

Hegemonic Masculinity and Gender Performativity: Breadwinner Ideology, Ego and Social Control in Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* and Nwapa's *Efuru*

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Abstract : This study examines the fraught negotiations of masculinity in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* (1960) and Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966), focusing on how breadwinner ideology, masculine ego, and social control intersect to produce crises of masculine identity in colonial and postcolonial Igbo society. Rather than treating masculinity as a fixed attribute, the paper draws on R. W. Connell's (1995, 2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity and Judith Butler's (1990, 1993) concept of gender performativity to argue that masculine identities are not merely inherited but are continually performed, contested, and reconstituted under economic and social pressures. Through close textual analysis of Obi Okonkwo's trajectory in *No Longer at Ease* and the male characters Adizua and Gilbert in *Efuru*, the paper reveals a central tension: while Igbo cultural norms idealise men as providers, protectors, and heads of households, the lived realities of these characters expose the fragility and instability of such ideals. Obi's inability to meet the expectations of the Umuofia Progressive Union, coupled with his conflicted relationship with Clara, illustrates how economic dependency erodes masculine authority. Similarly, Adizua's disappearance and Gilbert's secret second family in *Efuru* demonstrate how men, unable to fulfil breadwinner roles, resort to evasion and deception as performative strategies of self-preservation. The analysis suggests that what appears as masculine failure or deviance might be more productively understood as a crisis of performative coherence, a breakdown in the ability to sustain credible masculine performances under changing socioeconomic conditions. By situating these literary representations within ongoing scholarly conversations about masculinity in African contexts, the paper contributes to a growing body of work that challenges monolithic conceptions of African manhood and highlights the psychological and social costs of rigid gender expectations.

Keywords: Masculinity, hegemonic masculinity, gender performativity, breadwinner ideology, African novels, Chinua Achebe, Flora Nwapa

Résumé : Cette étude examine les négociations complexes autour de la masculinité dans **No Longer at Ease** (1960) de Chinua Achebe et **Efuru** (1966) de Flora Nwapa, en s'intéressant à la manière dont l'idéologie du soutien de famille, l'ego masculin et le contrôle social s'entrecroisent pour engendrer des crises d'identité masculine dans la société igbo coloniale et postcoloniale. Plutôt que de considérer la masculinité comme un attribut fixe, cet article s'appuie sur la théorie de la masculinité hégémonique de R. W. Connell (1995, 2005) et sur le concept de performativité de genre de Judith Butler (1990, 1993) pour démontrer que les identités masculines ne sont pas simplement héritées, mais font l'objet d'une performativité, d'une contestation et d'une reconstitution constantes sous l'effet des pressions économiques et sociales. À travers une analyse textuelle approfondie du parcours d'Obi Okonkwo dans « *No Longer at Ease* » et des personnages masculins d'Adizua et de Gilbert dans « *Efuru* », cet article révèle une tension centrale : si les normes culturelles igbo idéalisent les hommes comme pourvoyeurs, protecteurs et chefs de famille, le vécu de ces personnages expose la fragilité et l'instabilité de ces idéaux. L'incapacité d'Obi à répondre aux attentes de l'Union progressiste d'Umuofia, conjuguée à sa relation conflictuelle avec Clara, illustre comment la dépendance économique érode l'autorité masculine. De même, la disparition d'Adizua et la seconde famille secrète de Gilbert dans « *Efuru* » démontrent comment les hommes, incapables d'assumer leur rôle de soutien de famille,

recourent à l'évasion et à la tromperie comme stratégies performatives d'autoconservation. L'analyse suggère que ce qui apparaît comme un échec ou une déviance masculine pourrait être plus justement compris comme une crise de cohérence performative, une rupture dans la capacité à maintenir des performances masculines crédibles face à l'évolution des conditions socio-économiques. En inscrivant ces représentations littéraires dans le cadre des débats universitaires actuels sur la masculinité en contexte africain, cet article contribue à un corpus de travaux en pleine expansion qui remet en question les conceptions monolithiques de la virilité africaine et met en lumière les coûts psychologiques et sociaux des attentes rigides liées au genre.

Mots-clés : Masculinité, masculinité hégémonique, performativité du genre, idéologie du soutien de famille, romans africains, Chinua Achebe, Flora Nwapa

Introduction and Background

The study of masculinity in African literary contexts has only recently gained attention. There is more established scholarship on femininity and womanhood. This imbalance is not coincidental (Crous, 2010). Scholars note that early postcolonial criticism in Africa often focused on recovering indigenous cultures and critiquing colonial rule. These narratives of nationalist resistance frequently reinforced patriarchal ideas (Nadaswaran, 2013; Umezurike, 2021). In this critical environment, masculinity was often seen as natural, an unquestioned trait of male characters. Until the last two decades, few questioned or deeply examined masculinity as a socially constructed category. Recently, more nuanced studies have emerged (Muhammad & Zartashia, 2025, pp. 159-179). These works question the assumptions of male power and explore the vulnerabilities, contradictions, and pressures tied to masculine roles in African societies (Ouzgane & Morrell, 2005; Ratele, 2016; Smith, 2017).

The present study seeks to contribute to this growing conversation by examining how two foundational Nigerian novels, Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* (1960) and Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966), represent the pressures that bear upon Igbo men as they attempt to navigate conflicting expectations around economic provision, social status, and personal identity. Although these novels have been extensively studied individually, relatively few critical works have sustained dialogue among them on the specific question of masculinity (Anidi, 2024). Moreover, while Achebe's representation of masculinity has received considerable scholarly attention, particularly in relation to *Things Fall Apart* (see Landi et al., 2022; Ouzgane, 2003), Nwapa's male characters have often been analysed primarily through the lens of feminist critique, as foils to *Efuru*'s agency, rather than as subjects of masculine struggle in their own right. This paper argues that reading the two novels together illuminates complementary dimensions of masculine crisis in Igbo society during the colonial transition and its aftermath.

The timing of these novels is significant. *No Longer at Ease* was published in 1960, the same year Nigeria achieved independence from British colonial rule, while *Efuru* appeared six years later, in 1966, shortly before the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970). Both novels thus emerge from a period of profound social upheaval, during which traditional structures of authority, including those governing gender relations, were being challenged, dismantled, or reconfigured (Achebe, 2005). It is perhaps not coincidental that both texts depict male characters struggling to maintain coherent masculine identities amidst these

transformations. Obi Okonkwo in *No Longer at Ease* returns from British education only to find himself caught between the expectations of his Umuofia kinsmen and the demands of a modernising colonial bureaucracy. Adizua and Gilbert in *Efuru*, meanwhile, operate within a predominantly rural Igbo setting but exhibit behaviours, abandonment, deception, and evasion of responsibility that suggest a deeper crisis of masculine purpose.

The central argument advanced here is that masculinity in these texts is best understood not as a stable essence but as a performance that is constantly under threat of failure. Drawing on Connell's (1995, 2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity, the culturally dominant form of manhood that subordinates other masculinities and femininities, and Butler's (1990, 1993) theory of performativity, which posits that gender identities are constituted through repeated, stylised acts rather than expressing any innate essence, the analysis shows how economic pressures destabilise masculine performances. When men cannot fulfil the breadwinner role, when their earnings fall short of communal expectations, or when they find themselves economically dependent on women, the coherence of their masculine identities is called into question. The responses vary: Obi turns to bribery as a desperate attempt to maintain appearances; Adizua simply disappears; Gilbert constructs a double life that preserves his public reputation while avoiding domestic accountability. These are not merely individual failures but symptoms of a structural tension between cultural ideals and material realities.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section two reviews relevant literature on masculinity in African and Nigerian contexts, situating the study within existing debates. Section three elaborates the theoretical framework, explaining the relevance of hegemonic masculinity and performativity to the analysis of literary texts. Section four presents the analysis of *No Longer at Ease*, focusing on Obi Okonkwo's economic struggles and their impact on his masculine self-perception. Section five analyses *Efuru*, examining the toxic behaviours of Adizua and Gilbert as performative strategies of avoidance. Section six discusses the findings in comparative perspective, drawing out the implications for understanding masculinity as a site of crisis. A brief conclusion summarises the argument and suggests directions for further research.

1. Literature Review

1.1 Masculinity Studies in African Contexts

African masculinity studies have grown significantly in the past two decades. It has shifted from a marginal concern to a recognised area of interdisciplinary inquiry. Early contributions were mostly ethnographic and sociological. They focused on how men in African societies navigated economic change, urbanisation, and shifting family structures (Cornwall & Lindisfarne, 1994; Ouzgane & Morrell, 2005). More recently, literary scholars have used these frameworks to analyse African fiction. They explore how novelists depict complex male experiences beyond familiar tropes of patriarchy and domination (Lipenga, 2018; Umezurike, 2021).

In the Nigerian context, several studies have examined masculinity in Achebe's fiction. Landi, Nkeiruka, and Umar (2022) analyse the "antithesis of masculinity" in *Things*

Fall Apart and *No Longer at Ease*, arguing that Achebe's male characters use masculinity to excuse violence and suppress emotional expression. The study notes that the foundations of masculine identity have shifted over time, yet "the overarching ideology of male power may not always have reflected these shifts or done so rapidly enough or comprehensively" (Landi et al., 2022, p. 79). This observation points to a crucial insight: cultural ideals of masculinity often lag material changes, creating a gap that men must somehow bridge.

Another line of inquiry has focused on the typology of masculinities in Achebe's work. An anonymous study of dominant masculinities in *Arrow of God* and *No Longer at Ease* distinguishes between two forms of masculine achievement: *eze* (hereditary or ascribed masculinity) and *oka* (earned or achieved masculinity). Obi Okonkwo is presented as a character whose masculinity is of the *oka* type, earned through education and professional success, yet his inability to translate these achievements into sustainable economic independence undermines his claim to masculine authority. This finding aligns with broader anthropological work on Igbo masculinity. Smith (2017) demonstrates that for Igbo men, masculinity is an ongoing project where men constantly strive to meet societal expectations, such as proving economic worth and dominance in romantic relationships (as cited in Brainly, 2023). Smith's work suggests that masculine identity is never fully secured but must be continuously re-established through visible demonstrations of economic competence.

1.2 Representations of Masculinity in *No Longer at Ease* and *Efuru*

Critical responses to *No Longer at Ease* have frequently emphasised the novel's concern with corruption, colonialism, and the dilemmas of the educated elite. However, a growing body of scholarship reads the novel as a meditation on masculine failure. Catherine Innes (1990) notes that the novel opens with Obi's trial, framing the narrative as an inquiry into "why 'a young man of [Obi's] education and brilliant promise could have done this'" (p. 42). The question is not merely about bribery but about the broader social and psychological forces that lead a promising young man to betray his own values. From a masculinity perspective, Obi's downfall can be read as the collapse of a masculine performance: the educated, modern, incorruptible civil servant who would redeem his community. When this performance becomes unsustainable, when his salary cannot cover his debts, when his family's expectations exceed his means, Obi's masculine coherence unravels.

Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* has been studied primarily as a feminist text that challenges patriarchal norms through its portrayal of an independent, economically successful woman. Yet the novel's male characters deserve closer attention. Anidi (2024) provides a detailed analysis of toxic masculinity in *Efuru*, arguing that Adizua and Gilbert exhibit "underachieving, non-committal and harmful behaviours" that are "indicative of toxic masculinity" (p. 3). Adizua, *Efuru*'s first husband, abandons her after she fails to conceive, while Gilbert, her second husband, secretly maintains a second family and a son from a previous relationship. Anidi's analysis is valuable but tends to frame these behaviours as individual moral failings rather than as responses to structural pressures. The present

study builds on Anidi's work by asking what pressures, economic, social, and psychological, produce these toxic performances.

1.3 Gaps and Contributions

Despite the growing body of scholarship on African masculinities, several gaps remain. First, most studies focus on a single author or novel, limiting the scope for comparative analysis across different literary traditions. Second, the application of performativity theory to African literary masculinities remains underdeveloped, with notable exceptions such as Lipenga (2018) and Cruz-Gutiérrez (2023). Third, the specific intersection of economic pressure and masculine identity, the breadwinner ideology, has received insufficient attention in literary criticism, despite its centrality to ethnographic work on Nigerian men (Smith, 2017). This paper addresses these gaps by bringing two canonical Igbo novels into comparative dialogue, applying a dual theoretical framework that integrates hegemonic masculinity and performativity, and centring the analysis on the economic dimensions of masculine crisis.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Hegemonic Masculinity

The concept of hegemonic masculinity, developed primarily by R. W. Connell (1995, 2005), has become a foundational tool for analysing gender relations in sociology and cultural studies. Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell, 1995, p. 77). In simpler terms, it refers to the culturally dominant form of manhood that all men are expected to emulate, even if few can fully achieve it. Hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed set of traits but a historically variable ideal that shifts across time and place.

In the Igbo context that Achebe and Nwapa depict, hegemonic masculinity might be understood as comprising several interrelated expectations: economic provision (the ability to support a household), physical prowess (though this declines in importance in the colonial period), social status (achieved through titles, wealth, or education), and control over women (particularly wives and daughters). These expectations are not equally attainable by all men. Indeed, Connell (2005) emphasises that hegemonic masculinity functions precisely through its unattainability; it sets a standard that most men cannot meet, thereby generating anxiety and competition. This insight is crucial for understanding the male characters in both novels. Obi Okonkwo, Adizua, and Gilbert are not simply “failed” men; they are men who cannot achieve the dominant masculine ideal under the conditions in which they find themselves.

Importantly, hegemonic masculinity does not operate in isolation but in relation to subordinate, complicit, and marginalised masculinities. As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) later clarified, the concept must be understood as “a pattern of practice that allowed men's dominance over women to continue” while also recognising internal

hierarchies among men (p. 832). In the Igbo context, this means that the masculine ideal may be embodied by different figures in different settings: the titled elder in the village, the educated civil servant in the city, the successful trader in the market. Obi's tragedy, in part, is that he belongs to multiple social worlds with conflicting masculine ideals.

2.2 Gender Performativity

Judith Butler's (1990, 1993) theory of gender performativity offers a complementary lens for understanding how masculinity is produced and sustained, or fails to be sustained, through repeated acts. For Butler, gender is not a pre-existing essence that individuals express; rather, it is "a stylised repetition of acts" through which the illusion of a stable gendered self is produced (Butler, 1990, p. 179). This does not mean that gender is a performance in the theatrical sense, something one can choose to put on or take off at will. Rather, performativity refers to the way that gendered norms are internalised and enacted in ways that feel natural, even though they are historically and socially contingent.

Butler's framework is particularly useful for analysing moments of masculine crisis, as they expose the constructedness of gender identity. When a man fails to perform masculinity convincingly, when he cannot provide for his family, when he shows emotion deemed excessive, when he is economically dependent on a woman, the coherence of his gendered self is threatened. In such moments, he may intensify his performance (e.g., through aggression, boastfulness, or risk-taking) or abandon it altogether (e.g., through withdrawal, disappearance, or deception). Both responses, from a performative perspective, are attempts to manage the threat of gender failure.

The application of Butlerian performativity to African literary contexts is still emerging, but several scholars have demonstrated its utility. Di Candia (2025) applies Butler's framework to Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, showing how Igbo women navigate and subvert maternal expectations. Lipenga (2018) draws on Butler to analyse father-son relationships in the African novel, arguing that masculinity is "unmade" as often as it is made. The present study extends this line of inquiry to the male characters in Achebe's and Nwapa's works, showing how economic pressures produce performative crises that reveal the fragility of masculine identity.

3.3 Integrating the Two Theories

Hegemonic masculinity and gender performativity are sometimes treated as competing frameworks, but they are better understood as complementary. Hegemonic masculinity provides an account of the normative content of masculine ideals, what men are expected to be and do. Performativity provides an account of the process by which those ideals are enacted, internalised, and potentially subverted. Together, they allow for an analysis that is both structural (attending to the social expectations that shape masculine behaviour) and agential (attending to how individuals navigate, resist, or fail to meet those expectations).

In the analysis that follows, the paper uses Connell's framework to identify the breadwinner ideology as a central component of hegemonic masculinity in Igbo society. It

uses Butler's framework to analyse how Obi, Adizua, and Gilbert perform, or fail to perform, masculinity in response to economic pressures. This dual approach allows for a more nuanced account than either theory could provide alone, capturing both the weight of social expectation and the specific textures of individual struggle.

3. Analysis of *No Longer at Ease*

3.1 Obi Okonkwo: The Burden of Educated Masculinity

Obi Okonkwo's trajectory in *No Longer at Ease* is structured by a fundamental contradiction: he has been educated in Britain to assume a modern, professional identity, yet he returns to Nigeria burdened by traditional expectations of masculine provision. The Umuofia Progressive Union, which funded his education, expects him to use his position in the colonial civil service to benefit the community. His father, Isaac Okonkwo, expects him to marry a suitable Igbo woman and maintain family honour. His girlfriend, Clara, expects him to defy his family's objections and marry her despite her status as an *osu* (outcast). These expectations are not merely social; they are economic. Obi must provide for his parents, for his siblings, for his future wife, yet his salary as a civil servant is barely sufficient to meet his own needs.

The novel makes this economic pressure explicit from the outset. Obi's trial for bribery is framed not as a simple act of corruption but as the inevitable outcome of financial desperation. As Innes (1990) observes, the novel's opening question, "why a young man of [Obi's] education and brilliant promise could have done this", is never fully answered, but the accumulation of clues points to economic necessity (p. 42). Obi's salary of £360 per year, while respectable by colonial standards, is quickly consumed by obligations: remittances to his parents, contributions to the Union, expenses related to Clara, and the maintenance of a standard of living appropriate to his education and status. When his car is repossessed, his debts mount, his mother dies, and his father retires, the economic pressures become overwhelming.

From a performative perspective, Obi's masculinity depends on his ability to maintain the appearance of competence and control. He must appear as a successful modern professional, even as his finances crumble. He must appear as a dutiful son, even as his father's expectations exceed his capacity. He must appear as a devoted suitor, even as his relationship with Clara becomes untenable. These performances are unsustainable. The bribe that ultimately destroys him is not an act of greed but a desperate attempt to shore up a crumbling masculine identity. When Obi accepts the bribe, he is not merely breaking the law; he is acknowledging, perhaps for the first time, that his performance of educated, upright masculinity has failed.

3.2 The Breadwinner Ideal and Its Contradictions

Table 1 below summarises the key contradictions between ideal masculinity as articulated in Igbo cultural norms and the lived realities faced by Obi Okonkwo.

Table 1: Contradictions in Masculine Expectations in *No Longer at Ease*

Economic provision	Man must support the household and kin	Salary insufficient; debts accumulate	Colonial wages lag behind traditional expectations of male provision
Professional success	An educated man should rise in civil service	Promotions slow; corruption pervasive	Modern bureaucracy values compliance over merit
Marital authority	Man chooses wife; wife defers to husband	Obi's family rejects Clara; Clara refuses to defer	Clash between traditional marriage norms and modern individualism
Community leadership	An educated man should guide the community	Union's expectations exceed Obi's capacity	Community idealises education without understanding its limitations
Emotional restraint	Man should control emotions	Obi cries at trial; experiences "treacherous tears"	Suppressed emotions surface under pressure

Source: Author's analysis based on Achebe (1960) and Innes (1990).

The table illustrates a recurring pattern: Obi's failures are not personal inadequacies but structural contradictions between different systems of expectation. The colonial economy in which Obi works does not reward the kind of communal generosity that traditional Igbo masculinity demands. The modern legal system in which Obi operates criminalises the very behaviours that his community expects (such as using office to benefit kin). The romantic individualism that Obi absorbed in Britain conflicts with the familial authority structures that govern marriage in Igbo society (Okwuosa et al., 2021, pp. 1-10). Obi is caught between incompatible performances, resulting in a crisis of masculine coherence.

3.3 The Ego in Crisis: Obi's Emotional Unravelling

One of the most striking features of *No Longer at Ease* is the contrast between Obi's self-presentation as a cynical, realistic modern man and the emotional vulnerability that repeatedly breaks through this facade. Innes (1990) notes the significance of "the 'treacherous tears', as well as the oddity of his telling himself that his mother's death and Clara's departure were 'merciful'" (p. 44). Obi's attempts to narrate his own experience as rational and controlled are undermined by the very language he uses. His insistence that events are "merciful" signals a need for emotional containment that the narrative itself refuses to endorse.

From a Butlerian perspective, Obi's emotional eruptions can be understood as moments when the performative veneer of masculine self-control cracks. Hegemonic masculinity in the Igbo context, like in many other contexts, discourages emotional expressiveness, particularly the expression of vulnerability, sadness, or fear. Men are expected to be stoic, to absorb pressure without complaint, to manage crisis without

visible distress. (Anidi, 2024) Obi tries to conform to this expectation, but the pressure proves too great. His tears at the trial, a moment of public, masculine failure, are perhaps the most authentic act in the novel, because they reveal what the performance of masculinity has been designed to conceal: that Obi is overwhelmed, frightened, and profoundly alone.

4. Analysis of *Efuru*

4.1 Adizua and Gilbert: Toxic Masculinity as Performative Strategy

If Obi Okonkwo's crisis takes the form of emotional collapse and legal transgression, the male characters in *Efuru* exhibit a different pattern: withdrawal, evasion, and deception. Adizua, Efuru's first husband, disappears from the narrative after Efuru fails to conceive. Gilbert, her second husband, maintains a secret second family and a son from a previous relationship, only revealing this deception when it becomes unavoidable. Anidi (2024) categorises these behaviours as "toxic masculinity," defined as "the behaviour of 'troubled' or 'troubling' men who are labelled as 'toxic' and needing therapy because of violence, or lack of engagement in family life, and employment" (p. 3). While the toxic masculinity framework is useful for naming these patterns, it risks individualising what might be better understood as structural responses to performative pressure.

Consider Adizua's disappearance. He does not leave Efuru because she has failed as a wife; by all accounts, she is industrious, loyal, and supportive. He leaves because he cannot face the social implications of her infertility. In Igbo society, as the novel makes clear, a man's ability to produce children is central to his masculine identity. A wife who cannot bear children reflects poorly on her husband, suggesting either his inadequacy or her curse (Isiugo-Abanihe, 1994, pp. 237-258). Adizua's disappearance is thus a performative strategy: rather than remain and confront the erosion of his masculine status, he flees. The flight preserves his public reputation (he can claim that Efuru drove him away) while avoiding the daily humiliation of a childless household.

Gilbert's deception follows a similar logic. By maintaining a secret second family, Gilbert enjoys the benefits of marriage to Efuru, her economic contribution, her social standing, and her domestic labour, while also satisfying the masculine imperative to produce heirs. When Efuru discovers the truth, Gilbert does not apologise or explain; he simply retreats into sullen defensiveness. His behaviour is not, as a moralising reading might suggest, simple dishonesty. Rather, it is an attempt to reconcile irreconcilable demands: the demand that a man be monogamous (in the Christian marriage that Gilbert and Efuru have contracted) and the demand that a man produce children to continue his lineage. Unable to satisfy both, Gilbert constructs a double life that allows him to perform masculinity differently in different contexts.

4.2 Economic Dimensions of Masculine Evasion

Table 2: Economic Pressures and Masculine Responses in *Efuru*

Adizua	Limited earning capacity; dependent on Efuru's trading income	Breadwinner ideal; head of household	Abandonment of domestic space
Gilbert	Teacher with modest salary; benefits from Efuru's wealth	Provider role; sexual and reproductive competence	Secret second family; concealment of prior child
Efuru's father (comparative)	Wealthy and respected	Not threatened; ideal achieved	No evasion required

Source: Author's analysis based on Nwapa (1966) and Anidi (2024).

Table 2 reveals an important pattern: the men who experience the most acute masculine crises are those with the most precarious economic standing. Adizua has limited earning capacity; Gilbert's salary as a teacher is modest; both depend to some extent on Efuru's income from trading. In a context where the breadwinner ideal remains central to hegemonic masculinity, economic dependency on a woman constitutes a profound performative threat. (Ezegwu & Cin, 2022) The male characters' responses, abandonment, deception, and evasion, can be understood as attempts to manage this threat. If a man cannot be a provider, he may try to be absent (so that his non-provision is not observed) or he may construct alternative contexts (like Gilbert's secret family) where he can perform the provider role.

What makes *Efuru* particularly revealing as a text for masculinity studies is that it centres on an economically successful woman. Efuru's wealth and independence are not anomalies; they are central features of her characterisation. This inversion of traditional gender economics forces the male characters into positions of dependency that they are ill-equipped to manage. Nwapa's novel thus anticipates by several decades a phenomenon that contemporary ethnographers have documented extensively: the crisis of masculine identity that occurs when women's economic gains outpace men's (Smith, 2017; Ukpokolo, 2018; Smith, 2020).

4.3 The Limits of Hegemonic Masculinity

Both Adizua and Gilbert fail to achieve hegemonic masculinity, but they fail in different ways and for different reasons. Adizua fails because he lacks the economic resources to be a provider and the reproductive capacity (through his wife) to be a father. Gilbert fails because his pursuit of masculine achievement, producing a son, requires him to violate the marital contract he has entered. These failures are not simply personal inadequacies but symptoms of a hegemonic ideal that, by definition, is unattainable for most men. As Connell (2005) emphasises, hegemonic masculinity functions precisely through its inaccessibility; it is a standard against which men measure themselves and find themselves wanting.

The significance of Nwapa's portrayal lies in its refusal to romanticise or excuse masculine failure while nonetheless situating it within a social structure that makes failure

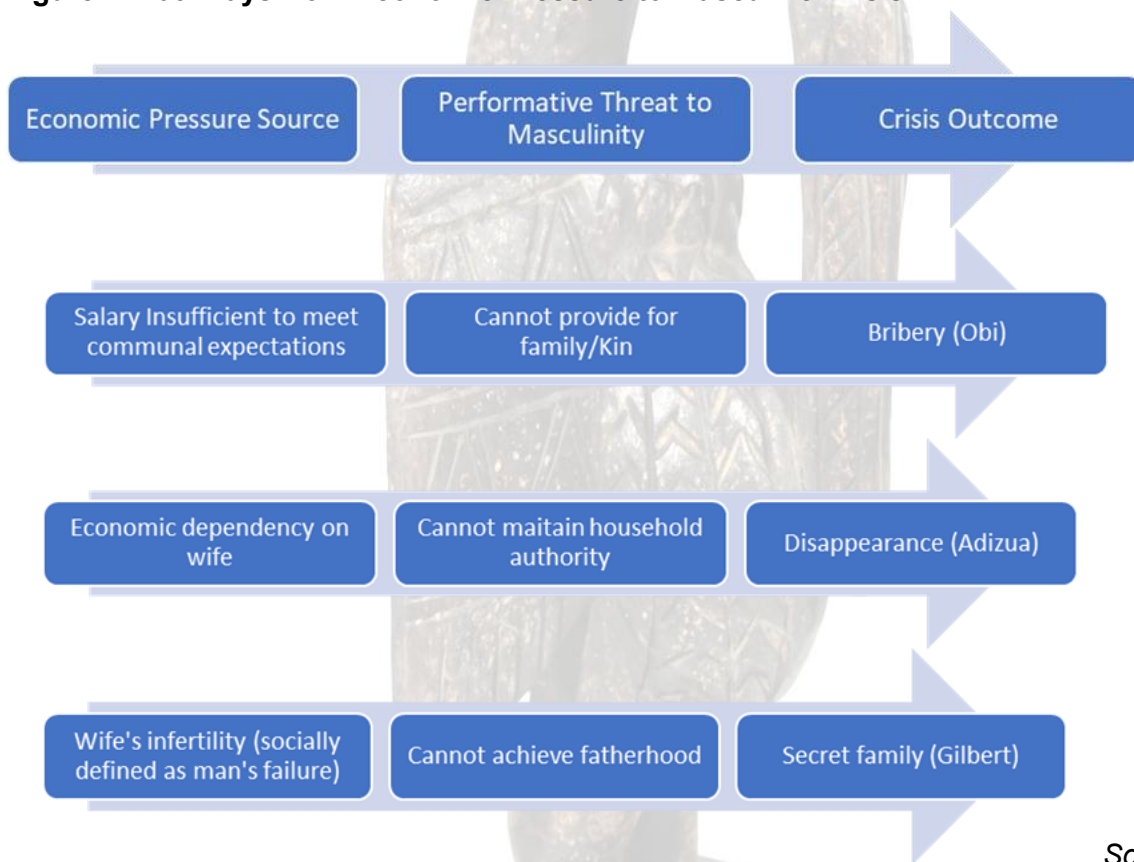
almost inevitable. Adizua and Gilbert are not sympathetic characters, but their behaviours become legible when understood as responses to contradictory demands. The man who abandons his wife and the man who maintains a secret second family are both, in their flawed ways, trying to be men according to the terms available to them. That these attempts produce harm, to Efurū, to their children, to themselves, does not make them incomprehensible.

5. Comparative Discussion

5.1 Breadwinner Ideology Across Two Novels

Figure 1 below presents a conceptual diagram illustrating the relationship between economic pressure, masculine performance, and crisis outcomes across both novels.

Figure 1: Pathways from Economic Pressure to Masculine Crisis



Source: Author's conceptual framework based on Connell (1995, 2005), Butler (1990), and analysis of Achebe (1960) and Nwapa (1966).

The diagram illustrates a common pathway across both novels: economic or reproductive pressure generates a performative threat to masculine identity, which in turn produces a crisis response. The specific form of the response varies depending on the character's social position and available resources. Obi, as an educated civil servant, attempts to resolve his crisis through bribery, a legal transgression that, ironically, attempts to restore his economic capacity. Adizua, lacking Obi's social capital, simply flees. Gilbert, with more resources than Adizua but fewer than Obi, constructs an

elaborate deception. The pattern suggests that masculine crisis responses are shaped by the tools available to different men, not merely by individual character flaws.

5.2 Ego and Social Control

A recurring theme across both novels is the role of social surveillance in maintaining masculine expectations. Obi is watched by the Umuofia Progressive Union, his colleagues, Clara's family, and his own parents. Adizua and Gilbert are watched by the village, by Efurū's family, and by neighbours who note who comes and goes. This surveillance is not merely external; it is internalised. Obi's sense of shame when he cannot pay his debts, Adizua's discomfort in a childless household, Gilbert's elaborate efforts to conceal his secret son, all testify to the power of social expectations to shape masculine behaviour even in the absence of direct observation.

This dynamic can be understood through the concept of performative reiteration. Butler (1993) argues that gendered norms are sustained through repetition: individuals perform gender in ways that conform to expectations, and these performances, over time, produce the illusion of a natural, stable identity. However, repetition is also the site of potential failure. When a man cannot perform adequately, when his performance deviates from the norm in ways that cannot be concealed, the entire edifice of gendered identity becomes unstable. The crisis responses analysed in this paper are attempts to manage or conceal performative failure. Obi tries to bribe his way back to economic competence; Adizua tries to escape the scene of his failure; Gilbert tries to create a separate scene where he can perform successfully.

5.3 Implications for Understanding Nigerian Masculinity

What do these literary representations suggest about masculinity in Nigerian contexts more broadly? First, they suggest that masculine identity is far more fragile than popular discourse often acknowledges. The figure of the powerful, dominant Igbo man, the trader, the patriarch, the provider, is an ideal that few can sustain consistently. (Ayodabo, 2020, pp. 1-15) Second, they suggest that economic pressures are central to the masculine crisis. When men cannot provide, their claim to masculine authority becomes tenuous, and they may resort to harmful or self-destructive behaviours to restore it. Third, they suggest that literary texts offer a uniquely valuable window into these dynamics, capturing the interiority, shame, rationalisation, and desperation that ethnographic accounts may struggle to access.

Conclusion

This paper examines negotiations of masculinity in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* and Flora Nwapa's *Efurū*, focusing on the pressures generated by breadwinner ideology, masculine ego, and social control. Drawing on Connell's (1995, 2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity and Butler's (1990, 1993) concept of gender performativity, the analysis shows that masculine identities in these texts are not stable essences but fragile performances constantly threatened by economic and social pressures. Obi Okonkwo's descent into bribery, Adizua's abandonment of Efurū, and Gilbert's secret second family are all, from this perspective, crisis responses to the impossibility of sustaining credible

masculine performances under conditions of economic strain and contradictory expectations.

Several implications follow from this analysis. In literary criticism, it suggests that readings of African novels should attend more carefully to the economic dimensions of masculine identity, rather than treating masculinity as a purely cultural or symbolic category. For masculinity studies more broadly, it suggests that the concept of performative crisis, the moment when a gendered performance fails to cohere, deserves further theoretical elaboration. For contemporary policy discussions about gender relations in Nigeria, it suggests that addressing harmful masculine behaviours requires attention to the structural conditions, particularly economic conditions, that produce performative pressure, rather than focusing solely on individual attitudes or cultural beliefs.

The study has several limitations. It focuses on only two novels, both written in the 1960s, and thus cannot speak to more contemporary representations of masculinity in Nigerian fiction. It does not examine female perspectives on masculine crisis, though both novels offer rich material for such an analysis. It also does not engage with the growing body of queer and non-normative masculinity scholarship in African contexts, which might complicate the binary frameworks used here. Future research might extend this analysis to more recent Nigerian novels, such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) or Ayòbámi Adébáyò's *Stay with Me* (2017), exploring how economic pressures continue to shape masculine identities in contemporary Nigerian society. Additionally, comparative studies across different ethnic groups in Nigeria, Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo, might illuminate how breadwinner ideology varies across cultural contexts. Finally, interdisciplinary work that brings literary analysis into dialogue with sociological and ethnographic research on Nigerian men could enrich both fields, bridging the gap between textual representation and lived experience.

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