

**“PERSEVERE IT LIKE A MAN”: RELATIONALITY,  
RESPECTABILITY AND MASCULINITY  
IN *BEHOLD THE DREAMERS* (2016)**

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**Abstract**

African migration novels offer interesting views on gender, but scholarly analyses of these texts have not always adopted masculinity in their critical approach. Although immigrant tales are now receiving more attention, studies have overlooked the masculine as gendered, as something socially constructed and individually re-enacted. For this reason, I propose a reading of the novel *Behold the Dreamers* (2016), by Cameroonian author Imbolo Mbue, that aims to interrogate the masculine struggle of the character Jende Jonga. I use the term ‘relational masculinities’ to explore how the character’s manhood is dependent on his relations with others. I will also include the concept of ‘respectability’ studied by Dominic Pasura and Anastasia Christou (2018) to underline that Jonga’s masculinity relies heavily on his success as an African immigrant and father. This article argues that the protagonist’s performance of masculinity hinges both on his ability to exert control within his inner circle and on his efforts to cultivate a respectable image in extended social circles. However, the pressures of migration within a white neoliberal context generate profound emotional strain, and the systemic obstacles he encounters ultimately thwart these aspirations. This study exemplifies how interdisciplinary approaches—drawing from literary analysis, gender theory and postcolonial critique—can enrich our understanding of new African diasporic fiction and open new possibilities for academic research.

**Keywords:** masculinity, relationality, respectability, migration novels, African literature, Imbolo Mbue, Cameroon, United States of America.

## Resumen

Las novelas sobre la migración africana ofrecen perspectivas interesantes sobre el género, pero los enfoques críticos hacia estos textos literarios no siempre han adoptado la masculinidad como una disciplina académica digna de consideración para su análisis. Si bien es cierto que las historias sobre inmigración están recibiendo más atención actualmente, muchos estudios han pasado por alto el componente de género de lo masculino, obviando que la masculinidad es construida socialmente y representada de manera individual. Por este motivo, propongo una lectura de la novela *Behold the Dreamers* (2016), de la autora camerunesa Imbolo Mbue, que profundizará en la crisis de masculinidad vivida por el personaje de Jende Jonga. Para ello, usaré el término ‘masculinidades relacionales’ para examinar cómo su existencia como hombre depende de sus relaciones con los demás. Asimismo, incorporaré el concepto de ‘respetabilidad’, que han desarrollado los autores Dominic Pasura y Anastasia Christou (2018), para subrayar que su masculinidad se apoya en gran medida en su grado de éxito como inmigrante africano y figura paterna. Este artículo sostiene que la *performance* de la masculinidad de Jende Jonga depende tanto de su capacidad para ejercer control en su círculo íntimo como de sus esfuerzos por cultivar una imagen respetable en entornos sociales más amplios. Sin embargo, las presiones derivadas de la migración en un contexto neoliberal blanco le generan una profunda tensión emocional, y los obstáculos sistémicos con los que se encuentra terminan por socavar dichas aspiraciones. Este estudio ejemplifica cómo los enfoques interdisciplinarios, que en este caso combinan análisis literario, teoría de género y crítica poscolonial, pueden enriquecer nuestra comprensión de la nueva ficción diaspórica africana al mismo tiempo que abren nuevas posibilidades para la investigación académica.

**Palabras clave:** masculinidad, relacionalidad, respetabilidad, novelas de migración, literatura africana, Imbolo Mbue, Camerún, Estados Unidos de América.

## 1. Introduction

Contemporary Black African diasporic fiction has shown its potential for portraying global mobility and transnational subjects in appealing ways. Scholarship on these texts has successfully analysed their treatment of race, class and otherness in narratives of migration. Nonetheless, it is necessary to continue examining these novels about Africans in the diaspora, for instance, by regarding men as truly gendered subjects with a particular set of preoccupations of their own.

Although traditional migration research has dealt almost exclusively with the lives of men, it has been claimed that “it has done so by examining men as non-

gendered humans and it too has ignored the gendered dimensions of men’s experiences” (Hibbins and Pease 2009: 5). New analyses must address this issue by means of “a stronger focus on treating gender less as a variable within the causes and experiences of migration and more as a central analytical concept” (Hibbins and Pease 2009: 5), to avoid oversimplification of the masculine identity. Doing so would likely reverse the current trend of stereotyping and dehumanisation, since migrant men are often “cast in negative and homogenizing light” (Charsley and Wray 2015: 404). Literary texts can be of key importance in challenging these stereotypes, as they allow us to read these identities more deeply, following personal ups and downs, demystifying but also problematising the lives of men.

Therefore, since the situation of migrant men is deserving of more widespread concern and scholarly attention (Charsley and Wray 2015), I maintain that fictional texts can become an appropriate tool “to fully explore the experiences of men *as men*” (Hibbins and Pease 2009: 4, emphasis in original). Thus, the aim of this essay is to analyse literary representations of Black African masculinities in contexts of transnational migration. To that end, this article will approach Imbolo Mbue’s *Behold the Dreamers* (2016), winner of the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, as a narrative which not only explores the challenges of migration and the resulting reassessment of personal aspirations, but which also clearly articulates the crisis of masculinity experienced by a working-class Cameroonian immigrant father named Jende Jonga. Furthermore, the analysis engages critically with masculinity through the lens of emerging African diasporic identities, foregrounding the concepts of relationality and respectability —both of which serve as key analytical tools in unpacking gender dynamics within the text.

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## **2. Relational Masculinities: Unravelling Men’s Position from a Feminist Standpoint**

Women and men are, in general terms, not treated equally, are certainly expected to behave differently, and are privileged or oppressed in different ways. Yet gender frequently finds a way to pass as invisible when addressing ‘the masculine’. This is the result of a patriarchal strategy which Allan G. Johnson has called “male identification”, through which in patriarchal societies “core cultural ideas about what is considered good, desirable, preferable, or normal are culturally associated with how we think about men, manhood, and masculinity” (2014: 7). This illustrates how masculinity has stressed and implemented a centrality and universality of its own which have reinforced the character of masculinity as culturally superior. Nonetheless, efforts launched by feminisms to critically appraise societal norms in terms of gender have laid bare, among other things, this

male privilege of superordination. Stephen M. Whitehead has developed this idea in the following terms: “Not surprisingly it has been feminists who have alerted men to the transparent ‘obliviousness’ in their ‘gendered attitudes, prejudices and motivations’” (2001: 356). Sally Robinson, for her part, offers a much clearer and direct statement to reinforce the very same idea: “Any discussion of masculinity that begins from the premise that men enjoy unearned privileges in society or that male subjectivity emerges from a position of dominance, is a discussion of masculinity constructed by feminism” (2002: 147). The author further remarks how “[f]eminist thinking has created this masculinity that we now study, deconstruct and work to reconstruct, and *this* masculinity is anything but invisible” (Robinson 2002: 148, emphasis in original). It is clear that through feminist interrogation it becomes possible to render masculinity visible and see how it operates.

The discipline of critical men’s studies as an academic field offers helpful frameworks to approach these issues. R.W. Connell and J.W. Messerschmidt affirm that “[m]asculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals [but rather] configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action” (2005: 836), thus confirming that gender is performative and that masculinity is also constructed. As stated above, some feminist scholars consider that “[t]he oppositional use of women in the construction of masculinity is so widespread that it has become transparent” (Collins 2006: 82), a fact that brings to the forefront the utmost importance in studying masculinities critically, in problematising this transparency. For that reason, Harry Brod (2002) highlights the urgency of analysing men as gendered beings in order to expose this contradictory invisibility of the masculine. Following these ideas, defending that men have been situated as superior and dominant requires acknowledging that men exist *as men* for the rest. My claim here is that their ontological position is relational, because it does entail a hierarchy and a difference towards others, even when one is unaware of it or when their privilege seems invisible, as previously discussed.

Relationality thus emerges as a pillar for this case study due to the fact that only through reciprocity and comparison can men come to exist *as men*. If identities are discursively constructed —shaped through both language and socialisation— it must be recognised that others play a crucial role in the formation of our identities, including the process of becoming men, women or non-binary individuals. For example, theoretical models of relational ontologies “challenge claims to essence and substance emphasizing interdependence, fluidity, and emergence in the context of an ever-changing relational world” (Spyrou 2022) and can be used here to see men as dynamic entities that cannot be essentialised, not as “thing-sin-themselves or things-behind-phenomena” but as “things-in-phenomena” (Barad 2009: 140). Gender, long understood as relational (Brod 2002; Connell and Messerschmidt

2005), operates within this framework, and masculinity, in particular, emerges as a practice of power that creates a category within the gender hierarchy (Bourdieu 2001; Robinson 2002). Precisely, this interdependence renders it imperative to scrutinise traditional gender categories jointly. Brod illustrates the significance of this point clearly: “it is a theoretical mistake to think that one can analyze women’s lives and men’s lives separately [...] [since this] misses precisely the core of the reality of gender, that gender is a socially constructed category formed precisely in and through the interplay of genders” (2002: 165). Consequently, in my study of masculinity in the novel *Behold the Dreamers*, there is a pressing need for a comprehensive analysis of the power dynamics and interactions between Jende Jonga and his wife Neni.

Just as it does for these characters, the interplay of genders constructs and reinforces hierarchies that shape the lives of individuals. As Johnson puts it, both patriarchy and people’s experiences “exist *through* the other, and neither exists without the other” (2014: 41, emphasis in original). Through the repetition of performative as well as symbolic acts, the gender system is created and the attribution of gender is achieved. But since this idea of gender is a socially produced reality, it can be undone or reconfigured. For that reason, many men become concerned with preserving their status and privileges. As a result, there exists a form of “permanent tension and contention [...] imposed on every man by the duty to assert his manliness in all circumstances” (Bourdieu 2001: 50), confirming the never-ending necessity of reassuring masculinity by means of behaviour and social interaction. From a feminist perspective, we are confronted with a striking contradiction: to be a man is supposedly unmarked, but only insofar as one succeeds in embodying an idealised form of masculinity. And men’s attempts to achieve hegemonic masculinity, “the culturally exalted form of masculinity” (Carrigan et al. 1985: 592), is certainly noticeable. Being a man implies *growing into a man*, by “learning the social expectations and cultural ideas of what a man is” (Mutua 2006a: 14), and finally *becoming a man* in the eyes of others. The relevance of these theoretical premises is best illustrated through the character of Jende Jonga, who exemplifies many of the dynamics outlined here, as his sense of masculinity is learned, not natural, and above all interactive, grounded in a clearly intersubjective dimension. Another particularly important consideration is that Jende’s masculinity is shaped by context and prone to continual transformation. As Connell and Messerschmidt remind us, masculinities must be seen as cultural constructs that “can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting” (2005: 836). For the protagonist in *Behold the Dreamers*, as will be demonstrated throughout the article, the struggle to assert his masculinity involves adapting, within his migratory context, to an ideal of the respectable African man living in the West

—one who, in his new life, achieves both economic stability and a solid family structure. In her novel, Imbolo Mbue introduces a working-class father figure who sees his own sense of identity “affected by movement and migration” (Hartung et al. 2024a: 14), and since conceptions of hegemonic masculinity also depend on geographical region, historical period and its respective values and norms as well as socio-economic context (Bühning 2024: 192), it seems necessary to emphasise how Jende (re)constructs his masculine self in relation to his new surroundings. As an African migrant in the United States, he is expected to succeed outside the home while remaining a pillar within it. Shaped both by white middle-class norms and his own cultural expectations, these competing pressures reveal how fragile his family leadership is and how his vulnerability manifests in controlling behaviour.

### **3. Black African Migrant Masculinity: Navigating Intersectionality and Respectability**

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When interrogating markers of identity, it seems important to discuss extensively a variety of social phenomena and personal experiences which simultaneously affect the formation of subjectivities. Since “one cannot isolate a dimension such as gender from other dimensions such as race, class, sexual orientation, etc., without oversimplifying and perhaps even falsifying what one is attempting to analyze” (Brod 2002: 164), paying attention to intersecting forms of identity and experience is crucial when approaching a text, as this helps resist reductive interpretations. In this way, the exploration of the text proposed in this article will take into account some of the multifaceted aspects of identity, which, just like masculinity, are “socially structured and individually embodied” (Kaufman in Mutua 2006a: 16). And to that end, special attention will be given to the African migrant male character in the novel by Imbolo Mbue through an analytical framework that accounts for the fragmentation of his identity. By including intersectionality<sup>1</sup> in the analysis of masculinity, this discussion interrogates several crucial problems at once in the exploration of dynamic, complex identities with the purpose of evaluating how race, class, sexuality, geographical origin, legal status and other circumstances can engage with the formation of masculinity.

One of the first aspects that must be stressed when analysing men in African migration novels is, without a doubt, race and how race specifically affects masculinity. Racial status is not immune to the issues of relationality expressed in the previous section, given that “[t]he Negro is comparison” (Fanon 1986: 211), for “he must be black in relation to the white man” (110), which causes a process of othering that subsequently ranks Black men as inferior, as subordinate:

“The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly” (113). Put more simply, “the black is not a man” (10) and cannot enjoy many of the privileges created by patriarchal systems. Indeed, for Collins, “[t]he fact of blackness excludes black men from participating in hegemonic masculinity because, if they do so, they decenter the assumed whiteness of those installed in the center of the definition itself” (2006: 74-75). Taking this idea further, it is possible to see how Black men are often particularly disadvantaged, for instance in the fields of education, employment, health and criminal justice (see Reeves et al. 2020) and, as Collins once again contends, they “have never been allowed to achieve the ideal of the real man of white middle-class masculinity yet have been evaluated using these criteria” (2006: 74), which means that Black men must endure certain helplessness regarding their gendered position.

Similarly, Black men’s class status is usually defined and constricted by race. This means that poor Black men “have less access to economic, social, and institutional resources and opportunities and are also subject to a range of disempowering and distorted stereotypes against which they must operate” (Mutua 2006a: 16). The possibility of asserting their manhood is then very limited, exposing the unbridgeable gap between them and the ideal selves, a reminder of their ‘failed’ masculinity. Moreover, in this context of impotence where poor Black men lack agency, anger grows into a response that tolerates the use of violence as a desperate but plausible strategy to hold authority over others. bell hooks comments on the menace posed by what she has called “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” and its construction of masculinity as “life-threatening”, for it is based on “sexist notions of masculinity [which] legitimize the use of violence to maintain control” (2015: 77). This evidences a clear connection between forms of bodily harm and Black heterosexual masculinities, especially in the American collective consciousness, discursively related to instances of the endangerment of physical integrity, such as Black-on-Black homicide, domestic violence and rape.

This degradation is more pronounced for poor Black men who have migrated from Africa, as their racialisation intersects with their construction as transnational, dehumanised others. Broadly speaking, recent migrants from Africa are often seen in the West as abject inasmuch as they do not “respect borders, positions, rules” thus “disturbing identity, system, order” (Kristeva 1982: 4).<sup>2</sup> These Africans in diaspora thus become menacing, destabilising forces that, as immigrants, are “conceived as a disruption, an interruption to the idea of [...] a particular nation” (Fortier 2012: 31-32). For this reason, through xenophobia and racism, the discourses around this phenomenon of global mobility portray immigrants as troublesome and even dangerous, complicating their Blackness by means of renewed forms of national and cultural ‘othering’.

Not only that, Black migrant masculinity is also liminal insofar as it must be renegotiated in relation to the new sociocultural context present in the Western globalised countries where they settle. That is why Dominic Pasura and Anastasia Christou, in their article “Theorizing Black (African) Transnational Masculinities”, state that “[t]he premigration gendered and social hierarchies are being challenged and contested in the hostland, as diasporic conditions force the majority of African men to rethink their masculine identities within diaspora households and society” (2018: 530). As part of a “global gender order” in which gender practices can be “specific or local, but carry the impress of the broader forces that make a global society” (Connell 2009: 128), different approaches to masculinity interact, blend and clash. This conceptual re-orientation requires recognising that African masculinities do not escape from merging local and global gender discourses and that only through the examination of how migrants can navigate both dominant discourses and their own cultural narratives can the intersectional tensions of Black men’s experiences in diaspora be fully understood.

African masculinities, as diverse as they may be, are all “constructed under the influence of a patriarchal ideology that places men above women” (Pasura and Christou 2018: 527), and although it may be true that “definitions of African masculinities are not uniform and monolithic, not generalizable to all men in Africa” (Morrell and Ouzgane 2005: 8), it is possible to see them following well-extended practices of heterosexual masculinity. For example, most contemporary notions of the ideal masculinity in Sub-Saharan Africa are based on achieving a level of financial independence, employment or income that allow men to start a family (Pasura and Christou 2018: 527). In the case of male economic migrants more specifically, their status as head of the family is validated by their earning potential and ability to retain what Pasura and Christou call “respectability”. This idea of respectability, they argue, “refers to migrant men’s desires and efforts to claim positive recognition in contexts structured by ‘otherness’ and a neoliberal economy” (523). The most relevant aspect of this conceptualisation is that it aligns with the values of neoliberal societies and pushes men to adopt certain attitudes, such as being a provider for one’s family and the accumulation of material possessions (523), reinforcing a model for African economic migrants which is analogous (to a certain extent) to the ideal middle-class white man of the global gender order. In brief, despite being “on the periphery of globalisation, Africans do not live in isolation and are influenced by global trends and cultural practices” (Mungai and Pease 2009: 100), thus revealing that the paradigm for men in diaspora revolves around their transnational experience at the same time that it aligns with a global conventional wisdom of masculinities.

However, there is a clearly moralistic component, perhaps more common to Black African diasporic communities than to other groups, that shapes the understanding

of respectable men as decent, with an emphasis on safeguarding propriety. Thus, respectability for African men “is not simply a measure of one’s economic and/or social capital but also of morality and proper norms of gendered behavior” (Pasura and Christou 2018: 532), and it becomes, in this way, something inherent to African traditional core values that has to be “appropriated, negotiated, and performed” (Pasura and Christou 2018: 523) in the diaspora space. Not only does it shape their everyday individual and communal transnational lives; it also serves as the distinctive feature of their assimilation into appropriate models of diasporic masculinities.

Consequently, a central aspect of the reconfiguration of their masculinity lies in securing recognition and positive validation for their performance across various domains of life —such as fatherhood, household leadership, education, employment, property ownership as well as citizenship or permanent residence in a Western country. This pursuit of respectability is linked with intersectionality and needs to be considered when exploring how men navigate and redefine their gender roles within transnational settings.

#### **4. Re-gendering African Migration Novels: An Exploration of Masculinities in *Behold the Dreamers* (2016)**

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*Behold the Dreamers* (2016) tells a story of intertwined lives in the 2008 financial crisis in New York, where Cameroonian immigrants Jende and Neni Jonga start working for the wealthy Edwards family. The African couple and their son, Liomi, currently residing in Harlem, have only recently reunited in the United States, where Jende has worked three jobs and saved for two years until he could afford their visas and plane tickets. Newly hired as a chauffeur for Clark Edwards, an investment banker at Lehman Brothers, Jende feels he is finally providing for his family, and he even manages to get Neni hired by Cindy Edwards for housekeeping and childcare over the summer. The family believe they are now in a better position to pursue job stability, higher education and financial security — starting anew in the land of opportunity— but their dreams do not last for long. Like other Afropolitan<sup>3</sup> literary explorations, Imbolo Mbue’s novel addresses the hardships and precariousness of immigration and contributes to dismantling, to a certain extent, the rhetoric of the American Dream. Such an objective is achieved not only by revealing the class divides, tough migration policies and gendered vulnerabilities that affect the characters personally, but also by pointing towards a greater scheme of Black empowerment that ended up failing, disproportionately emphasised during Barack Obama’s presidency.

The novel, through a personified setting of neoliberalism (Braga 2020: 49), offers a critique of idealised contemporary society attuned to Obama’s resurrection of

the American Dream (Masterson 2020: 3). On the one hand, the story shows the human component of Black African migrant families, “unable to achieve upward social mobility in the United States” (Wacker 2021: 237) but who naïvely “rejoice in the consumerism of America” (Onuzo 2017). On the other hand, it offers a critical perspective on white educated upper-class social circles who, despite running a “predatory capitalist world” (Nfah-Abbenyi 2024: 368), do not succeed in living “a contented life” (Onuzo 2017). In recent years, Mbue’s text has received critical attention for challenging discourses of neoliberalism and exposing the chimeras that shape some migrants’ hopes about life abroad (Braga 2020; Masterson 2020; Toohey 2020; Wacker 2021) as well as for its discussion of precarious diasporic mobilities (Sousa 2020; Odey 2022; Ngeh and Nalova 2023). However, I contend that most of them have not focused enough on its representation of gender identities and roles. Some have included in their analysis a deep insight into the interlocking oppressions of gender, class and race only for the character of Neni (such as Irele 2021; Costantini 2024), but few have made comments pointing towards Jende’s gendered behaviour as an accompaniment to the discussion of other topics (Suárez-Rodríguez 2023; Nfah-Abbenyi 2024). Since previous studies have failed to comprehensively address the issue of masculinity and most have certainly not taken into account the experiences lived by Jende in relation to this academic discipline, the aim of this section is then to inspect this character using the proposed theoretical framework of relational masculinities and the notion of respectability.

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My view is that Jende’s gendered position needs to be assessed as relational and requires an analysis of how his subjectivity depends on the power relations he establishes with others. For instance, in the opening pages of the novel, Jende “feels complete as he is on the verge of becoming a better man” (Ngeh and Nalova 2023: 130), since his hard work in the United States as a taxi driver in the Bronx and dishwasher in a Manhattan restaurant has finally allowed him to pay the bride-price for Neni. Jende is at last showing Neni the respect she is due and finally receives her family’s permission to marry her: “I had to show I am a real man, sir. Not take her for free as if she is... as if she is something I picked on the street” (Mbue 2016: 43). This ritualistic ceremony of the traditional Cameroonian arrangements before marriage resonates with “the tendency of African societies to commodify women as ‘fetish-objects’ exchanged between men to strengthen homosocial bonds” (Irigaray in Costantini 2024: 140), forcing Jende to perform a stereotypical version of masculinity that is created in relation to his wife, his wife’s family and the rest of their community. By proving his economic might and attention to custom, Jende moves towards respectability for the first time in his life.

It is crucial for my analysis to view as well his involvement in his wife’s life, both before and during the migratory process, as the new diasporic space that

they inhabit allows for a reconfiguration of gender practices. In some measure, this entails a questioning of previous hierarchies, just like Winston, his cousin, underscores when speaking of the different marital dynamics in America: “The kinds of marriage people have in this country, Bo, very strange. It’s not like back home where a man can do as he sees fit and a woman follows him. Over here it’s reversed. Women tell their men what they want and the men do it, because they say happy wife, happy life. This society is funny” (Mbue 2016: 199). Throughout the novel, Neni seems to reject that traditional conception imposed on African wives. She is presented as somebody resourceful enough to overcome all kinds of adversities on her own and determined to obtain a certain degree of agency, fighting against her secondary role in their marriage. Indeed, as Augusta Atinuke Irele argues, “Neni occupies a particularly gendered vulnerable position” (2021: 15) as a character who “finds herself in a migrant purgatory, trapped between the goals she longs to realize and the baggage of the society she left behind” (18). When the Jongas receive the news that Jende’s asylum application has not been approved, she feels like a puppet, as if her whole life had always been shaped by others’ decisions: “This helplessness crushed her, the fact that she had traveled to America only to be reminded of how powerless she was, how unfair life could be” (Mbue 2016: 63). She was about to be drawn into her husband’s deportation process, thereby being expected to leave the country as well, without the opportunity to respond on her own terms, without choosing what she thinks would be best for her.

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If her life is to be analysed closely, it is possible to reach the conclusion that, as a result of patriarchal dynamics, she is continuously subjugated to men: first to her father and now to her husband. She has even been read as “a woman dependent on a man who is himself financially disempowered” (Nkealah 2020: 204), emphasising not only their lack of agency as poor immigrants but also how power relations work within their marriage. Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi makes a very interesting remark related to this when she notes that “Jende takes advantage of Neni’s pregnancy to forbid his wife from enrolling in spring and summer courses” (2024: 369) because he wants her to stay in the home, even though her status as a registered student protects her from deportation: “‘I want my wife to stay at home with my new child for some time’ [...] there was nothing she could do. He had brought her to America. He paid her tuition. He was her protector and advocate. He made decisions for the family” (Mbue 2016: 171-172). Despite the fact that Jende now attends to everything, and treats her “like a queen”, Neni has no choice but to “defer to his wisdom” and accept “the privilege of being married to an overly protective man” (Mbue 2016: 173). As the story unfolds and the couple start realising their limitations in the host country, their attitudes and views begin to diverge more and more. Cláudio Braga comments how “Neni as a

character stands in opposition to Jende, which highlights the immigrant dilemma of believing or not believing in the dream, giving up or trying, and testing the limits of self-sacrifice and the meaning of perseverance” (2020: 47). This happens because Neni holds onto the dream, even considering the possibility of divorce and sham marriage, as the United States represents for her “a utopic space in which she can enjoy experiences that are inconceivable in Cameroon” (Irele 2021: 15): “Until the day she left the country, she was going to keep believing that she and her family had a chance” (Mbue 2016: 68). Moreover, Neni reproaches Jende for caring more about appearances than about looking for actual solutions to their problems: “I don’t think you will fight till the end for us to remain here. I think when the time comes, you’ll give up, because you care too much about your pride. But I’ll do whatever I need to do for us to stay in America!” (230). Once it is revealed that she has discussed their immigration woes with a female pastor who has offered help, Jende loses his temper and attacks his wife verbally for being imprudent: “The man who had promised to always take care of her was standing above her vomiting a parade of insults, spewing out venom she never thought he had inside him. For the first time in a long love affair, she was afraid he would beat her. She was almost certain he would beat her” (237).

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Jende’s resentment is born out of his wife’s flouting of gender roles, which reminds him of his failure as a husband and father in their new context. Jende eventually resorts to physical violence to correct her alleged stubbornness and improper behaviour when she keeps proposing alternative solutions; but she does not give in easily, as the next excerpt portrays: “She didn’t see the slap coming [...] ‘Did you just hit me?’ [...] ‘Then hit me again! [...] Go ahead and hit me, Jende... I’m begging you, hit me again!’ [...] ‘Oh, no, please hit me’, she said. ‘Raise your hand and hit me again! America has beaten you and you don’t know what to do and now you think hitting me will make it better. Please go ahead and hit —’ So he did” (Mbue 2016: 333-334). Mbue here, by means of her character’s words, combines on a symbolic level the systemic violence Jende has been confronting with an incident of gender-based violence. Nonetheless, my intention is not to justify this behaviour by focusing on the discrimination and suffering he is living. Many previous studies have avoided reading into the issue of gender-based violence in the novel, since only Toohey (2020) makes a reference to it, and although she does not rationalise or excuse his behaviour, she does place this incident within other forms of violence and pain. Although this is true, I argue that it is important not to contextualise his abusive character only as part of a spiral of multiform violence; rather, it should be viewed as a mechanism deliberately used in the construction of traditional masculinity within their diasporic household and as a tool used for the correction of gender transgressions.

Beyond the domestic sphere, Jende also strives to claim a dignified position and to affirm his value as a man, despite the constraints of his social, racial and educational status. Mbue portrays him as deeply involved in the Edwards family’s private lives, seeking to position himself as a male peer and even a friend to the men and boys of the household. When Jende learns of Clark Edwards’s encounters with prostitutes, he pretends not to be fully aware of what is happening and his silence is interpreted as connivance: “Jende drove him wherever he needed to be next and asked no questions [...] and agreed with whatever the boss said, as if to say, it’s okay, sir, it’s perfectly all right, sir, what you’re doing. And he could tell Clark felt that way around him; that Clark trusted him and knew that no one would ever know” (Mbue 2016: 187). Although it seems that he is accommodating to the circumstances willingly, Jende actually represents weakness and subjection, being more of a servant than an ally of what Clark Edwards stands for: transnational business masculinity.<sup>4</sup> Contrary to what Neni will do with Cindy later on in the novel, he respects the confidentiality agreement he has signed and is incapable of taking advantage of his role of secret-keeper. In point of fact, far from confronting his boss, he lies by omission to Mrs. Edwards to cover up for Mr. Edwards and eventually agrees to deceive her by falsifying his account of Mr. Edwards’s daily activities. Nfah-Abbenyi has interpreted his loyalty as a form of aligning with “manhood and (toxic) masculinity” (2024: 371) through which Jende conducts “a defence of power and manhood that runs counter to his (financial) interests and wellbeing” (372), playing the role of an obedient and cowardly man unable to defy stronger masculine figures. Nevertheless, on other occasions Jende proves to be capable of affection and tenderness toward Mr. Edwards’s sons, since he listens to their problems and gives them advice and emotional support. Their special connection arguably “challenge[s] the rigidity of social hierarchies revealing the existence of marginal spaces of interethnic and cross-class encounter” (Costantini 2024: 137, n. 5).

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Furthermore, in his struggle to conform to an ideal of respectability —the only model of true success for a Black African man in the diaspora— Jende Jonga embodies the liminal position of the economic migrant who is “a small man at work” but “a big man at home” (Onuzo 2017). First, he acknowledges the model of respectability on display in neoliberal Western societies when discussing his main motivations for migrating with his boss: “I stay in my country, I would have become nothing. I would have remained nothing. My son will grow up and be poor like me, just like I was poor like my father. But in America, sir? I can become something. I can even become a respectable man. My son can become a respectable man” (Mbue 2016: 39). His interest in patrilineal genealogy shows his conception of identity in a male-oriented world endowed with a sense of respect for vicarious success, where fathers can have the chance to redeem themselves if

they see their life expectations met by their sons. Moreover, as stated above, he also sees his family as the perfect environment for claiming back control. As Nfah-Abbenyi notes, “Clark dominates and governs his daily life and he finds ways to dominate Neni’s and Liomi’s” (2024: 370), thus replicating forms of subjugation and control that he is encountering in his job. Later in the novel, once Jende gets used to the corporate lifestyle, he tries to make use of small strategies that could help him achieve a temporary sense of respectability in other public spheres. For instance, he sees masculine business attire as a tool to obtain fleeting respectability and reaffirm his position: “Owning the briefcase and carrying it every day to work—that was one of his greatest career prides. It made him feel accomplished, like he was a sort of big man himself, not just a little man driving a big man around” (Mbue 2016: 248). This is especially relevant when performing masculinity in front of other men: “With his own briefcase, he’d become a white-collar professional, too [...]. On the downtown subway, dressed in his suit and clip-on tie, he held it firmly, looking no different from the accountants and engineers and financial advisors sitting next to him” (248-249). This moment of self-regard actually precedes the moment in which he is dismissed as an employee for the Edwardses. Such antithetical events put together in the narrative line enable an understanding of the inefficacy of pretence in hiding his failure to fit the ideal of respectable men. Therefore, his ability to take care of his family is clearly put in jeopardy once more. At this point, Jende must make certain decisions that will affect the future of his family: he could either remain in the country illegally, perhaps becoming a burden for them, or take his family back home. Other African men around him offer him different advice regarding this issue. From one perspective, Jende is reminded by his immigration lawyer Bubakar, “a fast-talking Nigerian” (19), that despite all hardships he must “[p]ersevere it like a man” (321). This character not only “contributes to maintaining Jende’s belief in the American Dream” (Suárez-Rodríguez 2023: 88), but also reenacts the discursive style of Black African transnational masculinities in terms of work ethic and persistence. Winston, in turn, is aware of the barriers Jende would have to face as an uneducated Black African man if he decides to stay in the country. Jende’s cousin believes that Jende “might never be able to make enough money to afford to live the way he’d like to live [...] to own a home or pay for his wife and children to go to college [...] to have a really good sleep at night” (Mbue 2016: 322), even if he eventually were to get his papers, pointing towards the impossibility for Jende to achieve the dream shared by so many immigrants.

His American Dream is doomed from the beginning, as far as the events in the novel are concerned. From the opening chapter, readers learn that Black African migrants’ opportunities are limited, even if the Jongas seem to overlook this, which raises doubt as to whether the family will succeed. In fact, halfway through

the plot, it becomes evident that Jende “has already endured enough physical and emotional suffering and made up his mind to return home rather than engage in an endless string of uncertain legal appeals” (Toohey 2020: 396). He decides to place all his ambition in the new projects that lie ahead of them back in Limbe: “he would be returning home with close to 10 million CFA francs, enough to restart their life in a beautiful rental with a garage for his car and a maid so his wife could feel like a queen. He would have enough to start a business [...] and send Liomi to [...] boarding school” (Mbue 2016: 352). But in so doing Jende fails to realise that, for the couple, “a return to their homeland means different things” (Toohey 2020: 398), since he only sees another chance at becoming a respectable head of the family and dismisses Neni’s torment over abandoning the many professional and personal paths that could have been opened for her in the United States. All in all, Jende opts to return, in a desperate attempt to regain a position of leadership that would allow him to provide for his family while impressing others in his hometown. This decision manifests a complex, sometimes contradictory, identity as a man, someone who adapts his masculinity to the different situations and people around him.

## **5. Conclusion**

This article has exposed the construction of masculine identity in the character Jende Jonga in Imbolo Mbue’s *Behold the Dreamers* by means of both relationality and respectability. The study of this novel through the lens of masculinity has stressed the importance of depicting gender in relational terms, as something performed in almost every action, dependent on social context and embedded in intersubjectivity. Similarly, it has been discussed how respectability represents one of the foundations of Black African migrant manhood, since gender norms for African diasporic communities rely on profound veneration for masculine figures and conform in some degree to a model of masculinity only achieved through perseverance and enormous effort.

The analysis proposed in this paper takes into account not only that Jende’s sense of masculinity has been overlooked by previous discussions of the novel, but also that his gendered position is renegotiated within the text by the migratory process. Jende is in a constant battle to earn recognition both in the US and Cameroon and, as the novel progresses, he experiences the consequences of the emotional and psychological exhaustion caused by his failed assimilation. His shame and disillusionment are overshadowed by his wife’s aspirations, led by her outstanding energy, which comes to occupy a central position within the household. Jende needs to fulfil his role of breadwinner for his family in order to validate himself as

a true man, using violence if needed to overcome insubordination or resistance to his power. Nonetheless, this character is far from powerful, as he is truly vulnerable, with his own autonomy significantly limited by socio-economic constraints, yielding to the authority of his employer and succumbing symbolically to white neoliberal upper-class manhood.

The present study underscores the need to reassess gender narratives within migrant literature, to interrogate the constructions, performances and tensions of masculinity in diasporic contexts. It also expands the scope of research on African diasporic fiction by encouraging the integration of theoretical insights from critical men's studies. This interdisciplinary approach not only enriches the literary analysis but also enables a more nuanced understanding of gender dynamics, particularly those shaping male subjectivities within transnational and postcolonial contexts, thereby opening a productive line of investigation for future scholarly work.

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## Notes

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1. Intersectionality is conceived here as “a methodology that will ultimately disrupt the tendencies to see race and gender [together with other markers of identity] as exclusive or separable” (Crenshaw 1991: 1244, n. 9).

2. The characters of Neni and Jende Jonga have been read as “abject cosmopolitans”, belonging to a world of exclusion, referred to as *deportspora* (Nyers in Suárez-Rodríguez 2023: 182).

3. This term refers to being African and cosmopolitan at the same time. It describes a modern, globally connected African identity that blends African cultural roots with world-spanning social practices and transnational lifestyles. The coinage of the word is associated, not without controversy, to both Achille Mbembe and Taiye Selasi.

4. For a thorough discussion of the concept, see Connell (1998) and (2005).

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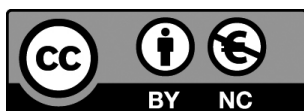
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