

Female supporting characters and patriarchy in Adichie's *Imitation and the Arrangers of Marriage*

Niken Elysia Dwiyantri

Faculty of Languages and Arts, Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia

nikenelysia@students.unnes.ac.id

Rini Susanti Wulandari

English Literature Department, Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia

rinisusanti_w@mail.unnes.ac.id

Abstract

This study analyzes two short stories written by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Imitation and The Arrangers of Marriage*, in which women sustain patriarchal expectations in marriage through their closest relationships. The study aims to examine how female supporting characters normalized patriarchal expectations in marriage and how this normalization affects the way the protagonists understand and negotiate their positions in marriage. Using Bartky's concept of internalized patriarchy and Kandiyoti's patriarchal bargain, this research applies a descriptive qualitative approach, utilizing close reading to examine the dialogues, narration, and actions performed by characters within both narratives. The research results show that it is not only men's authority that creates patriarchal expectations, but also the daily interaction among women. The research also shows that the protagonists actively negotiate their positions within the patriarchal system, rather than completely rejecting it. This study concludes by showing that women can also play a role in reproducing patriarchal expectations with other women.

Keywords: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, internalized patriarchy, patriarchal bargain, patriarchal expectations, women characters.

INTRODUCTION

Amid the growing discourse on gender equality, patriarchal expectations in marriage continue to be a source of pressure in various cultural contexts. Alwedini (2017) identified how Saudi women respond to marriage pressures through patterns of resistance, negotiation, or compliance, while Suleman et al. (2023) found that gender discrimination and traditional pressures such as dowry significantly correlate with marital unhappiness in Kurdish society. More

importantly, this pressure is often enforced by women themselves through close figures in Nigeria — a cultural context similar to the backdrop of Adichie's story — and Mensah (2023) shows that, in naming traditions, women actively instill gender expectations in girls from birth. A similar pattern was found by Ali, McGarry, and Maqsood (2022) in Pakistan, where mothers-in-law often enforce role expectations on their daughters-in-law. In world literature, Tabassum and Arif (2025) demonstrate a similar dynamic in *The God of Small Things*, *Beloved*, and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, in which women with relative

power in a patriarchal household discipline and ostracize other women who reject these norms.

These patterns can be explained through Bartky's (1990) argument that patriarchal oppression not only operates from the outside but is also internalized into women's consciousness and self-perception. This idea is reinforced by the concept of patriarchal bargains introduced by Kandiyoti (1988), which describes how women often negotiate security and social position within the confines of the patriarchal system — a negotiation that, rather than liberating them, contributes to the reproduction of the system that oppresses them. Kandiyoti specifically highlights the pattern of "classic patriarchy," where women who are oppressed as young daughters-in-law eventually become the ones in power over their own daughters-in-law, thus creating a cycle of intergenerational reproduction of patriarchy among women.

Adichie's works have generally been studied from various perspectives, ranging from sociolinguistic comparisons in *Americanah* (Sutrisno et al., 2023), postcolonial feminist critiques of several of her prose works, including *The Thing Around Your Neck* more broadly (Mogoboya & Sebola, 2022), to spatial readings of the short story *The Thing Around Your Neck* through wayfinding theory (Stefanova, 2023). However, the dynamics of the normalization of patriarchy through the support of female characters are particularly prominent in two of Adichie's short stories, namely *Imitation* and *The Arrangers of Marriage*, where the supporting female characters shape how the female protagonists interpret and respond to their positions in a patriarchal marriage.

Research that examines these two short stories so far has employed approaches such as mimicry and postcolonial hybridity

(Karkun, 2022; Sardari, 2021), African feminism and Stiwanism (Langat, 2024), situational irony (Mustafić, 2026), migration and identity crisis across three short stories (Yumnam & Laishram, 2025), diaspora and sense of belonging (Ait Benali, 2025), Igbo-English code-switching (Chijioke Edward et al., 2025), as well as general feminist literary criticism (Haider, 2019; Dwelee, 2023). Some of these studies do touch on supporting female characters; for example, Karkun (2022) examines Nkem and Amaechi's relationship through migration and class, while Mustafić (2026) reads Ijemamaka's comments as part of a situational irony analysis, in both cases treating these supporting characters as complementary to another theoretical framework rather than as the main focus. Dwelee (2023) similarly touches on women resisting other women's demands, but frames this through anti-feminism rather than internalized patriarchy, without engaging the internalization process as a systematic framework. Sabri and Abu Madi (2021) draw on several of the same quotations yet read them as instances of Butler's (2004) gender regulation rather than as a specific mechanism of patriarchal transmission between women. In line with that, Worugji and Ekpe (2019) describe Auntie Ada's statement as "an indictment on the patriarchy," while Olorunfemi (2018) reads Amaechi's counsel to Nkem through the theme of migrant women's solidarity and Auntie Ada's statement through the lens of "domestic dictatorship" — in both cases, without situating these moments within a systematic account of internalized patriarchy.

Although these studies collectively demonstrate the richness of *Imitation* and *The Arrangers of Marriage* as objects of literary study, no one has examined how patriarchal norms are transmitted through female

relationships in these two short stories. This gap is significant since such transmission has proven to be a meaningful mechanism in various disciplinary and literary contexts, yet it has not been the focus of systematic analysis specifically on these two short stories. This research fills that gap by analyzing *Imitation* and *The Arrangers of Marriage* through the lens of internalized patriarchy (Bartky, 1990), supported by the concept of the patriarchal bargain (Kandiyoti, 1988), to examine how supporting female characters normalize patriarchal expectations and how this normalization shapes the protagonists' negotiations in their marriages.

The problem formulation that guides this research is: (1) how the female supporting characters in the two short stories normalize patriarchal expectations in marriage and (2) how this normalization shapes the way the female protagonists understand and negotiate their positions within the patriarchal marriage structure. The originality of this research lies in the shift of analytical focus from patriarchy as a structure solely imposed by men, to the ways in which women themselves become active agents in reproducing it, a dynamic that complicates the simplistic victim-oppressor reading of Adichie's fiction.

METHODS

This study uses a descriptive qualitative method to analyze the normalization of patriarchal expectations and their impact on the female protagonists in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Imitation* and *The Arrangers of Marriage*. Creswell (2014) defines qualitative research as an approach that seeks to understand the meaning individuals or groups assign to social or human issues. The researcher employs an inductive process to

analyze the data and interpret emerging patterns and meanings.

The research data consist of words, phrases, and sentences from these two stories that illustrate the normalization of patriarchal expectations by female supporting characters and their impact on the protagonists. The data sources are Adichie's short story works *Imitation* and *The Arrangers of Marriage*, both included in the short story collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2010).

The data were collected through a three-step process. First, the researcher repeatedly reads both short stories to gain a comprehensive understanding of the narrative. Second, the researcher identified and marked dialogues, narratives, and actions relevant to the research questions. Finally, the researcher classified the data into two categories: data that showed normalization by supporting female characters, and data that showed the impact on both female protagonists.

The collected data were analyzed through the following steps: (1) organizing the data according to each research questions; (2) interpreting the data using the concept of internalized patriarchy proposed by Bartky (1990) to explain how female supporting characters normalize patriarchal expectations; (3) applying Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of patriarchal bargain to explain the motives and negotiation strategies underlying the protagonists' responses to that normalization; and (4) drawing conclusions based on the patterns identified in the analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Normalizing Patriarchy Through Female Supporting Characters

Throughout *Imitation and The Arrangers of Marriage*, patriarchal expectations are not only maintained through male authority but also reproduced by the women around the protagonists who articulate, reinforce, and normalize these expectations. This section argues that the process of normalization reflects what Bartky (1990) describes as disciplinary power that is “dispersed and anonymous... invested in everyone and in no one in particular” (pp. 79–80). Thus, patriarchy does not solely rely on direct control by male figures but rather operates through daily interactions when female supporting characters reproduce, reinforce, and sometimes challenge patriarchal expectations.

In *Imitation*, Nkem, the protagonist in the story, discovers her husband's affair after Ijemamaka, her friend, brings it up, who presents the matter in a particular way: “This is what happens when you marry a rich man” (Adichie, 2010, p. 22). Instead of criticizing Obiora's decision to have an affair, Ijemamaka presents it as something that women should expect when they marry wealthy men. Her statement shifts the responsibility away from Obiora's action and suggests that Nkem should have been prepared to face this situation because of her marital choice. This demonstrates Bartky's (1990) concept of internalized patriarchal expectations, in which women may accept and reproduce beliefs that place them in disadvantageous positions (pp. 22–23). Rather than recognizing the husband's infidelity as a failure of his own responsibility, the situation is reframed as a risk that women are expected to anticipate and accept as part of their marital position.

Ijemamaka's choice of words in another part further reinforces the same logic. She said, “I mean, Obiora is a good man, of course” (Adichie, 2010, p. 22), even while revealing

Obiora's infidelity. On the contrary, her anger is directed at the visibility of the mistress. “But to bring his girlfriend into your house? No respect. She drives his cars all over Lagos” (Adichie, 2010, p. 22). In this statement, the highlighted offense is not the affair itself, but rather the fact that the relationship is conducted openly. Obiora's moral reputation remains unquestioned, while the blame is shifted to the public behavior of the other woman. By maintaining Obiora's image as a good man despite revealing his infidelity, Ijemamaka reproduces the norm that male infidelity can be tolerated as long as it is done discreetly. The normalization was not achieved through explicit justification but through the way she selectively placed the blame.

A familiar form of normalization appears through Nkem's recollection of a Nigerian woman she once met in Delaware. Through her words, the woman presents living separately from a husband as a common experience rather than a problem that needs to be questioned. The woman's use of the collective possessive “our men like to keep us here; she had told Nkem. They visit for business and vacations, they leave us and the children with big houses and cars,” (Adichie, 2010, p. 28), through the collective expression “our men,” she presents this arrangement not as an individual marital problem but as a shared condition among women married to Nigerian men of wealth and social status.

Her strong reaction to the protagonist's simple question about returning to Nigeria, “Nkem had asked the woman if she planned to move back, and the woman turned, her eyes round, as though Nkem had just betrayed her.” (Adichie, 2010, p. 29) is unexpected considering the simplicity of the question. Her reaction shows that leaving the agreement is not considered a realistic option.

This idea is further reinforced through her justification, "But how can I live in Nigeria again? She spoke. When you've been here so long, you're not the same, you're not like the people there. How can my children blend in?" (Adichie, 2010, p. 29), which presents staying in America as the only possible choice. This demonstrates how the internalization of patriarchal assumptions operates horizontally, as women themselves may reproduce and defend the norms that constrain them rather than through direct male authority (Bartky, 1990, pp. 22–23).

A further, more direct form of normalized patriarchal norms appears through Amaechi, a housegirl who works in Nkem and her husband's household, who expresses beliefs about marriage and male behavior that reflect accepted patriarchal expectations. Once Nkem brings up her husband's mistress, Amaechi steers the conversation elsewhere entirely. Instead of questioning the husband's conduct, she questions the reliability of the information itself, "But madam—is she sure?" (Adichie, 2010, p. 34). This response avoids challenging Obiora's behavior and discourages further questioning of his actions without directly denying the affair.

When the protagonist asked what would happen after her husband was confronted, Amaechi answered without hesitation, "You will forgive him, madam. Men are like that." (Adichie, 2010, p. 34). The declarative statement "you will" indicates that forgiveness is not seen as a choice, but rather as something that must be done. Meanwhile, the phrase "men are like that" makes infidelity a characteristic considered inherent to men and difficult to change. Through this statement, Amaechi normalizes the belief that women should accept and tolerate men's actions.

Amaechi then showed a clearer form of involvement through her statement "You know oga Obiora has girlfriends. You don't ask questions. But inside, you know." (Adichie, 2010, p. 35). This statement shows that "knowing" does not mean a lack of information, but rather the failure to confront the husband's behavior. In this context, "knowing" means accepting the situation without questioning it. This can be understood through Bartky's (1990) concept of internalized disciplinary power, which explains how patriarchal expectations become internalized, leading women to regulate their own behavior according to those expectations (pp. 79–80).

Finally, when Amaechi says, "Many women would be jealous, maybe your friend Ijemamaka is jealous. Maybe she is not a true friend. There are things she should not tell you. There are things that are good if you don't know." (Adichie, 2010, p. 35), she undermines the credibility of the person bringing bad news by using stereotypes about women's jealousy. The impact is to weaken solidarity among women; warning a woman about her husband's infidelity is instead positioned as a form of jealousy, not concern. Thus, Amaechi normalizes silence and deliberate ignorance as the expected behavior of a wife.

A related pattern appears in *The Arrangers of Marriage*, where normalization begins even before the marriage, embodied in the figure of Aunty Ada, the protagonist's aunt and guardian. Aunty Ada frames her niece Chinaza's arranged marriage as a fortune that should not be rejected. "What have we not done for you? We raise you as our own and then we find you an ezigbo di! A doctor in America! It is like we won a lottery for you!" (Adichie, 2010, p. 170). The depiction of the marriage as a "lottery" cast her niece as

someone who should simply accept the marriage arranged for her rather than make her own decisions. By reminding Chinaza that “we raise you” and “we find you”, Aunt Ada expects gratitude and obedience rather than personal choice. Through this perspective, Aunt Ada normalizes the patriarchal expectations that women should accept family decisions regarding marriage.

Aunt Ada's next piece of advice further reinforces the idea that maintaining a marriage is primarily the wife's responsibility. “Don't let your husband eat out too much, “Aunt Ada had said, “or it will push him into the arms of a woman who cooks. Always guard your husband like a guinea fowl's egg.” (Adichie, 2010, p. 178). Instead of emphasizing the husband's responsibility to remain faithful, Aunt Ada teaches Chinaza that a wife must prevent infidelity through her domestic role and care for her husband. This advice shifts responsibility for the husband's actions onto the wife, suggesting that a man's unfaithfulness may happen because a woman fails to fulfill her role as a wife. This reflects the gender stereotypes discussed by Bartky (1990), in which women's identities and responsibilities are constructed through expectations attached to femininity (p. 24).

The internalization of that advice is then seen when the protagonist recalls Aunt Ada's words while cooking “I wanted to make pepper soup, too, the kind Aunt Ada said softened a man's heart” (Adichie, 2010, p. 178). Although Aunt Ada is not present, Chinaza still remembers and follows the expectation that a good wife should satisfy her husband through domestic care. This shows that Aunt Ada's expectations have become part of Chinaza's own understanding. This reflects Bartky's (1990) concept of disciplinary power, in which social expectations become internalized and influence an individual's

actions even without direct supervision (pp. 79–80).

This internalization reaches its clearest form when the protagonist considers leaving her husband, she imagines how Aunt Ada reacts if she tells her “You left your husband? Aunt Ada would shriek. Are you mad? Does one throw away a guinea fowl's egg? Do you know how many women would offer both eyes for a doctor in America? For any husband at all?” (Adichie, 2010, p. 184) Since Aunt Ada is not physically present and only appears in Chinaza's imagination, this moment shows that Aunt Ada's patriarchal expectations have become part of Chinaza's thought process. This is in line with Bartky's (1990) concept of disciplinary power, in which individuals begin to regulate themselves in accordance with social expectations without direct external control (pp. 79–80).

The Protagonists' Negotiation Within Their Marriage

This part analyzes how the protagonists in *Imitation* and *The Arrangers of Marriage*, Nkem and Chinaza, respond to that normalization, not as passive victims but as parties who actively negotiate their positions within the framework that Kandiyoti (1988) refers to as the patriarchal bargain women strategize within a set of concrete constraints (p. 274) that shape their rational choices and subjectivities.

In *Imitation*, Nkem's background as “Ada,” the first child who failed to fulfill the obligation of supporting her family economically, her parents still struggled on the parched farm, and her siblings still hawked loaves of bread at the motor park (Adichie, 2010, p. 31). Her situation changes after meeting Obiora, “the months passed and he had her siblings enrolled in school,” (Adichie, 2010, p. 32). Although Nkem's

relationship with Obiora is also based on personal affection, his ability to support her family makes the relationship a source of emotional and economic security. This situation can be understood through Kandiyoti's (1988) observation that in classic patriarchy, "women do not normally have any claim on their father's patrimony," making marriage one of the main pathways to security and mobility available (p. 279).

After getting married, Nkem continues to maintain her position within the marriage. She takes care of her hair and body as her husband likes. "She has planned to get a relaxer touch-up tomorrow, have her hair set in a flip that would rest around her neck the way Obiora likes. And she has planned, on Friday, to wax her pubic hair into a thin line, the way Obiora likes." (Adichie, 2010, p. 27). This is more than a concern about appearance. By adjusting herself according to what Obiora prefers, Nkem performs the role expected of a wife within her marriage. In return, she maintains the security and stability that the marriage provides. This aligns with Kandiyoti's (1988) observation that women in classic patriarchy may adhere to expected gender roles because these roles provide them with a form of security within an unequal system (p. 280).

The same pattern is seen in how she suppresses suspicion: "She would smell Obiora's closet, run her hand over his cologne bottles, and push suspicions from her mind" (Adichie, 2010, p. 27). This denial does not simply show that Nkem is unaware of the situation, but rather a mechanism to maintain the integrity of the bargain that has been established; questioning her husband's fidelity means risking the entire security she has built over the years.

When the possibility can no longer be denied, Nkem's possessive reaction, "Nkem

feels a fierce possessiveness now, imagining this girl locked in Obiora's arms, on their bed" (Adichie, 2010, p. 32), shows that the threat is not only emotion but also connected to the position and security she has gained through the marriage. Similarly, when she reassures herself about the housegirl's statement about her friend, Ijemamaka "I am sure she would not lie to me about something like that," Nkem says, leaning back on her chair. She feels ridiculous. To think that she is affirming that her husband's girlfriend has moved into her home." (Adichie, 2010, p. 34). Nkem's feeling of being "ridiculous" emerges because the reality she tried to ignore has become impossible to deny.

The turning point occurs when Nkem, instead of accepting her housegirl advice to remain unaware "She wants to agree with Amaechi, that there are things that are best unknown, but then she is not so sure anymore. Maybe it is not such a bad thing that Ijemamaka told me, she thinks. It no longer matters why Ijemamaka called." (Adichie, 2010, p. 35). This marks the beginning of renegotiating the marriage rather than a complete rejection of it. This is consistent with Kandiyoti's (1988) argument that patriarchal bargains are fixed but can change as women negotiate their position within existing gender relations (p. 275).

When Nkem finally speaks to her husband, "We are moving back at the end of the school year. We are moving back to live in Lagos. We are moving back." (Adichie, 2010, p. 41), she does not leave the patriarchal structure but instead attempts to change her position within it. She asks for direct oversight of her husband's household in Lagos: "I want to know when a new houseboy is hired in my house" (Adichie, 2010, p. 42). This shows her attempt to establish a greater role in decisions within the marriage. At the end of the story,

“There is nothing left to talk about, Nkem knows; it is done” (Adichie, 2010, p. 42) indicates that this decision is final within the framework of the marriage itself, not a step out of it. This is exactly the pattern described by Kandiyoti (1988) in the conclusion: women can renegotiate their part of the bargain but still operate within the logic of that bargain rather than leave it (pp. 285–286).

If Nkem’s negotiation occurs from within an ongoing marriage, what happened to Chinaza in *The Arrangers of Marriage* is different, as she enters the marriage from a more vulnerable position. While Nkem negotiates the conditions of an existing marriage, Chinaza enters a marriage whose initial terms have already been decided by others. Therefore, her negotiation begins not by changing an existing arrangement, but by responding to conditions established before she had control over them. The following section analyzes how this difference in starting points shapes distinct negotiation patterns while remaining within the same analytical framework.

Chinaza entered into her bargain before she had the opportunity to make decisions about the marriage herself. Her gratitude toward her aunt and uncle “I had thanked them both for everything — finding me a husband, taking me into their home, buying me a new pair of shoes every two years. It was the only way to avoid being called ungrateful.” (Adichie, 2010, p. 170) was not a sincere expression of thanks, but rather a payment of a debt that had been established since she was raised by that family. This reflects Kandiyoti’s (1988) explanation of classic patriarchy, where young women’s marriage may be arranged by senior members of their families, limiting their ability to determine the conditions of marriage themselves (p. 278).

After getting married, Chinaza tried to fulfill her part of the bargain through domestic work. When she suggested to her husband when they eat outside “We could go home so I can cook” (Adichie, 2010, p. 178), then on Monday she cooked coconut rice and tried to make pepper soup “the kind Auntie Ada said softened a man’s heart” (Adichie, 2010, p. 178), this was an active effort to maintain the stability of the marriage through methods that had been instilled in her since before marriage. Her effort to fulfill domestic expectations can be understood through Kandiyoti’s (1988) argument that women may follow expected gender roles because these roles can become strategies for maintaining security within patriarchal conditions (p. 280).

The crisis in this bargain arises when she finds out about her husband’s past marriage: “Ofodile, you should have let me know this before now” (Adichie, 2010, p. 183). This is not only a personal betrayal but also a disruption of the expectations that shape Chinaza’s decision to enter the marriage. She entered the marriage believing that obedience and adjustment would provide her with security and stability, but the revelation about her husband’s previous marriage challenges that expectation.

Her decision to go to her friend’s apartment. “That evening, while he showered, I put only the clothes he hadn’t bought me, two embroidered boubous and one caftan, all Auntie Ada’s cast-offs, in the plastic suitcase I had brought from Nigeria and went to Nia’s apartment.” Adichie (2010, p. 184) shows that this violation is serious enough to trigger active resistance rather than passive acceptance. However, her decision to return, “I could not leave yet” (Adichie, 2010, p. 186), should not be interpreted as a personal failure or weakness.

Molyneux (quoted in Kandiyoti, p. 282) explains this pattern by arguing that women may refrain from resistance not because of “false consciousness,” but because sudden changes could jeopardize their immediate interests or cause them to lose forms of protection without any replacement. Chinaza’s decision to postpone her departure until she had a work permit shows practical consideration of the limited options available to her rather than simple acceptance of patriarchal norms. Thus, both Nkem and Chinaza demonstrate that women’s responses to patriarchal bargains are not simply forms of acceptance or rejection. Both renegotiate from within the system, Nkem by demanding greater involvement in her husband’s household, and Chinaza by delaying her departure until she gains a more secure position. This demonstrates a more complex process than viewing women only as passive victims or complete rejecters of patriarchal structures. This aligns with Kandiyoti’s (1988) argument that patriarchal bargains affect not only the decisions women make within patriarchal structures, but also how they interpret and situate themselves within gender relations (p. 285).

CONCLUSION

This study examines the flouting of Grice’s conversational maxims in Ernest Hemingway’s novel *The Old Man and the Sea*, focusing on the dialogues between characters. The results demonstrate that the novel flouted all four conversational principles. The most common of these four principles is the principle of quantity, which is followed by the concept of relation. The principles of quality and manner are less common. These results suggest that Hemingway frequently conveys meaning

beyond the literal level of the dialogue through conversational implicatures and indirect communication.

Additionally, the analysis shows how conversational principles are flouted for a variety of narrative and communication purposes. The characters use these floutings to convey encouragement, emotional support, hope, endurance, responsibility, and acceptance of adversity. Readers are urged to infer the characters’ motivations, feelings, and interpersonal connections from the context by using these indirect phrases. As a result, flouting conversational principles helps develop the story and create conversational implicatures. Since this study is limited to an analysis of dialogue in *The Old Man and the Sea*, future research could examine other pragmatic phenomena, such as politeness strategies, speech acts, or deictics, or compare the use of maxim violations across different literary works by Ernest Hemingway or other authors. Therefore, such research yields a more comprehensive understanding of how pragmatic elements influence characterization and story development in literary discourse.

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