

## Interrogating Gender Experiences in Jennifer Makumbi's *Kintu*

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### Abstract

*This article examines the different gender experiences portrayed in Jennifer Makumbi's Kintu through interrogating gender role contestation, issues related to gender and marriage, hegemonic masculinity in marriage, and gender stereotypes in leadership. By applying masculinity and feminist theories, this paper investigates men's efforts to conform to societal and cultural expectations, as well as instances of female oppression and subjugation. Findings reveal resolute upholding of traditional gender roles, the sacredness of the marriage institution, subtle oppression of women in marriage and the persistence of gender stereotypes in leadership against women. These persist despite changes in global spheres of marriage, leadership, and culture. This paper concludes that patriarchy subtly facilitates dominance, gender inequality, and unpalatable experiences of the female gender.*

**Keywords:** *Female, Gender, Male, Experiences, Patriarchy*

### Introduction

The concept of gender has long been a subject of inquiry, debate, and developing understanding within scholarly and academic circles. The phenomenon has garnered significant attention across academic disciplines due to its intricate interplay with culture, society, and individual identity, and has undergone significant transformation over the years, shaping discourse in fields ranging from sociology and anthropology to psychology and gender studies. It is recognised that the idea and exploration of gender transcend the simple binary notions of masculinity and femininity, encompassing a range of identities, roles, and behaviours that are socially constructed and culturally contingent (Kirby, 2014). To understand the concept and meaning of gender, it is necessary to examine existing and emerging definitions, explanations, and narratives.

According to its glossary of terms and concepts, UNICEF (2017, p. 2) offers an insightful assertion on gender as “A social and cultural construct, which distinguishes differences in the attributes of men and women, girls and boys”, and accordingly refers to the roles and responsibilities of men and women. Gender-based roles and other attributes, therefore, change over time and vary with different cultural contexts. The concept of gender includes the expectations held about the

characteristics, aptitudes, and likely behaviours of both women and men (femininity and masculinity). In a similar vein, gender is referred to as the socially constructed and culturally defined roles, responsibilities, attributes, and entitlements assigned to people based on their sex assigned at birth in a certain setting, along with the power relations between and among the assigned groups. Blackstone (2003) avers that the social construction of gender entails that certain qualities attributed to individuals by people and societies are consequent upon their sex. The definition and expectations of gender, and sanctions for not adhering to these expectations, vary across cultures and over time, and often intersect with other factors such as race, ethnicity, class, caste, age, sexual orientation, and nationality (Johns Hopkins University, 2017). As a social construct, gender varies across different societies and can change over time. Gender is hierarchical and produces inequalities that intersect with other social and economic inequalities.

More so, the World Health Organisation conceptualises gender as the characteristics of women, men, girls, and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviours, and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl, or boy, as well as relationships with each other. Accordingly, gender encompasses diverse roles; thus, these consist of the expectations and behaviours associated with individuals based on their perceived gender. Townsend et al. (2024) define gender roles as “divisions of household labour, job segregation and gender differences in status and authority” (p.1614). Blackstone (2003) examines gender roles as “the roles that men and women are expected to occupy based on their sex” (p. 337). These emanate from interactions between people and their environment. Notably, they determine the behavior considered suitable for each sex. (p. 336). Townsend et al. (2024) discovered that with the change of mindset about changeable gender roles, women feel relieved to meet with expected tasks at home. A fixed gender role mindset conceals women’s potential to exhibit the feeling of being able to achieve all. Apparently, a fixed gender role mindset spells out increased work for women alone. The authors propose a growth gender role mindset for both men and women, as a fixed gender role mindset impedes women’s progress in their work, resulting in family conflict (Townsend et al. 2024, p.1628). Moreover, as part of the gender discourse is gender stereotypes, according to Okunrobo (2020), “Gender stereotype is the attribution of character traits, behaviours and social roles to men and women in society” (p. 116). This exists in different domains of human society, in academics, Schmader et al. (2024) reveal that emphasising the importance of gender while administering a

math test leads to lower test performance among women who approve of the stereotype, while for those who reject it, such has no effect.

In Jennifer Makumbi's *Kintu*, Muneeni et al. (2020) opine that the method of having women from different generations is employed. This technique reveals women's transition from the position of victims to conquerors. Additionally, the novel reflects a collaboration by women authors in contemporary times to reconstruct and reinvent the image of women misrepresented by male writers. Similarly, Kwanya (2022) argues that Makumbi positions women as co-creators to depict an additional representative gender relationship; this conflicts with the popular notion in African stories of creation that men are originators of the world. Further, Raji and Aluko (2024) focus on women in their research; they explore the culture of silence and stigma on female victims of rape in *Kintu*. The scholars aver that "The motif of secrecy pervades the novel, highlighting the culture of silence and stigma surrounding sexual abuse" (p.12).

Following these rallying thoughts, this paper therefore fills the gap in scholarship to investigate both female and male gender experiences in Makumbi's *Kintu*, with a focus on the contestation of gender roles, gender and marriage, hegemonic masculinity in marriage, and gender stereotypes in leadership.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Feminist Literary Theory**

Feminism emerged as a reaction to the oppression and subjugation suffered by women. The feminist criticism developed during the second wave of feminism in Europe and America. It challenged the discrimination against women's franchise and participation in Western cultures (Childs & Fowler, 2006) in aspects such as politics, education and equality in the workplace. Notably, the feminist school of thought played a pivotal role in critiquing and challenging traditional gender roles. From liberal feminism to radical feminism and beyond, feminist perspectives highlight how gender roles perpetuate inequality and advocate for gender equity. They scrutinise the power dynamics embedded in societal norms and strive for a more inclusive understanding of gender that transcends limiting roles (Enloe, 2014). Feminist proponents have significantly contributed to the comprehension of gender by highlighting its connection to power dynamics and oppression. Accordingly, feminist theories highlight how gender inequality is perpetuated and call for social and political change. Therefore, Childs and Fowler (2006) assert

that “Feminist criticism which adopts such a position scrutinises its texts for fissures and cracks and signs of heterogeneity, re-examining ‘the masculine imaginary, to interpret how it has reduced us to silence, to mutism...to find a possible space for the feminine imaginary” (p.87). Feminist literary theory seeks to uncover female oppression and subjugation in literary texts. It further aims to achieve liberation and emancipation for women.

### **Masculinity Theory**

The development of masculinities was motivated by the women’s movement and problems associated with gender (Connell, 2015). According to Connell (2015), masculinity refers to “the pattern or configuration of social practices linked to the position of men in the gender order, and socially distinguished from practices linked to the position of women” (p. 40). Adegbite (2012) notes that “masculinity is a cluster of norms, values and behavioural patterns explicit and implicit expectations of how men are expected to act and present themselves to other men and women” (p.122). Masculinity is socially and culturally constructed. There exist different patterns of masculinity, and these are constructed differently in historical periods and societies (Connell, 2015). Some are revered while some are despised. Globally, there are some conventional patterns of attaining masculinity, such as fatherhood, the workplace, and sports. Notably, masculinity transcends the issues of men and extends to “what makes a real man? What do men want? And of course it addresses the question: Are all men the same?” (Jegade, 2012, p. 109). Interestingly, masculinity focuses not on men alone but equally involves women who have masculine characteristics. Through behaviours exhibited by people, masculinities are portrayed; thus, it is not actualised in bodily positions or in static personalities (Connell, 2015).

### **Gender Experiences in Makumbi’s *Kintu***

Makumbi’s *Kintu* reveals certain behaviours of both males and females. It explores varied experiences of the genders, and these are discussed under the following themes:

#### **Contestation of Gender Roles**

The story of Kanani Kintu reveals a man bedevilled by rigidity; thus, he retains aspects of the Ugandan culture that acknowledge cooking as a female gender role. He chooses to conform to his culture rather than help his wife cook delicious meals. He says: “In our culture, the kitchen, especially the cooking stones, are taboo to the man of the house... As boys, if you wander too often into the kitchen doubt is cast over you” (p. 170). This portrays a misconception in Ugandan

tradition and further projects cooking activities as unmanly. Also, it positions women as people designated for culinary activities. Kanani's actions reflect a rigid mentality that discards change despite having witnessed Europeans who helped their wives prepare meals. He refuses to embrace change, nonetheless having seen the changing of gender roles through the Europeans his mother served. Rather, he believes that his wife's inability to prepare delicious meals is his cross to bear (p. 170). Obviously, he misunderstands how gender roles should ideally work and lacks the knowledge that preconceived gender roles can be swapped for efficiency. Suffice it to say that Kanani chooses to carry an unnecessary burden. Apparently, he is a graphical representation of a man who believes that a woman is domiciled in the kitchen.

Consequently, Kanani's rigidity in gender roles disposes him to eating meals described as horrible meals, prepared by Faisi, his wife. His supper is described thus: "the rice on his plate was boiled, soggy and white ... (p.170). Also, "Whatever Faisi cooked, she drowned: vegetables, Irish potatoes, even matooke. She never steamed food traditionally in banana leaves" (p.170). The above excerpt is explicit that Faisi lacks cooking skills. Ironically, "Kanani missed his mother's cooking... His mother was a housekeeper for a missionary, Mr Lane, who lived on the western slopes of Namirembe Hill" (p. 171). He would have taught his wife the cooking skills he learnt from his mother, but the reverse turns out to be the experience because he decides to hold tenaciously to the erroneous cultural norm. Accordingly, Kanani is a product of his society; he refuses to embrace change with the realities of the 21st century. The masculinity theory prescribes ways of becoming a man, standards, and expectations of a man in a specific cultural milieu (Adegbite, 2012). Masculinity is a social and cultural construct; hence, societies and cultures stipulate their standards. Obviously, masculinity projects the behaviours that men should exhibit. Drawing from this, Kanani, through his decisions and actions, adheres to the stipulations placed on him by his society and culture. Surprisingly, Kanani belongs to a religious sect known as the awakened that has jettisoned "most of the Ugandan culture, yet aspects of traditional manhood persisted" (p. 170). To him, cooking demeans a man and, at such, is unmanly. Therefore, he represents a man who fails to accept that times have changed and thus certain unfavourable facets of culture must also be adjusted.

### **Gender and Marriage**

Gender and marriage motifs are explored in the novel. The murder of Kamu resonates with the gender experiences in Uganda, such that a woman, on one hand, is not a wife without conventional

procedures being in place. On the other hand, a man who fails to follow the societal marriage pattern is not expected to take responsibility if the woman he lives with dies. Thus, Kamu's woman, notwithstanding living with him, is not reckoned as his wife. This reveals support for marriage as an institution by both genders in Ugandan society. Kamu's woman, living with him and rendering duties expected of a wife, nevertheless fails to qualify her as one. The writer says of it: "There was a knock. Kamu's woman woke up and climbed over him to get the door. She picked a kanga off the floor and wrapped it around her naked body. Sucking her teeth at being disturbed so early in the morning, she walked to the door with the annoyance of a proper wife whose husband was at home" (p. XV). Further, she perceives herself to be Kamu's wife "because she had moved in with him two years earlier and he had not once thrown her out. Every night after work, he came home to her, brought shopping, ate her cooking... When she visited her parents, Kamu gave her money so she did not go empty-handed. That was more than many certified wives got" (p. XV).

Undoubtedly, Kamu's woman enjoys the benefits of a wife but lacks the certification because Kamu fails to do the needful in accordance with societal and cultural values. He fails to marry her in the manner wives are married. This experience portrays clear approval and adherence to cultural rites in contracting marriage. Moreover, it is deduced that cohabitation does not validate a marriage contract but rather the adherence to and fulfilment of cultural demands. Suffice to say that Kamu's woman being unnamed in the novel is a narrative technique employed by the author to foreground the sacredness of the marriage institution and to project her as a non-conformist to the guidelines of the institution. Additionally, Kamu's woman uncovers the significance of having a child for a man. She says: "A child was far more secure than waddling down the aisle with a wedding ring and piece of paper" (p. XV). She laments that despite all her supposed wife duties; Kamu is reluctant to release his seed during intercourse. Suffice to say that Kamu's woman, being aware of her society's ethos, wishes that events would turn for the better. Her thoughts are captured thus: "Nonetheless, she would bide her time: condoms have been known to rip. Besides, sex with a condom is like sucking a sweet in its wrapper; Kamu would one day give it up" (XV). This incident apparently reflects emotional abuse suffered by the woman through Kamu hence, feminist literary theory aims to combat such treatment against women.

### **Hegemonic Masculinity in Marriage**

Hegemonic masculinity is an ideology that approves the global subordination of women (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Connell opines that it is the culturally dominant form of masculinity in

a society. Suffice to say that it is the manifestation of the combined opportunity men possess over women. In the novel, Isaac displays hegemonic masculine behaviours; a descendant of Kintu, he transmits HIV to his wife Nnayiga, having contracted the virus through his philandering lifestyle, but conceals it from her. Consequently, Nnayiga becomes infected and dies after a year. Therefore, Kaaya Isaac's colleague blames him for such a pretentious lifestyle. Undoubtedly, Isaac is the epitome of a silent oppressor, and he succeeds in sending his wife to an early grave, yet he feels no remorse. He narrates the ordeal of his wife's death without regret. He says:

She was sickly around Christmas 2002, but we did not take it seriously.  
Then in January last year, she started to freeze and shiver, I am cold, I am freezing, especially at night. Slipping into bed with her, I swear, was like getting in bed with a corpse. From then on, the disease accelerated- night sweats, fevers, fatigue, a funny rash on the left arm, sometimes her mind went and her feet hurt. She suffered from this, that and everything.  
Then her weight dropped. Before we knew it she had lost her hair.  
Then her feet hurt so much, I put her in a wheelchair Nnayiga hopped into the coffin- Kidney failure (p. 228).

Furthermore, Isaac is advised to go for medical checks to ascertain his medical status. Which he reluctantly agrees to after heavy persuasion from Kaaya. This incident equally shows the attitude often displayed by some men in issues of health. Isaac's character relates to that of Baba Segi, in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, who sees no reason to submit himself for medical screening following Bolanle's inability to conceive. Suffice to say that this attitude is perceived to be masculine, but in reality, it is indicative of subjugation and oppression of the feminine gender.

### **Gender Stereotypes in Leadership**

Culturally, patriarchy upholds the preeminence and dominance over women in the sphere of leadership in this Ugandan society. Bweeza is denied the position of an elder at the clan's meeting despite being a representative. Further, her efforts to usurp Kanani's position similarly prove abortive, being a woman. Whereas Kanani displays passivity in his responsibility as an elder. This depicts gender stereotypes fuelled by the domination of the male over the female gender. Nevertheless, a man, Miisi, makes efforts to have her Bweeza installed as an elder of the clan. This

equally fails and is captured thus: “Miisi had told her that he would sooner forget custom and install her as the elder, but the rest of the elders had refused: No, no, no, that’s not done, it does not work!” (p. 350). This attitude of the elders stems from the traditional stance of gender roles that men are supposed to be leaders (Blackstone 2003). The foregoing shows the power of culture in enforcing some practices which may be detrimental to the recipients. Surprisingly, even when a woman has distinguished herself and ought to be given a position occupied by a passive man, such is denied, with allegiance paid to customs/cultures. This incident vividly demonstrates the oppression and subjugation of women, which feminism seeks to address.

### **Conclusion**

This study has interrogated gender experiences in Jennifer Makumbi’s *Kintu* employing the feminist and masculinity theories. The experiences of male and female genders in this cultural milieu, respectively, indicate men’s conformity to the societal expectations of what makes a man and women's oppression/domination by men. Further, it reveals that culturally patriarchy implicitly and explicitly impacts a society and even more in spheres of marriage, leadership, and power. In this regard, instances and cases of oppression, exploitation, and discrimination take on a ‘normality outlook’. This paper concludes that patriarchy subtly facilitates dominance, gender inequality, and unpalatable experiences of the female gender.

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