



Unmaking Boundaries: Gender and the Nigerian Literary Imagination

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Abstract. Unmaking Boundaries: Gender and the Nigerian Literary Imagination is a publication that examines how Tomi Adeyemi's novel *Children of Virtue and Vengeance*, a fantasy action-adventure novel, un-makes, enumerates, and reconfigures patriarchal narratives as dictated by Western social norms. Adeyemi, who writes with expressive, poetic language, challenges and redefines traditional roles attributed to male rulers. The research posits that decolonial feminist methods anchored in Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí's pivotal work and the historical suppression of indigenous epistemologies have been instrumental in reimagining African literature. Through intensive qualitative analysis, the paper identifies complex female leadership roles such as Zélie and Amari, whose paths cross traditional boundaries and offer different visions of power and agency in Nigerian literature. It also notes that aspects of masculinity are touched upon. Characters like Inan and Roën elucidate inconsistencies associated with the conventional patriarchal era and the possibilities of fluid reimagining. With comparative analyses of classical and contemporary works written in Nigeria, the article places Adeyemi's novel within the larger literature discourse about reclaiming indigenous mythologies and exploring colonial roots.

Keywords: Unmaking, Boundaries, Decolonial Feminism, Indigenous Epistemologies.

1. Introduction

Nigeria is a country of people whose histories are marked by deep patriarchal institutional systems that impose rigid social ranks, influence cultural, political, and economic policy, and promote traditional gender norms. The patriarchal system has traditionally developed rigid gender roles and subordinated women and has limited the scope and utility of alternative identities. However, Nigerian literature is becoming a powerful forum for innovating alternatives to the traditional patriarchal structures. Tomi Adeyemi's

novel *Children of Virtue and Vengeance* exemplifies how literary imagination can challenge patriarchal norms and, ultimately, reconfigure them. The literary imagination in Nigeria is simultaneously rich with historical memory and myth in contemporary society and pulls from a vast range of oral traditions, folklore, and indigenous narratives that speak about various visions of gender and social organisation. Yet, the legacy of colonialism and the engendered system of patriarchal values have sometimes suppressed these diverse approaches. Against this background, Adeyemi's narrative is revolutionary, and it vividly reflects the reality of Nigerian society with a patriarchal structure while boldly envisioning a world where gender is plural, multilayered, and emancipatory. She creates a counter-story against traditional discourses that have traditionally stigmatised non-traditional gender expressions and spaces.

This research focuses on four questions, which offer a theoretical basis for the study: How does Adeyemi's narrative test the entrenched patriarchal structures that have shaped Nigerian society for centuries? What literary practices does Adeyemi adopt to shatter these conventions and resurrect alternatives? In addition, how is her imaginative reconfiguration of gender critically framed in the past, and what is the potential for future societal change anticipated by it? This paper seeks to contribute to understanding the variety of ways literature can function as a forum for resistance to oppressive regimes and open new avenues for cultural and social renewal. At its core, the research is concerned with decolonial feminist theory, one that challenges the imposition of Western gender categories and advocates a return to indigenous epistemologies of gender. The theoretical basis for this study is an approach that would be particularly appropriate to Adeyemi's work because it allows for a more in-depth examination of how gender is conceptualised within a particular cultural and historical setting. The research draws on the critical

and influential work of Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí, who has critically examined the enactment of rigid gender categories in African societies in order to demonstrate the possibility of fluidity and multiplicity of gender identities. The critical antipathy drawn to Western notions of gender and the proponent of indigenous understandings of gender serve as an important counterpoint to the dominant narratives that have long dominated literature and society.

The narrative format and language of Adeyemi's novel *Children of Virtue and Vengeance* are particularly successful here. The novel presents a vision of gender that is both transformative and subversive: an oppositional vision of gender that, as the author herself is apt to point out in her essay, challenges the binary images of the masculine and feminine that have been dominant in Nigerian (and colonial) conceptions of gender. *Children of Virtue and Vengeance* provides a new vision of an imagined space where gender roles are deconstructed and restructured into a more inclusive and dynamic framework. Adeyemi's novel also has a particular meaning on multiple levels. Adeyemi's novel represents a world in Nigeria, the country where influences of colonialism and patriarchy still exist despite many changes. It is also a dreamy work that looks ahead towards a future in which restrictive gender norms are no longer an obstacle to liberation and growth. For its inspiration, Adeyemi draws on Indigenous mythology and interrogates previously written histories to create a space for alternative gender identities to be born and flourish in Nigeria.

As Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí put it, the theoretical analysis that underlies this work is decolonial feminist theory. This article attempts to contribute to ongoing debates in Nigerian literary criticism and gender studies by examining how literature can dramatically impact social change. By approaching the topic from the perspective of decolonial feminist theory and working primarily with one pioneering text, the paper demonstrates how literary imagination can break down rigid boundaries and open a more inclusive and dynamic notion of gender. *Unmaking Boundaries: Gender and the Nigerian Literary Imagination* challenges the patriarchal status quo in literature and culture and posits an optimistic future where literature and culture are agents of profound change.

2. Early Depictions of Gender in Nigerian Literature

Gender in Nigerian literature has always been a tangled, multilayered topic, as reflected by the nature of the nation's sociocultural landscape and its

evolution over time. A historically patriarchal society, Nigerian society remained unnaturally male-dominated and built upon customary norms to rein in masculinity and set specific gender roles for its women. Contemporary research on the destabilisation of prescribed gender norms is on the rise. One such study, by Anigala (2024), claims that globalisation and modernity have pushed the boundary between what is considered a norm and what is socially prescribed. Over time, Nigerian literature has become an effective tool for questioning such entrenched systems, portraying a variety of women's experiences and pushing questions over the roots of gender representations.

Written mainly by men, early Nigerian literature portrays women's roles as confined to the margins, not bearing much evidence of their active influence over culture. Patriarchy is a breeding ground for toxic masculinity (Eguvwebere & Ilo, 2021). In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), for example, female characters usually occupy the dingy middle ground roles in a culture that is deeply patriarchal and hierarchical: their roles (and contribution) are largely overlooked by the dramaturgy of the male narrative; in the novel, women are not seen as significant figures in culture, they remain peripheral and the subject of less-than-positive media coverage. They do not gain traction in this way because the male narrative is dominant. The female character's role appears essentially limited in early Nigerian literature, but often, it is implicit. Many early novels and short stories focused on developing Nigeria's economic, political, and cultural space. Women were significantly absent from traditional politics and social life. As a result, the development of Nigeria's national narrative was reduced both as an organic whole and as a system in which women's voice was suppressed.

3. Advent of Female Voices and Feminist Narratives

The years between the 1960s and 1970s were remarkable for Nigerian female writers, who produced influential works. Among these were *Efuru* (1966) by Flora Nwapa and *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) by Buchi Emecheta. *Efuru* dealt with Nigerian women's roles, specifically the role of the mother and daughter. Its main character, Efuru, is an independent woman. The novel raised questions about issues of gender identity in a patriarchal society and how women were expected to conform to various types of social norms. Buchi Emecheta's novel is about women's roles in relation to family and husbands and their sacrifices. Nnu Ego, the protagonist, poses the tensions between traditional roles and her desires and aspirations in a

patriarchal society. The novel examined mothers and social expectations on women. Nnu Ego represents women's struggles in a patriarchal society. A critic claimed that Emecheta's narrative suggests that societal structures restrict a woman's ability to produce children. Women are required to be child bearers first, individuals at the second level (Ikpapi, 2024). This critique calls for revaluing cultural norms and customs forming the basis for women's subjugation. They challenged the monolithic portrayals of women, introducing complexity and depth to female characters and asserting the necessity of women's voices in the national discourse.

In contemporary society, Nigerian literature has witnessed an expansion in the exploration of gender, moving beyond the binary constructs of male and female to interrogate the fluidity and performativity of gender identities. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's works, notably *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), provide varied relevant examinations of gender roles, power dynamics, and the connections of personal and political identities. Adichie's narratives often feature female protagonists who challenge societal norms, asserting their agency in environments that seek to suppress it. Her recent novel, *Dream Count* (2025), continues this trajectory, exploring the lives of African women navigating challenges across continents and addressing themes from menstruation and genital mutilation to sexual assault and societal pressures related to marriage and motherhood. Contemporary literature has also begun to engage more with topics of gender fluidity and the deconstruction of old gender hierarchies. This trend is in line with today's global discourses on gender and sexuality, a step toward more inclusive and diverse representations of people of colour; authors are increasingly examining the structures of masculinity and femininity, looking at how their identities are performed, negotiated, and resisted within the Nigerian context.

4. Theoretical Framework: Decolonial Feminism and Indigenous Epistemologies

On the question of gender in Nigerian literature, there is a need for a theoretical framework that takes into consideration the socio-cultural and historical background of the region, which the theory of decolonial feminism can describe; it recognises the importance of indigenous knowledge systems and opposes the imposition of Western gender constructs on African societies. In *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (1997), Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyèwùmí raises the question of the universality of Western notions of

gender, arguing that pre-colonial Yoruba societies did not share the binary gender relations articulated in Western thought. Such radical and implausible epistemologies that colonialism brought to the fore established an alien system of classes and gender relations within African social structures that were, in turn, subverting the order of social relations in peculiar ways. This approach is vital when studying contemporary Nigerian literature since it shows how to conceptualise gender within indigenous contexts. By reiterating arguments such as the rejection of Western gender binaries, consideration of indigenous epistemologies, the intersectionality of gender with race and class, and narrative as a form of resistance, this theoretical framework will lend itself to analysis grounded in existing feminist theory while highlighting Adeyemi's innovative reimagining of gender. Accepting that foreign gender relations were historically applied in Nigeria, scholars and writers can recognise and articulate Nigeria's fluid and complex gender system. The colonial legacy can be deconstructed through such an approach, and indigenous identity and social organisation can be reclaimed and revitalised.

5. Tomi Adeyemi's Contribution to Gender Discourse

Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Virtue and Vengeance* (2019) represents a contemporary engagement with these themes, utilising the fantasy genre to explore and subvert traditional gender roles. Set in a richly imagined world inspired by West African (Yoruba) culture and mythology, the novel (book two of the trilogy: *The Legacy of Orisha*) features characters who challenge conventional notions of power, leadership, and identity.

This article addresses the intersectionality of gender with other critical dimensions, such as race, class, and colonial history. This multilayered theory is deemed necessary to understand the construction and representation of gender in Nigerian literature. By placing gender in a larger social and historical frame, it deduces the interconnectedness of different identities and forms of power. It is also concerned with this theoretical aim, according to Oyèwùmí's propositions, which advocate that gender is contextualised in indigenous epistemologies that oppose Western hegemony. It should be said, with certain limitations, that it is crucial to remember that the investigation involved is primarily interpretative and qualitative, dependent on the subjective interpretations of the researcher. At the same time, every effort is made to maintain objectivity; the interpretive nature of textual analysis predisposes to some degree of subjective interpretation. In addition,

as the study is conducted on one primary text, *Children of Virtue and Vengeance*, generalisation of the findings may not be possible. However, considering these limitations, the analysis is framed within a larger theoretical and comparative framework in which many sources and points of view are considered.

5.1 Analysis of *Children of Virtue and Vengeance*

Children of Virtue and Vengeance (2019) by Tomi Adeyemi submits a vigorous and complex reimagination of gender roles within the framework of Nigerian literary traditions and African-inspired fantasy. As the sequel to *Children of Blood and Bone*, the novel explores power, resistance, and identity while challenging the patriarchal structures historically defining leadership and heroism. This analysis focuses on three key aspects: the representation of female agency and leadership, the deconstruction of patriarchal power, and the intersectionality of gender, race, and colonial history within the novel.

5.2 Female Agency and Leadership in the Orïshan World

One of the best elements of *Children of Virtue and Vengeance* is that women are at the forefront of all things—both in leadership and war. Zélie Adebola and Amari Olubori (female protagonists) offer powerful portrayals of female agency under pressure in a society favouring men as rulers and warriors. Moreover, in contrast to the female roles commonly associated with Nigerian literature, where women are characters like mothers, wives, or passive participants in society, Adeyemi presents female characters who shape their surroundings, fight, and have tough political choices to face. Zélie, a diviner-turned-magi (a Reaper), embodies a revolutionary spirit that disrupts traditional power dynamics. Throughout the novel, her character develops significantly, evolving from an oppressed girl seeking justice to a formidable leader who must make strategic, sometimes ruthless, choices. Unlike earlier portrayals of women in Nigerian literature—such as Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958), where women essentially function within a male-dominated society—Zélie does not merely support a male protagonist’s journey; she drives the narrative forward. Her struggle to unite the magi and navigate the betrayals within her ranks highlights the complexities of leadership, particularly as a woman in a world structured by oppression. Likewise, Amari, a princess from an oppressive monarchy, challenges the gendered expectations imposed on her. Initially introduced in *Children of Blood and Bone* as a

privileged yet sympathetic figure, Amari evolves into a warrior-queen aiming to dismantle her family’s legacy of tyranny. Her transformation from a sheltered noblewoman to a leader willing to wield power disrupts traditional notions of femininity and leadership. Her journey mirrors real-life Nigerian female political figures who defy societal norms to assert their authority. Amari’s internal conflict—balancing compassion with war’s brutal necessities—deepens her character, offering a nuanced exploration of female leadership beyond the simplistic strong-versus-weak binary.

In Tomi Adeyemi’s novel *Children of Virtue and Vengeance*, the bonding of women with each other and as leaders is beautifully illustrated by Zélie and Amari, two girls who share a journey set against the backdrop of the world wrought by tragedy, loss, and struggle. Zélie, the teenage protagonist, has had a hard life. King Saran’s men killed her mother, and she also lost her father in her quest. Burdened with the responsibility of restoring magic and leading the maji, she does not give in to this worry and struggle. Nevertheless, when she says, ‘I can’t be expected to carry the burden of my people forever’ (Adeyemi, 2019, p. 11), she presents a stark yet earnest expression of her massive pressure. However, Zélie continues to commit to her people as she continues this mission. She passionately asserts the cultural significance of their magic: “Our magic isn’t about the war!” Zélie shouts. “Our incantations are the history of our people. They’re the very thing your father tried to destroy!” (Adeyemi, 2019, p. 118)

This declaration emphasises her dedication to preserving their heritage and resisting oppression. She also tries to unite her people, reminding them, “When the elders built this place, it was only bare mountaintops... It became a home because they built it together. This land, these temples—they’re not what matters. As long as we have each other, we will carry Orïsha in our veins. No one can ever take that away” (p. 285). Confronted with adversity, lifting her chin, Zélie asserts, “We’re the children of the gods... If someone’s running away, it’s not going to be us” (p. 364). This proclamation reflects her resilience and determination to lead her people despite overwhelming challenges. When Zélie falters in her convictions, afraid to walk her destined path alone, Mama Agba bolsters her, proclaiming, “You are the children of the gods. You shall never be alone” (p. 377).

Amari’s transformation from a sheltered princess to a proactive leader is equally compelling. She proves

that she is not all talk, but she also had a willingness to sacrifice for her vision:

Father used to say that Orisha waits for no one.

No man. No king.

They were the words he used to justify any action. An excuse to excuse everything.

As the flames around Baba's casket burn before me, the sword I sent through my own father's chest hangs heavy in my belt. Saran's body was never recovered from the ritual grounds. (2019, p. 6).

Determined to rectify her family's wrongs, she envisions a united Orisha, outlining the way magic could be used for the benefit of the people and proclaiming her vision:

"Think of how Grounders could farm our land. How teams of Tiders could cut the work of fishermen in half,"... "Wielders could erect new cities in days. Healers could ensure those we love don't perish from wounds or sickness!"

...

"Under my rule, this will be a land where even the poorest villagers are fed, housed, and clothed. A kingdom where everyone is protected, where everyone is accepted! The divisions of the past are over!" A new Orisha is on the horizon!" (2019, p. 33)

Her vision reflects a commitment to inclusivity and justice. Amari also seeks to inspire unity among her people, encouraging them to fight together, claiming, "Why run...Let us rise!...Let's band together and end this war! Together we can win! Gba nkàn wa padà!...Take back what's ours" (p. 286). This sentiment accentuates her belief in collective strength and resilience.

In a moment of self-doubt, Amari receives guidance from Mama Agba, who tells her, "You are not your mistakes... Do not let one moment define or destroy you. The gods work in mysterious ways. Have faith in their greater plan" (p. 379). This counsel empowers Amari to embrace her leadership role, emphasising growth and perseverance.

These excerpts showcase the protagonists' struggles, convictions, and unwavering dedication to their people's welfare. Adeyemi's depiction of female leadership aligns with decolonial feminist perspectives, particularly Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí's argument that Western gender constructs were imposed onto African societies through colonialism (Oyèwùmí, 1997). In many pre-colonial African societies, leadership and power were not strictly divided along gender lines, and Adeyemi's reimagining of the Orishan world reflects this historical reality. By positioning women as rulers, warriors, and strategists, *Children of Virtue and Vengeance* deconstructs colonial patriarchal structures and reclaims indigenous narratives of female power.

5.3 Deconstructing Patriarchal Power and Masculinity

While Adeyemi foregrounds female leadership, she critically examines masculinity and patriarchal power structures. One of the central antagonists in the novel is King Saran's son, Inan, who struggles with conflicting loyalties between his father's oppressive regime and his desire to create a more just society. Inan's character represents the internalised contradictions of patriarchal power, embodying its destructive tendencies and potential for reform. However, his inability to fully embrace change ultimately reinforces the rigidity of patriarchal structures. Inan's wavering allegiances and hesitations contrast sharply with Zélie and Amari's decisive actions, underscoring the novel's critique of traditional masculinity. Even when he appears to have won a battle, he cannot still feel victorious because he is unsure of his decisions. This is noticeable in chapter seventy-eight when his mother informs him that his plan to capture the "maggots" (magic wielders) worked:

I try to feel the victory...It's over. Done.

The war is won

But tears rise to my eyes as I squeeze my gut...

"We're poison" (2019, p. 355)

Unlike classic male heroes in Nigerian literature—such as Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, who embodies hyper-masculinity and equates strength with emotional suppression—Inan's journey reflects the limitations of patriarchal ideology. His failure to break free from his father's oppressive legacy suggests that actual change cannot come from within the existing patriarchal system but must be radically reimagined. This failure is evident when Inan reflects on his actions: "I finally see my truth. I wanted to be the king my father couldn't be. All I did was finish his work" (p. 356).

Another important male character, Roën, is an alternative model of masculinity. Unlike Inan, Roën does not seek to uphold or reclaim a lost patriarchal order; instead, he operates outside traditional power structures as a mercenary. His willingness to support Zélie without attempting to dominate or undermine her leadership challenges conventional gender dynamics. Roën challenges Zélie's perception of herself, emphasising her strength and resilience:

No one ever asks, but you're here. You're here when so many people aren't...You survived the Raid. The guards. You survived the wrath of a King. You're not a victim, Zélie. You're a survivor! Stop running away! (2019, p. 326).

In many ways, Roën represents a more fluid and adaptable masculinity, one that aligns with feminist redefinitions of male roles in society.

5.4 Intersectionality: Gender, Race, and Colonial Legacies

The novel engages with intersecting themes, demonstrating how gender oppression intertwines colonial and racial histories. The oppression of the magi in Orisha mirrors historical and contemporary racial injustices, particularly those of colonial Nigeria and postcolonial situations. Here, the monarchy symbolises the oppressor, while the magi, the oppressed, as Zélie states:

Eleven years ago... I lost my mother and my home. We lost our magic! ...the monarchs have brought nothing but death and destruction to our streets... They've taken our magic. Our homes. Those we love most. No more! They are Orisha's past. We are Orisha's future! (2019, p. 364).

The monarchy's efforts to suppress the magi's magic can be read as a metaphor for the colonial erasure of indigenous African cultures and belief systems. This aligns with the arguments of postcolonial feminists, who emphasise that gender cannot be analysed in isolation from colonial histories (Mohanty, 1988). Zélie's description as a dark-skinned magi further supports this intersectional analysis. The experiences of discrimination that Zélie has had within the magi community as well as outside of it mirror what Black women have to deal with in societies of racial and gendered oppression. An ideal example is when Zélie sees the maji culture's appropriation by non-maji persons and confronts them. She passionately asserts that "Yoruba is sacred to our people. It's not just something you can learn." Angry that non-maji individuals have stolen their magic, they now want their language. She reiterates, "You can't steal this, too" (2019, p. 118). This claim highlights her frustration at the loss and commodification of her culture, in part reflected in the wider struggle against systemic oppression that attempts to marginalise and 'coerce' the identity of Black women. This representation resonates with African feminist scholars such as Oyèwùmí, who argue that colonialism introduced new layers of oppression that did not previously exist in indigenous African societies. Zélie's internal struggle with her magical powers symbolises the burden of having a marginalised identity, for which she describes her subsequent resurgence of magic as:

The moment magic breathes under my skin, I can't find my voice...I stumble back as magic bubbles inside me. My legs go numb. Magic shackles me to my

past, dragging me under despite how hard I pull— (2019, p.3).

The metaphor of magic as 'a gift that strengthens but also is burdensome' represents the truthfulness of having one's identity as a force for strength and a target of discrimination. With an added linguistic layer, Adeyemi transforms Yoruba mythology and literature to regain Indigenous African epistemic authority that no longer sees its share in Eurocentric fantasy narratives. This is evident as Yoruba traditions, chants, and incantations litter the text. One notable example is in chapter eighty-one, when the people chant "Down with the monarchy" in Yoruba: "Mowà pèlu olú ọba!" five times. The characters pray to the gods of Yoruba, specifically "Oya" for Zélie. At other times, no English translation (Zélie is given the title of "Jagunjagun Ikú" by the people after she raises the dead- p. 363) promotes the Nigerian indigenous language. By grounding her fantasy world in African traditions, she offers an alternative to Western-dominated speculative fiction, much in the vein of Africanfuturism. This literary movement seeks to centre African cultural perspectives in speculative storytelling (Onye-Amah, 2022). This reimagining of fantasy through an African lens serves as a form of resistance against both cultural imperialism and patriarchal oppression.

5.5 Unmaking Boundaries in the African Literary Imagination

Through its intricate portrayal of female leadership, critique of patriarchal masculinity, and engagement with intersectional themes, *Children of Virtue and Vengeance* exemplifies the ongoing transformation of gender narratives in Nigerian literature. Adeyemi's novel not only challenges traditional gender binaries but also reclaims indigenous perspectives on power and identity, aligning with decolonial feminist frameworks. The novel unpacks the multiple layers of oppression that shape contemporary Nigerian and African literary imaginations by centring on Black female protagonists, integrating Yoruba cultural elements, and critiquing colonial legacies.

In doing so, *Children of Virtue and Vengeance* contributes to the broader discourse on gender in African literature, offering a radical reimagining of what leadership, power, and resistance can look like. Though set in a fantasy world, Adeyemi's work speaks to real-world struggles for gender equality, racial justice, and decolonisation, making it a significant text in contemporary Nigerian literary studies.

The analysis of *Children of Virtue and Vengeance* has revealed how Tomi Adeyemi's narrative functions not

only as a work of fantasy but also as a transformative intervention in the discourse on gender in Nigerian literature. The text is deeply engaged in unmaking entrenched patriarchal structures and reconfiguring traditional gender roles. In this discussion, the findings are synthesised to highlight how Adeyemi's work challenges and expands the boundaries of gender representation and the broader implications of this transformation for Nigerian literary criticism, feminist theory, and cultural discourse.

6. Synthesis of Findings

The study's findings indicate that Adeyemi's narrative operates on multiple levels to disrupt the patriarchal norms historically embedded within Nigerian society. By centering on female protagonists such as Zélie and Amari, the novel articulates a leadership vision that is dynamic and resistant to conventional gender binaries. Zélie's evolution from a marginalised figure into a determined leader exemplifies how female agency is present and central to the narrative. Her journey exposes the potential for literary texts to offer counter-narratives that challenge the historical subjugation of women, a theme that echoes the theoretical propositions of Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí (1997). Similarly, Amari's transformation from a sheltered princess into a warrior-queen disrupts traditional gender roles, providing a narrative space where power is reimagined beyond the confines of patriarchal expectations.

The text also critically examines traditional notions of masculinity through characters like Inan and Roën. Inan's internal conflict and inability to transcend the legacy of his father's oppressive regime reveal the limitations inherent in conventional masculine ideals. In contrast, Roën's portrayal as a supportive figure who operates outside traditional power hierarchies offers a more fluid interpretation of masculinity. This juxtaposition reinforces the argument that reconfiguring gender roles in literature requires not only the elevation of female voices but also a rethinking of male identities. Thus, the narrative interweaves a complex interplay between gender, power, and identity, inviting readers to reconsider the structures that have historically defined them.

7. Implications for Nigerian Literary Criticism

The insights derived from the analysis have significant implications for Nigerian literary criticism. Traditionally, Nigerian literature has been influenced by colonial narratives that reinforced binary gender roles and privileged male experiences. Adeyemi's work, however, represents a departure from this

tradition by incorporating indigenous mythologies and challenging the imposition of Western gender norms. This reimagining of gender roles, informed by decolonial feminist perspectives, offers a model for future literary productions in Nigeria. By foregrounding narratives that critique patriarchal hegemony and embrace gender fluidity, contemporary Nigerian writers can contribute to a broader discourse on identity that is more inclusive and representative of diverse experiences.

The study also reinforces the importance of considering historical and cultural contexts in literary criticism by examining how Adeyemi's novel reclaims indigenous epistemologies—particularly those suppressed by colonial legacies. Critics are encouraged to re-examine other literary texts within a framework that recognises the many-sided nature of gender. This approach augments the analysis of Nigerian literature and expands the scope of literary studies to incorporate voices and perspectives that have traditionally been marginalised.

7.1 Theoretical Contributions

From a theoretical standpoint, the analysis of *Children of Virtue and Vengeance* contributes to decolonial feminist discourse by empirically demonstrating how literature can serve as a medium for rearticulation gender identities. Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí's critique of Western gender binaries has long provided a basis for understanding how colonial powers redefined social structures in African societies (Oyèwùmí, 1997). Adeyemi's story validates these theoretical assertions by showing how pre-colonial Nigerian cultures, rich with indigenous epistemologies, offer alternative frameworks for understanding gender. The novel's rejection of rigid, binary classifications, favouring more fluid and dynamic representations, aligns with Oyèwùmí's call for an African reimagining gender informed by historical and cultural realities rather than imposed norms.

Moreover, the text's intersectional approach—where gender is analysed alongside race, class, and the legacies of colonialism—further extends the conversation within feminist theory. By demonstrating that gender cannot be disentangled from other forms of social and cultural oppression, Adeyemi's work supports arguments made by postcolonial feminists who insist on the necessity of an intersectional lens (Mohanty, 1988). It is not only the complexity of such characters (including ones who are all at once male and female) which confirms that these issues have a connection but also the importance of gender discourse as a tool for theoretical and practical action. Adeyemi's series of vivid and dispassionate accounts,

which have been reviewed herein, demonstrate how literary stories can be generative sites for resistance. Adeyemi uses mythology and fantasy to denounce and dismantle traditional representations of gender, which are necessary to enact democratic gender relations. These narrative forms can be more than literal agents of action, offering broader implications beyond fiction to cultural activism and the redefinition of identity.

7.2 Cultural and Societal Impact

The broader cultural implications of Adeyemi's work extend beyond the confines of literary criticism. In a society where patriarchal norms continue to shape social relations, *Children of Virtue and Vengeance* serves as an emblem of resistance and possibility. By reconfiguring traditional gender roles and offering alternative models of leadership and identity, the novel challenges the status quo and encourages a critical reassessment of societal values. The narrative's emphasis on female agency and its critique of toxic masculinity resonate deeply with contemporary movements for gender equality and social justice in Nigeria and globally. Additionally, the text's reclamation of indigenous mythologies and cultural narratives significantly impacts how Nigerian society views its history and identity. The novel's integration of Yoruba cultural elements and indigenous epistemologies is a powerful rebuttal to the lingering effects of colonial cultural imperialism. Doing so promotes a re-engagement with pre-colonial traditions that valorise diversity and fluidity in gender relations. This cultural reawakening is essential not only for the empowerment of marginalised voices but also for developing a more inclusive national identity.

By bridging the gap between literary innovation and cultural critique, Adeyemi's narrative also contributes to ongoing debates about the role of art in social transformation. Literature, as evidenced by this analysis, is not a passive reflection of societal norms but an active force in shaping and reshaping them. The transformative authority of narrative, particularly when used to re-imagine and deconstruct oppressive structures, also highlights the power of artistic interventions to promote effective societal change. In this way, *Children of Virtue and Vengeance* can be seen as a product and a forerunner of evolving cultural archetypes prioritising equality, justice, and the reclamation of indigenous identities.

8. Conclusion

This article's discussion of *Children of Virtue and Vengeance* informs our thinking about how Adeyemi's novel is an important engagement with

reimagining gender within the Nigerian literary imagination. Through its sophisticated depiction of female leadership, its critique of outdated ideals of masculinity, and its intersectional approach to politics, Adeyemi's work subverts rigid colonial and patriarchal structures. This multi-layered approach benefits from not only intellectual exchanges between Nigerian literary critics and decolonial feminist theory but also has practical implications for how society at large can envision and implement change. The findings paint a picture of literary power and influence that can infuse social critique and cultural renewal in our societies. Adeyemi's novel encourages readers to imagine a future where gender is understood as a fluid, dynamic, and empowering force and challenges readers to question inherited standards. As Nigerian literature evolves, texts like *Children of Virtue and Vengeance* pave the way for new narratives that embrace diversity, celebrate resilience, and advocate for a more equitable society.

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