

GENDER SCHEMA IN ADORAH NWORAH'S *HOUSE WOMAN*

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Abstract

Adorah Nworah's House Woman (2023) highlights gender discrimination faced by African women. This research aims to highlight the issues of gender schemas faced by African women after marriage. The novel's protagonist Ikemefuna is treated as a servant not only in her parents' house but in her partner's house as well. The other women in the novel are also seen as trying to fulfill the expectations of a gender-based society which usually follows gender schemas. Gender schema theory proposed by Sandra Bem illustrates the idea that gender discrimination is impregnated in the minds of individuals from a very young age. The present study also examines that the male characters in the aforesaid work are often seen as ordering their women to serve them all the time. This element of their personality shows that they are trained to subjugate their women and women are often born to obey and serve them. This paper intends to achieve the idea that it is the society that impregnated the minds of both genders with differentiated schemas. Women only live to serve men. Women strive for basic rights, while men enjoy all the freedom due to gender schemas.

Key Words: Nworah, Gender Schema, Women, Men

Introduction

The present study aims to explore the themes of gender schemas in Nworah's *House Woman*. The study of feminism and societal norms is shaped by various theories and theorists. The gender schema theory by Sandra Bem shapes the discussion on gender and feminism. Ikemefuna is the protagonist of the text and she is trapped in an arranged marriage which is common in an Igbo tradition from ancient times. In the initial stage of her relationship with her partner, she has some hopes or dreams about her husband but later on, she discovers that he is a violent man and no one here wants to help her out so she chooses to resist the violence. The problem here is that due to gender schemas, the minds of people follow false rules and regulations about males and females. This act of Ikemefuna shows how mentally unstable she becomes due to the continuous violence and trauma she encounters from the patriarchal society including her in-laws and father.

Ikemefuna is the protagonist of the text but the main issue taken from the text is that almost all the women face forced implementations and physical abuse. Men are shown to behave to be masculine and they usually dominate their women by all illegal means. Ikemefuna's father, Dumeje used to beat his wife and expected a son from her. He makes the lives of Adina (his wife) and Ikemefuna (his adopted daughter) very tough and limited. Apart from the continuous suppression, Ikemefuna and Agbala are the core examples of agency and resistance against these schemas. Their resistance shows that it is also necessary for women to live the way they want. The text is also relevant to the problem as it highlights the issues that due to gender schemas, women also don't support other women. They have become patriarchal agents due to learning gender binaries from an early age. Gender schemas are

impregnated in the young minds of both genders. These gender schemas teach the girls and boys to do certain acts and refrain from doing some other acts based on the 'gender binaries'. These gender binaries are the products of patriarchal mindsets.

African women possess the schemas of serving their family and home with devotion and are fully dedicated to their families and children but in return, they are subjugated and patriarchy and eventually, they face identity crisis. The text selected for this paper is *House Woman*, written by Adorah Nworah in 2023. Ikemefuna is trapped in an arranged and has pressure to give birth to a baby boy. There, she pleases her future in-laws by doing their chores and obeying them to satisfy their schematic expectations. Before heading to their house, she also faced discrimination and forceful implementations from her father in his house. She faces a lot of difficulties while living with her parents-in-law and soon realizes that she is surviving in a lot of distress and wants to escape from this, so she chooses the resistance against Nna and his torturous family. It is shown in the text that every man in her life just orders her and demands obedience because gender schemas. This text also depicts the difference of chores allotted to both genders which are the result of gender schemas. The male characters in the text, Nna and Dumeje never do any house chores and order their partners.

Sandra Ruth Lipsitz was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on June 22, 1944. She worked in androgyny and developed the Gender Schema Theory. She has notable contributions to academia and clinical work. She is very famous for her exceptional and notable works in androgyny, gender roles, gender stereotypes and gender studies. If we dive more into this theory, we come to know that individuals create their understanding of the world and individuals based on gender. At first, she proposed the aforementioned theory in her articles "Gender schema theory: A cognitive account of sex typing" written in 1981 and "Gender schema theory and its Implications for child development: Raising Gender-aschematic children in a gender-schematic society" written in 1983. After that she expanded this theory in her book known as *The Lenses of Gender: Transforming the Debate on Sexual Inequality* published in 1983. This theory reflects its cognitive characteristic and describes how mental structures receive information based on gender discrimination from the gendered society and teach the society to match those with the behaviors approved by the gender-based societies. There is gendered-based information fed to the individuals to proceed in their actions and behavior. According to these concepts, gender is a product of norms of one's cultural roots and heritage. Bem (1981) proposes definition of schema as: "A schema is a cognitive structure, a network of associations that organizes and guides an individual's perception. A schema functions as an anticipatory structure, a readiness to search for and to assimilate incoming information in schema-relevant terms" (p.355).

A child's cognitive development is combined with societal construction which affects the pattern of schemas and constructs male and female nominations. There is a link between gender cognitions and gender-related behavior through gender schemas. When children come to know about their gender differences as boys and girls, they adopt these schemas and differences for a lifetime. Schemas develop through the combination of cognitive learning processes and societal influences. According to this concept, children learn their identity and identify themselves as girls or boys. Children understand various aspects like events, objects, and behaviors as masculine or feminine and they identify and learn information about their own sex. Bem (1981) demonstrates that "gender schema thereby has a biologically based priority over many other schemata" (p. 362).

Moreover, the text *House Woman* taken for this research is written by an Igbo writer known as Adorah Nworah. She is from South-East Nigeria and currently lives in Philadelphia where she practices real estate finance law. Her stories are published in AFREADA and Adda

magazine. Her stories, *The Bride and Broken English* are shortlisted for the 2019 Commonwealth Writers Short Story Prize and longlisted for the 2018 Short Story Day Africa Prize. She is a passionate writer and focuses on feminist themes. She criticizes the very serious issue of migration of a woman to a new house and encounters various episodes of violent married life. *House Woman* is built upon the idea that humans learn about the fixed gender norms from childhood that some duties are specified for females only and others are for males only which supports the theory of gender schema by Bem. Children are motivated to learn about specific categories of genders from a very early age and then specified gender norms are created in this way. This phenomenon is explained very well in the text that how the mother makes her son's mind about the fact that his wife is supposed to do everything that a house full of in-laws demands and he is free to order her because he is a man. Gender schemas impose the expectations only on a wife. According to the prescription of gender schemas, it is a duty of a wife to nurture her children and other members of the family. She should also be submissive and accommodative in relation to her family. These enforcements cause extreme pressure on women and restrict their liberty. Society often expects the women to conform to their standards of living due to gender schemas. These navigations lead to tension and conflict between the members of the family. It is often seen that man when become husband usually influence more by gender schemas and prioritize his parents' demands over his wife's wishes. These marital dynamics often affect on the mental health of the women and they feel isolated and unsupported. In a nutshell, Nworah depicts that women have no bodily autonomy and freedom in most cases. Many women are trapped in marriages and they have to serve their husbands and parents-in-law for the rest of their lives as servants. This notion suspects of gender schemas theory presented by Bem. People are taught through schemas that they have to perform according to the fabricated norms of gender binaries followed by the repetitive acts of the male and female. The unfortunate reality presented in the novel is that only women suffer due to these dogmas.

Review of Literature

The existing literature seeks to present data from some primary readings and conducts the study accordingly. Gender schemas have been studied from diverse perspectives in contemporary times. The following review contains versatile responses schemas.

Oni (2013) suggests that a child develops her or his gender identity at the age of three or between the ages of four and six. Children learn about defined characteristics when they are at the stage of toddlers and preschoolers. It is important to note that gender identity does not develop through the puberty. Gender identity develops at such early age depends on influence of other people, social interactions among the society and a child's personal interest. Understanding gender is divided into four parts named as understanding the concept of gender, learning gender role standards and stereotypes, identifying with parents and forming gender preference. Gender is not fixed but still a child becomes able to identify himself or herself as a boy or a girl according to the societal constructions. When society approves certain conditions for the construction of the gender identity, the child follows these rules and perceives his or identity according to those conditions.

Lipenga Jr (2017) suggests that in African narratives, it is seen that fathers are responsible of gendered socialization for their sons. In most of the families, fathers make sure that their sons learn all the gender schemas from them. Fathers already rule on the whole house including the women so they transmit this trait of domination to their sons as well. The father usually never approves his son's actions until he behaves like a masculine man.

Onuoha, (2020) studies and exemplifies *Jagua Nana* (1961) by Ekwensi and also focuses on marital conditions. Jagua wants a life full of freedom but she captivates in a marriage. She wants to live in a city and adopt a city life. She wants to enjoy herself like a

free woman, such as to restaurants, and dressing according to her own choice. Finally, she comes out of the marriage because she faces difficulties in married life and wants freedom. Marriage is a very beautiful part of life but when it creates hurdles in the personal freedom of women, they feel it like a gibbet as Jagua doesn't like her captivating married life.

Nadaswaran (2013) suggests that an analysis was done on the writings of the three different generations of Igbo female writers and the study showed that they represented the dire need for agency and power that the African women need in their lives. African women are constantly struggling for their agency and power against the patriarchal society. African women writers play a very important role in giving voice to the subjugated African women. Igbo women often encounter gender discrimination in their whole lives and this gives rise to the theories that support women.

Boonzaier and De La Rey (2011) explain that children learn gender schemas from a very young age, for example, the age of three years is best to acquire the gender. Children can't identify their genders at older ages. It is difficult to change gender at the age of four years or more than that and by the age of six or seven, children completely acquire their genders and consider them to be fixed.

Starr and Zurbriggen (2017) suggest gender schema theory that children learn about their genders from a very early age and it is less possible to categorize genders at the elder age. People live according to the gender schemas throughout their lives what they learnt in the early years of their childhood. By acquiring the genders of masculine and feminine, they live their lives, make decisions of their lives, and perform actions according to this differentiation of gender.

Schmitt and Millard (1988) suggest that "individuals within each culture differ from one another" (p. 581). This shows that each individual learns about their gender and what they are taught by the culture in which they live. Each culture has different standards created for the masculine and feminine genders. Males and females have to fulfill the roles of their genders according to the traditions of their specific cultures. Some people compare their behaviors to the cultural standards and allow them to judge themselves and other people. Some individuals are pressured to act tough to fit in with the standards of masculinity in their culture. Some people do not pay heed to these standards and value their perceptions. It depends on the importance individuals give to these cultural standards. From the above review of the literature, it is clear that there exists a gap in regarding Gender Schema especially in the context of the novel. This paper efforts to fill this gap.

Materials and Methods

The qualitative research design is used for this research for better exploration of the text and its analysis through the theoretical perspective. The literary and textual analysis is done in this study with the relevancy of the contemporary problem and theoretical perspective. This research is reflexive, contextualized, and interdisciplinary.

Sandra Bem's Gender Schema Theory

Sandra Bem's work is concerned with social justice and equality applied to the analysis of sexuality and gender. They focus on three impacts of Bem's work including the social justice message of equality, focusing research attention on gender roles as malleable, and helping scholars divest themselves of the previous. Bem highlights terms like Gender Schematic and Gender Aschematic to propose the concept of resistance and equality.

According to this theory, a child's observations help her or him to learn about his gender and societal expectations of the genders. After learning these expectations, the child will learn about which roles and traits are considered appropriate for which gender. This will shape the child's mind to perform and live according to these roles. Bem(1983, p.598) states: "As every parent, teacher, and developmental psychologist knows, male and female children

become “masculine” and “feminine”, respectively. The idea that discourse creates the subject positions for the individuals supports this theoretical framework. This theory suggests four gender categories:

Sex-typed individuals

They must conform to stereotypical masculine and feminine traits. They integrate information according to their schema for their gender. They adhere to stereotypes associated with their biological sex. According to Bem (1981) “Sex-typed individuals” have much information about self. They may choose career, adopt clothing styles, etc based on societal expectations and stereotypes. Males are considered independent, less emotional, and strong while females are considered dependent on their males and emotionally more expressive. They are mostly expected to be focused on family instead of focusing on their own goals or careers. Traditional societal norms are so dominant that even children are allowed to play with toys based on gender stereotypes. For example, girls are often given dolls to play and boys are given toy pistols or trucks to play.

Cross-sex typed individuals

They integrate information according to their schema for the opposite gender. Roles and behaviors are deviated from traditional societal expectations in these types of individuals. Their influences and preferences are mostly associated with the opposite gender. This deviation resists the traditional gender norms. For example, those males who like to wear clothes are associated with females, and those females who adopt fields like construction, marketing, etc are often associated with males. Bem (1981) exhibits “a man who openly expresses his emotions, and takes on caregiver roles is a cross-sex typed individual who challenges conventional gender roles”. A woman with an interest in activities like sports or mechanics is considered a cross-sex woman. Cross-sex-typed individuals are more inclusive in nature. They live their lives beyond traditional expectations and support choices and freedom.

Androgynous individuals

Bem (1981) also proposes the type, “Androgynous individuals” (p.362) which states that those individuals who can process information based on their schema for both genders. They follow a combination of traits traditionally associated with both males and females. They show the blending of traditional masculine and feminine qualities. They don’t conform to typical gender-specific styles like strict masculine or feminine clothing. They promote the balance of traits like independence, empathy, etc. they are against societal expectations linked to gender. They engage in a diverse range of activities rather than stereotypical gender-specific interests. Their gender identity is not strictly identifying as male or female but inclusive in nature. These types of individuals do not fit into predefined societal expectations that challenge them.

Undifferentiated individuals

Those individuals who encounter difficulty while processing information based on any gender schema. They usually do not exhibit stereotypically masculine or feminine traits. They do not align closely with traditional gender roles associated with their biological sex and do not express traditional roles associated with either males or females. There is clear flexibility in adopting roles and behaviors and navigating various situations without engaging with gender expectations. They focus on personal preferences rather than conforming to traditional gender norms and embrace a sense of gender that is beyond conventional male or female categories. They contribute to the diversity of gender expressions and challenge binaries of gender.

The narrative unfolds against the backdrop of cultural norms and values associated with women’s role in society. Bem suggests that Ikemefuna is shaped by her gender schema,

the cognitive framework influences her interpretation of situations. Bem's lens allows us to unveil the internal conflicts and psychological impact of the protagonist. This also explores how the character's behaviors diverge from societal expectations.

Cognitive development and schemas

A child's cognitive development influences the patterns of schema that dictate male and female traits and a person's value in culture. These schemas are influenced by culture but mostly stem from a child's observations and experiences. A woman who decides to resist or go against these cultures and norms might be considered a rebellion society. Gender schemas are not only limiting for women but for men also. Bem believed in greater freedom and fewer restrictions while raising the children. Bem (1981) states that "boys are to be strong and girls weak hat boys are to be strong and girls weak" (p. 355).

Bem Sex-Role Inventory

Bem created a questionnaire called the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI) in 1974 which has become the most widely used psychological assessment tool in the world. It is a psychological tool to measure an individual's gender role orientation and individual's psychological androgyny. It is used to move beyond the traditional binary classification of masculinity and femininity. This measures the extent to which and identifies with traits associated with masculinity and femininity. There is an androgyny scale that identifies a balance of masculine and feminine traits and a high score on the scale indicates a more androgynous orientation. This scale indicates how individuals express their gender roles beyond societal norms. It is used to identify the impact of gender roles on different aspects of behavior and mental health. According to this inventory, gender identity is not rigid but a complex interplay of masculine and feminine characteristics.

The sentence taken from the text shows that "she bowed her head in penitence" (Nwurah, 2023, p. 130) shows that Ikemefuna is habitual to bow her head in front of every male in her life and to wait for what he will decide for her. This habit of bowing the head in front of the males is driven in her schemas by the gendered society. Before moving to Nna's house, she used to bow her head in front of Dumje (father) and in front of Nna (life partner). Men are considered so powerful and respectable that women must bow their heads in front of them. Agbala advises Ikemefuna to "find ways to be patient with him" (p.201). According to the gendered-based mentality of Agbala, Ikemefuna must learn to be patient with the anger of Nna because she is a woman and a woman must be patient in all circumstances. The text shows that "It seemed unfair that she should have to adjust to Nna's anger" (p.201). It is definitely against equality among both genders that women have to be patient but there are no limitations or advice for men and their anger issues.

Schemas are dynamic knowledge structures that vary with social experiences and cultural values. The term schema means patterns of thought. Gender cognitions and gender-related behaviors are linked with each other. They are mental structures that organize information according to gender categories. There are two types of gender schemas and they allow children to process information about events, attitudes, and behaviors and then categorize these aspects according to the traits of masculinity and femininity.

Discussion And Analysis

Nwurah, through her protagonist Ikemefuna and other female characters of *House Woman*, presents gender discrimination and patriarchal influence on the minds and actions of individuals. The novel presents the hard life routine of women who are forced to live according to patriarchal conditions. These women suffer a lot from these biased conditions and crave freedom and liberty. Starting from the useless objections leading to physical abuse, deprivation of liberty and freedom are mainly discussed in the novel. Thus, this novel is a great example to shed light on the problems of females living in a patriarchal society. For

example, the sentence, “Eggs for you, Ikemefuna announced, a sweet smile on her cherubic face” (p. 26) depicts the traditional gender schemas and expectations such as making breakfast and presenting it to her partner with a smile to confirm the stereotypical feminine roles. Women cannot show distress on their face if they are not feeling well, they must remain happy in front of their husbands and families in every situation. Eke said about Nna when he sees Ikemefuna, “I think he likes what he sees” (p.11) to showcase that men must approve of women’s physical appearance if they decide to live with her. A woman’s likeness and approval are not needed in a patriarchal society. This act is rooted in traditional gender dynamics where men’s approval for a woman’s appearance has a great worth and value. It is a schematic tradition that women must impress their men and men must focus on their physical beauty.

Women must take care of her looks and body for the society. The standards of the society are very high. They want a perfect figure of the women and also demand to get humans from her body at the same time. The sentence: “Then there would be the downtime, losing the baby fat, falling in love with her body all over again, or for the first time” (p.19) explores the reality that first a woman has to change her physic to give birth to a child then she has to again mold her body according to the societal beauty standards implanted in the schemas of the people. It is not at all easy for a woman to critically change her body continuously for the sake of societal schemas. After giving birth to a human, it is very obvious for the body to adopt a certain amount of fat but unfortunately, it is also mandatory to change herself again to impress society and her family. Also, men always find fault with the bodies of women. Ikemefuna’s husband thinks about, “Zainab’s chest hairs and her herpes problem” (p. 24). This sentence depicts the incident when Ikemefuna’s husband remembers his past girlfriends and their imperfect looks. One of them was named Zainab who was suffering from herpes disease and had some hair on her chest. This is not a choice of a woman to have hair on her body but they appear due to certain hormonal changes in her body. Nna never liked her hairy body like every other man so he keenly observation of Ikemefuna’s body this time to avoid his past mistake of choosing a woman like Zainab. Society is so biased that it gives every choice to man to enjoy his life, he can choose every other woman according to his standards of beauty made by the gender-based society. A woman only spends her entire life to please her man by her physical beauty because these schemas are impregnated by the society in which they live.

The woman’s appearance must be elegant, and sensitive while on the other hand, a man’s appearance must showcase his strength and power. The sentence, “He nodded approvingly at the big arms, the slim waist, and the toned legs” (p. 3) depicts Nna’s self-assessment and admiration based on physical appearance that is often associated with traditional gender ideals. The aforesaid characteristics show the strong appearance of a man. Nna “standing before the woman in that kitchen, he was painfully aware of his many imperfections” (p. 4) highlights his self-consciousness, which is a performative aspect of his manliness. It is a bitter truth that no one is perfect, even a man can also have many flaws in his appearance but he only judges’ women in terms of physical beauty. Man must be physically strong according to the ascribed gender schemas.

Besides, women are often considered as greedy and always in a need of rich man. This mentality and thought is fixed in patriarchal society due to gender schemas. The sentence which is, “Women auditioning for wifey” (p. 124) represents that many women want to be the wife of Nna because he earns a six-figure salary which shows that women are often not financially independent. After all, they are not taught to be independent. Women are less taught from a young age to be financially independent. They are often taught to do the chores of their husbands and the other members of the family and in return, they get food

from them. Gender schemas are so fixed in some people's mind that they don't see the real problems of the women. They consider women as a reason of all the sins and faults. The police officer "wondered about the killer's upbringing" (p. 229) because everyone focuses on the upbringing of a woman when she commits any offense. No one cares about the reasons which lead her towards this. The police officer also "had learned that the only way to keep young in check was to watch her like a hawk (p. 229). When the officer was solving the case of Ikemefuna, he blamed her upbringing. This happened because according to the patriarchal society, a man can commit any offense and no one will ask from him in that way but when a woman does anything to show resistance, she is considered mad or ill-mannered.

Thus, gender schemas operate on the minds of children that they act according to the expectations of the culture. When Nna came to know the reality that Azubuikes are his parents, Agbala denied it by saying: "I should have done a better job of teaching you our culture" (p. 173). In this sentence, she wants to ensure that Igbo elders refer to every child as their own and she forgot to indulge this schema in Nna's mind in his childhood. Gender schemas are so enacted that it is affirmed duty as a girl child to learn cooking and other chores from the initial age to be a perfect wife in the later part of her life. Dumeje said to Nna, "I raised her well for you" (p. 178). It is important to raise a girl child according to the standards of the society for parents otherwise it is considered a great taboo in the dynamics of gender-based society. He also said: "He does not need one of those yeye girls who lack home training" (p. 178). A girl child is raised only for the sake of a man. She was taught in her early life about all the cooking and other home chores to do after marriage. A woman has no life of her own. She is only trained to live for others. The sentence taken from the text, "her hunched back curved like a sickle as she straightened his pillows and sniffed the air for dust" (p. 2) shows that a mother is involved in traditional gender roles like taking care of her child's place which reinforces the expectations of femininity. A boy's mom is more responsible for all the care and maintenance of her child. When the child grows up, she is still responsible for his chores because she is a woman and she must manage all the things of her children and family.

Furthermore, a man is entirely dependent on his woman for his meals because he could not learn cooking at an early age due to the constructed schemas and. The sentence, "She hummed an old Bright Chimezie number, one Agbala often hummed as she chopped bell peppers in the airy open-concept kitchen of the Nwosu family house" (p. 2) portrays the traditional feminine roles such as cooking which is associated with the women. The text shows that: "The wooden ladle striking the sides of an aluminum pot. The pretty woman's small feet on the kitchen parquet" (p. 3) highlights the domestic and traditional roles associated with women only. The woman must be beautiful and her feet must be small which depicts the fragility of the woman. The sentence, "Eggs for you, Ikemefuna announced, a sweet smile on her cherubic face" (p. 26) depicts the traditional gender schemas and expectations such as making breakfast and presenting it to her partner with a smile to confirm the stereotypical feminine roles. Women cannot show distress on their face if they are not feeling well, they must remain happy in front of their husbands and families in every situation.

Apart from that, men are taught from their childhood that they can enjoy their lives by doing whatever they want and women are always available to them for the chores. The sentence, "Dumeje showing her how he liked his Peugeot washed" (p. 96) shows that men are habitual of asking women to do their chores. Adina tells Ikemefuna that "he will be very hungry all the time" (p. 101). It depicts that men are not habitual to cook the food and only focus on eating. They just get hungry all the time because they just order their women one moment and the meal is here in the next moment. Adina wants to disclose the harsh reality

that men are dependent on their women, they are always demanding and expecting to be served with the food by their wives all the time. The sentence, “dusting their furniture, making their eggs all fluffy, just the way they liked it” (p. 104) describes that Ikemefuna makes food according to the likes and dislikes of male family members. She fulfills all the needs and demands of men in her life despite her discomfort. She and many other women feel tired from doing all the chores and never get any reward.

Another line from the text tells that Agbala yelled for dinner on Ikemefuna by saying: “Make yourself useful for once Ikemefuna” (p.106). This shows that a woman always tries to make herself useful by doing productive tasks for her family is a cut-and-dried practice. When Ikemefuna thinks of getting rid of the continuous domination from her to be parents-in-law by killing Eke, she thinks that “how much blood would she have to clean up?” (p.107) means that even after killing the patriarchal mentality she can’t even completely remove the patriarchal agenda, she has to fish in troubled water and clean up the blood because she is a woman and a woman has to do the process of cleaning no matter what is her condition at that time. The following sentence where Eke says to Ikemefuna by the end of her first trimester: “Sit in one place, for the baby’s sake” (p. 208). It depicts that a woman’s health is only important for her in-laws when she is pregnant, otherwise she and her body are nothing to them but just a piece of flesh. The sentence, “Nna heard the clatter of pots and pans as he reached for the work laptop he’d pushed beneath his bed in the moments before last night’s lovemaking” (p.25) describes the imagery of Ikemefuna doing kitchen chores while Nna doing her office work. This shows the biased distribution of work between males and females due to gender schemas.

Agbala says to her that, “Your job is to erase his doubts about you. Show him you are wife material” and we told you that you must prove you are fertile before the wedding” (p. 12). These lines depict the duties and roles of the wife which she has to fulfill by any means. There is a criteria set that defines wife material and this criterion is necessary to be fulfilled by the oppressed woman Ikemefuna is a new member of the house but she is expected to understand everyone in the house, especially her husband. She must make sure that others know her perfectly. She is commanded by her mother-in-law to express herself to make him understand her. She is forced to represent herself as a perfect wife. Strangely, there are certain conditions to be fulfilled to be a perfect wife but not for the man to be a perfect husband. Gender schemas are so indulged in the minds of people that a man will remain what he is in actuality but a woman has to mold herself to please the standards of the society. In the second line, it is seen that how Ikemefuna is pressured by her mother-in-law to give birth to a child. In many cases, women become patriarchal agendas because of gender schemas that they have been acquiring since their childhood.

In addition, Ikemefuna is severely pressured by her parents-in-law to give birth to a baby but she has her dreams and plans in which she seems interested. No one cares about her plans or memories because she is a woman and she can only live for others not for her own self. The sentences: “She did not care for maternity dresses. She wanted Nneka’s bodycon. A house party with deafening Afrobeats. Bobo’s big, strong palms guiding the sway of her hips” (p. 53) shows that she wants to be a dancer and dreams of it usually but is unable to do it because of Agbala’s constant pressure. She misses her friend, and the music and dance they used to enjoy but now she is living under the pressure and contract of a married life from which she cannot escape.

There is a distinction between the roles of men and women. Different societies project different tasks on the two sexes. Bem (1981) explains the term Sex Typing which transmits males into masculine and females into feminine. Women and men live according to these roles. Nneka’s mother, Nwanneka was forced to love her husband due to the forceful

traditions of the society. The line, “Was she not proof that a woman could love a script?” (Nworah, 2023, p. 78) depicts that Ikemefuna is bound to love a man like Nwanneka because they both have the same stories. They both are trapped in arranged marriages at different times but according to the same traditional rules. They both learned to love their husbands because there is no way out. A woman has to follow the script written and proposed by society. A woman in such a patriarchal society is compelled to love the person that it presents. Nna’s internalized cultural gender schema regarding marriage practices shows through the line which is: “Notwithstanding his study abroad in Sydney and Madrid, he was Nigerian enough to know that arranged marriages remained the norm in Nigerian backwaters” (p. 25). This elaborates on the deeply ingrained societal norms in his thinking.

In a gender-based society, it is necessary for women to impress men with the physical body to attain their attention. When Ikemefuna feels something special for her dance teacher, her friend suggests she impress and attract him. She says to her: “I think you should adjust your blouse small. Pull it down so that your cleavage shows a little” (p. 60). She also suggests she look beautiful by saying, “Use my lipgloss” (p. 60) to physically attract him because a woman must look good to keep the man always close to her. Nna also tells Ikemefuna the deepest secret by saying, “Smile at him and look pretty” (p. 48) to keep a man with her for a lifetime. This idea depicts that a woman has to do a lot of struggles to keep her desired man to herself for a longer time. She should look pretty and display a smile all the time to flatter him. The point is that only a woman has been taught to impress a man but there are no conditions implemented for a man to impress a woman to stay with her by society so, the sentence shows: “She would soften her voice like Nneka advised” (p. 61). Nneka tells Ikemefuna some skills to impress Bobo. She tells her that: “It seemed like a practical skill to have when dealing with Nigerian men” (p. 62). Some technical skills are mandatory to apply to men by the women to get their attention.

Nna when saw the picture of a woman similar to him wanted to “hide the woman’s eye bags with his thumbs like they were dirty laundry on a dinner table” (p.66). A woman is to look beautiful all the time; it is not appropriate for her to have eye bags or other flaws in her face. If she possesses some flaws, they must be concealed. Nna sees Zainab “without the Lancome foundation” (p.134) for the very first time. This sentence shows the concerned level of men about women’s beauty. Men see women as a beauty object to impress them whenever they want so their beauty standards are so high about them and they are often found beauty conscious. This is also a gender schematic instinct present in the males to objectify women and consider them as a tool that only knows how to impress them. Men are always skeptical about women; they always think that women are characterless and they can cheat their husbands as Nna “scanned the room for Ikemefuna’s cellphone because he had learned from his past experiences that a woman’s cellphone could hold the answers to his most intimate questions” (p. 37). Nna searches for Ikemefuna’s cell phone to get some personal information about her. It is shown that he was involved in many intimate relationships with different women but he does not trust Ikemefuna. He has doubts that she might be involved in such kind of relationships him so he tries to find her mobile phone to search the details of her. For example, the sentence expressing, “She would learn not to keep things from him” (p. 52) depicts that Nna is still curious about her cell phone. He still tries to find it everywhere, especially inside the pillowcases. In the end, he concludes that he will train Ikemefuna to not hide things from him ever. Ikemefuna says to Nna ironically, did you, “Find anything of interest, Mr Officer?” (p. 69) when she observes that he is very skeptical about her. A man is completely free to do anything in his life and he is not at all answerable but it is the demand of a gendered-based society that a woman must not be skeptical about her character and she is always answerable to her life partner.

Similarly, women are often considered as greedy and always in a need of rich man. This mentality and thought are fixed in patriarchal society due to gender schemas. The sentence which is, “Women auditioning for wifey” (p. 124) represents that many women want to be the wife of Nna because he earns a six-figure salary which shows that women are often not financially independent. After all, they are not taught to be independent. Women are less taught from a young age to be financially independent. They are often taught to do the chores of their husbands and the other members of the family and in return, they get food from them. As a result, men often become dominating and start giving themselves airs despite the major contribution of women. Patriarchal society is always political in nature. Some in-laws have very typical nature and do politics and interference with their daughter-in-law all the time. It is their schematic action to interfere against with women every time. “His parents had good intentions, but they must learn to stay out of his business” (p. 51) declares that Nna’s parents are habitual to interrupt in their son’s life and now they are interrupting the life of their daughter-in-law by asking questions like these from their son. Agbala asked Nna when he met with Ikemefuna to know every single and important detail of their meeting, “Did she share anything important?” (p. 51). She also asked to know what they talked about by saying that, “Did she mention us?” (p. 51). It means that Nna’s parents are so typical and have political mindset that they want to know everything that their son and daughter-in-law are doing. They always want to be dominating on their future daughter-in-law. The sentence “his parents were stubborn folk” (p. 150) shows that Nna’s parents often prefer themselves and don’t compromise on anything. They are complete agents of patriarchy which follows the trends of gender schemas.

Nna asks Ikemefuna something repeatedly but she does not pay heed to him properly so it becomes non-digestible for him. This is mentioned in the text as: “That someone so small could disobey him” (p. 68). Ikemefuna is called here ‘someone so small’ by him who is not obeying her husband means a woman has no worth at all and she is just like a small entity just to obey her partner. A woman must obey his partner immediately no matter what. When Ikemefuna calls Nna in terror then the text shows that, “his fingers dusting the tip of his belt buckle” (p.163). This means that a man can torture a woman by any means but when that woman does or says something in response to that torture, the aforesaid man can’t tolerate the resistance. Ikemefuna begins here her resistance by calling him a pig, although she calls this in terror, he furiously brings his hand to his belt to show her that he can physically harm her if she will speak anything against him. The sentence: “He reached for her neck” (p.174) harmed her but she showed proper resistance to go out of his grip. Men become violent in many situations; they don’t possess calmness in their nerves because society teaches them to be violent and abusive against women through gender schemas. Gender-based society restricts their freedom and liberty. Nna observes that his parents are very hard on Ikemefuna so he says, “The girl just needs some air. Why can’t we give her that?” (p. 85). If a woman wants fresh air, she is still dependent on societal decisions. Men are always demanding in nature. They demand from women what they want. Agbala tells Adina that Ala is very generous, that “He will be a beast of a man. Handsome and hungry. Demanding” (p. 233). The patriarchal societies having mentalities of gender differentiation promote the beast-type men, the men who are cruel in nature and always demand something from their women. Men are the symbol of animals and they are often admired in this form. This sentence, “Adina could not save her from the man because Adina could not save herself from the man” (p. 240) tells how compelled and helpless a woman is that she couldn’t save herself from the violence of a man, now she is also unable to save her daughter from the same kind of violence. One thing the text shows here is that not every woman is that compelled like Adina, some are like Ikemefuna who knows how to be violent in return to show resistance and agency. In the

following line, “I fought him as my life depended on it because it did” (p. 245) Ikemefuna gives a statement to the officer and tries to prove her by saying the above line. This line clearly shows that Ikemefuna killed Nna for some reason and the reason was her own life. She took his life because her own life was not safe.

We see in another scene that Ikemefuna stepped on Nna’s foot accidentally but he thought that it was done intentionally so: “He pushed her so hard she almost fell” (p.167). This shows that men are less patient as compared to women. No one can tolerate violence but these are gender schemas that teach men to be less patient and women to be patient always. Ikemefuna’s outburst and instant apologies are shown as, “Stop it! She shrieked. Her shallow breaths filled the kitchen. Nna massaged his knuckles. She held Nna’s eyes then looked away. ‘I- I’m sorry’” (p.26). This shows the societal expectations of women to control themselves and show nurturing behavior no matter if they are distressed or happy. It is not acceptable at all for women to raise their voices against men or change their behavior towards them no matter what the condition or situation is. They have to always remain calm and apologetic to fulfill the criterion of a gender-based society.

Besides, gender roles are not fixed, they are always changing. Butler (1990) states that gender roles are always changing and not fixed in nature. Sometimes, women feel their worth and resist back in response to the constant domination they bear in their lives. Agbala in her teenage scolded her sister’s boyfriend by saying, “Why don’t you do it yourself?” (Nworah, 2023, p. 56) when he asked her to prepare food for him. It is affirmed in a society that females are meant to cook for their men while men just enjoy the meal but resistance against this norm is depicted here. The sentence, “Agbala was not melody” (p. 2) depicts that Agbala’s performance and role are different from the other women described in the text. Her identity and personality depict the divergence as compared to other women in the text. The majority of the women shown in the text as subjugated and repressive but Agbala is the only woman described as strong, clever, and dominating woman. She is a clear example of a reverse gender differentiation system. Gender schemas are so fixed in some people’s mind that they don’t see the real problems of the women. They consider women as a reason of all the sins and faults. The police officer “wondered about the killer’s upbringing” (p. 229) because everyone focuses on the upbringing of a woman when she commits any offense. No one cares about the reasons which lead her towards this. The police officer also “had learned that the only way to keep young in’ in check was to watch her like a hawk (p. 229). When the officer was solving the case of Ikemefuna, he blamed her upbringing. This happened because according to the patriarchal society, a man can commit any offense and no one will ask from him in that way but when a woman does anything to show resistance, she is considered mad or ill-mannered. The unfortunate thing is that no one wants to know the real reason behind her offensive nature, everyone only blames her due to their gender schemas.

Gender schemas operate on the minds of children that they act according to the expectations of the culture. When Nna came to know the reality that Azubuikes are his parents, Agbala denied it by saying: “I should have done a better job of teaching you our culture” (p.173). In this sentence, she wants to ensure that Igbo elders refer to every child as their own and she forgot to indulge this schema in Nna’s mind in his childhood. Bem (1981) asserts that gender schemas are constructed in the minds of men and women in their childhood. Women are learned through these schemas that they weak and sensitive and always need a support. The sentence shows, “she felt weightless, like she was free-falling through a vertical tunnel” (Nworah, 2023, p.13) indicating that Agbala’s instructions and the overwhelming expectations placed on Ikemefuna caused distress to her. The physical reaction of leaning against a wall and feeling weightless reflects the stress that she felt when she thought of performing her gender role prescribed by societal expectations and norms. The

description of the room as like: “A master bedroom that smelled of fish oil and soursop” (p. 18) suggests that certain scents are associated with gendered spaces such as the ‘smell of fish oil’ and ‘soursop’ evoke a sense of traditional male activities like fishing or other outdoor activities. The following sentence is about Agbala which shows that “his hurricane of a mother would fondly call a yellow pawpaw, to be shielded from the sun at all costs” (p. 1). This sentence asserts that a woman is metaphorically referred to as a delicate fruit which implies the need for protection and care. This reference reflects the gendered cultural perception and traditional gender schemas imposed by the society. Men often see women as a fragile and feminine creature. These men are taught through gender schemas that women are fragile.

Conclusion

The research identifies the components that add and contribute to the development of gender schema. Ikemefuna and Adina, the female characters of the novel experience gender discrimination, oppression from patriarchal society, male dominance and unequal treatment. They not only face gender discrimination but also encounter physical abuse from their partners on minor issues. They are forced to do only those things that the patriarchal society lets them do, otherwise, they just crave for life they want. They are meant to obey and serve the men of their families for. Men like Nna and Dumeje are shown as highly patriarchal mind due to the gender schemas they learned in their childhood. They are now habitual to oppress women due to repetitively gender-based actions. These schemas are initiated and driven by the patriarchal society which the aforesaid novel describes with evidence in the analysis section.

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