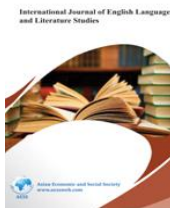




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OF NEGATIVE PORTRAYAL AND THE PLIGHT OF WOMEN IN THE AKAN FOLKTALES

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the negative portrayal and the plight of women in Akan Folktales (AF), using selected AFs from the author's collection of 50 to demonstrate these. Analysis of the stories shows that, in many of the tales, women are depicted as greedy, evil, stubborn, disobedient, wicked, homicidal, ungrateful, cheating, lazy and apathetic. The negative depiction is attributable to the negative perception of women in the society. In fact, in some tales, women are maltreated and sometimes killed. The paper posits that the continual depiction of women in negative terms, sometimes to the extent of equating them to evil depresses the self-esteem of women and hinders their socio-economic mobility. The study ultimately advocates that women should be supported and encouraged to enable them contribute their best in the socio-economic development of their societies.

Keywords: Women, Vice, Self-Esteem, *Anansesem*, Negative Perception, Traditional Stories

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INTRODUCTION

As imitations of real life situations, folktales parade both male and female characters with assigned roles. In the Akan Folktales (AFs), there are many male and female characters but they are human and non-human. Like their male counterparts, the female characters can be put into five different subgroups, namely human, animal, plant, supernatural and geo-features (Mireku-Gyimah, 2010a; Mireku-Gyimah, 2011a). However, all non-human characters are given human qualities through the literary device of personification. Generally, the different characters are studied to make one statement or another about human beings and human society. Usually, these statements have been concerned with ethical issues leading to the desired goal of good neighborliness among individuals who constitute the society. Thus, display of bad neighborly attitudes by (a) character(s) is, to a large

extent, punished in the tales. Whereas good neighborly attitudes emerge as virtues (such as kindness of all sorts and selflessness), bad ones come up as vices (such as greed, deception, stubbornness and ingratitude).

In a study of 50 AFs from the Asante of Ghana, the author discovered that women play several significant roles, especially as wives and mothers, and are also positively cast in several ways for their industry as well as love and concern for their families. Yet in more than half of the tales – about twenty-nine (29) of them – women are cast in very negative light.

The unpleasant depiction is noted to reflect in two main ways. The first is the negative portrayal of women which goes beyond mere description to actual depiction of women in various unfavorable lights. The second is the plight of women which refers to the condition of extreme hardship, danger, suffering and such like in which women find themselves in the society. That more than half the total number of the fifty (50) tales in the author's collection ([Mireku-Gyimah, 2011b](#)) illustrates the poor condition of women shows the significance of this gender-based theme. The paper examines the various stories to expose the negative portrayal of women and the plight of women in order to discourage attitudes that engender such depiction among women themselves and in the society as a whole. The study advocates the positive depiction of women and their abilities in order to engender high self-esteem of women so that they can play meaningful roles in society.

NEGATIVE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN

The negative portrayal of women is observed in various ways in the tales. For example, women are derogatorily depicted in as many as twelve selected tales as: gossipy: Tale 8, greedy: Tale 11, evil: Tale 12, stubborn: Tales 21, 25, 26, 39 and 46, disobedient and wicked: Tale 24, homicidal (or killers of husbands): Tale 16, ungrateful: Tale 45, cheating, lazy and apathetic: Tale 31.

In Tale 8 entitled “How Everyone Got a Depression over the Backbone”, the narrator opens the narration with reference to the women as “eight gossiping women”. In the above-mentioned tale, the eight women are nearly killed by a lion in whose den they inadvertently seek shelter after their long gossip makes them forget themselves only to be caught in a bad rainstorm when they attend a market day programme in a sister village some distance away from their own. They escape death but one was not too fortunate because she loses part of the flesh covering her backbone when the lion tries to grip her in its claws. The lion misses her but succeeds in tearing the flesh on her back. For this reason, everyone born by a woman has a depression at the back. “That is how every person has come to have a narrow trench at his or her back containing the backbone”, says the narrator (p. 45).

Tale 8 is, therefore, etiological, that is, a tale which gives an explanation for a phenomenon. Komasi (2008) describes it as a “How and Why story”, which seeks an explanation for “a phenomenon” (p. 183). The tearing of flesh from the back of the woman and the perpetual scar that is left for her could be said to serve as her punishment, which punishment spills over to the whole of the human race. And, indeed, like the sin of Adam, which we are told was provoked by a woman - his wife, Eve - all people born by women have a depression over the backbone as a consequence of the women’s gossip.

In Tale 11 entitled “Women are Greedy”, women are already accused in the title of the tale as greedy. The whole story illustrates how women are derogatorily depicted not only as greedy but also as witches and murderers of their own children and, therefore, deserving violent death. In this story, a boy is being hotly chased by the mother who wants to kill him because, according to the son’s story, she is a witch. A woman refuses the boy help when he approaches her for shelter but a man who is a carpenter offers the boy the needed help. When the carpenter seizes and overpowers the witch mother who is also described as having unusually large and exaggerated “singing” breasts, he kills this supposed witch, and he goes to the extent of chopping the huge breasts into pieces. When the womenfolk (of the town) are invited first to pick some of the pieces of breast, they rush to pick the bigger ones, leaving the smaller ones for the men. For this reason, the tale explains that women have large breasts whereas men have small ones. The women’s action is underlined by the narrator as an act of greed and made to confirm the negative perception of women expressed in the title of the tale that: “Women are Greedy” (p. 57).

The anti-women message of the tale is emphasized by the other woman’s unwillingness to save the poor boy and the town women’s action of grabbing the big breast pieces, which indicate that women are unhelpful and greedy. It must be noted that the story does not talk primarily about greed but witchcraft, a practice considered evil and punishable by death. Even then, it is a woman who is described as a witch! Hence, in Tale 11 alone, women are painted negatively as greedy, unhelpful and evil.

Another significant point noted in this particular tale is that it is the young boy being pursued in the story, who tells those he meets that the mother is a witch, has devoured nine of his siblings and is now after him. Worst, it is worrying that this story should be told by a young teenage school boy (at the Basic Education level during a story-telling performance), because this little boy appears to harbor already the prejudiced view about women that they are greedy. This is despite the fact that the schoolboy was simply narrating a story he might only have heard.

It is true that this is only a folktale but, again, one should not lose sight of the fact that even though we are in the realm of fiction, a lot is learned at the story-telling session, which can be compared to a real classroom offering education not only for children, but also for adults. As Aduonum (1992)

rightly observes, story-telling is a significant form of education, and it is not limited to infants. Aduonum emphasizes that “This significant form of education ... benefits adolescents as well as adults since it helps them to understand all the whys in the world” (p. 7, qtd in (Boateng, 1993). Of course, the closing formula of the AFs cautions that the audience should take “something away from the story and let something remain”. But it is likely that the negative portrayal of women in this tale and others like it is what mostly remains in the minds of the audience, who, unfortunately, include very young people. We may, therefore, not be wrong to suppose that for these children and some adults, these negative depictions of women are what would be taken as the reasons “for the whys in the world”!

In fact, in view of the AFs’ great power to “affect gender roles”, Addei and Addei (2010), for instance, caution that society needs to mind “what is spoken ...” because “... what we say about men and women in our society in terms of proverbs, folktales and wise sayings ... bring about the gender differences. They also note that “a whole lot about women’s subjugation is depicted in such tales” (p. 3).

Added to the above, five tales, namely Tales 21, 25, 26, 39 and 46, also illustrate the derogatory depiction of women as stubborn. In Tale 21 captioned “Why *Akyekyede* the Tortoise is Killed with Fire”, a young lady who desires and actually chooses independence over remaining perpetually in her parents’ home is considered stubborn, and she quickly loses her life by wild animals tearing and eating up her body. Her blood becomes the red color of the parrot’s tail, as the narrator says. The story evidently portrays the girl’s stubbornness and how she suffers death as a result. The explanation in this etiological tale is confirmed by the audience participants at the performance session of that tale when they observe that: “Parrot dipped the tip of his tail in the blood Yes, that is the red color on the tip of Parrot’s tail.... O-k-a-y...” (p. 134). In Tale 25 titled, “The End of a Stubborn Mother”, an adult woman is so stubborn that she refuses to take the advice of her children and meets untimely death as she is killed by a falling tree thereby orphaning her three children (daughters) unnecessarily.

The title of Tale 26 is the famous Akan proverb which says, “Stubbornness Led to the Elongated Nature of *Onwam* the Black-Casqued Hornbill’s Occiput.” (p. 159). The tale, which is related to Tale 25, shows beyond any doubt that the young ladies, *Ataa Panyin* and *Ataa Kumaa*, meet their untimely death on account of their stubbornness. The story has it that two young ladies who are the twins named *Ataa Panyin* and *Ataa Kumaa* refuse to heed their parents’ advice not to go to the river to swim since they cannot swim. Another reason is the warning that they may lose the golden beads they are wearing. They ignore the warning and lose their golden beads which get torn and scatter in the river. As the girls make frantic efforts to retrieve their precious beads, they are swept away by the swift current of the river and they drown, one after the other, all because of stubbornness. So,

females, young or old (child or adult), are portrayed as stubborn and disobedient. By painting the young twin sisters as stubborn and recalcitrant, women are, once again, derogatorily depicted.

Tale 39 entitled, “How *Sasabonsam* the Devil Multiplied in the World” also illustrates how women are derogatorily portrayed as stubborn. In this story, *Abenaa* the beautiful maiden is ready for marriage. As an independent woman, she decides to choose her own husband contrary to custom. Unfortunately, her choice happens to be the forest devil disguised as a man and she gets nearly killed by him. While being relentlessly chased by him, *Abenaa* shouts for help. Her folks save her; they kill and chop *Sasabonsam* up into pieces which they scatter all over. This is why many forest devils exist in the world – according to the narrator. We note that *Abenaa*’s life is threatened for deciding to choose her own husband against custom. Indeed, she escapes death only by the skin of her teeth. So the independent woman is equated to a stubborn person who must suffer. Women are, therefore, negatively depicted in this tale also.

In Tale 46 titled, “Why *Kraman* the Dog Urinates at a Junction”, another woman is, as usual, negatively depicted as stubborn. In this tale also, we note how a maiden who is only identified by her dog’s name, *Degre*, refuses every suitor who asks for her hand in marriage. She defies all advice from parents and friends to change her behaviour. She eventually selects her own husband but lives to regret her action because she lands squarely in the hands of *Sasabonsam*, the wicked forest devil. But for the help of her dog, she would have been killed. So, again, the woman who chooses her own husband is considered stubborn. She is seen as one who deserves to die. This story, therefore, paints women derogatorily and reminds one of the plight of *Aku-nna*, the heroine of Emecheta’s novel, *The Bride Price* (1995). *Aku-nna* rejects the man selected for her as husband and suffers greatly for her action. Is it a case of another maiden seeking after independence? It is observed that traditional society finds unacceptable the practice where women choose their own husbands. Akan society believes that only men have the right to select their own spouses. Some men even win their wives as prizes, as found in some of the tales. In fact, there does not seem to be a single tale from the corpus of fifty in the author’s collection which shows that a man suffers for selecting a spouse. There is also no tale in the collection demanding that a boy must accept without question any bride selected for him to marry, and there is none in which the man suffers for refusing a bride. The foregoing emphasizes that Akan society is essentially patriarchal. Hence women who insist on deciding who to marry are derogated as disobedient and even hard-hearted.

Apart from the above, women are also derogatorily portrayed as disobedient and wicked. In Tale 24 titled, “Why Some People are Fair in Complexion”, we learn that a divinity assists a barren woman to get a child and instructs her never to expose it to the sun’s rays. When the mother is hired and goes to work on a farm, the woman who hires her refuses to allow the mother to attend to her child. The mother therefore leaves the baby in the sun against the instruction of the divinity who gave her

the child. For being abandoned in the sun, the baby melts into palm oil. Those who besmear themselves with some of the oil become fair in complexion, as the story etiologically concludes.

The story demonstrates clearly that the mother loses her treasured baby out of disobedience and not just negligence. The sad loss of her child becomes her punishment for being disobedient. However, it also shows abundantly clear in the story that the real cause of the loss is the wickedness of the employer who, incidentally, is another woman, for despite the poor mother's pleading, she repeatedly refuses to allow the former to pick the child from the sun. Hence, as one of the two women featured in the story is disobedient, the other is depicted as extremely wicked. Thus, in this short tale also, the picture painted of women is that they are disobedient and wicked.

In Tale 16, "The Widows' Ordeal", women are also negatively portrayed as killers of husbands and, therefore, murderers. This story tells about how the highly polygamous Father (*Ɔ*)*Dom* the fish dies after a short illness. On his death, however, his numerous wives, being all the fishes in the river, are invited to weep (according to custom). Each of them is expected to fill a brass basin with her tears, or there will be trouble! Indeed, failure to meet the demand will mean that the particular widow is responsible for the death of the man. The widowhood rite gets underway and each of the wives, except one, cries and fills the brass basin with her tears. So this one widow, *Konkontibaa*, who is unable to do as expected, is accused of murdering the husband, and she is brutally executed. It must be noted that, for not being able to squeeze water out of stone as tears, as it were, the poor widow suffers great injustice. She is treated like a common criminal and lynched.

The tale also paints a negative picture of the woman who loses the husband as homicidal and as someone who can be abused anyhow in the name of widowhood rites. This picture becomes unfortunate as it goes to perpetuate such wanton acts done against innocent women who are already hurting on account of the loss of their beloved spouse(s). It is also unfortunate how such unwarranted acts occur in the society on almost daily basis, not only in Akanland but also elsewhere in Ghana and abroad as newspaper reports and other sources often show (see, for example, a document of the Widows and Orphans Ministry, in [\(Mireku-Gyimah, 2010b\)](#)).

"How Sores Multiplied in The World" which is the title of Tale 45, offers another illustration of the derogatory portrayal of women as ungrateful. In this story, a woman covered in sores seeks a cure, but to no avail. Then her parents agree to *Kwaku Ananse's* offer to cure the woman of the sores on condition that *Ananse* will take her for his wife, if she is cured. When the woman becomes cured and is later transformed into a beautiful queen, she declines to marry *Ananse* because she does not love him. Offended, *Ananse* brings the sores back to the woman who becomes dirty and helpless again and loses her status as queen. The woman's refusal to marry *Ananse* is considered ingratitude and she is punished for it. Women are thus negatively painted in this story also as ingrates. Parallels of Tale 45 are Rattray's "How It Came About that Many Diseases Came Among the

Tribe” (77-81) and Owusu-Sarpong’s “How Divorce Came Into the World” (151-159) and they also exemplify this fact.

That women are ungrateful and cheating is a popular perception in Akan and other Ghanaian societies. In fact, many FM Radio programmes on the subject of marriage exist these days on which the perceived subject of women’s cheating nature becomes the main topic for discussion. These discussions are usually observed to be replete with stories, especially from male callers, about how they or someone they know has been duped of his money by a lady or two, who have refused to be married to them. Other callers, including women, will then follow up with calls to condemn such women. Condemnable? Yes, but sometimes, the men are rather culpable because they may not have done what they should have done. For example, they may only have showered expensive gifts on the women instead of performing the necessary customary rites to contract the marriage and make the ladies wives recognized by society. Ironically, in many cases, doing the right thing would have cost those men less. It is obvious then that most of these stories are only aimed at fanning a “cult” and perpetuating the misconceptions to make the perception a real concern about what [Azasu \(2008\)](#) refers to as “the perniciousness of women” (p.125).

It may be observed that these seeking-to-confirm views do not include the fact that the men in their exaggerated stories do not live up to their responsibilities, or do not do what is expected of them. An example of this case is found in written African Literature. In Act One of her work, *The Marriage of Anansewa*, Sutherland offers a kind of response by throwing light on the subject of women’s cheating through the *Akwasi* and *Akosua* intervention. In what could be called a scene in the Act (the play, which she calls *Anansegoro*, comes only in Acts), *Akwasi* and *Akosua* are lovebirds but have a disagreement. *Akwasi*, the male lover is peeved; he is seeking to claim *Akosua* as his wife just because he has been showering *Akosua* with gifts - which action is good - but without actually going to see the lady’s parents at home with the customary “head-drink” that will make *Akosua* his wife. This negligence detracts from *Akosua*’s self-esteem and makes her uncooperative with him. As the Akans say, *Y ε y ε de ε ehia ansa na yε ayε de ε ε fata*, to wit, “first things first”. In his anger, *Akwasi* resorts to name-calling when the wise *Akosua* draws his attention to the fact that, really, she is not his wife as gifts alone do not bring that recognition of her as *Akwasi*’s wife. Indeed, customary law or the ordinance does not make *Akosua* his wife.

Tale 31 entitled “Why *Akoroma* the Hawk Catches Chicks” is a story which illustrates the derogatory depiction of women not only as cheating but also lazy and apathetic. In the story, *Akoko* the Hen does not contribute her feathers to the making of a drum, yet she hides and plays the drum in the absence of her friend, who is the owner. The story shows Mother Hen to be a cheat so she suffers serious punishment in that her chicks are killed by Hawk always. The seriousness of her punishment lies in the fact that even though she does not die herself, she is condemned to lose her offspring to Hawk, perpetually. What is worse, she is made to come to a point where she

pronounces this serious judgement herself, thereby causing the pain and anguish that her family will have to endure forever. Thus Tale 31 also portrays women negatively as lazy, apathetic and, above all, cheats who must suffer.

It would be observed that many of the AFs and, indeed, folktales from other cultures try to explain an occurrence in nature and so offer some reasons as to how or why something happens. It is also true to say once again that the tales take us to the realm of fiction hence, sometimes, in these etiological tales, logic is far-fetched and, at best, they merely provoke some humor. However, almost all of such tales tend to link women negatively to the reasons offered. This is so much like the biblical story linking the cause of the ultimate woe of humankind to a woman, as we have previously noted. In our tales, women are the cause of the devil multiplying in the world; women, even when they are birds, are the cause of their own woes of having other birds prey on their children, including those yet unborn, and women are also the cause of such repugnant things as ulcers, “sores” in the society.

Worst is the fact that the women in these instances do not seem to have specific names so that they may be considered as only individuals. Where they have names at all, they are common names available to every Akan woman the moment she is born. In Akan society, a child, whether female or male, first acquires its name by virtue of the day on which it is born. In fact, there need not be any time lapse or any ceremony at all to give that name to the newly born. This is why day-names like *Adwoa*, *Abenaa*, *Akua*, *Yaa*, *Afia* (or *Afua*), *Amma* (or *Ama*) and *Akosua* (running from Monday to Sunday respectively) tend to be very common among the Akan. By depicting them anonymously in the tales, especially as *Ananse*'s wife (when we know the name of *Ananse*'s wife is *Asɔ* or sometimes *Ɔkɔnorɔ Yaa*), then the so-called bad woman becomes everywoman as indeed the conclusions to the tales also demonstrate by way of generalisations. Sometimes, both the beginning and the conclusion do this; for example, in our tale on “sores”, we learn from the narrator at the start of the story that: “A woman had sores ... all over ... from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet” (p. 289). And we also learn from the narrator at the end that:

... the woman's sores visited her again. ... So they seized the woman and cut her body up into many small pieces and scattered them And this caused sores to come into the world. (p. 291)

The conclusion is further negatively reinforced by a male participant's comment addressed particularly to the women in the audience during the performance of that tale when he interjected: “Women, you have supplied us with sores”. (p. 291), that is to say, “Women, you are the origin of sores”.

The Plight of Women

The plight of women is revealed in at least ten tales. Out of this number, eight are fresh in the discussion: women are ill-treated and despised by their spouses: Tales 15 and 38, and also by their own children: Tale 41; women are negatively treated as objects for use as prize awards: Tales 22 and 40; and also as objects for male pleasure: Tale 4; women are negatively depicted as murderers: Tale 16, and also as witches: Tales 6 and 11; and, finally, women are negatively perceived as ill-luck personified: Tale 18.

Tales 15, 38, and Tale 41 illustrate the view that women are ill-treated and despised by their spouses and children, who are, indeed, the closest family members. In Tale 15, “Why Father Hunter is so Very Poor”, the story is told of a poor hunter who comes across an empty snail shell which, fortunately for him, miraculously turns out to be a female “fairy”, *Lady Abenaa*, who transforms this hunter’s life for the better. *Lady Abenaa* provides the hapless hunter a paradise on earth. Above all, she becomes his wife and queen, but warns Father Hunter never to reveal her origin to anyone. “Hunter-King” allows himself to be deceived into drinking alcohol much against his nuptial contract. His senses thus dulled by alcohol, he oversteps his bounds by insinuating about the origin of the wife after he has ignored several warnings from her to be careful. Indeed, “Hunter-King” disregards the wife’s cautions. Finally, when she is unable to take it anymore, *Lady Abenaa* reverses the paradise back to its original state as a thick forest, and she herself disappears into thin air. It is clear from this story that Hunter ill-treats and despises the wife. For this behavior, Father Hunter also gets condemned to unspeakable, perpetual poverty as echoed in the title, “Why Father Hunter is so Very Poor” (p. 87).

In a similar tale – Tale 38 - entitled “Married Couples Who Do Not Appreciate Each Other Should Beware”, *Ananse* is the one in the shoes of our hunter in the previous tale. Severe hunger compels *Ananse* to venture into the jungle for food. There, a rare species of “dwarfed” plantain which he tries to harvest for lack of anything better, luckily changes into a mysterious, beautiful and kind woman who is so magnanimous as to offer *Ananse*, out of the blue, a brand new kingdom, together with its modern facilities. In addition, *Ananse* finds great wealth and a new wife and queen in her. The only condition attached to endless heavenly delight on earth for *Ananse* is spelt out to him as abstinence from alcohol, just as in the case of the hunter in Tale 15. *Ananse* accepts the condition wholeheartedly. However, he persistently breaks his promise each time an elder dies and he attends a funeral. Eventually, he becomes a drunkard and throws in male chauvinistic attitudes by raining insults on the woman as to how bossy she is in spite of her springing from nowhere other than the deep forest. *Ananse* refuses to heed the various promptings he is given to change. When the husband has so much offended his wife, the nameless “plantain fairy woman”, she performs another magic that reverses everything and she also disappears like *Lady Abenaa* did. Here in this tale, too, it is observable that *Ananse* the husband ill-treats the wife and also despises her. Like Hunter, *Ananse* is also punished for his misdeeds by being reverted into penury.

It would be observed that Tales 15 and 38 show clearly how women are abandoned in matrimonial homes, considering that the legitimate wives *Adwoa Manu* (Hunter's wife) and *Asɔ* (*Ananse's* wife), respectively, are together with their children deserted and left in abject poverty and hunger. When their husbands, Hunter and *Ananse*, respectively, go out with the good intention of winning bread for the family and themselves, they stray and stay in the arms of strange, mysterious women who entertain them briefly and promise them eternal happiness. Of course, being irresponsible, they are unable to keep their promises of never touching alcohol and end up abusing their concubines as well. By their irresponsible attitudes, these men treat the women very badly and despise them. Indeed their behaviors (or rather misbehaviors) could amount to domestic violence and thereby underline the plight of these wives in particular and wives in general.

In addition to the above, we would also recall from Tale 39: "Why *Sasabonsam* the Forest Devil Multiplied in the World" and Tale 46: "Why *Kraman* the Dog Urinates at a Junction", how the two forest devils, *Sasabonsam*, scare their human wives and try to kill them. Fortunately, the two women escape death but not after the hectic race and the traumatic experience, which are obviously their punishments for refusing earlier suitors.

Apart from the above, Tale 41 demonstrates that women are ill-treated and despised by their own children. Titled "How *Yafunu* the Stomach became King of the Human Body", the tale has Leg and Hand as first and second sons who treat their mother badly and despise her. It is rather the youngest child, Stomach, who shows concern for the poor, old mother. In this story, *Enan*, the Leg, and *Nsa*, the Hand, are two sons who abandon their old mother in the home with the excuse of seeking a better life elsewhere. Long after, the poor and vulnerable woman travels in search of her three sons who had not come back or paid her any visit. She is fortunate enough to locate each of them; Leg, the first; Hand, the second, and Stomach, the third, in that order. However, the first two sons do not welcome her or accord her any respect as customary hospitality demands. She is disappointed as she leaves them for the last child's place. It becomes clear that the old woman gets forsaken and rejected by her two older sons. The story also tells how the sons ill-treat and despise the old lady.

From the story, it is observed rather pathetically that women are badly treated by their own children yet, today, it is no news to find or hear stories of children, males in particular, abandoning their mothers and sticking to their nuclear families, that is, their wives and their children alone. Even though the society is generally changing from the extended family system to the nuclear one, it is widely believed that children should not neglect their parents.

Added to the foregoing ways in which women are negatively treated in the tales, women are also perceived as objects of male pleasure and even as prizes to be awarded to males. Tales 22 and 40 illustrate this view. In Tale 22: "*Akyekyede* the Tortoise was the Fastest Runner", the father of

Akosua Gyamea organizes a contest to find the fastest runner to touch the daughter's breasts first so that that runner will take her for a wife. Tortoise wins the race; he touches the girl's breasts first and is awarded *Akosua* as his prize. Tortoise takes the girl for a wife. In this story, there is no doubt that the woman is treated like an object, rather than a human being with feelings. This is obviously demeaning. Above all, in the story, we also note that Tortoise wins the race through deception and trickery because he secretly lines up other tortoises up to the winning point. That the dishonest Tortoise finds a wife so easily and also touches her breasts in this story further heightens the negative treatment of women.

In Tale 40, "*Kwaku Ananse* the Spider and *Nana Nyankopon* the Skygod's Nettle Farm", Skygod the Supreme Being also holds a competition by which He seeks someone who can weed his nettle farm without scratching the body even if the nettle weed makes it very unbearably itchy. When all other persons have declined to participate in this weird contest, *Kwaku Ananse* comes along to declare his ability to do the work. He succeeds and wins the prize all right. This award is nothing but a woman, the daughter of the Skygod Himself! Once again, we see how a woman, even one of high status as Skygod's own child, is also treated as a chattel by no mean a personality than the Almighty Himself. Thus we find Skygod's daughter put in the same category as the bulls and the cows which the Almighty Himself offers as prizes. This way of treating women so cheaply is also derogatory. Worse, we also know from the story that *Ananse*, like Tortoise in the previous story, is successful only through the use of deception and trickery. This is so because *Ananse* actually scratches himself several times during the execution of the task after tricking *Kwaakwaadabi*, the Crow, who is Skygod's own appointed supervisor, to get safely out of the way. So Skygod hands over the woman as an object to the crooked *Kwaku Ananse*. This, again, exemplifies how women are treated negatively in Tale 40.

In a similar manner, Skygod exchanges his prized sheep for a beautiful woman in one of Rattray's stories entitled: "How It Came about That Many Diseases came Among the Tribe" (77-81). On this score also, [Opoku-Agyemang \(1999\)](#) confirms that women are negatively depicted when she opines that, "The placement of cows and sheep and a woman in the same class speaks to the feasible, interchangeable equal values attached to them" (p. 123).

It is also observed in Tale 4: "*Sebo* the Leopard and *Nkran Dɔkono Ahahan*" that women are treated as a pastime just like table tennis or any other indoor game, when in that story, *Sebo*, the Leopard, and *Nwansena*, the Housefly, become bored and decide to go women-hunting. Housefly makes the suggestion: "Let's go out in search of women. Let's go out in search of women" to which Leopard replies, "... All right then, accepted". Subsequently, "They got up and rushed out ..." (pp. 19-20). The amusing idea to go hunting for women by those characters provokes wild laughter from the audience present during the story-telling session, which reaction, in a way, goes

to confirm disrespect for women and lack of seriousness attached to them. So women are derogatorily depicted as objects for men to enjoy as tension-release valves.

In addition, to the above-noted, the case of an old lady and the three brothers in Tale 6 also illustrates how women are negatively treated as witches just as is the case of the mother-witch and her ten children in Tale 11, which we have previously studied. In Tale 6: "Unity is Strength", three young brothers - a set of twins and their younger brother - get stranded and an old lady offers them accommodation. But this old lady has eyes glowing like fire and she speaks a strange, magical word, *nyankankotrokampe*, meant to kill her victims through witchcraft. The narrator describes her from the beginning of the story as a witch and confirms it with the description of her looks and actions redolent of the image of witches. As an evil person, she is not permitted to live. She is killed to serve as her punishment. In this story too women are negatively treated as witches.

In addition to the above, we recall how in Tale 11 (entitled "Women are Greedy"), a woman is said to be literally pursuing her last born to destroy him, through witchcraft. She is so strong that she gives the young boy a very hot chase as he flees. She intimidates almost everyone who is in her way such that they are afraid to save the boy. The woman has giant breasts which literally sing to announce her appearance. In fact, a woman who happens to meet the boy first refuses to help him for fear of the mother's evil powers symbolized by the image of her unusually large, singing breasts. This last son is not the only victim of his mother's evil appetite because, according to the story, she has actually killed the first nine of her own ten children, through her evil power of witchcraft.

In the beginning of the tale, the narrator refers to the woman as "a witch mother of ten". In addition, he describes her in such hyperbolic terms as to demonize her: she has an unusual physical appearance, strength, and the ability to destroy on a large scale so that no one dares challenge her, and, indeed, her current attempt to kill the little boy appears to be only a trivial task to her. The references to her breasts as "unusually big", the nine children that she has been able to "chew" and her resolve to destroy the single remaining child, are cases in point. The narrator's description of the woman both in words and action combine to show that this woman, "a practicing witch", is a very evil person who is unfit to live. Therefore, for her punishment, a daring and uncompromising carpenter comes along to strike her head with a hammer killing her instantly. Even in death, the carpenter humiliates her further when, symbolically, he destroys her power and belittles her by chopping the woman's giant breasts into pieces and giving them away. This story also demonstrates the way in which society demonizes women by labeling them as witches.

This practice of calling women witches and destroying them is observed to be common in African societies but probably not limited to them. In Ghana, women still suffer from accusations of witchcraft and other evil practices as evidenced at prayer camps, in various newspaper reports and

eye-witness accounts almost on a daily basis (see (Mireku-Gyimah, 2010b)). The observation is therefore not a concocted one as suggested in the quotation below:

African women cannot prove that they are oppressed or violated. After all, there is no discrimination against them on the basis of their sex in our culture and religious practices. Some of them are only trying to imbibe Western practices which are un-African. In so doing, they will succeed in misleading others (extracted from *Women and the culture of Violence in Traditional Africa* (eds.) Akintunde and Labeodan (2002), "Preface" p. vi).

Added to all that has been discussed so far, we have also noted how women are accused as murderers of their own husbands as in Tale 16 entitled: "The Widows' Ordeal" (pp. 105-107). The story is told about the polygamous husband (*Ɔdom* the Fish, who becomes sick and dies naturally. His widows are subjected to inhuman treatment by demanding that each of them should shed tears to fill a basin, or risk being saddled with the false accusation that she is the cause of the husband's death. We observe how the last wife is unable to meet the demand and is therefore killed. This story illustrates how women are falsely accused of the murder of their own husbands or how they are sometimes falsely accused of being guilty of the crime of homicide.

Finally, Tale 18 entitled "Why *Kwaku Ananse* the Spider Has *Afafa* or A Whitish Substance Clinging Onto its Chest" (pp. 114-120) shows how women, in particular the aged, are accused of being jinxes. In fact, that is another way of describing the old woman as a witch, a term synonymous with "an ugly or wicked old woman". To all intents and purposes, the old woman in the story is hardworking as indeed, we meet her on the way to the farm during a planting season. Then she comes across a water yam which she picks up and tries to prepare for planting. Miraculously, however, this water yam metamorphoses into another old woman who could be described as demon possessed or supernatural, and she pursues the innocent farmer without reason. In this story, we find another vilification of either an innocent hardworking old woman, or yet a highlighting of old female persons as evil or devilish. Either way, women, particularly when aged, are portrayed negatively in society and thereby in many AFs as evil.

Considering the foregoing discussion on the plight of women which emerges in the AFs, one cannot help but agree with the observation of Azasu (2008) that, since long, women have been "cast in bad light" (p. 125). In his very revealing discourse on "Icons in the Cult of the Perniciousness of Women: Asare Konadu's Female Characters in Ghanaian Popular Fiction", Azasu points out how Ghanaian popular fiction succeeds usually at the expense of women being almost always negatively portrayed as nothing worse than evil. Today, some young people go to

the extent of killing their mothers because they perceive them to be evil and the cause of their problems on earth. How unfortunate! But, of course, they usually have false prophets fanning the idea, which actually emanates from the society, sometimes, in a kind of innocent wrapping.

The Way Forward

It would be agreed that the portraiture of women in the AFs, which is only a kind of reflection of what pertains in the society, is bleak and does not augur well for women's self-esteem and greater participation in socio-economic development, particularly in developing countries such as Ghana. The demographic statistics of Ghana indicates that women are about 51% of the population of Ghana. Be that as it may, it means that there are more women in Ghana than men. This is why society must do everything to change its attitude towards women. This can begin with the way in which women are depicted in literature, whether oral or written.

Women are not angels; just like men, women have their weaknesses. Why, for example, could the "fairy" queens in Tale 15 and Tale 38, not be made to sack the men they enticed to stray and stay with them in those women's own kingdoms to go back home to their own "legal" wives and children? Why did they not just offer the poor men the little help they needed? (After all, those powerful women had the money and everything the struggling men needed to return home to their rightful families). Both sexes need each other for the survival of the human race. Composers of oral tales should therefore do everything to enhance the image of women in their tales. This is necessary if the damage done to the image of women in AFs can be undone by reconstructing the old tales with a realistic image of women rather than depicting them as personifications of evil. This is necessary for the progress of society.

In Ghana, it is believed that women must participate more in governance. Indeed, many programmes have been put in place for more women to stand for election to the Assemblies and Parliament. Some people are even ready to become women presidents. Already, Africa has two female Presidents in the persons of Her Excellency Mrs. Ellen Sirleaf-Johnson of Liberia and, recently, Her Excellency Mrs. Joyce Banda of Malawi. In a newspaper article entitled "Women's rights are relevant to gender equality", it is heartwarming, to read the story by [Issah \(2011\)](#) in an authoritative newspaper of Ghana that the Commissioner of Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAG), Ms Laurretta Vivian Lamptey, has stated that:

The Commission would continue to play its critical role as human rights promoters to pursue a vigorous campaign to create awareness, raise consciousness, lobby and, if need be, move mountains to secure gender justice for women (see *Daily Graphic*, Friday, December 9, 2011, p. 11).

With these positive developments and the need to achieve the millennium development goals, it is thought that women must be encouraged to participate in all sectors where they have the capabilities. There must therefore be more positive depiction of the woman through education of all kinds, in particular, those which are sensitive to gender, the use of non-vilifying stories and proverbs, and even the creation and telling of “new” positive stories. As [Awuni \(2011\)](#) advises while attributing his twin sister’s retrogression in school to “discriminatory and anti-feminist beliefs that are steeped in the culture of our country ... the advocacy must continue. It’s not all doom and gloom. Even if feminine sermon wins just one soul, it is enough” (see *Daily Graphic*, Monday, December 19, 2011, pp. 7 & 10). Women themselves should also do more to project themselves more positively by working harder and dedicatedly in whatever responsible positions they find themselves. They must also learn to love their fellow women and stop the petty jealousies and wrangling that sometimes make them lose focus and even hurt their fellow women.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we could say that AFs demonstrate that the negative portrayal of women and the plight of women take many forms. However, some of the painful experiences women go through appear to emanate from society itself. There seems to be a societal conspiracy against womanhood, especially with regard to the terrible superstition of witchcraft and its practice by women. Women, like men, must be allowed to choose their own husbands. Widowhood rites must also be modernized. The injustices inherent in some of these practices need to be corrected in the same way as societal vices such as greed, deception, stubbornness, disobedience and ingratitude are condemned in the various tales. This is because women’s issues are only human issues. One of the artistic functions of folktales is to expose the shortcomings of society and have them corrected. This study, therefore, recommends that more positive stories be told about women so as to encourage them to do more to aid themselves and contribute to national development. It also recommends that women develop “the attitude of learning and winning”, which consists largely of the need for them to overcome the following five negative attitudes and thereby conquer their insecurity as noted by [Awe \(2002\)](#):

1. The selfishness that shrinks her;
2. The prejudice that blinds her;
3. The indifference that isolates her;
4. The envy that erodes her;
5. The greed that consumes her.

(p. 128).

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