



Reinterpreting tradition through Feminist Literary Theory: Gendered narratives in folktales

Nontokozi Gladys Mdhuli ¹ 

¹ Department of African Languages, Siswati Section, University of Venda, Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education, Thohoyandou, 0950, South Africa.

ABSTRACT

Folktales have long been used as cultural objects to convey values, customs, and social standards throughout generations. This study investigated the portrayal of gender roles in traditional folktales through Feminist Literary Theory, examining how these narratives generate and reinforce societal gender expectations. The study considers folktales from African and East Slavic traditions for recurring themes of female agency, male authority, and gendered morality. The study adopted a qualitative content analysis methodology, with an emphasis on textual interpretation and comparative analysis of chosen folktales. Primary sources included oral and written folktales, while secondary sources offered feminist and literary analysis. According to the findings, traditional folktales frequently show women as weak and subservient, whereas men represent power and heroism. However, current versions defy these assumptions by reinventing female characters as empowered and resilient, reflecting changing cultural attitudes toward gender. The discussion focused on the consequences of these findings for cultural identity, education, and gender representation in literature. It contends that folktales, like developing narratives, can either reinforce or undermine gender biases. The study recommends introducing gender-sensitive storytelling into school courses and encouraging inclusive retellings of traditional narratives. This study contributes to the broader conversation on gender and literature by incorporating Feminist Literary Theory into folktale analysis, emphasizing the importance of a critical re-evaluation of traditional storytelling. It emphasizes the importance of folktales in creating contemporary gender perspectives and calls for more inclusive narratives in cultural and literary studies.

Keywords: Girl Child, Folk Narrative, Re-Telling, Discourse Analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Folktales have historically functioned as conduits for cultural inheritance, passing along social norms, beliefs, and ideologies from one generation to the next. These stories frequently contain nuanced yet potent gender role constructs that mirror, uphold, or contradict dominant social norms.¹ The gendered aspects of folktales are still not well studied in cross-cultural contexts, especially in East Slavic and

¹ Shachi Shukla, "Page A Comparative Study of Folklore and Oral Traditions Across Cultures," *Scholar Digest: Journal of Arts & Humanities* 1, no. 1 (2025): 55–74; Doris Paschal-Mbakwe and Ezinne Jimia Okoronkwo, "The Relevance of Folktale as a Genre of Folklore and Stimulus for Moral Lessons in African Society," *Awka Journal of English Language and Literary Studies* 11, no. 1 (2024): 120–36.

CORRESPONDENCE – Nontokozi Gladys Mdhuli Email: nontokozi.mdhuli@univen.ac.za

PUBLICATION HISTORY - Received : 6th January, 2026 | Accepted: 23rd April, 2026 | Published: 23rd June, 2026.

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE –Mdhuli, Nontokozi Gladys. "Reinterpreting tradition through Feminist Literary Theory: Gendered narratives in folktales." *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences* 7, no.5 (2026): 1183 - 1194. <https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.2026752>

COPYRIGHT AND LICENSING - © 2026 The Author(s). Published and Maintained by Noyam Journals.

This is an open access article under the CCBY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

African traditions, despite their continued existence in oral and recorded forms. In the comparative feminist analysis of folktales across these culturally diverse yet scholarly, disjointed locations, this study finds a substantial research deficit.

The continuing representation of gender stereotypes in traditional folktales, where men are romanticized as heroic and authoritative figures and women are frequently reduced to passive, subservient positions, is the issue this study attempts to address.² These representations support the persistence of gender inequality in social institutions and cultural narratives. This study aims to address the following questions: how are gender roles constructed and portrayed in traditional East Slavic and African folktales, and what effects do these depictions have on modern conceptions of gender?

To address this issue, the study critically examines a few chosen folktales using feminist literary theory, demonstrating how they either support or challenge gender stereotypes. The study adds to an expanding corpus of research that promotes more inclusive and equitable storytelling practices by concentrating on themes of female agency, male authority, and gendered morality.³

Although gender representations in Western folktales have been the subject of much current folklore and literary studies scholarship Alshehri, comparative studies that analyse non-Western narratives using feminist theoretical frameworks are scarce.⁴ Furthermore, current research frequently ignores how folktale retelling and reinterpretation reflect changing cultural values.

By examining and contrasting gender representations in East Slavic and African folktales, this study aims to determine how traditional and modern retellings differ in depicting male and female characters. In doing so, it seeks to shed light on how folktales can serve as dynamic cultural instruments, either promoting resistance and empowerment or serving to uphold patriarchal ideals.

With an emphasis on textual interpretation and comparative analysis, a qualitative content analysis methodology is used. Oral and written folktales make up the primary data, and literary and feminist critiques offer theoretical justification for the interpretations. The chosen books are examined to find recurring themes and trends in how gender roles are portrayed.

Three main themes serve as the framework for the conversation: how women are portrayed as either powerful or submissive, how male authority is constructed, and the moral lessons that are ingrained in gendered actions. It also promotes the integration of gender sensitive storytelling in school curricula and discusses the literary, cultural, and pedagogical ramifications of gender biased tales.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in Feminist Literary Theory, which provides a critical lens for analysing how gender roles are constructed, maintained, or subverted within literary and oral narratives. Feminist theory emerged as a response to the historical marginalization of women in literature and society, questioning patriarchal norms and advocating for gender equality and the representation of diverse female experiences.⁵

Examining power dynamics, especially how literature reflects and perpetuates societal gender ideas, is at the heart of feminist literary theory. As culturally rooted narratives, folktales frequently serve as ideological instruments that mould ideas about what it means to be a man or a woman. Guillory, argues that literature should be read for its artistic value as well as for the sociocultural power systems it either challenges or reproduces.⁶ Folktales, which are usually the result of patriarchal cultures, contain implicit messages about gendered conduct and morality, making this theory particularly useful for understanding them.

² Sabnam Khatun, "Deconstructing the Marginalized Female: An Appraisal of Gender Roles in Santali Folktales," 2023.

³ Sujit Kumar Chattopadhyay, *Women in Folk Literature: Exposition of Their Status through Gender Lenses* (Literatureslight Publishing, 2023); Sahreen Gul and Fatima Zafar Baig, "Gender Socialization Through Fairy Tales: A Critical Discourse Analysis," *The Critical Review of Social Sciences Studies* 3, no. 3 (2025): 1–16.

⁴ Ameerah Saleh Alshehri, "Marvellous Real in the Middle East: A Comparative Study of Magical Realism in Contemporary Women's Fiction," 2022.

⁵ Maryam Sajjad, Atta Ur Rahman, and Ayesha Shoaib, "Un-Writing the Canon: Feminist Erasures and Revisions in Historical Fiction," *Journal of Social Signs Review* 3, no. 4 (2025): 186–99.

⁶ John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (University of Chicago Press, 2023).

The claim made by Simone de Beauvoir in 1949 that one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman emphasizes how gender roles, a key idea in this framework, are socially produced.⁷ Understanding how female characters in folktales are frequently portrayed in ways that mirror society expectations of domesticity, dependence, and submissiveness is made easier by this idea. On the other hand, masculine figures are often portrayed as leaders, guardians, or explorers, embodying traits of bravery, strength, and reason.⁸

Gendered dichotomies play a major role in the African and East Slavic folktales studied in this study: men are typically associated with culture, action, and power, while women are frequently connected with nature, passivity, and morality. These binary oppositions, according to feminist theorists like, are culturally manufactured and uphold unequal gender relations.⁹ When examining how characters "perform" gender roles within folktale structures, Butler's theory of performativity, which holds that gender is a continual performance rather than a fixed identity, becomes especially pertinent.

To further recognize the intersections of gender with race, culture, and geography, particularly in the setting of African folktales, postcolonial feminist theory is incorporated into this paradigm. The propensity to generalize women's experiences without taking into account the impact of colonial histories and local cultures has been questioned by academics such as Guillory.¹⁰ This study respects cultural specificity while providing comparative views on how gender roles are portrayed by incorporating both East Slavic and African traditions.

Recognizing that folktales are not isolated but rather exist in conversation with other texts, social circumstances, and historical events, the study also uses intertextuality as a theoretical tool.¹¹ Folktales are places for both the preservation and the alteration of gender norms since they are impacted by modern views as they are passed down through the generations.

- Using this feminist theoretical framework, the research critically looks at:
- The construction of masculine and female characters,
- The ethical ramifications of their roles and behaviours,
- the degree to which modern retellings question or maintain these roles.

In the end, the theoretical framework emphasizes how folktales are dynamic and play a part in both reflecting and influencing societal views on gender. Using feminist literary theory, the study aims to show how storytelling may be used to promote gender equity and social change in addition to criticizing conventional narratives.

This study demonstrates the transformational power of narrative when critically redesigned, while simultaneously exposing long-standing gender prejudices through a comparative analysis of East Slavic and African folktales using feminist literary theory. To promote more equal gender representations and the development of inclusive cultural identities, it makes the case for a critical re-examination of traditional storytelling.

METHODOLOGY

Using a qualitative research design, this study looks at how gender roles are portrayed in a few African and Eastern Slavic folktales using qualitative content analysis. Because it enables a thorough interpretation of textual and narrative components and offers insight into how cultural stories reflect and develop gendered ideas, the qualitative technique is ideally suited for this study.¹²

⁷ Aysenaz Postalcioglu, "Simone de Beauvoir in Turkey:(Her) Story of a Translational Journey," 2016.

⁸ Cary Therese Gardell, *Dismantling Hero Mythology, Releasing Stereotypes and Embracing a New Model of Heroism* (Pacifica Graduate Institute, 2022); A. C. Vanichkachorn, "Exploring Masculine Strengths Through Character Strengths: A Pilot Study of Positive Masculinity in Boys" (University of Pennsylvania, 2023).

⁹ Veronica Muskheili, *Narration's Warp and Weft: East Slavic Folktales and Short Stories About Mothers and Daughters* (University of Washington, 2021).

¹⁰ Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*.

¹¹ Hazzaa M Al-Hazzaa et al., "Lifestyle Factors Associated with Overweight and Obesity among Saudi Adolescents," *BMC Public Health* 12, no. 1 (2012): 354.

¹² Karel Van Nieuwenhuysse et al., "Representations of Women and Their Role within Society in the Past in Flemish and Hungarian History Textbooks," *History Education Research Journal* 22, no. 1 (2025).

The study's foundation is interpretivist epistemology, which recognizes that reality is socially created and aims to comprehend the meanings that individuals ascribe to their cultural manifestations.¹³ The interpretivist method allows the researcher to examine how traditional narratives reflect and uphold gender norms because folktales are intricately woven into social contexts.

Two types of information were used. Oral and written folktales from East Slavic and African cultures made up the primary sources. These books were chosen because their original and translated forms were accessible in. They also had cultural significance and a gender-related theme.

Scholarly folktale analyses, feminist literary critiques, and theoretical works from feminist literary theory were examples of secondary sources. These supported comparative interpretations and helped put the findings in context.

To choose folktales that primarily highlight male and female characters and impart moral or social lessons about gender, a purposeful sampling technique was used. Because it enables the selection of instances with a wealth of information that most effectively answer the research objectives, this non-probability approach is suitable for qualitative research.¹⁴

Ten folktales from Africa, including those from East, South, and West Africa and ten folktales from East Slavic nations, including Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia were included in the final corpus.

Stories featuring recurrent themes of female agency, male heroism, gendered behaviour, and moral implications were given preference in the selection process. Textual information was gathered from scholarly sources, published anthologies, and fieldworkers' and ethnographers' transcriptions of oral narrative recordings. Versions recorded by reputable folklorists and faithfully translated to maintain subtlety and meaning were given special consideration.

The study used qualitative content analysis, emphasizing comparative interpretation and thematic categorization. After reading each folktale several times, recurrent themes of gender portrayal were found, classified, and categorized into groups like:

- Domesticity and subservience of women
- Heroism and authority in men
- Moral results by gender
- Traditional roles are subverted or reinforced.

Feminist literary theory was subsequently used to study these themes, with special attention to how the texts depict power dynamics, social expectations, and performative gender roles.¹⁵

To find parallels and discrepancies between the East Slavic and African narratives, a comparative approach was also used. This comparative method highlighted the universal and varied representations of gender across traditions while allowing for cultural heterogeneity.¹⁶ The study used a variety of data sources, including written and oral folktales, theoretical texts, and academic criticisms, in order to ensure trustworthiness. To verify interpretations, peer debriefing and member checking with literary and cultural studies peers were carried out. Additionally, reflexivity was upheld throughout the investigation to recognize the positionality and prejudices of the researcher.¹⁷

Ethical Considerations

Every text used was openly available and properly cited. The study ensured that the communities or collectors from whom the stories came received cultural and authorial credit when working with oral folktales.

¹³ Nasrin Pervin and Mahani Mokhtar, "The Interpretivist Research Paradigm: A Subjective Notion of a Social Context," *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development* 11, no. 2 (2022): 419–28.

¹⁴ Ishra Batool, Sofia Jabeen, and Samaira Zulifqar Ali, "Journal of Social Sciences Advancement," n.d.

¹⁵ Marianna Fotaki and Alison Pullen, "Feminist Theories and Activist Practices in Organization Studies," *Organization Studies* 45, no. 4 (2024): 593–616.

¹⁶ Mahdi DAHMARDEH and Abolfazl MAHDIKHANI, "Cultural Representation in English Language Textbooks: A Comparative Study of Local and International Editions.," *International Journal of Language Studies* 19, no. 1 (2025).

¹⁷ Abdulmalik Saber, "The Role of Positionality in Enhancing Trustworthiness: A Methodological Framework for Qualitative Researchers," 2024.

DISCUSSION

Folklore studies, literary theory, cultural anthropology, and gender studies are among the fields that have critically examined how gender roles are portrayed in folktales. As conventional narrative forms, folktales function as ideological instruments that uphold and legitimate prevailing standards, such as gender roles, in addition to reflecting society's values.¹⁸ This literature review highlights a research gap that this study aims to address, gives a summary of previous studies on gender in folktales, and looks at how feminist literary theory has been applied in these analyses.

Folktales are a source of amusement and instruction, especially in traditional civilizations where they are utilized to pass along cultural identity, social norms, and moral precepts.¹⁹ According to scholars, gender plays a crucial role in these narratives, frequently showing men as courageous, powerful, and active while women are portrayed as submissive, nurturing, or reliant.²⁰ These descriptions are not coincidental; rather, they are a reflection of deeply ingrained patriarchal beliefs.

Male characters typically hold leadership and heroic roles in African folktales whereas women are frequently depicted in domestic or supporting roles.²¹ Similar to this, East Slavic folktales, especially those from Russia and Ukraine, tends to perpetuate hierarchical gender binary classifications, even while they sometimes have strong or crafty female characters, such as witches or wise elderly women, whose roles are nonetheless minimized or portrayed as villains.²²

The feminist literary theory provides a critical lens for examining how literature and conventional narratives create gender identities. By exposing the cultural and ideological underpinnings of gender norms, it contests their naturalization.²³ Judith Butler's (1999) theory of gender performativity, which argues that gender is a recurrent performance influenced by cultural norms rather than an intrinsic trait, has had a significant impact. By applying this theory to folktales, researchers might discover how narrative structures and character development in storytelling normalize gender stereotypes.

According to academics such as Kung'u and Shahrin, even stories that appear to be neutral or magical serve to promote hegemonic gender beliefs by discreetly teaching audiences, particularly children, what constitutes appropriate behaviour for men and women.²⁴ Folktales with feminist re-imaginings, such as Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, provide a counter-discourse that questions the patriarchal clichés present in classic stories.

Comparative research reveals both universal and culturally unique trends in how gender is portrayed. Although patriarchal standards dominate most folktale traditions are, some regional variations do show up. For example, gender roles are usually based on familial and communal responsibilities, and African folktales frequently combine moral education with community-based ethics.²⁵ In contrast, the effect of feudal social institutions and Orthodox Christian norms, which create strict expectations for male and female behaviour, is often reflected in East Slavic folktales.²⁶

Notwithstanding these distinctions, many elements emerge in both traditions: male domination, female virtue associated with compliance, and harsh penalties for breaking gender roles. However, there

¹⁸ Khatun, "Deconstructing the Marginalized Female: An Appraisal of Gender Roles in Santali Folktales."

¹⁹ Paschal-Mbakwe and Okoronkwo, "The Relevance of Folktale as a Genre of Folklore and Stimulus for Moral Lessons in African Society."

²⁰ Sahar Zahoor and Syeda Mumduha Masab Zaidi, "How Languages Constructs Gender Roles and Reflects Power Dynamics in Literature, Exploring Speech Acts, Conversational Dominance, and Stereotypes," *Review of Applied Management and Social Sciences* 7, no. 4 (2024): 759–76.

²¹ Mehari Yimulaw Gebregeorgis, "Gender Role Perceptions in Selected South-African Folktales," *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*, no. 85 (2022): 181–200.

²² Muskheli, *Narration's Warp and Weft: East Slavic Folktales and Short Stories About Mothers and Daughters*.

²³ Ega Nur Fadillah, "Gender Narratives in Contemporary Prose Literature," *Journal of Literary Prose and Society* 1, no.1(2024): 16–25.

²⁴ S. W. Kung'u, "Portrayals of Gender Based Violence in Selected Locally Produced Soap Operas in Kenya and Their Influence on Audience Behaviour" (University of Nairobi, 2024); T. Shahrin, "Reincarnation of the Myths: The Evolution of Fairy Tales in Modern Literature" (Brac University, 2023).

²⁵ Amos Francis Dike, "Gender-Based Violence: The Role of Indigenous Spirituality in Shaping Gender Relations in Africa," *African Journal of Religion, Philosophy and Culture* 6, no. 2 (2025): 255.

²⁶ Jan Hanuš Máchal, *Slavic Myths & Legends* (DigiCat, 2023).

are also exceptions to folktales that challenge conventional wisdom by showcasing strong or cunning women, especially in matriarchal myths or trickster stories.²⁷

Re-readings and alterations of classic stories that question gender norms have recently attracted the attention of scholars. These modern renditions frequently feature strong female leads, reinterpret what it means to be a hero, and delve into issues of identity and resistance.²⁸ These retellings provide future generations with more inclusive gender models while also serving literary and educational objectives.

Research indicates that contemporary writers and educators are increasingly utilizing folktales to advance gender equity and dispel negative stereotypes in both African and Slavic contexts.²⁹ This illustrates how folktales are dynamic and ever-changing, living texts that adapt to changing societal beliefs.

Comparative studies between African and East Slavic folktales employing feminist literary theory are still relatively rare, even though gender in Western fairy tales and myths has been thoroughly examined in extant literature. Without a solid theoretical foundation in feminism, the majority of works either concentrate on a single tradition or use generic literary analysis. Furthermore, few studies analyse how gender depiction has changed over time by examining both historical and modern folktale forms.

To close this gap, this study applies feminist literary theory to a cross-cultural investigation of gender representation in East Slavic and African folktales, revealing both similar and different processes of gender formation. To evaluate how changing cultural contexts impact gender narratives, it also adds a diachronic component by contrasting traditional and contemporary interpretations.

FINDINGS

Important insights into how traditional narratives create, uphold, and occasionally question gender roles can be gained from the qualitative content study of a few chosen African and Eastern Slavic folktales. Gendered character roles, power dynamics, moral expectations, and story consequences were the main theme areas into which the study categorized its findings. These results show general gendered tendencies in the two folklore traditions and cultural specificities.

According to the investigation, men and women are primarily portrayed in East Slavic and African folktales in stereotypical roles. Female characters are frequently portrayed as docile, benevolent, or morally redeeming, whereas masculine characters are invariably given assertive, heroic, and leadership positions. Men are frequently portrayed as warriors, chiefs, or hunters in African folktales, serving as emblems of power and dominance.³⁰ Similar to this, male characters in East Slavic stories are portrayed as courageous and astute, charged with settling the main problem, frequently by conquering or guile.³¹

In contrast, women are usually mothers, wives, or daughters, and their identities are linked to their interactions with males. These roles reinforce the patriarchal perception of women as subservient and dependent by emphasizing obedience, beauty, and domesticity.³² In East Slavic mythology, for example, Vasilisa represents the epitome of ideal femininity: she is devoted, hardworking, and gentle, and she is eventually rewarded with marriage.

Folktales' depictions of power are closely related to patriarchal ideologies. Aside from physical dominance, men are granted spiritual authority and intellectual superiority. The male protagonist of

²⁷ Rachel S McCoppin, *The Legacy of the Goddess: Heroines, Warriors and Witches from World Mythology to Folktales and Fairy Tales* (McFarland, 2023); Khatun, "Deconstructing the Marginalized Female: An Appraisal of Gender Roles in Santali Folktales."

²⁸ H. L. Gingerich, "Constructing the Fragmented Identity in Her: A Cinematic Depiction of Resistance to Gender Norms Within Popular Culture" (Purdue University, 2025).

²⁹ Mantoa Motinyane, "Reimagining the Role of Folklore in the 21st Century: Don't We Need New Ones?," *Southern African Journal for Folklore Studies* 32, no. 2 (2022): 1–14; Bill Templer, "Teaching Bulgarian Folktales in the EFL Classroom: Exploring 'Storytelling in Education', Textual Realms of Aesthetic Illusion and Your Own Local Folkloric Culture," *Любословие*, no. 24 (2024): 207–41.

³⁰ R. J. Lubambo, "The Role Played by Siswati Folktales in Building the Character of Boys: A Socio-Functionalist Approach" (University of South Africa, 2015); M. Mohammadkhani, "Revolution in Imagery: Visual Representation of Hegemony in Iranian Illustrated Books before and after the 1979 Revolution" (University of British Columbia, 2025).

³¹ Juniper Guthrie, "Drowned Maidens and Mother Earth: The Roots of Sexism in Russian Folklore Studies," *The Corinthian* 21, no. 1 (2024): 4.

³² S. Sayi, "Female Stereotypes in Selected Zimbabwean Ndebele Novels, 1975-2016" (University of South Africa, 2022); E. P. Nthangeni, "Exploration Revival of Folktales Towards Morel Generation: Lessons from Tshivenda Folklore" (University of South Africa, 2025).

many African stories speaks for the society, solves difficult challenges, and gets help from ancestors or the divine.³³ Men are frequently portrayed in East Slavic stories as chosen individuals who are picked to fulfil heroic destinies by fate or supernatural forces.³⁴

When it does occur, female authority is frequently shown as harmful or disruptive. Despite having power, characters like Baba Yaga in Slavic mythology and the witch-wife in African folklore are portrayed as dangerous, abnormal, or unreliable.³⁵ The established hierarchy that sets men in charge of the public and spiritual spheres is reinforced by these depictions, which suggest that female strength must be repressed or punished.

The moral double standard given to both male and female characters is a prominent motif that arose from the folktales. Male characters are commended for their independence, boldness, and even guile, while female virtue is severely policed and associated with chastity, obedience, and silence.³⁶ Women who defy expectations are punished, shunned, or changed in both East Slavic and African traditions.³⁷ For instance, women who speak out against elders or refuse to follow marriage arrangements are frequently shown as cursed or doomed in African folktales.

Conversely, men are frequently rewarded for acting assertively or rebelliously. This moral framing implies a gendered script where women are told to submit while men are urged to act. These narrative frameworks demonstrate how repeated activities within tales educate and enforce gender norms through normative behaviour, which is consistent with Judith Butler's (1999) theory of gender performativity.

Some modern folktales have started to question conventional depictions of gender, even though conservative gender images still dominate. Women are increasingly portrayed as courageous, knowledgeable, and capable of leadership in contemporary African folktales that feminist writers have recounted.³⁸ Modern retellings of Baba Yaga in East Slavic regions have recast her as a symbol of resistance rather than terror, indicating a change in the way that female authority is perceived.³⁹

Rather than being penalized, these new versions often include female characters who defy traditional norms by pursuing education, taking charge of communities, or refusing marriage. These kinds of stories align with contemporary feminist initiatives to recover storytelling as a platform for social change and gender equality.⁴⁰ They also show how society's views on gender have changed as a result of the growing international conversation about women's rights and gender justice.

Despite their disparate locations and cultures, the study discovered a startling degree of similarities in the fundamental gender ideas of East Slavic and African folktales. Both traditions subject female characters to constrictive rules while elevating male figures as heroic and authoritative. These similarities could point to a common patriarchal system in pre-modern societies where social standards and values were passed down orally.⁴¹

However, there are also important distinctions. Whereas East Slavic folktales place more emphasis on personal morality and cosmic order, African folktales frequently incorporate collective wisdom and spiritual justice. Each narrative tradition's construction and justification of gender roles are influenced by these cultural differences, which complicates the perception of these roles.

The gender ideals reflected in the folktales examined in this study are firmly ingrained and consistent with patriarchal social institutions. These stories both reflect and uphold conventional ideas of masculinity and femininity through character roles, power relationships, and moral teachings. The

³³ H. Nkosi, "The Representation of Father and Son Relationships in African Fairy Tales.," 2023.

³⁴ Kris Spisak, *Becoming Baba Yaga: Trickster, Feminist, and Witch of the Woods* (Red Wheel/Weiser, 2024).

³⁵ K. Rapala, "The Shapeshifting Image of Baba Yaga and the Forest as a Transformative Space in Slavic Fairytales" (Institute of Art, Design+ Technology, 2024).

³⁶ Anwesa Karmakar and Abhirup Bhadra, "Disney Setting and Changing Gender Stereotypes," *International Journal For Multidisciplinary Research* 5, no. 6 (2023).

³⁷ T.B. Boya, "The Implications of Setswana Hare Folktales Contemporary for South African Children" (University of Pretoria, 2023).

³⁸ Nthangeni, "Exploration Revival of Folktales Towards Morel Generation: Lessons from Tshivenda Folklore."

³⁹ Desiree Lewis and Gabeba Baderoon, *Surfacing: On Being Black and Feminist in South Africa* (Wits University Press, 2021).

⁴⁰ Judith Inggs, "Weak or Wily? Girls' Voices in Tellings and Retellings of African Folktales for Children," *Children's Literature in Education* 52, no. 3 (2021): 342–56.

⁴¹ Lubambo, "The Role Played by Siswati Folktales in Building the Character of Boys: A Socio-Functionalist Approach"; Mohammadhani, "Revolution in Imagery: Visual Representation of Hegemony in Iranian Illustrated Books before and after the 1979 Revolution."

rise of feminist reinterpretations and alternative retellings, however, emphasizes how storytelling has the power to change how people perceive gender. This emphasizes the dual function of folktales as cultural texts that are both liberating and conservative.

Discussion Summary

The goal of this study is to use feminist literary theory to analyse how gender roles are portrayed in East Slavic and African folktales. Gender norms are formed, reinforced, and sometimes subverted in these classic narratives in ways that are both culturally specific and strikingly similar, according to the analysis.

Both African and East Slavic folktales mostly reinforce male dominance through binary gender norms, according to the findings, which align with feminist literary theory's critique of patriarchal literature.⁴² Male characters are frequently portrayed as leaders, hunters, fighters, and problem-solvers in stories, signifying strength, independence, and reason.⁴³ On the other hand, female characters are frequently limited to domestic or passive roles, such as mothers, wives, or daughters, and their virtues are evaluated based on their beauty, humility, and obedience.⁴⁴

For example, by associating a woman's value with her subservience and devotion to family institutions, East Slavic stories like *Vasilisa the Beautiful* uphold patriarchal norms.⁴⁵ *Intfombi Yetimanga* is a South African folktale about a brave young girl who showed incredible fortitude and tenacity. After her parents passed away, she was raised by her grandmother and went on to rescue countless lives in her neighbourhood. Similarly, North African folktale female characters are frequently portrayed as successful only when their behavior conforms to socially accepted ideals of femininity.⁴⁶ For younger audiences in particular, these representations serve as ideological instruments that control gender behaviour.

The application of archetypes is essential to maintaining gender norms in both cultural traditions. It is clear from using Vladimir Propp's morphology of the folktale that characters frequently fulfil predetermined roles: the hero is almost always a man, while the helper or reward is usually a woman.⁴⁷ By enshrining gender roles in recognizable and recurring narrative structures, these patterns aid in the naturalization of gender norms.

It's interesting to note that certain people defy these stereotypes, especially in tales involving witches, cunning old women, or tricksters. *Baba Yaga* is a representation of both marginality and power in East Slavic folklore. She is portrayed as violent, monstrous, and other despite her agency and magical abilities, a recurrent motif used to undermine powerful women.⁴⁸ Although they are typically presented as comedic relief or abnormal exceptions, female trickster characters such as the hare's wife may also challenge expectations in African contexts.⁴⁹

Understanding how characters perform socially created roles can be aided by applying Judith Butler's (1999) concept of gender performativity. In both traditions, routine behaviours like serving food, watching over kids, and controlling one's emotions are used to designate feminine behaviour. The assumption that femininity is a learned, socially acceptable behaviour is reinforced by the tale world's reward system for these "performances."

Folk narratives that depart from these standards, however, frequently highlight the repercussions of such violations. Women who are aggressive or want to be independent are often punished, scorned, banished, or transformed into animals.⁵⁰ The folktale of *Siswati*, for instance, *Umfati Nemtfwanakhe*

⁴² Aondover Eric Msughter, "A Critical Review on Gender Based Violence in Nigeria Media Dimension," *Journal of Gynecology and Womens Health* 24, no. 2 (December 6, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.19080/JGWH.2022.24.556135>; J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

⁴³ Karmakar and Bhadra, "Disney Setting and Changing Gender Stereotypes"; Mohammadkhani, "Revolution in Imagery: Visual Representation of Hegemony in Iranian Illustrated Books before and after the 1979 Revolution."

⁴⁴ Sayi, "Female Stereotypes in Selected Zimbabwean Ndebele Novels, 1975-2016."

⁴⁵ Guthrie, "Drowned Maidens and Mother Earth: The Roots of Sexism in Russian Folklore Studies."

⁴⁶ Nthangeni, "Exploration Revival of Folktales Towards Morel Generation: Lessons from Tshivenda Folklore."

⁴⁷ V. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (Texas: University of Press, 1968).

⁴⁸ Rapala, "The Shapeshifting Image of Baba Yaga and the Forest as a Transformative Space in Slavic Fairytales."

⁴⁹ Nkosi, "The Representation of Father and Son Relationships in African Fairy Tales."

⁵⁰ Boya, "The Implications of Setswana Hare Folktales Contemporary for South African Children"; Guthrie, "Drowned Maidens and Mother Earth: The Roots of Sexism in Russian Folklore Studies."

Enyangeni, describes a single mother who disregarded the rule against working on Sundays. She went to the fields to gather firewood since she had to feed her child. Sadly, she was apprehended and punished; hence, it is thought that when one looks up at the moon, they may still see a woman carrying firewood while carrying a baby on her back.⁵¹ These narrative conclusions act as warning structures that uphold societal norms about gender conformity.

Although gender depictions in traditional folktales are largely conservative, contemporary retellings and reinterpretations offer opportunities for subversion and resistance. By reworking stories from female perspectives and giving previously one-dimensional characters more depth, authors such as Angela Carter in Western contexts and other feminist writers from Africa and Slavic countries have questioned traditional representations.⁵²

Folktales are increasingly being used to promote gender equity in educational and community contexts. African stories have been updated to feature female heroes who seek education, resolve social issues, or defy repressive traditions.⁵³ Similarly, classic heroines have been recast as socially engaged and politically aware characters by post-Soviet Ukrainian storytellers.⁵⁴ These developments imply that folktales are flexible and dynamic forms of discourse, reflecting larger societal alterations.

This study's comparative focus highlights universal and culturally unique patterns. The folktales of both traditions universally uphold patriarchal and heteronormative standards, with gender serving as the main axis of character identity. However, the East Slavic emphasis on personal pursuits and philosophical difficulties contrasts with the African emphasis on moral education and communal cohesion.⁵⁵

Furthermore, women are frequently positioned as moral compass or mediators in African stories through supernatural components such as nature spirits or ancestral guidance, albeit in limited capacities.⁵⁶ On the other hand, East Slavic folktales frequently portray women as either sinners or saints, reflecting the dualistic morality that Christian orthodoxy has impacted.⁵⁷ These cultural quirks imply that although patriarchy's mechanisms are universal, different religious, historical, and social settings affect how it manifests itself.

In short, this debate demonstrates how gender ideas are reflected and perpetuated in East Slavic and African folktales, which is consistent with the focus of feminist literary theory on the social production of gender. These stories serve as reflectors of cultural expectations through moral lessons, narrative purposes, and archetypes. However, they also provide places of resistance, especially in their contemporary forms. A more sophisticated understanding of folktales as living texts that have the power to upend or reinforce societal norms is made possible by an awareness of these interactions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following suggestions are put forth to advance gender equity, inclusively preserve cultural heritage, and support the conversion of folktale traditions into instruments for social change, considering the findings that traditional folktales frequently perpetuate gender stereotypes and patriarchal values: Folktales with balanced gender representations should be included in the literary and language curricula of educational institutions. For students to question and reinterpret gender norms rather than merely accepting them, teachers must be ready to examine classic literature through critical, feminist lenses. Incorporating feminist critique into school curricula empowers learners to challenge stereotypes and imagine alternative gender identities. It is important to support authors, academics, and cultural activists in reimaging traditional folktales in contemporary, inclusive ways. Female characters should be given

⁵¹ Mkhathshwa M et al., *Tibuya Emphandzeni* (Cape Town: Macmillan, 2015).

⁵² Ings, "Weak or Wily? Girls' Voices in Tellings and Retellings of African Folktales for Children"; Lewis and Baderoon, *Surfacing: On Being Black and Feminist in South Africa*.

⁵³ Nkosi, "The Representation of Father and Son Relationships in African Fairy Tales."

⁵⁴ Lewis and Baderoon, *Surfacing: On Being Black and Feminist in South Africa*.

⁵⁵ Lubambo, "The Role Played by Siswati Folktales in Building the Character of Boys: A Socio-Functionalist Approach"; Spisak, *Becoming Baba Yaga: Trickster, Feminist, and Witch of the Woods*.

⁵⁶ Mohammadkhani, "Revolution in Imagery: Visual Representation of Hegemony in Iranian Illustrated Books before and after the 1979 Revolution."

⁵⁷ Guthrie, "Drowned Maidens and Mother Earth: The Roots of Sexism in Russian Folklore Studies."

a voice in these retellings, along with a variety of gender identities, strong women, and emotionally astute men.

"Cultural renewal and social justice are made possible by retelling traditional stories from feminist perspectives." Cultural archives and oral history initiatives should guarantee the inclusion and prioritization of women's perspectives and experiences. Oral literature collectors need to look for female narrators and record how women utilize storytelling to confront oppression and articulate their worldviews. Creating gender-balanced cultural memory and rewriting history requires the preservation of women's oral traditions. Academic institutions and research groups should promote and encourage multidisciplinary initiatives that link folklore with gender studies, literary criticism, and cultural anthropology. This will facilitate the development of comprehensive frameworks for understanding how traditional tales in different nations impact gender attitudes.

A multidisciplinary approach offers deeper insights into how folktales function as both mirrors and moulders of gender ideology. A larger audience should be reached by discussing gender roles in folktales through theatre, radio dramas, movies, and community storytelling events. These platforms have the potential to be powerful tools for exposing implicit biases and promoting inclusive cultural narratives. Performance arts offer dynamic ways to reshape public imagination and challenge oppressive norms embedded in traditional tales.

Translators must be aware of how gender roles are portrayed while translating or modifying folktales between languages and cultures. Instead of perpetuating prejudices, they ought to draw attention to the stories' underlying potential for equality. Translation is not just linguistic but also cultural and ideological; gender-sensitive translation can reclaim marginalized voices. Traditional leaders, cultural custodians, and community storytellers should all participate in critical discussions about the impact of gendered storytelling. Workshops, seminars, and debate circles can help communities reflect on and alter their oral traditions to promote gender parity.

The recommendations above are intended to bridge the gap between tradition and transformation. By reviewing folktales through a feminist lens and practical reforms in education, literature, and cultural practices, cultures can begin to eradicate long-held gender inequalities and build more inclusive, empowering narratives for future generations.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to look at how traditional folktales from African and East Slavic cultures describe gender roles, and how these depictions develop and reflect society's attitudes towards gender. Using Feminist Literary Theory as a critical lens and qualitative content analysis of selected folktales, the study has revealed the pervasive presence of gendered stereotypes in which women are frequently portrayed as passive, subservient, or morally flawed, while men are cast as powerful, heroic, and authoritative figures.

The study found that these narratives have historically supported patriarchal attitudes and helped to normalize gender inequalities in society. However, it was discovered that current reinterpretations of folktales are beginning to question these traditional roles by envisioning female characters as resilient, clever, and forceful, as well as portraying men in more emotionally sophisticated ways. These changes reflect shifting gender norms and a growing global emphasis on equity and representation.

By emphasizing both the regressive and progressive parts of folktale traditions, the study stresses folklore's dual role: as a preserver of cultural values and as a potential instrument for societal change. It emphasizes the significance of critically engaging with folklore in educational, literary, and cultural contexts, ensuring that traditional narratives change to promote inclusiveness and gender equity.

Finally, this study adds to the larger discussion about literature and gender by revealing how folktales can either reinforce or challenge gender preconceptions, depending on how they are presented, interpreted, and taught. It advocates intentional, gender-sensitive storytelling techniques, inclusive curriculum development, and active community participation to guarantee that these cultural narratives benefit all members of society, regardless of gender.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Al-Hazzaa, Hazzaa M, Nada A Abahussain, Hana I Al-Sobayel, Dina M Qahwaji, and Abdulrahman O Musaiger. "Lifestyle Factors Associated with Overweight and Obesity among Saudi Adolescents." *BMC Public Health* 12, no. 1 (2012): 354.
- Alshehri, Ameerah Saleh. "Marvellous Real in the Middle East: A Comparative Study of Magical Realism in Contemporary Women's Fiction," 2022.
- Batool, Ishra, Sofia Jabeen, and Samaira Zulifqar Ali. "Journal of Social Sciences Advancement," n.d.
- Boya, T.B. "The Implications of Setswana Hare Folktales Contemporary for South African Children ." University of Pretoria, 2023.
- Butler, J. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Chattopadhyay, Sujit Kumar. *Women in Folk Literature: Exposition of Their Status through Gender Lenses*. Literatureslight Publishing, 2023.
- Dahmardeh, Mahdi, and Abolfazl Mahdikhani. "Cultural Representation in English Language Textbooks: A Comparative Study of Local and International Editions." *International Journal of Language Studies* 19, no. 1 (2025).
- Dike, Amos Francis. "Gender-Based Violence: The Role of Indigenous Spirituality in Shaping Gender Relations in Africa." *African Journal of Religion, Philosophy and Culture* 6, no. 2 (2025): 255.
- Fadillah, Ega Nur. "Gender Narratives in Contemporary Prose Literature." *Journal of Literary Prose and Society* 1, no. 1 (2024): 16–25.
- Fotaki, Marianna, and Alison Pullen. "Feminist Theories and Activist Practices in Organization Studies." *Organization Studies* 45, no. 4 (2024): 593–616.
- Gardell, Cary Therese. *Dismantling Hero Mythology, Releasing Stereotypes and Embracing a New Model of Heroism*. Pacifica Graduate Institute, 2022.
- Gebregeorgis, Mehari Yimulaw. "Gender Role Perceptions in Selected South-African Folktales." *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*, no. 85 (2022): 181–200.
- Gingerich, H. L. "Constructing the Fragmented Identity in Her: A Cinematic Depiction of Resistance to Gender Norms Within Popular Culture ." Purdue University, 2025.
- Guillory, John. *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*. University of Chicago Press, 2023.
- Gul, Sahreen, and Fatima Zafar Baig. "Gender Socialization Through Fairy Tales: A Critical Discourse Analysis." *The Critical Review of Social Sciences Studies* 3,no.3(2025): 1–16.
- Guthrie, Juniper. "Drowned Maidens and Mother Earth: The Roots of Sexism in Russian Folklore Studies." *The Corinthian* 21, no. 1 (2024): 4.
- Inggs, Judith. "Weak or Wily? Girls' Voices in Tellings and Retellings of African Folktales for Children." *Children's Literature in Education* 52, no. 3 (2021): 342–56.
- Karmakar, Anwesa, and Abhirup Bhadra. "Disney Setting and Changing Gender Stereotypes." *International Journal For Multidisciplinary Research* 5, no. 6 (2023).
- Khatun, Sabnam. "Deconstructing the Marginalized Female: An Appraisal of Gender Roles in Santali Folktales," 2023.
- Kung'u, S. W. "Portrayals of Gender Based Violence in Selected Locally Produced Soap Operas in Kenya and Their Influence on Audience Behaviour ." University of Nairobi, 2024.
- Lewis, Desiree, and Gabeba Baderoon. *Surfacing: On Being Black and Feminist in South Africa*. Wits University Press, 2021.
- Lubambo, R. J. "The Role Played by Siswati Folktales in Building the Character of Boys: A Socio-Functionalist Approach." University of South Africa, 2015.
- Máchal, Jan Hanuš. *Slavic Myths & Legends*. DigiCat, 2023.
- McCoppin, Rachel S. *The Legacy of the Goddess: Heroines, Warriors and Witches from World Mythology to Folktales and Fairy Tales*. McFarland, 2023.
- Mkhatshwa M, Masoka NE, Maseko NF, and Mazibuko. *Tibuya Emphandzeni*. Cape Town: Macmillan, 2015.
- Mohammadkhani, M. "Revolution in Imagery: Visual Representation of Hegemony in Iranian Illustrated Books before and after the 1979 Revolution ." University of British Columbia, 2025.
- Motinyane, Mantoa. "Reimagining the Role of Folklore in the 21st Century: Don't We Need New

- Ones?" *Southern African Journal for Folklore Studies* 32, no. 2 (2022): 1–14.
- Msughter, Aondover Eric. "A Critical Review on Gender Based Violence in Nigeria Media Dimension." *Journal of Gynecology and Womens Health* 24, no. 2 (December 6, 2022). <https://doi.org/10.19080/JGWH.2022.24.556135>.
- Muskheli, Veronica. *Narration's Warp and Weft: East Slavic Folktales and Short Stories About Mothers and Daughters*. University of Washington, 2021.
- Nieuwenhuysse, Karel Van, Balázs Sipos, Lies Depickere, and Nóra Lengyel. "Representations of Women and Their Role within Society in the Past in Flemish and Hungarian History Textbooks." *History Education Research Journal* 22, no. 1 (2025).
- Nkosi, H. "The Representation of Father and Son Relationships in African Fairy Tales.," 2023.
- Nthangeni, E. P. "Exploration Revival of Folktales Towards Morel Generation: Lessons from Tshivenda Folklore ." University of South Africa , 2025.
- Paschal-Mbakwe, Doris, and Ezinne Jimia Okoronkwo. "The Relevance of Folktale as a Genre of Folklore and Stimulus for Moral Lessons in African Society." *Awka Journal of English Language and Literary Studies* 11, no. 1 (2024): 120–36.
- Pervin, Nasrin, and Mahani Mokhtar. "The Interpretivist Research Paradigm: A Subjective Notion of a Social Context." *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development* 11, no. 2 (2022): 419–28.
- Postalcioglu, Aysenaz. "Simone de Beauvoir in Turkey:(Her) Story of a Translational Journey," 2016.
- Propp, V. *Morphology of the Folktale*. Texas: University of Press, 1968.
- Rapala, K. "The Shapeshifting Image of Baba Yaga and the Forest as a Transformative Space in Slavic Fairytales ." Institute of Art, Design+ Technology, 2024.
- Saber, Abdulmalik. "The Role of Positionality in Enhancing Trustworthiness: A Methodological Framework for Qualitative Researchers," 2024.
- Sajjad, Maryam, Atta Ur Rahman, and Ayesha Shoaib. "Un-Writing the Canon: Feminist Erasures and Revisions in Historical Fiction." *Journal of Social Signs Review* 3, no. 4 (2025): 186–99.
- Sayi, S. "Female Stereotypes in Selected Zimbabwean Ndebele Novels, 1975-2016 ." University of South Africa , 2022.
- Shahrin, T. "Reincarnation of the Myths: The Evolution of Fairy Tales in Modern Literature." Brac University, 2023.
- Shukla, Shachi. "Page A Comparative Study of Folklore and Oral Traditions Across Cultures." *Scholar' Digest: Journal of Arts & Humanities* 1, no. 1 (2025): 55–74.
- Spisak, Kris. *Becoming Baba Yaga: Trickster, Feminist, and Witch of the Woods*. Red Wheel/Weiser, 2024.
- Templer, Bill. "Teaching Bulgarian Folktales in the EFL Classroom: Exploring 'Storytelling in Education', Textual Realms of Aesthetic Illusion and Your Own Local Folkloric Culture." *Любословие*, no. 24 (2024): 207–41.
- Vanichkachorn, A. C. "Exploring Masculine Strengths Through Character Strengths: A Pilot Study of Positive Masculinity in Boys ." University of Pennsylvania, 2023.
- Zahoor, Sahar, and Syeda Mumduha Masab Zaidi. "How Languages Constructs Gender Roles and Reflects Power Dynamics in Literature, Exploring Speech Acts, Conversational Dominance, and Stereotypes." *Review of Applied Management and Social Sciences* 7, no. 4 (2024): 759–76.

ABOUT AUTHOR

Ms. Nontokozo Gladys Mdhluhi started her teaching career at Siphumelele Secondary School in 2013, where she found her love for language development and teaching. Ms. Mdhluhi has written a great deal about literature and how feminist theories may be used to reinterpret traditions. Her writing has been featured in respectable journals and book chapters both domestically and abroad. She is working on her doctorate and has been actively supporting linguistic and cultural development as a board member of the National Language Body (NLB) since 2024. Her important contributions to scholarly writing, language development, and Siswati cultural studies ensure the preservation and ongoing development of Siswati's intellectual and cultural heritage.