

Gender Power Contestations: Man the Ogre, the Weaker Sex; Images of Men in Kikuyu Oral Narratives

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Abstract

This paper explores the representation of the male in the oral narratives of the Kikuyu people of Central Kenya. The paper analyses a sample of seven folktales recorded from female artists from Kirinyaga County. The folktales were recorded in the original Kikuyu dialect and translated into English for analysis. The narratives were analysed using a gender studies approach where gender representations are the central category of analysis. In the analysis, man, the male character emerges as a negative persona, represented by the negative binary. The male is embellished in the image of the ogre or a villain archetype in the narrative. The male character is depicted as potential violator of girls and as a glutton who would annihilate the society through his uncontrolled greed. Symbolically, the male can only be controlled by the older woman or the younger male who has been apprenticed by the older woman. The paper concludes that the narratives have an overwhelming feminine focus that foregrounds female power in the traditional contestation of gender power. This focus has developed over the years as women's reaction to patriarchal power and male dominance. Women being the main storytellers in this community have used the folktale as an instrument of exercising female power.

Key Words: Gender, Images, Men, Kikuyu, Oral Narratives

Introduction

This paper analyses and discusses the representations of the male image in selected narratives from the Kikuyu community of Central Kenya. The paper pays particular attention to the negative depiction of the male character in the folktales. The focus of our analysis is to elucidate how oral literature transmits thoughts ideas and motifs that essentially project a traditional feminist framework.

Folktales extricate the relationships between male and female in these contexts in different but interacting symbolic perspectives. Our discussion in this paper is contextualized in the representation of gender power relations and the propagation of gender ideology from a feminine perspective. This is against a background of overwhelming male dominance ideology projected in all spheres in the patriarchal society. The negative images of men will be discussed as inversions and subversion of male dominance in the bid for female empowerment (Kabira: 1994, Bukenya: 2001).

For our analytical purposes we shall discuss three sets of folktales from our sample. In the first set we shall analyse folktales that focalise on the young female character. In the second set, we shall analyse those that focalise on the male character and in the third category discuss the role of the grandmothers as the custodians of the families.

Man, the Ogre

Courtship is an exciting stage in the lives of young women and men in the traditional Kikuyu community. This is the only stage in life when individuals traditionally enjoyed the highest degree of freedom. It comes after circumcision and acts as a period of incubation into maturity and responsibility. The folktale, foregrounds at the conscious and the unconscious plane the essence of this freedom articulating the limits and possibilities in the choice of a marriage partner.

One running characteristic in the narratives is the stereotypical gender characterisation contrastive. Male or symbolic male characters are depicted as substantially different from their female counterparts. The girls participating in the courtship game as normal human beings. But there is always something abnormal about the male character. He is either an ogre or an animal character. When he is a human character, he is an 'incomplete' male. He is poor, crippled or uncircumcised.

The contrasting fictional set of characters consist of what Jay Edwards refers to as binary oppositions (Edwards: 1991) in the traditional structure of the tale. The structure is definitive, making the story memorable and the content easy to transmit and retain (Lesser: 1962:169 -170). Secondly, this contrast articulates the psychoanalytic and the social significance of the narratives.

In the courtship game, the male is always invariably represented as an ogre. There are many variations and versions of folktales in which ogres woo girls. In our discussion we shall follow the version of 'The Girl, the Ogre and the Ogre's Son, Manga'. The version was recorded from Wanjira Wa Rukenya from Baricho Village, Kirinyaga County.

The most common arena of the wooing game, is usually at the dances. The ogre comes to the dance disguised as a handsome young man. He is a very attractive and a very good dancer. In most stories he is a stranger in the particular locality. He also speaks 'well' and at the end of the dance he wins the hearts of many of the girls. He is elegant, eligible and attractive. As he leaves, a group of girls insist on accompanying him 'so that they can go and see his home'

On the way, the girls following from behind notice some oddities about the handsome young man. When he jumps over trenches, the hair at the back of his head parts and a second mouth is visible. Occasionally the ogre swallows flies through this mouth. One after the other, the girls excuses themselves and flee back home. They go back home feigning excuses that there are tasks they had been assigned by their mothers and they are yet to complete performing them. One adamant girl remains. She follows the ogre despite the warning from the others. In some versions she simply does not notice what the rest of the girls observe about the physical features of the young man. She is finally led to the ogre's house where she is held prisoner in readiness for the day when she will be 'eaten'.

In extended versions of the story, the girl attempts to escape from the ogre's house. She digs a hole, gets out but on her way home it rains heavily. She seeks shelter on top of a tree from where she is unfortunately recaptured by the ogre and his son, Manga. She is taken back into captivity and given two options. She either agrees to be their 'mother' so that she can be cooking for them or she is eaten. She chooses the former and remains in the ogre's homestead cooking for them whatever they hunt, including humans.

One day they bring back infant twins after killing and eating the mother. The woman is ordered to cook the babies but secretly substitutes the two boys with a pair of rats. The gullible ogres eat the rats despite protestations from the ogre's son, Manga, that that meat was bitter. The woman brings up the boys secretly and acquires weapons for them. When they are of age, the boys, assisted by their 'mother', kill the ogres. They then take over the home and convert it into a normal human abode.

There is also the story of "Wanja" by the same storyteller. Wanja is the girl who tempts the ogre and ends by losing one of her breasts to the ogre. In the story, the female character tempts or transgresses on the ogre. The ogre is initially presented as a stump on the path which the girls use as they go to collect firewood in the forest. The stump repeatedly injures the toes of girls. One girl, Wanja, decides to uproot it with a machete. On their way back home, the uprooted stump has already turned into an ogre.

He seeks revenge on the girl who uprooted him and has to be pacified with one of her breast. After eating the breast, the ogre also warns the girl never to reveal who ate it. Unfortunately, she is too traumatised. One day she reveals the truth. The ogre immediately appears in their home where he swallows everybody and all the animals as he seeks the girl. Meanwhile she is hiding in her grandmother's house. The grandmother fights back the ogre, overcomes the beast and retrieves all he had consumed by cutting the ogre's index finger.

Another related version narrated by Jacinta Wangithi from Kiaritha Village, Kirinyaga County; tells a story of the girl who falls in love with a young man she meets near the river while drawing water. The girl invites the man to her home to meet her parents. He is reluctant but she insists. The young man warns her that if he visits the home he might ruin it. She insists. He agrees to go but turns up as an ogre and true to his word he ruins the homestead. He swallows all the livestock and everybody except for a younger brother who was away visiting his maternal grandmother. The boy grows up in his grandmother's home. The grandmother procures weapons for him. He goes back home, confronts the ogre, kills him and retrieves his lost family.

In all the versions summarised above, the ogre symbolically represents the young male in the courtship game. He is not only the image of a deceitful man but also a signification of male sexuality, a threat of sexual violation on the unmarried female (Brinkman: 1996:138).

The practice of a group of girls following the eligible bachelor and engaging in overnight fondling in his hut, was a common and socially accepted practice in the traditional society. The group would follow the bachelor into his hut and collectively engage in the practice known as *nguiko*. The man would lie on top of each girl in turns and finally settle for the night with the one he had chosen as a possible spouse. But as the fictional tale intimates, this could be a risky situation posing the danger of sexual

penetration. In reality, if the man became too aggressive and the girl was at risk, she would pinch the girl sleeping next to her, who would pinch the next one. This way the threat would be communicated and they would rise and resist the man collectively (Kenyatta: 1971(1938) Brinkman: 1996)

This possibility is articulated in the stories when the group of the girls is following the ogre and notices the mouth at the back of his head. The signal, warning of the possible threat of being eaten, is communicated among the girls through pinching one another. Once the communication is perceived, the girls excuse themselves one by one and go back home except the lone girl who refuses to heed the warning. The story, at this stage, points at the beginnings of the consolidation of a common feminine consciousness in confronting the male world against the possibilities of sexual violation. It points to the necessity of female co-operation in matters of courtship (Brinkman: 1996:139). Female solidarity becomes a protective measure. The girl who refuses to co-operate or who wishes to act independently does so at her own risk. Her actions outside those of the rest of the group can lead to actual violation or threat of possible sexual violation. And it can happen as in the story of 'Wanja' in the story outlined above. She provokes the ogre by being brave enough to uproot the stump on the path. She acts alone. The others avoid it and she pays dearly with her breast and a possible destruction of her entire family.

These narratives foreground the question of individual choice in courtship. The focus is weighed on the female character. The narrative subverts the freedom the girls enjoy during courtship by proposing the possible negative consequences of that freedom. The story reinforces patience in the choice of spouses. They particularly warns against 'male strangers who may well turn out to be ogres. Essentially, the narratives are abstracting on the choice of an ideal husband, a husband who will not turn into an ogre in real life. (Brinkman: 139). Simultaneously the stories do not discount the possibility of one being courted and eventually being married by a man who is an 'ogre'.

This possibility is actualized in the story of 'Nyanjiru' also by Wanjira Wa Rukenya. Nyanjiru is a young girl who is courted by all sorts of despicable men, symbolized in the narrative by Hyena, Beetle and Hawk. First to seek her hand in marriage is Hyena, whom she accepts. He brings beer to her family as a sign that he is ready to open marriage negotiations. Members of the clan drink the beer signifying that the negotiations can begin. Beetle then comes along to woo Nyanjiru. She accepts him and he also brings the beer to the people. They accept it despite having taken the offer from Hyena. Hawk finally enters the scene. He appears richer than the other two. He offers to pay dowry in the form of chicks. Nyanjiru decides this is her man and she marries him. They go off to live in Hawk's nest up the tree.

The husband, Hawk, however turns out to be an ogre. He mistreats her as he bides his time waiting for the day he will invite the other hawks so that they can feast on her. Fortunately, she calls out to her brothers who save her. She vows that she will never again marry animal suitors.

Nyanjiru's story portrays a rather anti-ethical proposition. She has multiple suitors and she lets her relatives accept beer from them all. Under normal circumstances, a girl cannot give her parents and relatives the green light to accept beer from a suitor unless she is sure she would marry him. Before the beer is drunk, it is poured into a horn and given to the girl who passes it to her father. He regards the horn of beer, then asks her

clearly so that everybody gathered for the ceremony can hear, “Mother, if I drink this beer, will I ever vomit it? “If the girl answers “no”, then, the father can proceed and drink from the horn. It means she has accepted to be married by the suitor. The horn is refilled. The girl is asked to take a sip and then pass it on to her suitor so that everybody at the ceremony can ‘know who he is.’ Once that identity is established, it is an impossible sacrilege to come up again with another suitor. (Gathingira:1934, Kenyatta: 1971 (1938)

Nyanjiru’s story defies this ethic. She not only brings in one lover after another, but her relatives willingly drink from them all. She accepts all but takes the richest. This story captures the setting of opportunistic materialism in courtship in contemporary society but never condemns the girl. The men however emerge as ‘the greedy hyena’, ‘the stupid beetle’ that keeps on rolling moulds of dung and as the hawk who actually is an ogre.

Man, the Incomplete Suitor

The disadvantaged male suitor is also represented in many folktale versions as poor, ugly and jigger-ridden. He could also be an uncircumcised boy. In either case, the young man intends to marry the most beautiful woman in the village. This girl has refused to talk to all men, vowing that if she ever talks to any man, even if it is an overgrown boy, she would marry him.

In the story of ‘Kabindura’, recorded from Wanjira Rukenya, Kabindura is poor and the narrator in the story refers to him as ‘useless’. He has crooked, jigger-ridden feet ‘because he has nobody to take care of him’. His age mates disregard him, but he alone knows what he is capable of. He bets with them that he can win the girl who has refused to talk with them. If he wins her, they promise to give him the goats and cattle with which he can pay for her bride price.

Technically, the narrator uses song as the instrument through which the young man wins the bride. He goes to woo her in the fields where she is scaring away birds from her mother’s millet farm. He tricks the girl into speaking to him by singing to her and uprooting millet at the same time. The girl is puzzled about this ‘madman’ who is singing and uprooting her mother’s millet. She asks him what he thinks he is doing. This becomes her undoing. She has talked to the man and has to marry him. Kabindura wins a bride and the bet.

The other young men pay what they promised and he has enough to pay for the bride price. The story of the uncircumcised boy by Jacinta Wangithi follows a similar pattern. The boy tricks the girl by requesting her to come and help his ‘father’ who is in the pangs of labour pain and is about to give birth by the roadside. “But since when did men start giving birth?” Queries the girl, too late to realise that she has spoken. She has no alternative than to marry the boy. The boy wins the bet, gets circumcised and marries the girl.

On the surface these stories are commenting on obvious moral messages. They invert popular perceptions of individual ability and worth. They project the folk psychology, which sympathises with the weak and the poor projecting an alternative to the status of the underprivileged (Zipes: 1992:17, George and Jones: 1995:163). Everybody in the community is expected to marry or get married whether they are poor or ugly. The

overgrown boy is not circumcised because his father is poor. He and Kabindura can only acquire the necessary 'wealth' to go through these rites of passage through their own wit and courage. One of the messages in these stories then is that poverty should not be an impediment to self-actualisation.

Nevertheless, the two characters can marry virtuous girls only through deceit. In their extended symbolic representation of all men, they offer man as the inferior spouse in the marriage pact. They can be complete and decent men only through the engagement to a woman.

The arrangement of the symbolic images in the narratives discussed so far, favour the female character. In the courtship game, she is the positive, dynamic and central, while the male suitor is the negative of the binary. He is an ogre, an undesirable animal or the deformed or incomplete young man.

Feminine Focalization

A deeper analysis of the folktales discussed so far in this paper present what Bal refers to as 'the vision of the fabula, (Bal: 1985: 100,105). Besides thematic messages highlighted above, the stories present the audience with an external focalisation, which is overwhelmingly feminine. Whether it is the male or female artist who narrates the stories, the perspective remains feminine. An analysis of the narrative patterns of the stories discussed above, confirms this dominant feminine vision in folktales.

The story the ogres, 'Manga and his father', demonstrates the process and pattern of acquisition of female power even while under the grip of male dominance. In the version of the story summarized above, when the ogres catch up with the escaping female character, she is given two alternatives. She has to choose either to be eaten, or agree to become their 'mother' so that she can be cooking for them. She opts for the latter. She cooks for them whatever they hunt but refuses to partake in the ogre's meals. The female character adopts accommodation strategies as a way of negotiating her space in the male world (Petchesky and Judd: 1998:19, Karim: 2009:99). Whatever they hunted, she would cook for them. If they caught squirrels, she would cook for them. If they caught humans she would cook for them.

The accommodation strategies of the female character at this point enable her to transcend her position as a victim. She becomes a survivor. As the story develops, she can become the controller. As the controller, she is able to save the twins brought in as hunt by the two ogres by substituting them with rats. She hides them in a pot until they finally mature despite suspicions by Manga.

At this point, her level of control is even greater. She is able to willfully make the ogres participate in a game, which is their death trap. She convinces them to join her in a test of strength. In turns, they are pegged under a hide and attempt to release themselves. When the ogre's and his son's turn to be pegged under, she secures the hide so tightly that they cannot release themselves. At that point she calls upon the boys she had been bringing up secretly and they kill the ogres.

It is interesting to note that this is a story of one woman and many men. Significantly then, this story demonstrates female power over the life of males. Her capture and enslavement by the male ogres is just but an illusion of their visible male power. The

woman has the real power over life and death. She can nurture life as she does with the twins and dispense with it when it comes to ogres. At the end of the narrative, the female character is the determinant in resolving the conflict. She determines how the society will be organized once the ogres are dead. At the beginning of the conflict, the woman is the victim. In the resolution of the conflict the woman emerges the victor, the protector of life and a symbol of the powerful 'great mother' figure who is the source of knowledge' (Kabira: 1994:134, Chinweizu: 1990:90, Gachanja: 2002).

In the story of 'Muya and Cinji', (also by Wanjira Rukenya) man without woman is depicted as helpless. Muya and his sister Cinji are orphans who live alone. Muya is always going out to dance leaving the sister alone. Despite her repeated warning to the brother that there are male marauders who want to kidnap her, Muya does not heed her advice. She is afraid that once these men take (marry) her, Muya will have nobody to take care of him. And she warns him of the possibility of suffering if she is 'carried off'.

The prediction is fulfilled when Cinji is forcefully taken away to be married. Her brother attempts to follow her but he gets lost on the way. He seeks and gets employment. But without the sister or the mother to take care of him, he is famished and attacked by jiggers. One day, years later, he stumbles into his sister's homestead. She cannot even recognize him. She did not know it was her brother because he had become haggard. When she eventually recognizes him, he is rehabilitated. The jiggers are removed and the sister helps him to get a wife because as the narrator puts, without a wife he was a useless person. The sister reinstates his humanity. He became like a son. He is assisted in building his house, starting a home and establishing his identity as a man.

The feminine focalization further finds focus even greater expression in the motif of the grandmother who helps salvage society in the face of extinction. When the community is threatened with annihilation by an ogre, only the grandmother can harness resources and skills to neutralize the threat.

In the story by Jacinta Wangithi summarized earlier, the ogre eats up everything and everyone during a visit to his prospective in-laws. This is a visit normally required by tradition. Within the Kikuyu community young couples may choose whom they want to marry. But parents always require that they 'see' the prospective groom before negotiations of the marriage begin. This 'seeing' of the prospective groom is a crucial vetting process. After knowing the prospective groom, parents can vet the marriage on several grounds. Among the accepted grounds are blood relationship and blood enmity. The others are the practice of witchcraft and a prevalence of genetic diseases in the family of the prospective groom (Gathingira: 1934, Kenyatta: 1971(1938)).

All these factors are feared because they can lead to the extinction of a family line. In the two versions above the ogre is an epitome of all these and more. In Wangithi's version, it is only the boy who was away visiting his grandmother, who escapes. The grandmother brings him up, prepares him and gives him the resources to kill the ogre and retrieve back his family.

The narrative of 'Mwathi' by Marion Mwaniki from Kamuiru Village in Kirinyaga County, exhibits the same pattern and principle but the details are slightly different. Here we have a man who rears a dog that metamorphoses into an ogre. The man is

warned early but does not heed the advice. When told that his dog is eating goat's kids he claims both the kids and the dog belong to him. Then the next time the dog ate a cow. The man said the dog and the cow belonged to him. The dog became big and its next target was humans. It ate people in that country and almost finished them.

The ogre consumes everyone except the neglected wife who lives with her grandson in the backyard overgrown with bush. The grandmother prepares the grandson to one day confront the animal. But only when he is fully-grown. But one day the ogre gets hold of Mwathi and after a struggle defeats him and carries him off. The grandmother comes to his rescue. She cuts off the legs of the ogre with a secret weapon and rescues Mwathi. The people it had consumed are also retrieved after its index finger is cut.

The point of view, tone and perspective in the two stories are feminine. The artists project the view that it is within the ability and the experience of woman to save society from the threat posed by the vices of male dominance. In the image of the ogre, the male is represented as a creature of uncontrollable greed and sexuality. But the grandmother can block, reversing or controlling the destructive elements. She can do this by applying the use of secret weapons and by nurturing the male child in such a way that he can conquer the elements of greed and dominance in himself. By conquering the ogres through the help of their grandmothers, the young men are conquering the traits of excessive greed and dominance in themselves and hence subjecting themselves to dictates of female power. The women in these narratives, like the mother in the story of the ogre and his son, Manga, emerge as the gender with power over life and death in the community. They are visualized as the protector and source of knowledge and resources that can restore the community after a period of crises.

Conclusion

The male character in the narratives discussed in this paper, emerge as a negative characters embellished in the image of the ogre or an archetypically negative animal character. The male character is depicted as potential violator of girls who given a chance would annihilate the society through his uncontrolled greed. The narratives demonstrate the extent of the negative destructive forces of male dominance which can only be tamed by older women.

The narratives discussed project a compact feminist consciousness in analysing social gender power relations. They project the awareness of gender injustice against women, sense of sisterhood, female solidarity and the positive feminine vision (Learner 1986: 238). We can hence in this paper conclude that, the negative images of men in the folktales underlie ideological position advanced by women as the dominant performing gender. While men also perform folktales covered by our research, women are the predominant performers (Kabira: 1992). Over the years, the tale seems to have evolved a feminine vision that acts as a balancing and cathartic force against patriarchy. Women, as cardinal storytellers, have integrated the manifestations of female power in the performance of oral literary texts.

The ideology projected in the tale operate in constant opposition to the 'officially' sanctioned ideology of male dominance. In the fictional truth of the tale, the female characters expresses resentment at the norms and attitudes that define them as inferior

and subvert and invert the structures of male dominance. The narratives then constitute an exercise of female power within the confines of patriarchy. In the process women develop their separate binaries enabling them to resist and subvert patriarchal oppression (Halls: 2001:203-205, Tong: 96).

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