



Symbolic Interactionism and Feminist Readings of Women in Igbo Folktales

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Abstract. Gender discourse has assumed a prominent position in contemporary African scholarship, with many scholars attributing women's challenges to entrenched patriarchal ideologies within African societies. In Igboland, these perspectives often highlight male dominance as the root cause of female marginalization. However, this study re-examines women's representations in Igbo folktales to uncover other underlying factors contributing to women's experiences beyond patriarchy. Anchored on feminist literary theory, Principle of Female Mortification and symbolic interactionism, the paper investigates how women's portrayals in selected Igbo folktales reflect individual agency, internalized gender dynamics, and social attitudes that sometimes perpetuate female subjugation. The study adopts a qualitative research design, employing purposive sampling to select and analyze relevant folktales from written anthologies. Through critical textual and thematic analysis, the findings reveal that while patriarchal structures influence women's conditions, certain negative experiences are also self-engendered through women's complicity, rivalry, and moral failings as depicted in the tales. These narratives illustrate that Igbo oral tradition serves both as a mirror and a moral compass, using storytelling to instruct, critique, and reform social behavior. The study concludes that meaningful gender transformation in Igbo society requires a dual approach: confronting structural patriarchy while encouraging individual introspection, self-assessment, and moral mortification among women. It recommends renewed attention to folktales as educational tools for promoting self-awareness, mutual respect, and societal harmony.

Keywords: Women, Igbo Folktales, Patriarchy, Feminist Theory, Symbolic Interactionism, Self-Mortification.

1. Introduction

Human relationships within society are complex and often characterized by conflicts, negotiations, and survival struggles. In African societies, particularly among the Igbo, gender interactions have attracted significant scholarly attention, with many studies emphasizing that women's challenges are largely rooted in patriarchy and traditional gender ideology (Awe, 2019; Oyěwùní, 1997; Nnaemeka, 2004). Such scholarship suggests that African women are often at the receiving end of cultural, social, and economic structures that privilege men. Common examples include women being blamed for childlessness, subjected to domestic violence, or denied inheritance rights. However, the degree and nature of such subjugation vary across contexts and historical periods.

Gender relations in Africa can be categorized into three dimensions: inter-gender (between men and women), intra-gender (within women's relationships), and individual or self-induced (emanating from personal actions or moral failings). While many feminist scholars have rightly challenged patriarchal domination, the continuing social instability, moral decadence, and family disintegration in contemporary society suggest that gender equality alone does not guarantee social harmony. In contrast, the precolonial Igbo society, though hierarchical, was guided by a value system that emphasized *omenala* 'moral conduct', community ethics, and complementary gender roles (Nwala, 2010; Afigbo, 1981).

As Nwala (2010) notes, every society holds basic beliefs about the universe and human behavior that shape conduct and social stability. In traditional Igbo philosophy, moral responsibility and self-discipline were essential to personal and communal well-being. Thus, both men and women were expected to act within the bounds of cultural and spiritual norms. In

contemporary times, however, despite numerous advocacy efforts toward gender equality, the situation appears paradoxical, there is greater awareness of gender rights but also increasing moral confusion and social fragmentation.

This study therefore argues that while patriarchy is a significant contributor to women's marginalization, it is not the only factor. Women, as moral and social agents, also contribute, consciously or unconsciously to their experiences through interpersonal rivalry, jealousy, and self-centeredness. This view does not trivialize structural inequality but expands the conversation to include individual moral agency and accountability. Thus, the study examines selected Igbo folktales to uncover how these narratives represent women not merely as victims but as active participants in shaping their destinies.

The choice of folktales as data is deliberate. Folktales serve as a vital component of Igbo oral literature, encapsulating the people's philosophy, values, and moral expectations. They mirror society's ideals and contradictions while transmitting knowledge to younger generations (Uba-Mgbemena, 1985; Okoh, 2010). If the ancient Igbo society, guided by such narratives, enjoyed greater moral coherence, then revisiting folktales can offer insights into how self-examination and moral restraint, what this paper terms "self-mortification" may restore social balance.

This study adopts a Womanist theoretical perspective, which moves beyond Western feminism to emphasize the African woman's agency, community-centered values, and moral integrity (Hudson-Weems, 1993; Nnaemeka, 2004). The research is qualitative and expository, drawing data from purposively selected Igbo folktales gathered from oral and written sources. Through textual and thematic analysis, the paper explores how women's portrayals reveal a moral dimension to gender discourse in Igbo culture, one that calls for introspection, self-assessment, and moral renewal as complementary to structural change.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Folktales as Cultural and Moral Frameworks

Folktales are foundational components of the Igbo people traditional literary heritage. As Abrams (1981) notes, across cultures, traditional genres are handed down orally from generation to generation, including *ifo* 'Igbo folktales' which may appear either in poetic or prose form. In the Igbo context, folktales historically served as the primary modes of socialisation, instruction, and learning, particularly before Westernisation.

Folklorists and cultural educators emphasize that folktales are more than entertainment, they act as moral road-maps guiding individuals in communal life. For instance, Uba-Mgbemena (1985) defines *ifo* as an inclusive term covering fables, myths, hero-tales and epics, repositories of knowledge about folk customs, beliefs, morality, and the idea of the universe. Toni-Duruaku (2004) warns that when people discard their folklore, they risk losing identity and shared values.

More recently, scholarship has reiterated the enduring relevance of folktales in moral and social education. For example, film and media adaptations emphasise how folktales are being re-imagined to address contemporary issues Döbereiner (2024) reports on a short-film series where traditional tales are reinterpreted to highlight gender-based violence and female agency (dandc.eu). Likewise, Mdhluli (2025) examines how African folklore shapes moral behaviour, social values, and collective identity, showing that despite modernisation, folktales remain vital vehicles for communal cohesion and cultural transmission (Noyam Journals).

These sources support the view that Igbo folktales function as cultural mirrors, reflecting social norms, moral expectations, and patterns of behaviour, and as moral compasses, offering cautionary or exemplary narratives. This dual role is central for your study's focus on how women are represented and how moral agency is depicted.

2.2 Gender Representations and Patriarchal Narratives

Extensive literature on gender and culture in Africa emphasizes patriarchy as the predominant framework for understanding women's marginalisation. Scholars like Montgomery (1995) argue that African women are socialized into powerless roles through cultural and linguistic mechanisms, while men maintain dominance using verbal strategies and symbolic power. Such work highlights the role of culture, including folktales, in perpetuating gender inequality.

However, more recent scholarship has begun to nuance this analysis by emphasizing women's agency, internalized gender dynamics, and intra-gender relations. For example, ElFalih & El Idrissi (2024) analyse Moroccan folktales and find that although female characters remain tied to negative stereotypes (jealousy, deceit), the storytelling also reveals contradictions and opportunities for women's self-assertion as narrators and agents (ijlls.org). In the Cameroonian context, a recent study of Nso

folktales (2025) finds that while women are often portrayed in subordinate roles, some tales highlight female intelligence and resourcefulness, challenging the view of women as merely passive victims (EA Journals+1).

The scholarship also points to intra-female dynamics, for instance, Okide (2018) analyses how women may contribute to other women's marginalization through rivalry and hostility. This is especially pertinent for your study, which explores individual moral agency as much as structural patriarchy.

In her edited collection *Feminism in African Literature: Essays on Criticism*, Helen Chukwuma (1994) assembles a range of critical essays that examine African literature through feminist perspectives. The volume focuses on how African women writers and female characters in literature reflect, resist, and engage with issues of gender inequality, patriarchal domination, and the quest for agency and identity. It challenges the dominance of Western feminist frameworks by rooting feminist literary analysis within African sociocultural and historical contexts. Through this, the collection encourages a nuanced understanding of African women's experiences under colonial and postcolonial systems, emphasizing the intersection of gender, culture, and power. Significantly, the work represents one of the earliest scholarly efforts to foreground feminist criticism in African literary discourse and to promote African women's authorship and voices within literary studies (Chukwuma, 1994).

Together, these literatures suggest three important dimensions:

- Structural patriarchy and external gendered power relations,
- Cultural vehicles (folktales, proverbs, myths) that transmit gender norms,
- Internal and relational factors, women's agency, complicity, moral choices.

While the reviewed studies richly document how folktales reinforce gender norms and patriarchy, fewer works focus specifically on women's moral agency within folktales, how female characters are not only shaped by patriarchal culture but also shape their own destinies and participate in their moral positioning. This study fills this gap by examining how Igbo folktales represent women beyond victimhood, as moral agents capable of self-reflection, self-correction, and communal transformation. By integrating the folktale literature (on socialisation, moral education, cultural transmission) with gender scholarship that emphasises agency and intra-gender

relations, this work offers a new vantage. It explores how women's representations in Igbo folktales speak to both structural and moral dimensions of gender relations.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Womanist Theory

This study is anchored on Womanist Theory, as articulated by Alice Walker (1983) and further developed by Clenora Hudson-Weems (1993) and Chikwenye Ogunyemi (1996), among others. Womanism emerged as a corrective and complementary response to the inadequacies of Western feminism, which often fails to capture the spiritual, communal, and moral dimensions of African and Black women lived realities. While Western feminism largely defines women's liberation as resistance to male dominance, Womanism expands the discourse by emphasizing *complementarity*, *community*, *spirituality*, and *self-reclamation*. It is rooted in the conviction that the liberation of women cannot be isolated from the healing and restoration of the entire community.

Unlike Western feminism, which tends to interpret gender relations through oppositional binaries of oppression and resistance, Womanism recognizes that African women's struggles are not merely against men but against social, cultural, and moral dislocations that destabilize both genders and threaten communal harmony. The womanist worldview thus privileges *balance* over rivalry, *self-definition* over imitation, and *spiritual self-recovery* over victimhood (Walker, 1983; Hudson-Weems, 1993; Ogunyemi, 1996; Phillips, 2006).

3.1.1 Relevance of Womanist Theory to This Study

Womanist Theory provides the most appropriate interpretive framework for this research because it transcends the narrow focus on patriarchy as the sole determinant of women's conditions. Instead, it probes the internal, moral, and communal dimensions of women's experiences and responsibilities. This theoretical lens aligns with the study's purpose, which seeks to uncover how Igbo folktales portray women not only as victims of subjugation but also as moral agents capable of shaping their destinies through their actions, choices, and ethical orientation.

As Hudson-Weems (1993) contends, African women's liberation must begin with *self-definition*, not mere reaction to patriarchal norms. This assertion resonates with the moral and didactic functions of Igbo folktales,

which serve as instruments for ethical education and communal discipline. Womanism views culture not as a static tool of oppression but as a dynamic resource for moral and social transformation. This position supports the study's finding that folktales act as *moral compasses*, didactic texts that guide ethical behavior, encourage reflection, and inspire reformation.

Similarly, Ogunyemi (1985) emphasizes that Womanism "celebrates Black life, encompassing both men and women in an inclusive struggle for wholeness." This inclusivity reflects the Igbo worldview, in which gender relations are understood within the broader framework of social balance and collective wellbeing. Within this cultural logic, women in folktales are portrayed as multidimensional beings, nurturing and virtuous on one hand, yet capable of jealousy, rivalry, and moral failing on the other. Womanism provides the interpretive space to analyze these portrayals critically, recognizing that women are not passive victims of patriarchy but active participants in shaping moral and social outcomes.

Womanism thus becomes a platform for exploring themes of female complicity, self-examination, and moral regeneration, which are central to the findings of this study. Its emphasis on *self-healing*, *ethical introspection*, and *communal balance* echoes the research's recommendation for *self-assessment and mortification* as pathways toward social harmony. Moreover, Womanism integrates the moral and functional aspects of folktales, understanding them as cultural tools for moral education, behavioral correction, and social empowerment especially for young women in processes of socialization.

Through a Womanist lens, this study interrogates how women in Igbo folktales are represented as moral exemplars or deviants, how such depictions promote self-awareness, cooperation, and social order, and how storytelling functions as a cultural arena for examining women's attitudes and responsibilities not merely men's authority or dominance.

3.2 The Concept of Female Mortification

To extend Womanist ethics, this study introduces the concept of Female Mortification as a moral principle rooted in African spirituality and self-discipline. Derived from the Latin *mortificationem* 'to put to death', mortification in this context does not imply self-destruction but *moral refinement and restraint*. It entails a conscious process of examining one's passions, desires, and attitudes that may foster conflict, envy, or disharmony, and deliberately curbing

them for the sake of inner peace and communal growth.

In Igbo cultural philosophy, this principle mirrors the ethic of *ime ihe n'oke*, meaning *self-restraint* or *moderation*, a virtue considered essential for maintaining social balance and moral integrity. Female Mortification, therefore, calls upon women to engage in self-examination and moral responsibility, not as submission to patriarchal expectations but as a voluntary act of spiritual and ethical renewal aimed at achieving harmony and collective upliftment.

Applied to this study, Female Mortification serves as a womanist strategy of renewal. It encourages women to redirect emotional and social energies away from rivalry and hostility toward self-discipline, introspection, and positive influence. By doing so, it bridges the gap between structural critique and personal responsibility, asserting that genuine gender transformation in African societies must encompass both social reform and individual moral regeneration.

3.2.1 Relevance to the Study

Applying Womanist Theory and Female Mortification to the analysis of Igbo folktales allows for a detailed reading of women's portrayals that moves beyond a purely patriarchal interpretation. This approach enables the researcher to identify how female characters demonstrate moral agency within traditional narratives.

Furthermore, using this framework helps to interpret negative portrayals of women, such as those involving jealousy, betrayal, or rivalry, not merely as evidence of patriarchal bias. Instead, these are read as moral lessons that promote self-discipline and reinforce communal ethics.

Ultimately, this theoretical synthesis allows the study to advocate for internal reawakening. This is a dual approach where women are encouraged to confront structural social inequities while simultaneously cultivating the inner virtues necessary for self-actualization and harmonious coexistence. By synthesizing Womanist Theory with the indigenous moral concept of Female Mortification, this study offers an Afrocentric framework that underscores moral agency, relational balance, and collective healing, values deeply embedded in Igbo cosmology and oral tradition.

3.3 Conclusion

In summary, Womanist Theory provides an Afrocentric and culturally authentic framework for

interpreting women's representations within the moral and social logic of Igbo society. It affirms female agency, self-definition, and ethical responsibility as integral to African womanhood. By situating this discourse within African epistemology rather than Eurocentric feminist paradigms, the study ensures both cultural relevance and scholarly originality. Womanism encapsulates the cultural, moral, and gender dimensions of this research, aligning with the study's overall themes of self-examination, moral regeneration, and communal harmony. Rejecting the adversarial stance of Western feminism, it promotes reconciliation, introspection, and collective upliftment. This perspective enables a richer reading of Igbo folktales as moral texts that portray women not only as victims of patriarchy but as agents of transformation through ethical renewal and social responsibility, values consistent with the didactic and communal functions of African storytelling.

4. Refined Methodology: Interpretive Textual Analysis and Womanist Principles

This study employs a qualitative research design rooted in interpretive textual analysis to systematically explore the moral meanings and cultural values embedded in selected Igbo folktales. The analysis is theoretically anchored in Womanist Theory, focusing specifically on its principles of harmony, balance, communal responsibility, and moral integrity. Data for this study are derived from written sources, comprising ten (10) Igbo folktales that have been purposively selected from published anthologies and scholarly works on Igbo folklore. The Womanist principles guide the interpretation and critical analysis of the selected tales.

4.1 Data Presentation

The data for this study consist of ten Igbo folktales drawn from written sources, particularly Emenanjo (1977), Iroaganachi (1973), Nnabuihe (2005), and Ogbalu (1973). The tales foreground diverse portrayals of women, exposing social attitudes, moral expectations, and the consequences of women's choices and behaviors within traditional Igbo cosmology.

Data 1: *Ede Nwa na-Enweghị Nne* 'Ede the Motherless Child' (Emenanjo, 1977) This folktale tells of Ede, a motherless girl who suffers severe maltreatment from her stepmother after her mother's death. Forced to do all household chores and deprived of food and inheritance, Ede remains obedient despite her suffering. Seeking solace, she visits her dead mother's spirit, who warns her to avoid a forbidden pot of water. When Ede refuses to disobey

this instruction, the stepmother sends her own children to fetch water and they are killed by the spirit, followed by the stepmother herself. The ordeal of a motherless girl maltreated by her stepmother underscores envy, cruelty, and divine justice, illustrating the belief that wickedness self-destructs. The tale underscores the moral victory of virtue, patience, and obedience over cruelty and greed.

Data 2: *Nwa Udele nọ na Nne Orié* 'The vulture chick in Orié Mother market' (Emenanjo, 1977) A disobedient woman repeatedly returns home late from the market despite her husband's warnings. On one occasion, she lingers at the *Nne Orié* Market until a vulture spirit devours her and her children who come searching for her. Her husband later rescues the children by killing the vulture, though the wife remains dead. The tale portrays a woman whose disobedience and stubbornness lead to her death, highlighting the moral premium placed on discipline and obedience. The story warns against stubbornness and disregard for wise counsel.

Data 3: *Nwaada Lọlọ* 'Daughter of Lọlọ' (Nnabuihe, 2005) Nwaada Lọlọ, the daughter of a titled man, endures cruelty from her stepmother after her father's death. Despite her innocence, she is subjected to impossible tasks meant to lead to her death. Benevolent spirits assist her but warn her never to reveal their help. When she finally confesses under pressure, she dies instantly. Her miraculous resurrection during burial and her stepmother's death serve as a moral reversal, affirming justice for the virtuous and punishment for the wicked. In this tale, female rivalry and oppression are dramatized through a wicked stepmother's maltreatment of her stepdaughter, culminating in supernatural retribution and moral vindication for the victim.

Data 4: *Nwa Agboghọ na-Agba Nho Di* 'A Young lady Over-selective of husbands' (Iroaganachi, 1973). This tale features a beautiful maiden who rejects all suitors out of pride. Eventually, she marries a spirit disguised as a man and is taken to the spirit world to be sacrificed. She narrowly escapes death through the intervention of a hawk. The story condemns pride and excessive selectiveness, promoting humility and discernment in relationships.

Data 5: *DiOchi na-Akụ Ngwọ* 'A Palm Wine-Tapper Tapping Ngwọ Drink' (Iroaganachi, 1973). A grandmother kills her son's pet bird despite her granddaughter's plea to spare it. Upon returning home, the son executes his innocent daughter, believing his mother's false accusation. Later, a palm-wine tapper discovers the truth, and the man kills his mother in remorse. The tale condemns false accusation and injustice, showing how hasty judgment leads to familial destruction. The tale warns against deceit,

rash judgment, and the abuse of trust within family structures.

Data 6: *Nwaanyi na-Ero* ‘A Woman And Mushroom’ (Iroaganachi, 1973).

A woman ignores warnings and harvests a forbidden mushroom believed to be bewitched. Despite songs of warning from the mushroom and her neighbours, she eats it and dies when it bursts her stomach. The tale further present women whose pride, greed, or disobedience invite tragic consequences, reinforcing the moral code of moderation and humility. The tale symbolizes the fatal consequences of greed and disobedience.

Data 7: *Nwaanyi zuru Ihe Di ya na Imo* ‘The Woman that stole her Husband’s item in Imo’ (Iroaganachi,1973).

A man warns his seven wives not to touch a piece of meat before he travels. His favourite wife, Obidiya, secretly eats it. When the theft is discovered, each wife is tested by a river spirit. The innocent ones float, but Obidiya drowns, exposing her guilt. The narrative upholds truthfulness and accountability as moral ideals.

Data 8: *Eke na Nwaanyi* ‘Python and Woman’ (Iroaganachi, 1973)

A woman finds python eggs and eats them against all warnings that they belong to a sacred serpent. When the python discovers the loss, it cuts her open to retrieve its eggs. The tale dramatizes greed and disregard for taboos as a woman eats python eggs and suffers fatal retribution, reinforcing the sacredness of moral restraint. The story reinforces respect for taboos and the spiritual balance between humans and nature in Igbo cosmology.

Data 9: *Ihe Mere Umụ Nwaanyi ejighi Agba Afu-Onu* (Ogbalu, 1973).

In ancient times, women had beautiful beards. A woman named Nkemdiche loses this gift for all women after stealing a king’s ring and hiding it in her beards. As punishment, the beards of all women are shaved and never grow again. The tale teaches against greed and dishonesty. It symbolizes how individual misconduct can bring collective repercussions and disgrace upon womanhood.

Data 10: *Nwaanyi na-Akpọ Di ya Onyenuu* ‘the Woman that calls her Husband ‘That Person’ (Ogbalu,1973).

Tale 10 presents a wife’s arrogance and disrespect toward her husband as social taboos, with redemption achieved only through repentance. A woman refuses to address her husband by his name, calling him “that person” instead, an act considered taboo. To teach her respect, the husband invokes a river spirit to seize her until she pronounces his name. When she finally does, she is released. The story upholds marital respect and the sacredness of language in naming relationships.

Collectively, these folktales reveal that while patriarchal structures shape women’s realities, many conflicts arise from women’s internal flaws, envy, pride, greed, and disobedience. Through supernatural justice and moral allegory, Igbo folktales advocate *female mortification*, a self-corrective process of introspection, humility, and moral discipline, consistent with Womanist ideals of self-realization, harmony, and communal balance

5. Findings

The analysis of the ten selected Igbo folktales reveals several key patterns regarding women’s roles, experiences, and moral lessons within traditional Igbo society.

Firstly, many tales such as *Ede Nwa na-Enweghi Nne* and *Nwaada Loolo* portray women as victims of oppression, often from stepmothers or other female figures. These narratives expose how patriarchal structures and internalized female rivalry contribute to women’s suffering and reinforce systems of subjugation within domestic and communal spaces.

Secondly, folktales like *Nwa Agboghọ na-Agba Nho Di* and *Nwaanyi na-Ero* emphasize the consequences of disobedience, pride, or greed. Women who act against societal expectations often face misfortune or death, underscoring the cultural demand for humility, self-discipline, and moral restraint as markers of acceptable womanhood.

Thirdly, stories such as *Eke na Nwaanyi* and *Nwa Udele na Nne Ori* highlight the supernatural enforcement of justice. In these tales, spiritual or otherworldly forces intervene to punish wrongdoing or vindicate the innocent, illustrating how morality, spirituality, and social order are deeply intertwined in Igbo cosmology.

Furthermore, narratives like *Ihe Mere Umụ Nwaanyi Ejighi Agba Afu-Onu* and *Nwaanyi na-Akpọ Di ya Onyenuu* codify gender norms and expectations. They function as cultural instruments of moral education, defining acceptable female behavior and prescribing consequences for those who transgress social and ethical boundaries.

Overall, the findings indicate that Igbo folktales serve as moral and social instruments, guiding women on appropriate behavior, cautioning against transgressions, and promoting ethical agency. They underscore the intertwined relationship between female agency, communal harmony, and cultural values, providing a basis for applying Womanist Theory in understanding female experiences and

strategies for empowerment in Igbo society. The tales promote self-reflection and ethical agency among women. Through their experiences, the folktales advocate moral self-regulation and inner discipline, suggesting that women attain both personal fulfillment and communal harmony when they embody humility, introspection, and virtue, qualities aligned with the philosophy of ‘Female Mortification’.

6. Data Analysis

The analysis of the selected Igbo folktales reveals that many of the challenges, adversities, and moral conflicts faced by female characters are not entirely the result of external oppression or patriarchal dominance but are, in many instances, consequences of their own choices, actions, and attitudes. While it is undeniable that women suffer injustices from men and, at times, from other women, these narratives illuminate a deeper truth, that individual women also play an active role in shaping their own experiences and the moral fabric of their communities. Moreover, the study aligns this moral philosophy with biblical injunctions such as *Ephesians 5:21–22*, which calls for mutual submission and cooperative coexistence within marital and social relationships. Such spiritual and ethical grounding emphasizes that true strength in womanhood is not expressed through rivalry or rebellion but through wisdom, moderation, and moral integrity.

The ten selected Igbo folktales reveal a complex but consistent moral framework surrounding women’s behavior, agency, and social responsibility. These folktales present women not merely as victims of patriarchal dominance but also as moral agents whose choices significantly shape their destinies and influence communal harmony. Through the lens of Womanist Theory and the principle of Female Mortification, the narratives underscore that self-discipline, moral reflection, and humility are central to women’s empowerment and the preservation of societal balance.

In tales such as *Ede Nwa na-Enweghi Nne* and *Nwaada Loolo*, the cruelty of stepmothers exposes the destructive power of jealousy and internalized female rivalry, revealing that oppression sometimes emerges from within women’s social circles. Similarly, in *Nwa Udele na Nne Ori* and *Nwaanyi na-Ero*, disobedience and pride lead to personal or familial tragedy, reinforcing the Igbo moral ethos that self-restraint and ethical conduct safeguard both individual and communal welfare. Supernatural justice in stories like *Eke na Nwaanyi* functions as a moral equalizer, ensuring that wrongdoing—especially when driven by

greed, envy, or deceit—invites divine retribution and moral correction.

Tales such as *Ihe Mere Umu Nwaanyi Ejighi Agba Afu-Onu* and *Nwaanyi na-Akpo Di Ya Onyenwu* highlight how personal misconduct can extend to collective suffering, demonstrating that women’s moral lapses may perpetuate broader gendered vulnerabilities within their communities. Yet, these same narratives also reveal possibilities for transformation: humility, self-control, and moral introspection emerge as redemptive virtues. Within this moral framework, *Female Mortification*, understood as the conscious discipline of one’s desires and impulses, functions as both a corrective and empowering process through which women reclaim agency while aligning with communal ethics.

Collectively, the tales advocate a form of womanhood rooted in moral self-examination, spiritual awareness, and social responsibility. They assert that empowerment in the Igbo worldview is not achieved through defiance alone but through an active engagement with one’s inner self and moral obligations. Thus, Igbo folktales position women as both moral exemplars and custodians of societal harmony, reflecting a deeply indigenous vision of balance between individual agency and collective well-being.

7. Discussion

The findings from the analyzed folktales challenge the often-generalized notion that African oral narratives merely reinforce patriarchal oppression. Instead, Igbo folktales portray a nuanced moral universe where women possess significant moral agency and social influence. These narratives, when interpreted through the lens of Womanist Theory, articulate a distinctly indigenous form of feminism that balances individual autonomy with communal ethics. Unlike Western feminist paradigms that often emphasize confrontation with patriarchy, the Womanist framework adopted here underscores harmony, complementarity, and moral responsibility as pathways to empowerment.

Central to this interpretive approach is the concept of Female Mortification, which represents the inward discipline through which women achieve moral and spiritual balance. The tales suggest that while patriarchal structures exist within Igbo culture, women’s challenges are not always externally imposed; they often arise from internal human weaknesses such as pride, envy, and greed. By acknowledging and regulating these impulses, women become agents of transformation rather than passive

victims. This moral philosophy resonates with the Igbo proverb *onye kwe, chi ya ekwe* “when one agrees, their personal deity agrees” which affirms the power of individual will and self-mastery in shaping destiny.

Furthermore, these folktales reveal the cultural mechanisms through which society enforces moral accountability. Supernatural justice, community judgment, and personal suffering serve as moral correctives, ensuring that transgressions, whether by men or women, do not go unchecked. This underscores the Igbo worldview of moral equilibrium, where the stability of the cosmos depends on ethical conduct and social harmony. By positioning women as both subjects and enforcers of moral order, the tales dismantle the binary of female victimhood versus male dominance, suggesting instead a relational ethic of balance and interdependence.

Through this lens, *Beyond Patriarchy* becomes not merely a call for resistance but for re-evaluation an invitation to see Igbo women as participants in their own moral and existential journeys. The Womanist perspective thus situates these narratives within a broader discourse of African self-definition, highlighting that empowerment in Igbo oral tradition is achieved not by rebellion but by inner fortitude, self-awareness, and communal alignment. Ultimately, Igbo folktales affirm that the path to gender equity lies in cultivating moral integrity and spiritual consciousness values that sustain both individual dignity and collective resilience.

8. Conclusion

The analysis of the selected Igbo folktales reveals that many of the adversities, moral conflicts, and unfortunate circumstances faced by female characters are not merely the products of external oppression or patriarchal dominance but are often the direct or indirect consequences of their own actions, attitudes, and decisions. While the existence of gender-based injustices and male-induced suffering is undeniable, these narratives uncover a subtler, introspective dimension of accountability, showing that women, too, play crucial roles in shaping their personal destinies and the moral order of their society.

Contrary to Virginia Woolf’s (1991, cited in Bonuedie, 2015:16) assertion that “men have treated women and continue to treat them as inferiors,” the folktales suggest that women frequently contribute to their own predicaments through pride, disobedience, greed, jealousy, or failure to exercise restraint. These traits, when left unchecked, often lead to personal downfall or communal disharmony. Yet, the tales also present

opportunities for self-redemption, teaching that moral growth, humility, and self-discipline are pathways to restoring harmony and balance within the society.

Ultimately, this study concludes that genuine female empowerment must be holistic, encompassing both the external struggle against societal marginalization and the internal cultivation of virtue and self-discipline. When women acknowledge their agency, embrace moral responsibility, and engage with others through self-regulated and constructive conduct, they not only uplift themselves but also advance the collective well-being of society. True progress, therefore, lies in the balance between external liberation and inner transformation, where women become architects of peace, justice, and sustainable coexistence in the moral universe of the Igbo people.

9. Recommendations

This study therefore advocates for female mortification, a deliberate process of self-examination, moral reflection, and character refinement through which women identify and correct attitudes and behaviors that may engender conflict, suffering, or social discord. By cultivating humility, empathy, patience, and restraint, women can transform not only their own lives but also contribute to peace, stability, and moral renewal within their families and communities.

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