



FEMALE MASCULINITY: A RECONFIGURATION OF GENDER IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *PURPLE HIBISCUS* AND *HALF OF A YELLOW SUN*

Ms. P.N. Pushpalatha, Dr. K. Deepa

Ph.D. Research Scholar in English, Assistant Professor, Department of English

Sri G.V.G. Visalakshi College for Women

Udumalpet

Abstract : The Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) portray female characters who enact practices traditionally coded as masculine, thereby reconfiguring conventional understandings of gender. Drawing on Connell's theory of masculinities, this study argues that Adichie dismantles the notion that masculinity is a fixed identity intrinsically tied to the male body. In these texts, female masculinity is not merely the imitation of masculine traits; rather, it underscores the instability of the binary gender system. By examining the ways in which women inhabit the attributes traditionally coded as masculine such as authority, autonomy, aggression, rationality, or resistance, this framework exposes masculinity as a performative social practice rather than a natural attribute. This dynamic is exemplified through key characters: Auntie Ifeoma's intellectual and economic independence in *Purple Hibiscus*, Kainene's business acumen and organizational ability, and Olanna's political awareness, emotional endurance and humanitarian effort in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Ultimately, their performances of masculine-coded roles subvert traditional gender norms and expectations typically associated with femininity to reconfigure agency within global literature.

IndexTerms - Gender binary, female masculinity, gender reconfiguration, masculine traits, performativity.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a renowned Nigerian novelist, non-fiction writer, and public speaker who is widely recognized as one of the most influential voices in contemporary African and postcolonial feminist literature. Her novels frequently explore complex gender dynamics, including representations of female masculinity. In her works *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), female masculinity functions not as a passive adoption of male attributes, but as an active rejection or subversion of traditional gender expectations typically associated with femininity. This performative shift is enacted through key female protagonists who navigate crises of authority, war, and domestic oppression. Characters such as Auntie Ifeoma, Kainene, and Olanna demonstrate qualities such as assertiveness, intellectual authority, economic independence, resilience, leadership, and autonomous decision-making, which have conventionally been coded as masculine within patriarchal societies.

Drawing on R.W. Connell's theory of masculinities, this study analyzes how Adichie's female protagonists embody autonomy, rationality, and resistance, thereby exposing masculinity as a performative social practice rather than an innate biological trait. Traditional gender theory often treated masculinity as the natural property of men, while femininity was assigned to women as a complementary but subordinate category. However, contemporary gender scholarship has demonstrated that masculinity is not a biological essence but a historically produced configuration of practices, discourses, and power relations. Connell conceptualizes masculinities as multiple and relational rather than singular. According to Connell, hegemonic masculinity refers to the dominant form of masculinity often that marginalizes or silences complicit, subordinate, and marginalized masculinities. It is associated with traits such as dominance, power, and heterosexuality that the ideal men are expected to embody. Within this theoretical shift, female masculinity emerges as a vital analytical category, illustrating how masculine practices can be embodied, performed, and negotiated beyond male subjects.

Though extensive research works have examined feminism, postcolonialism, diasporic identity, and gender perspectives in Adichie's oeuvre, less attention is given to the way in which Adichie's female characters destabilize the conventional association between masculine and male bodies. A reading of specific female characters such as Auntie Ifeoma in *Purple Hibiscus*, along with Kainene and Olanna in *Half of a Yellow Sun* through Connell's framework of masculinities provides an alternative perspective on Adichie's treatment of gender. Through these characters, Adichie demonstrates that gendered behaviours and identities are fluid, socially constructed, and subject to continuous renegotiation. Consequently, her portrayal of women who embody masculine-coded traits reconfigures gender hierarchies and dismantles the rigid gender binary.

The study adopts a qualitative, text-based analytical methodology to demonstrate the reconfiguration of gender. In *Purple Hibiscus*, the representation of female masculinity is apparent through the character of Auntie Ifeoma, a university professor and widow. Her economic independence, intellectual authority, assertiveness, household headship provide an alternative, non-patriarchal model of domestic governance that directly challenges her brother Papa Eugene's authoritarian, colonial-baptized masculinity. Within Connell's framework, Ifeoma manifests female masculinity by her refusal to assume the passive, subordinate role dictated by traditional Igbo patriarchy and Western Christian dogma. By assuming the role of primary breadwinner, disciplinarian, and political activist, she decouples patriarchal authority from the male body, thereby proving that leadership and rationality are not naturally male attributes.

Unlike Eugene, whose hegemonic authority relies on physical coercion and religious dogmatism, Ifeoma exercises power through open debate, critical thinking, mutual respect and encouragement of individual freedom among her children and their cousins. When Eugene's children, Jaja and Kambili, stay at her house in Nsukka, they are exposed to an alternative perspective on parenting, religious belief and domestic life. She dismantles Eugene's dogmatic teachings by showing them that Papa-Nnukwu is not a pagan, but a traditionalist who adheres Igbo religious practices. Furthermore, she creates an environment where her children discuss politics, combine Catholic prayers with Igbo songs and participate in important family decisions. Unlike Eugene's authoritarian parenting, which silences and disciplines his children, Ifeoma's approach encourages them to think independently and express their opinions freely. Through her parenting, Ifeoma challenges the patriarchal belief that authority must be maintained through fear and unquestioning obedience. Instead, she demonstrates that effective authority can be built on care, communication and mutual respect.

Her assertiveness and refusal to submit to oppressive authority become explicit when her wealthy brother, Papa Eugene, attempts to regulate her lifestyle. Eugene pressures her to abandon her cosmetics and conform to his rigid religious orthodoxy. Despite facing severe economic hardships as a widowed university lecturer, Ifeoma steadfastly rejects his financial conditions and refuses to trade her personal freedom for his material assistance. By defying Eugene's patriarchal authority, she maintains her self-respect and demonstrates female masculinity through her active resistance to hegemonic male authority within the family structure.

Auntie Ifeoma's care for her traditionalist father, Papa-Nnukwu, further illustrates her female masculinity by assuming the filial duty traditionally associated with a son. While Papa Eugene abandons his own father due to his religious fanaticism, Ifeoma steps into this primary caregiving role. When her father becomes seriously ill, she takes him into her home in Nsukka and struggles to obtain a doctor and necessary medicine despite her limited financial resources. She criticizes Eugene's rigid religious practices and his treatment of their father without fear or submission. It is evident in her criticism on Eugene for refusing to take care of their father Papa-Nnukwu who follows Igbo instead of Catholicism.

But you know Eugene quarrels with the truths that he does not like. Our father is dying, do you hear me? Dying. He is an old man, how much longer does he have, *gbo*? Yet Eugene will not let him into this house, will not even greet him... Eugene has to stop doing God's job. God is big enough to do his own job. If God will judge our father for choosing to follow the way of our ancestors, then let God do the judging, not Eugene. (PH 95-96)

Her enactment of female masculinity is further underscored after Papa-Nnukwu's death, when she firmly insists on conducting a traditional Igbo funeral for him. Though Eugene insists her to arrange catholic burial through the parish priest, she refuses to do in order to protect her father's dignity and cultural identity. It is clearly shown in the following lines:

Auntie Ifeoma got up and started to shout. Her voice was unsteady. "I will put my dead husband's grave up for sale, Eugene, before I give our father a Catholic funeral. Do you hear me? I said I will sell Ifediora's grave first! Was our father a Catholic? I ask you, Eugene, was he a Catholic? Uchu gba gi!" Auntie Ifeoma snapped her fingers at Papa; she was throwing a curse at him. Tears rolled down her cheeks. (PH 188 - 189)

By standing her ground and insisting that Papa-Nnukwu be honoured with a traditional Igbo funeral, Ifeoma asserts her ideological independence and assumes the role of head of the family. She refuses to yield to his financial coercion, Ifeoma takes full responsibility for the burial, ensuring her father receives the honour and ancestral rites appropriate for an elder. Through Connell's framework, her defiance during this crisis proves that leadership, moral fortitude, and filial headship are not biological traits tied to the male body, but performative social practices that can be effectively performed by women.

Ifeoma's embodiment of female masculinity extends beyond domestic sphere into the public arena through her courageous resistance against state corruption at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Although the university administration is affected by political interference, corruption and deteriorating working conditions, Ifeoma refuses to remain silent or passively accept autocratic authority. She openly expresses her dissatisfaction, participates in the lecturers' strike and continues to defend the rights and dignity of the academic community, even when such resistance threatens her employment security. Her willingness to challenge institutional power reveals her intellectual independence and moral conviction, and unwavering commitment to socio-political justice.

Thus, Auntie Ifeoma represents a counter-hegemonic form of female masculinity through her alternative model of leadership based on economic independence, intellectual authority, cultural responsibility, ethical courage, filial integrity, and care. Ultimately, her character proves that women can embody masculine authority to challenge patriarchal power and dismantle traditional gender binaries in both household governance and public life.

Thus, Auntie Ifeoma represents a counter-hegemonic form of female masculinity through an alternative model of leadership based on economic independence, intellectual authority, cultural responsibility, ethical courage, filial integrity, and care. Ultimately by uncoupling masculine traits from biological sex, her actions prove that women can embody masculine authority to challenge patriarchal power and dismantle traditional gender binaries in both household governance and public life.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie expands this reconfiguration of gender in *Half of a Yellow Sun* through the characters such as Kainene and Olanna within political turmoil and violence of the Nigerian-Biafran War. Unlike emphasized femininity which often relegates women to decorative or domestic roles, they demonstrate alternative forms of authority through their economic independence, political awareness, emotional resilience and response to the violence of war. Kainene, the twin sister of Olanna, embodies a masculine-coded identity through her assertiveness, business acumen, emotional restraint, and refusal to conform to expectations of feminine domesticity. Her successful management her father's business establishes her as economically independent and professionally authoritative, while her pragmatic temperament distinguishes her from conventional expectations of

feminine emotionality. Her father recognizes her business acumen and acknowledges her performative female masculinity, when he declares: She will oversee everything in the east, the factories and our new oil interest. She has always had an excellent eye for business. ... Kainene is not just like a son, she is like two.” (HYS 31) Kainene’s professional competence to that of a male heir decouples economic power, strategic leadership, and corporate governance from the biological male body.

Kainene’s performance of female masculinity is further underscored through her subversion of traditional gender roles in her intimate relationship with Richard. Richard’s vulnerability and non-hegemonic status sharply contrast with Kainene’s emotional dominance and assertiveness within the private sphere. She approaches their intimacy with pragmatic stoicism and unyielding agency, rather than performing a passive or soothing femininity. Through this dynamic, Kainene further decouples authority, control, and sexual potency from the biological male body, proving that relational dominance in Adichie’s narrative is consistently claimed through female agency.

During the Biafran war, Kainene’s management of a refugee camp and her courage in confronting people in power exemplify her masculine-coded agency and leadership. In a situation marked by displacement, hunger, violence and institutional breakdown, she assumes responsibility for organizing resources, distributing food and responding to the needs of displaced people. Kainene’s practical intelligence, decisiveness, and calm under pressure distinguish her from the conventional image of women as passive wartime victims. Her ability to negotiate with people in power shows female agency rather than inherent male traits. Nevertheless, her agency should not be understood as a mere imitation of male behaviour. Kainene transforms leadership through responsibility and humanitarian concern, using power to protect vulnerable people rather than to dominate them. Thus, Kainene shatters expectations of emphasized femininity and reconfigures gender hierarchies through her courageous, performative female agency.

Olanna’s trajectory demonstrates a complementary, transformative model of female masculinity. Her character does not consistently display the assertiveness associated with Kainene; instead, her masculine-coded agency emerges through resilience, independent decision-making, and her ability to negotiate the disruptions produced by war, displacement, and personal trauma. Though initially framed within the realm of emphasized femininity as a decorative, highly educated daughter of the Igbo bourgeois elite, Olanna deliberately rejects the submissive, transactional expectations of her social class by refusing to let her body be commodified by her family’s political gain.

Olanna’s performance of female masculinity is further manifested in her complex sexual encounter with Richard, Kainene’s partner after discovering her boyfriend Odenigbo’s infidelity with Amala, Odenigbo’s infidelity. The episode disrupts the expectation that women should remain sexually passive, morally pure and governed by the boundaries of romantic loyalty. She claims radical sovereignty over her body and desires by temporarily occupying a position of sexual agency conventionally associated with men. Adichie frames this episode not as a shameful transgression, but as a physical and psychological liberation. This shift is captured in the metaphor of her emotional release: “... it was as if she was throwing shackles off her wrists, extracting pins from her skin, freeing herself with the loud, loud cries that burst out of her mouth. Afterward, she felt filled with a sense of well-being, with something close to grace.” (HYS 234) From a Connellian perspective, Olanna’s action may be read as a disruption of emphasized femininity, yet it does not automatically constitute a fully counter-hegemonic practice. Rather, it highlights the ambivalent nature of female masculinity, which can resist the regulation of women’s sexuality while remaining entangled within unequal interpersonal dynamics.

During the Biafran War, as Odenigbo disintegrates into chronic alcoholism following his mother's death, Olanna steps into the traditionally male role of head of household, provider, and structural protector. She assumes responsibility for the survival of Baby, Ugwu, and Odenigbo himself. She endures long queues for rations, manages scarce resources, and maintains emotional stability under constant bombardment. She also organizes a makeshift primary school in the refugee community, asserting leadership amidst societal disintegration. Olanna’s female masculinity is manifested through her family protection, economic provision, and spatial governance, thereby, demonstrating that women can embody masculine-coded traits that are not inherent attributes of male body.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s narratives expose gender hierarchies as inherently unstable constructs and masculinity is not biologically fixed. Instead, Adichie destabilizes binary gender assumptions that masculine-coded traits are not associated with male bodies. However, her representation of female characters is not mere imitation of male behaviour or reversal of the gender hierarchy. Therefore, female masculinity becomes a form of gender reconfiguration rather than a mere imitation of men.

REFERENCES

- [1] Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Purple Hibiscus*. Fourth Estate, 2003.
- [2] ---. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Fourth Estate, 2006.
- [3] Connell, R. W. *Masculinities*. 2nd ed., University of California Press, 2005.
- [4] Dube, Musa W. “Purple Hibiscus: A Postcolonial Feminist Reading.” *Missionalia*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2018, pp. 222–235.
- [5] Fwangyil, Gloria Ada. “A Reformist-Feminist Approach to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*.” *African Research Review*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2011, pp. 261–274.
- [6] Halberstam, Judith. *Female Masculinity*. Duke University Press, 1998.