

THE TOXIC MASCULINITY IN GUILLAUME OYONO MBIDA'S TROIS PRETENDANTS....UN MARI

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Abstract

Masculinity has long been associated with traits such as dominance, aggression, and strength. However, these traits have been utilized to justify a culture of harmful behaviour among men. This pervasive tradition of toxic masculinity can have disastrous consequences for individuals and society as a whole. It is particularly prevalent in some parts of the world. Guillaume Oyono Mbida in his piece of work Trois prétendants.....un mari, depicts the adverse effects of destructive male behavior on women's lives and society. The protagonist Juliette faces numerous hardships at the hands of her suitors and father, who prioritize their desires over her well-being. This harmful character among men can manifest in various forms, including physical abuse, violence, emotional abuse, sexual harassment, and controlling behaviour. These behaviours are often normalized or justified, perpetuating a cycle of harm and oppression. The following also have a negative impact on men, as they may feel pressured to conform to hurtful gender norms, resulting in adverse effects on their relationships and mental health. Through the application of gender and masculinity theories, this article explores the portrayal of toxic masculinity in the drama Trois prétendants.....un mari. By exploring the power dynamics in this work, this article aims at bringing out a better understanding of how gender expectations and norms can influence, and shape social behaviour, and how it can be harmful and oppressive. This requires a collective effort to raise awareness and challenge harmful gender stereotypes, creating a more inclusive and equitable society for all genders.

Keywords: Masculinity, harmful behaviour, Toxic Masculinity, Gender stereotypes, Power dynamics

Introduction:

The arrival of Europeans to Africa has brought a lot of positive changes. But, some rural areas find it difficult to let go of certain obnoxious cultures. Some of these cultures, which are characterized by traditional ideologies and masculine beliefs delineate men as brave, noble, unemotional, intelligent, and strong, and thus, must not be fragile or emotional in the face of challenges or overwhelming events.

Potency is a term used to describe the attributes, behaviours, and roles typically associated with men and male identity. Kimmel in his book *The History of Men*, defines this concept as not only a collection of traits or characteristics but also a system of power relations that organize social life in a gendered way (103). It is a set of practices that are constantly changing and being negotiated and are thus subject to contestation and change (Raewyn 71). In today's society, the concept of Masculinity is often associated with traits such as strength, courage, assertiveness, and competitiveness. However, these traits can also be used to justify harmful and oppressive behaviour, such as aggression, violence, and sexism, leading to the concept of toxic masculinity. The latter is defined as a “narrow and harmful concept of manhood, which prizes aggression, dominance, and emotional control, and which can contribute to a range of negative outcomes for men and women, including poor mental health, substance abuse, and relationship difficulties”. (Greene 197-212).

Authors like Bell Hooks in her book *The Will To Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* explores how patriarchy and toxic masculinity harm both men and women and advocate for a more compassionate and equitable vision of masculinity. (9) On the other hand, Michael Kimmel in his book, *Theorizing Masculinities*, explores the socialization of young men into toxic masculinity and encourages them to question and challenge these harmful cultural norms(2). Guillaume Oyono Mbia a renowned Cameroonian writer in his piece of work *Trois Pretendants.....un mari* also demonstrates this hazardous manliness. The writer uses the characters in his piece of work to show this harmful manliness and how it affects men themselves, and the society that surrounds them.

Although the drama portrays African marriage and the payment of dowry, it also deals with different behaviours of men that are harmful to the surroundings and themselves. Antagana the father of the main character Juliette has this belief that the daughter's hand in marriage should be given to the highest bidder not minding her choice and emotion. The suitors on their side, exhibit behaviours that are hurtful to others.

Using the Gender and Masculinity theories, this article shows more of the depiction of toxic masculinity as seen in the work of Guillaume Oyono Mbia and its effects on society. The objective of this article is to bring out a better understanding of how gendered expectations

and values can shape and negatively influence social behaviour, and how it can be oppressive and harmful.

An overview of the Plot *Trois Pretendants.....un mari*:

One of Guillaume's most famous works is the drama *Trois prétendants.....un mari* (*three suitors.....One Husband*), which was published in 1962. The novel is a satirical portrayal of traditional African society, its patriarchal structure, and its obsession with social status.

It is a captivating story that revolves around the challenges faced by Juliette, a young girl living in a Cameroonian village, as she confronts the age-old tradition of dowry collection. Even though she is still in secondary school, Juliette's father Antagana, is determined to find her a husband and collect a sum of money from suitors who show interest in marrying her, without putting her wishes into consideration.

However, Juliette rebelled against this practice and falls in love with Okô, a fellow student much to the dismay of her family who viewed him as an unsuitable match. In a bid to secure her happiness, Juliette, her cousin Kouma and her fiancée Okô plan to steal the dowry collected from her suitors. Despite her father's attempt to retrieve the money or find the culprit, Juliette and her accomplices remain successful in their scheme.

The story takes a surprising turn when Okô presented the stolen money to Antagana as Juliette's dowry, leading to the acceptance of their union and a happy ending for the couple.

Toxic masculinity in *Trois prétendants.....un mari*.

Guillaume's work explores harmful behaviours that plague the lives of his characters, causing significant harm to those around them. Through the lens of Gender and Masculinity theories, which seek to understand how social and cultural factors shape individuals' experiences and perceptions of gender, particularly the masculine gender, we can examine the concept of nefarious behaviours in Mbia's *Trois prétendants.....un mari*. These theories posit that manliness is not an inherent, biological characteristic, but rather a social construct reinforced through cultural practices, norms, and expectations.

Ndi, a stark illiterate farmer, pays a young girl's dowry without seeking her consent, believing it to be the right thing to do. Ndi: Mais.....je vous ai versé cent mille francs!.....(Oyono 66)

He sees women as objects incapable of making decisions for themselves, reducing them to mere commodities. Ndi's actions are representative of a larger issue of patriarchal control, where men view women as subservient and powerless, existing solely to fulfil their needs.

Ndi's actions deprive Juliette of her identity and her right to choose her future. She is relegated to the status of a passive object, unable to speak for herself. This same treatment

of women is echoed in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, where Nnu Ego is similarly subjected to patriarchal control and emotional abuse. In both cases, women are denied their voices and forced into marriages that do not align with their aspirations.

By limiting women's opportunities and denying them their rights, societies lose out on the contributions of educated females who could play significant roles in their development. Ndi's belief that women belong only in the kitchen is a pernicious ideology that undermines women's potential and reinforces harmful gender stereotypes.

If Juliette had accepted Ndi's proposal, she would have been condemned to a life of emotional trauma and stifled potential. This not only affects the individual but also the broader community, leading to a generation of timid individuals who lack the courage to speak out against injustice. Women, in particular, bear the burden of raising children and shaping the next generation. If they are denied their agency and voice, this can have disastrous consequences for the development of society as a whole.

Polygamy as a toxic gender practice

Polygamy is the practice of marrying multiple spouses, typically wives. Our analysis reveals that this concept is a product of toxic behaviour. Mbia, a civil servant and wealthy man, has already taken eight (8) wives but now seeks Juliette's hand in marriage.

".....Notre genre est donc célibataire? Pas tout à fait mais il n'y a que huit femmes.....(41).

The statement suggests that polygamy is ingrained in their culture and accepted as a customary practice. This societal norm views polygamy as a conventional way of living. It is unclear what drives the desires of those pluralistic men in society to marry so many women, but it is apparent that he has little regard for women as individuals. To him, these women are interchangeable possessions to be discarded once he is done with them, and boasting about them as his property seems to fulfil his ego. Mbia uses his wealth to intimidate those around him into accepting whatever he presents, thus perpetuating the polygamous lifestyle that can leave a man restless, emotionally traumatized, and susceptible to health risks. Meanwhile, women in polygamous relationships often suffer a lack of love and care, leading to low self-esteem and a lack of companionship with their husbands. In society, polygamy reinforces gender inequality and perpetuates the denial of education for girls. "Polygamy reinforces gender inequality by perpetuating notions of women as inferior and subjugated to men. The practice also perpetuates the denial of girls' education, as families prioritize marrying off daughters over-investing in their education." (Volume 13)

Mbia's hazardous attitude not only makes him a chauvinist but also contributes to his arrogance and overbearing personality. When he arrived to ask for Juliette's hand in

marriage, instead of simply stating his intentions, he indulged in self-praise, speaking of his commitment, position, and achievements.

"C'est moi Mbida, grand fonctionnaire de Sangmélina. Je travaille dans un très grand bureau.Je suis au Gouvernement depuis vingt-cinq ans, et bien connu de Monsieur le Ministre.Mes capacités exceptionnelles m'ont valu bien décorations, bien des honneurs." (29, 30).

By offering double what Ndi had paid for Juliette, he belittled women and reduced them to mere commodities.

Makrita: Ça bien marché avec le fonctionnaire?

Antagana: Très bien, très bien! Il nous a verser deux cent mille francs...(45)

He even had his assistant take note of the family's needs so that he could provide for them during his next visit, further emphasizing his power and influence.

".....pour que tu puisse épouser Juliette, il faudra que tu m'apportes trois de ces grands pagnes que les commerçants Bamileke vendaitun sac du kolas du Nord, et une belle chaise longue. (Mbida fait signe à Engulu de prendre note de tout ce que les villageois vont demander)" (42).

Mbida's attitude made the villagers compromise their objective judgment. From an objective standpoint, Juliette and Mbida's relationship precludes them from getting married.

Mbida:la mère de ma mère était Yembong, et celle de.....

Makrita: Quel malheur mon fils! La grand-mère de l'arrière grand-père paternel de Juliette était Yembong! Mariage impossible (33)

However, with the indiscriminate display of affluence, the quest for a higher dimension of life and a title within the community, they accepted Mbida's proposal. (41 - 43). No one seemed to care about Juliette's feelings. They seemed to ignore the fact that accepting Mbida's proposal would reduce her worth, expose her to emotional abuse, and could even lead to domestic violence. She would never achieve her dreams in that kind of life.

Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* also explores the disastrous consequences of forcing young women into marriages with wealthy suitors. Akunna, like Juliette, had a lover she would have preferred to marry but was pressured into marrying Chike, the richest suitor, to help her mother settle her bills. This decision resulted in Akunna losing her happiness and dreams. (Emecheta 31). The same could happen to Juliette if she were to accept Mbida's proposal to be yet another one of his wives.

Covetousness as an offspring of toxic masculinity

Antagana, a pivotal character in this literary work, embodies greed as a result of his harmful beliefs. He operates unilaterally, ignoring the counsel and opinions of others. Antagana sent Juliette to college with the sole intention of maximizing her dowry.

".....En l'envoyant au college, j'avais bien raison de dire à tout le monde: un beau jour cela me rapportera! (15)

He subscribes to the belief that the more he invests in his daughter's education, the higher the dowry he can expect to receive. This unquenchable greed compelled him to accept dowry from two different suitors. When he lost the money, he scoured the land for another suitor who could help settle his debts, in case the previous suitors returned.

Antagana's avarice also drove him to pressure Tchentgen into marrying Juliette. He extolled his daughter's virtues to such an extent that Tchentgen felt compelled to inquire about the dowry, thereby belittling and devaluing Juliette.

" Tu vois Missa Tchetgen? La fille la plus obéissante du monde! Ce n'est pas comme ces filles de maintenant qu'il faut faire taire à coup de baton en admettant qu'on y parvienne.....(106).

If Juliette were to concede to this demand, she would be stigmatized for life. Furthermore, Antagana's conduct led him to accept money from Oko without conducting the necessary background checks, as required by tradition (116). If Oko had turned out to be a dishonest man, Juliette's future would have been in jeopardy. Antagana's behaviour brought shame, not only upon himself but also his entire village. When the villagers met with Mbia to request additional funds, their demands and urgency only served to embarrass themselves and their community. Poor Juliette continues to endure these emotional torments, causing her worth to depreciate in the eyes of her suitors. Antagana's greed and detrimental beliefs caused a multitude of problems for himself, his daughter, and their community.

The life of Antagana can be compared to that of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*. Like Okonkwo, Antagana gives his daughter's hand in marriage without her consent, demonstrating a lack of understanding and empathy towards his daughter's feelings and highlighting his shortcomings as a father and member of the community. Such actions could lead to a loss of respect from others and a decline in his social status. By forcing his daughter into a marriage that she does not want, Antagana demonstrates a rigid adherence to traditional gender roles and patriarchal values, limiting his ability to adapt to changing circumstances and ideas and hindering his potential for success and progress. Antagana's decision could deny his daughter the opportunity to have a say in her future and to choose her partner, ultimately leading to her unhappiness and, potentially her death, as in the case of Okonkwo's daughter.

Other pernicious gender roles in Oyono's society.

Tchengen, Juliette's third suitor, though a forced one, also exudes toxic virility. He could have declined Antagana's offer as his only intention was to sell his wrappers. However, he proceeded to negotiate. He offered 200,000 francs for the dowry but refused to pay 300,000

francs, claiming that women are not worth such an amount (106). This single act renders him detestable. He didn't even bother to speak with Juliette first to ascertain her consent before haggling over the price. Tchengen displays a lack of respect for women and believes them to be inferior creatures who are not deserving of monetary investment. His perception of life degrades Juliette. It presents her as a lady without value and a future.

Okô, the well-educated suitor selected by Juliette, initially appeared as an ideal gentleman by seeking her consent before offering his dowry (116). However, despite his education, he failed to extricate himself from the norm of paying a dowry, which went against his beliefs. To conform to social expectations, Okô resorted to stealing money, taking on a despicable act that contradicted his character. This toxic trait of conformity has made him lose his identity and resort to selfishness and dishonesty. It is ironic that in trying to prove his love for Juliette, he defrauds the family and society he seeks to be accepted by. Okô had other ways to demonstrate his devotion. Instead of resorting to theft, he could have planned another strategy with Juliette or perhaps eloped with her. Collaborating with Kouma to commit this unacceptable act has not only presented him as a wealthy man but has also set false expectations for his in-laws, Juliette's family. Living a lie in a marriage built on falsehood will cause Okô and Juliette to live a false life, jeopardizing their future together. While Juliette may find Okô's decision acceptable now, it is crucial to revisit it since it could lead to significant discomfort later on. If Okô lacks the financial means to sustain their union, he should take responsibility and own the situation, relying on their families and community to assist them. Nonetheless, regardless of how he presents his situation, Okô will have to live with the moral dilemma of commencing his married life with an unethical act, feeling guilty all his life. In conclusion, Okô's actions require reconsideration since they have significant repercussions not only for the future of his relationship with Juliette but also for his image in the community. A marriage built on falsehood is not one rooted in love and principle but a ticking time bomb with severe consequences. Okô and Juliette must pursue their future with integrity, honesty, and love.

Conclusion

Guillaume Oyono Mbia's work expertly portrays toxic masculinity from the very first page. Every male character in this novel displays this harmful behaviour, which is a learned attitude reinforced through societal expectations, cultural norms, and media representation. As could be seen in *Trois Pretendants Un Mari*, Antagana's father and son, Oyono, both exhibit this hazardous trait, suggesting that society passes down from one generation to the next. It's worth noting that while toxic masculinity is typically associated with men, toxic femininity also exists and can have detrimental effects on both individuals and society.

Nonetheless, challenging harmful gender stereotypes and promoting healthy expressions of gender is essential to creating a more equitable and just society for all genders. By

emphasizing respect, empathy, and equality through education, empowerment, role models, media, community engagement, and policy changes, we can work towards promoting a healthy expression of gender. By recognizing the destructive effects of toxic masculinity and advocating for positive models of masculinity and femininity, we can create a more inclusive and compassionate society for everyone.

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