

GENDER ROLES ON STAGE: AN EXAMINATION OF SOME SELECTED NIGERIAN CHILDREN'S PLAYS

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Abstract

This study examines the limited scholarships on how Nigerian children's plays represent and negotiate gender roles. It investigates how gender stereotypes are perpetrated or reinforced. It aims to show how gender roles are constructed and contested in two Nigerian children's plays using Judith Butler's gender performative theory. The study employs qualitative textual analysis of Ukala's *The Tortoise and the Leopard* and Osofisan's *The Moon and the Cape*. The plays were analysed for characterization and thematic contents. Findings reveal that both plays make gender roles visible, challenge traditional stereotypes of masculinity and femininity and present alternatives based on cooperation and role reversal. The study concludes that children's plays can disrupt gender binaries among young Nigerian audiences. It is therefore recommended that playwrights should write more gender-balanced children's plays, that Drama teachers should always follow performance with discussions, that parents and communities should balance children's story diet, and that the Federal Ministry of Education should sponsor the production of more gender-neutral plays.

Keywords: Gender, Gender roles, Children's plays, Stereotypes

Introduction

Gender is one of the first social categories children learn. From family interactions to school lessons and medial consumption, children learn messages about what it means to be "a boy" or "a girl" in their society. In the Nigerian context, children's theatre occupies a unique space in this socialization process. Unlike television or film, live theatre for young audiences is interactive, communal, and didactic. It is "edutainment" - it entertains while teaching moral, history, language and acceptable behaviour. Ebewo (2001) notes that African theatre for children is deliberately pedagogical because "the child audience is seen as the future bearer of culture".

Despite this educational mandate, many Nigerian children's plays draw heavily from folklore and oral tradition where gender roles are sharply divided. In pre colonial narratives, men are often hunters, kings, worries, and tricksters who operate in the public sphere. Women are wives, mothers, cooks, or passive rewards for male achievements. When these narratives are adopted for stage without critical revision, they risk transmitting 19th century gender norms to 21st century children). According this theory, gender is not innate but performed through repeated acts. This lens reads

Yet, while gender studies in Nigerian literature are growing, few studies focus specifically on drama written for children. Most scholarship focuses on adult drama by reknown dramatist like Soyinka, Rotimi or Osofisan. Thus, it becomes necessary to pay attention to this important area in order to employ it as a means of portraying gender appropriately.

Conceptual Review

- i. Gender in children's literature. Gender refers to socially constructed roles, behaviours, and expectations attached to sex (Butler, 1990) in children's literature, these constructs are often naturalized through character action (Nwosu, 2020). However, recent African scholarship argues for texts that deconstruct such binaries to support SDG5: Gender Equality (UNESCO, 2022).
- ii. Children's Drama in Nigeria: Nigerian Children's plays function didactically. It uses myths, folktale and allegory to teach civic and moral values (Ukaka, 202) scholars note a shift from moralizing narratives to critical, participatory texts that invite children to question norms (Inegbe, 2023).

Theoretical Frame Work

This study adopts two theories:

- i. Gender performativity theory (Butler, 1990). According to this theory, gender is not innate but performed through repeated acts. This lens reads Lara and Mrs. Tortoise in *The Tortoise and Leopard* as agents who 'do' leadership and intellect, thereby destabilizing fixed gender categories.
- ii. Post Colonial Feminist Drama Theory (Ebewo, 1999) this framework examines how African drama negotiates gender within post-colonial, indigenous contexts, emphasizing resistance to imported patriarchal norms and recovery of female agency (Chukuma, 2024).

Textual analysis of the two plays

a. Synopsis of The Plays

Sam Ukala's *The Tortoise and the Leopard* (1998)

The play is a dramatization of an animal folktale for children. In it, Leopard, who is strong but proud and foolish, is unable to cross a wide river to attend a feast in the neighbouring village. He meets the Tortoise who is small but cunning and intelligent.

The Leopard mocks the Tortoise for his small size as both of them try to cross the river. The Leopard, relying on his physical strength tries and fails to cross the river. The Tortoise then devises a plan with the cooperation of his wife, Mrs. Tortoise, he tricks the Leopard into becoming their "bridge".

Through teamwork and intellect, Tortoise and his wife cross the river on Leopard's back, attend the feast, and with Leopard stranded and humiliated. The play ends with Leopard learning that strength without wisdom is useless, and that cooperation and intelligence are more powerful than brute force.

Femi Osofisan's *The Moon and the Cape* (1997)

The play is set in the Kingdom of Irawo. In this play, a wicked spirit has stolen the Moon and hidden it. Following this singular act, all rain has stopped, and as a result, the land is facing drought and famine.

The son of the King, Prince Ade, believes he should be the one to rescue the Kingdom because he is a male. However, he fails to achieve this feat. Prince Lara, His younger sister, is brave, intelligent and determined and against her brother's protests she undertakes the quest.

Lara faces several difficulties and with wit and courage, she outwits the spirit and recovers the moon. Rain returns, and the Kingdom is saved. Ade learns humility and acknowledges his sister's superiority. The play ends with a reversal of gender roles: a girl, not the prince, becomes the true hero of the Kingdom.

Discussion on the Themes of the Two Texts

- **Reinforcement of patriarchal stereotypes.**

Ukala's play dramatizes an Igbo folktale about tortoise's contest with Leopard. While entertaining, the play presents three consistent gender patterns.

- Male dominance in decision – making and public space. The entire plot revolves around male negotiation, competition and rulership. Tortoise and Leopard bargain over marriage and kingdom without consulting any female character.

For example,

Tortoise: "I am the wisest of all animals. Let the king give me his daughter and half his kingdom if I win, (page 18)

Leopard: "No animal dares challenge me; I am king of the forest by strength" (page 9)

Marriage here is a transaction between males. The king's daughter has no dialogue about her consent. Public power-kingship, judgement and war is exclusively male. This reflects Butler's idea that masculinity is performed through claims to authority and control.

- **Female characters as domestic and passive**

Mrs Tortoise and other female animals appear only in the kitchen or as background. They have no names, no carriers and no independent goals, their dialogue is limited to service and obedience.

Mrs. Tortoise: "husband, your guest are here, let me prepare food for them" (Page 22).

Narrator: "so the king's beautiful daughter was given to tortoise as wife" (page 45)

The phrase "given to Tortoise" objectifies the female character, she is property transferred from father to husband. This mirrors Akingbe's findings that folklore plays often presents women as "prizes for male achievement". For child audiences this normalizes the idea that girls ultimate role is marriage.

The Moon and the Cape: Subversion and female agency Osofisan's play revises a Yoruba Myths about a community threatened by a destructive "cape" unlike Ukala, Osofisan centers women as problem solvers.

Female leadership in public/political space

The Moon, a female deity and Iya Agba, a female elder, drive the plot. They speak in council, negotiate with spirit and organize the community:

The Moon: “I am not just a light in the sky. I am the conscience of this land. I will speak for the children. (Page 12)

Iya Agba: When men make war, it is women and children who bury the dead. We must stop this (Page 28)

Here women move from the kitchen to the council chamber, leadership is not gendered. This directly challenges the division seen in Ukala’s play

- Courage and voice for girl characters

Young females characters are not damsels. They question elders, volunteer for danger and initiate action.

Girl 1: “If the cape must take our mothers then it takes me first. I am not afraid. (page 41)

Girl 2: “We will go to the forest. We will face the cape. We are not cowards. (page 43)

In the above extract, Osofisan uses these lines to model assertiveness for girl audience. The girls act first, men follow later. This provides a counter model to the silent “king’s daughter” in Ukala

Analysis and Discussion**Presentation of Male Characters.**

Male characters in the plays are shown as transformable: For example, Ade learns humility and acknowledges his sister’s superiority when she successfully undertakes a dangerous mission in order to save the whole community. The Leopard, obviously a male character, also change from pride to humility. The Leopard was outwitted by a very little creature, the tortoise, thus making him to realize that one’s stature does not matter in all cases.

Presentation of Female Characters

In the two plays, female characters play significant roles. They serve as protagonists and strategists. In *The Tortoise and the Leopard*, Mrs. Tortoise is pivotal to her husband’s victory. With her cooperation her husband outwitted the powerful Leopard thereby portraying her as a very intelligent character. Equally in Osofisan’s *The Moon and the Cape*, Prince Lara demonstrates courage and wit to recover the moon and save her kingdom from drought and famine.

Gender Stereotypes

Gender stereotypes refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women (Butler, 1990). In the Nigerian context, gender roles are often tied to labour division, authority and morality.

In the two plays under study, some characters are presented as stereotypical, subversive or neutral based on the roles they play. For example in *The Tortoise and the Leopard*, the Leopard bargains over marriage and kingdom without consulting any female character while in the *The Moon and the Cape*, a female and not a male takes the responsibility of saving the community from drought and famine.

Moral lessons for child audience

The plays present very important moral lessons to the child audience such as:

Humility: In *The Tortoise and the Leopard*, the child learns that it is good to be humble and intelligent. The leopard's failure caused by a small animal (the tortoise) is a typical example

Courage: The child audience learns that one has to be courageous in life in order to succeed. Prince Lara shows a lot of courage by insisting that she will be the one to recover the moon.

Cooperation: Cooperation as against pride, is an important quality needed for success between both males and females. With cooperation difficult tasks can be overcome.

Comparism of both Plays

Osofisan in *The Moon and the Cape* uses direct boy-girl reversal while in *The Tortoise and the Leopard* Ukala uses animal allegory and cross-sex cooperation to critique pride/strength both achieve a corrective gender message (Inegbe, 2023).

Findings

The findings of the study shows that the two plays function as counter-narratives to patriarchal gender norms for young audience. In both plays male characters are not portrayed as inherently superior but as capable of changing from pride to humility. In contrast, female characters are positioned as central agents who exercise courage and intellect to resolve crisis. By staging stereotypes only to reverse them, both texts detach competencies such as bravery and strategy from biological sex. This is remarkable as it disrupts the internalization of fixed gender hierarchies at a formative adolescent stage (Butler, 1990).

In addition to the above, the finding indicate that cooperation is framed as a gender neutral civic virtue. Success is achieved only through collaboration, while individual dominance leads to failure. This narrative structure aligns with the goals of gender-responsive basic education, which emphasizes collective problem-solving and equity (Federal Ministry of Education, 2023).

Comparatively, the authors use different dramatic modes to achieve a similar corrective message. Osofisan employs direct human role-reversal, while Ukala uses animals allegory to make the message accessible. Together, they provide alternative gender script that can be used pedagogically to advance SDG 5 in Junior Secondary Schools classrooms (UNESCO, 2022).

Conclusion

This study examined gender roles in Sam Ukala's *The Tortoise and the Leopard* and Femi Osofisan's *The Moon and the Cape*. Three conclusions emerged, first. Nigerian children's plays present contradictory gender ideologies: folklore plays often reinforce patriarchy, while revisionist plays challenge it. Second, female characters range from silent objects to courageous leaders depending on the playwright's vision. Third, the impact on children depend on how teachers mediate the performance. Thus, Nigerian children's theatre does more than entertain. Through *The Moon and the Cape* and *The Tortoise and the Leopard*, it makes gender roles visible, and gives children space to rehearse equality instead of inequality. Therefore the study concludes that both texts challenge patriarchal stereotypes, centre female agency, valorize cooperation, and as such, they serve as literary and instructional tools for promoting gender and equity among Nigerian children.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, this study recommends that:

- Playwrights should write more gender-balanced children's plays. Give female characters names, goals, and dialogue beyond marriage
- Drama teachers should always follow performance with discussion. Ask: who had power? Was that fair? Could a boy or a girl have done it differently?
- Parents and communities should balance children's story diet. If they perform patriarchal folklore, they should show the children a strong female lead at home in such stories.
- The Federal Ministry of Education and SUBEBS should fund and institutionalize school drama clubs and annual inter-school children's theatre festivals. This will provide a low-cost, scalable platform for pupils to perform, watch, and discuss equitable gender roles.

By taking these steps, Nigerian children's theater can fulfill edutainment mandate: entertaining children while educating them as well.

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