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Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and toxic masculinity in Igbo Nigerian society

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ABSTRACT

This work focuses on the concept of toxic masculinity in Igbo society, in relation to the two major male characters in Flora Nwapa's 1966 novel, *Efuru*, set in Igbo Nigerian society. The methodology applied in the study is the qualitative content analysis, using the theoretical tool of toxic masculinity. Toxic masculinity is viewed here in much the same way as it was viewed in the earlier years of its coinage (1980s). It describes the behaviour of "troubled" or "troubling" men who are labeled as "toxic" and needing therapy because of violence, or lack of engagement in family life, and employment (Harrington, 2020). This analysis reveals how the underachieving, non-committal and harmful behaviours of Adizua and Gilbert, the two leading male characters in *Efuru*, are indicative of toxic masculinity. Nwapa's *Efuru* therefore seems, at the time of its writing, a foreshadowing of the issue of toxic masculinity which has now become topical in the present day society of Nigeria. This paper reveals the urgent need for all stakeholders to devise sustainable means of breaking the incidence of toxic masculinity in real society. Literature reveals the paucity of works in the discussion of Nwapa's *Efuru* and indeed other African literary works from the angle of toxic masculinity. These factors collectively underscore the significance of this study.

1. Introduction

Efuru was first published in 1966 by Flora Nwapa, who by virtue of this debut publication became widely known as the first African woman to write and publish a novel in the English language. Rising from this background, *Efuru* has over the years been the subject of a number of critical works on women, feminism, and gender in Africa. Following the golden jubilee celebration of the publication of *Efuru* in 2016, there seems to be a renewed interest of scholars in the novel. This paper is one of such inspired by the celebration of "Efuru at 50". It opts to examine the major male characters in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, Adizua and Gilbert, respective husbands of the protagonist, *Efuru*, as symbols of toxic masculinity in the Igbo Nigerian culture, wherein the story is set. This study is deemed timely, with the increasing need for conversations on men and masculinity in Nigeria, as observed in literature.

Reports show that one of the crises being faced by most African communities today is the increasing underachievement of boys and men in schools and family life. There are, for example, reports of widespread increases in father absence in the homes which, according to Richter (2006), have elevated the discussion of masculinity and fatherhood "from relative obscurity to a central position in efforts to understand and promote children's well-being" (p. 53). Though some writers rightly point out that fathers' contributions go beyond the hands-on care of

their children, as fathers provide resources, skills, and knowledge for their children, yet, as Richter goes on to emphasize, there are indications that children who live with their fathers or with the male partners of their mothers may be better protected than children who live in single women-headed households. Thus, researchers in the social sciences advocate that men increase their involvement in the lives of children, even those that are not biologically theirs.

Similarly, there are reports of the dwindling interest of boys in school work in many African communities. In Nigeria, for instance, the National Bureau of Statistics, (2018) estimates that from 2014 to 2016 (for instance), the percentages of males and females graduating from Nigerian tertiary institutions and participating in the NYSC were 54.05% and 45.95%, respectively, compared to 64.06% and 35.94% in the 2012/2013 report (p. 21). It may be necessary to remark that the percentage of boys in the Nigerian tertiary sector would have dropped much lower than estimated in the statistics above, but for the low girl-child education in the north central states of Nigeria. Many parents in the northern part of Nigeria still erroneously believe that the education of the girl-child will only benefit the girl's husband; make the girl deviate from their religion; or make her 'wise'; hence, girls in this region are led into early marriage, farming and hawking (Okafor, 2020, pp. 45–54). This situation is not the same in the south east part of Nigeria, for example, where there is high enrolment of girls in schools. What

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rather obtains in the south eastern states of Nigeria is the male-child lack of interest in school. The “male draught in education” in south east Nigeria, according to Okafor, arises because “those who are educated have nothing to show for it, in terms of employment, lack of counseling in education, long process of education with poor numeration in salary, poverty, quest to travel abroad, trade, street hawking, preference for trade, and abandoning schooling for trading or street hawking” (p. 47). So far, the affirmative actions taken by the government in some of the states in Nigeria to improve male students’ enrolment include the introduction of free school transportation and school feeding programme. This background reveals that just as we need conversations focusing on girls’/women affairs, we also need conversations focusing on boys’/men affairs in Nigeria.

Presently, women and feminist studies in the Nigerian literary scene have received considerable attention, resulting in improved educational, career and social wellbeing of girls and women, particularly in the southern part of Nigeria. The study of men and masculinity in the literary scene, on the other hand, seems not to be getting the attention it equally needs. Regarding the emphasis given to feminist studies in the Nigerian literary scene, Nwachukwu and UnekeEnyi (2015) warn that feminism in Nigeria has the potential of becoming the proverbial crocodile that eats its own egg: “By urging the education and improvement of the girl child, without laying proportionate emphasis on the education of the boy child, feminism courts disaster for the future of the Nigerian and the African society” (p. 49). The importance of masculinity studies to balance the feminist literary studies in Nigeria is emphasized in the above statements. A proper review of Nwachukwu and UnekeEnyi’s article will be found in the literature review, below.

2. Review of Literature on *Efuru*

Literature on *Efuru* reveals an assortment of critical works written over the years, since the publication of the novel. An attempt has been made here to review some of the more recent works on *Efuru*. From the review, most critical works on *Efuru* and other related African literature focus on the women in the narratives: their industriousness, economic independence; spirituality; and role in ecology. One of the reviewed works here, however, queries what it refers to as “matriarchy and logocentricism”, that is, undue emphasis on women and feminism, which, according to it, is the bane of most critical works on *Efuru* and other African literature.

Akongo (2021) in “Women as Saviours of Men’s Faces in Four Selected Flora Nwapa’s Novels: *Efuru*, *Idu*, *One is Enough*, and *Women are Different*” scrutinizes the woman’s image vis-à-vis the man’s in the household. Relying on the reader-response approach, the article depicts women’s endless will to save their husbands’ faces in their households and society. In *Efuru*, the chief character, Efuru, provides Adizua with bride price money for her own marriage. Amaka in *One is Enough* contributes substantially for the daily food in her household. She also buys a car for Obiora, her husband, and intervenes at his workplace to save his job when it is being threatened. Dora, in *Women are Different*, albeit being abandoned by her husband focuses on her children’s education, and also employs Chris her husband at her bakery. Idu in the novel of the same name, *Idu*, appreciates the importance of family and forbids her husband from sending his only brother away from his house. Akongo in this study focuses on the female characters and has not asked questions on the issue of toxic masculinity as it relates to the men in the narratives, a gap which the present work fills.

Tambari (2014) in “Marriage, Tradition and Superstition in Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru*” emphasizes the eroding of stereotypical insinuations of Nigerian male authors that the woman is weak and without voice in matters affecting her, as shown in *Efuru*. Tambari argues that the female characters in *Efuru* as in most other feminist-based texts have taken the front seats and have counter-attacked, as it were, the stereotypic identity for which they have been projected and known over the decades. Tambari is not alone in this argument. Other critics such as Ezeigbo

(1998) in “Myth, History, Culture, and Igbo Womanhood in Flora Nwapa’s Novels”; Ikegwuonu (2018) in “Women and Economic Independence in Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru* and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo’s *The Last of the Strong Ones*”; Anidi (2018) in “Women Empowerment for Sustainable National Development in Nigeria: Lessons from Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru*”; and Anidi et al. (2021) in “Role-redefinition in Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru* and Need for Dynamic Gender Balance in Contemporary Society”, respectively, highlight Nwapa’s depiction of her female characters as industrious, articulate, independent, self-defining and self-determined. Additionally, in this regard, Egudu (2000) in “Flora Nwapa’s Ajanupu: The Legacy from Tradition to Feminism” asserts that *Efuru* is a point of balance and order in traditional marital and womanist ambitions of self-preservation, free speech and action. As Egudu explains, the falling of Ajanupu (one of the female characters in *Efuru*) and her rising from the floor when slapped by Gilbert is symbolic, as the floor represents the lowly position to which women have all along been subjected, and from which every woman has to struggle to rise (p. 31). In all the works mentioned here, not much attention has been given to the issue of toxic masculinity and the male characters in *Efuru*, as done in the present work.

Ojedola (2018) in the “An Ecofeminist Study of Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru*” underscores the contribution of Nwapa’s *Efuru* to ideas of ecological consciousness and environmental protection. For Ojedola, human activity is not a separate category from other natural phenomena; hence, misogyny and exploitation of the environment are parallel forms of male domination, with adverse effects on nature. Ojedola discusses the significance of water and Uhamiri, the deity of Oguta Lake, in the lives of the Igbo communities inhabiting that region. He exposes how the people of Oguta (the birthplace of Nwapa and setting of her novel, *Efuru*) practise strict conservation of medicinal plants and sacred groves, and how they protect specific animals which they regard as sacred to the goddess from being hunted – the crocodile and turtle, for example. The water goddess, Uhamiri, is linked to all aspects of environmental conservation practised by the Igbo people of this area, including observation of lake levels in the initiation of annual farming cycles, shifting yam cultivation, and spacing of the birth of children at three-year intervals, as women are required to abstain from intercourse for two and a half years after the birth of a child (Ojedola, 2018). Reflecting on the words of the female character, Omirima, in *Efuru*, Ojedola notes that Western education and religion have neglected the dictates of Uhamiri, the goddess of Oguta Lake, particularly, as those dictates affect the natural environment. The ironical part about the worship and depiction of Uhamiri in *Efuru* is that despite the fact that water symbolizes life and reproduction, yet, the worshippers of Uhamiri are guaranteed no children: “She gave women beauty and wealth but she had no child”. In this vein, Ojedola opines that Nwapa, through the character of Efuru and her counterpart, the Lake Goddess, speaks prophetically about Nigerian environmental crises during the twentieth century and beyond. As seen here, Ojedola’s interest in Flora Nwapa’s novel, *Efuru*, is focused on the roles of the Lake Goddess Uhamiri, in conjunction with other women, in balancing the ecology and preventing environmental crises among the Igbo community depicted in the novel.

Nwachukwu and UnekeEnyi (2015) in “Matriarchy and the Feminist Agenda: Deconstructing the Logocentric Tenets and Posture of Nigerian Critics/Writers on Feminism” take on another, different, critical view of the representations of female characters in African literature and discourse, generally. These representations, for Nwachukwu and UnekeEnyi, are indicative of “matriarchy and the feminist agenda”. Citing various critics such as Egudu, Chinweizu, Maduakor, Nnolim, and Taiwo, in their respective analyses of the literary works of Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Ifeoma Okoye, Zaynab Alkali, and Ifeoma Ulasi, Nwachukwu and UnekeEnyi warn that feminism in Nigeria has the potential of becoming the proverbial crocodile that eats its own egg. In their opinion, “by urging the education and improvement of the girl child, without laying proportionate emphasis on the education of the boy child, feminism courts disaster for the future of the Nigerian and the

African society” (p. 49). They contend that feminists have intimidated the Nigerian society to erect widows’ centres and create the Ministry for Women Affairs all over Nigeria without encouraging the erection of widowers’ centres and a Ministry that will as well take care of “men’s affairs”. The feminist agenda, therefore, for Nwachukwu and UnekeEnyi, is “the seizure of space – all the available space”:

By reversing traditional male roles in their works through the representation of wicked, emasculated, weak, and silenced males, vis-à-vis the portrayal of angelic, enigmatic and superlative females, feminist creative writers like Adichie, Atta, and even the more conciliatory Ezeigbo urge the reversal of power locations, not the balancing of power. They decry the supposed male gender tyranny over the female but encourage tyranny if only the course is reversed in favour of the female. Since their gambit is to encourage and institute matriarchy, feminists have no solution for society’s lack of cohesion and wellbeing as far as the gender question is concerned: *One form of injustice is not a redress for another* [emphasis theirs] (p. 49).

Though Nwapa is not specifically mentioned among the feminist creative writers in the quotation here, one can easily include her in the list as one of the oldest female Nigerian writers portraying strong female characters in their works. In the opinion of Nwachukwu and UnekeEnyi, the Nigerian governments at the federal, state, and local levels must balance the gender equation. The calls for the girl-child education, for example, should go with corresponding calls for the education and proper sensitization of the boy-child.

Nwachukwu and UnekeEnyi’s assertions, as cited above, remind one of [Maduakor’s \(2000\)](#) warning that only when the Nigerian female writers balance their characterization and eschew the inordinate and vindictive urge to get even, to balance the act with men, will their ‘telling’ attain depth and restore poetic energy to the language of their diegesis (p. 138). Notwithstanding some valid points raised by Nwachukwu and UnekeEnyi on the need to balance the female affairs with corresponding male affairs in today’s literary studies and society, yet, one may not agree with their argument that female writers and critics are purposefully creating reverse-roles for the male characters in their works just to get even with the men. There are real cases of men in society who are “wicked, emasculated, weak, and silenced”, and who can be depicted as such in literary works. Nevertheless, Nwachukwu and UnekeEnyi’s views, above, underscore the overwhelming need to balance the prevailing femininity discussions on African literature with a corresponding masculinity discussion. This present article is a step in that direction; hence its focus on (toxic) masculinity and the male characters in *Efuru*. Through this article, the present writer hopes to improve on the dearth of literature on masculinity in the Nigerian literary scene and by extension contribute in providing solutions to the issue of boys and men in Nigeria, as revealed in literature. Again, considering that the present writer, in her previous works on Nwapa’s *Efuru*, has focused on feminism, the female characters, and gender roles reversal, and, as she identifies with Hudson-Weem’s “Africana womanism”, committed to the survival and wholeness of the man and the woman ([Anidi, 2018](#)), there is need for her, therefore, to balance the act this time by focusing on masculinity and the male characters in Nwapa’s *Efuru*. By so doing, she adds something new to the existing literature on *Efuru*.

3. Methodology

This study relies mainly on the qualitative content analysis method of research. It applies the theoretical tool of toxic masculinity in its analysis. Content analysis, according to [Frey et al. \(1999\)](#), is a research method “used to identify, enumerate, and analyze occurrences of specific messages and message characteristics embedded in texts” (p. 236). As Frey et al. state further, in qualitative content analysis, researchers are more interested in the meanings associated with messages than with

the number of times message variables occur, as obtains in quantitative content analysis. The nature of the present study makes this choice of qualitative content analysis method appropriate. The study critically examines the unwholesome behaviours of the two leading male characters in Flora Nwapa’s novel, *Efuru*. The issue of toxic masculinity is quite topical in present-day Igbo Nigerian society, so the present writer finds it necessary to use the concept of toxic masculinity as the theoretical framework for the present study.

This study is limited to the analysis of the concept of toxic masculinity, in relationship to the two major male characters, Adizua and Gilbert (also known as Eneberi), in Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru*. The writer has limited her study to this area, because there are a number of other studies, including the present writer’s works, focusing on the female characters in *Efuru* and the feminist and gender roles theories. This study is thus significant and would fill the gap of paucity of literature on toxic masculinity, and as it relates to Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru*.

4. Toxic masculinity

Not much has been done in terms of conceptualizing toxic masculinity in scholarly works, even though the term has come up fairly frequently in the social, medical and literary world, today ([Harrington, 2020](#)). Toxic masculinity is interpreted in various forms, such as: harmful masculine norms; traditional masculine norms; or mental conditions in men which inhibit development of social-emotional well-being. In general, the term refers to a critique of all harmful masculine norms. The term, toxic masculinity, was coined in the late 20th century men’s movement. Then, the term was often adopted by conservative policy makers, therapists, and others engaged in working with or providing therapies for troubled or troubling men who were labeled as “toxic” because of violence, or lack of engagement in family life, and employment. Corroborating this, [Boise \(2019\)](#) states that toxic masculinity is employed by groups such as the Mythopoetic Men’s Movement and the Promise Keepers during the 1980s and 1990s in appeals to reject ‘hypermasculine’ and ‘warrior’ masculinity, which are seen as detrimental to the spiritual life of the family. These groups then promoted a vision of the ‘benevolent patriarch’ as the (nuclear) family’s economic and spiritual provider.

In the later 1990s and early 2000s, toxic masculinity spread from men’s movements to wider self-help, academic and policy literature. Literature in this area posits that emotionally distant father-son relationships produced “toxically” masculine men. A number of psychologists in this field proffer that toxic masculinity is culturally normative through engaging men who are fathers to help with masculine emotional development of their sons ([Harrington, 2020](#)). [Pittman \(1993\)](#) in *Man Enough: Fathers, Sons, and the Search for Masculinity* argues that men who lack adequate fathering pursue unrealistic cultural images of masculinity and feel a constant need to prove their manhood. Similarly, [Biddulph \(1997\)](#) in “Raising Boys: Why Boys Are Different – and How to Help Them Become Happy and Well-balanced Men” argues that boys need a strong bond with a father figure/male mentor to avoid becoming toxically masculine men. Also, [Eberly \(1999\)](#) in *Renewing the Sacred Vocation of Fathering* suggests that emotionally absent fathers contribute to young men’s violence, and was likely a factor in the Columbine shootings of April 20, 1999. Thus, toxic masculinity, then, provided a discourse for diagnosing men’s problems in the face of the gendered fall-out from deindustrialization, during which well-paid jobs in “masculine” occupational sectors disappeared while feminized service sector occupations expanded. One of the results of such discussions and policies on toxic masculinity is that parents found it promoted heterosexual marriage, engaged fatherhood and had “a civilizing influence on men” ([Harrington, 2020](#), p. 348).

All the above are the original conceptions of toxic masculinity. However, since 2014, the term, toxic masculinity has become a popular feminist vernacular, used as framework for analyzing sexism in men and the gender factor in social problems. Most researchers today define toxic

masculinity, in part, as “a set of behaviours and beliefs that include suppressing emotions or masking distress, maintaining an appearance of hardness and it may include as well an indicator of power” (Mabrouk, 2020, p. 420). In this vein, Harris (2021) defines it as adherence to traditional masculine norms that is harmful to men and those around them. Harmful masculine norms, for Harris, include: power over women; intimate partner violence; aggressive behaviors; emotional detachment; as well as heterosexual self-presentation. In the same vein, Kupers (2015) refers to toxic masculinity as “the need to aggressively compete [with] and dominate others, and encompasses the most problematic proclivities in men” (p. 713), while Amaefula (2021) views it as the assemblage of regressing features of a man that seeks to reinforce his superiority, the devaluation of women – and even marginal men, and finds expression in wanton violence, misogyny, homophobia, greed and other forms of unhealthy rivalry. These definitions show that toxic masculinity can be viewed as a critique of strict adherence to masculinized gender norms or as a critique of “harmful” masculine norms with the goal of overturning these (harmful) gender norms.

Toxic masculinity can also be viewed as a mental or psychological disorder in men. In this regard, Harris (2021) relates toxic masculinity to inhibited psychological development in the domains of social-emotional competencies as well as poorer mental health in males. In the opinion of Harris and other researchers who describe toxic masculinity as a form of mental condition in men, men are constantly exposed to stress, depression and other mental health disorders because of men’s constant struggles to meet up with societal masculine expectations. In Harris’s words:

“We have set an unfair and unachievable standard, and in trying to live up to it, many men are slowly killing themselves. We have to move far beyond our outdated ideas of masculinity, and get past our very ideas about what being a man is. We have to start seeing men as innately so, with no need to prove who they are, to themselves or anyone else.” (p. 3)

This opinion is corroborated by Ezeugwu and Ojedokun (2020) who observe that men are usually reluctant to show or share their innate fears and weaknesses due to the fact that they are socialized to display a strong ‘manly’ image, yet, their lack of communication in moments of crises usually results in mental health disorders, such as depression, emotional detachment, or drug or alcohol addiction. These are all harmful behaviours that affect men, together with the women, children, and families with whom the men share their lives.

One can conclude from the foregoing that toxic masculinity refers to harmful behaviours in men which are not only damaging to the men, but damaging too to the women, children and families in the men’s lives. The harmful behaviours may come in different forms: lack of proper engagement in family life; lack of regular employment/job/income; inability to help in the training of their children; violent and aggressive behaviours; or self-destructive, psychological or mental disorders. The term ‘toxic masculinity’ may have been conceived originally from this perspective, when it was adopted by policy makers and therapists, such as Pittman (1993), Biddulph (1997), and Eberly (1999), as discussed above. The works of psychologists such as Boise (2019), and Ezeugwu and Ojedokun (2020), as mentioned above, have also helped to describe the psychological and mental health perspective of toxic masculinity.

Specifically, toxic masculinity in this paper is viewed as a framework used to analyze the underachieving and ‘harmful’ behaviours of troubled or troubling men. Toxic masculinity as used here is not an alternative term to hegemonic masculinity. Also, this paper does not view all traditional masculine norms as toxic.

5. Toxic masculinity in Adizua and Gilbert in Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru*

Adizua, Efuru’s first husband, and Gilbert (alternatively referred to as Eneberi), Efuru’s second husband, are the major male characters in

the novel, *Efuru* by Flora Nwapa. Adizua and Gilbert, respectively, exhibit negative masculine behaviours that are harmful to themselves and the people around them. In the real world, both Adizua and Gilbert should be needing therapy, due to their “toxic” behaviours as portrayed in the story. Further, Adizua and Gilbert in the story gradually fall into ‘toxic’ mental conditions – conditions which often arise in men as a result of their inability to live up to societal expectations and to share their challenges with family members who might help them (Ezeugwu & Ojedokun, 2020; Harris, 2021).

6. Adizua

Most traditional societies portray men as family heads and protectors, who are brave, strong, noble, and emotionally intelligent. Masculine norms in Igbo land, according to Ayodabo (2021), entail effective management of one’s household, successful farming, hard work, wrestling victories, large family, and titles, as evidence of power and success. The Igbo people, like most other ethnic groups in Nigeria, are predominantly farmers, cultivating staple crops such as yams, cassava and cocoyam (Olawoye et al., 2004). The picture painted of Adizua in the text under study goes contrary to these expectations:

Life in the farm was becoming unbearable. Adizua no longer worked as hard as before. In the morning he slept while others went to work ... he was so lazy that his neighbours gossiped ... Adizua is stupid. Every morning you see him sharpening his knife but he will not work (Nwapa, 2016, p. 20).

Adizua is depicted here as a lazy man who can hardly make any living through farming. This is indicated further in the following statement from the text: “His harvest was of course very poor. His fellow-farmers laughed at him and said unkind words behind his back. He did not make any profit at all. But his wife consoled him” (p. 20). The picture painted of Adizua here falls short of the typical traditional Igbo man. Among the Igbo, the traditional indications of manhood include a regular job and income. In this regard, Barker and Ricardo (2005) observe that men’s social recognition and sense of manhood suffer when they lack regular jobs or income. Laziness, whether in a man or a woman, is found abhorrent among the Igbo people.

Again, Adizua is unable to provide the bride price money to be presented to Efuru’s family, to legalize his marriage with Efuru, according to the laws of their community. We see this in the conversation Efuru has with one of her kinsmen:

But your husband must fulfil the customs of our people. It is very important ... tell your husband, he must see your father, let him not be afraid ... my husband is not rich. In fact he is poor. But the dowry must be paid. I must see that this is done (p. 10).

The Igbo people, as revealed in this discussion, do not joke with marital traditions. In this regard, Olawoye et al. (2004) observe that marriage and family are very important institutions among the Igbo; unmarried persons of either sex, except in special cases, are objects of derision in the community. It is the payment of the bride price, which, oftentimes, the common Igbo person mistakenly refers to as “dowry” (as seen in *Efuru*) that seals the marriage deal. We can see in the passage, following, that Efuru’s illegal relationship with Adizua due to his non-payment of her bride price has become a subject of gossip, ridicule and scandal in their village:

‘Her husband is Adizua

‘Who is Adizua? Who is his father? Is he known?

‘He is not known. And nobody knows why she even married him, and besides, not a cowry has been paid on her head’. ‘What are you telling me?’

‘It is true. The husband has not even gone with his people to Nwa-shike Ogene’ (p. 18).

Lack of finance, due to his laziness and lack of engagement in any meaningful employment, has been Adizua's major setback in the provision of the bride price and successful conclusion of the marriage rites between him and Efuru. Luckily, for Adizua, Efuru is interested in trading and so they leave farming and turn to trading. Trading, in addition to farming, livestock rearing and local crafts, according to [Olawoye et al. \(2004\)](#), is an important traditional economic activity among the Igbos. We see Adizua and Efuru benefitting richly from this alternative sources of revenue (trading) when they left farming:

Four trips gave Efuru and her husband a huge profit. The fifth trip was not so good ... it was by sheer luck that Efuru and her husband recovered their capital. 'We won't go again.' She told her husband. 'Yes we won't go again. But what are we going to do? 'We are going to look for another trade.' (p. 21)

This passage shows that Adizua relies on Efuru for direction and management of their family business and income. It is Efuru, for instance, who provides the money with which Adizua pays for her bride price.

Adizua's financial dependence on Efuru is further exposed during Efuru's maternity and confinement – the early nursing period for their baby:

'Efuru, I think it is time you should face your trade. Your baby is old enough to be left with a nurse. My mother will see that you get a good nurse. At this time, your baby can eat some mashed yam well prepared with palm oil. You have to think over this, my dear wife.' (p. 36)

The above lines indicate that some men, like Adizua, in the bid to hide their inadequacies and weaknesses, end up hurting the people around them, and hurting themselves, too. This passage reveals that not only is Adizua not good at trading, he is also not interested in helping with the care of their new child or other family chores. He denies his wife the needed rest after the strains of pregnancy and childbirth as well as denies their young baby the early nursing care it needs from its mother. From every indication, Adizua's lack of finances and gainful employment contributes to his carelessness and irresponsibility over cogent family matters. Adizua is unable to admit to his wife, as he used to, that he has no money at that time and that he is entirely dependent on her, financially. For him, the best way of handling the situation is to dish out the instruction as seen in the above passage. Adizua's meanness, as revealed in the passage, is unnecessary. The term, 'your baby', as used by Adizua, suggests a lack of commitment and love, on his part, for their precious child, conceived after three years of childlessness with Efuru. Also, Adizua has not bothered to first enquire from his wife whether she feels fit enough to resume her trading, after childbirth; neither has he offered to assist with the family trade or the care of the baby or with anything at all.

Adizua mirrors [Uchendu's \(2007\)](#) belief that toxic masculinity often reinforces the need to project an image of power and motivates men to hide their susceptibilities, especially their physical and emotional weaknesses, and to adopt "a psychological defense mechanism" (p. 285). Later, when Adizua starts to keep late nights and to lose interest in his family and trading, entirely, Efuru does not mind so much about shouldering the family responsibilities more than she minds about her husband's scandalous absences: "Adizua returned from the market, had his bath quickly and went out. He said nothing to anybody" (p. 51). Adizua's poor communication skills is also revealed here. It is also very likely from the passage above that Adizua has taken to alcohol and even extramarital affairs. His inability to provide for his wife's bride price, added to his inability to support his wife in the family business; to be a good father to his child, Ogonim; to live up to the expectations of his community; and, most importantly, his inability to share his failings and feelings with family members and people who can help him, all may have led to a psychological disorder manifesting in his antisocial behaviours. Ossai, Adizua's mother, however, is always there to console

her daughter-in-law.

'Have patience, my daughter. Don't be in a hurry. Everything will be all right. Don't mind my son. It is only youth that is worrying him and nothing else. He will soon realize what a fool he has been, and will come crawling to you. Look after your daughter and your trade. Your husband will come back to you after his wanderings. Men are always like that.' (p. 51)

The height of Adizua's strange absences and behaviour is witnessed at the death of his only child and daughter with Efuru, Ogonim. Adizua has been away from home throughout the period of his daughter's ill-health. And when the child eventually dies, everyone in Adizua's immediate and larger family, including Efuru, and Ossai (Adizua's mother), has kept hoping that Adizua will return, to grieve together with them. Unfortunately, that is never to be. Yet, news reveal that Adizua and his new found woman have been very much around, in a nearby community, all through those periods. Efuru's father's statement while conversing with Efuru indicates this: "Well, I thought you heard about him because some of our people who returned from the Great River told me they saw him and the woman at Ibeocha." (p. 78).

Adizua's unceremonious breaking away from the smooth relationship he has with his loving, respectable, industrious and peaceful Efuru and his preference of another woman described by her own mother as "a bad daughter, and whose child's body is "full of yaws" (p. 55) are possible evidences of inferiority complex and psychological disorder which, as mentioned earlier, are signs of toxic masculinity. Any man who fails to live up to the expected standard and, in addition, finds it difficult to share his challenges and inadequacies, will invariably suffer depression, emotional detachment, or other forms of mental disorders, including drugs or alcohol abuse ([Ezeugwu & Ojedokun, 2020](#)). The Igbo society of Adizua's time recognizes polygamy and, so, Adizua should have been responsible enough to marry a second wife if he has so wished, and Efuru will have supported him, as she herself has attested: ".... If he decides to marry a wife I shall be only too happy ... " (p. 50).

7. Gilbert (Eneberi)

There is also enough evidence of toxic masculinity in Gilbert, Efuru's second husband. The initial portrayal of Gilbert, however, is much better than that of Adizua. His performance of his own part of the marriage rites between him and Efuru is quite impressive:

That night, Gilbert and some members of his family went to Efuru's father's house. They brought with them kola-nuts, palm wine, home-made gin and schnapps. ... Gilbert's relatives told the people why they had come and Efuru was asked whether they should drink wine. Efuru asked them to drink. After the wine, the dowry was settled and Gilbert paid in cash. (p. 135)

With time, however, Gilbert's interest in Efuru and their marriage starts to diminish. In a bid to get a child for her family, since she has not been able to conceive a child, herself, Efuru arranges for and gets a second wife, Nkoyeni, for Gilbert. She is also on the verge of getting a third wife for Gilbert when she suddenly becomes very sick. Her ill-health and eventual false accusation by the dibia (the local diviner) that she has been unfaithful to her husband which has resulted in her ill-health leads to the end of her second marriage. The faults of Gilbert include his lack of will power and inability to inform his wife and family about the woman he met at Ndoni who, as eventually is revealed, has given birth to his first son – the child he brings home to stay with his family whose true identity he keeps away from his wives. The proper thing should have been for Gilbert to have married the woman (p. 196).

The unexplained intermittent absences of Gilbert from his family can be compared to the late nights constantly kept by Adizua before his eventual disappearance from his family. For no obvious reason, Gilbert is absent at the birth of his supposed first child, with his second wife, Nkoyeni, a child that comes after several years of childlessness with

Efuru. One expects that Gilbert should have cherished the birth of this child and be present at the period of the child's birth and post-natal care. The child is supposed to be Gilbert's first, though circumstances eventually reveal that he is not. Gilbert is also conspicuously absent at the death and funeral, respectively, of his noble father-in-law, Efuru's father, Nwashike Ogene. Adizua's and Gilbert's behaviours, particularly, their lack of respect for their dead relatives, are inconsistent with the Igbo traditional values. Among the events largely celebrated in Igbo land, four are observed to be the most important – marriages, new yam festivals, masquerade religious-social festivals, and burials/funerals. At funerals, particularly, if it is an elderly person's funeral, not only are the relations, in-laws, family, friends and community, as a whole, of the dead expected to be in attendance, the in-laws, particularly, are also expected to pay homage to the family of the dead through presentations of live animals (cows, goats, etc.), yams, drinks, and with very prestigious traditional dance groups (Ugwu, 2014–2015). That is why it is a big disgrace for Efuru that her husband, Gilbert, is absent at her father's funeral.

Again, Gilbert's acceptance of the *dibia*'s divination, that Efuru's ill-health is brought about by her unfaithfulness to him seems to indicate a certain level of psychological disorder. Gilbert who himself has been unfaithful and grossly dishonest to Efuru, on several counts, should not have agreed with the *dibia* in judging his wife, unfairly. Probably, he needs to believe the *dibia* as a way of shifting the blame from himself – a kind of misplaced aggression or psychological defence mechanism, as Uchendu (2007), while discussing masculinity and the Nigerian youths, describes such behaviour.

Adizua and Gilbert in their actions, as seen in the discussion, remind one of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* who for the fear of being thought a weak man, is driven to kill Ikemefuna, his 'adopted' son. Okonkwo's eventual suicide is also born out of fear of losing the force of his masculinity. However, one can say that while Okonkwo's "toxic" behaviour stems from his hegemonic superiority attitudes, Adizua's and Gilbert's own "toxicity" comes as a result of their underachievement as husbands and fathers, and the psychological complexes that come with it. While Okonkwo has been physically violent, Adizua and Gilbert, respectively, have been emotionally violent to themselves and to others living with them. In this regard, one can say that most male characters in African literature lack communication skills.

Additionally, Adizua and Gilbert are portrayed as people who never cry, or show their real feelings or disappointments, thus making it difficult for them to relax and live normal lives. Men and women should appreciate that men can also cry. If Adizua and Gilbert have opened up and communicated their weaknesses and shame to their loved ones – wives, mothers or other trusted relations or friends – their mistakes will not have been as much; they will not have wronged themselves and their families as much as they have done.

Adizua and Gilbert do not behave like heads of their individual families and they care very little about peace and harmony in their households. They play no protective roles to their wives, children and aged parents, as they are supposed to. These men hence can simply be defined as under-achievers. Adizua's inability to perform the basic rites of marriage as expected in his community should have been a warning sign to Efuru of the nature of the relationship to expect in the marriage. Despite Adizua's and Gilbert's obvious failings, Efuru, their wife, in their respective marriages, remains devoted to them. One wonders if Gilbert's toxic treatment of Efuru has arisen from the fact that he has married Efuru as a second husband, after Efuru's first marriage. But, then, Gilbert still has exhibited the same nonchalance and abusiveness to Nkoyeni, his young wife, and even to the woman from Ndoni whom it is revealed is really the mother of Gilbert's actual first child/son. Gilbert should have properly married this lady.

The revelations of Ossai, Adizua's mother, concerning Adizua's father are insightful. Adizua's father, in his own days, behaved exactly like his son, by abandoning Ossai, his wife; his young son, Adizua; and every member of his family and disappearing completely. For Ossai, therefore,

her son's bolting away with a free woman to an unknown destination is a manifestation of her worst fears: "The son of a gorilla must dance like the father gorilla", she said (p. 51). This revelation is a confirmation of failed fatherhood and toxic masculinity, as portrayed in the novel. Adizua has been unfortunate; his father has never been there for him. The implication is that apart from fathers being role models to their male children, the father's presence in the house and participation in the upbringing of the children are very important. Richter, in this regard, reports that availability and involvement of fathers in their homes have benefits for the children – in school performance, reduced aggressive behaviours in boys and increased self-esteem in girls (p. 60).

From the discussion, it can be inferred that Ogonim's death may have sprung from the lack of proper attention given to her in the family. With her father's perpetual absence, and financial demands, her mother has gone back to her trading shortly after her birth. It can also be argued that Efuru's sudden ill-health in her second marriage has resulted from the many abuses she has suffered while living with her husband, Gilbert. Though it is beyond the scope of this study, it should be mentioned that not all the male characters in *Efuru* can be described as exhibiting toxic masculinity; the same way we know that toxic masculinity is not a common feature of all men in real Igbo society.

8. Conclusion

The underachieving, non-committal and harmful behaviour of Adizua and Gilbert, the two leading male characters in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, as analysed above, are indicative of toxic masculinity. These men can rightly be described as "troubled" and "troubling", as Harrington (2020) describes men exhibiting toxic masculinity. It is interesting that the novel, *Efuru*, written and first published in 1966, could be interpreted from the purview of toxic masculinity, a relatively recent terminology in our society. Toxic masculinity, from literature, became topical as from the late 1990s and early twenty first century; yet, it looked as if Nwapa, in *Efuru*, had 'toxic masculinity' in mind in her characterization of Adizua and Gilbert. Though literature mirrors society, it can also be a foreshadowing of what is to come in society, as we see here. Again, literature, like all social media, can influence society and cause society to behave in a particular positive or negative way. A stereotypical portrayal of male characters in Nigerian literature from the angle of toxic masculinity may have a negative cumulative effect on the young Nigerian readers' psyche, as Nwachukwu and UnekeEnyi (2015) warn. Nonetheless, examining literary works such as Nwapa's *Efuru* which depict a set of underachieving, non-committal, and troubled male characters may help to explore the concept of toxic masculinity which also exists in real society. There is an urgent need, therefore, to find ways to break the incidence of toxic masculinity wherever it is found in real society.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Ojel Clara Anidi: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The author declare that she has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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