

Gendered Memory in Oral Narratives and the Socialization of the Girl Child in the African Society

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ABSTRACT: *Before writing gained currency in the African society, important societal traditions were perpetrated, perpetuated and memorized through popular oral genres and subgenres like sayings, proverbs, songs and/or folk narratives. These genre types, apart from providing entertainment, formed a core element of socialization of a child into the society. In their enjoyment of folk narratives in particular, children also drew moral lessons from the stories. Through the stories, children learn't the do's and don'ts of their people. Today, like in the past, though to a lesser extent, oral performances and in particular folk narratives still elicit enormous interest and still draw important lessons. This paper argues that many African societies, the majority of which are patriarchal in their social setups, use these popular genres, more so folk narratives to depersonalize and/or re-personalize girl children. The process of depersonalization and re-personalization of girl children involves training them to belong in second place to boy children. Girl children are unconsciously but systematically, through the stories told to them, urged to surrender their personal interests, claims and rights, and instead, redefine their personalities in terms of the society's prescription of roles and expectations, more often than not based on gender.*

Keywords: *gendered memory, socialization, girl child, oral narratives, patriarchy, depersonalization, re-personalization.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Gender identity and its exclusionary potentials for the female are deeply rooted in the fabric of both the traditional and modern African societies, (Uwakweh, 1998:9). From the very onset, ideological war is waged against the girl child in an African social setup, through the oral performances she is exposed to and through the day to day conversations by members of the community. These interactions it appears – targets to influence the girl's memory and perceptions as to who she is and where she belongs. To start with, her birth is a mistake since society prefers boy children, (Muleka, 2007). This fact is emphasized by rewarding women who bear boy children. Men on the other hand are expected and encouraged to marry other wives if their current ones do not bear sons.

Gender choice in narratives

Preference for boy children often comes out through narratives in which the father is unhappy with 'a daughters only' mother and concerned that without a son, people will look at him with scorn. This is, for instance, captured in narratives from some communities in Africa. In the narrative "Wanakhatandi" of the Bukusu from Kenya, the protagonist Wanakhatandi, is regarded as being cursed or having bad luck because he has daughters only. Wanakhatandi's situation is made worse by the fact even his very first child is a girl. Meanwhile, in the Kikuyu myth of creation, Gikuyu the founder of the community got nine beautiful daughters but no son. This disturbed him a great deal. He had to appeal to *Ngai* the creator for a son to be his heir, (Akivaga and Odaga, 1982). Even with nine children, Gikuyu saw himself as having no children as there was nobody to carry him into posterity. In fact, it is as if to say that a father with daughters only is virtually childless. This is because the African patriarchal system does not bestow status on women, (Odhonji, 1994). Traditionally, a girl child cannot carry the family lineage.

Many of the folk narratives told to children, thus, advertently or inadvertently emphasize the less privileged position of the girl child. Instead the narratives endeavour to extol the myth of male superiority and female inferiority. This is in keeping with the patriarchal ideology which operates on the premise that men are naturally superior to women. Conversely, women are weak and have to depend on men for survival, (Masinjila, 1994). Owing to their 'natural inferiority', women have to be trained into subservient positions. They are trained to believe wholly in their weakness and their expected dependence on the men. As is the case among the Luo, women and girls are regarded as frail and weak parties who need constant masculine care and protection (Odhonji, *ibid*). Among the Luhya, the frailty of the girl is expressed in one song that compares her with a reed. Indeed the fragility and breakable nature of the reed is in this case obvious.

One perceives that without men around to protect them, women would perish. Indeed this view is brought out quite well through the popular narratives like *Cutting a middle finger* of the Luo, or, *Nasio and her brother* of the Luhya, both from Kenya. In both narratives, the boys are worried about the safety of their sisters. They fear that 'Hono,' the monster and 'Okunani,' the ogre respectively will harm their sisters if left alone. And indeed, in both cases, the man-eaters on learning that the boys have left, creep in and trick the girls, subsequently eating them. It takes the boys to fight the monsters, to conquer them and to have the subdued creatures surrender all the humans they have eaten. The boys in both narratives, thus, come out not only as the saviours of their sisters, but of mankind. It would be argued that the really intention of such portrayal of the boy is to intimidate the girl into revering the former; to have know realize that her safety depends on the presence of her brother.

Apparently the hideous and ravenous man-eaters pose a danger to girls alone. The boys on the other hand, come out as immortals that make these fearful creatures panic. In the Nasio story, for instance, when Nasio's brother comes back and finds that his sister has been eaten, he single-handedly invades the land inhabited by the ogres. Making inquiries from door to door; he is able to trace the ogre who ate his 'helpless' sister Nasio:

He challenged the ogre to tell him where Nasio was, but the ogre denied any knowledge of her. "I will kill you if you don't vomit out my sister!" he threatened. The ogre panicked saying, "Please, please, please, don't kill me! Just cut this little finger and your sister will come out". Thus subdued, ogre vomited all the people he had eaten (1976:10).

It is sheer commonsense that in a scenario such as this, the girl Nasio, a perpetual victim of the ogre, must surely revere her brother's courage and envy his apparent immunity against this terror. "I wish I were a boy like my brother," Nasio must be saying. "I would be able to fight against this monster." Of course what Nasio may not know is that her brother's extreme bravery and success could perhaps just be a patriarchal man-made attribute aimed at intimidating her into adoring the stature of the male.

Almost all ogre narratives, present the possibility of the girl being eaten in the absence of the boy, only to be saved later by the latter. At other times, the boy will be presented fighting with the monstrous ogre, to protect the girl who is actually present witnessing the fight but doing nothing to help. If the ogre defeats the boy, the girl will be eaten. If the boy wins he will take away the girl and marry her. Thus, either way, the girl will be possessed – as food or as a wife. On the other hand, the boy, regardless of his size or his circumstances, will be enabled to destroy the monster and save the community, (Akivaga and Odaga, *ibid.*)" Through such narrations, the girl (perpetual victim) is contrasted with the boy (defender, liberator and hero).

The girl as the irredeemable victim

Interestingly, in spite of the men's 'naturally' duty bound 'benefaction' and 'benignity,' girls still always find themselves in trouble. All this – it seems – not because the men have absconded their duty, but due to the girls' own 'foolishness' and 'gullibility', or perhaps their 'inherent stupid unhearing.' What comes out is that girls or women in general are difficult to help. They are always guilty of the Proppian functions of 'interdiction' and 'violation.' They constantly facilitate 'villainy' against themselves through their own complicity. For instance, Obong'o in the narrative, *Cutting a middle finger*, strongly warns Aloo, his sister not to open the door to strangers, while Nasio, in *Nasio* is forbidden by her brother, to talk to strangers and the girl in *Nandagaywa* is severely instructed to always feed the dogs first before she herself eating. However, in all the cases, the girls violate the interdictions and end up being harmed. Apparently, the only way the girls in the three narratives would have avoided harm was to have their brothers around. In effect, the lesson here is clear – girls are not able to take care of themselves. Left alone, they will always 'violate' 'interdictions' through their inherent 'complicity and facilitate 'villainy', thus, coming to harm.

The place of girls

Owing to the apparent vulnerability imposed on girl children by society, it must be impressed upon them on the imprudence of wandering away from designated safe precincts. Girls are, thus, to stay indoors to avoid the dangers outside: the ogres, the dark forests, strange lands and the strangers who inhabit such places. Often it is perhaps simply to avoid being caught between the might of the men who could be engaged in battle out there. Conversely, the only safe place for girls is indoors. They have to live indoors and work indoors. The virtuous girls, thus, are the ones who are completely tamed. Those who venture out like Simbi in the popular Bukusu narrative *Simbi and Namakanda* are eaten by the ogre. Contrary to the norm and expected practice, Simbi refuses the young men from her country, recommended by her parents, choosing to be married far away in a strange land. Perhaps as a way of teaching her adventurous spirit a lesson, Simbi finds herself faced with death at the hands of the ogres. Having escaped death by sheer luck, Simbi comes back to her parents a humbled girl.

It is observable that Simbi's encounter in the narrative is a big lesson to prospective Simbis, who should learn that for them to be safe, they better live indoors and get married next door, to men chosen for them. Indeed those who insist on making their own choices like Nsalala in *Nsalala, the Beautiful Girl* narrative from the Soga of Uganda, are made to regret. After escaping death in the home of the suitor she herself had chosen:

Nsalala returned to her home and apologized to her parents... She became a less conceited girl and her parents selected a nice young man from her village for her to marry, (1969: p. 106-108).

Arguably, confining the Simbis and Nsalalas, serves a great purpose in the culture of training girls into submission and subservience. While the boys who work outdoors become exposed and learn survival tactics and self dependence, the girls who remain tamed indoors learn nothing beyond domestic chores. They consequently remain to depend on the men to hunt for them, provide for them and to protect them. They, thus, become helpless without the men's support. In effect, they have been trained into dependence and subservience.

The narratives further train the girls to understand that household duties are naturally theirs and that they risk rejection if they can't display expertise in this area. As demonstrated in the narrative, *Njabala* from the Ganda community in Uganda:

Njabala would not have got married, if her suitor was to know beforehand that she had not trained to perform domestic chores. Indeed, when he discovered that Njabala had deceived him, he sent her packing. And so Njabala returned to her father's house in great shame, (1969: p.102).

Otherwise, it seems like the necessity for men to protect women is apparently crucial, even imperative, if the latter are to avoid the numerous accidents to which they are susceptible, presumably being the "weaker sex."

Women as their own enemies

Other instances of the presentation of Girls and women in general, appear to suggest that they even need to be protected against each other, lest they harm one another. As depicted in most jealousy inspired narratives, females are inherently jealous of each other. They are always trying to kill one another out of jealousy. Often one is more beautiful than the other and the less beautiful one wants to get rid of her rival for fear that she will lose a prospective husband to the more beautiful one. In one popular Luo narrative, *In search of husbands*, the more beautiful girl is changed into a smoking pipe, then into a pot and subsequently into a dog by her companions, to conceal her beauty; for fear that her presence might distract their prospective suitors.

In other instances, if the girls are not destroying their competitors, they are busy trying to outdo one another. They appear concerned with trivial issues such as, who will be decorated more beautifully. Occasionally, their jealousies often lead to self destruction, for instance, in the story *Mwambu and Sera* of the Gishu in Uganda, the girls who fail to be married by the handsome Mwambu, out of jealousy, end up committing suicide. However, in *A cut navel*, another popular narrative among the Luo of Kenya, it is Awiti's mother, Akelo who tries to kill her daughter's rival for her, though in the event she kills her own daughter by mistake. Meanwhile in the story *Nambi and Nvuma* of the Ganda, Nambi's mother would smear her with oils to make her beautiful and in the meantime, smear the face of her step-daughter, Nvuma with soot to make her less attractive than Nambi, her daughter.

The ultimate success

Having painted women as jealous, society then apparently attempts to minimize the anticipated harmful outcomes of this supposed jealousy by putting a man amidst the women, perhaps so as to control them. And, to ensure that every woman is under a man, society expects every woman to get married. Society then puts in place taboos that ridicule and more-or-less outlaw spinsterhood. An unmarried woman is thus viewed with suspicion. She is dangerous. Narratives told to young people, thus, emphasize the issue of marrying and living happily ever after. The girls are snatched from the jaws of the ogre or hyena or gorilla, to enable them get married and live happily ever after. Men go for girls or girls are rewarded to male heroes so as to have them married and live happily ever after. Where initially there was no girl, one is created in a mysterious manner and contrived into marrying and living happily ever after. All the stories, thus, end in marriage. Girls are described in marriageable terms. The good girls marry good husbands and live happily ever after. The bad girls and those who refuse suitors like Simbi and Nsalala, subsequently get bad or ugly husbands who mistreat them, or even kill them, or have them eaten.

The importance bestowed on marriage in the African view, was and still is urgent and crucial. The African society views marriage as the ultimate goal for a woman, (Uwakweh, *ibid*). The narratives told to children extol marriage as the natural course for girls. The success of a girl is, therefore, explained in terms of her ability to secure a husband. That girls should be so preoccupied with personal beauty and rivalry against each other, is a matter that seeks and indeed earns justification in this status accorded marriage. With marriage that celebrated and institutionalized, society hits two birds with one stone. Firstly, women are made available to

serve the men; a role they are perhaps most valued for. Secondly, thus married and confined in their houses, the men can subordinate them and exercise total control over them.

‘Commodification’ of women

We are coining the word ‘commodification’ for our purposes of explaining the tendency in African setups to treat women like a commodity, or property, in other words. Apart from projecting marriage as the highest achievement for girls, narratives also objectify them. Indeed, in Igbo- Nigeria, the word *nwanyibuego* is a popular term meaning ‘woman is wealth’. In Emecheta (1978), the main character is named ‘Aku-nna’ at birth, meaning literally ‘father’s wealth’. On the other hand, she is described in some communities as a flier, a stranger or a passerby implying that she is never permanent in a place, including her parents’ home. So her parents value her primarily for the bride wealth she will fetch upon her marriage, (Uwakweh, *ibid*). Similarly, stories abound in Africa where a father or a chief will offer his daughter or/and a sizeable portion of his wealth to whichever man will perform a set goal to satisfaction. The men in these narratives often have to choose between the girl and wealth. Many times, the suitor earns both the girl and a herd of cattle. Hardly is the value of the girl differentiated from the alternative option of wealth such as animals.

The view of women as some kind of commodity is entrenched in many African cultures. For instance, among the Baganda, a man who committed adultery “would be fined two women... In case of accidental homicide... the fine for homicide was generally 20 cows, 20 goats, 20 backcloths and 20 women,” (Roscoe, 1965:261).

It would appear prudent to argue that this treatment of girls and women in the narratives is only natural and does not mean any harm. But the weight against such an argument is the fact that the narratives play a role in socializing the girl child into the society. Indeed, as Plato once observed, the influence of literature on society cannot be gainsaid. It goes without saying that folk narratives in Africa advertently or inadvertently aim to map out a course of subservience for the girl child, this by carefully emphasizing particular aspects of life; aspects that extol male superiority and female inferiority while the latter are conditioned to look up to and depend on men. These aspects are idealized as virtue in a woman, thus, a measure of female dignity and integrity, to which every ‘normal’ woman has to conform. The end product of this effort is then a woman whose inferiority, frailty, weakness and dependence have been caused and internalized as the girl tries to conform to gain society’s acceptance.

What motivates the narratives?

In view of all the preceding facts, pertinent questions come to mind. Why does everybody tell these narratives? Why do women tell these narratives? Why do girls tell these narratives in spite of their glaring bias or imbalance? Why should the narratives be told anyway, despite their obvious negation of girls and the entire women folk?

In attempting to answer these questions, we may need to foreground two underlying possibilities. Firstly, subordination of women to men is something institutionalized by the society and internalized and accepted by the very victims of the said subordination. The mother of the girl child found her mother serving this system, which the mother of her mother and the mother of her mother’s mother had all served in the same capacity. To the members of this lineage, subservience is the norm. The existence of alternative options has never and does not occur in their memory. Happiness and contentedness are sought within this framework. In fact even the very attempt to draw attention to the injustices of the framework may be viewed with suspicion by the very women themselves. What could one be up to? What the women are familiar with is this status. And anyway, if life can still continue with everything the way it is, why not maintain the status quo! In other words, it may be like a situation where it is the outsider feeling the pinch of the shoe and not the wearer herself.

Secondly, the pressure exerted on the mother of an African girl child is immense. She is held responsible for what her daughter grows into. Society has trained her to feel guilty if her daughter fails to adhere to the society’s prescriptions and expectations. During story telling sessions, the mother of the girl child feels duty bound to emphasize those aspects of the narratives that will help her mould her daughter into the society’s ideal woman – the faithful servant of her husband and virtuous mother of her children. Alkali (1987), describes what the African society considers a virtuous woman to be: a quiet and good-natured girl, who sees the man as superior: she is not aggressive but coy; not boisterous but quiet; not assertive but compromising... These lessons are packaged in the narratives, and without stopping to think and without any sense of guilt, they are administered raw and full doze, to the unsuspecting girls by women or fellow girls, who on their part intend no malice. However, the power of this innocent gesture is like a smolder that keeps alive without ever bursting into umbers, but which effectively cooks the potato buried in the ash at the hearth, into edible state.

What has changed?

This question can only amount to a rhetoric. Other than the fact that the sessions for oral narrative performance have reduced, the ideology and expectations on women and girls remain more or less constant. An utterly aggressive woman is always viewed with suspicion while a woman who does not get married raises eyebrows. On the other hand, women who become very visible, whether politically, economically or otherwise invite a number of questions. A significant question here is likely to be: Who is the man behind her? As they say, old habits die hard; the woman and girl child in Africa still require some effort to wriggle themselves out of the shadows of men and, so to say, live in some space of their own.

II. CONCLUSION

African societies use the power of oral literature to train the girl into the type of woman they want in society, specifically a subservient and compromising woman. Narratives packaged with the type of woman character preferred are told to the unsuspecting girl children who, in their enjoyment of the stories internalize the lessons propagated in the stories. Consequently, the girl child's character is moulded along the lessons in the stories to become society's virtuous woman: not aggressive but coy; not boisterous but quiet; not assertive but compromising.

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