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**MALE VULNERABILITY AND THE BURDENS OF PATRIARCHAL MASCULINITY IN
AYOBAMI ADEBAYO'S *STAY WITH ME***

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Abstract

This study examines male suffering under patriarchal structures, which despite appearing to privilege men, also subject them to forms of vulnerability that mostly remain unacknowledged. Drawing on R. W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, the study explores how patriarchal masculinity places men under persistent pressure to embody socially sanctioned ideals of strength, authority, and emotional restraint. These demands produce profound psychological consequences, including fractured identity, emotional withdrawal, and social isolation. The study also explores the strategies through which the male protagonist negotiates, resists, and challenges patriarchal expectations, arguing that although such acts of resistance remain constrained by established social structures, they create possibilities for reimagining and redefining masculinity. The paper concludes that men are also victims of patriarchal expectations and that the demands of these expectations affect them psychologically.

Keywords: Patriarchy, psychological consequences, expectations, pressure, victims

Introduction

Patriarchy is one of the most enduring and widespread social systems in human history. More broadly, it refers to a social order in which men exercise greater authority and control within the family, political institutions, and society. Traditionally, scholarly writings on gender have focused on women's experiences of oppression, marginalization, and resistance within patriarchal structures. While this focus remains important, it has often produced a predominantly female-centred understanding of patriarchy, positioning women as its primary victims and men as its principal beneficiaries. Such an understanding leaves insufficient room for examining the ways in which patriarchal structures and expectations can also impose constraints, pressures, and vulnerabilities on men. This study addresses this gap by examining male characters whose lives are marked by vulnerability, emotional fragility, and psychological burdens through an analysis of Adebayo's *Stay With Me* (2017).

The examination of male vulnerability is significant because it unsettles the conventional association of masculinity with strength, control, and invulnerability that underpins patriarchal ideology. As the analysis of *Stay With Me* will demonstrate, male characters experience vulnerabilities relating to their bodies, emotions, social positions, and relationships. However, patriarchal expectations often discourage men from acknowledging or expressing such vulnerabilities, demanding instead emotional restraint, self-reliance, and masculine stoicism. These expectations are closely connected to the burdens of patriarchal masculinity, which refers to culturally prescribed ideals of masculine behaviour within a patriarchal system. Such ideals emphasize dominance, emotional suppression, provision, protection, procreation, and the preservation of family lineage. They consequently establish standards against which men's identities and social worth are measured. When men are unable to fulfil these prescribed roles, they experience shame, anxiety, humiliation, and a diminished sense of masculine authority. Male vulnerability, therefore, is not simply an individual psychological condition but is also shaped by the social expectations through which masculinity is constructed and evaluated.

Literature has long provided a significant space for representing, reinforcing, and questioning these gendered structures. In the Western literary canon, works such as Homer's *The Iliad* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* demonstrate how patriarchal values inform ideas of masculine honour, authority, and control. Achilles' rage over Briseis in *The Iliad*, for instance, reflects a conception of masculine honour connected to possession, status, and control over women, while Hamlet's condemnation of his mother's sexuality in *Hamlet* reveals the regulation of female sexuality through masculine authority. With the development of the novel, particularly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, literary representations of gender became increasingly important for exploring the social expectations attached to both women and men. Literature thus provides a useful framework for examining not only women's perceived subordination within patriarchal systems but also the expectations through which masculine identities are constructed and maintained.

This concern with gender, masculinity, and patriarchy is particularly significant in African literature, which has engaged extensively with questions of culture, power, gender, and social hierarchy since its emergence as a major literary tradition in the mid-twentieth century. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) remains one of the most influential literary representations of masculinity in African literature. Okonkwo embodies a form of traditional masculinity characterized by a fear of weakness, emotional restraint, physical aggression, and the pursuit of social status. His fear of becoming like his father, Unoka, drives him to construct and continually defend his identity through aggressive displays of manliness. Yet these efforts eventually

contribute to his isolation and destruction. *Things Fall Apart*, therefore, presents masculinity not as a permanently secured position of power but as an identity that must be continually demonstrated and defended. Okonkwo's experience illustrates how the demand to embody culturally approved forms of manliness can become a source of personal and psychological pressure.

The costs embedded within masculine expectations are further illuminated by Murray Knuttila's discussion of the "double-edged sword" of patriarchy. Knuttila argues that although men derive benefits from patriarchal structures, they also come at a cost to both men and women. In *Paying for Masculinity*, he examines the consequences of these expectations, particularly the demand that men "man up." Although men receive what is described as the "patriarchal dividend," the obligations associated with masculine privilege can contribute to emotional suppression, diminished human connection, and shorter lifespans. Knuttila's argument consequently complicates the simple categorization of men as beneficiaries of patriarchy by drawing attention to the burdens involved in maintaining the masculine position that patriarchy privileges.

This tension is also visible in Fatiha Bouanani's study of West African women's writings, which observes that representations of male characters reveal "the psychological and emotional afflictions of the male characters under study, such as anxiety, bewilderment, and humiliation" (i). Bouanani's observation is particularly relevant because it demonstrates that even literary works primarily concerned with women's experiences can expose the vulnerabilities of men within the same patriarchal structures. Such representations broaden the study of patriarchy by showing that gendered power relations do not produce a uniform experience among men. Rather, the privileges attached to masculine authority may coexist with emotional and psychological burdens, especially when men are required to fulfil roles that demand strength, authority, provision, protection, and control.

African literature consequently provides a productive space for examining these contradictions in masculine experience. Several African novels, including Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*, and Chris Abani's *Song for Night*, present male characters whose experiences complicate conventional assumptions about masculine strength and authority. Their representations demonstrate that masculinity is negotiated through intimate relationships, political conflict, social expectations, violence, loss, and personal failure, thereby revealing dimensions of male experience that are often obscured by dominant constructions of masculinity.

It is within this broader literary and critical context that Adebayo's *Stay With Me* becomes particularly significant. By placing marriage, procreation, male identity, and patriarchal expectations at the centre of its narrative, the novel provides a compelling space for examining how the demands of patriarchal masculinity can intersect with male vulnerability, emotional distress, and psychological burden.

Existing scholarship on *Stay With Me* has predominantly approached the novel from a feminist perspective, with particular emphasis on Yejide's experience of infertility. Gloria Ada Fwangyil, for instance, demonstrates how patriarchal expectations make infertility primarily a woman's burden, subjecting Yejide to mistreatment from her in-laws, frequent medical examinations, and the humiliation associated with the arrival of a second wife. Such readings establish the novel as a critique of a patriarchal system that defines female identity through marriage and motherhood and exposes the emotional and psychological consequences of this gendered expectation.

More recent scholarships, however, have begun to draw attention to the masculine dimensions of the novel's treatment of infertility. Victoria O. Gbadegesin's analysis of Akin's narrative voice is particularly significant in this regard. Through her examination of Akin's repeated use of the pronoun "I," she identifies the personal struggles underlying his experience of infertility and argues that an erect phallus is central to male self-appraisal and self-actualization in the Nigerian context (240). Her observation that male infertility negatively affects masculine identity provides an important departure from readings that treat infertility exclusively as a female experience. It suggests that Akin's concealment of his condition is connected not only to deception but also to the threat that infertility poses to his sense of masculinity.

Arif Rahman's reading similarly shifts attention towards the relationship between masculinity, power, and insecurity. He interprets Akin's attempt to get a child through Dotun as a strategy through which he seeks to avoid the social consequences of emasculation. Although Rahman emphasizes Akin's manipulation and the harm it causes to Yejide and Dotun, his conclusion that Akin becomes "the real victim of his own rule" (22) points to the contradictions within his masculine position. Akin exercises the privileges associated with patriarchal authority while simultaneously experiencing the anxiety and insecurity produced by the expectations attached to that authority.

The relevance of R.W. Connell's hegemonic masculinity to this study lies in its ability to illuminate the tension between the social privileges associated with masculinity and the pressures involved in sustaining them. By drawing attention to the cultural expectations through which masculine identities are constructed and evaluated, the theory provides a useful lens for understanding how men can experience vulnerability within structures that position them as powerful. This perspective is particularly applicable to *Stay With Me*, where masculinity is closely tied to fertility, sexual potency, authority, emotional restraint, and male responsibility.

Male Vulnerability, Patriarchal Expectations, and Masculine Performance in Ayobami Adebayo's *Stay With Me*.

In *Stay With Me*, Adebayo uses Akin's sexual and reproductive condition to expose the vulnerability that can exist beneath socially valued forms of masculinity. Within Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, sexual potency and the ability to father children constitute important markers of socially approved manliness. Connell sees hegemonic masculinity "as the form of masculinity that "embodied the currently most honoured way of being a man" (77). Since fatherhood is one of the socially valued markers of masculinity, Akin's impotence becomes more than a private bodily condition. His inability to fulfil the reproductive expectations attached to marriage consequently threatens both his masculine identity and the social recognition associated with it. Akin's attempts to overcome his impotence demonstrate the extent of this pressure. He confesses that he "watched every pornographic video that was available in Nigeria. I watched it all: men and women, men and men, women and women—nothing worked" (215). He also recalls travelling "to Ilara-Mokin to consult Baba Suke," who gave him "a tar-black concoction to drink" for five naira, only for the treatment to produce "diarrhoea like I'd never had before" (217). His consultations at LUTH, visits to traditional healers, and experimentation with different remedies reveal his determination to restore a bodily capacity that he associates with masculine adequacy. Yet these efforts remain secret because acknowledging his condition would expose him to shame and emasculation. His silence therefore demonstrates how patriarchal expectations can make bodily vulnerability difficult to disclose for men.

This fear of exposure is also evident in the explanation Akin gives Yejide about male sexuality. He tells her that “each penis was different,” explaining that “some got hard, that others never did” (209). What initially appears to Yejide as an ordinary explanation of sexual difference later becomes evidence of Akin’s deliberate concealment. By presenting his erectile dysfunction as a natural variation rather than a health concern, he tries to maintain the appearance of sexual competence. His behaviour can therefore be understood through Messerschmidt’s concept of “masculine compensating behavior,” in which men adopt strategies to preserve a masculine identity when they are unable to meet dominant expectations.

The psychological difficulty of disclosure becomes clearer when Akin finally confides in Dotun: “I told him I’d never had an erection. At first he laughed, ... and told me not to worry because it would happen when I met the right girl” (215). Dotun’s initial laughter confirms Akin’s fear that revealing his vulnerability will attract ridicule rather than sympathy. Kimmel explains this homosocial dimension of masculinity by arguing that men are subjected to the “constant scrutiny” of other men, who “watch us, rank us, grant our acceptance into the realm of manhood,” (63). Akin’s experience shows that the pressure to appear sexually capable is sustained not only through expectations from women and family but also through male judgment.

The arrival of Funmi, the forced second wife further exposes the consequences of Akin’s concealment. While his withdrawal from Funmi becomes a means of protecting his secret, the strategy eventually collapses when Funmi confronts him during Olamide’s naming ceremony: “Tell me how a penis that has never been hard makes a woman pregnant? And don’t tell me again that it only happens when you are with me. I don’t believe that anymore” (200). Her question exposes the contradiction between Akin’s performed masculine identity and the limitations of his body. Butler’s concept of gender performativity further illuminates this contradiction. She describes gender as “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame” (33). Akin performs the expected roles of husband and prospective father while concealing the bodily condition that prevents him from fulfilling the reproductive ideal attached to those roles. His work, marriage, social conduct, and carefully maintained appearance help sustain this performance, but its dependence on secrecy makes it unstable. Butler’s observation that “The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency” (26) captures the tension in Akin’s experience. Although he cannot control his impotence, he exercises agency in how he responds to it. His deception, however, demonstrates how the patriarchal demand for masculine competence can shape that agency in destructive ways. Akin’s body thus becomes both the source of his vulnerability and the site upon which masculine expectations are imposed, revealing the psychological cost of a system that leaves little room for men to acknowledge bodily limitation.

Patriarchal Expectations Imposed on Akin and his negotiation strategies.

In *Stay With Me*, Akin’s vulnerability is shaped by patriarchal expectations that define masculine worth through fertility, family continuity, economic success, and emotional control. These expectations are not merely individual preferences but are reinforced through family structures and cultural practices. As Connell observes, masculinity is “institutionalized in this structure, as well as being an aspect of individual character and personality” (29). Akin’s experience demonstrates this institutional pressure particularly through the cultural expectation that a man should father children and preserve his family lineage. His infertility therefore becomes a family concern rather than a private matter. His mother repeatedly visits his office with “a new woman, a potential second wife” (Adebayo 24). This intervention reveals how childlessness is interpreted

as a failure requiring a patriarchal solution, while the possibility of male infertility remains concealed.

Akin's reproductive vulnerability is intensified by comparison with other men and by his position as the first son. His half-brother Juwon, who have four sons become an implicit measure against which his own masculinity is judged. As Connell explains, masculinities are "multiple" and "arranged in a hierarchy... defined in relation to each other and in relation to femininities" (37). Akin's masculinity is therefore not evaluated independently but in relation to men who appear to fulfil the expectations of fatherhood. His mother's warning; "You are the first son in this family, do you know what that means? Do you know what that means at all? Do you want him to take your place?" (Adebayo 23), further connects masculinity with lineage and family responsibility. This expectation continues after his father's death when, as the oldest son, he performs the burial duty of shovelling "the first and last clumps of sand out of the grave for safe-keeping" (Adebayo 71). The ritual positions him as the bearer of his father's legacy and reinforces the pressure to preserve the family line. Thus, although Akin occupies a privileged position within the family as the first son, that position also carries obligations that he must continually prove himself capable of fulfilling.

Economic success provides another dimension of this masculine ideal. Akin's position as a successful bank manager gives him financial security and social respect, yet the novel demonstrates that economic achievement cannot compensate for his failure to fulfil the reproductive expectations attached to masculinity. Dotun, by contrast, illustrates the vulnerability produced by economic failure. After losing his job, he tells Yejide, "I was roped into a fraud at work, that's why I got sacked. Word gets around about these things—no one will employ me now. Nobody" (92). His unemployment deprives him not only of financial independence but also of the social validation associated with masculine provision. Through the contrasting experiences of the brothers, the novel suggests that masculine worth is constituted by several overlapping expectations. Success in one sphere does not necessarily protect a man from failure in another; Akin can be professionally successful while experiencing profound insecurity because he cannot father children.

These pressures are compounded by the expectation that Akin should remain emotionally composed at all times. When the doctor informs him that Sesan's test result proves he is not his biological son, the doctor urges him, "Calm down, sir, you need to handle this like a man, ok? Please calm down. Be a man, sir. Be a man" (Adebayo 147). The repetition of "be a man" reduces masculine worth to emotional control, requiring Akin to suppress his actual feelings even though he is hurt and in dare need to express himself. Akin's response to loss further exposes the cost of emotional restraint. After Funmi's death, his grief is difficult for others to recognize because "there was no staring into space, no angry outbursts" (70). His lack of expressing visible emotion is interpreted as detachment, demonstrating how masculine composure can make male suffering invisible. His vulnerability emerges precisely from the pressure to satisfy these demands while having little cultural space to acknowledge failure, seek support, or openly express pain.

The expectations of patriarchal masculinity take a heavy psychological toll on Akin. Connell's hegemonic masculinity helps explain this; he argues that the privileges attached to hegemonic masculinity come with hidden costs, and men are expected to pay this price for the privileges that their masculinity grants them. Akin's experience shows how this pressure gradually robs him of his selfhood. The constant vigilance he experiences is immense as he can never relax, be authentic or simply be himself, he clings to hope instead. Akin's experiences manifest especially

in his inability to maintain a fixed identity. In public, he appears as a successful bank manager, a respected husband, and a responsible first son. In private, however, he is psychologically burdened by infertility, shame, and the guilt of deceiving his wife. His desire to preserve his masculine image therefore makes concealment a way of life. Even when he has opportunities to tell Yejide the truth, he chooses secrecy instead as he admits, "There were things I could have told her. Should have said to her..." (Adebayo 25). His decision to remain silent allows him to preserve the appearance of a normal marriage, but it also prevents genuine communication between him and his wife. Thus, the very secret through which Akin attempts to protect his masculine identity gradually becomes a source of emotional distance and their marital instability.

This burden becomes more complicated after Funmi's death. Akin carries the knowledge that his actions contributed to the tragedy, although he did not intend to kill her. Instead of confronting these emotions openly, he internalizes them, further withdrawing from those around him. His frequent trips to Lagos, partly for medical consultations, become both a means of addressing his condition and a way of escaping the pressures of his marriage. Even within the home, he remains emotionally distant from Yejide and avoids conversations that might expose his fears. His inability to communicate his vulnerability therefore transforms his private suffering into relational isolation. The novel consequently shows how patriarchal expectations of male composure can make emotional pain difficult to acknowledge, even to those closest to the one experiencing it.

Akin's emotional withdrawal extends beyond his marriage and eventually fractures his relationship with his family. His conflict with Dotun produces a wider rupture that separates him not only from his brother but also from his mother, Moomi. After their violent confrontation, Dotun attempts to repair their relationship, pleading in a letter, "Brother mi, get this right. You can't fight with me. You can't fight with family" (Adebayo 189). Akin, however, resists these several attempts at reconciliation, instead tears up the letters without responding. Moomi is similarly drawn into the conflict because she cannot accept the violence between her sons. Her confrontation with Akin represents also an attempt to restore the broken bond between the brothers, but his refusal to explain himself leaves her deeply hurt. She eventually withdraws from him, making "a promise never to speak to me until I explained why I'd tried to kill her precious son" (Adebayo 177). The simultaneous breakdown of Akin's relationships with Yejide, Dotun, and Moomi demonstrates how his inability to confront and communicate his shame, guilt, and vulnerability also destroys the familial relationships that could have provided emotional support that may have helped him navigate and process his psychological distress.

The novel presents how Akin negotiates; resists, and sometimes conforms to these patriarchal expectations. The strategies he adopts to navigate these pressures further reveal the implication of his choices for contemporary understandings of masculinity in the Nigerian society.

In the novel, Akin did not simply submit or reject patriarchal masculinity. Instead, he negotiates its demand, seeking for more suitable ways to express his masculinity.

This complexity corresponds with Connell's observation that hegemonic masculinity is "not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable" (76). Akin's masculinity reflects this contested nature because he moves between compliance, negotiation, and resistance as he attempts to reconcile his personal vulnerabilities with the expectations placed upon him by the society.

Akin's decision to ask Dotun to impregnate Yejide is his most desperate attempt at negotiating the appearance of fatherhood despite his infertility. The conversation between them reveals the depth of Akin's desperation and the complexity of his negotiation. Explaining his plan, his conversation with Dotun goes thus:

You need to spend just a weekend. Next weekend, she'll be ovulating."

"And Yejide? She agreed to this thing you are saying?" He looked as if he was about to vomit all over the green rug on his sitting-room floor.

"Yes." Truth is I hadn't discussed it with Yejide, but I just wanted him to agree to the plan so I could go to bed and forget the discussion. (148)

The proposal demonstrates the extent to which patriarchal pressure has narrowed Akin's choices: in order to preserve his marriage and masculine identity, he is willing to ask his own brother to sleep with his wife. Dotun's initial rejection of the proposal, calling it "nonsense" and "an abomination" (148) emphasizes its moral and cultural transgression, yet Akin will not give in as he desperately needs to fit into this role of fatherhood that is expected of him. Although the negotiation is meant to accelerate him to the position of fatherhood as part of his masculine fulfilment, it at the same time undermines the biological certainty upon which that ideal depends. Kharbouche describes this contradiction as a "bitter victory", emphasizing the cost that comes with such relentless pursuit of traditional masculine ideals like power, status, or success. Akin's actions though, cannot be reduced to simple conformity as his decision is also born out of love as much as desperation. The complexity of his motivation challenges any simple reading of his character as either victim or villain and reflects the diverse nature of masculine performance, where characters are driven by competing forces that resist easy categorization.

Although Akin makes painful compromises, he also resists patriarchal expectations in some significant ways. These moments of resistance represent his attempt to redefine masculine identity on terms that challenge rather than reinforce hegemonic norms. For instance, Akin's initial refusal to take another wife when he and Yejide could not have their own children is one of such acts of resistance. His delay and reluctance show resistance in the form of hesitation, even though he eventually conforms. He does not eagerly adopt polygyny as a patriarchal right but sees it as a painful compromise forced upon him. Also, when Moomi suggests that he take another wife because of Yejide's experiences with Abiku children, Akin firmly rejects her intervention: "Don't involve yourself in this matter any more, *ema da soro mi mo*, do you hear me?" (Adebayo 204). His insistence that "Rotimi is going to live" (204), and not die like the others demonstrates his outright refusal to allow his mother to determine the future of his family. His rejection of the practice of marking Sesan's body after his death similarly demonstrates his resistance to traditions that conflict with his personal convictions. When Moomi insists on the ritual, Akin responds, "I said no. Can't you hear me?" (161). By rejecting this ritual, Akin questions inherited beliefs about fatherhood, family and masculine responsibility. He refuses to accept tradition without questioning, instead, he chooses a form of masculinity grounded in personal conviction, suggesting that he is willing to break with tradition when it conflicts with his understanding of fatherhood and care. Butler's concept of subversive repetition helps explain this act because gendered norms are maintained only through their continual repetition, where refusing to repeat them can destabilize their authority without requiring open confrontation.

Although the novel exposes the pressures of patriarchal masculinity, it also imagines other ways of masculine expression. The clearest possibility for an alternative masculinity emerges in Akin's understanding of fatherhood. For him, fatherhood is more defined through emotional

attachment than biological ties. When Sesan's biological paternity is revealed, Akin refuses to allow genetic connection to determine his relationship with the child:

But I knew Sesan was my son. I loved him. I was planning for his future, had bought shares in his name. I often thought of the day I'd buy him his first bottle of beer. Could hardly wait to teach him how to play table tennis at the sports club. I knew I was the one who would do all those things. There are things scientific tests cannot show, things like the fact that paternity is more than sperm donation. I knew Sesan was my son. There was no test result that could change that. Besides, I already knew that Dotun was the sperm donor. (Adebayo 148)

The repeated assertion "I knew" emphasizes Akin's conviction that fatherhood is constituted through love, care, responsibility, and presence rather than biological connection alone. His relationship with Rotimi reinforces this alternative conception of fatherhood. When Rotimi calls him "Baba," the title is "like an absolution" (193), providing him with a sense of acceptance and emotional redemption. Akin's understanding of fatherhood does not outrightly reject paternity through biological connection, yet, it redefines it through love, care, and future commitment. This negotiation between biological fact and social recognition reveals the constructed nature of patriarchal fatherhood and the possibility of redefining fatherhood on alternative terms.

Akin's experiences in the novel reveal the contradictory nature of patriarchal masculinity. He is neither simply a victim nor merely a conformist. His actions are shaped by the pressure to appear virile, authoritative, and capable of becoming a worthy husband, but he also makes choices for which he remains responsible, particularly his deception, violence, and refusal to communicate. As Rahman observes, Akin becomes "the real victim of his own rule" (22). The statement captures the central paradox of his masculinity: the very standards he attempts to satisfy in order to secure his identity eventually contributes to his psychological suffering, emotional isolation, and familial breakdown. Yet his relationships with Sesan and Rotimi also reveal the possibility of reimagining masculinity through love, care, responsibility, and emotional commitment. *Stay With Me* therefore presents Akin's masculinity as a continuous negotiation between patriarchal demands and alternative possibilities of being a man. His vulnerability does not simply demonstrate the damage patriarchy inflicts on men; it also reveals the possibility of moving beyond a model of masculinity in which male worth is measured primarily through control, sexual potency, biological fatherhood, and emotional silence.

CONCLUSION

This study on Ayobami Adebayo's *Stay With Me* establishes that patriarchy does not benefit men exclusively, even though it grants them authority and privilege within the gender hierarchy. Instead, the system also imposes on men rigid expectations concerning masculinity, fertility, fatherhood, emotional control, and masculine authority. Akin's experience demonstrates how these expectations can become a source of psychological distress when a man is unable to fulfil the roles prescribed for him. Connell's framework therefore enables Akin's experiences to be understood within the patriarchal structures that shape his behaviour without excusing his harmful choices. The study consequently argues that patriarchy is a system that privileges men, while simultaneously constraining them individually.

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