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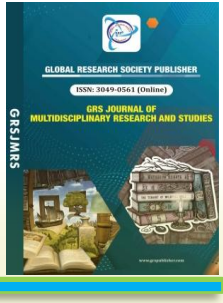


# Interrogating the Constructs of Gender, Power, and Identity In Ayòbámí Adébáyò's "*A Spell Of Good Things*

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**Abstract:** This scholarship challenges Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀'s novel *A Spell of Good Things'* trinity of gender, power, and identity, and situates its analysis within Nigerian political and social discourses and African feminist arguments today. Adébáyọ̀'s novel depicts that gender identity is not a biological immanent essential, but an intermediary performance required by socio-economic environments, colonial pasts, and intersecting powers like class and ethnicity.

A close reading and application of Judith Butler's gender performativity theory and Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality framework throughout the research reveals how characters move in and subvert traditional gender expectations within a postcolonial setting marked by poverty, patriarchy, and political motive. The novel brings to the fore the gender role reversals and subverts fixed Nigerian masculinity and femininity, revealing how economic crisis forces adaptive gendered performances in the home and in the public sphere. The mother assumes a breadwinner's role traditionally masculine, while young people like Ẹniọlá and Bùsọ́lá move through gendered expectations of poverty.

The political power dynamics complicate gender performances such that male characters speak traditional patriarchal desires enshrined in social control as well as violence. The study discovers that *A Spell of Good Things* not just challenges patriarchal and colonial discourses but also deepens understanding of African gender identities through tacit expressions of resistance and accommodation.

Through an intersection of feminist and postcolonial theories, the book provides a rich contribution to gender studies scholarship by revealing the ongoing redefinition of gender, power, and identity in postcolonial African literature.

**Keywords:** *Gender performativity, Intersectionality, Postcolonialism, Feminist resistance, African literature, and Power relations.*

**Cite this Article**

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## Introduction

### Background to the Study

Gender, power, and identity in present-day African literature, for example, Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀'s *A Spell of Good Things*, is the key paradigm for interpreting societal normalcy and individual conflict in postcolonial states. Adébáyọ̀, with the book set against the Nigerian social field, analyzes in close detail the interplay on the field of women's place, negotiation of power, and individual and collective construction of the sense of the self within the active politico-social context. Gender and its intersection with power and identity has come to become increasingly the object of academic interest, particularly within the scholarship of Africa, where an ancient sense of tradition, colonial architecture, and modern ideas of the sense of self coexist (Umezurike, 2021). Adébáyọ̀ recounts in *A Spell of Good Things* how social pressure defines women's roles, revealing cultural tradition to personal want. The protagonist whose gender and sense of self are essentially created by politico-societal realities provides a language of accommodation and resistance. In challenging the intersectionality of women's role with the powers that be structures, Adébáyọ̀ subverts the laws that bind women, in fact men as well, to predetermined fates. This fascination with the performativity through which, according to the theory proposed by Judith Butler, the sense of gender is imagined rather than an accreted feature becomes an innate quality (Butler, 1990). Through the personality, the novel shows how such sense alignments with the genders are not static but rather the very practice of repeat performance with the interactions with society. Butler's theory of gender performativity has been at the core of gender role fluidity, particularly in postcolonial African fiction. Gender to her is not an identification but a series of performance based on the dictates of society (Butler, 1990). Adébáyọ̀'s protagonists, similar to postcolonial African fiction, interact with these gender constructions and attempt to subvert them in the act of developing new identifications. *A Spell of Good Things* so perfectly demonstrates the struggle with which its maidens have the courage to co-exist in a society that prescribes to them how to

perform its constructions of the genders. It is a good example with which to see how the gender can be employed today by the modern African teller of stories for the subversion of power relations towards legitimation that the gender is not only a matter of individual identification but also a matter with inter-subjective relations and the exercise of power.

Furthermore, the intermingling between power and gender in the prose by Adébáyọ̀ reflects broader trends in the writings of Africa, wherein colonialism's influence continues to determine how power and gender are distributed. Colonialism's infusion of autochthonal models for gender upset indigenous thought on the constitution of gender and foreshortened the reordering of roles in society (Said, 2022). Adébáyọ̀'s book, among other postcolonial texts, contests this legacy by examining the means by which these transplanted arrangements endure in the present era. Women, not leastly but especially, but the book's protagonists in general, contendlabor with the leftovers of colonial government and the intercourse between the sexes colonialism left, re-configured, and sometimes codified postcolonial regimes as well as civil society institutions.

Another characteristic feature of the novel *A Spell of Good Thing*s is the crossing over between gender with other identificatory categories, including class, ethnicity, and political allegiance. Kimberly Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, which points to how the many vectors of identification (race, gender, class) intersect to create the lived reality for subjects, is useful in the analysis of the socio-politico dynamics for the novel by Adébáyọ̀ (Crenshaw, 2017). In the novel, the depiction of relations of power between the characters demonstrates the manner in which the identification with or ascription to gender cannot isolate but needs to access the other forces of oppression, including political malfeasance and social injustice. With these forces thus intersecting, the binary opposition between the masculine and the feminine becomes vanquished by something far more delicate and nuanced between the poweramericanization (if the term is permitted) of power (Collins, 2020).

The postcolonial context in which *A Spell of Good Things* is being read also raises the way in which gender identity has been politicized and commodified in African societies today. The impact of, and legacy of, colonialism on gender roles is one that has been endlessly argued by postcolonial scholars, such as Edward Said and Frantz Fanon, both of whom argue that colonial occupation was as so much a psychological and cultural undertaking as it was political and economic (Said, 2022; Fanon, 2020). Adébáyọ̀, and these theorists, stages a world in which the political and the personal are inseparable, and in which gender performance is ineluctably tied up in social and political institutions that organize lives. The gendered existence of her characters, and indeed of women, grapples with the legacy of colonial patriarchy, while also calling for the eradication of current gender imbalances. Also on the shift is queer theory popularity, which is equally becoming popular in reading African literature as a significant paradigm on how gender and sexuality are negotiated and fluid. Queer texts, particularly those built on same-sex desire or non-binary sexualities, provide a way of challenging the heteronormative presuppositions that overdetermine gender's discourse.

In *A Spell of Good Things*, not immediately relating to queerness, the negotiation between non-compliance with gendered expectation offers an underground critique of the binary, heteronormative standards that relentlessly organize society's assumptions (Dibia, 2020). In doing so, the book becomes part of the expanding body of African literature breaking the rigid edges of the masculinity and the femininity, compelling the reader to reconsider the social-constructed fictions of power and gender. Finally, Adébáyọ̀'s *A Spell of Good Things* is an interesting book for examining the constructions of power, gender, and identity in the postcolonial world of Africa. Through the statistical Application by the Butlerian theory, permitting the operation of performivity and the functioning practiced by the theory of intersectionality, the present study would peel away the layers of social, political, and historical forces that determine the gendered identities of humans. Adébáyọ̀'s book challenges mainstream concepts of masculinity and gender, presenting an explicit description of how the concept of gender is performed, challenged, and rearticulated among the Nigerian society today. Through this, the present study will add input to prevailing studies on gender in the world of black literature, presenting useful knowledge on how the sense of gender identity is always constructed and deconstructed in the face of politics and civil disturbances.

## Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze the gender, power, and identity constructs in Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀'s *A Spell of Good Things* based on the gender performativity and intersectionality theory.
2. To explore how Adébáyọ̀'s characters perform their gender identities amidst Nigerian socio-political conditions.
3. To contribute to gender studies by examining how sexual identities and gender roles are performed, resisted, and transformed in African literature.

## Methodology

The research relies on qualitative methodology and uses literary analysis and theory application as a way of critiquing the gender, power, and identity principles in Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀'s *A Spell of Good Things*. This type of methodology allows for a close reading of gender presentation in the book through a multi-faceted approach of close reading and theory application. The first step of the method is to carry out close reading of *A Spell of Good Things* by Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀. This is in order to have a deeper understanding of the work and how the gender roles and the power dynamics are being defined by the characters and how they are interlinked. I shall consider through close reading how gender identities are being constructed especially in the play, i.e., in social expectations and family units, and political context in which the characters exist. This method allows one to have a close reading of how gender is not only biological or essentialist, but one that is always performed and constructed through the doings and happenings of the characters to themselves within their own context. In addition to close reading, the research will employ theoretical analysis based on gender performativity theory (Butler, 1990) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2017). Gender performativity theory is used in this research specifically because it asserts that one is not their gender but does certain things to perform gender on a daily basis through the use of actions and behavior in accordance with society's norms. This theory will be used to examine the means through which characters in the novel continue performing their gendered performances, receive, resist, or negotiate external expectations. The intersectional theory will be employed to enhance this by allowing us to analyze how gender intersects with other identification categories such as race, class, and ethnicity, and which operates to complicate the characters'

executions and experiences of gender. It works to put into perspective different elements of gender identity that are not in isolation but must be dealt with in conjunction with other socio-political and other cultural considerations. From this secondary sources literature, through this analysis, we would have an enriched background with which to set the primary text, which will allow us to place the construction of gender in Adébáyọ̀' novel in the context of discussions that abound in the field of gender studies and postcolonial discourse. This will further allow for points of research gaps that have already been addressed and place this study among the larger body of academic literature on power relations and gender on contemporary Africa literature.

By using such a mixed method, the study seeks to engage in a comprehensive examination of gender identity construction and performance in Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀'s *A Spell of Good Things*, addressing the performance of gender, power, and identity in a postcolonial Nigerian context. The approach facilitates a greater sensitization with the text and contributes to the gender studies, feminist theory, and postcolonial studies conversation.

# Review of Related Literature

## Introduction

This study analyzes the theoretical underpinnings of gender roles, identity, and performance in postcolonial African literature. Feminist theory has been applied in this chapter as the primary framework in examining gender issues. Two broad schools of feminist theory have been utilized to inform the analysis. The first of these is Judith Butler's *Gender Performativity Theory*, which departs from the usual assumptions of gender as an essential identity. Gender, in Butler's view, is not an innate quality but rather a performance and is reconstituted in repetition by language, behaviour, and social norms. This theory dissolves binary constructions of gender and provides room for a more comprehensive explication of gender fluidity, particularly in postcolonial African societies wherein gender roles are rigidly constructed both by the colonial experience and the existing patriarchal structures.

The second theory used is Kimberlé Crenshaw's *Intersectionality*, in the hope of illustrating how various axes of identity, race, gender, and class, for example, intersect to create resultant and additive experiences of oppression. This theory is particularly useful in explaining how gender relations are founded in postcolonial African contexts in which gender identity cannot be separated from socio-political and cultural environments that constitute people's realities.

These two theories, Gender Performativity and Intersectionality, are the foundation from which it is realized how gender roles are performed, contested, and constructed by African author like Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀.

## Gender Performativity Theory

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity shows that gender does not exist as a fixed identity because it resists the way that society portrays gender. Social performance of acts of gender leads to the creation and ongoing reconstruction of gender identity as argued by Butler (2020). The acts create the foundation of gender existence instead of exhibiting natural gender traits. The approach negates essentialist interpretations of gender based on McCall (1992) who depicts the way that culture norms create fluid gender patterns instead of fixed identities (McCall, 1992). The introduction process of gender per Butler (2020) operates as a machine that runs in circles and makes social norms rule it by repetitive actions talked and performed on an ongoing basis (Butler, 1990). Following this, Butler (2020) also opposes the binary conception of gender as confining individuals into rigid male and female boxes. Gender, to her, is performative and negotiated constantly in view of historical and cultural backgrounds. This is in accordance with the positions of scholars like Butler (2020), who argue that gender identities are not determined naturally but by societal and cultural forces that universalize them into normative roles (Butler, 1990). Butler's theory also has very serious implications, particularly for queer and feminist theory, in that it demands a broader and expansive understanding of gender than the historically entrenched binary models. Butler (2020) is against the traditional binary gender system since it forces one to stick to strict male or female roles. In her view gender is a performative act whose constant negotiation it requires because cultural and historical conditions dictate its definition. The study confirms Butler's view that society and cultural forces condition gender identities by their establishment of normative roles as compared to biological factors as held by Butler (2020). The theory of Butler generates multiple important effects which affect both feminist and queer theory because it requires scientists to study gender outside of traditional binary classifications.

In her earlier works Butler (1990) emphasized that power functions as the key factor which dictates how people perform their gender roles (Butler, 1990). People establish their gender identity through social standards which they adopt from their surroundings. The concept of performativity remains connected to power systems which control gender identity, according to Farhadytooli (2021) because social approval and repeated actions serve as necessary components for gender identity construction (Farhadytooli, 2021). Oakley (2020) along with other scholars examine Butler's power theory to show how gender functions as a social control system through institutionalized rules which define social acceptability (Oakley, 2020).

According to Butler (1990) the concept of Gender trouble shows how people break down gender rules through their defiance of standard gender expectations. The resistance shows how gender functions as a performance which breaks down the male and female social norms (Butler, 1990). Gender trouble is a subversive process that resists fixed gender norms by demanding a new imagination of gender beyond male and female terms. The ones who defy such norms resist the systems that generate gender discrimination while they create new forms of themselves beyond given gender roles. Butler's theory also intersects with intersectionality since gender identity is not only gender-norm knowledge but also other social categories such as race, class, and sexuality. Butler (1990) speculates that gender is performed within these intersecting categories, which define how gender identities are viewed and lived. This is further argued by scholars such as Silva (2020), who point out that gender identity cannot be studied in isolation but has to be examined alongside other social cleavages that cut across and shape the lives of individuals (Silva, 2020). The intersectional perspective shows how gender identity is not just a gender issue but has power and inequality that is shaped by much broader social systems. Aside from intersectionality and power, Butler's theory also revolves around language as an element in the formation of gender. According to Butler (1990), the role of

language is most important in doing gender in the sense that it is through language that gender norms are done and controlled. This assertion stems from the argument of Floyd (2020), which describes how gender identity is done and constructed through language processes, and how this also relates to the experience of the individual based on their gender (Floyd, 2020). Gender is not merely a biological or individual trait but a performative expressed and done by action and speech. The performativity conception of gender also deconstructs the binary framework, because it creates the possibility of more than two, non-traditional performances of gender that deconstruct customary linguistic and behavioral conventions (Butler, 1990). Performativity theory developed by Butler also deconstructs the conception of a stable, cohesive self. Instead, (Butler, 1990) points out that the self is not an ontologically determinate, pre-existing entity but is constructed repeatedly through the performance of gender. In this view, it confirms Morgenroth's (2020) argument that identity is fluid and re-defined by social performances and engagements. Given that gender is performed through a series of actions, it is re-produced as an unknowable and fluid notion that is mediated by the cultural beliefs about it (Morgenroth, 2018). This perspective is counter to the conventional constructions of identity and new possibilities are created for thinking about the multiplicity and fluidity of gendered experience. The performativity theory of gender engenders some risky outcomes which affect queer and feminist political movements. The Butler theory is a necessary tool to interpret the manner in which gender expectations within society function and change through performance. Morgenroth, (2018) explains how Butler's theory enables people and social groups to subvert normal gender norms as they construct new gender identities that exhibit the whole range of human living. The political outcomes become evident since this mode enables the production of spaces which enable inclusive gender change with equal access to all (Morgenroth, 2018). Judith Butler created her Gender Performativity Theory in order to subvert traditional assumptions regarding gender while proving that gender exists as a socially constructed form which has no definitive definitions. By proving gender performance Butler shows how gender exists beyond male-female dichotomies, which allow the production of numerous diverse gender identities. The theory demonstrates how power relations as well as language intersectional and systems elements constitute gender identities as they establish one framework through which to study gender disparity and oppose traditional gender roles. Butler's theory continues to energize feminist and queer movements that aim to subvert gender oppression and allow social change (Butler, 1990).

## Intersectionality

Kimberly Crenshaw developed intersectionality analysis in the late 1980s which remains a useful analytical framework to analyze how multiple identity markers like race and gender and class and ethnicity create complex patterns of influence on social and personal experiences. Crenshaw (2017) shows how different identity dimensions create particular systems of oppression which build on each other (Crenshaw, 2017). Intersectionality as a field of study continues to be essential for African postcolonial society because it unites pre-existing colonial systems with historical colonial structures to reveal how different social groups experience differing degrees of oppression. Intersectionality, according to Bowleg (2017), enables researchers to study patterns of discrimination which cut across simplistic identity categories by showing how different identities intersect with each other. The multi-dimensional model is effective as a strategy for postcolonial societies because such societies experience ongoing racial and gendered and classed discrimination which affects their daily lives (Bowleg, 2017). Gender and race, in the view of Crenshaw (2017), cannot be separated from each other when examining systems of oppression. Her work, particularly as it relates to legal studies, demonstrates that legislation and policies hardly consider the experience of those who find themselves at the intersection of multiple groups that are marginalized (Crenshaw, 2017). Legal disregard for women of color who experience domestic violence is one such example where intersectionality becomes applicable. Crenshaw (1991) contended that policy used to address matters like domestic violence is usually based on the status of white women, while colored women are left behind whose cases are determined based on race and gender (Crenshaw K. , 1989). The idea has been advanced by current research, for instance, Garcia Bedolla (2006), which discusses how environmental justice policy in the United States, if understood intersectionally, reveals deep health inequalities that affect cohorts by virtue of the intersection of race, gender, and class (García Bedolla, 2006). The intersectionality approach transcends legality and health and is highly relevant to social and political action. Intersectionality in African societies can be used to demonstrate how gender intersects with ethnic, cultural, and colonial histories to create distinctive structures of power. These intersecting systems of oppression, Crenshaw explains, are not additive but are constitutive of each other, in a way that the oppression of those who have multiple marginalized identities is not one that can be deciphered by totaling the effect of each individual discrete axis (Crenshaw K. , 2017). This observation is reiterated in the work of Collins (2020), which argues that intersectionality presents a complicated method of understanding how gender, race, class, and other identities intersect to produce complex forms of inequality and marginalization (Collins, 2020).The African postcolonial situation illustrates how colonial institutions remain extant through their reproduction of racial and gender and class systems which reproduce social hierarchies and limit resource distribution to particular groups. The intersectionality framework is an efficient way to analyze identity in global social movements according to existing literature. Intersectionality, Crenshaw argues, allows activists to build coalitions across numerous social justice movements by way of an awareness of the diversity of experience within dominated groups (Crenshaw K. , 2017). This has particular application in postcolonial African societies, where struggle for gender equality, racial justice, and economic justice overlap. As Dhamoon (2020) suggests, intersectionality offers a theoretical framework that can be employed to enhance the efficacy of social movements by recognizing the diverse ways in which individuals in oppressed groups are oppressed and forging solidarity across different experiences (Dhamoon, 2020). The examination of postcolonial African identities through the lens of critical because colonial histories continue to shape present power relations. In Oyęwụmi's (2020) opinion, intersectionality is an important framework to analyze how colonialism shaped gender roles in Africa with a perspective of unmasking Western colonial identity and gender imposition practices. Colonialists imposed gender structures on Africa that did not exist before and these structures continue to affect African gender ideology and social conduct today (Oyěwùmí, 1997). The colonial gender system merged with the indigenous traditions to create new patterns of gendered domination which affect men and women differently according to their ethnicity and social class and racial identity (Oyěwùmí,

1997). African intersectionality studies have confirmed that intersectionality is a theoretical paradigm which contributes to the formulation of social transformation according to (Crenshaw K. , 2017). Alvarez and Evans's (2021) research shows that environmental justice studies that utilize intersectionality offer pose particular challenges which affect African communities who suffer from both environmental degradation and social discrimination (Alvarez, 2021). The intersectionality approach enables one to understand how different social categories interact with oppressive systems to create distinct experiences for African communities who face discrimination. The intersectionality approach enables postcolonial feminist thinkers to analyze individual experiences together with institutional structures. By moving beyond monolithic categories of analysis, Crenshaw offers a way of examining how interlocking systems of power, including colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism, work together to reproduce systems of inequality. This has been applied within more recent African feminist scholarship, which resists the continued influence of colonial histories on gender norms and relations in the present (Crenshaw K. , 2017). Semu (2020) states that the key to understand is how African women negotiate multiple, often contending, systems of power that continue to restrict their political, economic, and social freedoms (Semu, 2020). Thus, intersectionality remains a useful analytical framework that makes sense of the interconnected and compound systems of oppression in postcolonial African societies. As Crenshaw illustrates, the intersection of race, gender, class, and ethnicity produces unique experiences of marginalization that cannot be understood from a single axis. The application of intersectionality in African studies not only more adequately informs us of how intersecting identities shape both individual and collective experiences but also offers avenues of social and political change (Crenshaw K. , 2017). Emergent scholarship builds on Crenshaw's work further, demonstrating how the salience of intersectionality continues to address issues of inequality and oppression in the contemporary world.

## Gender Identity and Roles in Postcolonial African Literature

Postcolonial African fiction has been leading the way in reconfiguring social norms and interpretation of gender roles for postcolonial critics in African societies. The work of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Jude Dibia, and Chinua Achebe has individually led to the deconstruction of old-fashioned gender norms. Gender fluidity, masculinity, and femininity, in relation to postcolonial identity ambiguity, are covered by the writers. Crenshaw's intersectionality theory which explains how gender intersects with race and class to construct new experiences of oppression is a most pursued approach in gender identity research in African literature (Crenshaw K. , 2017). Authors like Adichie and Achebe show how the intersecting categories construct gender roles, especially in the postcolonial context (Bonvillain, 2016).

In Purple Hibiscus, Adichie offers a powerful analysis of gender roles in the figure of Kambili, a young Nigerian girl who has to find her way through the oppressive systems of her society and family. The novel provides a dynamic of changing relations between Kambili and her father, Eugene, a man whose authoritarianism is representative of traditional gender norms of power and control. Kambili's eventual personal growth symbolizes a challenge to the rigid gender roles imposed by both family and society. This can be seen in her transformation from a submissive girl to a woman who reclaims her voice and identity. As Dhamoon (2020) discusses, this transformation defies normative constructions of gender and championing women's autonomy, offering a critique of patriarchal society in African societies (Dhamoon, 2020). Adichie's focus on gender roles is not only women but also the ways in which men, like Eugene, are constrained by societal constructions of masculinity, and how this then leads to them imploding morally

and psychologically.

Similarly, Jude Dibia's Walking with Shadows challenges traditional constructions of masculinity with the character of Adrian, a gay male attempting to navigate the expectations of heteronormative Nigerian society. Dibia's portrayal of Adrian resists homosexual male stereotypes

instead presenting a complex human with emotional depth and vulnerability. The novel documents the postcolonial African context contradictions of gender identity, where gender fluidity is fought against cultural expectations and legal regulation. Adrian's dilemma illustrates the need for a broad vision of gender and sexuality in African literature, provoking readers to ask themselves what it is to be a man in a world that insists on conforming to rigid gender roles.

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* also raises questions about gender roles, and that too largely through the character of Okonkwo, who embodies traditional concepts of masculinity. Okonkwo's insistence on the rigid male-female role dichotomy leads to his own tragic downfall because he is unable to synthesize his internal vulnerabilities and the outside pressure of conforming to hegemonic masculinity. The novel's portrayal of Okonkwo's relationship with women, his wives and daughter, captures the way gender roles are not only socially constructed but also reproduced by cultural and political institutions of Igbo society. As Whitehead (2020) argues, Achebe's novel criticizes how the colonial experience complicated gender norms and tensions that emerged between pre-colonial and colonial masculinity (Musyoka Boniface Muthui, 2018). Okonkwo's failure is a criticism of the harm that rigid gender categories inflict.

Further, postcolonial African literature also has a tendency to explore the intersection of gender with race, class, and ethnicity, which allows for an appreciation of identity's complexity in an evolving world. African literature in Bonvillain's definition, always defines gender as multifaceted and fluid, reversing patriarchal and colonial discourses that have long silenced women throughout history (Bonvillain, 2016). Such intersectional positioning can be experienced in novels such as Adichie's Half of a Yellow Sun, which experiments with the effects of war, class, and gender on Nigerian women during the Biafran War. Adichie depicts women who reverse gender norms commonly found in Olanna and Kainene, who navigate their complicit social positions with agency and strength, showing that gender is not monolithic or essential but intersectional and socially and politically constructed.

Specifically, Dibia and Okparanta provide a critical analysis of gender fluidity and non-normative sexualities. In Under the Udala Trees, Okparanta narrates the life of Ijeoma, a young woman as she learns to accept homosexuality in a patriarchal society. Through Ijeoma's narrative, Okparanta condemns the homophobia institutionally entrenched in Nigerian society and the violence habitually doled out to individuals who violate customary gender and sexual roles. Okparanta's presentation of queer subjects' family

acceptance, and the acceptance of the family by Ijeoma's mother of her sexuality, is a deviation from the way African literature has been able to present gender ambiguity and sexual diversity so far. This has been seen as a move in the right direction for African literary studies, in which queer lives have been erased or pushed to the periphery. Ojiakor counters that the writing of Okparanta serves to redefine Nigerian literature's gender construct in the direction of nonheteronormative frames towards a better explanation of a wider array of human identity (Ojiakor, 2024; Mag, 2022). Postcolonial African literature in general is rich to access on the issues of gender identity politics, fluidity, and doing femininity and masculinity. Such authors as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Jude Dibia, and Chinua Achebe are also building postcolonial African gender roles discourse and using their writings to unsettle hegemonic norms and to consider the intersection of gender with other markers. By their writing on the performativity and fluidity of femininity and masculinity, these authors offer a critical framework for approaching postcolonial African complexity with regards to questions of identity, requiring a longer and more complicated struggle with gender and sexuality.

## Feminist and Postcolonial Theory in African Literature

Postcolonial and feminist theories have been pivotal in theorizing discourse on gender roles in African literature. In postcolonial African societies, power relations between genders are greatly influenced by both the colonial experience and patriarchal forms. Feminist theorists such as Judith Butler believe that gender is not just a biological or natural aspect but one constructed through actions subject to relations of power (Butler, 1990). In African literature, the mentioned theories meet with postcolonial theory, which examines how legacies of colonialism continue to shape gender relations and roles (Bizimungu, 2024; Niwabiine, 2025). The novels of such authors as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀, and Tsitsi Dangarembga present sophisticated accounts of the way in which these inheritances shape the lives of women and men in contemporary African societies. Purple Hibiscus (2003) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a touchstone for the coming together of feminist and postcolonial theory within African literature. Adichie in her depiction of Kambili theorises the psychological and emotional impact of patriarchal authoritarianism and domination at the level of the family, a representation of the prevailing social order of Nigerian society. Chandran comments that Kambili's evolution from silence and conformism to self-actualization is a representation of a critique of dominating structures that thwart the agency of girls and women (Chandran, 2022). The novel examines not just the gender relations of a colonial context but also its individual and social effects on such power onesupremacies. By showing the development of Ndubuoke's change, Adichie examines not only the colonial and patriarchal agendas that construct and circumscribe Ndubuoke's feminine identity but also what these may entail in postcolonial Nigerian society.

Likewise, in *A Spell of Good Things*, Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀ uses feminist and postcolonial frameworks to explore the intricacies of gender relationships among Nigerians society reproduced. The heroine of the novel, Eniola, experiences a gendered world organized by gendered expectations based on colonial and postcolonial histories. Adébáyọ̀'s portrayal of Eniola's engagement with the father and the men surrounding her life reveals the ongoing legacies of patriarchy in organizing women's lives. To the limit of the argument of Bizimungu (2024), Adébáyọ̀ objectifies colonial imposition of gender norms and examines how colonial legacies limit the agency and empowerment of women (Bizimungu, 2024). Eniola's struggle to secure autonomy in a patriarchal world is a reflection of intersectionality across gender, class, and colonial history, since her class and economic standing are foisted upon her social location as a woman. Postcolonial feminist scholarship also grapples with the manner in which the histories of colonization disrupted traditional African gender norms, imprinting Western patriarchal order. This is observable in Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions (1988), where the intersection of colonialism, gender, and race from the lives of the protagonist, Tambudzai. Dangarembga critiques the manner colonialism reorganized gender roles in Zimbabwean society as secondary to men, both during colonial rule and postcolonial rule.

For Moyana, R., the novel portrays the internalized oppression of women, both by colonial and patriarchal ideologies. Tambudzai's journey of self-discovery, which includes questioning the social constructs around her gender and race, highlights how postcolonial literature uses feminist theory in a bid to overcome the residual traces of colonial power that continue to define women's roles (Moyana, 2011). Intersection of race and gender in postcolonial African literature is also crucial in grasping the subtle depiction of gender roles. Intersectionality, as Crenshaw understands it, serves as a critical framework with which the intersection of race, gender, and other social categories cross over and produce discrete experiences of oppression (Crenshaw K. , 2017). In *A Spell of Good Things*, Adébáyọ̀ integrates such a conception of intersectionality within her work, as characters such as Eniola exist in a world where both gender and class intersect to impact their social mobility. Osmani's treatment of gender dynamics in the Nigerian context is informed by the colonial history that constructed and reinforced rigid gender roles, often relegating women to the private sphere while limiting their agency in public and political life (Osmani, 2019). The portrayal of gender roles in the novel is thus a rebuke of the colonial and postcolonial patriarchal structures that still shape women's identity and their societal roles. Feminist and postcolonial feminist readings of African literature also observe how women in African cultures have negotiated and violated the roles which they have been assigned. Bizimungu says African feminist novels like those by Adichie, Dangarembga, and Adébáyọ̀ creates room for imagining gender and goes against colonial and patriarchal injunctions. The power of the female heroines, for instance, Kambili in Purple Hibiscus and Tambudzai in *Nervous Conditions*, is symbolic of a bigger battle for gender equality in the context of African feminist struggles (Bizimungu, 2024). With the intervention of postcolonial feminist theories, the novels upset the hegemony of the colonial gender norms and demand a revolution in the conception and performance of gender in African societies. Secondly, postcolonial feminist theory has emphasized richer interplays between colonialism, gender, and identity in African literature. Oyěwùmí (1997) argues that colonial imposition of Western gender dualism destroyed indigenous African gender systems that were more fluid and less rigid than those in operation under colonial states (Oyěwùmí, 1997). In *A Spell of Good Things*, Adébáyọ̀ is scathing in her critique of colonial imposition of gender roles, noting with especial sharpness how such roles continue to restrict women's identities and stifle their potential. The novel, by Eniola's existence, proves the long-lasting legacy of colonialism on gender identities because colonial legacies have continued to shape the

construction of gender power relations in postcolonial African societies (Oyěwùmí, 1997).

In conclusion, postcolonial and feminist theories provide a solid ground for the analysis of gender role and identity portrayal in African literature. By Adichie, Adébáyọ̀, and Dangarembga, these theories show the survivance of colonial traditions on gender relationships and women's struggle and survival in postcolonial African communities. By the feminist and postcolonial critique of gender roles, African literature redefines conventional gender norms and opens new avenues for gender empowerment and ident.

# Textual Analysis

## Socioeconomic Struggles Shape Gender Roles

The Ẹniọlá household exists in a world of desperate economic struggle, a position that intensifies the way gendered conduct is performed and negotiated within the house. The father, former breadwinner, falls into unemployment, representing a breakdown in the classical masculine privilege based on economic provision. This is established early in the novel:

"He'd even ticked each finger against his eyelids before demanding Ẹniọlá to turn over

The Daily. The newspapers could then be traded off for money or food from the women who vend groundnuts, fried yam or boli on this street or the next." (p.17)

Here, the father is fixated on newspapers not for news, but as a mercantile source to trade off for sustenance, reflecting his desperation and decreased role as sole breadwinner. He is depicted to be actively seeking for work through these papers, a practice bred of necessities and yet symbolic of his diminished status. The father is also burdened with debts, school, rent on the house, and even to Egbon Abbey, news stand man, conditions that magnify his fall from breadwinner to debtor. His emasculation is tellingly acknowledged in a habitual behavior:

"Sometimes, this reminder caused him to forget that his father had become a man who now preferred to leave the house in the evening, as his creditors would be less likely to know him in the dark." (p.37)

The nighttime goings-out of the father symbolize his relinquishing of public and familial responsibilities traditionally associated with masculinity. Actually, he avoids confrontation with creditors, adopting a facade of silence and invisibility. Though still legally the head of the family, his capacity for role performance is disadvantaged by unemployment. This state of unemployment leads to a crisis of masculinity associated with impotence and withdrawal.

In spite the father's silence and withdrawal, the family remains reliant on his nominal control to preserve appearances. As an instance, although he never went begging with the rest of his family, money raised by them was handed over to him to pay the landlord in instalments:

"Though Ẹniọlá's father never went begging with the rest of his family, all the money they earned was always given to him. He presented the notes to their landlord upstairs, instalment-paying and begging for an extension on the ultimatum the man had issued them." (p.183)

This reaffirms his patriarchal role in a formal sense while underlining the incongruity between his authority and his actual economic contribution. In marked contrast to the passivity of the father, Ẹniọlá's mother takes on the role of provider and protector, exercising roles culturally coded as masculine. She actively is in charge of the survival of the family, going out begging and negotiating, a reversal of roles that undermines normative gender hierarchies within their society. The desperation of their situation forces this reconfiguration of gender identity. The mother's transformation is vividly portrayed:

"Ẹniọlá's mother rushed towards the door, then fell to her knees as the landlord barged

into the room. 'Good afternoon sir.' 'Don't bribe me with empty greetings, Ìyá Ẹniọlá,'

he yelled, hitting the floor with his carved walking stick. 'I'm here to see

your husband. Where is he?' (p.172)

After losing his job, Ìyá Ẹniọlá has undertaken the role of husband, providing and sustaining everyone in the family by every means.

This scene is the flip-flop of gender roles: the mother asserts strength, challenges power holders in a head-on confrontation, and shoulders the economic and emotional burdens usually assigned to the male breadwinner. Her negotiation with the landlord and intimidations are proof of her public and active role as defender of the breadwinner status of the family. The literal crawling on her knees here is an act of desperation and humility but also of resistance, a powerful sight of caregiving and resilience. The mother's role as chief breadwinner and negotiator is also confirmed as the family moves toward a mutual identity of begging to survive: "Today will be better than yesterday,' Ẹniọlá's mother said, folding the bills she'd just counted. 'People are more generous on Sundays. Remember last Sunday? Six thousand o, almost six thousand in total.' His mother also believed people were more generous on Fridays." (p.182) The mother's optimism in desperation manifests her emotional labor and instrumental management of the family's scarce resources. Her trust in donation patterns signals a firm engagement with the survival strategies in their world. This gender role reversal is not without social tensions and pressures. The mother battles against raw contempt by power and social isolation threat: "'Don't bribe me with insincere greetings, Ìyá Ẹniọlá,' he shouted, tapping the floor with his meticulously fashioned walking stick." (p.172) These incidents illustrate the cultural embarrassment and error brought about by a woman doing what everywhere is regarded as man's work. And rather than weakening her, such instances highlight her agency. Baba Eniola is intended to go to the landlord, but in shame, Iya Eniola take up the responsibility by going to the landlord and pleading for mercy; Baba Eniola hide in the room through the duration. Through this economic and social battle, the mother redefines femininity as such as endurance, provider responsibility, and guardianship. When the traditional economic agency role of the father decreases, the mother fills in and extends her role from caregiver to provider and performs gender in a manner that accommodates adaptively to family needs.

## Children Negotiating Gender Expectations amid Poverty

The life of the Ẹniọlá children graphically demonstrates the gendered onus of poverty and social expectation. Their journey through schooling, employment, and domestic activities demonstrates how institutionalized gender norms are challenged

and reaffirmed during economic hardship. Ẹniọlá, the boy, grapples with the shame of economic need in a way that transcends his male identity construction. He is faced with the shame and punishment that are resulting from being the last one in his class to pay school fees: "Ẹniọlá rubbed his palms over his arms until his fingers were dry. He was always last one to pay school fees in his class, so he had grown used to the punishments." (p.91) The physical reaction, rubbing his palms dry, reveals nervousness and embarrassment, and the fact that this shame and punishment has become habitual highlights an ongoing economic difficulty. In a culture that places so much emphasis on educational achievement as the borderline for personal responsibility, his failure to keep up with fees identifies him and makes him vulnerable to his peers and also brings into question his gender performance as a responsible, capable man.

Adding to the complexity of his gender performance is Ẹniọlá's sewing apprenticeship, a traditionally female-coded career:

"Over the first month of Ẹniọlá's apprenticeship, Aunty Caro taught him how to measure and cut. She put him on a sewing machine alongside her and showed him how to do stitches. But on the last day of that month, when his parents failed to send his apprenticeship fee, she took him aside and told him that she could no longer train him. She was aware his father did not work, but nobody was giving her threads and needles for free either. (p.50)

His sewing work, traditionally culturally constructed as work for women, can be read as an adaptive, fluid masculinity that remakes male value outside of traditionally masculine labour. It can, however, hold vulnerabilities in the open and push traditional gender roles to the breaking point because societal presumptions too often delegitimize boys working at trades that are seen as feminine.

Bùsọ́lá, Ẹniọlá's sister, shows resistance against structural pressures, asserting her agency over gendered assumptions about schooling and duty. She pushes against her parents' inability or refusal to pay school fees by absolutely threatening to stay home to avoid corporal punishment:

"Is it not me they will flog in school on Monday? I will not take it o, I can't take another week of flogging. If you're not going to pay, let me just stay at home next Monday. They will kúkú send me back home the Monday following this one if you have not paid yet, let me just be remaining at home." (p.107)

This announcement demonstrates Bùsọ́lá's courageous negotiation with power and her refusal to succumb passively to punishment for circumstances over which she has no control. She deploys a form of femininity that is realistic, outspoken, and self-protective, continuing her education on the condition that her basic needs and security are maintained. Her relationship with Ẹniọlá also involves policing gender performance:

"Come and be going, stop following me. Do you want everyone to think I'm a child?"

Bùsọ́lá informed Eniọlá her Brother, scowling at him as they were moving in the direction of the block of rooms. "Unripe cashews will give you stomachache." Said Eniọlá. "It's

sha not your stomach. Be going, jàre. You'll be late for your own assembly." (p.40)

Here, Bùsọ́lá's rebuke of Ẹniọlá to refrain from "acting like a child" is replete with gendered subtext; she advises him to forego immaturity and assume the serious demeanor suited to a male brother. Her scowl and tone of voice give away a defensive assertiveness, and Ẹniọlá's jesting retort suggests their sibling relationship under rigid gender regulations and economic pressure.

Their mother, Abọ́sẹ̀dé, is the embodiment of gendered tension between desire and restraint determined by economic necessity. Her narrative catches a trajectory where schooling is abandoned out of exhaustion with structural barriers, yet traditional femininity and wedded bliss continue to be ultimate goals:

"Abọ́sẹ̀dé (Ìyá Ẹniọlá), why did you leave school? Kóìtiírí? Why?"… questioned by her

grandmother. "I just get tired of going to school on a daily basis. But don't worry, I will marry someone with a degree. Nothing less than Grade II teacher training. I swear." (p.111)

This promise is a realistic optimism that a marriage of wedded bliss to an educated man will secure economic and social welfare beyond her means on the basis of her own schooling. It is a reiteration of the social presumption that women's security could be in marrying well rather than in official work or individual resources. Abọ́sẹ̀dé's self too is founded on valued domestic roles: "Abọ́sẹ̀dé would inherit her large frying pan and be the new and legendary Ìyá Alákàrà …. She put away the frying pan, but after having given birth to her son and becoming Ìyá Ẹniọlá, made sure her family fasted on àkàrà every Saturday morning. (p.112) The frying pan as a source of domestic power and nourishment ties her gender performance to motherhood and cooking as a skill, arenas traditionally the province of women. Her title of Ìyá Alákàrà, the best creator of the family's favorite food, is both identity maintenance and social capital, setting her value and power within the family and society by a culturally sanctioned female role. These examples illustrate how the mother and children negotiate their gender roles in poverty. Ẹniọlá's masculinity is eroded and rebuilt by economic need and out-of-the-ordinary labor like sewing. Bùsọ́lá's femininity is assertive and defensive, pushing schooling boundaries clearly and confidently. Abọ́sẹ̀dé's femininity is performed through acceptance of traditional roles, strategic marital aspirations, and skills of domestic labour as a basis of family and social power.

## Gendered Labor, Family Roles, and Survival Strategies

The quotes as a whole indicate an intense and ongoing conflict between deeply rooted traditional gender roles and the survival needs of hard times. In the Ẹniọlá family, the father's inability to assert the conventional male role of breadwinner ultimately reduces him to a symbolically denigrated role of headship. His titular power is maintained more in form than function, challenged by unemployment and social obscurity. This novel dynamic highlights the active and central economic function of the mother, which relocates normative femininity in their circumscribed world. She is driven into men's labor, including public performance of begging, negotiating with landlords and creditors, and providing sustenance for her family. Public, exertive care is not a non-wage extension of feminine care but a survival mechanism forced on her by her circumstances that she enforces with: "Ẹniọlá's mother rushed to the door, then dropped on her knees as the landlord burst into the room. 'Good afternoon sir.' 'Don't try to bribe me with polite greetings, Ìyá Ẹniọlá,' he boomed, stamping on the ground with his decorated walking stick. 'I have come to visit your husband. Where is he?' Due to Bàbá Ẹniọlá

losing his job, Ìyá Ẹniọlá has taken the husband's position, earning and providing for the whole family in every single way…" (p.172) Her physical stance, prostituting herself on her knees, recounts the juxtaposition of demure prayer and tough courage in standing up to harassment by the landlord. The experience caps her full assumption of the husband's role, characterized by tough caregiving and budgeting authority, which redefines social gender roles to suit the needs of the family. Furthermore, the pragmatic management of scarce resources through begging is echoed in her hopeful counting of money, which shows women's capability to exert domestic and economic agency:

"'Today will be better than yesterday,' Ẹniọlá's mother said, folding the bills she'd just counted. 'Sunday is a day that people give more. Think about last Sunday? Six thousand o, almost six thousand altogether.' His mother believed also that people gave more on Fridays." (p.182)

This befits her own experience with local patterns of generosity and her affective interest in maintaining the family income, signaling women's agency as strategic economic actors in times of crisis. Household children also demonstrate gender roles differently, with the sharp economic hardship influencing them. Ẹniọlá's seamstress work defies traditional masculine labour expectations, in addition to his regular experience of punishment for failing to pay school fees represents his battle with masculinity's devaluation by poverty:

"During the first month of Ẹniọlá's apprenticeship, Aunty Caro taught him how to measure and cut. She sat him down at a sewing machine beside her and told him how to do stitches …(p.50)

"Ẹniọlá dried his palms on his arms until his fingers were dry. He always was the last pupil to remit school fees in his class and thus was used to punishments. (p.91)

These excerpts call attention to how Ẹniọlá's youth and later masculinity are openly marked by economic failure and engagement in unconventional gendered work, proof of masculinity remade in adversity. With Bùsọ́lá's bluntness and insistence on not passively enduring punishment, contrastive relief is drawn to a form of practical, stoic femininity:

"Come and be going, stop following me… (p.40)

"Is it not me they will flog in school on Monday?... (p.107)

Her brutal comments exhibit a resolute femininity which ignores patriarchal and economic constraints, marking her as a self-willed agent of her own survival within societal expectations.

Importantly, the family collectively adopts *begging* (poverty) as a performative identity for social survival that blends economic poverty and gendered performativity. They adopt roles and use signs in a bid to command public sympathy, the father still scripting their story in the background:

"The signs they used were scripted by their father, who wrote why they should be pitied and preceded that with details Ẹniọlá believed were unnecessary. Wasn't is it sufficient for people to think that Ẹniọlá was deaf? Did they also have to believe that he had lost both parents in a fire? Ẹniọlá never complained about the signs." (p.184)

"…he stood in the doorway and observed his mother and Bùsọ́lá prepare to start their day as a blind woman and her daughter." (p.185)

This performative strategy, taking on disabled people's roles, shows not just how gender and economic identities are tied together but also how survival necessitates a collective performativity. The interference of the father in inscribing these signs, even when he bodily recedes, is a play to establish male dominance and control over the outer presentation of the family. The novel accurately represents the dynamic readjustments of gender roles in economic adversity. The father is the symbolic figure retreating from mainstream labour, the mother is the stoic breadwinner against gendered norms, and the children are adaptive enactments of gender according to survival imperatives. The public performativity of disability and poverty in the family also interlocks and reshapes gender and social identity for functional ends.

## Emotional Labour and Gendered Expectations

Emotional labors within the Ẹniọlá family highlights with bitter poignancy how highly gendered social values inform the expression, repression, and management of feeling within it. These emotional displays reinforce and materialize gender norms even in absolute misery. The father's emotional display is characterized by stoic suffering. His nighttime departure to escape creditors is an action of emotional containment and guarding, guarding himself as well as the family honor from open ignominy: "Sometimes, remembering this helped him forget that his father had become a man who now preferred to stay at home in the evenings, as his creditors could no longer identify him at night. (p.37) This withdrawal is not simply physical but emotional, for it is the stoic ideal of masculinity which demands suffering hardship in silence. His withdrawal is an attempt to keep the family protected from outer shame while holding over to his own weak pride in the house. This outside silence hides inner struggle, chronicling the cost of masculinity built on provision and bodily strength even when those abilities are beyond reach. Contrasted with the silence of the father is the verbal empowerment and active feeling labor of the mother. She will not be brought to rigid grief, insisting her husband move beyond despair and action for the survival of their relatives: "'Bàbá Ẹniọlá, stand up and wake. Sorrow will not pay school fees but will tire you out instead. I know you are aware, Bàbá Ẹniọlá. Bàbá Ẹniọlá?' (p.113) Her determination to call him out and demand that he wake up manifests a caregiving role caring and authoritative that includes the emotional labor required of women, caring for and supporting the family through resilience in hardship. She possesses accountability for not just physical survival but psychological well-being. The mother also turns patriarchal expectations on their heads in vitriolic rhetorical resistance to dependency on patriarchal institutions like remarriage: "'Let's suppose Bàbá Ẹniọlá is even as lazy as you claim, can't I be something? Why must the fix for my predicament be another marriage? Shouldn't I be able to take care of my children on my own? Am I not the one who gave birth to them?'\" (p.127) This powerful statement asserts a feminist declaration of independence for women, refusing the normative assumption that women need to depend on men, the husband or some new husband, for survival and social positioning. Her emotional display is both vulnerable and forceful, transgressing gendered expectations of women's dependency and making a claim to a hunger for independence and self-sufficiency. The children's affective conduct also illustrates gendered work and expectation. Bùsọ́lá's hissed scowl and biting verbal reprimand to her brother are instantiations of a strict, disciplining femininity, charged with keeping interpersonal tensions at bay and household discipline in place:

'"Come and be going, stop following me around. Do you want everyone to think I'm a child?' Bùsọ́lá said Enioḷá her Brother, frowning at him as they headed towards the block of classrooms." (p.40) Her control and assertiveness illustrate a young woman's work on feeling, regulating behaviour within gendered social norms to deflect exposure and establish order in dangerous circumstances. In contrast, Ẹnioḷá's work on feeling is enforced silence and stoicism, bearing punishment and shame in conditions of poverty: "Ẹnioḷá dried his palms up and down the arms of his until his fingers were dry… (p.91) His unobtrusive restraint is proof of male norms for male emotional display, boys have to bear pain, shame, and vulnerability quietly, displaying strength when emotionally injured. This is a hard face that is an affective labor supporting male concepts of toughness even in times of clear vulnerability.

## Socioeconomic Status and Gender Identity Performance

Wúràọlá's emerging identity is deeply shaped by social expectations closely linked to her class position, desires for modernity, and gender script. Her appearance and comportment are created through a self-aware effort to emulate professional ideals of femininity in the modern age, provoked explicitly by visions of female authority and achievement that complicate and challenge the idealized domestic space.

One of Wúràọlá's central figures is Professor Cordelia Coker, Kúnlé's mother, whose extraordinary career trajectory represents an aspiration model for young women who want to achieve empowerment via education and professional success:

"Wúràọlá had been trying to follow in Professor Cordelia Coker's spotless. The woman was a consultant at thirty, and a professor at forty-six. Half of Wúràọlá's class fell for her." (p.71)

In this, Cordelia is a role model for independent woman and success. She is the new woman, with intellectual power and social stature. Emulating Wúràọlá's poise and success is for Wúràọlá a revolution of the conventional roles where marriage and motherhood are the pivot of women's existence. The fact that even her friends at school look up to Cordelia already indicates that there is a cultural shift that values feminine professional excellence and hegemony. Wúràọlá's aspiration cannot be divorced from her perception of what women need to do femininity today, a self-determination and autonomy of one's own body and decisions. Such progressivism is tested by the strongly rooted patriarchal and conservative family life. The tension is foregrounded in the encounter with Kúnlé's father, the very image of traditional male authority and policing on matters of moral correctness, especially women's sexuality and morality: "Wúràọlá willed herself to meet his look this time. His hint was unmistakable: her father's plan for her had not included having sex with her boyfriend and then sleeping on his sofa afterwards as a good girl." (p.72) It is a dazzling example of the moral expectations placed on Wúràọlá as a female youth. The imputed charge of "being like a common girl" stigmatizes her sexual freedom and easygoing nature, calling for a stern ideal of chastity and limited behavior as respectable womanhood and family honor. It also demonstrates the ways through which women's bodies remain places of social control, and reputations have tangible consequences on familial standing, especially among middle and high socioeconomic ranks. Fueling the flames of these controls, Wúràọlá's mother and Caro the family tailor, also manage gendered norms, in the guise of maintaining respectability and purity of stock: "Ha, Caro, speak sense to this girl now. When she's not SU, it's only nuns that should be dressing in a certain way when they're unmarried, and the latter have kúkú married Jesus already." (p.90) Those social expectations of female modesty and social decorum are reflected in that ironic reprimand which draws a contrast between contemporary styles and conventional norms. We can learn from this episode how older kin as well as community members use deterrence strategies to prevent young women from participating in behavior perceived as improper or sexually promiscuous. Interactions within the family present ethnic traditions that act along with cultural norms to regulate gender behavior. Ethnicity became a tool of regulating the interaction between Wúràọlá and her boyfriend when her mother stubbornly rejected her boyfriend Nonso because he belonged to a different ethnic group: "Don't you dare bring any strange boy into my house again… if I were ever to catch sight of that Igbo boy in this house again, ehn, God will surely accept someone's soul to heaven that day." (p.81) The exaggerated response demonstrates the degree to which Wúràọlá's devotion to family obligations extends beyond modesty limits into cultural borders which prioritize her social obligations over individual considerations. The complex system of social surveillance directed towards women constrains their agency through ethnicity and gender and also across moral expectations. In spite of traditional constraints being powerful Wúràọlá is an irreconcilable conflict between new ideals of womanhood and settled habits with her resistance and fleeting self-expression. The female protagonist explicitly imitates powerful female role models but is persistently challenged with the challenge of reconciling her identity with the gendered limits enforced by both male and female seniors who vehemently resist new behaviors. Dominant-class women are persistently reminded of negotiations between professional identities and dominant social demands on sexual behavior and ethnic loyalty. The Wúràọlá character represents transitional existence because she is a modern-traditional woman who struggles for independence under harsh public scrutiny.

## Masculinity, Political Ambition, and Family Pressure

Kúnlé's father emerges as a firm representative of traditional, patriarchal masculinity bound up with political ambition, power, and family legacy. His gubernatorial ambitions represent not only personal ambition but also the exertion of masculine power through public leadership and intergenerational influence. This political ambition is established early, when he discusses the upcoming election and his desire to get Kúnlé ready to participate in the campaign:

"The party chair was at the church service, and we had a chance to talk before he left. He thinks the next election can be our chance. His people are ready to run me, but I have to start getting ready right away and I want you to be involved."…"Congratulations sir," Kúnlé said." (p.72)

This conversation reveals a number of levels of masculine identity formation. It establishes manhood initially in terms of the acquisition and exercise of public power, defining masculinity as rule and authority. The desire to bring his son into the political enterprise indicates the patriarch's concern to leave behind not just a name but an inheritance of power, responsibility, and masculine service to the country, or at least, political supremacy. These masculine institutions are impossible to separate from class

privilege and webs of elite patronage, which are both facilitators and shapers of political influence. Political campaigns are advertised as bargains as much as political fights, with money and allegiances being negotiated for influence and eventual material gain:

"We could be in-laws very soon. Your investment in my ambition is not just about business. It's an investment in Wúràọlá's future too." (p.87) "Investment. That was what Fẹ̀sọ̀jaiyé's people had called it too. Invest in the campaign, reap returns in contract allocations." (p.86)

Here, investment is not a neutral financial activity but a deliberate intertwinement of political ambition and economic opportunity. Masculinity is performed and legitimized through control over capital and the promise of material returns in the form of lucrative contracts and influence. This is a masculinity that is both public-oriented, rooted in campaign rallies and governance aspirations, and firmly embedded in private transactions and elite business networks. The comment on the establishment of family ties through marriage also shows how masculinity negotiates alliances for consolidating power:

"We could be in-laws very soon. Your investment, it's an investment in Wúràọlá's future too." (p.87)

This foregrounds that political and economic interests extend beyond the individual male protagonist to shape family futures, revealing a type of patriarchal masculinity that constructs the family as a strategic unit bound by marriage, business, and political alliances. It shows how men in power perform their masculinity not just through public office but through the control of and social networks. Masculine ambition here is not risk-free, however, and harsh stakes are entwined together with competition and savagery: "Fúnṣọ́ Williams, didn't they kill him in his own compound over governorship?" (p.167) This ghastly reminder of deadly political competition brings out the savage foundations of the masculine struggle for public authority. Masculine identity here involves not just the acquisition of power but also its defence, sometimes violently or by intimidation, testimony to the virulence of masculine performance in Nigerian political society. Political ambitions of the individuals require them to keep quiet and be loyal to relatives which presents twin challenges to men who have to balance their public competition and familial relations. The act of withholding economic support to Fẹ̀sọ̀jaiyé is different from being supportive to another political contender who is likewise vying for office. That fellow can put all business operations my company is about to start in Abuja to a halt. (p.87) The practical analysis shows how men perform masculinity through strategic risk-taking and negotiated power. Men are required by the elite class to play a game of calculation between their desires and their vows and staying alive. Kúnlé's father personifies traditional masculine values by his political position and his identification with family traditions and his wealthy social networks. His public ambitions find origins in private class interests and family pressure to maintain and consolidate power, placing masculine identity as a public spectacle and a calculated private enterprise. This intricate gender performance illustrates the intersections of masculinity, rule, and socio-economic privilege in the novel's sociopolitical landscape.

## Violence as a Gendered and Power Dynamic: An Expanded Analysis

The exchange between Kúnlé and Wúràọlá shockingly lays bare the fact that violence does not only exist in isolated moments of aggression but also as a strategic performance of masculinity embedded in patriarchal hierarchies of power. The physical violence, slapping, beating, is violent insistence on control and dominance within the domestic and familial sphere, reflecting broader societal norms within which masculinity is often legitimized through the exercise of power over women.

The scene where Mọ́tárá interrogates her mother for witnessing the slap, "Mọ́tárá took a deep breath and stepped nearer to her mother. 'Kúnlé slapped Wúràọlá, I saw him do it.'" (p.242), constitutes the disruptive visibility of private violence into the open. This confession breaks the silence that frequently attends domestic violence and highlights the intense pressure on victims to remain silent and protect perpetrators' reputations.

This secrecy and minimization are highlighted when the narrative records the incredulity that the violence occurred in Wúràọlá's own family home, "The effrontery of slapping Wúràọlá in her family home, with her family so close by? No, he had to be doing worse when they were alone elsewhere." (p.245).

Here, the family home, traditionally a space of safety for women, is invaded by abuse, illustrating how patriarchal power acts in spaces thought to be protective. The suggestion that more severe violence likely takes place in secret underscores the hidden and systematic nature of abuse,

where public propriety conceals ongoing abuse.

Kúnlé's interrogation of Wúràọlá's telephone call to Kingsley also discloses an escalation of control through jealousy and possessiveness, "'Why did you call Kingsley?' Kúnlé asked. 'He's my friend.' 'I said, why did you call him?' Wúràọlá felt the sudden urge to run into the bathroom and shut the door behind her… he beat her again." (p.257). This moment reveals the way violence was used not only to punish, but to regulate women's autonomy and social relationships. Physical violence following a mere attempt at understanding friendship shows how intimate and domestic violence dictates women's mobility and choices, that enhance the gendered power imbalance.

## Intersections of Gender, Politics, and Reputation

In A Spell of a Good Thing, the political aspirations of male characters, particularly most notably that of Professor Coker's son, Kúnlé, are a huge behind-the-scenes influence on not only public life but also on domestic gender performances as well as family dynamics of the novel. Politics as a quest for power and prestige cannot be dissociated from family reputation, gender, and control issues, shaping the construction and performance of masculinity and femininity. Professor Coker's remark, "I wanted to tell you in person that going-on to become governor" (p.85), sets in motion a series ofevents in which political power is a significant axis on which public and personal identity are forced to revolve. His political aspiration draws the family into coalition-building and sharpens consciousness towards reputation, decency, and standing. Congratulations responses, "This is great news. We must celebrate this!" (p.85), applaud the premium placed upon political success as a indicator of domestic status. But this conjunction of politics and domesticity has a shadow side, in which power struggles turn into brutality and rivalry. The recollection, "Fúnṣọ́ Williams, didn't they kill him in his own house over governorship?" (p.167), places the action within actual political brutality. This exceptional promise of

bodily harm raises the stakes for figures like Professor Coker and consists of the performative scripts of manliness, wherein power struggles within the public sphere resonate in private sphere conflict and govern gender relations.

The political discourse continues as Professor Coker involves his son Kúnlé in the campaign:

"The party chair came for the church service, and we had a chance to talk before he left. Their people are ready to send me out, but I need to start preparing now and I want you in it" (p.72).

This father-son bond illustrates the passing on of masculine political ambition, securing a legacy of power, oftentimes based on family affiliations, public connections, and sometimes the repression of dissent or marginalized voices within the family structure.

Wúràọlá's movement within gendered spheres remains strained. The interaction with Kúnlé's father serves to demonstrate how political aspiration brings stringent restraints on women's behavior and sexuality:

"Her intimation was clear: her father's plan for her did not involve having sex with her boyfriend and attempting to sleep on his couch afterward like a regular girl" (p.72).

This on-looker comments on the policing of Wúràọlá's behavior as paradigmatic of upholding family and political dignity, with femininity closely associated with control and respectability. Gendered expectations also manifest in everyday interactions and ambitions. The exchange about skill acquisition, where Wúràọlá dismisses stereotypical “women’s skills” like beadmaking, “You’re a woman?” “That doesn’t make me an expert on what skill all women are learning at this point in time” (p.75), reflects her resistance to prescriptive gender roles even as societal pressures seek to confine women’s potential.

Simultaneously, discussions of political messaging, “We need simpler messaging, something that can fit on a bag of rice or salt. You can’t print a comprehensive plan on those” (p.77), highlight the manipulation and simplification inherent in political campaigns, echoing the ways gendered performances often reduce complex identities to manageable stereotypes. Social and familial rituals further reinforce hierarchical gender performances and ethnic tensions:

Yèyé’s control over behavior and status, “Get up, Lakúnlé, get up. Omo dada, sit down, please” with its underlying expectations terms of respect and decency (p.80), and the brutal denunciation of Nonso's Igbo identity, "Don't you dare bring any strange boy into my house ever again… if I see that Igbo boy in this house again, ehn, God will surely receive someone's soul into heaven on that day" (p.81), demonstrate how ethnicity, gender, and reputation are intricately interlocked and policed in domestic and social spaces.

Political alliances and familial relationships also turn into transactional relationships, witnessed in the campaign negotiations and "investments": "Your investment in my ambition is not just about business. It's an investment in Wúràọlá's future too" (p.87). This commodification of relations indicates how political power and family status are mobilised as bargaining weapons, where women's futures get incorporated into broader male ambitions and economic calculations.

The tension between past expectations and future hopes is highlighted most powerfully in clashes over dress and behavior, where generations of women foist traditional standards on young women:

"When she's not SU, it's only nuns who should be dressing like this when they are not married" (p.90).

This remark also indicates the continued policing of women's bodies and selves, reminding us of women's sexuality and public selves being policed.

## Thuggery and Politics in a Spell of a Good Thing

A Spell of a Good Thing takes apart the intersection of political power and thuggery in Nigeria's contemporary realities and uncovers how extralegal violence, intimidation, and coercion build and sustain political ambition. A Spell of a Good Thing is a tale of a regime in which politicians and political aspirants increasingly mobilize networks of "boys" or political Things to exert pressure, silence opposition, and mobilize neighborhoods. The extremely casual attitude of violence and threatening conduct is revealed right from the beginning. The exchange between Rashidii, and Samu elucidating Ẹniọlá on "Honourable" politician, who vows, "Àní, Honourable Fẹ̀sọ̀jaiyé will never die." The food's there, but if you don't wish to join us, no issue" (p.265), betrays the transactional character of governmental interaction whereby giveaways, such as complimentary food stuff or items of commodities, are used to acquire allegiance and marshal popular support. The offer of a "flexi banner" proclaiming Honourable KTF as best option for governor (p.268) is similarly an instance of the surface spectacle of political campaigns with the intention of creating mass popularity. The youthfulness and employment of intimidation by political machinery unmistakably resurface in the exchange regarding Ẹniọlá's age: "Muchacho, how old are you?". "Sixteen sir." "You're eighteen, do you understand?" (p.275). The focus on Ẹniọlá being cast as a political thuggery actor as an adult highlights the manner in which young people are inducted into a game of power and violence, often by fraud or violence. In the manner the Honourable inducts Ẹniọlá into a series of acts of coercion that are political, from transferring free goods among women in a bid to build goodwill, he overlays a sinister tone: "You just have to look tough… Don't worry about anything when you are on the beat." Even cops. Nobody can harm you." (p.277-278) This is the impunity with which political affairs operate, generally assured to be protected from the police, and functioning power exercised by political leadership that creates duplicate structures of power that side-step the legal norms. Sàámú's individual background of being an orphan struggling to fend for his siblings (p.288) makes the lives of the people who get involved in this ominous realm of politics understandable. Not ordinary criminals, these young men are often from impoverished families and forced into thuggery and violence, and their political thuggery matches the socio-economic origins. Political violence as a means is aggravated when Holy Michael, an Honourable Fẹ̀sọ̀jaiyé's thug, reveals an orchestrated "special task" to harass Professor Coker (Kúnlé's father) and Ọ̀túnba (Wúràọlá's father): "Honourable wants the two of them to understand that the lion is the cat's elder father." (p.294). This imagery prefigures a violent struggle for domination where political authorities impose their will through brutal intimidations against rivals and their families, blurring the public-political and private-personal spheres. The raw brutality of these encounters is brutal as Holy Michael physically assaults Ọ̀túnba: "Holy Michael gave the man two quick slaps… Holy Michael kicked Ọ̀túnba's

kneecap." (p.324) This attack on a politically influential subject reveals the gravity of lawlessness and disrespect for authority entrenched in the political environment portrayed. The cycle of violence intensifies as, after instances of burning of houses, the policeman drags Ọ̀túnba into the bus (p.325), a symbol of collaboration between the authorities and political things towards suppressing dissent. Ẹniọlá's hot-tempered reaction, "Suddenly, as Rashidi had directed, Ẹniọlá sliced the policeman's forearm. The policeman screamed with agony and allowed his gun to drop to the ground" (p.327), Demonstrates the fragile nature of this government, where political-affiliated youth militias brazenly attack the agents of the state, breeding insecurity and anarchism. This performance leads to Ẹniọlá's own exclusion from the political game. His dread of retaliation, served up by the dark threat: "Don't tell me you are going to police o." I'm giving you a warning now, you will never lay eyes on your daughter again if you do," said Sàámú, (p.330). It signifies the forced loyalty and gagging requested in such political militant groupings. Such a warning encapsulates the human cost of political thuggery, extending violence from the political realm to familial and individual lives. The web of violence does in Ọ̀túnba and Ẹniọlá's sister as a result of the political patronage rivalries between Professor Coker and Honourable Fẹ̀sọ̀jaiyé's ambition. The book effectively connects these individual tragedies to its broader Nigerian political analysis on how political patronage degrades government effectiveness while creating violent regimes of control. The author reveals to the readers how the system of political patronage creates deadly networks which sustain themselves on violence and coercion. The author weaves individual tragedies into a thorough examination of Nigerian politics in order to demonstrate how political patronage destroys not only governance institutions but also civilian security.

## Discussion of Findings

The research conducted a close reading of gender identity in Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀'s A Spell of Good Things using an investigation into the tension between discourses on gender norms and social expectations and economic positioning in the novel. The research used gender performativity theory and intersectionality to examine how characters perform their gender identity and how their racial and social class positioning affect how they perform gender. The main findings of the analysis were:

**I. Gender Identity Performance as Society's Expectation Response:** The gender identities of the characters in A Spell of Good Things are performed specifically in response to societal expectations, particularly in terms of poverty. The research showed that the gender roles performed by the characters are not static but adaptive and dynamic to the socio-economic demands imposed upon them. In Ẹniọlá's family, for instance, the father's economic failure leads to a reversal of male gender roles. The mother becomes the breadwinner and caretaker, positions stereotypically male. This is typical of how gender roles are reversed under economic pressure and burst loose constructions of masculinity and femininity.

**II. Defying Traditional Nigerian Concepts of Masculinity and Femininity:** Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀ defies traditional Nigerian concepts of masculinity and femininity by presenting characters who act in nonconformist manners. The depiction of the emasculation of the father, as represented through his inability to keep his family alive, defies the traditional concept of masculinity most identified with economic provision and dominance. The mother who gets to become the breadwinner of the family and who haggles with landlords and creditors defies the conventional gender roles placed upon women by Nigerian culture. The presentation of the character in this way enables the novel to show how gender is an adaptable social construct that shifts according to environmental conditions and not fixed status. III. Intersectionality in Gender Identity Construction: The construction of gender identities in A Spell of Good Things also depends heavily on the intersection of race and class and ethnicity with each other. The construction of characters' gender identity is derived from their respective gender identities along with their social class and their ethnic origin. The family of Ẹniọlá is also economically affected and this is exacerbated by their position in society belonging to the lower socio-economic class. Wúràọlá also experiences a conflict between her ethnic identity and the traditional gender roles because she wants to be a modern person but society, the community, and her family all require her to follow traditional gender roles.

**III. Gender Performativity Theory and Intersectionality in Nigerian Literature**: The research applied gender performativity theory and intersectionality to study Nigerian literature through a new framework which reveals more about how gender identity operates in these texts. Judith Butler developed the theory of gender performativity to demonstrate that people create their gender identity through repeated social behaviors rather than being born with specific gender traits. The characters in A Spell of Good Things express their gender identities through various performative actions which both support and challenge established social expectations. The research became more detailed by using intersectionality to study how different personal traits such as race and class and ethnicity affect the way Nigerian characters express their gender identity.

## Conclusion

Finally, the study has established that Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀'s A Spell of Good Things is a rich analysis of gender identities within everyday life of the characters, particularly under the state of economic hardship. The research establishes that characters perform their gender using gender performativity theory and intersectionality in coping with socio-economic environmental contexts. The novel shows people who change their gender roles which breaks down traditional Nigerian notions of what makes a man or woman. The research shows that people can transform their gender identity through role reversal and intersectionality studies that confirm the process of social context makes such transformation possible. The research shows that social expectations and culture and economic conditions govern the ways in which people perform and understand gender in Nigerian society. Apart from that, this research has established that gender performativity theory and intersectionality are robust theories to apply when carrying out research on gender identity in Nigerian literature. Through the emphasis of the intersectional and performative aspects of gender, these theories provide an extremely broad framework for the investigation of the dynamics of gender in literature, particularly in Nigerian society.

### Recommendations for Future Studies

Although this research has enriched our knowledge of gender identity in A Spell of Good Things, there are various research avenues open that can enrich our knowledge of gender in Nigerian literature and beyond:

**I. Analyzing Gender Identity in Post-Colonial African Literature:** Further research could expand the scope of this research by analyzing the enactment of gender identities in other post-colonial African literature. A comparison of gender roles in literature by authors like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Sefi Atta, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o might provide more information on how gender norms are built, dismantled, and reconstructed in African literary cultures. This may also include examining the ways colonial legacies continue to shape gender expectations in modern African societies.

**II. Intersectionality and Global Perspective:** More research on the intersectionality of gender, race, class, and ethnicity at a global scale is also possible. This would make it possible to compare performances of gender identity of Nigerian literature with that elsewhere in the world, especially in post-colonial countries. An inter-national approach may uncover similarities and dissimilarities in gender as imagined and lived in different cultures and sites.

**III. The Role of Men in Subverting Gender Norms:** While this research has been focused on the lives of women and children in *A Spell of Good Things*, another study can be grounded on the role of men in subverting or supporting gender norms. The male characters in the novel, particularly the father figure in the Ẹniọlá household, are important in that they incite essential questions regarding the crisis of masculinity and the manner in which men navigate society's expectations during economic crises. Future studies may be done on how male characters enact and re-negotiate their gender identities, particularly with regard to power, economic security, and household duties.

IV. **Gender and Socio-Economic Mobility***:* It is also important in the future to investigate the intersection of gender and socio-economic mobility. This could involve a closer investigation of the effect of economic status change on gender roles and the role of gender in upward or downward socio-economic mobility. Such studies can examine how economic class affects gender performances and how people refuse or acquiesce to gender norms for the sake of social and economic achievement.

**V. The Intersection of Gender and Political Ambition in Nigerian Literature**: Finally, future studies could explore the intersection of gender and political ambition within Nigerian literature, as well as how political structures of power influence gender roles. *A Spell of Good Things* crosses the border of political power and gender, as in the case of Kúnlé's father and his own desire for political ambition. There can be research into how gendered performance in the political sphere is represented in Nigerian literature and how political ambition shapes the roles men and women play in Nigerian society.

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