbolic categories, the study seeks to elucidate enduring and emergent symbols of Nigerian manhood and its implications for the understanding of masculinity and gender politics in Nigeria more broadly.

3. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

3.1. The Male Body and the Physical Embodiment of Masculinity

One of the significant symbols of masculinity, key to how male characters see and define their masculinity or lack of it in the narratives, is the male body. Connell, largely responsible for the development of the concept of hegemonic masculinity, notes that:

The physical sense of maleness is not a simple thing. It involves size and shape, habits of posture and movement, particular physical skills and the lack of these, the image of one's body, the way it is presented to other people and the way they respond to it, the way it operates at work and in sexual relations (Connell, 1987:84).

Here, Connell sees the male body as an important factor in any man's life. His idea of the male body and how it compares with the notion of the physical ideal and the expectations of others colour every area of men's life including relationships with other men, violence, sexual relationship, susceptibility to injury and success at work. This is illustrated in some of the narratives as authors zoom in on specific parts of the male body, including arms, muscles, eyes and face to visualize men as strong, tough, stoic, aggressive and sexually attractive. Such stereotypical body parts indicate that men are immersed in the physical world.

In Ikechukwu Ebonogwu's *The Champion of Echidime* for instance, the author highlights men's physicality by creating series of terrific wrestling matches in a wrestling arena. The author portrays in the narrative, an Igbo society exuding different shades of male authority which compel male characters to contend with their masculinity by physically challenging each other in wrestling matches. The narrative tells the story of Dimgba, a wrestler, whose victories in the ring have been a source of pride to his community. Early in the narrative, the depiction of Dimgba's body is presented as central to his identity, as he is described as "fast, strong and skillful in the art of wrestling" (7). This indicates that strong body and muscles with the ability to fight are the tripod on which his success as a wrestler rests. As a result of his wrestling exploits, the villagers call him names such as "elephant" (5), "eagle" (16), "lion" (31) and "terror" (40). Mbonu, who is Dimgba's opponent, is also "well built and looked as strong as Dimgba" (22). Later in the narrative, during a fight between Dimgba and Mbonu, the author captures the exhilarating match between Dimgba and Mbonu:

They were both equally matched. They pushed and slapped at each other while looking for an opportunity to bring the other down. Mbonu grabbed Dimgba's leg and started to pull...Dimgba managed to pull his leg free and push Mbonu off. Sweat had started to pour down their faces and their backs glistening in the evening sun. They launched at each other once again, wrapping their arms in a face to face wrestle hold. They snarled and growled at each other, but the hold was fast (34-35).

Here, Dimgba and Mbonu's shuffling feet, clamped legs, glistening backs and sweating faces are symbols of power, strength and aggressiveness that reflect and perpetuate the physicality of men in the society. For Dimgba and Mbonu, bodily strength is a crucial symbol of masculinity. They are portrayed with a similar body symbol evidenced in the character of Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. For instance, Dimgba, just like Okonkwo, is well built and is popular because of his war exploits in the society. In the narrative, a man becomes recognizably masculine through several accomplishments as a wrestler, or at least is associated with, some extraordinary physical achievements.

The text also depicts the male body as a site of sexual attraction, accentuating wrestlers' physiques to highlight masculine desirability. For instance, the author focuses on Dimgba's eroticized form - his exploits bare his muscular build in a way that elicits female gaze and awe. After a match, women fawn over Dimgba, as one village lady exemplifies: "the dream of every girl is to have a strong man like [Dimgba] as a husband to protect her" (30). This reaction reinforces Connell (1987)'s notion that hypermasculine bodies offer not just brute force but operate at work and in sexual relations. Clearly the young girl, reflecting conventional expectations, sees physical power - big arms and muscle - as ideal husband material. Such traits constitute dominant Nigerian masculinity, while also feeding the objectification of men's bodies. Male physiques thus get assigned value based on masculine standards - those seen

lacking suffer marginalization. Furthermore, the lady's veneration of strength stresses perceived gender dichotomies in Nigeria - framing women as passive and needing male protection.

The male body as an essential element in the construction of masculinity is further highlighted in Ifeanyi Ifoegbuna's *Folake and Her Four Brothers*. Folake's brothers in the narrative are described as jobless boys who "idled away their time in the house practicing wrestling, judo and karate" (1). Despite their idleness, when Folake is kidnapped, they swing into action by preparing for battle with the cult group responsible for Folake's disappearance. The author pictures the boys singing a war song and dancing round a circle in a graphic display of the body: "Folake's four brothers were busy practicing a war dance in the courtyard. People gathered to watch them. They were heavily built, and the crowd admired their vigour and youthfulness" (30). The description once again focuses on body shape, physical strength, and their intimidating nature. In addition, strategic parts of the brother's body (arm and head) are rounded with red ropes denoting marital prowess. This illustrates White's idea that masculinity is constructed on "different parts of men's bodies rather than on the body as an undifferentiated whole: not just on genitals but on faces, arms and backs" (2004:10). In this instance, acknowledgment of readiness for war and battle is marked by specific cultural symbols in Africa. First, the boys are adorned in a grass skirt and while they tied rope round their arms and head. The skirt and red rope mounted on the head and arms symbolises war raffia always associated with warriors in traditional Nigerian societies. In addition, by dancing in a circle while adorned with such garb, the boys' physicality conveys readiness for violence and defense of familial honor.

In earlier narratives, the male body typically symbolizes attributes such as strength, endurance, aggression, and dominance. However, Ekpa Anthonia's *Edidem Eyamba and the Edikang-Ikong Soup* presents a contrasting view, depicting the fragility of masculine worlds through visual markers like wrinkled eyes and pale skin. The narrative initially portrays Edidem as the archetypal man: a "young handsome ruler" renowned for his valor in battles and conquests, embodying more than just physical prowess but also aesthetic appeal (1). Despite these attributes, Edidem faces a profound dilemma: his desire for a male heir to succeed him in Eburutu. With fourteen daughters from multiple marriages but no son, this issue profoundly affects him, manifesting physically as he becomes lean, loses his good looks, develops wrinkles and a sagging jaw, and rapidly goes bald. These physical changes are not just signs of aging but are portrayed as indicators of diminished masculinity, stemming from his perceived impotency. The narrative thus paints Edidem as a figure diminishing in health and vitality, where his altered face detracts from the advantages his status might otherwise confer. His faded appearance, lined forehead, and sagged jaw are seen as diminishing his manliness. The author's emphasis on Edidem's facial features highlights a deviation from traditional masculine norms, marking him as distinct from other men in this respect.

While the male body in earlier narratives symbolizes men's strength, endurance, aggression and dominant, Ekpa Anthonia's *Edidem Eyamba and the Edikang-Ikong Soup* shows the fragility of masculine worlds through wrinkled eyes and pale skin. Initially in the narrative, Initially, Edidem is the ideal man and a "young handsome ruler who had fought in many battles and had conquered all the towns and villages close to his kingdom" (1). Here, being a man goes beyond developing big muscles but also looking good. However, he has a big problem. He wants a son who would succeed him as king in Eburutu, despite having fourteen girls already. He had married many wives with the hope that one of them would give him a son. All his wives had given birth to girls instead. The issue weighs him down to the extent that, "the problem made him lean. His good looks faded away, wrinkles lined his forehead and his jaw sagged. He grew bald so quickly" (*EES*, 3). Here, these body parts are indications of lack of manliness which stem from impotency. One visualizes Edidem as a weak, unhealthy and apprehensive man while the face cancels out any potential benefit a man of his status would enjoy. The faded look, wrinkled forehead and sagged jaw make him less manly. The author's description of Edidem's face suggests that Edidem's physical appearance is extraordinary in that his face exempts him from other men.

In conclusion, the diverse representations of the male body in these narratives offer a nuanced perspective on the process of masculinization in Nigerian culture and its broader implications for gender politics. The glorification of physical strength and prowess in narratives like *The Champion of Echidime* and *Folake and Her Four Brothers* reinforces traditional masculine ideals. Characters like Dimgba and Folake's brothers, who exhibit physical attributes such as muscularity, skill in combat, and a readiness for violence, are celebrated and idealized. This perpetuates a

cultural norm where masculinity is equated with physical dominance, aggression, and the capacity for protection. Such depictions underscore a societal valorization of hypermasculine traits, which in turn contributes to the marginalization of men who do not conform to these standards. However, the narrative of *Edidem Eyamba and the Edikang-Ikong Soup* presents a counterpoint, challenging the monolithic view of masculinity. Edidem's deteriorating physical condition, a metaphor for his failure to produce a male heir, reflects a vulnerability that contradicts the traditional notion of an unwavering, strong male figure. This portrayal disrupts the conventional association of masculinity with unyielding strength and power, highlighting instead the impact of societal pressures and personal failures on a man's perception of his own masculinity. The juxtaposition of these narratives illustrates the complexity of masculinity in Nigerian society, where traditional norms coexist with evolving perceptions. It reveals how masculinity is not a static trait, but a construct influenced by cultural, social, and personal factors.

3.2. Masculinity and Sexual Symbols in Nigeria

In Nigerian society, sexuality often embodies the essence of being sexual or how individuals perceive and express their sexual identity. It manifests in various forms, but societal norms predominantly define sexual behaviors and attributes through biological and physical aspects of sexuality (Kiyimba, 2010; Maduagwu, 2011). One notable expression of masculinity in this context is through the demonstration of virility, often symbolized by the number of wives a man has and the size of his family. In Nigeria, the biological aspect of sexuality largely concerns the human reproductive functions, physical manifestation of love, and the human sexual response circle. This is expected to be shown, through a man's ability to impregnate the female. Patriarchal cultures typically stigmatize female sexuality as inferior because polygyny, apart from underlining the social worth of the man, reinforces men's sexual prowess. In fact, it is believed that "the man with one wife is a chief among the unmarried" (Kiyimba, 2010:43). In such a context, a man with more wives is usually regarded as more masculine than the man with one wife. There might be diverse perceptions about the issue of polygyny in Nigeria, but "there is no doubt that the institution of polygamy is a celebration of superior masculinity" (43). This idea is exemplified in *Edidem Eyamba and the Edikang-Ikong Soup*, where the story of Edidem Eyamba, a renowned king in Eburutu, illustrates the traditional African kinship system. Edidem, with his four wives and fifteen children, embodies this symbol of virility. Edidem not only reflects the cultural valuation of male fertility and sexual prowess but also underscores how deeply entrenched gender norms and expectations are in shaping perceptions of masculinity within Nigerian society.

In Essien Ako's *The Adventures of Akpan Akan Uto*, sexuality is also portrayed as a key symbol of masculinity. King Nsabong, like Edidem in another narrative, has multiple wives, symbolizing the value placed on male virility. Nsabong views his wives primarily as objects for sexual domination, exemplified by his dismissal of Nwan Usua, one of his wives, whom he sees as offering no value beyond satisfying his sexual desires. This depiction aligns with broader critiques of polygamy in African societies. Scholars like Ndabayakhe (2013) argue that polygamy hinders women's emancipation and self-expression, an idea echoed by Adesami (2005:304), who notes that in polygamous relationships, the power dynamics between men and women are clear, with men as the dominant figures and women as subordinates. King Nsabong's behavior in the narrative exemplifies this oppressive masculinity. He frequently verbally abuses Nwan Usua to assert his dominance and even isolates her in a separate hut, further exerting control. This portrayal suggests that polygyny not only reinforces male authority but also frames women's non-compliance as a sign of male weakness, thereby perpetuating rigid gender roles and power imbalances.

In Africa, beyond possessing it, a phallus is expected to be used for procreation because a degree of male masculinity is dependent on it. Irrespective of the size, if a man is unable to procreate, his masculinity is always going to be subjected to scrutiny. The phallus is, thus, not just a mark of power; it also symbolises life-giving power. This idea is further stressed in the narrative, where the author describes King Nsabong as "a very rich and wealthy king, but not a happy man. Despite the number of wives he has, he had no children. He kept marrying more and more wives but he still did not have children by them" (1). In this context, the male reproductive organ is not just a biological symbol but gains significance through its procreative function. Nsabong's discontent highlights a prevalent societal belief: a man's life accomplishments are overshadowed if he fails to produce offspring and continue his lineage. Respect and privileges in the family and society are thus not merely tied to possessing male genitalia, but to the effective fulfillment of its reproductive role, as asserted by Uchendu (2007).

The figurative significance of the phallus to procreation is also emphasized in *Edidem Eyamba and the Edikang-Ikong Soup*, but in a more complex dimension. In the narrative, the emphasis on the phallus, as a symbol of masculinity, goes beyond procreation and extends to a man's ability to produce a male child. This responsibility is so pivotal that a man's ultimate purpose is often seen as producing a son to continue the family legacy and prevent its extinction. The pressure to perpetuate the paternal lineage is intense in traditional African societies, as illustrated by the Lugandan proverb: "I will exterminate you; the way an impotent man exterminates his ancestors [by not begetting heirs for them]" (Kiyimba, 2010:46). In the narrative, King Edidem's anguish over not having a son underscores this theme. Despite having multiple wives, all his children are daughters, leading him to desperate measures, including sacrifices and consulting medicine men. In fact, the problem begins to "make him lean. His good looks faded away, wrinkles lined his forehead and his jaw sagged. He grew bald so quickly" (3). His physical decline, marked by loss of weight, fading looks, wrinkles, and baldness, metaphorically mirrors his failure to produce a male heir. His visit to a priest, who prophesies another marriage as the solution to his problem, further emphasizes his perceived inadequacy. This narrative highlights the societal devaluation of female offspring, contrasting them with the coveted male child. The wives, representing femininity, are depicted as passive and docile, their importance overshadowed by the quest for a male heir. This portrayal reinforces gender stereotypes, casting women as secondary to the central narrative of male lineage and inheritance.

Hence, both Edidem and Nsabong's behaviors are shaped by traditional, stringent expectations of masculinity. These expectations underscore aspects like sexual prowess, multiple sexual partners, risk-taking, and procreation. Roberts (1996:14) observes that the "concept of phallus is more or less inescapable in discussions of masculinity", while Heath (1989:125) describes its centrality in hegemonic masculinity as the "eternal problem of the phallus." This is evident in the challenges faced by both kings regarding their sexual potency; Edidem is distressed by his inability to father a son, and Nsabong struggles to have any children at all until he seeks external help. Although their infertility is not explicitly linked to their sexual organs, their actions, such as marrying more wives, are attempts to alleviate doubts about their manhood. Thus, these narratives expose readers to the perils of such rigid masculine expectations and the pivotal role of the phallus in shaping them.

Sexuality as a symbol of masculinity is further expressed through gender dichotomies in Ifeanyi Ifoegbuna's *Folake and Her Four Brothers*. In traditional African societies, sexuality prescribes gender behaviors and attributes - male children are preferred over females, a dichotomy still prevalent today. The narrative exposes this through Folake, a 14-year-old girl being forced into marriage. Central to masculine discourse in this narrative is Kassidi, a rich young man, who wants to marry Folake. Exploiting Mr Babaji's unpleasant situation, Kassidi promises to help the Babaji's family, but on condition that Folake becomes his wife. Stuck in an economic crisis and limited job prospects for his wife and daughters, Mr. Babaji agrees with Kassidi without considering the future of his daughter who is still fourteen years and in primary school. Mrs. Babaji is not too happy about his decision and reacts:

My husband, don't let us be selfish. We should also think of what is good for our daughter. As for starving, we won't starve. I will work harder and so will Folake. Kacha will also do her best. It is a pity that my sons just idle away their time wrestling and yet you men say that only sons can save you. (6)

Folake is forced into this ill-fated condition because of the socio-economic factors which, in part, are the consequences of a traditional gender order that favours men over women. Her brothers are allowed to finish school, while she is being considered for marriage as a primary school pupil. In fact, Folake's father has no qualms in exchanging Folake for financial gains. He points out; "Kassidi is a very rich young man and I don't want Folake to miss her luck...Folake is very beautiful and has good manners and no man will like to lose her" (6). Mr. Babaji only recognizes his daughter's sexuality as a bargaining chip for financial freedom. In particular, he sees her as a sexual object as well as static and pliant object of desire. Hence, Folake finds herself in a patriarchal environment, where a woman's profession hinges on the profit that her sexuality can bring. In this way, women are not only subjugated and implicitly encouraged to embrace the patriarchal sexual structure, but their own sexuality is not considered as independent, but shaped predominantly by masculine displays of heterosexuality. The importance, value and function of their sexuality lie in demonstrating and applauding the heterosexuality of men. This story is an illustration of

dominant discursive orientations that centralise masculinity and its performance as normal, norm and vital. It should be noted that though women's sexuality is receiving positive intervention, such agency does not appear as an empowering discourse for women in the narrative. Instead, the narrative communicates to the readers the idea that women exist mainly as sexual entities through which men realize their hegemonic masculine personality.

In essence, the emphasis on sexuality as a core component of Nigerian masculinity promotes rigid norms around male virility, prowess, and dominance. By equating manhood with attributes like having multiple female partners, fathering many children, and aggressively exerting sexual control, these symbolic tropes reinforce the masculinization of males within narrow confines. They also contribute to unequal gender hierarchies in which feminine sexuality and reproductive labor are exploited to validate masculine identity. Furthermore, these dynamics enable systems of oppression in which women lack autonomy and men feel pressure to constantly prove sexual potency. Ultimately, restrictive expectations around sexuality normalize the subjugation of feminine agency while burdening men with precarious performative burdens—damaging gender relations overall. Transforming these uneven politics will require representations that move beyond biological essentialism and consider masculine sexuality more holistically. Renegotiating notions of manhood could help ease masculinity's overinvestment in sexual symbols and mitigate resultant harms.

3.3. Symbolism and the Gendered System of Agriculture

In the narratives, the Nigerian agricultural system is portrayed as perpetuating sex-typed gender roles through the valorization of certain crops. Yams, for instance, are emblematic of male strength and societal status. The ability of a man to provide his family with yams is often construed as a marker of authentic masculinity. Conversely, crops like cocoyam, cassava, and vegetables are relegated to a secondary status, correlating with their association with women. This agricultural gender dichotomy not only underscores the patriarchal notion of male supremacy but also implicitly devalues the role of women, suggesting an inherent gender hierarchy in the valuation of agricultural produce.

In the Ibo culture, as depicted in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, yams are revered as the supreme crop, symbolizing masculinity, and wealth. A man's worth within the Umuofia clan is gauged by his yam yield. Yams are central to the Umuofia people's daily life and celebrations. Yam farming, a task exclusively for men, requires significant labor and attention. The novel contrasts two characters: Okonkwo, who dedicates himself to yam cultivation and embodies the ideal of masculinity, and his father Unoka, who shows little interest in agriculture, leading to poverty and debt. This dichotomy highlights the cultural belief that yams represent manliness. Achebe notes, "Yam stood for manliness, and he who could feed his family on yams from one harvest to another was a very great man indeed." (24) This reflects the deep-seated association of yam cultivation with male identity and success in the Ibo society.

This is the kind of significance that is attached to yam as a symbol of masculinity in some of the narratives. Though the topic of yam is not the focus of any of the narratives, yam operates at a significant level in some of the narratives. First, yam symbolises wealth, and this is evidenced in the character of two kings in parts of the narratives. In *Edidem Eyamba and the Edikang-Ikong Soup*, Edidem is described as "rich, who had fleets of ships on the high seas, oil palm plantations, big yam farms and very many herds of domestic animals" (2). Similarly, Nsabong in *The Adventures of Akpan Akan Uto* is also represented as "a very rich and wealthy king" who "plants yam in his farm" (1). In both circumstances, yam do not only symbolise their status as wealthy men, but it also provides them with luxury to marry more wives.

Yam also symbolises hard work and man's image as a provider. In *Chima Laughs Last*, Chima's father is not rich but he is hard working. In the text, Chima's father "was a shoemaker but that did not stop him from cultivating his farm. In fact, he had the best yam barn in their village" (25). Mr. Chinazo is poor and could hardly feed in a day, but he knows that yam is vital to his success as a man in life despite being a shoemaker. The relationship between yam and hard work conveyed here is also expressed in *Things Fall Apart* through a conversation between Nwakibie and Okonkwo:

I know what it is to ask a man to trust another with his yams, especially these days when young men are afraid of hard work. I am not afraid of work...I began to fend for myself at an age

when most people still suck at their mothers' breasts. If you give me some yam seeds I shall not fail you" (Achebe, 2006:15-16).

Okonkwo's words show his masculinity, and Nwakibia is pleased with Okonkwo's enthusiasm and gives him twice of the yam Okonkwo demands. As such, Chima's father just like Okonkwo shows his capability as a hard worker. He shows that the wealth of a man is dependent on his ability to provide all facilities to his family from food, protection, and so on. All in all, Achebe states, "Yam stood for manliness, and he who could feed his family on yams from one harvest to another was a great man indeed" (Achebe, 2006:23).

The hegemony of yam is further stressed with the dichotomy that is suggested between yam and other food crops. Certain crops such as coco-yam, beans, vegetables and cassava are considered women's crops, while yam is reserved for men. In *Chima Laughs Last*, while Chima's father grows yam, the wife is described as a very diligent woman who "no woman harvested as much cocoyam, cassava and vegetables as she did from her farm" (25). This distinction not only highlights the perceived lesser role of women in farming but also the gender dichotomy in agricultural practices. Drawing from Foucauldian theory and Judith Butler's work, we see that the body is shaped by societal disciplines, with gender being a key aspect. Gender identities in any society are imprinted on individuals through various means, including food-related behaviors. These behaviors influence physical appearance, health, and overall well-being. Adams (2010) further elaborates on this concept, suggesting that vegetables:

represents the least desirable characteristics: suggesting or like as vegetable, as in passivity or dullness of existence, monotonous, inactive...to vegetate is lead a passive existence; just as to be feminine is to lead a passive existence. Once vegetables are viewed as women's food, then by association they become viewed as "feminine" passive (60).

Adams further points out that "vegetables are thought to have a tranquilizing, dulling, numbing effect on people, so a man cannot possibly get strength from them...to eat vegetable is to become a vegetable, and by extension, to become womanlike" (61). This belief propagates the stereotype that eating vegetables is akin to adopting feminine characteristics, thus reinforcing the desire among men to avoid foods associated with women. This dietary gender divide is institutionalized in sexist attitudes, where women's crops are used to express criticism, weakness, and disparagement. This theme is further explored in the narrative *Edidem Eyamba and the Edikang-Ikong Soup*, where the soup becomes a symbol of women's constrained roles yet also their resilience in a male-dominated world. In this story, a king's quest to father a son leads him to a prophecy about a slave girl whose preparation of Edikang-Ikong soup will facilitate the birth of a male heir. This event underscores the significance of culinary skills in the narrative, particularly highlighted when Chief Obasi's daughters, initially hostile to Ifiok, come to realize the importance of cooking skills "because a good cook should make a god wife" (77). In fact, the author reveals:

Queen Ifiok Akabom made a law that all girls in Eburutu should be taught cooking and good housekeeping. She also trained women in the palace who in turn trained women in the palace who in turn trained the young girls. Mothers were made conscious of their responsibility to breed good girls, who would in turn be good wives and mothers (78).

This is an indication of the limited roles attached to the female sex in the society and the realization of women of such limitations. The text only equips the girl-child with skills that will help her cope with marital life. Thus, in these narratives, the act of cooking and the types of food prepared not only reflect but also perpetuate gender stereotypes, emphasizing traditional roles and expectations in a patriarchal society.

The symbolism inherent in the Nigerian agricultural system, particularly the valorization of yams and the marginalization of crops like cocoyam and vegetables, has significant implications for the masculinization of the Nigerian male and gender politics at large. The elevation of yams as a symbol of masculinity and wealth, as depicted in various narratives, not only reinforces traditional male roles as providers and hard workers but also establishes a rigid gender hierarchy. This hierarchy is further emphasized by the contrast between the esteemed status of yams and the perceived inferiority of crops associated with women, which are often linked to passivity and weakness.

This agricultural dichotomy extends beyond mere crop cultivation, permeating societal attitudes towards gender roles. The narratives suggest that men must distance themselves from 'feminine' foods and activities to uphold their masculinity. This attitude institutionalizes sexist views, where men's worth and identity are tied to their ability to produce and provide specific crops, predominantly yams. Simultaneously, women are confined to roles that revolve around less valued crops and domestic tasks, limiting their societal value and opportunities.

Moreover, this symbolic system influences the broader gender politics by perpetuating patriarchal norms and expectations. The cultural emphasis on yams as a male crop not only delineates what is considered appropriate for each gender but also reinforces the notion that men are inherently superior in status and capability. This creates a societal framework where gender inequalities are normalized and perpetuated, affecting everything from economic opportunities to social status and personal identities.

4. CONCLUSION

This examination of masculine symbols across contemporary Nigerian children's literature reveals the complex interplay between textual ideals, youth enculturation, and broader gender politics. The analysis spotlighted three major symbolic categories - the male body, sexuality, and agriculture - as gendered sites of meaning tied to traditional archetypes of Nigerian manhood. The glorification of strength, virility, and prowess through bodily depictions and sexual motifs promotes restrictive masculine norms. Such tropes contribute to the rigid masculinization of males, while also reinforcing unequal power relations that subordinate and exploit feminine agency. In addition, the valorization of yams in agriculture, the polygynous structures in kinship, the emphasis on male virility and progeny, and the commodification of female sexuality are all indicative of a deeply entrenched patriarchal system. These symbols not only delineate gender roles but also perpetuate a rigid hierarchy where masculinity is equated with power, control, and dominance, while femininity is often relegated to a subservient, objectified status.

Ultimately, masculine symbols operate as compass needles - orienting children towards internalized maps of manhood that influence aspirations, self-perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors with political implications. Alternative representations could profoundly reshape gender discourse by loosening reductive links between manliness, domination, and feminine subordination. But the enduring power of symbolic motifs also highlights the difficulty of disrupting gender tropes embedded through childhood socialization.

This analysis constitutes an early foray analyzing children's literature to decode masculine archetypes and their broader gendered reverberations in Nigeria. Much scope exists for scholars to build on these initial insights through intersectional approaches attending to plurality amidst fluidity. Such efforts to complicate masculinities could constructively inform youth engagement programs, policy reforms, and media interventions to transform unequal gender politics on the ground.

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