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Gendered Power Dynamics in *What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky*: A Corpus-Based Verb Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The primary focus of this study is to investigate the gender roles present in Lesley Nneka Arimah's (2017) collection of short stories titled as *What it Means When a Man Falls from the Sky*, analytically focusing on the use of mental and material verbs. Generally, it is acknowledged by the scholarship that it is society that moulds and upholds the power structures associated with gender roles, using Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) combined with Corpus Tools, particularly AntConc (2019). The study analyses how linguistic choices either preserve or challenge gender ideology. Furthermore, the analyses bring to light how the material verbs linked with male characters often assert dominance and control, while the mental verbs are frequently linked with female characters, portraying them as emotional and obedient beings. These language patterns not only repeat traditional gender bias but also show how society's norms get quietly blended into stories. In the end, these results help us understand how language, power, and gender connect in today's narratives, and how they give a powerful lens to look at how literature either keeps gender roles going or pushes back against them.

1. Introduction

Gendered power dynamics refer to the customs through which society structures men and women in different positions in terms of power, authority, and agency, often resulting in inequalities that can confine or empower individuals based on their gender. As placed by Jabiri (2017) in his article, the characterization of the norms through which the ideology construction of images and acts during and after revolutions, creates the acute form of the gender construction with all the factor: the externalization and subjugation of women, and objectification of their revolutionary acts as modes of alienation...the employing of alienation ways are essential for creating conditions that allow for the reconfiguration of power dynamics. This stance suggests that the compass of politics not only connects to political activism, but it is also an arena to produce proper regulation of gendered acquaintance.

Contributions:

^{1*} Corresponding author: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data Curation, Writing – Review.

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Numerous theories interpret gender identity as a result of social interaction and the social environment. For example, according to Davis, S. N., & Greenstein, T. N. (2020) gender construction of men is mainly based on their social power depictions, where they have to be portrayed as brave, wealthy and intellectually superior. They highlight how power structures are unevenly dictated to the subjects and how roles are defined and associated with specific genders, making one more empowered and the other more submissive to them. Also, the differences across gender attitudes often dictate power dynamics, which can also be observed through contemporary narratives. Moreover, in chapter 9 of this book, it is stated that every individual learns and internalises the power structure of their own family and carries the traditions in all relations. Suggesting that the process of gender dynamics not only stops there and then but rather is internalized through the discursive practices, which may be taking place through the linguistic patterns in contemporary literature.

Moreover, Martin, M., in *The Modern Language Journal*, explains the significance of word collocations emphasizing the idea that the linguistic choices made in a narrative affect the overall theme or discourse being delivered to the world at large. He adds that each meeting with a word is in a meaningful context; succeeding end-counters strengthens the social command, and it makes our work so special, so it makes our language choice so specific and narrows down its range of operations. We slowly develop an understanding of what kinds of sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds tend to be habitual. (Martin, 1984). Through different linguistic choices, people are given a blueprint of gender roles in society, which subsequently reinforces them in the contemporary world.

Furthermore, tools like corpus linguistics have made it easier for the researcher to examine certain discursive practices through specific linguistic patterns. In this regard, researchers have been adding that CDA and corpus linguistics combine for the purpose of exploring different ideologies with opposite stances and have been realised at the collocation level across contrasting discourses (Salama 2011, Batool et al., 2019). For analysing a narrative, through CDA, collocation patterns can be driven and analyzed for the identification of recurrent themes. Baker (2006) further sheds light on the importance of technological use, which modern-day researchers can make using a corpus, along with any theory application, combining corpus methods and CDA has provided new horizons to the critical study of collocational lines at methodological and theoretical levels. Firstly, collocation relations can contribute to the recontextualization of a single discourse topic across conflicting texts. Secondly, statistically noteworthy collocations can exactly reveal contrasting discursive voices or textual manners towards similar or the same topics. Lastly, an ever-growing need for CDA has driven people to build qualitatively on more dependable quantified textual structures, especially when it comes to collocations. The intention of this research centers around the observation of collocations of active and passive verbs associated with male and female characters in the novel under study to reflect gender-based power dynamics. Therefore, it can be righteously said that Salama's stance has set the grounds for this research.

Importantly, this study aims to investigate the linguistic choices in the book, especially in terms of how traditional gender roles are embedded in everyday language. Focusing on the usage of mental and material verbs in relation to gender, the research seeks to understand how language structures or constructs power relations, gender dynamics, and agency. In doing so, the research aims to fill a gap in existing literature by focusing only on the aforementioned verb types in the selected text. In addition, the study offers a significant insight into how discourse shapes or influences society, especially in the case of gendered power dynamics. Hence, this study is of importance for both gender and linguistics studies.

1.1 Problem Statement

Literature often portrays certain ideologies through language, and short stories are not an exception. Observing the repetitive linguistic patterns, such as the use of mental and material verbs, this research aims to investigate the impact of verbs on readers' perception and internalization of gender norms when connected with masculine or feminine characters. Interestingly, *What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky* (2017) provides a reliable textual data to analyze and uncover the subtle ways in which language operates as a means of establishing power dynamics and research the impact of such obscure language practices on human perception of gender roles and agency.

1.2 Research Questions

The research aims to answer the following questions.

- How are mental and material verbs saturated across *What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky* in terms of male and female characters, and what meaning do these patterns suggest about the characters' agency and power?
- In what ways do these linguistic patterns preserve, challenge or complicate the traditional patriarchal assumptions about gender roles both within the story and the reality it reflects?

2. Literature Review

Gender has a crucial influence on how humans lead their lives, as is illustrated by Aikhenvald, A. Y. in *Anthropological Linguistics*, as the multifaceted notion of gender pervades every aspect of life and of living. The way gender is articulated shapes the world of individuals and of the societies they live in. Some linguistic classes show strong associations with social hierarchies, cultural values, and their conceptualization (perhaps more so than other categories). Moreover, Aikhenvald (2012) gives a statement which aligns with the context of this research, i.e. the use of language plays a crucial role in the way gender-based power dynamics are structured in society. He infers that S-gender is shown in the conduct in which people use language to represent gender roles. Different semantic limitations play numerous roles in mirroring the S-gender stereotypes.

According to Desai (2006), women are more loving, sensitive, nurturing, anxious, and emotionally expressive, even in situations when women are portrayed as more ambitious, less passive, and career-focused; they are still depicted as being more interested in domestic life than boys are (Kimmel, 2011). This suggests that even when both men and women work, women are still expected to do the traditional household duties. According to Stuhler (2024), most of the female characters in the texts under study are portrayed as ones who never think, act, initiate, confront, or question. While men are involved in problem-solving and adventure, women are typically underrepresented in illustrations, titles, and major and supporting roles. When they do appear, they play minor and secondary roles and are only involved in loving, observing, or helping (Lee & Chin, 2019). Motherhood, which is portrayed as a full-time, lifetime employment, is the only occupation offered to women (Kimmel, 2011). Similarly, Kramer (2001) argues that men are portrayed as less affectionate, passive, or emotional, even when they are given feminine characteristics the same number of times as women.

The insight taken from this literature review is about language and power dynamics in the book *Language and Power* by Norman Fairclough (2014). In this new edition, Fairclough brings forward an updated debate about the relationship of language and power; he mentions how ideologies are embedded in features of discourse, which are taken for granted as matters of common sense. In the same chapter, he says that the understanding of agreements habitually projected upon in discourse symbolize ideological assumptions which tend to be taken as simply 'common sense', and which add to existing and nourishing power relations (Fairclough, 2014). His contribution through these statements is that he highlights how ideologies are shaped and certain beliefs are made up, which are then considered normal. As Zehra et al. (2017) state that people unknowingly fall subject to hidden power, the same power in the form of biased structures is indirectly dictating and identifying their common sense. Likewise, Van Dijk (1998) argues that ideology shapes how groups think, speak, and interpret events, influencing the representation of people and power in discourse. Supporting the problem statement of this research, Fairclough sets grounds for the impact of narratives in adding to the dictated power relations, be it gender roles or any other social construct, which is internalised through the discourses.

While prior studies, such as those by Aikhenvald (2012), Fairclough (2014), and Stuhler (2024), provide empirical and theoretical frameworks for understanding the connection of power, language and gender, they lack a focused exploration of the forms of material and mental verbs in contemporary narratives. The existing literature mostly observes larger overarching discourse strategies or thematic portrayals, without probing into the explicit linguistic choices, such as verb associations, which contribute to gendered power dynamics. Moreover, works like Salama's (2011) highlight the value of corpus tools for the detection of discursive ideologies but do not extend this approach to analyze gendered verb patterns in literary texts. This research addresses these gaps by investigating the designs of mental and material verbs linked with male and female characters in *What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky*.

3. Methodology

In order to tackle this research, the use of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) along with corpus linguistics was made to ensure a systemic analysis of the text. The corpus approach involves two important functions (Stubbs, 2001). First, the concordance lines of mental and material verbs and the context they were used. Next, collocates help to quantify the recurrence of specific verbs with the characters they frequently appear with. This technique highlighted the frequency of verbs, their association with characters and the context they frequently appear together. According to Abbas et al. (2024), this kind of study helps to reveal the underlying intentions inside social structure; therefore, the verbs and their link with either male or female characters reveal the structures of agency, power, emotion, and action. Moving on, the keyword analysis conducted using AntConc confirmed that the author's patterns of gendering resonate with the overall modern literature trends, which uphold the prevalence of control and controlled groups.

Lazar's FCDA (2005) helps us to qualitatively decode the statistical data unearthed by AntConc. It helps us understand how

the language aids patriarchal ideas to penetrate everyday life. Verbs are significant elements of the language because they show who is doing what; therefore, the unequal distribution of power can be studied through them. Thus, the analysis is not only statistical but also has a clear theoretical grounding. The text, *What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky* was selected based on its portrayal of gender and social structures, and it is modern. The corpus was built to be representative, meaning that its size must be ‘wide enough’ and ‘deep enough’. The whole text was included, and each short story was made into a new file that can be read by the software and managed in a systematic way.

The text was turned into machine-readable files for analysis. Next, through the in-depth study of sentences, verbs were identified, and their context was explored. This exploration of the context and identification of verbs was done through word lists and concordance lines, which made the data more nuanced for studying the immediate environment of each verb. Lastly, the collocates helped in identifying the recurring patterns of verbs, i.e linking the verbs with certain situations and characters. All in all, these patterns show how language choices quietly operate within a text to reinforce gender-based power dynamics.

4. Findings and Discussion

To begin with, the use of verbs in stories helps identify how gender and power are situated. To make analysis profound, two categories of verbs were analyzed: Material verbs and Mental Verbs. First, *Material verbs* are used to demonstrate any sort of physical action, for instance, “write”, “shout” or “say”. As an example from the text explains, “Nneoma jumped to her feet, her heart pounding,” the word *jumped* gives Nneoma a sense of action and control. However, the following phrase: “her heart pounding” adds emotion and nervousness, which negates the previous association with power. This juxtaposition indicates how the author has frequently presented female characters as action-doers but immediately burdens them with sensitivity in the same breath.

Contrary to material verbs, *Mental Verbs* are used to portray emotions, feelings and thoughts. For example, “feel”, “hear”, “wish”, or “hope”, etc. These verbs were analysed individually, and the context they appear illustrates how much influence they carry: high, medium, or low. This categorisation highlighted how verb choices distinguish the distribution of power between male and female characters.

Figure 1

Concordance Lines of Material Verb: Jumped

a whine blooming in his throat. The front door slammed and we both	jumped.	I soothed him before whimper turned to full cry. That’s how
coverage as the day before, except now the fallen man’s widow had	jumped	into the fray, calling for a full audit of the Center’s
the door, listening, but what noise does hair make? When the hair child	jumped	onto Ogechi’s head she shrieked and shook herself but it gripped
It had seemed like the start of a new era. Now the newscast	jumped	to the Mathematicians who’d discovered the equation for flight. They were
familiar sound of my mother’s car horn honked at the gate. I	jumped	up and scrambled to put the magazines away. Mayowa got up unhurriedly,

This verb demonstrates mobility and physical action. When it is linked with male characters, it preserves the traditional masculine identity through significant action. Looking at the first instance, immediately after the material verb “jumped”, the pronoun I is used. Here, “I” is used for the female protagonist of the story, who is a mathematician and is working to extract grief from people’s lives using advanced calculations. Although jump shows physical agency and action, the context appears in the concordance lines reveals the hasty nature of women projected through the text.

Figure 2

Concordance Lines of Material Verb: called

her so. Nneoma had called her sanctimonious, and Kioni had	called	her a spoiled rich girl who thought her pain
quickly led to her contemplating taking her own life. She	called	her mother, hoping to be talked out of it,
a dearest friend. Her name was eventually forgotten. Soon all	called	her She Who Betrayed River, a name that over
aunt was deferential, calling the woman “ma,” while the woman	called	her Ugo and answered her chattiness with as few
re not fat, Ijeoma would say, just grief-fed. She	called	the girls and they came running, a race Louisa
far as it would go. When lunch was ready she	called	the girls in, and continued their lessons after. More
reason, was there no matching tear on his trouser. Someone	called	the police despite Brother Benni’s claim that the
though it would never be the same between them, she	called	her father every other Sunday. She directed Amadi to
for such a thing, and told her so. Nneoma had	called	her sanctimonious, and Kioni had called her a spoiled
went to the pastor, who went to Brother Benni, who	called	me a liar. That was the beginning of the
but unsure of the second. That’s why she’d	called	me onto the veranda to explain myself. I wanted
wife and mother had gone to the States, the family	called	and spoke to each other several times a day.
that involved her Port Harcourt cousin calling another cousin who	called	another and so on and so forth, until the
Glen, who was actually Greg, who was also Peter, who	called	every day at least four or five times and
wound. Several someones called on the name of Jesus. Someone	called	for a car so they could take him to
his mother’s house. But back to Glorybetogod, whom everyone	called	Glory except for her grandfather, who called her “that
Glorybetogod, whom everyone called Glory except for her grandfather, who	called	her “that girl” the first time he saw her.”

The verb “called” reflects command and summoning; here, the concordances show that when paired with male characters, it strengthens dominance and control; on the other hand, when used with female characters, it signals emotional labour or interpersonal dependency, depending on the context. Reading through these examples, it can be noted that the most frequently appearing pronoun after “called” is “her” This suggests that Lesley Nneka Arimah, in her book *What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky* has upheld patriarchal mindsets and gender-based power structures which are prevalent in society.

Figure 3
Concordance Lines of Material Verb: discovered

long. They believed that it was only a matter of time before someone	discovered	the formula to create life, rather than to just manipulate it. But
of a new era. Now the newscast jumped to the Mathematicians who'd	discovered	the equation for flight. They were being ambushed by gleeful reporters at
well. Into the vacuum stepped Francisco Furcal, a Chilean mathematician who	discovered	a formula that explained the universe. It, like the universe, was infinite,
fist. I tried hard not to think of Emmanuel, how he'd been	discovered	by the sister with whom he still lived, hanging from the ceiling
ides, people began to experiment with this infinite formula and, in the process,	discovered	equations that coincided with the anatomy of the human body, making work
person who always gets his way. Godwin, who broke his cello when he	discovered	his younger brother could play it better, which is why he came
stole lipstick from my aunt's dresser. I heard it when my mother	discovered	me gathering ants in a plastic bag to put in a schoolmate'
so clean, a rumor started that the building was to be sold. She	discovered	that the child disliked fake hair and would spit it out. Dirty
behind with daydreams of how upset my real parents would be when they	discovered	these temporary guardians had used me ill. I tried very hard not
Buchi sighed and continued to mop. The broken doll furniture would not be	discovered	until the kids returned in two months—and she didn't want
tethered to your mother by familiarity and a notion of loyalty. Then you	discovered	your pregnancy. You were sitting in the parking lot of a 7-Eleven

This verb carries exploratory or intellectual action. Male associations show an inclination with traditional characters of achievement and intelligence. Female associations contest norms, emphasizing cognitive domains and independence. The above implications, however, draw an ambiguous line between the male and female character association as only one instance, when he discovered his younger brother... highlights this verb with male association.

Figure 4
Concordance Lines of Material Verb: ran

her daughter ran, then returned to shout "Thank you" through the door, and	ran	to the kitchen again, Buchi found herself struggling to hold back a
and began to dig. He gave it to a boy, but the boy	ran	to show his friends, so Ant snatched it back and buried the
River's fury washed it away. Seeing this, Ant lost all reason. He	ran	to River's house and, while her sister slept, slipped through an
in the morning, crying dry sounds, like stalks of wheat rubbing together. Ogechi	ran	to it, and smiled when the fibrous, eyeless face turned to her. "
cookbook," Dickson said, and roared at his jest. Louisa lost it then and	ran	up to him and beat her small fists about his head. Dickson
penitent pace, as though she'd already begun to beg forgiveness. Auntie Ugo	ran	up to the car and pulled on the driver's-side door,
lay. No one ventured close enough to touch it. Finally, one shirtless boy	ran	up to it with a stick. His mother screamed at him to
she must have cringed at having to introduce me as her daughter. I	ran	out to the patio and slammed the door so hard it cracked,
then followed her sister outside. Buchi watched them from the window till they	ran	out of sight, then sighed and returned to her chores. Louisa would
it had been, was her baby. Ogechi pushed it behind another wig and	ran	the first wig back to Mama, who insisted that the woman take
the human body, making work like hers possible. A computer at the Center	ran	the Formula 24/7, testing its infiniteness. There were thousands and thousands of line
identifying potential Mathematicians, who had a way of feeling each other out. She	ran	a finger along the Formula, still mesmerized by it after all this
as if she were trying to see everything at once. Ogechi fled. She	ran	all the way home, and even through her panic, she registered the
ill their neighbors heard the commotion and pulled the two women apart. Ogechi	ran	away that night and vowed never to return to her mother's
only to be expected. What I hadn't expected were the boys who	ran	behind her during recess and lifted up her skirt, as though my

The highlighted verb ran represents escape or urgency. When associated to male characters, it lines up with action and problem-solving. Female implication could either indicate empowerment or vulnerability, depending on the context. If we read through the above instances, majority of the concordance lines such as boys who ran, the boy ran to show and he ran. highlight the inclination towards material verb being associated with the male character adding to this research.

Figure 5

Concordance Lines of Material Verb: should

I was six, I hope you don't think I	should	have kept my accent that long." He flinched at
how are you? Are you enjoying yourself?" Her sugary tone	should	have set off Chinyere's warning bells but I
older woman had guffawed, blowing out so much air she	should	have fainted. She'd then taken the molded form
grew to resent her and stewed so hot the child	should	have boiled in her belly. And three years later,
arms out like ta-da! and she does what I	should	have done when I first saw my mother: she
years to complete a master's in technical communications that	should	have taken two. I'd lived at home until
I am Grace Ogige," the woman said as though I	should	have known the name. "Who are you?" "I'm
Your auntie said you arrived almost an hour ago. You	should	have called me, or at least texted so I
need of a grief worker, was the last person she	should	have asked for such a thing, and told her
privileges of his maleness, it seemed to Glory that they	should	have been in the same place. She began to
back room kept her blessing active long past when it	should	have faded. Ogechi tried to think of it as
you two are supervising a group of three hundred? You	should	have no problem with a family then. Thomas says
one asked Ant what he thought of River, but someone	should	have known that you do not take small things
speaker that serves as an end table. My mother, who	should	be standing in front of the couch, is missing.
passage. What is this the girl is wearing? The girl	should	be sitting with her legs crossed at the ankles.

This modal verb should imply expectation or obligation. For females, it may reflect societal pressures. Its link with male characters often conveys authority, suggesting directives rather than getting orders. The above instances show its link with females such as the girl should be sitting My mother, who should be standing, and she should have fainted Highlighting the gender-biased power dynamics.

Figure 6

Concordance Lines of Material Verb: slapped

apart. Ogechi had slapped her and her mother had slapped her back, and	slapped	her again and again till their neighbors heard the commotion and pulled
it into the mop bucket until it softened and fell apart. Ogechi had	slapped	her and her mother had slapped her back, and slapped her again
it softened and fell apart. Ogechi had slapped her and her mother had	slapped	her back, and slapped her again and again till their neighbors heard
the last of her tea, choked, and was almost knocked over when Lawrence	slapped	her back. "Chineke, before Madam sees you and accuses you of assault."
I couldn't help myself. "What?" I said rudely. My mother would have	slapped	my mouth. "You look just like him. I didn't see it

This verb indicates physical assertion or aggression. Reading through the above concordance lines reveal the frequent use of this aggressive and violent word with the pronoun her.

Figure 7

Concordance Lines of Material Verb: tone

way that causes little offense. She is a ghost of Bibi, paler in	tone	and personality, but sweet in the way Bibi can be when Bibi
house. "Chinyere, my dear, how are you? Are you enjoying yourself?" Her sugary	tone	should have set off Chinyere's warning bells but I could hear
who had paid her debt became restless and stood to leave. Mama's	tone	was muted fury. "Sit. Wait." To Ogechi, "Go and get the wig
touched my hand. The woman in red. She spoke in a low, concerned	tone."	You should probably go after her." I grabbed the gift bags Chinyere

The word Tone with Female associations indicates traditional roles of gendered communication. The above lines reveal that often these things are defined by society through different discourses, and it becomes obligatory for the genders to conform to the societal norms. For instance, it is a general gender-biased concept that a woman's tone should be sugary, concerned or low.

Figure 8

Concordance Lines of Material Verb: order

inept, each too intimidated by their sullen house girl to	order	her around. She spends most of the day watching
she'd had to be so firm, and Dickson's	order	superseded hers. The girl stayed. Buchi sighed. "It's

Order denotes control and command. Male practice reinforces patriarchal dominance, as the text highlights Dickson's order suspended hers.

Figure 9

Concordance Lines of Material Verb: stand

and wouldn't replenish till they returned. Damaris finished first and went to	stand	by Buchi, expectant. Buchi looked at Louisa. "She wants to feed Kano
begun a few months before, when we relocated to Port Harcourt. As the	stand-	in for Emmanuel, my father's old friend, I was to match
the hair child standing over her. It should not have been able to	stand,	let alone haul itself onto her bed. Nor should it have been
Chinyere didn't respond, she tried a different tack. "Why don't you	stand	up and let me see that dress, Chi-Chi, my dear?" Chinyere
m glad there are beds around because I collapse onto one, unable to	stand.	When I grab my father's wrist—I cannot at this juncture
Buchi dreaded the lecture she knew was coming, about how a wife must	stand	with her husband and how she, Buchi, should not let the devil

The verb modal verb stand in the above concordance lines can be interpreted as being used as an obligation for a female character when commanded by a male. As the last concordance line highlights a strictly implemented gender-biased dilemma where a wife must stand with her husband.

Figure 10

Concordance Lines of Material Verb: think

allow the draining fluid to pool on the floor. When the fall begins,	think	of it as a dance: right leg up (two, three, four), left
her blessing active long past when it should have faded. Ogechi tried to	think	of it as an even trade, a little bit of her life
Glory that they should have been in the same place. She began to	think	of his luck as something that had been taken from her and
Mama would show up with her goons, and Ogechi was too frightened to	think	of much else. But Mama didn't appear, and she fell asleep
test results and every other thing that proved their genius. Nneoma tried to	think	of where she'd put her own documents after the move, but
her nose, how it crackled beneath my fist. I tried hard not to	think	of Emmanuel, how he'd been discovered by the sister with whom
matched gaits toward the pharmacy, neither of us speaking. While I tried to	think	of what to say, Mayowa quickened her steps and I sped to
came to her. Who, she wanted to know, and where? No one could	think	of anyone who would wish River such harm. Even Death shrugged his
these temporary guardians had used me ill. I tried very hard not to	think	about the little girl and her nose, how it crackled beneath my
until the kids returned in two months—and she didn't want to	think	about what would happen then, the questions she would have to answer—
towels. My mother had given me a strange look. I tried not to	think	about that. In the days after Emmanuel's death, my father slipped
life wouldn't "contribute a fair environment" for the baby. "What do you	think	about that?" She turned up the radio, cutting you off. A deep,
creeping on that age when life begins to lose all meaning, fifty, I	think.	I would go and sit with her because everyone knows how old
I've been here since I was six, I hope you don't	think	I should have kept my accent that long." He flinched at her
going to stop, it needs to be soon, that's all." "Why, you	think	I don't know these things? You think I'm a bad

Think echoes cognitive agency. Male usage often aligns with rationality adding to stereotypes, while the above lines associate it more to the females. Now the interesting fact is that the word think in the above concordance lines are more likely to reinforce the idea of struggle which women need to go while indulging in some kind of cognitive process. The words such as want to think tried to think frightened to think diverge the whole ideology of think as something rational process but rather highlight the great efforts needed to use their mind if women are to think.

Figure 11

Concordance Lines of Mental Verb: cry

A hiccup interrupted the noise and when it resumed it was a human	cry.	The girl's mother laughed and danced, and the girl just cried,
of the messages—My cousin is a bitch and worse—and began to	cry.	The usher had returned to her duties but stayed close enough that
as all efforts to remain stoic come to naught. Have one's child	cry	along for effect, or better yet, drop her during the fall, let
of the young men at his work? And Glory would delete it, and	cry,	and retrace all the missteps that had led her to this particular
At the Emporium, Ogechi kept the child with her, worried that it would	cry	if she removed it. Besides, the brash assistant who had tried to
glare seared holes into me. "Wait till your father hears this thing," her	cry	of last resort. At such moments I became my father's daughter,
girl blinked awake, became aware of the damp underneath her, and started to	cry. "	Shh, it's okay, honey, up, up." Damaris raised her arms and
buckle (two, three, four), land askew, and await the attention of an audience.	Cry	silent tears at first that build to anguished wails as all efforts
Ogechi neared it with caution. When it saw her, the texture of its	cry	softened and—Ogechi couldn't help it—she softened, too. It was
slammed and we both jumped. I soothed him before whimper turned to full	cry.	That's how Chinyere found me, sitting on her bed, her son

Reflecting vulnerability, female usage reinforces emotional stereotypes. Male usage challenges stoic ideals, presenting an alternative masculinity.

Figure 12

Concordance Lines of Mental Verb: felt

please the gods," he'd said. The older she got, the more she	felt	the truth of it: the deep inhale her life had been so
as we envied the styles we were too young to wear. If she	felt	the sheet of protective plastic crinkle when she shifted on the bed,
of hips and buttocks and woe. All but one. The only one who	felt	the rage of River, multiplied by that most powerful feeling that won'
hand under Damaris, at six years old her youngest, and sighed when she	felt	the wetness. Precious would have her head. The little girl was supposed
mother's, and the rest were for friends left behind, soon forgotten. I	felt	like crying now. Chinyere scraped her chair back, grabbed her purse, and
a variety of dishes awaiting eager bellies. His mother was tall and Glory	felt	like a child next to her. His mother was also warm, and
worshipped. What were ants to her? He decided to show River what it	felt	like to lose. The mightiest river, from which all rivers flowed, was
her mother started praising God again. Glory couldn't help but laugh and	felt	a blush of gratitude. It had been years since any news she'
Yes, Mama, you can have it." Mama touched Ogechi's shoulder and she	felt	a little bit sad, but nothing she wouldn't shake off in
in hidden corners, maneuvering my mother with my smart mouth. I'd never	felt	as much of a child as I did just now. The elevator
think?" "I guess." Every minute that passed without Thomas by her side, Glory	felt	as though a veil was slipping off her, revealing more and more
erless, another daughter being sent back to her mother in disgrace. My thanks	felt	foolish under the glare of this truth. Girls with fire in their
and how foolish of people to define themselves by it. That high- mindedness	felt	foolish now that she couldn't afford to send her children to
to her was a grim man with a nonexistent bedside manner. She'd	felt	his disapproval as he worked on her. No doubt he thought his
With every question his mother asked, and every terse answer she gave, Glory	felt	his mother close off a bit, leaning back as though to consider

This verb indicates emotional awareness. Female usage aligns with nurturing roles, while male usage challenges traditional notions of emotional suppression.

Figure 13

Concordance Lines of Mental Verb: soft

girl. Ogechi was determined that her child would be a thing of whimsy,	soft	and pretty, tender and worthy of love. But first, she had to
of the cabinets than at the store. The edges of her face are	soft,	as though she's kept the slight blur of the photo as
You need something with strong limbs that can plow and haul and scrub.	Soft	children with hard lives go mad or die young. Bring me a
at each other. I was seated on a crate that had once held	soft	drinks. Damaris Ndibe, who had installed herself as my second in command,
AT HOME The yarn baby lasted a good month, emitting dry, cotton-	soft	gurgles and pooping little balls of lint, before Ogechi snagged its thigh
had sent her expensive bras from London edged with barely-there lace and	soft	ribbons and powdered with fairy dust, and how she made the rule
and harvests tender tubes of half-grown corn in stealth. They boil so	soft	she eats the inner core and the fibrous husk, too. One night,
a precious smirk. It wore a frilly white dress and frilly socks and	soft-	soled shoes that would never touch the ground. Only a very wealthy

When associated with females, it reinforces nurturing stereotypes. Male associations challenge toughness ideals, highlighting vulnerability.

Figure 14

Concordance Lines of Mental Verb: obey

in diaries, guarded closely by the type of girls who, above all else,	obey.	And while Bereaver wanders, River and her women lie catatonic with heartache,
out like Christmas lights—he's shorter than her, so he has to	obey	her, he's finally learning how to kiss well—and her mother

This verb denotes submission. Female usage highlights patriarchal expectations, while male associations suggest hierarchical power dynamics.

Figure 15

Concordance Lines of Mental Verb: excited

me. Then she shook it off. "Let's go." She was smiling now,	excited	at her release, and I couldn't help catching her mood. The
fact, but she kept that from him, enjoying, then loathing, then enjoying how	excited	he was to explain the country to her. He didn't know
She told her about Thomas and his ambitions, getting more animated the more	excited	her mother became. She ignored the undercurrent of disbelief on the other
had been when I got into Emory and how I must be so	excited.	Not once did she look at Chinyere, who rolled my suitcase behind
voice in the hallway. It was shrill, and you knew she was either	excited	or angry. She walked in and took a seat. Her hand stroked
Abuja and wouldn't be back till next week, but he was very	excited	to see me. Then she updated me on people I'd long

This verb reflects enthusiasm and emotional engagement. Female usage aligns with expressive stereotypes, while male usage broadens the scope of masculine emotional expression.

Figure 16

Concordance Lines of Mental Verb: concerned

I've seen her with you before." He looked very	concerned,	and suddenly Nneoma didn't want to know who
talks to the girl in whispers and Enebeli isn't	concerned	because they are in the house and how much
anyone looking at that moment she must have resembled a	concerned	caretaker. Maybe if you continue looking at her from
was instant and blinding. You heard someone wailing and the	concerned	murmur of the crowd that gathered. When the keening
of what real pain is. As far as I'm	concerned,	their feelings on this matter are invalid. I would
hand. The woman in red. She spoke in a low,	concerned	tone. "You should probably go after her." I grabbed

Except for the first concordance line, the rest show the verb concerned with feminine insights.

Figure 17

Concordance Lines of Mental Verb: explained

they could meet up then. After ending the call, Chinyere	explained	that her mother didn't allow her to have
mother said, adding, "You are too kind," when Mrs. Ajayi	explained	that Mayowa was the child of a third cousin
a phone I could borrow. At her cagey expression, I	explained	my predicament (stranded) without going into the why of
roll of money inside. "It's from the church," I	explained,	oddly proud for the first time. "They gave it
Francisco Furcal, a Chilean mathematician who discovered a formula that	explained	the universe. It, like the universe, was infinite, and

Generally, it reflects intellectual agency, but female associations reinforce a traditional role of women explaining her self all the time.

Figure 18

Concordance Lines of Mental Verb: impress

that hadn't seen a man's handiwork in an age. Wanting to	impress	Mayowa, I asked if she wanted to see the rest of the
answer and gave it. But she panicked at the prospect of having to	impress	this woman. Her parents had been easy. Thomas was impressive. She was

This verb association is specifically directed towards women, as if her emotional side is to be misused to get things done.

Figure 19

Concordance Lines of Mental Verb: feeling

didn't get money directly, yet she couldn't stop	feeling	like she was funding the idea of them. Ignoring
at home until a year ago. But after years of	feeling	like an exposed nerve, I'd finally myelinated. I
more about identifying potential Mathematicians, who had a way of	feeling	each other out. She ran a finger along the
the minutes and undo catastrophe. I thanked her and left,	feeling	eyes on me but not daring to look around.
wrong, that you shouldn't be stopping a person from	feeling	natural hardships. That's what it means to be
Knees to her chin, Ogechi sobbed into the callused skin,	feeling	part relief, part something else—a sliver of empathy
felt the rage of River, multiplied by that most powerful	feeling	that won't let a person rest: guilt. River'

This verb emphasizes introspection. Female usage reinforces empathetic stereotypes.

Figure 20

Concordance Lines of Mental Verb: request

the bed today." He grunted, then murmured, "Sorry, oh." Unspoken was Buchi's	request	that he be gentle with her daughter. Gentler. When she and the
foreign papers. Later, even knowing what it will do to him, she will	request	that he send the girl to her in America, where her mothering
all the choice. These foolish little choices incremented into probation, then a polite	request	to leave, followed by an impolite request to leave after she'd
incremented into probation, then a polite request to leave, followed by an impolite	request	to leave after she'd staged a protest in the dean's
never imagined that on April 16, 2013, after receiving yet another e-mail denying her	request	to restore her Facebook page (the rep refused to believe any parent
good fortune resting on his head. When Glory had him write a new	request	to Facebook, her page was restored in a day. He would have
take care of your brother," Auntie Ugo said, and the cadence of the	request	carried the rhythm of one uttered many times. The boy was a
curious about the baby, but the two assistants were. When Ogechi denied their	request	for a viewing, their sudden deference returned to malice tenfold. They made
I just need you to ask or else she'll say no." The	request	seemed harmless enough. "Okay. But that makes us even." "Fine." "Fine." In

Request implies seeking assistance or permission. Female usage may reflect dependency, and reading through these lines reinforces this gender biased idea, for example, she will request.

Figure 21

Concordance Lines of Mental Verb: hope

two people in the room. "Yes, I can." And to kill her dawning	hope, "	But it is a highly regulated and very expensive process. Most of
clients are heavily subsidized by their governments, but even then"—in case any	hope	remained—"you have to be a citizen." The girl lowered her eyes
to win her parents' good graces by her own merit. She held out	hope	that one day all her missteps would stumble her into accomplishments she
six hours of labor and six years of barrenness. Pinning on her every	hope	they had yet to realize, her parents imagined the type of life
don't sound it." "I've been here since I was six, I	hope	you don't think I should have kept my accent that long."

Associated with aspiration, female usage aligns with emotional depth.

Figure 22

Concordance Lines of Mental Verb: felt

gods," he'd said. The older she got, the more	she felt	the truth of it: the deep inhale her
envied the styles we were too young to wear. If	she felt	the sheet of protective plastic crinkle when she
you can have it." Mama touched Ogechi's shoulder and	she felt	a little bit sad, but nothing she wouldn'
settled its head on the back of her neck. Then	she felt	it, the gentle suckling at her nape as
Damaris, at six years old her youngest, and sighed when	she felt	the wetness. Precious would have her head. The
edges of the store, looping toward the checkout lane. Then	she felt	him. Nneoma slowed and picked up a small
put the child to bed and stared until it slept.	She felt	its belly, which was cooling now, and recoiled

The mental verb felt is largely observed to be used with the pronoun she, linking it to the research question, i.e. the patterns of mental verbs associated with the female characters in *What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky* by Lesley Nneka Arimah, reflecting gender-based power dynamics and levels of agency.

Figure 23

Concordance Lines of Mental Verb: think

allow the draining fluid to pool on the floor. When the fall begins,	think	of it as a dance: right leg up (two, three, four), left
her blessing active long past when it should have faded. Ogechi tried to	think	of it as an even trade, a little bit of her life
Glory that they should have been in the same place. She began to	think	of his luck as something that had been taken from her and
Mama would show up with her goons, and Ogechi was too frightened to	think	of much else. But Mama didn't appear, and she fell asleep
test results and every other thing that proved their genius. Nneoma tried to	think	of where she'd put her own documents after the move, but
her nose, how it crackled beneath my fist. I tried hard not to	think	of Emmanuel, how he'd been discovered by the sister with whom
matched gaits toward the pharmacy, neither of us speaking. While I tried to	think	of what to say, Mayowa quickened her steps and I sped to
came to her. Who, she wanted to know, and where? No one could	think	of anyone who would wish River such harm. Even Death shrugged his
these temporary guardians had used me ill. I tried very hard not to	think	about the little girl and her nose, how it crackled beneath my
until the kids returned in two months—and she didn't want to	think	about what would happen then, the questions she would have to answer—
towels. My mother had given me a strange look. I tried not to	think	about that. In the days after Emmanuel's death, my father slipped
life wouldn't "contribute a fair environment" for the baby. "What do you	think	about that?" She turned up the radio, cutting you off. A deep,
creeping on that age when life begins to lose all meaning, fifty, I	think.	I would go and sit with her because everyone knows how old
I've been here since I was six, I hope you don't	think	I should have kept my accent that long." He flinched at her
going to stop, it needs to be soon, that's all." "Why, you	think	I don't know these things? You think I'm a bad

Think is a verb which is often categorized as being associated with intellect and rationale, but ironically, if we read through the lines, it will be noticed that it is associated generally with women and towards a negative thought. For instance, Nneoma tried to think of where she put her own documents after the move... reveals the thinking process of a female character, but is linked with her trait of being forgetful.

Figure 24

Concordance Lines of Mental Verb: soft

girl. Ogechi was determined that her child would be a thing of whimsy,	soft	and pretty, tender and worthy of love. But first, she had to
of the cabinets than at the store. The edges of her face are	soft,	as though she's kept the slight blur of the photo as
You need something with strong limbs that can plow and haul and scrub.	Soft	children with hard lives go mad or die young. Bring me a
at each other. I was seated on a crate that had once held	soft	drinks. Damaris Ndibe, who had installed herself as my second in command,
AT HOME T he yarn baby lasted a good month, emitting dry, cotton-	soft	gurgles and pooping little balls of lint, before Ogechi snagged its thigh
had sent her expensive bras from London edged with barely-there lace and	soft	ribbons and powdered with fairy dust, and how she made the rule
and harvests tender tubes of half-grown corn in stealth. They boil so	soft	she eats the inner core and the fibrous husk, too. One night,
a precious smirk. It wore a frilly white dress and frilly socks and	soft-	soled shoes that would never touch the ground. Only a very wealthy

Although not a verb itself, if we read through these concordance lines, we will observe how the surrounding verbs with it and the context will reinforce the idea of females connected with beauty and submissiveness.

Figure 25

Concordance Lines of Mental Verb: request

Text	request	request context
the bed today." He grunted, then murmured, "Sorry, oh." Unspoken was Buchi's	request	that he be gentle with her daughter. Gentler. When she and the
foreign papers. Later, even knowing what it will do to him, she will	request	that he send the girl to her in America, where her mothering
all the choice. These foolish little choices incremented into probation, then a polite	request	to leave, followed by an impolite request to leave after she'd
incremented into probation, then a polite request to leave, followed by an impolite	request	to leave after she'd staged a protest in the dean's
never imagined that on April 16, 2013, after receiving yet another e-mail denying her	request	to restore her Facebook page (the rep refused to believe any parent
good fortune resting on his head. When Glory had him write a new	request	to Facebook, her page was restored in a day. He would have
take care of your brother," Auntie Ugo said, and the cadence of the	request	carried the rhythm of one uttered many times. The boy was a
curious about the baby, but the two assistants were. When Ogechi denied their	request	for a viewing, their sudden deference returned to malice tenfold. They made
I just need you to ask or else she'll say no." The	request	seemed harmless enough. "Okay. But that makes us even." "Fine." "Fine." In

Request suggests seeking permission or assistance. Female practice may reflect dependency.

Figure 26

Concordance Lines of Mental Verb: should

Text	should	should context
I was six, I hope you don't think I	should	have kept my accent that long." He flinched at
how are you? Are you enjoying yourself?" Her sugary tone	should	have set off Chinyere's warning bells but I
older woman had guffawed, blowing out so much air she	should	have fainted. She'd then taken the molded form
grew to resent her and stewed so hot the child	should	have boiled in her belly. And three years later,
arms out like ta-da! and she does what I	should	have done when I first saw my mother: she
years to complete a master's in technical communications that	should	have taken two. I'd lived at home until
I am Grace Ogige," the woman said as though I	should	have known the name. "Who are you?" "I'm
Your auntie said you arrived almost an hour ago. You	should	have called me, or at least texted so I
need of a grief worker, was the last person she	should	have asked for such a thing, and told her
privileges of his maleness, it seemed to Glory that they	should	have been in the same place. She began to
back room kept her blessing active long past when it	should	have faded. Ogechi tried to think of it as
you two are supervising a group of three hundred? You	should	have no problem with a family then. Thomas says
one asked Ant what he thought of River, but someone	should	have known that you do not take small things
speaker that serves as an end table. My mother, who	should	be standing in front of the couch, is missing.
passage. What is this the girl is wearing? The girl	should	be sitting with her legs crossed at the ankles.

The above concordance lines reveal the association of the word should with she or female characters. For instance, My mother, we should be standing in front... and she should have asked... This reveals the linguistic structures that mirror the patriarchal notions.

Figure 27

Concordance Lines of Mental Verb: woman

Text	woman	woman context
This is the picture she clutches when she cries. Your mother is a	woman	who craves the attention of men. After the money came, so did
to me like that. Before she grows cautious under the mothering of a	woman	who loves but cannot comprehend her. Before she quiets in a country
stalled vehicle, Nnamdi pulled over. "Hian! See this one," Buchi said of the	woman,	who wore a dress so tight it sliced the pudge of her
her baby secret. But the girl didn't return. After a while, the	woman	who had paid her debt became restless and stood to leave. Mama'
back, grabbed her purse, and left. I sat, lost. I glanced at the	woman	who had ruined more than just the evening and she seemed to
didn't mention Chinyere. I relaxed, surprised to find myself liking her, this	woman	who had been my enemy short minutes ago. It was not long
listen." "Well, are you going to start now?" My mother was a small	woman	who carried her weight in her personality. I had three inches and
her ear, and a voice just shy of being too deep for a	woman'	s greeted her. Glory tried to say all the right things about
bless me and my child. It was a joyous occasion in a young	woman'	s life when her mother blessed life into her child. The two
would hide an old woman's medication and watch the trembling in the	woman'	s hands increase till she was too incapacitated to stop Mayowa from
fact, she seemed like the sort of girl who would hide an old	woman'	s medication and watch the trembling in the woman's hands increase
but when I told her, she quieted and refused to look in the	woman'	s direction again. When one of our table companions got up a
as I walked back to the event center. Inside, I stopped a young	woman	in usher red and asked if she had a phone I could
had gotten it and her sixth time overall. She was the most trusted	woman	in our church. She made sure everyone knew it. "Six times, oh.
over her, no doubt jesting about the food. Someone touched my hand. The	woman	in red. She spoke in a low, concerned tone. "You should probably

The concordance lines of the word woman show its association with the mental verbs. If the lines are read, the context of woman who craves the attention who loves who wore a dress etc. is revealed that again adds to the gender-biased dilemmas linked with the contemporary society.

Figure 28

Concordance Lines of Mental Verb: sensed

Every time it stilled and Emmanuel approached it, the snake	sensed	him and started flipping around again. "The next morning,
I must have made a noise, or she must have	sensed	me, because she stopped and stared in my direction,

Reflecting perception, female usage aligns with being driven by the sensory insights and not the rational insights. For once it is associated with snakes and then secondly it is linked with a female Character, again adding to the gender biased stereotypical assumptions.

Findings and interpretation of verbs can be concluded with the following insights:

4.1 Material Verbs

- Jumped: Often linked with male characters, highlighting action and control. Female links reveal impulsive or hasty traits.
- Called: Male usage reflects authority, whereas emotional labour or dependency is suggested when it’s linked with the female characters.
- Ran: The reinforcement of traditional masculinity in the male characters is highlighted in the concordance lines of Ran. Ultimately, adding to the context of males being dominated in action-oriented contexts
- Should: For its link with female characters, this verb often implies obligations and societal expectations.

4.2 Mental Verbs

- Think: Associated with struggle or hesitation for females and rationality for male characters. As the above-mentioned interpretation highlights the capability of cognitive thinking as something which females generally must struggle to think, as if it does not come to them naturally.
- Felt: Highlights the aspect of emotional awareness; female implementation aligns with nurturing roles, while male associations challenge emotional suppression.
- Cry: It reinforces helplessness and vulnerability in females; the weaker side of them
- Request: It suggests dependency for females, therefore aligning with traditional power dynamics.

5. Conclusion

The research showcases the patterns which reflect the wider societal norms that support male characters’ authority while portraying female characters as emotionally driven or passive. The study, even apart from the results, reinforces Fairclough’s (2014) idea, which suggests that ideologies often function via expected common-sense discourses, which, in this instance, was the association of male characters with action and female characters with emotion. Furthermore, Nadeem et al. (2020) say that language not only mirrors but actively helps further develop social hierarchies, which include the gendered ones.

The way men are linked with power and women with feelings and emotions shows how our culture still promotes men as the dominant characters who are in charge, while women are portrayed as emotional and obedient beings. By looking at the concordance lines, it can be observed how these material and mental verbs get used in modern stories, sometimes to preserve the traditional gender and sometimes to challenge or push back against it. On top of the acquired results regarding mental and material verbs, the data has also revealed that there are instances where these two types of verbs are applied subvertedly. The detailed explanation in each section concludes that there are a few instances where the verb associations are switched around; mental verbs linked with the male character and material verbs with the female character. However, this low frequency is also significant and can be explored further across other contemporary narratives. The main point remains that the linguistic pattern that appeared in *What it Means When a Man Falls from the Sky* keeps recurring and reinforcing the same social stereotypes regarding gender roles.

At the end, this study opens doors for further research on how language in contemporary narratives shapes or reshapes gender roles in different cultural settings. Future research may explore the reasons and impact of less recurring verbs in connection with gender and power dynamics to build a nuanced scholarship. This aspect can work as a starting point for exploring other directions that researchers may have yet to explore and research.

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