

The (un) making of a man: fathers and sons in the African novel

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Abstract

The subject of masculinities is among the relatively unexamined topics in African literature. There have been many discussions of the portrayal of women, but few surrounding the portrayal of men and boys. A look at the literature reveals that African literature has been influential in the forming of masculinities, but also in the critiquing of certain models of masculinity. One of the ways in which this is done is through the portrayal of the process in which fathers teach their sons the performance of masculinity. In this paper, I explore these processes through examining the nature of relationships between fathers and sons in the African novel. My argument is specifically based on four novels: Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Zakes Mda's *The Sculptors of Mapungubwe* (2013), Leila Aboulela's *Lyrics Alley* (2012) and Jennifer Makumbi's *Kintu* (2014). In my reading, I draw from Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity, but also engage with scholarship on masculinities in Africa. This perspective enables me to read the texts as not merely depicting masculinity as a social topic, but also as a means by which the authors create

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tension, establish character development, and entrench, challenge but also suggest new masculinities.

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Introduction

The Holy Bible contains multiple narratives of paternity, going as far back as Genesis. In line with this theme are narratives displaying acceptable and deplorable models of paternity, as well as images of obedient and disobedient sons. The Bible is used to commence this essay in order to highlight the fact that there are numerous narratives in the global canon of literature, both the sacred and the profane, which have utilised the father-son relationship as a basis for constructing instructive and enjoyable texts and stories. African literature is not an exception, starting from its oral roots which, for example from Nigeria, include stories of Ogun and the rest of the Yoruba pantheon. Perhaps this is also reflective of the often mentioned point that literature is a mirror of reality, since we have seen many instances where sons step into the shoes of power formerly occupied by their fathers. In actual situations, too, sons often succeed their fathers in leadership positions, in business or politics – in present and especially in earlier times.

In their book, *African Masculinities: Men in Africa from the Late Nineteenth Century to the Present* (2005), Robert Morrell and Lahoucine Ouzgane make the observation that “in various contexts, masculinity has been represented by Africans in the process of ‘making masculinity’ within the continent” (p. 11). This statement highlights the socially constructed nature of the concept of masculinity, the fact that ways of being men are constantly being created, upheld and challenged in various contexts. This crucial point is linked to the way that, in the current essay where the focus is on the African novel, writers make use of father-son relationships as the basis for creating the narrative that eventually becomes the novel. The relationships are based on, among other things, the reinforcement and/or reconfiguration of dominant masculinities within the societies depicted in the texts. African literature, in both its oral and written forms, has been influential in the forming of masculinities within the continent, but also in the critiquing of certain models of masculinity. One of the

ways in which this is done is through the portrayal of the process by which fathers teach their sons the performance of masculinity. In this paper, I explore these processes through examining the nature of relationships between fathers and sons in certain African novels. My argument is specifically based on four novels: Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Zakes Mda's *The Sculptors of Mapungubwe* (2013), Leila Aboulela's *Lyrics Alley* (2012) and Jennifer Makumbi's *Kintu* (2014). The argument draws from Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity, but also engages with wider scholarship on masculinities in Africa. This perspective enables a reading of the texts as not merely depicting masculinity as a social topic, but also as a means through which the authors create tension, establish character development, and entrench, challenge but also suggest new masculinities.

The choice of texts for this discussion is based on the observation that they represent a trend that is observable in many African narratives. This is a trend where at the social level, we discover instances where fathers act as agents of a special kind of gendered socialisation for their sons, a process where the male children are encouraged to emulate and display a certain form of masculinity, usually in attempts to gain the father's approval. Additionally, at the narrative level, these texts reveal a structural trend where the relationship between the father and the son[s] is a formative element in the development of the plot.

The method that is being proposed in this exercise is not entirely new. Within the field of narratology, which I draw upon, various figures have observed that, in any typical narrative, characters can be classified according to function. The best-known case is that of Vladimir Propp, and his identification of functions in Russian fairy tales. The important thing to note in his analysis is his highlighting of the various functions fulfilled by certain characters in the narrative. In more recent times, we can observe similar argumentation in narratology. In her primer on narratology, for instance, Mieke Bal (2009) tackles this issue in reference to what she calls the flexibility of character function. Bal argues that "most readers tend to 'do' semantic categorization" (2009, p. 127), drawing on character pairs that act as binary opposites. Although she acknowledges that there are problems with this approach, she also notes that such a structuralist principle reflects the expectations of most people when approaching a text. The notion of semantic categorization is particularly useful, as it clearly resonates with this idea of

thinking of a son in relation to a father, and also constructing the narrative with a father in relation to a son.

In the narratives, it is not just the characters alone that are important, but the relationships that exist between them – relationships that, on the one hand, destabilize accepted notions of masculinity, and on the other, affect the narrative structure. According to Bal (2009), readers tend to think of characters as existing in pairs. Perhaps a more accurate way of thinking of them is as constellations, so that we are not limited to just two characters. In the four novels under discussion, fathers and sons should be understood as forming character constellations. Constellations can comprise two or more characters who are related in some fashion (Elder, Jannidis & Schneider, 2010, p. 36). The term is particularly relevant, since these characters appear to form a pattern, shining out from the rest of the crowd of characters. In this case, therefore, the constellation of interest is one that includes the father, and his son[s]. Interestingly, in all the novels under study, this constellation includes a biological son and an adopted son, forming a triangle. What this means is that the influential relationship is not merely that of the father and the sons, but also the one existing between the sons, which may be one of sibling rivalry or affection.

In creating these constellations (or binaries, if one is to adopt a structuralist position), the focus might be on a particular issue, or, in this case, what Bal (2009) calls a semantic axis. In the present case, the relevant axis is that of masculinity, where we have two different poles based on models that are socially accepted (the hegemonic masculinities), as opposed to models that are deemed peculiar because unusual. Bal gives an example – particularly relevant to this discussion – of a farmer (strong, hard-working, strict) who is contrasted with his son (weak, effeminate, artistic, lazy) (2009, p. 128). This form of characterisation ensures that there will be a conflict between the two characters, and other events are to ensue based on this conflict. What the farmer displays is the hegemonic masculinity of that social setting, a model of masculinity that is dominant and often reinforced in social groupings. The reference to the “unmaking” of a man is supposed to reflect the argument that, in these texts, we have moments when the discourse is so structured to challenge these very notions of hegemonic masculinity. In Africa, one dominant form is the “Big

Man” model of masculinity, which is often supported by the father figures in the novels. This is an archetype that, in “pre- and early-colonial [Africa] [...] offered an established and highly desirable form of masculinity” (Holland, 2005, p. 122). In the selected novels, in the very process of unmaking a man, a new masculinity is articulated. The idea of unmaking comes from the understanding that it is those dated, call them conventional, models of masculinity that are being de-centered, making room for new notions of masculinity. And the ones at the centre of this unmaking are often the sons, who are to be applauded for daring to perform masculinities that go against what is taught in their societies.

At the end of the day, however, the African novel does not necessarily make a prescription for masculinity. If one enters the novel looking for a blueprint of African masculinity, one is bound to be left disappointed. After all, as Kopano Ratele (2008, p. 25) observes, even within Africa, we have multiple masculinities. Instead, what one finds there is an indication of a variety of ways of being a man, some of them old, some of them newly emerging.

Okonkwo, Nwoye and Ikemefuna (*Things Fall Apart*)

One of the most memorable lines from *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is Okonkwo’s resolute statement, “This meeting is for men” (Achebe, 1958, p. 19), which he utters as a subtle way of saying men with titles are more masculine than those without in the Umuofia society. The reason this statement has resounded in many a discussion of the novel, is in part due to the fact that it reveals a particular construction of masculinity not only subscribed to by the speaker, but also seemingly supported by the Umuofia society. With this statement as a springboard, we can begin to examine a dominant model of masculinity in the society, and further dissect means by which this masculinity is articulated by various males in the novel.

Equally important are the means by which such a masculinity is transmitted from the older to the younger generation, and the perceived means by which the model encounters challenges, and is itself forced to change, in the text. We can draw upon the society depicted in Achebe’s novel as an example:

In the Umuofia community of *Things Fall Apart*, Igbo men are constrained to achieve and flaunt [male superiority], in order to be seen and respected. To be able to draw upon divergent types of power, men apply different resources during discussions, including the use of irony, riddles, proverbs, sarcasm, jokes, oratory, voice and status, to mention only these few. (Azodo, 2004, p. 50)

The connection between (masculine) power and language is clear from this analysis, and we need to pause and think of the ways in which language becomes a channel not just for the transfer and display of power, but also for the exhibition of a specifically masculine authority. Such a discussion has the potential to take us into extra-textual discussions of the language of the African novel, and return us to the age old argument of whether writing in the western language is itself an emasculating move. Azodo correctly observes that

[In the Umuofia community] each man is known along with his foibles, weaknesses and strengths, all of these attributes and qualities force the kind of personality and/or power he can muster at any gathering. When he speaks, such a man by his gestures, stance, posture and gaze is forced to live up to community expectations without appearing strange or incoherent to himself or his community. (Azodo, 2004, pp. 50-51)

Azodo identifies seven ways in which men construct their identities in the novel: “physical (coercive and ability); economic; knowledge; structural; nurturing; demeanor, and ideological” (2004, p. 52).

In examining fathers and sons in *Things Fall Apart*, it is not just Okonkwo and his sons (including the inherited son Ikemefuna) who are the objects of this study. It is also important to consider the relationship that exists between Okonkwo and his father, Unoka. In this regard, we begin to see the emergence of the constellation that I spoke of earlier. Unoka has been recognized as a key figure in the novel specifically because he acts as a foil to Okonkwo. In fact, he could be regarded as part of the stimulus that leads Okonkwo to develop his specific style of masculinity, which is in direct contrast to Unoka’s. By the time that Unoka died, “he had taken no title at all and was heavily in debt” (Achebe, 1958, p. 6), a great cause of shame to Okonkwo. Indeed, “Okonkwo is transformed into the sombre inversion of his father” (Irele, 2000, p. 10). As

Azodo (2004) observes, “though he did not take any title, for indeed in the eyes of the community he was nothing more than an agbala (a woman), [Unoka] was an accomplished flutist who thrilled gatherings and functioned as an emissary in gay and sorrowful community gatherings” (p. 53). To Azodo, this is a display of artistic power derived from specialist knowledge, such as that of oral literature and music. Unoka’s role in these gatherings, in line with the Butlerian model of performativity, is to perform. In so doing, he retains this role as a masculine figure in the society, albeit one socially placed at the lowest rungs of men.

The character of Unoka in *Things Fall Apart* has drawn attention over the years, as a foil to Okonkwo in a few ways (Lynn, 2017, p. 30). Much as he appears to be vilified in Umuofia, readers of the novel have come to recognize the artistic worth of the character. From the very first moment that he is introduced, Unoka is described in unimpressive terms, easy to misread as the author’s opinion, but which are in actual fact Okonkwo’s views (Sarvan, 1977, p. 155). Furthermore, due to his artistic prowess, Unoka is often thought to represent Achebe (Kortenaar, 2004, p. 783). Unoka is described as someone who wasted his life on merriment, “a failure” (Achebe, 1958, p. 4). In the eyes of Okonkwo, Unoka’s failure to adhere to the standard of masculinity is seen in the fact that he remained “poor and his wife and children had barely enough to eat” (Achebe, 1958, p. 4). In an article, Irele argues that

Unoka can be considered a rebel against the rigidities of society. His unorthodox style of living is a conscious subversion of the manly idea, to which he opposes the values of art, along with a playful irony and an amorality that accords with his relaxed disposition to the world. (Irele, 2000, p. 9-10)

The fourth prong of this constellation is Ikemefuna, and the relationship that he has with Okonkwo. For Emeka Nwabueze (2000), one of the main ways of reading the relationship between Okonkwo and Ikemefuna is to focus on the aspect of dualism. According to him, “[d]ualism seems to appeal to Achebe because it produces a multiplicity of meanings and indeterminate zones of representation that generate narrative invention” (Nwabueze, 2000, p. 164). In a way, he is echoing my point that the relationship between the father and the

son serves as a structural item that advances the plot of the story. It is a key element in the structure that allows us, as readers, to fully concretize a certain aspect of the protagonist's character or personality.

When scholars discuss Ikemefuna in *Things Fall Apart*, the focus is almost inevitably on his death, and its effect on Okonkwo (see Opatá, 1987; Iyasere, 1992; Nwabueze, 2000; Azodo, 2004). For me, this moment is important only in so far as it helps to explain the father-son dynamics between the two characters. Okonkwo is tasked with taking care of Ikemefuna, and comes to care for him as a father (although he will not say this out loud).

Ikemefuna's death can be read in formalist fashion, by relating it directly to plot development and to the structure of the novel. The very act of killing the child because "he was afraid of being thought weak" (Achebe, 1958, p. 43), creates a conflict in the transmission of masculinity. Ikemefuna is supposed to be the recipient of the teaching of masculinity, as Okonkwo's adopted son. In a twisted form of irony, the young man is killed through Okonkwo's display of masculinity.

The third prong in the constellation is Nwoye, Okonkwo's biological son. In the novel, the two of them have a strained relationship, as the father believes that the son is growing into a lazy fellow. In Okonkwo's eyes, "there is too much of his mother in him" (Achebe, 1958, p. 46). His solution to this is "constant nagging and beating" (Achebe, 1958, p. 10). Ikemefuna's death ruins any chance of improvement in the relationship between Okonkwo and Nwoye. The son only finds solace when he adopts Christianity, and adopts the name Isaac (symbolic of another famed father-son relationship). Besides echoing that famous relationship, this name is symbolic of a rebirth (Irele, 2000, p. 14), which importantly carries the suggestion of a fresh relationship. Within Nwoye's new Christian context, perhaps it would not be too much of a stretch to suggest that the new father-figure that he looks up to will be Christ (or perhaps Mr Kiaga or Mr Brown), entailed by this "sign of his release from the constraints of the ancestral universe" (Irele, 2000, p. 10).

Much as the protagonist of the story is Okonkwo, as readers we can choose to read the novel as the story of the young African boy and his relationship with his father. In this regard, the Okonkwo-Nwoye relationship is one which

determines the structure of Nwoye's story. Nwoye's conversion to Christianity is because of action taken by his father, just as Okonkwo's fierce personality is a result of the supposed effeminacy of Unoka.

Zwanga, Rendi and Chata (*The Sculptors of Mapungubwe*)

This multi-pronged constellation can also be observed in Zakes Mda's *The Sculptors of Mapungubwe* (2013), whose setting one critic claims "salutes an early modern, technologically advanced state and economy that existed in the region long before the era of colonization" (Carruthers, 2006, p. 4). The other captivating thing about the novel is its fairy-tale air, which results in the creation of an atmosphere where the presence of magic would not be too surprising. This point is important when we take into account the rain dance which occurs towards the end of the novel, which purportedly brings a long-drawn-out drought to an end. Indeed, the world of myth is very well interwoven with the main story, which centres around two men. As is often the case in many archetypal tales, this is one of men competing over one woman.

The focus in this section is similarly on how Mda employs these two men – Chatambudza (Chata) and Rendani (Rendi) – as expressions of masculinity, but also as key elements in determining the trajectory of the novels' plot. As the title of the novel suggests, sculpting is a key feature of this novel, and indeed one that is key to determining masculinity. However, we see a conflict in the sense that there are competing masculinities in the text, mainly centred on three characters: Zwanga (the father figure), Chatambudza and Rendani. Zwanga serves the role of imparting lessons in masculinity to the two boys. Like Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, Zwanga takes in the young Chata and treats him as his own son, passing on to the two boys his knowledge of sculpture and metallurgy: "When he began to train his son in the rudiments of shaping clay and wood into objects of art, and later in identifying the characteristics of various metals, he included Chata in those lessons" (Mda, 2013, p. 26).

The central point of this constellation is Chata, who is also the protagonist of the story. He is a crucial character in a discussion of contesting masculinities in the sense that in his community, he deliberately chooses to divert from the prescribed masculinity model. We can start with considering the importance of the image of the mirror in the novel. The novel starts with the telling of a story

of how a mirror came to Mapungubwe, and was eventually owned by Chata, the protagonist of the story. Significantly, in a Lacanian sense, we can read this mirror as an item that permits the viewing of the self. It is therefore a way in which the main character can visualise his own masculinity. Indeed we are told that this is a person “whose claim to fame was his bachelorhood” (Mda, 2013, p. 4), among other attributes.

Chata is isolated in several ways, the least of which is his immaculate (read effeminate) presentation. The floor of his home is always glimmering, due to the attention he gives when cleaning it, which “he did [...] with his own hands even though it was regarded as women’s work” (Mda, 2013, p. 4). Indeed, “[m]en often joked about his finicky tidiness” (Mda, 2013, p. 4). The effeminacy that is attributed to Chata’s activities is an important element in reading minor masculinities, which are often not regarded as the societal norm. It might help to look at the origins of Chata’s masculinity. Later in the novel, he confesses before his peers and elders: “What makes me different from the other men of Mapungubwe is that I was taught by my mother how to be a man” (Mda, 2013, p. 78). It is worth pausing to examine this statement a bit more closely. J. U. Jacobs (2015) observes that “Chata’s independence [unlike Rendani’s] is the result of his education by his !Kung mother, who instructed him in the ancient wisdom of her hunter-gatherer people” (Mda, 2013, p. 18). Chata’s admission therefore undermines the role of fathers in passing on accepted models of masculinity to their children. He is in essence saying the marks of masculinity can be taught to boys by a woman. In so doing, not only does he raise the profile of the woman by hinting at her knowledge of masculinity, he is also denying the men their exclusivity as teachers of masculinity. Perhaps more important is the fact that Chata’s mother is acknowledged by the entire Mapungubwe community as an outsider. His uplifting of her position as teacher therefore ascribes authority to her outsider position – there is a form of authority possessed by the !Kung woman, which the menfolk in Mapungubwe do not have.

Chata is an outsider in more ways than his display of this unusual masculinity. He is said to be “born of the Vhasarwa people” (Mda, 2013, p. 9), and his mother is a !Kung woman. In introducing this element into *The Sculptors of Mapungubwe*, Mda comments on the long history of one of the persistent

problems that have dogged African societies – ethnicity. In this particular case, ethnicity is used as a determinant for masculinity. A man of Vhasarwa lineage, in Mapungubwe, is regarded as an undesirable sort. Indeed, the reflection of this position is found in the modern day, when skin colour is used to determine hegemonic masculinities.

In the Mapungubwe society, this prescription of gender roles brings a form of harmony, where every person knows their role. Chata's position therefore raises questions among those who view him as an oddity: "How did a man survive without a woman in his life? Leaving aside the lack of conjugal pleasures, how did he manage to go through his day cooking for himself and cleaning up after himself?" (Mda, 2013, p. 18). Such a position may be considered controversial from a feminist point of view, but in Mapungubwe, the norm is that a woman should perform these prescribed duties. A man who chooses to defy the prescriptions of the society is therefore deemed an aberration.

As a father figure, Zwanga is responsible for the moulding of his children into men, but his approach has some negative effects. For example, he tasks the more knowledgeable Chata to teach Rendi how to hunt.

Unfortunately, he did not put it that way. He said, "Teach him how to be a man." This left Rendi feeling very small and absolutely mortified; he was obviously not a man in his father's eyes. (Mda, 2013, p. 34)

Only at the end of the novel, long after Zwanga's death, is it revealed that he was Chata's biological father. This creates a mixture of emotions in Chata, with the dominant one being anger. He expresses the same to the woman who reveals the truth to him:

"The man never acknowledged me."

"He treated you like a son."

"And pretended it was charity. I don't want to be treated like a son; I want to *be* a son. He can keep his charity." (Mda, 2013, p. 188)

The desire for paternal approval is one we find in a number of novels, including *Things Fall Apart*, *Lyrics Alley*, *Kintu*, and many others. We constantly have sons who seek the approval of their fathers, and go to various lengths to attain this appreciation, which is not always guaranteed. This particular pattern is what the writers employ as a plot construction device, which as I observed, is indeed quite archetypal. As Harry Sewlall (2016) observes, “[w]hen Chata discovers that his real father is Zwanga [...], he begins to feel his alterity acutely, more so because Zwanga had failed to acknowledge him publicly as his son” (p. 33). Therefore, Chata’s narrative depends to a certain extent on the attention that he receives from Zwanga.

Zwanga, Chata and Rendani therefore form a character constellation in the novel. Taking this frame into mind, it can easily be seen how the rivalry between Chata and Rendani is what drives most of the plot. A lot of Rendani’s actions in the narrative are designed to frustrate Chata, out of the belief that Chata is the favoured one; he is driven to always prove himself better than Chata. This includes the declaration that nobody except the King should wear silk. It is claimed that by doing so, Chata stops rain from coming to the village. Even after Zwanga’s death, Rendi’s hatred for Chata drives him to further extremes, including the ordering of Chata’s house to be broken into under the guise of the King’s orders.

A pattern that begins to emerge in the novels discussed so far is that the character constellation rarely remains stable up to the end of the narrative. This is a complex relationship fraught with strong emotions, and it is not unusual to see it end in death in some cases, as illustrated in Jennifer Makumbi’s *Kintu*, discussed next.

Kintu, Balema and Kalema (*Kintu*)

Jennifer Makumbi’s *Kintu* (2014) is a novel that spans several generations. It begins in 1750, and ends in the 21st century, tracing a particular family lineage, and the persistence of a curse that dogs family members over many years. For this paper, my interest lies in the very first section of the story, which details events that occur in 1750. For this section of the story, Makumbi draws on the Kintu myth from among the Buganda.

Kintu supports the argument that sometimes, fathers are unable to form bonds with their true sons, but instead form them with other, surrogate children. The main character in this section of the story, Kintu, grudgingly forms a relationship with a surrogate son, Kalema. Kalema is the biological son of Ntwire, a *munnarwanda*. In this regard, *Kintu* shares with *The Sculptors of Mapungubwe* this focus on the external figure – he who does not belong, by virtue of being of a different ethnicity or race. From childhood, Kalema forms a relationship with Baale, Kintu’s real son, again creating an early constellation in the novel, one which involves these three central figures.

For clarity, the constellation comprises four male characters, which are two father-son pairs: Kintu and Baale; Ntwire and Kalema. The first complication arises in the adoption of Kalema by Kintu. This creates a triangular constellation very much like the one observed in *The Sculptors of Mapungubwe*. It is a relationship fraught with unease, for two reasons. The first is grounded in the tribal hierarchies of the land, where Kintu, being a Ganda, is regarded as being of a superior ethnicity. Ntwire, on the other hand, is a Tutsi, a tribe that is frowned upon by the dominant Ganda. Secondly, Ntwire’s decision to let his son live in Kintu’s household has the repercussion of alienation for him. We are told in the text that “while Kalema blended into Kintu’s vast household, Ntwire hovered on the peripheries of the community” (Makumbi, 2014, p. 27), very much an isolated figure. Ntwire’s position as a father is therefore usurped from the start, a point that only becomes more evident with the tragedy that befalls his son.

In all the novels considered here, one can sympathise with the older men for their awareness of the expectation that society has of them. Some men are unable to live up to this social expectation. At the beginning of the novel, Makumbi gives us a glimpse at Kintu’s thoughts on the matter, having seen the misfortune of a colleague: “He knew the snare of being a man. Society heaped such expectations on manhood that in a bid to live up to them some men snapped” (Makumbi, 2014, p. 24). The fact that some men ‘snap’ should be an indication that it is wrong to make such a prescription for all, that not all men can engage in this performance meant to produce “an abiding gendered self” (Butler, 1988, p. 519). However, the implication that is given in the text is that

the social expectation of masculinity is so strong that no man dares to veer from it.

Like the other novels, there is therefore the single figure of the adult man, who has to pass on lessons to two sons, one adopted, the other biological. If we consider these two sons as a binary, then we notice that, in most narratives, the two sons will have different fates (two other relevant Biblical examples are the Cain and Abel, and Esau and Jacob pairs). The most crucial event in the story occurs when Kintu takes Kalema on a trip to the capital, where the child may have hopes for securing work. On their way, the party stops to rest, and Kalema makes the mistake of drinking from Kintu's gourd. In retaliation, Kintu slaps him. The action of slapping the child, for daring to drink from an elder's gourd, is one that is taken as a form of chastisement. It is meant to be one among many lessons to be imparted to the child in crossing *o Lwera*, the harsh desert. Unfortunately, it is a lesson that goes wrong. Upon being struck, Kalema falls into an epileptic fit, and dies.

The second prong of my argument is that the father-son relationships are crucial in determining the narrative path of the story. The epic truth of this argument in *Kintu* is seen in the fact that Kalema's death leads to the curse placed upon Kintu, by Ntwire. The curse stays with the family for many generations, until its eventual exorcism in 2004. The entire plot of the novel is therefore based on the consequences of a relationship between two fathers and a son. The novel traces ways in which this curse remains with the family, leading to a series of misfortunes.

Nur, Nassir and Mahmoud Bey (*Lyrics Alley*)

Aboulela's *Lyrics Alley* (2010) was selected for this analysis again primarily due to the father-son relationship that exists in the novel. But there is an additional angle that makes this novel particularly crucial to this paper. That is the point that in the text, the central patriarchal figure is a man who appears to value his sons based on their bodily performances. In other words, bodily performativity is a crucial standard for defining masculinity in the text. Consequently, the existence of disability as a variable makes the novel particularly crucial in reading articulations of, and challenges to, existing models of masculinity. The central relationship in the text is between the

patriarch, Mahmoud Bey, a wealthy businessman in Sudan, and his two sons, Nassir and Nur, older and younger respectively.

In this text, the relationship between fathers and sons is crucial because the praise of his father is part of what drives Nur to succeed in life. He is driven by the need to marry as his father has determined, and to take over the family business. He is a real chip off the old block. This same need for acceptance from his father is part of what makes the story tragic once he becomes disabled in a diving accident, upon which the father's adulation disappears.

Nassir, on the other hand, seems to have given up the attempt to gain his father's praise, and is therefore driven by other pleasures in life. This paradoxically makes him a much more liberated character, despite the scorn in the eyes of his father. He is the one person that, at a very early stage in the narrative, chooses not to define himself according to the patriarchal frame of their society, in which Mahmoud Bey is an imposing figure.

Like the other novels considered in this paper, it becomes evident that, for the characters in *Lyrics Alley*, masculinity is not a private affair, but instead very much a social one. One's performance of masculinity is therefore expected to conform with social norms/codes. One of the frames that is employed to articulate masculinity is the religious frame. In this society, the ideal man must not only be able-bodied, but must also be a practising Muslim. In this regard, the paterfamilias of the Abuzeid family is (at least in the eyes of the society) the ideal man. In this initial frame, Mahmoud Bey fits the model of the "Big Man" masculine figure. He is a successful businessperson, has two wives, and has children with those two wives. Perhaps even more important is the fact that these children include sons.

This is the idea that he is meant to pass on to his two sons. For me, this relationship is crucial. The eldest son is a drunk, and proved to be quite irresponsible. As a result, the father decides to focus on the younger son, Nur, as the one who is to run the family business. After all, Nur has displayed all the preferred qualities of the growing masculine figure. He is a brilliant student at school, and is also captain of the football team. His actions in the first half of the book (prior to his disability) are therefore governed by a desire to fit into this frame that his father (and the rest of society) has created for him. He can

see no other way out of it. In a way, therefore, conventional masculinities can have an imprisoning effect, as young men hardly realize that there are alternative ways of articulating their masculinities. One can therefore observe how the narrative – at least at this early stage – is determined by the young man’s desire to please his father.

The narrative changes when the son becomes disabled. In his father’s eyes, he is no longer worthy of becoming his heir. The father-son relationship is still there, but its nature has changed. The son realizes that he can no longer pursue the model of masculinity defined by his father. Instead, he must articulate his own. And what is the basis for this model of masculinity? It is poetry.

In pursuing this model, the son – at least at the mental level – unsettles the rigid model of masculinity based on able-bodied anatomy, and makes room for a new model that acknowledges artistic expression. This is a model that is reflected by Chinua Achebe’s *Unoka* and many other artists living and breathing in the pages of literature.

It is little wonder then that Robert Morrell and Lahoucine Ozgane (2005) suggest that in the representation of masculinities, narratives have the potential to portray new forms of masculinity, and to challenge entrenched forms of masculinity (p. 11).

Conclusion

In closing this discussion, the words of Desmond Lesejane, come to mind. He observes: “Once respected in African culture(s) as a man of wisdom, good judgement, care and consideration, the father today is an object of suspicion” (2006, p. 173). As the foregoing discussion has illustrated, this suspicion sometimes comes from the sons, who are often the recipients of the approved form of masculinity. But it is not necessarily a bleak turn of events. The instability that may exist within literary representations of paternal and fraternal relationships is part of what makes these stories apt representations of the human condition, where the status quo is not always one of harmony. Therefore, it is part of what makes the narratives interesting to readers of the novel as a genre. Drawing on examples from four African novels, this paper has examined how father-son relationships are a common narrative anchor in the genre.

Relationships of patrilineality and fraternity appear as recurrent narrative patterns, into which the authors often insert other common thematic concerns. Many other novels, not examined in this paper, also display this feature. However, it is obviously not the only narrative feature. There are many novels, for instance, which explore relationships among female characters, or between genders. Rather than creating a limited reading of the texts, what this gestures towards is the rich potential for interpretative paradigms to which the African novel, and indeed narratives from other parts of the globe, may be subjected to. It shows the wealth of productivity that continues to characterise the genre, and will indeed continue to do so for years to come.

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