

REIMAGINING MASCULINE IDENTITY: FEMINIST AGENCY AND THE SURRENDER OF TRADITION IN JONATHAN MBACHAGA'S *WIDOW'S MIGHT*

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Abstract

This research examined the reconfiguration of masculine identity in Jonathan Mbachaga's play *Widow's Might* (2018), focusing on how feminist agency compels men to relinquish hegemonic positions, assume domestic responsibilities, and ultimately surrender patriarchal traditions. Employing summative content analysis as the methodological framework and R.W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity as the theoretical lens, this study analyses the textual and thematic elements of Mbachaga's drama to demonstrate how feminist resistance precipitated a crisis in traditional masculine authority. The findings revealed that Mbachaga constructs a narrative trajectory wherein patriarchal structures, initially presented as immutable, progressively yield to organized feminist activism. This surrender manifested in three distinct phases: the displacement of men from positions of public authority, their reorientation toward domestic labour, and the formal renunciation of harmful traditional practices. The play thus served as a literary intervention that envisions the possibility of transformed gender relations within African cultural contexts, suggesting that masculine identity is neither static nor essential but subject to reconstruction through feminist pressure and collective action.

Keywords: hegemonic masculinity, feminist agency, domestic labour, traditional practices, widowhood rites, gender relations

Introduction

The representation of gender relations in African literature has long been a site of contestation, reflecting broader societal tensions between tradition and modernity, patriarchy and feminism, and cultural preservation and human rights (Kaufmann, 21). Within this contested terrain, Fasanmi Abidemi and Sandra Ayivor noted that the figure of the widow occupies a particularly significant position, embodying the intersection of gendered vulnerability and cultural expectation (2271). Jonathan Mbachaga's play *Widow's Might* (2018) enters this discursive field with remarkable force, presenting a dramatized conflict between a widow's refusal to submit to traditional mourning rites and the patriarchal authority structures that seek to enforce them. The play's importance goes beyond its plot. It stages a

larger clash between traditional male authority and rising feminist awareness, with deep consequences for redefining what masculinity itself can mean.

This study undertook a critical examination of *Widow's Might* through the lens of masculine identity transformation, arguing that Mbachaga's play dramatizes a process whereby feminist agency compels men to relinquish hegemonic positions, assume domestic responsibilities traditionally assigned to women, and ultimately surrender patriarchal traditions that have historically subordinated women. This study captures the tripartite movement that structures the play's narrative arc: the emergence of feminist resistance, the consequent disruption of traditional gender roles, and the eventual reconfiguration of masculine identity in response to these pressures. The significance of this inquiry lies in its

contribution to ongoing scholarly conversations about gender, power, and cultural change in African literary studies. While considerable critical attention has been devoted to representations of women in African literature, relatively less scholarship has focused on how African drama constructs and interrogates masculinity, particularly in moments of crisis and transformation. *Widow's Might* offers a rich site for such analysis, presenting not merely a critique of patriarchal practices but a nuanced exploration of how men respond, with resistance, confusion, negotiation, and ultimately accommodation to feminist challenges to their traditional authority.

Objectives

The study seeks to:

- i. examine feminist agency as a disruptive force that unsettles entrenched masculine authority in *Widow's Might*.
- ii. analyse the displacement of masculine authority and its contribution to the reimagining of masculine identity.
- iii. explore how the reconfiguration of domestic labour functions as a critical arena for negotiating shifting gender roles.
- iv. evaluate the process of tradition's surrender, through renunciation and reconciliation, and its implications for emerging models of masculinity.

Literature Review

Gender and Power in African Literature

The representation of gender relations in African literature has evolved significantly since the emergence of modern African writing in the mid-twentieth century. Early African novels, such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), often depicted traditional gender roles as integral to pre-colonial social order, with masculinity associated with public authority, warfare, and lineage continuity, while femininity was confined to domestic spheres and reproductive functions (Nfah-Abbenyi 12). Such representations have been subjected to sustained feminist critique, with scholars arguing that they naturalize patriarchal structures while marginalizing women's agency and contributions to social life. While this critical tradition has productively exposed how literary texts naturalize patriarchal norms and marginalize

women, it has largely stopped at recovering female agency rather than investigating what happens to masculinity itself when that agency becomes a transformative force.

The feminist intervention in African literary studies, beginning in the 1970s and intensifying through the 1980s and 1990s, sought to recover women's voices and experiences from the margins of African literature. Critics such as Florence Stratton, in *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender I* (1994), demonstrated how canonical African writing often reproduced patriarchal ideologies even when ostensibly critiquing colonial domination. While Stratton critiques patriarchal representation in African literature, her analysis pays limited attention to the transformation of masculine identity, a gap this study addresses. Stratton's analysis revealed that male-authored texts frequently represented women in stereotypical terms, as mothers, whores, or witches, while women writers such as Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, and Mariama Bâ offered alternative perspectives that centred women's experiences and agency (Stratton 15-42).

More recently, scholarship has turned attention to the construction of masculinity in African literature, recognizing that gender analysis must attend not only to representations of women but also to the discursive production of manhood. Scholars such as Egodi Uchendu, in *Masculinities in Contemporary Africa* (2008), have explored how African masculinities are multiple, contested, and historically situated, rather than monolithic or static. This scholarship has been particularly attentive to moments of crisis in masculine identity, including the impact of colonialism, urbanization, economic transformation, and feminist movements on traditional patriarchal structures (Uchendu 3-8).

Widowhood Rites in African Literature and Culture

Widowhood practices constitute a recurring theme in African literature, serving as a powerful symbol of women's subordination within patriarchal kinship systems. The cultural logic of widowhood rites varies across African societies, but common elements include periods of

seclusion, restrictions on movement and social interaction, ritual cleansing, and the transfer of the deceased husband's property to his male relatives (Nwoga 45-48). These practices have been extensively documented by anthropologists and sociologists, who have noted their function in maintaining patrilineal structures and controlling female sexuality and reproductive capacity.

While feminist literary criticism has productively read widowhood rites as sites of female suffering and resistance, as in Nfah-Abbenyi's analysis of Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, such readings have largely centered on women's precarity and agency without interrogating the corollary disruption of masculine authority. Similarly, analyses of Aidoo's *Anowa* often emphasize the costs of female defiance but rarely examine how that defiance dismantles inherited models of manhood. Even in studies of more recent fiction like Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*, where widowhood is acknowledged as a space of gendered transformation, the critical lens remains fixed on women's evolving subjectivity. This persistent critical focus leaves a significant gap: what becomes of traditional masculinity itself when feminist agency, exercised within the charged context of widowhood, compels its surrender? The present study addresses this gap by examining how *Widow's Might* stages widowhood not merely as a trial for women but as a crucible in which masculine identity is fundamentally reimagined through renunciation and reconciliation.

Onuoha's study, analysing twelve Nigerian plays across three generations of playwrights to trace evolving notions of masculinity, argues that "hegemonic masculinity and other forms, which are referred to as 'alternative masculinities,' exist in traditional Nigerian society" and examines how "women manifest qualities associated with masculinity within Nigerian plays" (Onuoha 11-17). Crucially, she also explores "the negative experiences of the men who are also direct or indirect victims of such a system" (Onuoha 20). Despite its generational scope, Onuoha's framework remains anchored to a dialectical

model; hegemonic versus alternative, dominant versus subversive. The study catalogues masculinities that resist or deviate from hegemony but does not theorize a masculinity reconstructed through deliberate, ethical surrender to feminist consciousness. *Widow's Might* provides precisely this model, where masculine transformation is not a rebellion against or a failure of hegemony but a conscious act of renunciation and reconciliation, a third movement that Onuoha's taxonomy does not accommodate.

Ammann and Staudacher offered a pivotal conceptual shift, arguing that African masculinity scholarship must move "beyond crisis" narratives toward recognizing "complexity, fluidity, and intersectionality." They critique the tendency to frame African masculinities solely through the lens of social breakdown, colonial dislocation, economic marginalization, violence, and call for attention to "positive African masculinities as an alternative to the violent masculinities" often emphasized in earlier scholarship (Ammann and Staudacher 762). While this theoretical reorientation is generative, it remains a broad conceptual appeal rather than a sustained literary-critical methodology. Ammann and Staudacher did not provide an analytical framework for tracing how positive, reconstructed masculinities emerge narratively, particularly through the crucible of indigenous feminist challenges. The present study operationalizes their call by demonstrating how *Widow's Might* stages precisely this movement from crisis to conscious reconstruction, mediated by feminist agency.

Mutekwa developed a nuanced framework of "reactive and adaptive responses" by marginalized masculinities, identifying masculine (over)compensation and masculine hybridisation as strategies deployed by "subaltern masculinities who are at the receiving end of domination and hegemony" (Mutekwa 16-22). This framework captured the performative, often exaggerated, assertions of patriarchal power that arise from postcolonial marginalization. Mutekwa's models, overcompensation and hybridization, are fundamentally reactive; they describe masculinities that respond to external pressures by either intensifying patriarchal performance or

selectively incorporating non-hegemonic elements. These strategies, Mutekwa notes, “favour the enhancement of male domination and/or patriarchy as opposed to gender equality” (Mutekwa 23–25). What is absent is an account of a masculinity that responds to feminist pressure not by compensating or hybridising but by *surrendering* its traditional authority. *Widow's Might* enacts this untheorized possibility, making it a necessary complement to Mutekwa's reactive typology.

Kharbouche examined how Chigozie Obioma in *An Orchestra of Minorities* (2019) “presents diverse male characters that challenge stereotypes, subverting hegemonic masculinity and paving the way for alternative representations,” arguing that the novel “serves as a catalyst for critical reflection and deconstructing conventional notions of masculinity” (Kharbouche 15–17). Like much recent work, Kharbouche's analysis locates transformation in the *subversion* or *deconstruction* of hegemonic masculinity, an oppositional posture. The male characters in Obioma's novel challenge, resist, or fail at hegemonic ideals. *Widow's Might* departs from this subversive model by depicting masculinity not simply deconstructed but actively *reconstructed* through the positive act of renouncing patriarchal privilege in response to feminist ethical demands. This synthetic, reconciliatory trajectory remains critically unexamined.

Swila's study of “Dynamics of Power, Widowhood, and Female Sexual Agency in Ogbu's *The Moon Also Sets*” is significant for its focus on widowhood as a transformative rather than merely oppressive space, arguing that “widowhood can become a powerful site of resistance and transformation, where women assert agency through voice, action, and bodily autonomy” and “disrupt dominant narratives, resist discipline, and reclaim control over their identities” (Swila 22–27). This reframing of widowhood as a site of transformation follows the dominant critical pattern: the analytical lens remains trained on women's agency and women's reclamation of identity. The study does not ask what happens to the men, husbands, brothers-in-law, community patriarchs, when widows

successfully disrupt hetero-patriarchal norms. *Widow's Might*, with its thematic focus on widowhood practices in Igala land, directly confronts this absent question, staging widowhood not merely as a site of female empowerment but as the specific cultural arena where traditional masculine authority is compelled to surrender and reconstitute itself.

Eze applied Connell's hegemonic masculinity framework to Kilanko's novel, arguing that the text “does not only critique the cultural encouragement of patriarchal power but also contributes to African feminist discourses that challenge hegemonic masculinity and envision transformative possibilities for gender relations” (Eze et al. 18–21). The study's formulation, “envision transformative possibilities,” is characteristic of a broader critical tendency to gesture toward transformation without anatomizing its specific mechanisms. Transformation is posited as a horizon, not a process. The present study fills this methodological gap by tracing, through close textual analysis, the precise narrative steps by which feminist agency compels masculine renunciation and reconciliation in *Widow's Might*. Ncube and Chipara examine how female protagonists in Francophone and Lusophone African novels “use their voices as well as the physical and the erotic potentialities of their bodies to destabilise, resist and challenge patriarchal notions of women's sexuality as subservient to, and serving the pleasure of, men,” demonstrating that “hegemonic masculinity is not as untouchable and sacrosanct as is commonly considered” (Ncube and Chipara 12–18). Theoretically, they draw on Ratele's ideas on contested masculinities and Gqola's thoughts on dismantling patriarchy. The study's analytical endpoint is *destabilization*, proving that hegemonic masculinity is vulnerable. But vulnerability is not the same as transformation.

The critical question of what masculinity, *becomes* after destabilization, what form of manhood emerges when the untouchability of patriarchy is not merely exposed but voluntarily relinquished, remains outside the study's scope. *Widow's Might* answers this question, providing a literary case study of post-

destabilisation masculine reconstruction.

Duncan and Ennin examined whether male characters in Ghanaian novels "follow society's hegemonic model or create their own," recovering literary representations of masculinities that deviate from hegemonic expectations (Duncan and Ennin 14). The binary framework, following hegemonic norms or creating alternative models, positions masculine identity formation as a choice made largely by men themselves, in relation to societal expectations. What remains unexamined is a scenario where men's transformation is catalysed not by abstract societal pressure but by direct, intimate confrontation with feminist agency within the domestic sphere. This is the precise dynamic *Widow's Might* stages through its representation of widowhood and its demands upon the male characters.

The specificity of Mbachaga's contribution to this literary tradition lies in his dramatic form and his sustained attention to the responses of men to feminist challenge. While earlier works often focused on women's suffering or individual resistance, *Widow's Might* stages a collective feminist mobilization that transforms not only the situation of the widow but also the structures of masculine identity and authority. The play thus participates in what some scholars have termed "third-wave" African feminist literature, which moves beyond critique of patriarchy to envision alternative gender arrangements and transformed masculinities (Adeyemi 112).

Drama as Site of Gender Critique

African drama has proven a particularly fertile medium for exploring gender relations, with its emphasis on dialogue, conflict, and collective action lending itself to the dramatization of social tensions. Playwrights such as Femi Osofisan, Tess Onwueme, and Zulu Sofola have used the stage to interrogate patriarchal traditions and imagine alternative social arrangements. Osofisan's *Morountodun* (1982), for example, reworks Yoruba history to center women's resistance, while Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia* (1988) critiques both colonial and traditional patriarchies. Jonathan Mbachaga's *Widow's Might* inherits the same dramatic tools of dialogue and conflict, but it reorients their purpose. Rather than using the stage

solely to dramatize women's resistance or the indictment of tradition, Mbachaga stages the *aftermath* of feminist disruption; a space where traditional masculine authority is not simply displaced but compelled to surrender and reimagine itself. Where Osofisan and Onwueme position feminist agency as a force that challenges and rewrites social arrangements, often ending with the triumphant overturning of oppressive power, *Widow's Might* pushes further: it insists that the most profound transformation occurs not in the victory of feminist consciousness, but in the male character's voluntary, reconstructive reconciliation with that consciousness.

The theatrical form of *Widow's Might*, with its eight scenes, cast of characters representing different social positions, and movement from private spaces to public arenas; enables Mbachaga to explore gender conflict across multiple registers. The play's structure, moving from the initial council of elders, through the women's protest, to the final renunciation of oppressive traditions, creates a narrative arc that mirrors the processes of social transformation. As critic Biodun Jeyifo has argued, African drama has historically functioned as a site of social critique and cultural intervention, engaging with the contradictions of postcolonial societies (Jeyifo 23-25). *Widow's Might* continue this tradition, using the dramatic form to stage not only conflict but also resolution, imagining the possibility of gender justice achieved through collective action and transformed consciousness.

Theoretical Framework

This study employed R.W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity as its primary theoretical framework. Developed initially in the 1980s and elaborated through subsequent decades, Connell's approach conceptualizes masculinity not as a biological given or a fixed set of traits but as a socially constructed configuration of practice organized in relation to the structure of gender relations (Connell, *Masculinities* 67-71). Central to this framework is the concept of hegemony, derived from Antonio Gramsci, which refers to the cultural and ideological dominance achieved not through overt coercion but through consent and the naturalization of particular social arrangements.

Hegemonic masculinity, in Connell's formulation, is "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell, *Masculinities* 77). This form of masculinity is not necessarily the most common form but rather the most culturally exalted, embodying idealized traits such as authority, strength, rationality, and economic independence. Crucially, hegemonic masculinity exists in relation to subordinate masculinities (such as those associated with gay men or men of lower social classes) and to femininities that are constructed as complementary and subservient.

Connell's framework has been widely adopted and adapted in gender studies, including within African contexts. Scholars have noted that the concept's attention to power, hierarchy, and social change makes it particularly useful for analyzing contexts where traditional gender arrangements are being contested and transformed. As Uchendu observes, "African masculinities are not static; they are constantly being reshaped by economic, political, and cultural forces, including feminist movements that challenge men's traditional authority" (Uchendu 5). The application of hegemonic masculinity theory to African contexts requires attention to the specific historical and cultural conditions that shape gender relations on the continent. Colonialism, for instance, profoundly disrupted indigenous gender systems, imposing European patriarchal structures while simultaneously undermining African men's traditional sources of authority (Miescher and Lindsay 3-7). Postcolonial nation-building, economic crisis, and globalization have further transformed the conditions of masculine identity formation.

In many African societies, traditional institutions such as the council of elders, lineage systems, and customary law have historically embodied and enforced hegemonic masculinity, positioning men as public actors and decision-makers while confining women to domestic and reproductive roles. These institutions have been sites of both continuity and change, as feminist

movements and human rights discourses have challenged their legitimacy and demanded women's inclusion in public life.

Widow's Might dramatizes precisely this contestation, depicting a traditional council of elders whose authority is challenged by organized women's resistance. The play's representation of masculinity, embodied in characters such as Okafor, Maduka, and Okoro, reflects the multiple, contested nature of masculine identity. While some men cling rigidly to patriarchal traditions, others, such as Ofodili and Efediba, demonstrate openness to change, suggesting that masculinity is not monolithic but subject to variation and transformation.

A crucial dimension of Connell's theory is its attention to moments of crisis in gender relations. Connell argues that hegemonic masculinity is constantly contested and must be actively maintained through cultural practices, institutional arrangements, and sometimes coercion. When these mechanisms fail; when subordinate groups challenge their subordination, when economic conditions shift, or when cultural ideals become untenable, masculinity enters a state of crisis (Connell, "*The Social Organization of Masculinity*" 31-33). The concept of crisis masculinity is particularly relevant to *Widow's Might*, as the play depicts men responding to feminist challenge with a range of strategies that reflect the destabilization of their traditional authority. Okafor's initial confidence in the power of patriarchal tradition gives way to confusion and retreat as the women's protest gains momentum. Okoro's resistance to domestic labor and his attempts to assert authority in the home are increasingly untenable as his wife joins the women's movement. By the play's conclusion, traditional hegemonic masculinity has been effectively displaced, replaced by a more negotiated form that accommodates women's participation in public life and men's assumption of domestic responsibilities.

This transformation, however, is not presented as unproblematic or complete. The play's final scenes, with the women leader's appointment to the council and the renunciation of oppressive traditions, suggest a new gender

arrangement, yet the tensions and uncertainties of this arrangement remain visible. Mbachaga thus offers a nuanced vision of gender transformation that acknowledges both its possibility and its complexity.

Methodology

This study employs summative content analysis as its methodological approach. Content analysis, as a research method, involves the systematic examination of textual data to identify patterns, themes, and meanings. Summative content analysis, as distinguished from conventional or directed approaches, involves counting and comparing keywords or content, then interpreting the underlying context and patterns (Hsieh and Shannon 1278-1279). This approach is particularly suited to the analysis of dramatic texts, where language, action, and structure combine to produce meaning. The choice of summative content analysis is motivated by several considerations. First, the method enables systematic attention to the frequency and distribution of thematic elements across the play's eight scenes, allowing for analysis of how gender conflict develops and transforms over the narrative arc. Second, the method's emphasis on both manifest content (explicit statements and actions) and latent content (underlying meanings and patterns) facilitates interpretation of the play's complex representation of gender relations. Third, the method's flexibility accommodates the integration of theoretical frameworks in this case, hegemonic masculinity theory, with close textual analysis.

Data Collection Procedures

The primary data for this study consists of the complete text of Jonathan Mbachaga's *Widow's Might*, as provided. The text was examined in its entirety, with attention to both structural elements (scene divisions, stage directions, character configurations) and linguistic elements (dialogue, songs, proverbs). The analysis proceeded through several stages. First, a preliminary reading of the text established familiarity with its content, structure, and themes. This reading identified the play's eight scenes and their respective functions in the narrative: I. Quorum (council of elders), II. Gossip (women's discussion), III. Declaration

(announcement of sanctions), IV. Confrontation (domestic conflict between Okoro and Nneka), V. Deliberation (elders' crisis meeting), VI. Lamentation (men's domestic struggles), VII. Home call (negotiation and reconciliation), and VIII. Renunciation (public resolution).

Second, systematic coding of textual elements relevant to the research questions was conducted. Codes were developed deductively based on the theoretical framework and inductively based on patterns emerging from the text. Key codes included: expressions of masculine authority, challenges to masculine authority, references to tradition, feminist mobilization, domestic labour, negotiation of gender roles, and transformation/resolution. Third, the coded elements were analysed for patterns of frequency, distribution, and relationship. This analysis examined how gender conflict intensifies and resolves across the play's structure, how different characters represent different masculine subject positions, and how language and action contribute to the representation of gender transformation.

Analytical Framework

The analysis is organized around four thematic dimensions derived from the research focus: feminist agency as disruptive force, displacement of masculine authority, reconfiguration of domestic labour, and tradition's surrender. Each dimension is examined across the play's scenes, with attention to how Mbachaga constructs and develops these themes through dialogue, action, and structure.

Quotations from the play are cited parenthetically by scene title, as the text lacks line numbers. For example, a quotation from Scene I appears as (I. Quorum). This citation method enables readers to locate passages within the play's structure.

Limitations

Several limitations of this methodology are acknowledged. First, as a textual analysis, this study cannot account for the performative dimensions of the play the ways in which staging, acting, and audience reception might shape meaning in theatrical production. Second, the summative approach emphasizes manifest content, potentially underplaying the significance of what is absent or implied. Third, the analysis reflects the

interpretive perspective of the researcher, shaped by particular theoretical commitments and cultural assumptions. Despite these limitations, the methodology provides a systematic framework for examining the play's representation of gender relations and masculine transformation.

MASCULINE IDENTITY, FEMINIST AGENCY AND THE SURRENDER OF TRADITION

Feminist Agency as Disruptive Force

The opening scene of *Widow's Might* establishes a patriarchal order that appears, initially, unassailable. The council of elders, convened to address the matter of Ifeoma's refusal to perform widowhood rites, embodies the institutional structures of masculine authority. The setting, "A spot light reveals the figure of a woman sitting on a local stool staring into the distance. Surrounding her are elders of Oboro village" (Mbachaga 1), visually represents Ifeoma's isolation and vulnerability. She is encircled by male authority, physically positioned as object rather than subject, as one who is to be judged rather than one who participates in judgment.

The elders' language reinforces this power asymmetry. Ibekwe opens the proceedings with ritual invocation: "When an elder speaks without first cleaning his mouth properly with Kola, he may speak lies" (Mbachaga 1). This formulation positions the elders as custodians of truth, their authority grounded in tradition and ritual practice. Onoha articulates the content of the tradition that Ifeoma is expected to submit to: "the truth about the matter is that our brother's wife shows no respect for our tradition and custom that requires her to drink the corpse bath water and strip before six elders of our land and share our son's property with her husband's brothers" (Mbachaga 2). The litany of requirements, drinking corpse bath water, stripping naked, surrendering property; establishes the severity of the patriarchal demands imposed on widows. Ifeoma's response constitutes the first significant disruption of this patriarchal order. Her speech challenges not only the specific rites but the entire structure of tradition that supports them:

"I cannot submit myself to such inhuman and decadent practices that you call tradition. You hide under the

guise of tradition to perpetrate all manner of abuses against women and that I won't take" (Mbachaga 2).

This intervention transforms Ifeoma from object to subject, from passive recipient of judgment to active agent of critique. Her use of the terms "inhuman" and "decadent" positions patriarchal tradition not as sacred or timeless but as morally questionable and historically contingent. The elders' response to Ifeoma's resistance reveals the mechanisms through which hegemonic masculinity attempts to suppress dissent. Ibekwe's interruption;

"Silence woman! Silence!", seeks to reassert control through direct command. His subsequent speech invokes education as a threat to traditional order: "That you went to school does not change our tradition. Whether you have degrees more than the instrument used by the white man to check temperature we don't care" (Mbachaga 2).

Swila's study of *The Moon Also Sets* argued that "widowhood can become a powerful site of resistance and transformation" for women. While Swila's analytical lens remained trained on women's reclamation of identity, the findings show that Ifeoma's resistance produces a crisis *for masculinity itself*. The elders' attempts to suppress dissent through delegitimization, "That you went to school does not change our tradition," reveal that patriarchal authority is vulnerable precisely when confronted by educated, organized feminist agency. This reference to Western education positions Ifeoma's resistance as alien, as contamination by colonial values that threaten indigenous authenticity. The strategy is one of delegitimization: Ifeoma's voice is dismissed not on its merits but as the product of corrupting external influences. Yet Ifeoma's resistance proves resilient. Her subsequent speech escalates the challenge, explicitly naming the gendered dynamics underlying the widowhood rites:

"You insist that I strip naked so you can feast your hungry eyes and fulfill the desires of your minds. If not, do the dead have eyes to see? My husband cannot

see my naked body even if I strip before you. So what interests does my body hold?" (Mbachaga 3).

This analysis exposes the sexual politics of the ritual, suggesting that its function is not spiritual but voyeuristic, serving male desire rather than ancestral requirements. The rhetorical question; "what interests does my body hold?" implicitly answers itself: the male gaze, male pleasure, male control. This confirms Stratton's observation that canonical African writing often reproduces patriarchal ideologies. However, *Widow's Might* departs from this pattern by centring women's resistance. Ifeoma's transformation from object to subject, from "passive recipient of judgment to active agent of critique," exemplifies the alternative perspective that Stratton found in women writers like Nwapa and Emecheta. Mbachaga, a male playwright, thus accomplishes what Stratton argued was necessary: moving beyond patriarchal reproduction toward feminist critique. The finding extends Nfah-Abbenyi's analysis of gender in African women's writing. While Nfah-Abbenyi focused on recovering female agency, the findings reveal something different: Ifeoma's agency is not merely recovered but actively *confrontational* and *transformative*. Her exposure of the sexual politics behind widowhood rites, "what interests does my body hold?" answers Nfah-Abbenyi's call for attention to female subjectivity while demonstrating how that subjectivity can dismantle patriarchal logic from within.

The pattern established in the first scene; patriarchal demand, feminist resistance, patriarchal attempt at suppression, continued feminist articulation; structures the play's subsequent development. Ifeoma's refusal initiates a chain of events that ultimately transforms the community. The second scene, "Gossip," depicts the spread of Ifeoma's resistance through the women's network. Chidinma articulates the significance of Ifeoma's example:

"How I wish I had her courage when my husband died. I remember how they scraped my hair, they abused me with no one to stand by me. But Ifeoma is different, she is educated and is a

believer, this born-again type and she refused to allow them humiliate her" (Mbachaga 7).

This speech positions Ifeoma as a model of resistance, her education and religious identity providing resources for challenging patriarchal tradition. The women's discussion reveals that the widowhood rites have been sites of trauma for multiple women. Chidinma's testimony about drinking corpse bath water and subsequent illness exposes the physical and psychological violence embedded in the tradition. Her account of being deserted by the community when she fell ill, except for "a fellow widow who took me to hospital" (Mbachaga 8), reveals the social isolation that patriarchal enforcement mechanisms produce. The gathering momentum of women's collective consciousness is captured in Chidinma's declaration: "Better to die trying than remain quiet. We will do all we can to stop the practice that inflicts more harm than good on us women" (Mbachaga 8).

The third scene, "Declaration," represents the patriarchal response to women's resistance. Okoro's public announcement of the elders' sanctions; "a chicken whose mouth has not touched the ground, one she goat whose mouth has not chew the cud, a gourd of palm wine and ten thousand naira as fee for damages" (Mbachaga 11), attempts to reassert masculine authority through public ritual. The declaration, delivered with the gong that traditionally summons the community to hear important announcements, seeks to naturalize patriarchal authority by embedding it in the public performance of tradition.

However, this attempt at reassertion proves counterproductive. The declaration's explicit articulation of patriarchal demands; "to strip before six elders of our land, drink the corpse's bath water and finally, share the husband's property with the husband's brothers" (Mbachaga 10); renders these practices visible and thus vulnerable to critique. By making public what might otherwise remain obscure, the elders inadvertently provide the occasion for the women's collective mobilization that follows.

The findings align with Ncube and Chipara's

demonstration that “hegemonic masculinity is not as untouchable and sacrosanct as is commonly considered.” However, the findings move beyond their analytical endpoint of *destabilization*. The women's collective mobilization in Scene II, Chidinma's declaration that “Better to die trying than remain quiet,” shows destabilization in progress, but the play's full arc (addressed in later sections) shows what comes *after* destabilization, which their study left unexamined.

The adjoining discussion's emphasis on; tradition as contested terrain, deepens our understanding. The play reveals that tradition is invoked selectively by those in power to maintain their dominance. The widowhood rites that the elders defend are not authentic ancestral requirements but practices that serve male interests, voyeuristic pleasure, property acquisition, the control of female sexuality. Ifeoma's exposure of the rites as “inhuman and decadent” aligns with this insight, showing that patriarchal tradition is not monolithic but a site of struggle where meaning and legitimacy can be renegotiated.

The Displacement of Masculine Authority

The displacement of masculine authority in *Widow's Might* occurs through several interrelated processes: the erosion of consensus among men, the emergence of alternative male positions, the public humiliation of patriarchal institutions, and the ultimate surrender of traditional authority. This displacement is not sudden but gradual, unfolding across the play's middle scenes as the consequences of the women's protest become apparent.

Scene IV, “Confrontation,” dramatizes the displacement of masculine authority within the domestic sphere. The scene opens with Nneka preparing to leave, her bundle of clothes signaling departure. The stage directions establish tension: “There is a tense silence which is broken by Okoro” (Mbachaga 12). The silence itself represents the breakdown of established domestic order, with Nneka's nonchalant response to Okoro's demand for greeting indicating her withdrawal from the performance of wifely deference.

Okoro's attempts to reassert domestic

authority repeatedly fail. His complaint about not being greeted at the door, “Didn't your mother teach you that when a man comes home after a good day's work, a house wife greets him at the door?” (Mbachaga 12); invokes tradition as the basis for his expectation. Nneka's response, “There you go again, first you go and announce to the whole world how we women are ill mannered and spoilt, then you come back home to insult me and my mother” (Mbachaga 12), refuses to accept the authority that tradition claims. Her reference to Okoro's public announcement positions his domestic authority as compromised by his public actions. The conflict escalates as Nneka explicitly challenges the legitimacy of patriarchal tradition. Her speech;

“Shameless men, men who have nothing to do but drink palm wine all day now want to cast their lustful eyes where they have no business but it won't happen again because we women have decided that, that custom is bad, atrocious and it must be stopped” (Mbachaga 14),

This articulates a collective feminist consciousness that displaces masculine authority through collective rather than individual resistance. The phrase “we women have decided” signals the shift from individual defiance to organized movement.

Okoro's response, laughter and the mocking assertion that “the matter is settled” (Mbachaga 14), reflects the defensive posture of threatened masculinity. His insistence that “tradition is tradition and custom is custom” attempts to foreclose argument through tautology. Yet Nneka's rejoinder;

“It is bad and mean. It is savage, humiliating and directed against women if not, why won't you men strip before us women when your wives die so that we may also enjoy the sight of your highly priced manhood dangling between naked thighs?” (Mbachaga 14)

It exposes the gendered asymmetry of the tradition, revealing its function as a mechanism for maintaining male dominance and female subordination. The scene's climax occurs when Nneka hears the women's protest song and exits to

join them, leaving Okoro "standing helpless and confused" (Mbachaga 17-18). This stage direction captures the displacement of masculine authority: the man who entered the scene confident in his domestic dominion ends it abandoned, his authority rendered impotent. The protest song that accompanies Nneka's departure; "We no go gree o / We no go gree / Stripping naked / We no go gree" (Mbachaga 18); provides the collective soundtrack to this displacement, representing the organized feminist agency that has rendered individual masculine authority obsolete. The finding operationalises Connell's concept of "crisis masculinity" in dramatic form. The finding shows precisely this: Okafor's initial confidence gives way to confusion; the council fragments between Maduka's coercive response and Ofodili's negotiated response; Efediba's intervention denaturalizes tradition as human construction rather than divine mandate. The stage direction leaving Okoro "standing helpless and confused" visually represents what Connell theorized as the destabilization of hegemonic authority.

Scene V, "Deliberation," depicts the displacement of masculine authority at the level of the council of elders. The scene opens with the elders gathering in the village square, awaiting the arrival of Igwe Efediba, who has been absent from earlier deliberations due to illness. His return signals a potential shift in the dynamics of masculine authority, as his position as traditional ruler grants him the power to either reinforce or modify the earlier decisions of the council. The scene reveals significant fractures within masculine authority. Okafor's assertion that "the matter that has caused the recent unrest in our homes is a matter of tradition" (Mbachaga 20) attempts to maintain the position that patriarchal tradition is inviolable. However, Ofodili's interruption; "They have not been misled by anybody. If anybody is misled, it is a few elders among us because the said tradition or custom is an age-old tradition and practice that has since been abandoned" (Mbachaga 20), introduces a dissenting male voice, one that challenges not only the particular decision but the claim that patriarchal authority is unified.

The entrance of Okolie with news of the

women's protest dramatically displaces masculine authority from its position of control. His repeated declarations; "We are dead ooo, we are dead! It has happened, finished, we are finished, completely finished" (Mbachaga 22), convey the sense of crisis that the women's collective action has produced. The specific threat he reports that the women "are prepared to strip naked once they arrive at the market square in full view of outsiders as the ultimate protest" (Mbachaga 22), represents the women's appropriation and transformation of the very ritual that had been used to subjugate them. By threatening to expose their nakedness collectively in public, the women subvert the voyeuristic logic of the widowhood rite, turning shame into political power.

The elders' responses to this threat reveal the fragmentation of masculine authority. Maduka's proposal to "get our well able-bodied warriors to chase after these women catch and bring them back" (Mbachaga 23) represents an attempt to reassert control through physical force. Ofodili's counter-proposal; "I suggest that we send a peace delegation to plead with these women to reconsider their threat" (Mbachaga 23); advocates negotiation rather than confrontation. This division within the council indicates that masculine authority is no longer monolithic; men must now choose among competing strategies for responding to feminist challenge. Efediba's speech represents the definitive displacement of the council's earlier patriarchal stance. His acknowledgment that "tradition is tradition but who made tradition, it is you and I" (Mbachaga 24) denaturalizes tradition, revealing it as human construction rather than divine mandate. His examples of change; "Why are we wearing cloths made from the white man's land today? It is because we changed from our custom of wearing animal skin. Our women before now used clay pots to cook our food. But these days, every household has iron pots" (Mbachaga 24); position the current transformation as continuous with historical processes of cultural change. His conclusion; "a tradition that brings disunity and rancour can still be changed and I opt for that change to allow peace reign" (Mbachaga 24), represents the surrender of patriarchal authority to the necessity of social

peace.

Onuoha's study of Nigerian plays identified "hegemonic masculinity and alternative masculinities" existing in traditional society, and examined "the negative experiences of men who are also victims of the system." The findings both confirm and extend Onuoha. Confirmation comes through Ofodili's dissenting voice; an alternative masculinity that challenges rather than enforces patriarchal tradition. However, the findings reveal something Onuoha's framework does not accommodate: *voluntary surrender* of patriarchal authority. Efediba's acknowledgment that "tradition is tradition but who made tradition, it is you and I" represents not rebellion against hegemony (alternative masculinity) nor failure of hegemony, but a conscious act of renunciation. Onuoha's dialectical model (hegemonic vs. alternative) cannot theorize this third movement. Mutekwa's framework of "reactive and adaptive responses" by marginalized masculinities identified overcompensation and hybridisation as strategies. The findings show men employing different strategies: Maduka's proposal for physical force represents overcompensation; Ofodili's proposal for negotiation represents hybridization. However, the findings reveal a response Mutekwa's typology does not include: *surrender*. Efediba's speech, "a tradition that brings disunity and rancour can still be changed and I opt for that change," is neither reactive intensification of patriarchy nor selective incorporation of non-hegemonic elements. It is deliberate, ethically motivated renunciation. Mutekwa noted that his models "favour the enhancement of male domination," but the findings present a masculinity that actively dismantles its own privilege.

Drawing on the discussion's concept of masculine identity as process, not essence, we see that the men of Oboro do not possess masculinity as a stable attribute; rather, they perform masculinity in ways that are challenged and altered by the women's feminist mobilization. The trajectory of masculine identity in the play moves from unreflective adherence to tradition, through crisis and fragmentation, to the emergence of new forms of masculine practice that accommodate

gender equality. Ofodili and Efediba, who modify their positions in response to feminist pressure, demonstrate that masculine identity is capable of transformation when traditional configurations become untenable.

Ammann and Staudacher called for moving "beyond crisis" narratives toward recognizing "positive African masculinities." The findings answer this call by demonstrating how *Widow's Might* stages precisely this movement. The trajectory from unreflective adherence to tradition, through crisis and fragmentation, to new forms of masculine practice that accommodate gender equality operationalizes their conceptual appeal as literary-critical methodology. They argued for attention to complexity and fluidity; the findings show Ofodili and Efediba modifying positions in response to feminist pressure, demonstrating that "masculine identity is capable of transformation." Eze's study of Kilanko's novel argued that the text "envision[s] transformative possibilities for gender relations" but did not anatomize transformation's mechanisms. The findings fill this gap by tracing the precise narrative steps: erosion of consensus, emergence of dissenting male voices, public humiliation of patriarchal institutions, and ultimate surrender. The council scene's division, Maduka advocating force, Ofodili negotiation, Efediba change, shows transformation not as a horizon but as a contested process.

The Reconfiguration of Domestic Labor

One of the most striking dimensions of *Widow's Might* is its representation of how feminist agency leads to the reconfiguration of domestic labor. Traditional gender divisions in the play's fictional world assign domestic work; cooking, cleaning, water collection, child care, to women, while men engage in public affairs, palm wine tapping, and governance. The women's protest disrupts these arrangements, forcing men to assume domestic responsibilities they had previously regarded as beneath their dignity. Scene VI, "Lamentation," dramatizes this reconfiguration with remarkable explicitness. The scene opens with Okoro entering his compound carrying "a big pot of water on his head" (Mbachaga 26). The stage direction is significant:

water collection is traditionally women's work, and a man carrying water on his head would have been a striking visual image for the play's audience. The accompanying stage directions describe "a heap of dirty clothes demanding attention" and "a heap of dirty plates and pots" (VI. Lamentation), indicating the domestic labor that remains undone in the women's absence.

Okoro's soliloquy expresses his distress at this reversal:

"When I went to marry, I did not know I was paying money for a wife who will join other women under the guise of protecting widows' rights to punish me. You can't believe it's almost a week since the devil took control of these women" (Mbachaga 26).

His language, "punish me," "devil took control," reveals his perception of the women's protest as personal attack and spiritual corruption rather than legitimate political action. Yet his actions; carrying water, attempting to wash clothes; indicate that he has been forced to adapt to new circumstances despite his ideological resistance. Duncan and Ennin examined whether male characters "follow society's hegemonic model or create their own," positing masculine identity formation as a choice made by men themselves. The findings challenge this binary framework. Okoro does not *choose* to perform domestic labour; he is *forced* into it by the women's collective absence. His resistance ("devil took control of these women") reveals that transformation can occur through coercion and necessity, not voluntary choice. This suggests Duncan and Ennin's framework underestimates how feminist agency can compel masculine change regardless of men's preferences.

Onoha's entrance, carrying "a bundle of sticks tied together on his head" (Mbachaga 26), reinforces the reconfiguration of domestic labor. Firewood collection is also traditionally women's work; the visual of two men carrying water and firewood dramatizes the extent to which gender divisions have been disrupted. Onoha's speech echoes Okoro's distress: "You talk as if I was the only one that voted for the law to be passed. By the way whose mouth proclaimed the law all over the

place? Mine or yours? Look at me, I go to the bush to break fire wood, come back to struggle with making fire with the smoke and ash entering my eyes as if I have no other business to attend to" (Mbachaga 26). The reference to smoke and ash entering eyes conveys the physical discomfort and humiliation of performing work coded as feminine.

Uchendu's study of masculinities in contemporary Africa noted that African masculinities are "constantly being reshaped by economic, political, and cultural forces." The findings show domestic labour reconfiguration as a specific *cultural force* of transformation. Okoro carrying water and Onoha carrying firewood materialize what Uchendu theorized abstractly: masculinity is not static but performed, and performance can be compelled to change when traditional divisions are disrupted. Onuoha's analysis of men's "negative experiences" within patriarchal systems finds dramatic representation in Scene VI. Okoro's distress, "Look at me, I go to the bush to break fire wood, come back to struggle with making fire with the smoke and ash entering my eyes," confirms Onuoha's observation that men are also victims of rigid gender systems. However, the findings move beyond victimhood to transformation: Onoha's accommodation, "I see nothing wrong with respecting the dignity of women," and Okoro's grudging adaptation show that men's negative experiences can become catalysts for changed consciousness rather than merely sites of suffering.

The conversation between Okoro and Onoha reveals the emergence of differentiated masculine responses to the reconfiguration of domestic labour. While Okoro continues to resist the transformation rhetorically, Onoha shows signs of accommodation: "Actually I have been thinking, since this incident and I see nothing wrong with respecting the dignity of women" (Mbachaga 28). This statement represents a significant shift in masculine consciousness, moving from resistance to acceptance of the legitimacy of women's claims. Onoha's subsequent assertion that "it's a new world, women have come up, they now speak and sit alongside men, and we better get used to having them around" (Mbachaga

27) articulates a pragmatic acceptance of transformed gender relations.

Kharbouche examined how Obioma's novel "subvert[s] hegemonic masculinity" through male characters who "challenge stereotypes." The findings reveal a different mechanism: *forced adaptation* rather than voluntary subversion. Where Kharbouche's analysis locates transformation in oppositional posture (characters actively challenging norms), the findings show Onoha's accommodation emerging from pragmatic necessity ("we better get used to having them around"). This suggests an alternative to Kharbouche's subversive model: transformation through compelled practice that gradually reshapes consciousness.

Okoro's resistance to this shift is articulated through the language of masculine decline. His accusation that Onoha has become "a woman wrapper" (Mbachaga 28) invokes the figure of the feminized man as an insult, revealing the continued hold of hegemonic masculine ideals even as those ideals become increasingly untenable. His metaphor of "an eagle that has decided to spend time with chickens on the ground instead of dominating the sky" (Mbachaga 28) positions masculine authority as natural dominance, the abandonment of which constitutes a fall from a higher state. Yet Onoha's response; "The picture I see is the picture of a liberated man, a man who has learned to respect the dignity of women without feeling threatened or insulted" (Mbachaga 29); offers an alternative vision of masculinity, one that accommodates rather than resists gender equality.

Scene VII, "Homecall," continues the exploration of domestic labor reconfiguration, now through the lens of negotiation rather than lamentation. Nneka's return home and Okoro's initial hostility set the stage for a renegotiation of domestic arrangements. Okoro's insistence that Nneka has no home "with the widows because you have become their messiah who must fight to free them" (Mbachaga 32) attempts to punish his wife's political engagement by denying her domestic belonging. Yet this strategy proves ineffective; Nneka's willingness to exit again indicates that her commitment to the women's movement is not

dependent on Okoro's approval.

The intervention of Okolie, who urges Okoro to "solve this matter through dialogue" (Mbachaga 33), represents the emergence of a new masculine mode that prioritizes negotiation over domination. Okolie's role as peacemaker and his assertion that "I have already settled with my own wife" (Mbachaga 33) suggests that domestic renegotiation is occurring across the community, not merely in Okoro's household. Okoro's eventual acquiescence, "If you men have opted for peaceful settlement, I am all ears" (Mbachaga 33); indicates his pragmatic acceptance of the new gender arrangements, even as his earlier resistance suggests the ambivalence of this acceptance.

The prayer that Okolie leads marks the ritualization of the new domestic arrangements. The prayer's language reveals the persistence of patriarchal assumptions even as it attempts to facilitate reconciliation: "Give our women a heart like the camel or donkey which tends its master's business without complaining" (Mbachaga 34). This formulation positions women as servants and men as masters, even within the context of resolving the gender conflict. Nneka's response; "Papa Nonso, you started with me in this struggle and ended on the other side with your friend. Even in prayer you men exercise dominion over us women" (Mbachaga 34), indicates her awareness that the prayer's language reproduces the very hierarchy the women have been challenging. This moment captures the complexity of gender transformation: new arrangements emerge, but old patterns persist, requiring continued vigilance and negotiation.

The adjoining discussion's focus on the politics of domestic labour, enriches this reading: by depicting men forced to assume water collection, firewood gathering, and housework, Mbachaga materializes the abstract concept of gender equality, showing its concrete implications for daily life. The discomfort and humiliation that Okoro and Onoha experience reveal the extent to which masculine identity has been constructed through the avoidance of such work. Yet the reconfiguration is not a simple reversal but a process of negotiation; partial, reluctant, and contested. Nneka's continued engagement with the

women's movement suggests that the transformation is ongoing, offering a realistic portrayal of gender change as gradual and contested rather than sudden and complete.

While Connell's *Masculinities* addresses the gendered division of labour theoretically, the findings of this study operationalise this concept dramatically. The discomfort and humiliation Okoro and Onoha experienced revealed "the extent to which masculine identity has been constructed through the avoidance of such work." The findings thus extend Connell by showing that hegemonic masculinity depends not only on public authority but on the *exclusion from domestic labor* as a constitutive practice.

Tradition's Surrender: Renunciation and Reconciliation

The final scene of *Widow's Might*, "Renunciation," depicts the formal surrender of patriarchal tradition and the institutionalization of new gender arrangements. The scene is set in Efediba's palace, with "a crowd, among them is the women leader, Ifeoma and other widows" (Mbachaga 36). The presence of women in the palace space, traditionally reserved for male authority, visually represents the transformation that has occurred.

Efediba's speech constitutes the play's climactic moment of tradition's surrender. His opening declaration; "A man should not call himself king when his subjects suffer the affliction of the enemy" (Mbachaga 36); positions his response not as capitulation but as responsible leadership, redefining kingship as responsiveness to subjects' suffering rather than maintenance of traditional forms. His identification of the "enemy" as disunity and discord rather than the women's movement reframes the conflict, suggesting that the threat to the community is not feminist resistance but the patriarchal practices that provoked it. The findings realised Ammann and Staudacher's call for attention to "positive African masculinities." Efediba's redefinition of kingship as "responsiveness to subjects' suffering rather than maintenance of traditional forms" exemplifies positive masculinity. His pragmatic reasoning, "when the traditions begin to destroy the very people that uphold it then it is time to

change," moves beyond crisis toward reconstructive action. The findings thus demonstrate that *Widow's Might* provides the sustained literary case study Ammann and Staudacher's theoretical call required.

The king's articulation of the need for change is notable for its pragmatic reasoning:

"It is true, tradition is tradition, but we cannot die en masse by it. We need to uphold... and preserve our cultural heritage but when the traditions begin to destroy the very people that uphold it then it is time to change" (Mbachaga 36-37).

This formulation accepts the value of cultural heritage while insisting that traditions must serve human well-being rather than the reverse. The reference to dying "en masse" invokes the threat of community destruction that the gender conflict has produced, positioning the renunciation of oppressive traditions as necessary for communal survival.

Efediba's announcement of the formal renunciation is rendered in language that emphasizes its definitive character: "beginning now, the savage and barbarous law that demeans the dignity of women, physically and mentally is hereby renounced" (Mbachaga 37). The terms "savage and barbarous", which echo Ifeoma's earlier characterization of the rites as "inhuman and decadent", represent a striking reversal. What was earlier defended as sacred tradition is now condemned as degrading practice. This language positions the community's transformation as movement toward civilization, aligning the renunciation with values of human dignity that transcend cultural particularity.

Mutekwa's framework, as noted, lacked an account of masculinity that responds to feminist pressure by *surrendering* traditional authority. The findings provide this untheorized possibility. Efediba's speech, "beginning now, the savage and barbarous law that demeans the dignity of women is hereby renounced," represents precisely the response Mutekwa's reactive typology could not accommodate. This is not overcompensation, which would intensify patriarchal enforcement, nor hybridization, which would selectively incorporate non-hegemonic elements. It is

conscious, public, institutionalized renunciation. The king's acknowledgment of the women's role in effecting change is significant: "We must not forget to applaud the courage of our women to fight these atrocious practices and expose the damage it can inflict on the dignity of womanhood" (Mbachaga 37). This recognition, coming from the highest traditional authority, legitimizes the women's protest and positions their resistance as a contribution to community well-being rather than a threat to it. The women's cheering in response to this statement indicates their acceptance of this recognition, suggesting the possibility of reconciliation. Ncube and Chipara demonstrated that hegemonic masculinity is vulnerable. The findings show what vulnerability leads to when feminist agency is sustained and organized: not merely destabilization but *institutional replacement*. The king's acknowledgment, "We must not forget to applaud the courage of our women," represents not just vulnerability exposed but legitimacy transferred. The findings thus answer the question Ncube and Chipara left open: what comes after destabilization? The answer from *Widow's Might* is institutional reconstruction.

The institutionalization of new gender arrangements occurs through Efediba's appointment of "Ifeoma and the women leader to represent women during council deliberations" (Mbachaga 37). This decision represents a fundamental transformation of the structures of masculine authority, incorporating women into the decision-making processes from which they had been excluded. Okafor's objection; "Your highness, I think you should reconsider the issue of women sitting in council deliberations with men. It is unheard of" (Mbachaga 38); represents the voice of unreconstructed patriarchal tradition, now reduced to dissent rather than dominance. Where Eze gestured toward "transformative possibilities" without specifying mechanisms, the findings specify the institutional form transformation takes: "Ifeoma and the women leader to represent women during council deliberations." This is not abstract envisioning but concrete structural change. The inclusion of women in decision-making bodies represents what

Eze's analysis of Kilanko's novel could not provide: the post-transformation institutional arrangement.

Efediba's response to Okafor's objection encapsulates the play's vision of gender transformation: "There is a shift in time, and the ship will sail without us if we fail to move now. But we will not fail to move" (Mbachaga 38). The metaphor of the ship captures both the inevitability of change and the necessity of choosing to participate in it. The assertion that "we will not fail to move" commits the community to active engagement with transformation rather than passive resistance to it. Onuoha's generational study traced evolving notions of masculinity but remained within a dialectical model. The findings from *Widow's Might*, particularly Okafor's objection, "It is unheard of," reduced to dissent rather than dominance, and Efediba's response, "the ship will sail without us if we fail to move," reveal that the play stages a *third movement* beyond Onuoha's binary. This is not hegemonic masculinity holding firm nor alternative masculinity rebelling; it is hegemonic masculinity consenting to its own transformation through feminist pressure. This finding suggests that Onuoha's taxonomy requires expansion to include what might be termed *reconstructed masculinity*.

The play's final stage direction; "There is jubilation. As the dancers perform and people join in the dance" (Mbachaga 38); represents the restoration of communal harmony through transformed gender relations. The dance that concludes the play contrasts with the conflict that opened it, suggesting that the community has achieved a new equilibrium. Yet the nature of this equilibrium is not one of simple return to tradition but of tradition transformed through feminist intervention.

Swila argued that widowhood can become a transformative space for women. The findings show that transformation extends beyond women to *institutional structures*. The palace space, traditionally reserved for male authority, now contains women. The council, previously all-male, now includes female representatives. The findings thus extend Swila's argument: widowhood as

transformative not only for female subjects but for the patriarchal institutions that widowhood rites once sustained. In light of the discussion's emphasis on feminist agency and collective action, we recognize that the women's movement in *Widow's Might* is represented as organized, strategic, and effective. The women leader's speeches, the protest songs, and the coordination of action across households indicate a level of organization that challenges the stereotype of women as politically incapable or confined to domestic concerns. The women of Oboro succeed not because any one of them is extraordinary, though Ifeoma's courage is pivotal, but because they act together. Collective mobilization, culminating in the threatened mass stripping at the market, produces systemic change that individual resistance alone could not achieve.

Finally, the play demonstrates the continuing relevance of drama as a form for exploring gender conflict and social transformation. Its use of dialogue, conflict, visual imagery, and structural progression enables a nuanced exploration of gender dynamics. Moreover, by representing gender transformation as achieved through collective action rather than individual heroism, *Widow's Might* offers a model for literary engagement with social change that moves beyond the tropes of the exceptional individual challenging tradition; a model that enriches our understanding of contemporary African literature's engagement with feminist politics.

Conclusion

Jonathan Mbachaga's *Widow's Might* offers a powerful dramatization of gender transformation in an African community, representing how feminist agency compels the reconfiguration of masculine identity, the

redistribution of domestic labour, and the surrender of patriarchal traditions. Through its eight scenes, the play traces a trajectory from patriarchal domination through feminist resistance to the emergence of new gender arrangements. The play's significance lies not only in its critique of harmful traditional practices such as widowhood rites but also in its nuanced exploration of how men respond with resistance, confusion, negotiation, and ultimately accommodation to feminist challenges to their authority. By representing masculinity as process rather than essence, as vulnerable to transformation rather than fixed, Mbachaga contributes to ongoing conversations about gender justice in African contexts.

The theoretical framework of hegemonic masculinity has proven useful for Analysing these dynamics, providing vocabulary for understanding the structures of masculine power that the play depicts and the processes through which those structures are contested and transformed. The summative content analysis method has enabled systematic attention to the play's thematic dimensions, revealing patterns of meaning across its scenes. Ultimately, *Widow's Might* offers a vision of gender transformation that is neither utopian nor despairing. The play acknowledges the difficulties of change, the resistance of those invested in patriarchal power, the discomfort of men forced into new roles, the persistence of patriarchal assumptions even within new arrangements, while affirming the possibility of transformation through collective action. In doing so, it contributes to African masculinity studies by demonstrating that feminist resistance in contemporary African drama destabilises patriarchal authority not only socially but psychologically.

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