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Gender Representations in Selected Nso Folktales of the Northwest Region of Cameroon

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Abstract: *This paper examines gender representations in selected Nso folktales from the Northwest region of Cameroon, exploring how these narratives reflect and shape societal norms, values, and cultural beliefs of the Nso people through gender roles. These folktales do not only play vital roles in the socialisation process and entertainment arena but equally serve as vehicles for moral education and cultural identity. From a collection of fifteen folktales from Nso in both indigenous and English languages, the paper is analysed from a feminist critical lens, revealing a dichotomy in the representation of gender thus reflecting traditional expectations of femininity and masculinity. The paper found out that despite the prevalent portrayal of women in subordinate positions, some of these folktales highlight female agency and intelligence demonstrating that, women can be resourceful and influential in the society thus challenging the notion of women as merely passive figures and stereotypes.*

Keywords: gender representation, Nso folktales, feminism, masculinity, female agency.

INTRODUCTION

African folktales and particularly Nso folktales are a vital component of the society's rich oral traditions, serving as a mirror reflecting the cultural values, social norms, and historical contexts of the Nso people. These are people endowed with a rich cultural heritage manifested through their songs, dance, folktales, rituals and others. They constitute one of the largest Fondoms in the Northwest region of Cameroon and Lamnso is their indigenous language. Their folktales are more than mere entertainment as they reflect and shape societal norms, values, and cultural beliefs of the Nso people through gender roles and representations. The people depend largely on subsistence farming, the reason their folktales remain an informal means of educating the young about their cultural values and traditions. These folktales do not only reflect the Nso people's oral traditions but play vital roles in the socialisation process while at the same time serving as vehicles for moral education and cultural identity. They often convey the expectations and behaviours associated with masculinity and femininity, providing insights into the cultural constructions of gender and the dynamics of power, agency, and identity. Naana Jane Opoku-Agyem (1999:118) argues that "folktale offers a closer account of the values of society than other forms of written, imaginative texts, given the context for

the creation in both literary form". This is because the folktale becomes a body of growing narratives that reflect the dynamism and testament of society. Hence, it is safe to argue that folktales, as a component of folklore, offer penetrating pictures of the lifestyles of their respective communities. They are echoes of the psychological and sociological disposition of the communities they belong to (Campbell 1986).

In many African folktales, gender representation is depicted through various archetypes and roles. Men are frequently portrayed as heroic figures, warriors, leaders, and providers, embodying traits such as bravery, wisdom, strength and authority. In contrast, women often assume roles related to nurturing, wisdom, and moral guidance, projecting societal norms that emphasize care-giving and domestic responsibilities reflecting traditional expectations of femininity. Inequality between both genders becomes a recurrent decimal as the men are portrayed as the "dominant group" while the women are seen as the "subordinate class". However, this binary portrayal is not absolute, as many narratives now feature strong female protagonists who defy stereotypes, highlighting intelligence, bravery and agency. The female gender who had hitherto submitted to cultural norms that do not grant them equality with their male counterparts, have realized that everybody either man or woman deserves equal opportunities. The female gender is sometimes perceived as rebellious if she goes against the accepted cultural norms of male superiority that places her far below her male counterpart thus suppressing her inherent skills needed for the positive transformation of the society.

Gender Discourse

Gender representations is a subject that has continuously engaged the minds of many literary scholars and critics. There is great awareness today about the importance of gender in literary discourse. Thus, critiquing popular notions on gender, patriarchy, sexuality, identity and other dominant discourses is a process that illustrates shifting paradigms in people's consciousness. This awareness of the importance of gender in literary discourse makes it very difficult today, to discuss Milton's "Paradise Lost", or Keat's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" or the Elizabethan stage or the Victorian novel and even Modernists' works without a special reference to gender. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* can also be discussed along gender lines considering his treatment of the female gender as well as Senghor in some of his poems given the differing roles the genders are made to play.

Writing about aspects of women's voices from Northern Nigeria, Margaret Hausa Kassam(1996) points out that the word 'gender' signifies, first and foremost, differences in the biological make-up of human beings in general, in terms of the sex of the species as either male, female, or neuter; and in a more recent, but problematic application of the term, 'transsexual' or 'transvestite (qtd in Egara Stanley Kabaji, 2005:1)

Gender, as it were, has changed the shape of literary conversation and has become a recognized phenomenon. That is why Elaine Showalter (1989:1) quoting Rutven considers gender a "crucial determinant in the production, circulation and consumption of literary discourse". For Showalter, gender encompasses speech and, in every language, gender is a grammatical category. Thus, writers have employed both the written and the spoken word to engage with various topical issues in their societies. This brings to mind Simone de Beauvoir's assertion in *The Second Sex* that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (1973:301) which she emphasizes the idea that gender is not an inherent or biological trait but rather a social construct shaped by cultural, historical, and societal influences.

Lise Ostrgaard (1992) defines gender in terms of relations of power. She writes:

> Gender relations are constructed in terms of the relations of power and dominance that structure the life chances of women and men. In other words, gender divisions are not fixed in biology but constitute an aspect of the wider social divisions of labour, which in turn are rooted in the conditions of production and reproduction and reinforced by the cultural, religious and ideological systems prevailing in a society (6).

In essence, the social construction of gender in terms of 'maleness' or 'femaleness,' 'masculinity' and 'femininity', sublimates the biological construct in the sense that the production and consumption of culture seems to be dependent upon the effective control of one social class over another or one sex over another; in this case the biological male controls the female in power relations. It is therefore apparent that in this respect, the interpretation of the gender classifications of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' seems to have more to do with the socialisation process of the individual rather than the biological endowment of nature. Kabaji (2005:7) views gender as "a product of social interaction rather than a fixed bipartite division and proceed to interrogate the folktale to render recognisable those actions, images, formulaic patterns and frames within the folktale discourse that contribute to gender construction". The folktale narrative tradition is therefore an avenue of persuasive dialogue where the audience embraces a set of socially constructed and validated gender roles and attitudes.

Buchi Emecheta (1988:179), on her part paints a picture of how the woman is conditioned to accept this arrangement. She asserts that, "From childhood, she is conditioned into thinking that being the girl, she must do all the work, she must help her mother cook, clean, fetch water and look after her younger brothers and sisters". While Ityavyar Dennis and Stella N. Obiajunwa (1992: 3) lend credence to Emecheta's argument above asserting that "the roles and position of women were learned in childhood through the process of socialization". Girls were socialized into female roles. They were expected to marry and raise children. They were homemakers and agriculturalists. The male child on the other hand is socialized into seeing himself beyond the boundaries of the home where he exhibits his prowess by adventuring into the world of wars, hunting, wrestling etc. He is preferred over the girl child because unlike her who will lose her identity in marriage, he is there to 'perpetuate the family name'. Nenola (1999:21) reiterates Emecheta's assertion as she opines that: "The natural division of labour between insemination and childbearing has been thought to indicate that the nature and activities of men and women are different in other ways as well and belong to different areas of society and culture".

The virtues and vices of maleness and femaleness are conveyed in the different male and female characters in folktales. In this regard, femaleness is usually equated to daughterhood, obedient wifehood (competence in women's work) and motherhood (child-rearing). Scholars like Al-Barazenji (2014:146) argue that in doing this, folktales are "objects for the real suffering of this generation because women are subjects of submissiveness, silence, patriarchal authority, or physical and psychological violence". However, Nenola and other scholars are of the opinion that this is not always the case in the instrumental value of folklore, in which folktales are subsumed. She equally claims that as folklore serves the dominating group to legitimise socially constructed truths, it is also a tool of the dominated group for resisting hegemonic stereotyping discourses and transforming them for their

benefit

In essence, women have not enjoyed the same rights and privileges as their male counterparts and the burning desire to improve the lot of the women has given birth to different forms of women writings in contemporary times. In pre-literate societies however, the tensions arising from gender relations were expressed through verbal art forms or oral literature via different forms or genres of oral art. These and many more are some of the reflections portrayed in some Nso folktales capturing gender intricacies in this society. This paper, however, argues further that, these images of women have experienced shifting paradigms as some of the narratives portray strong women as opposed to the earlier notion of the weak and feeble. There is, therefore, no gain saying the fact that women in the 21st century have outlived the limited traditional roles of childbearing, caring and cooking, as they now assume roles hitherto the exclusive preserves of the men.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This paper draws on fifteen (15) selected folktales from various collections of Nso folktales in English and Lamnso (Nso Language) such as *Metiitiy I & II* (1976), *Vimfer ve Nyam* (1976), and *Kighevshuu* (1976), and Tales from Nso (1969). These narratives pay particular attention to the various ways the authors view gender roles in their community through the tales recorded, translated, and transmitted from generation to generation. To explore gender representations in the Nso folktales, this paper centers its analysis within the feminist theory with a focus on African feminism as it reflects gender dichotomies and sex roles.

African feminism though diverse as it is, addresses the unique experiences and challenges faced by African women, shaped by their socio-cultural, historical and political contexts. It equally challenges patriarchy while dismantling the systems of oppression that marginalizes women though in an attempt at giving the women a voice to ensure that their voices are heard and as such resisting external impositions and stereotypes about African women. This type of feminism celebrates the strength, resilience, and creativity of African women, challenging negative stereotypes and promoting positive representation.

This approach to gender within the feminist theory focuses on relations of dominance and subordination and all possible structures such as, power dynamics and dialectics between male and female, men and women as gendered individuals in society. African feminists such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Ama Ata Aidoo, Nawal El Saadawi, Wangari Mathai, Mariama Ba, and a host of others have in various ways articulated the plight of the African woman in some of their written works. In her book, *We Should All Be Feminists*, Adichie emphasizes that feminism is not about hating men or asserting female superiority, but about achieving equality. She highlights the pervasive nature of patriarchy and its impact on women's lives thus opining for a re-examination of cultural norms and traditions that limit women's opportunities and perpetuate gender roles. She advocates for solidarity among women, both within Africa and globally believing that women should support each other in the fight for equality.

In her most influential book, *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir argues that women have been defined by men as "the other". She maintains that "otherness is a fundamental category of human

thought" (xvii). Women are defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is incidentally the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute and she is the "Other." De Beauvoir urges women "to decline to be the "Other", to refuse to be a party to the deal" (ibid: xx). The condition of otherness enables them to stand back and criticise the norms, values and practices that the dominant culture (patriarchy) seeks to impose on everyone. Shulamith Firestone in *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970), reiterates de Beauvoir's assertion above opining that women have been discriminated upon for ages as a result of their gender. To her, gender inequality stems from the patriarchal societal structures imposed upon women because of their bodies as a result of pregnancy, childbirth and child-rearing. However, a genuine and thorough examination has to take into consideration the African socio-cultural context and the values that govern the sexes.

These feminists emphasize equal opportunities for all sexes believing that everyone irrespective of race, sex, or religion, deserves equal opportunities to develop their capacities so that they can be fulfilled. the construction of gender in this case, concentrates on gendered social roles, relationships, institutions and the division of labour (that is, what men and women do socially, politically and economically) and how this is brought out in the folktales under study. The goal of feminists is therefore, not just to free women from oppressive gender roles; but to promote the image of the female gender and to celebrate womanhood, rejecting the notion of male superiority that perpetually keeps them in a relegated position. Many scholarly works on gender and folklore inform this study.

Ruth Finnegan (1970) is a comprehensive survey of oral literature in Africa in which she examines various approaches to the study of folklore and types of folktales found in Africa. She admits, however, that her study is not exhaustive, because she does not study the contextual details of the narrative realisation during performance. Isidore Okpewho (1986) surveys the traditional approaches to the study of folktales. He reviews the structuralist, formalistic and psychoanalytic approaches. According to him, these approaches, used singly, are inappropriate in comprehending the folktales in totality. He calls for appreciation of aesthetic principles and recognition of myth as a creative cultural resource (34). Akporobaro F.B (2012) argues that in many African societies, there are a variety of songs composed specifically to be sung by women reflecting the relationship between the woman and her husband. In one of the songs the woman complaints about her husband's shortcomings:

> I hate such things. There are women who say, 'what shall I do with the husband of another woman?' woman, do you say same? …I do not know what is killing the man, he sleeps until it dawns; I will leave, I hate such things (264).

In this case, the female gender is seen as being conscious of the short comings of men. Contrary to the traditional notion of a silent women who should neither question, nor complain about her husband's in-activeness.

Angela Miri (2019:40) explores gender issues in African folklore through songs that project women in various light through their manners and behaviours such as vaingloriousness, protest, prostitution, fecundity and male preference, jealousy amongst others. To her, most African societies put high

premium on the male child and if a woman does not get one, she is blamed by her husband's family and the society for the situation. This brings about the binary notion of gender roles where the woman plays the cardinal motherhood role. Helen Chukwuma (1987) in one of her poems quoted by Miri (2019: 47) clearly illustrates this phenomenon thus, "My dear husband, I am in labour and it is a boy". This is a demonstration of the African society's gender preference and expectation.

While appreciating the role of women in the production of culture in the "gendered" society of Northern Nigeria, Hawa Kassam (1996:12) posits that,

> Women and men in this society have different life experiences and so it is important to acknowledge that gender is much more than a psychological attribute. It involves a person's sexuality, which has both a private and a public dimension and must always be understood in the context of particular changing, social relations between men and women.

To her, art or popular culture is an instrument for modifying consciousness and organising new modes of sensibility and is utilised equitably by both genders in the society. She argues further that although women are not given enough opportunity to participate in the production of culture, they try to beat the system which seeks to confine them to a limited domestic space by creating and re-creating popular songs/culture suitable for both private and public consumption (Qtd in Kabaji, 2005:18).

While drawing from the positions discussed above, this paper investigates the narrative processes in the selected folktales from Nso in order to expose the underlying ideology behind the portrayal of gender representations taking into consideration, marriage and its attendant issues of procreation and barrenness, gender roles and character traits.

ANALYSIS OF GENDER REPRESENTATIONS

African marriage and gender representations

Marriage as a universal phenomenon cuts across races of all ages and cultures despite the diversity of customs, forms and functions. For a typical African, marriage is defined based on its intended purposes such as procreation, family lineage, and building of the society. In this case, it is not on how it is contracted, or on how many women are involved, but more on how the union is fulfilling its role as the focus of continuation of the life of the community. A bachelor in the Nso society is seen as an incomplete man, while a barren woman is tagged with derogatory names such as a "witch", or "an empty calabash". African marriages have childbearing as a major binding force that seals the union, as such, barrenness becomes a serious issue as sterility is seldom attributed to the man and in most societies, it was and still is a major cause of divorce. Barrenness in most African societies is still largely viewed as a female problem; a construction that is deeply rooted in most African cultural practices and beliefs. The desire for many children is regarded as having a compelling social force so much so that women without children are/were pitied, feared, hated, sometimes tagged as witches, and to an extent, ostracized from the society. Marriage and childbirth in the Nso society and Africa in general, are thus occasions for celebration, congratulations and festivity. This accounts for the reason folktales abound in Nso that project these varying views of the social life of the people in relation to gender representations.

Marriage in Nso is done in three major phases: Firstly, is the search phase which sometimes is often the prerogative of the parents. Secondly, the investigative phase where both families or the go-between will find out about each family's histories and lastly, the traditional marriage phase in which both families have agreed and there is the payment of the bride price and the traditional marriage proper with festivities. Elizabeth Yuven in her narrative "*Wánlé Ŋgòn wó wùú shávín Nyuy Arím"* (The most beautiful village maiden who married a monster) portrays the quest for marriage as one of her major preoccupations in this folktale. In this tale, the beautiful maiden disobeys his parents and stubbornly rejects every suitor proposed by her parents in search for the most handsome man in the village. The choice she makes is what later leads to her self-destruction and humiliation as she returns wretched after several years. This cautionary tale fails to meet up with the three phases of marriage that the Nso community adheres to because of the young girl's stubborn attitude. In the few cases where marriage takes place without the consent of the parents, the tale often ends badly as evidenced by Yuven's folktale. This similar folktale is captured in Amos Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard*, where he narrates the story of the 'Complete Gentleman'. Tutuola's palmwine drinkard sojourns to the land of the dead (Death's town) in search of the most handsome man in the community who disappeared with the Town Head's beautiful daughter. This stranger whom Tutuola describes as the 'Complete Gentleman' eventually transforms himself into a skull. These two tales project a similar search pattern where beauty is placed at the center of everything. The search for the most beautiful girl in Yuven's tale and that of the most handsome man in Tutuola's narrative. In this case, "Beauty begets beauty".

Marriage in these two communities is regarded not only from the perspective of beauty, handsomeness and wealth but through character, family background and certain behavioural traits which are also taken into consideration. Yet, the young beautiful maids in both narratives quickly fall into the trap of the strange handsome "complete gentleman". Beauty in these narratives is compared to none as the maiden is portrayed in such a way that everyone in the town and distant villages clamours for her hand in marriage. Here, Tutuola and Yuven, demonstrate beauty from both the feminine and masculine gender. In the same way that the beauty of the maiden captivates the attention of many men in Yuven's folktale, so does the handsomeness of the "complete gentleman" to the women in Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard*. Tutuola, like Yuven describe his complete gentleman as "a beautiful 'complete' gentleman dressed in the finest and most costly clothes" (18). However, the point these narratives try to make here is that, there is a difference between appearance and reality; all that glitters is not gold' in the words of Shakespeare. "Don't let handsome strangers drag you into the woods", is one of the most obvious lessons that could be drawn from this tale. Yuven concludes her narrative with a stern warning to young girls thus: *"À ghán wìr e wòŋ jì wùn kù tá' à dzè kìfá ké juŋ kì, wù kú wìy yén à kìwún"*(29). [Anyone seeking only for beauty will eventually reap its consequences]. This goes on to confirm the young lady's regrets in both narratives. As soon as the most beautiful lady in *The Palmwine Drinkard* realises her mistake, "she began to say that her father had been telling her to marry a man, but she did not listen to him or believe him" (21). These authors are of the shared opinion that marriage from the African perspective is not a one-man affair or just the couple alone, but it entails the consent of both families. Young girls are equally advised to listen to their parents when it comes to making spousal choices. These stories offer us a specific view of the place of the women in the traditional African society. In each of these tales what is discouraged is the exercise of will by the women.

In the folktale *'Vindze' vi yii bayir ansho'ti tan*' (Wrestling is often encouraged by the bald headed), the narrator John Suuyka, exposes the issue of spousal selection, marriage and childbearing. Kpuboy, the protagonist is given a wife, Yuyar (a princess), as custom demands unlike the beautiful maidens in the above narratives who chose their spouses. This was to ensure that Kpuboy is matured enough to take care of his family. Five years after marriage, the couple is unable to bear a child and this creates a lot of curiosity and controversy since his wife is a princess from the royal palace. Meaning that, there ought to be continuity of the royal lineage in the household of Kpuboy. The fact that children are needed to ensure the continuity of family lineages and be the social security of their parents in their old ages makes childbearing and upbringing one of, if not the main, requirements for a successful marriage in the African society. For this reason, life for a barren woman in the traditional Nso society is painful, especially in a polygamous marriage where wives compete to win the attention of their husband. The reason the Fon (King) is so happy when Yuyar, the Princess eventually gives birth to a male child after five years to the amazement of everyone in the Fondom for they had almost given up thinking that the Princess was barren. The Fon names the child Mbiin and always sends gifts of various kinds to the parents to cater for the child. Suuyka describes the importance of childbirth thus:

> Kpuboyiì kùy mèé lùmèn, á nèn fò wiíy sho a dzə wán ntó'. A yír wiíyi dzə ji Yuyar… wùn wun dzə'əm viyá vitàn, a baá yò' kér wán. Kishiíy kímó' kí wìy fəə, Yuyar nèn dzəə wán lumèn… wírií kér ghá' e ŋaáŋanŋ foo yu ji Yuyar kér á wan" (12).
>
> [When Kpuboy became matured enough, he was given a princess for a wife named Yuyar… They lived for 5 years without a child. One day, Yuyar gave birth to a baby boy to the bewilderment of the villagers. (My translation)].

The joy the Fon and his community has over the birth of the male child by Yuyar indicates that her seemingly barrenness was an issue of concern to the community at large. What is needed is not themselves but their reproductive success. A woman's wifehood becomes complete and legitimate the moment she gives birth to her husband's child. This affirms the most important reason for marriage in Africa which is procreation and the gender role of childbearing accorded to women in the African society.

In "*The Frog on Naa's Back"* (Shijá' Shée Náa Ndzèm), the theme of procreation and barrenness is also emphasized. In this narrative, the Fon appealed to the women of his entire tribe to cultivate his farm as custom demands. In his communique, "every woman should bring along her children so that he might see them" (43). To this effect, All the women strap their babies on their backs except Naa and takes off to the fon's farm. Work begins and progresses till evening hours, the women start carry their babies and belongings and head for their homes. As a routine in this community, farmers always bath in the stream after work on their way home at the close of the day's activities. The women are seen washing the dust off their feet along the river bank with their babies strapped on their backs except Naa. Noticing that Naa does not have a baby on her back, the little frog that kept watch from its distance, leaped unto Naa's back and every attempt to push it away by the women becomes futile and the frog left to occupy the place of Naa's child. "She tried to push it away, but it held fast. The other women came to her aid. But when they pulled the frog, Naa's skin came away with the frog. So, they left the frog alone, and it occupied the place of Naa's child" (43). Naa is laughed at and mocked at by the villagers because she couldn't bear a child and must carry the frog on her back day and night, and

everywhere she goes to. Frustrated and sad for many years from carrying the frog on her back, "she grew thin that she looked like a skeleton" (46). This leads to her untimely death as she drops dead one day beside the stream and the frog noticing that, relaxes its grip on her corpse and leaps back into the stream where it still lives till date and will live for all the time. From this narrative, the author lays emphasis on the importance of bearing children and equally shuns barrenness in the Nso community and African society at large. Dominant depictions of the reproductive processes such as pregnancy, childbearing, child upbringing and the problem of barrenness demonstrate that women's ultimate roles in the traditional African society are getting married, bearing children, and bringing them up.

Gender roles and behavioural attributes

Besides marriage, procreation and barrenness, women are also depicted in most of the Nso folktales as mothers, wives, carers, hardworking and a host of others. According to Mehari Yimulaw Gebregeorgis (2022:186) "Women deploy all the resources under their control to do their motherly duties. They are seen expressing their care, affection, and concern for their children by feeding them, keeping their hygiene, and working for their security". Mothers' love for their children goes to the extent of sacrificing themselves and all what it takes to cater for their children. In the story of "*Wanyeto and Baa"*, Wanyeto out of imminent fear of death because of famine, suggests to his friend that they should kill their mothers and use their flesh for food. Although Baa sheepishly kills his mother, Wanyeto all the time "had his mother hiding on the dark shelf beneath the ceiling where pots are kept" (6) and every time, Wanyeto stylishly throws food onto the shelf "to appease the rats" (7) so his mother would not go hungry at any time. Wanyeto's mother makes sure her son is well fed by cooking her son's cocoyams thoroughly while Baa struggles with half cooked cocoyams all the time. According to the narrator, "the two friends loved cocoyams and when famine lessened, they ate them every day. But each time they left cocoyams on the fire to cook while they went out hunting, they return to find Wanyeto's cocoyams cooked and Baa's uncooked" (7). Although as risky as this duty was, Baa's mother was ready to risk her life to ensure that her son is well fed and does not die of hunger. She is however killed by Baa after the discovery that his friend tricked him into killing his own mother. This equally indicates betrayal of trust and friendship on the part of Wanyeto.

Moreover, in the story of "*Yé-éng and Náa"*, the motherly figure and care giver is portrayed when Naa out of envy, pushes her friend Yé-éng into the lake during their search for tadpoles. The mother's love for her child is manifested here where Yé-éng's mother is restless and worried over the disappearance of her daughter. She complaints, "Never before has Yé-éng been out alone so late" she muttered to herself. What has happened to her? Tears began to roll down her cheeks as she went to her neighbours to see if they had news of her daughter" (60). A community search is organised though it becomes futile until a wood cutter hears recognizes her voice singing from the lake one day. With the help of the diviner, she is rescued, and the lake goddess reclaims the life of her wicked and envious friend Naa in recompense for her evil act. Naa's mother is delighted when she reunites with her daughter, thus expressing the love and care that mothers have for their children. On the other hand, Yé-éng is portrayed as a villain for she betrays her friendship with Naa. This is a character trait that most communities abhor in their children. She does not set a good example for others as such the punishment she receives at the end of the story justifies her evil deed.

Julia Wood (1994:49), defines a role as,

> A set of expected behaviours and the values associated with them. Roles are assigned to individuals by society as a whole. There are masculine and feminine roles and statuses that are ascribed to individuals. The value of these roles is also defined by the same society. Consequently, male and female infants follow different development paths depending on the specific relationship the y have with the mother. (Qtd in Kabaji, 2005: 102-103).

From this definition, girls are taught motherly duties of caring, cooking, farming and carrying out household chores while boys socialize with their fathers and learn masculine duties such as fetching and splitting firewood, hunting and herding. Gender therefore can be understood in terms of social roles of women and men; as determined by the female and male; or in terms of the attributes of femininity and masculinity.

In the folktale "*Kpuntir the Rat Hunter"*, Kpuntir the protagonist meets a group of young girls sitting in the courtyard and looking after some babies whose mothers were at the farms. Here, Kpuntir provides meat for the young girls to feed their babies with as evident from the ensuing dialogue:

> Why do you feed the babies with "mbar" (cocoyam leaves)? he asked. Have you no meat in this village even for the children? We have no meat, replied the girls. Our mothers told us to give the babies mbar. I have meat. Said Kpuntir and he opened his bag and showed the the birds. Please give us some for the babies, the girls begged. Have as many as you wish, said Kpuntir. (70).

The girls are portrayed here as caregivers in the absence of their mothers, tending the young, feeding and nursing them. These are roles that female children most especially, learn right from childhood as they socialize with their parents and the larger society. Kpuntir on his part is portrayed as a good hunter who provides the baby nurses with birds he had hunted to feed their babies with, having learned the art of hunting from his father.

In the "*The Talking Bird"*, Bíy is sent by her mother, Yébíy to plant pumpkins in her farm, for this is the staple food of the people. The young Biy on her way to the farm, decides to roast the pumpkin seeds and savour them. During this process, a raw seed falls on the ground and a bird that watches her all along, later picks it up and sows it on Yebiy's farm. Harvest time comes and Biy is sent to go and harvest some pumpkin leaves for the evening meal. To her greatest surprise and amazement, she beholds the farm full of fresh pumpkins that she never planted. In this tale, we find the opposite of the caring, and duty conscious girls as seen in the story of "*Kpuntir the Rat Hunter".* Biy rather demonstrates character traits not worthy of young girls in her village and society at large.

On the one hand, the masculine gender does what is perceived to be 'manly jobs' while the feminine gender does the 'womanly jobs' on the other. It is for instance, a masculine role to go hunting and collect firewood from the bushes around the home while it is feminine to cook, fetch water from the well, do all the house chores and go to the farm. While men were not expected to engage in female occupations, women were equally not expected to indulge in manly works. In the traditional Nso society for instance, it was a taboo for males to be found in the kitchen cooking sweeping the courtyard; while at the same time, it was also a taboo for females to dig a grave, go hunting or sit on a man's chair. Local chairs made of bamboo sticks in Nso community are designed in such a way that they convey these femininities and masculinities. Children grow up knowing the differences in these sitting

arrangements and respect them as such. In "*Kpuntir the Rat-Hunter"*, the young boy Kpuntir is taught hunting by his father at a very tender age. "From boyhood, he learned to hunt rats, and when he had grown up, he was the most skillful rat-hunter in all the land. He spent all his life killing rats" (66). From rat hunting to bird hunting, Kpuntir displays his expertise in these domains illustrative of the fact that hunting is one of the masculine roles imbibed by men and boys in the society. In the same tale, Kpuntir encounters a group of men at a funeral ceremony "using banana stem for a drum" instead of animal hides and skin. The art of making drums is one of the masculine roles since it involves physical strength to fell a tree, hollow it and then cover it with a tough animal skin to ensure longevity and effectiveness. According to the narrator in this tale, "usually, you make a drum from a skin which has matured a bit. If you use a new soft skin, you should wait a few days before tuning and playing the drum" (74). Grave-digging is another role accorded to men as evidenced in this same tale at the funeral ceremony, where the men are said to dig up the corpse from the grave. The art of hunting, drum-making and grave-digging are portrayed in this story as masculine roles, thus enhancing power and authority. The general perception here is that women are born weak, and therefore vulnerable. This patriarchal ideology is based on the premise that men are biologically superior to women who are weak and must depend on men for survival. This controlling perception therefore underlies the confinement to the domestic sphere and the assignment of roles deemed feminine as well as those deemed masculine.

Trickster tales and representations of male personality traits

Trickster tales often embody some masculine character traits such as cunning and cleverness, deceit and mischief. These characteristics of the trickster character in most African folktales, often resonate with themes of intelligence and adaptability as the trickster is a common figure in oral literature throughout Africa. In the collection *Tales of Nso*, the trickster character is a male known as "Wanyeto" (Ant-eater), who features in most of the Nso folktales as a cunning, witty and deceitful character. In "*Wanyeto the Farmer"*, Wanyeto tricks and kills the birds that have been eating his guinea corn. In another trickster tale, "*Wanyeto the Artist"*, Wanyeto deceives the King and devours five of his beautiful daughters under the pretext of tattooing their faces to make them look more beautiful. The only princess who survives the wrath of Wanyeto is Tutu Mankwa, the deaf and dumb daughter of the King whom Wanyeto used to showcase his art work in order to convince the King. Also, in the narrative "*Wanyeto and Baa"*, Wanyeto tricks, his friend Baa to go and cannibalise his mother while Wanyeto hides and protects his own mother. After killing his mother, Baa realises that his friend did not do the same to his mother. He then plots and avenges his mother's death by killing Wanyeto's mother. These set of trickster tales, portray the main characters as males with negative masculine attributes.

Animal tales from Nso land also feature the tortoise (*Kibóŋgaàrí*) as one of the trickster characters. In the folktale "*Kinsénín ké Kibóŋgaàrí wùn à Nyám símó' sí"* (A competitive race between tortoise and other animals), tortoise who is considered as one of the slowest but wisest animals in the animal kingdom, enters into a competitive race with the big and faster animals in the forest. He begins by challenging the hare (considered as the fastest animal in the animal kingdom) into a race. The hare however, underestimates the tortoise because of his size and slow movements and fails to understand that outward appearances could be sometimes deceitful. In his wisdom and cleverness, tortoise gathered the tortoise family and together, they hatched a plan to hide as many tortoises as possible on the runway. Once the race begins, the hare runs until it collapses and gives up its last breath because

at every stop, he would see the tortoise almost overtaking him and the hare would increase its speed. This brings us to the adage that "in every race, it is not how fast you begin, but how well you finish". Tortoise applied wisdom to win the race despite his size and stature.

In the second competition in the same folktale above, Tortoise is seen comparing his strength to that of an Elephant and Hippopotamus. This leads to a hot argument that tortoises eventually put both animals to the test. He tricks the two big animals into believing that each of them would be competing with him (tortoise). Elephant and Hippopotamus mock at Tortoise for dragging them into a stupid competition that Tortoise can never win. Tortoise hatches a plan that a long rope will be tied at two invisible points and once the rope swings at both ends, the parties will begin to pull to determine who is more powerful. Tortoise however, puts the Elephant and Hippopotamus at various invisible ends, and while at the centre he begins swinging on the rope and both animals start pulling until they become exhausted, collapses and dies. Tortoise surfaces thereafter and proclaims himself champion. From this narrative, one adheres with the saying that "Wisdom is profitable to direct". Under normal circumstances, a tortoise can never win a race with either an elephant or a hippopotamus but through his cleverness and wisdom, he is able to defeat the two big animals. Tortoise in this folktale exhibits character traits of cleverness and intelligence as seen in most African folktales.

In another trickster tale, "Ɔk*ùúnyàm wùn Kibóŋgaàrí kí"* (The Pig and The Tortoise), there is a display of cleverness, deceit and cunning behaviour by Tortoise who is owing his friend Pig, some money and has no intention of paying back his debts. He plots with his wife, recoils his head inside his shell and urges his wife to use him as a grinding stone once his friend, the Pig comes for his money. "A *ŋgaàrí* s*ùúy* bèy, a bó w*ù* yó' kér mbàm. Wù nèn sìíy i yìì ménaŋ wùn wiíy vƏ jií, wù bvəəshi kijàvndze káŋ kibán, wù lì wùn a jò sho à ji ŋgò" (9) [Knowing fully well that he does not have money and the intention to pay back his debts, tortoise rather plots with his wife to use him early in the morning as her grinding stone at the sight of his friend the Pig]. Pig's demands for the whereabouts of tortoise fall on deaf ears and infuriated, Pig seizes the grinding stone (supposedly tortoise in disguise) from tortoise's wife and flings it into the nearby bush. This works perfectly in favour of Tortoise as he immediately crawls back home from the bush to meet his wife crying over the loss of her grinding stone because of Pig's actions. Tortoise then insists that he can only pay back Pig's money after he returns his wife's grinding stone. "*ŋgaàrí* nèn s*ùú*y e Ɔk*ùúnyàm* jií, mbàm sə sí á síné. Wù fó rí ŋgó' yé wú kí faàsìn fo wiíy və á, bó wùn la' wùn". [here is your money but you must bring back my wife's grinding stone before I will refund your money.] (9). This narrative portrays the reason the pig is always grunting and digging the ground presumably in search of the grinding stone belonging to tortoise's wife. Tortoise uses his wit to outsmart his friend the Pig, thus escaping the settlement of his debts.

In another proverbial and mythical folktale titled "*Fiì léng é Méshavti"* (Slow water runs deep), tortoise ends up with a cracked shell because of his greed and gullibility after being invited by the birds for a party in the sky. Tortoise tricks the birds and devices a plan that they should each take new names in the sky. He names himself "V*é*n adzèm" meaning "all of you" (7). When food is served, he eats all the food because the host presented and said "the food belongs to all of you". "Á wìy e k*é* yiín kí, à sùúy jíi, kí dzè fo v*é*n adzèm" (7). Out of anger the birds take back their feathers which they borrowed tortoise to enable him fly with them to the sky for the party. By way of vengeance, the birds convey a

negative message to the tortoise's wife requesting that she displays all sorts of harmful objects in the courtyard contrary to the soft objects requested by tortoise who jumps down from the sky and has his shell cracked into various shapes. This accounts for the reason tortoise has a cracked shell. The birds felt betrayed by their friend tortoise, because of his greed. This betrayal goes a long way to buttress the proverbial saying that, "one should not judge a book by its cover". Tortoise pretended to be friendly with the birds beneath his cunning and trickery motifs. From the mythical perspective, it is believed that tortoise got a cracked shell because of his greed as well as deceit.

These folktales project tortoise as a clever but also greedy and deceitful animal. His desire to be/have more than others leads to his downfall. While his deceitful bahaviour such as tricking other animals or breaking promises is what ultimately causes his shell to crack indicating that values of integrity and honesty are very important in maintaining relationships and one's reputation. Tortoise's overconfidence equally blinds him to the risk of his schemes, the reason he jumps from the sky to meet his waterloo. Tortoise's lack of humility and his desire to outshine others lead to his punishment and his actions often disrupt the harmony of the animal kingdom.

Another Nso folktale that projects the characteristics of a trickster is "*Kérviviíshaáfón"* (the only one wiser than the King). According to the narrator, it was a custom that every child born in the land should be presented to the King for naming. But Kérviviíshaáfón was never presented to the King by his parents at birth. The child grows up to learn of his fate and decides to pay a visit to the King while naming himself "Kérviviíshaáfón". To the King, it is an aberration for a child to stand before him and boldly proclaim himself as one who is more intelligent than the King. Through his witty and cunning character, Kérviviíshaáfón outsmarts the King at various instances to be crowned King and the former King dethroned. His display of intelligence in various circumstances that even warrant his death, demonstrates his cleverness as a trickster character. It is noticeable, on the surface, that the trickster in the Nso tales is consistently male. Here, the trickster is cast as being combative and rebellious. These are in patriarchal perspectives, and definitely male characteristics which highlight gender dichotomies.

The general notion of power and strength attributed to the masculine gender are however contested in the tale "*Chomtu the Ogress"*. An Ogre/Ogress is a mythical creature often depicted as a large, hideous, and brutish being. They are commonly found in folklore, fairy tales and fantasy literature; often characterized by immense size, strength, and a tendency to be hostile or malevolent. To a larger extent, it may be said that the ogre is an embodiment of evil. His ultimate role is to commit a villainous act. The ogre-centred tales among the Nso people explore moral ambiguities of social life and examine themes of bravery and cowardice, loyalty and deceit, generosity and greed. In this narrative of "*Chomtu the Ogress"*, we come across an Ogress who is as powerful as a man rather representing strong, violent and destructive females unlike the caring, motherly and wifely women presented in most Nso folktales.

The Ogress in this tale is devoid of human compassion devouring females in her society whom she ought to protect being of the same gender. This tale therefore contrasts weakness with power, gentleness and courtesy with brutality. Chomtu is described as "a long-headed Ogress, a man-eating giantess, whose head was four feet long and tapered to a point at the top" (49). From her secret hideout on top of the hill, "Chomtu would creep down the hill and kill and eat people who came to farm there, especially the women" (49). From the above quotations one can decipher that the Ogress is presented with varied attributes of cannibalism with the aim of executing a fatal crime. They are also cast as

greedy since they destroy everything in sight once they have their way. Because the Ogress portrays masculine characteristics, it is believed that only men can capture this wild beast. The reason the Chief of the community, together with his counsellors, diviner and clansmen gather to devise a strategy on how to do away with the valiant creature. According to their plan:

> We will kill Chomtu at midnight when she is asleep. To do this, you will need many things. You will need large, sharp needles, pots full of slime, and sharp knives. Before midnight, some of you must go to Chomtu's house and fix the needles in the earth around it and spread the slim over the ground. Then when all is ready, you must shout 'Chomtu, Chomtu' loudly. She will wake with anger and rush out to kill you. As such, she will slip on the slime and fall on the sharp needles. Then you must come out with your knives and kill her" (56).

This is how the men eventually killed Chomtu and peace and prosperity finally returned to the land. The tale thus appropriate some negative masculine attributes to the Ogress such as; exceeding greed, crafty, wily, patient but sometimes gullible. Through this narrative, the narrator passes out a warning to the males in society that they can equally be outmatched by women.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the representation of gender in Nso folktales is a rich tapestry that reflects the society's diverse cultural, social, and historical contexts. These folktales serve as a mirror to the values, norms, and aspirations of the people, offering insights into the traditional gender roles while also providing spaces for the subversion and re-imagining of these roles. The selected tales uncover gender-inflected images as well as gender roles that construct femininities and masculinities. Women and men in these tales are depicted in ways that reinforce societal expectations, projecting women as mothers, caregivers, and morally upright and men as strong, protective and authoritative. However, some of the tales here challenge these dominant stereotypes, presenting strong and independent female characters besides vulnerable male figures thus highlighting the complexity and fluidity of gender identities. The Ogress represents masculine hegemony thus contesting patriarchy and subverting masculine stereotypes. Thematic concerns on issues of marriage, procreation and barrenness reflect the African world view and belief in marriage for procreation. The various tales deal with relationships within the family unit and the socialisation of both girls and boys towards marriage and gender roles. Trickster characters in the tales studied also convey certain traits that society often abhors such as deceitful and cunning behaviours. However, Nso folktales do not only enrich our understanding of the Nso society and her cultural heritage, but equally contributes to broader conversations about gender, and power dynamics generally.

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