



## **African Folklore in Women's Narratives: An Exploration of Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions***

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### **Abstract**

Many of the contemporary challenges faced by women in Africa are deeply intertwined with African traditions and long-standing cultural practices. However, while African traditions indeed contribute to many of the challenges women face today, they also offer pathways to empowerment. African literature and folklore are posited in this study to be sources of retrospection into these African women-related narratives. This study aims to analyse folklore within a selected African literary text, in relation to women-centred narratives and explore the role of folklore in women's narrative and experiences. Using Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* as a primary text, this study adopts a textual and interpretative analysis framed by feminist and nativist branches of postcolonial theory to achieve the objectives of the study. The study identifies two folklores (storytelling and marriage rituals) as central to women-related narratives and traditions depicted in the text. The analysis further reveals that African folklore can function as a double-edged sword as either reinforcing women's subjugation or serving as a vehicle for their empowerment. The continuous integration of folklore in literature serves as a tool for illuminating and preserving previous experiences of women and the traditions of African culture. African folklore is an enabler of women subjugation, but it also has the capacity to challenge patriarchal structures and promote women's empowerment. Deliberate efforts are required to amplify the women-empowering aspects of folklore. Strategic emphasis that focuses on promoting empowering narratives within folklore, challenging and deconstructing harmful narratives through critical engagement, and cultural revitalization by applying a gender lens to traditional practices are some of the implications for women's empowerment.

**Keywords:** Oral literature; Folklore; Women; African tradition; African literature

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Sociocultural narratives and traditions are part of foundation of every society (Ngam, 2019; Warom, 2023). They serve as vessels through which collective identities, values and stories are transmitted across generations (Sone, 2018). Within this cultural framework, women's narratives occupy an important place as they often summarise the roles, expectations and experiences of women's in different cultural contexts. These narratives play a critical role in shaping societal norms and gender relations while providing a medium for the expression of women's voices, often in environments where such voices are suppressed (Mata et al., 2022).

In many African societies, women's narratives are deeply rooted in the oral traditions that have historically determined the transmission of cultural knowledge (Lilomaiaava-Doktor, 2020; Moyo, 2020). These narratives are not just stories, they are

cultural artifacts that carry the weight of centuries of tradition and capture the lived realities of women in particular sociocultural contexts. They reflect the complexity of gender roles, the dynamics of family structures and societal expectations of women and often highlight the tensions between individual agency and collective norms (Chingiz, 2024; Kanal and Rottmann, 2021). The importance of these narratives lies in their dual function of maintaining cultural continuity and providing a platform for change. On the one hand, they strengthen existing social structures by passing on established norms and values. On the other hand, they represent a means by which women can challenge and negotiate their positions within these structures, often subtly subverting dominant narratives to create spaces for resistance and self-assertion (Guillourel and Hopkin, 2017).

African literature and folklore are posited in this study to be sources of retrospection into these African women-related narratives. African literature is rich in diversity and complexity and is closely interwoven with the continent's extensive and diverse oral folklore traditions. It is generally agreed that folklore in African societies serves as a repository of cultural knowledge (Sone, 2018), encompassing a wide range of oral traditions such as myths, legends, proverbs, songs, and folktales. These oral traditions served as the primary medium through which sociocultural norms were communicated, reinforced, and sometimes challenged. Long before the advent of written texts, African societies relied on oral traditions to pass knowledge, values, stories, and cultural practices from generation to generation (Finnegan, 2012; Osei-Tutu, 2023). In this context, African literature has emerged not only as a form of artistic expression, but also as a crucial medium for the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage, particularly in relation to women-related narratives and traditions.

African literature, particularly in its modern forms, has drawn largely on the rich oral African tradition and incorporated folklore into written narratives to explore and critique the socio-cultural realities of the continent. It is important to note that folklore in African societies is not just a collection of stories; it is a living, dynamic phenomenon that is evolving in response to the changing socio-political and cultural landscapes (Dibaba, 2021). It encompasses the collective wisdom of communities and provides insights into the moral and ethical frameworks that guide social behaviour (McDowell, 2021). The integration of folklore into African literature serves several purposes, including the preservation of traditional narratives in the face of modernisation and globalisation (Oko and Ogbodo, 2023; Amponsah, 2023) and the opportunity to engage with and reinterpret these narratives in contemporary contexts. The connection between folklore and socio-cultural women's narratives in African literature is profound (Thosago, 1999). Folklore, with its rich repository of stories and symbols, provides a powerful lens through which women's experiences can be examined and understood. It offers insights into the ways in which gender roles are constructed and maintained in different cultural contexts and how women navigate these roles in their daily lives. In many African folk tales, women are often portrayed in roles that reflect societal expectations such as a dutiful wife, a caring mother, or a wise elder (Alola and Alola, 2020). These narratives serve to reinforce traditional gender roles and pass cultural norms from one generation to the next. However, folklore also contains stories of powerful, autonomous women who defy these expectations and embody characteristics such as intelligence, bravery and resilience (Chingiz, 2024). These stories offer alternative models of femininity, challenging dominant cultural narratives and providing a space for the expression of women's agency and resistance.

Many of the contemporary challenges faced by women in Africa are deeply intertwined with African traditions and long-standing cultural practices. These persistent gender dynamics in African societies, which continue to disadvantage women even in the

21st century, raise significant concerns. There is still an urgent need to identify the factors that contribute to this phenomenon. One such factor is the indigenous knowledge system, including folklore, which often plays a role in either perpetuating or challenging gender inequalities. This study critically examines how African folklore can both subjugate and empower women as reflected in African literature, aiming to reinterpret these narratives to advocate for social change and women's empowerment. This paper explores the relationship between folklore, socio-cultural women-related narratives and gender dynamics in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* and the role of technological innovation in their preservation and transmission.

The specific objectives of this study are to 1) identify and analyse the folklores used in the text in relation to women-related narratives, experiences, and gender dynamics, 2) examine the role of folklore as either an enabler of women's subjugation or a source of women's empowerment, and 3) discuss the role of technological innovation in the transmission and preservation of women experiences and traditions. Through examining the narratives within *Nervous Conditions* and contextualizing them within both traditional and modern frameworks, the study illuminates the ways in which these narratives continue to shape and reflect the experiences of women in African societies. This paper is structured as follows: after the introduction, the background, objectives and historical and cultural relevance of folklore in African societies and its influence on women's narratives were established, next comes the research methodology and theoretical framework, followed by a detailed analysis of the text. The discussion then relates the findings to broader implications for women's empowerment in African cultural contexts. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the contributions of the study and suggests directions for future research.

### *Theoretical Framework*

The analysis is hinged on feminist and nativism theory because both offer a profound approach to understanding the gender dynamics and cultural tensions depicted in the novel. Feminist theory focuses on understanding and addressing the ways in which literature and other cultural texts challenge the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women (Hooks, 2000; Gunew, 2013; Brubaker, 2021; Davis and Craven, 2022). It critically examines gender roles, power dynamics and the marginalisation of female voices (Few-Demo and Allen, 2020). Feminist theory examines how patriarchal structures and ideologies perpetuate the oppression of women and seeks to uncover and challenge these power dynamics. In Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, feminist theory plays a crucial role in exploring gender dynamics and challenges faced by female characters. Feminist theory enables a critical examination of the question of how patriarchal structures and gender roles affect the lives of women in the novel. By focusing on the experiences of characters such as Tambu, Nyasha, Ma'Shingayi and Maiguru, the theory is used to explore Dangarembga's critique of the oppressive structures that limit their opportunities and highlights the importance of resistance and empowerment in the pursuit of gender equality.

Nativism theory in a postcolonial context focuses on the revival and preservation of indigenous cultures, traditions, and identities as a form of resistance against colonial influence (Mamdani, 2020; Sengar and Adjoumani, 2023). It emphasizes the importance of reclaiming and celebrating native heritage to counteract the cultural imperialism imposed by colonial powers (Harrison, 2023; Breakfast et al., 2021). In this study, nativism theory is essential for understanding how folklore serves as a means of cultural preservation and resistance against colonial influences depicted in the novel. In Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, nativism theory helps to explore the tensions between

traditional Shona culture and the impacts of colonialism. The novel portrays characters like Tambu and her family contending with these cultural conflicts and highlights the potential for cultural revival that empowers women and preserves indigenous values without subjugating them to patriarchal norms. Using feminist and nativist theories provided a critical framework for analysing the data, ensuring the study addressed both gendered and cultural perspectives.

## RESEARCH METHOD

### Research Design

This study uses a qualitative research approach to examine the role of folklore in the transmission and preservation of sociocultural women-related narratives in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. Qualitative research is a flexible, non-numeric and unstructured data-driven research method that is used to gain an understanding of social phenomena, contexts, and realities such as people's experiences, beliefs, and behaviours (Oranga and Matere, 2023; Hammersley, 2012). The qualitative approach was chosen in this study for its suitability in exploring the complex cultural, gender, and themes embedded within literary texts. The qualitative approach is appropriate for investigating these themes, as it supports the analysis of complex cultural and symbolic representations that quantitative methods may overlook.

### Data Collection and Data Analysis

The sources of data for qualitative research are often obtained from interviews, focus groups, audio-visual materials, document and archival records among others. The primary data for this study is the text *Nervous Conditions* by Tsitsi Dangarembga. Following a close reading of the text, quotes were identified and selected. Furthermore, instances where folklore intersects relevant women's sociocultural narratives and tradition themes were identified and interpreted in detail. The analysis followed a systematic, two-step approach, first is identification and categorization where relevant passages in the text were categorized based on folklore elements. These categories were aligned with the research objectives to assess folklore's impact on gender dynamics. Second is textual and interpretative analysis, where each identified passage was analysed through the dual lenses of feminist and nativist theories. The feminist lens helped highlight how folklore perpetuates or challenges patriarchal norms, while the nativist lens explored how these cultural narratives resist or preserve Indigenous traditions. This theoretical integration allowed for a detailed analysis of folklore's role in subjugating or empowering women within the novel. The interpretive textual analysis was chosen because it enables a layered exploration of folklore's socio-cultural impact in literature and an examination of underlying gender dynamics within the selected text.

### Synopsis of Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*

Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* is a semi-autobiographical novel that was published in 1988. The novel is set in 1960s Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, the novel examines subjects of colonialism, cultural identity and gender inequality through the experiences of its young protagonist, Tambudzai Tambu Sigauke. Tambu grows up in a village, where her family struggles with poverty. Her father, Jeremiah, is largely passive and relies on his brother Babamukuru, the headmaster of a mission school, for financial support. Tambu's mother, Ma'Shingayi, embodies the traditional role of women, shouldering the burdens of domestic life. She yearns for education as a means of escaping her oppressive circumstances. However, her opportunities are limited because of her gender. When her brother Nhamo, who is sent to the mission school, dies unexpectedly, Tambu seizes the chance to take his place. This marks the beginning of her journey toward self-realization



and empowerment. At the mission school, Tambu lives with her uncle Babamukuru, aunt Maiguru, and cousins Nyasha and Chido. She is exposed to a new world of possibilities and challenges. Babamukuru, a strict and authoritarian figure, who represents the patriarchal and colonial values that permeate her society.

Although Maiguru is educated, she is constrained by her submissive role as a wife. Nyasha, her cousin who has returned from England, struggles with the cultural conflict between her Western education and Shona traditions. Her rebellious spirit and outspoken nature bring her into conflict with her father Babamukuru and illustrate the psychological toll of colonialism and patriarchy. Nyasha's nervous breakdown serves as a distressing symbol of the nervous conditions suffered by people caught between conflicting identities and expectations. During her journey, Tambu becomes increasingly aware of the systemic injustices that oppress women in her society. She recognizes the sacrifices the women around her have made and the need for change. Her education becomes both a source of empowerment and a means to question and challenge the situation. The novel explores traditional gender roles and the oppression of women through elements of folklore such as wedding rituals and family dynamics. Babamukuru's insistence on a formal wedding for Tambu's parents despite their long-standing marriage highlights the control exercised over women's lives. Tambu's inner conflict grows as she grapples with these expectations and aspirations.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study, in line with the objectives of the study, focusing on the role of African folklore in shaping and reflecting the experiences and identities of women. The analysis is structured around the dual role of folklore as both a tool for subjugation and empowerment. The chapter begins by identifying and explaining related folklore from the text. It goes further to examine how the identified folklores are enablers or otherwise of women subjugation.

### Folklore and Women-Related Narrative and Gender Dynamics.

This section provides answer and discussion on objective 1 (identifying and analysing the used folklores relative to women-related narrative and gender dynamics) of this study. Two folklore elements related to women-narratives are identified in the text. These are storytelling and marriage rituals.

#### Storytelling

In the text under consideration, storytelling which is a key element of Folklore is employed as a narrative tool to highlight the experiences and perspectives of women, specifically in the context of colonialism. Dangarembga in *Nervous Conditions* conveys the hardships and resilience of women in a patriarchal and colonised society through oral story telling as inferred in the following excerpts:

*Yes, it was a romantic story, the way my grandmother told it. The suffering was not minimised, but the message was clear....* (Dangarembga 1988: 37)

*My grandmother, who was very old, would sit on a reed mat on the floor and tell us stories of the old days.* (Dangarembga 1988:112)

*She told me how, when the white men came, a long time ago, her father and many other men of the village were taken away to work on the road that the white men were building. How they went willingly because the white men had guns and strange magic, and it was impossible to resist them. How they left the fields they were supposed to plough and weed and went to work for the white men*

*who did not care that they were taking men from the land in the middle of the growing season. How they had no food to eat except for what they were given by the white men, because their own fields grew wild with weeds. How they were paid in salt and cups of sugar, and some other things that were equally useless because you could not eat them, which was bad enough; but worse, you could not plant them in the earth, where they would grow into something that could be eaten. (Dangarembga 1988:112)*

The excerpt is framed as a retelling of a story passed down from Tambu's grandmother to her. Tambu's grandmother narrative becomes a vessel for conveying the impact of colonialism on their society, particularly from a female perspective. This suggests that women may have been marginalised in written history, yet they are undoubtedly keepers of stories and cultural memory. Moreover, the story recounted by the woman in the passage speaks to the disruption of traditional life by colonial forces. This disruption directly affects women, who rely on the men's labour for survival. The storytelling element of folklore used here captures the economic and social impact of colonialism on women who have suffered disproportionately. It emphasises their vulnerability in a system that disregards their well-being. Ayeb-Karlsson et al. (2023) support this by describing the disproportionate impact of loss and violence on women and children and asserting that the storytelling approach helps capture women's loss of well-being. Besides, considering that due to the taken away of men by colonial powers disruption and the continuity of the community threatened while women are left behind, the story telling does reveal the indispensable place of women in the community as symbol of the continuity of culture and tradition and as cultural bearers. Apparently, these give volume to women perseverance, resilience and agency as they navigate the profound challenges posed by colonial rule.

#### *Ritual of Celebration Marriage*

Rituals in African cultures play a fundamental role in marking important life events, fostering community bonds, and maintaining a connection to ancestral traditions and spiritual beliefs (Odey et al., 2023). They serve as essential support for both traditional education and the preservation of the people's culture. Of particular importance in the Shona community are rituals, which are often elaborate ceremonies honouring ancestors and seeking their guidance and blessings. These rituals not only celebrate important milestones but also ensure the continuity of cultural practices and social norms. In *Nervous Conditions*, Dangarembga portrays an example of a traditional Shona wedding ceremony, the wedding of Babamukuru's daughter, Nyari. Dangarembga links the use of folklore, specifically in the marriage ritual and the negotiation of the bride price (*roora*), to women-related narratives and gender dynamics. These rituals reflect the intersection of cultural tradition and patriarchal structures and reveal the roles women play within these dynamics. The author provides insights into the marriage ritual in the following excerpts:

*The preparations for the wedding were extensive and Babamukuru was at the helm of it all, ensuring that every detail adhered to the traditional customs. He negotiated the roora, which was meant to symbolize the union of two families but often reduced the bride to a commodity being traded (Dangarembga, 1988:155)*

*When the day of the bride-price negotiation arrived, the men of the family gathered to discuss and agree on the terms. The women, including Nyari, were expected to wait patiently and accept the outcome, their futures decided by the exchange of cattle and money. (Dangarembga, 1988:156)*

These excerpts highlight the central role of Babamukuru, a male authority figure, in overseeing the wedding preparations and ensuring that every detail adheres to traditional customs. This reinforces the idea that men hold power and control over important cultural rituals, positioning them as the decision-makers and enforcers of tradition. Also, Babamukuru's role in negotiating the *roora* further emphasises this patriarchal control. The fact that he is responsible for determining the bride price underscores the gender dynamics in which men exercise authority over the process, while women are expected to comply with the outcomes. This practice highlights the unequal power dynamics that position women as inferior and vulnerable to abuse. As Mubaiwa (2020) explains, marriage, family and kinship structures are fundamentally characterized by inherent inequalities. This dynamic reinforces the notion that women's roles within these rituals are passive, relegated to the background while men make the decisions that will shape their futures.

Furthermore, the excerpts explicitly critique the commodification of women through the marriage ritual. Although the *roora* is traditionally meant to symbolise the union of two families, form of recognition of the bride's value, giving her a sense recognition and belonging within the groom's community, Dangarembga however, points out how it often reduces the bride to a commodity being traded. Deng (2021) alluded that bride price is a form of modern slavery in the sense that it reduces women to the level of commodities that must be purchased. This contradicts the prevailing belief that all people are born free and equal, a belief on which the International Bill of Human Rights (Assembly, 1948) is based. This commodification is a clear reflection of the patriarchal structures that treat women as objects of exchange rather than autonomous individuals with agency. Likewise, the transactional nature of the bride price negotiation reveals the underlying gender dynamics where women's value is quantified in terms of cattle and money. This exchange not only diminishes the woman's agency but also underscores the gender inequality inherent in these traditional practices.

Besides, the second excerpt highlights the exclusion of women from the decision-making process during the bride price negotiation. The men of the family gather to discuss and agree on the terms, while the women, including Nyari (the bride), are expected to wait patiently and accept the outcome. This gendered division of roles reinforces the patriarchal norm that men are the active participants in cultural rituals, while women are passive recipients of the decisions made by men. The expectation that Nyari and other women should accept the outcome without question highlights the limited agency women have within these traditional practices. Their futures are determined by negotiations in which they have no voice, which reflects the broader societal norms that restrict women's autonomy and reinforce their subjugation.

### *Folklore, Women Subjugation, and Women Empowerment*

This section addresses the second aim of this study: examining the dual role of folklore in shaping women's experiences. Folklore as a carrier of cultural values and social norms can either reinforce patriarchal structures that lead to the oppression of women or serve as a platform for challenging these norms and promoting empowerment. This analysis examines how folklore narratives and practices contribute to the reinforcement of gender roles or provide ways for the empowerment of women, thereby influencing their social status and agency.

A detailed reading and analysis of Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* in relation to the second objective of this study brings to light that folklore is not inherently one-dimensional in that it can be used to serve dual purposes of reinforcing women's

subjugation or as a source enabling empowerment. The role of folklore as a tool for women's subjugation is seen through reinforcement of patriarchal norms (through cultural narratives, representation and stereotypes, control and decision-making, commodification of women, and gendered expectations) and cultural continuity and resistance to change (that is reflected in the preservation of gender inequality).

#### *Storytelling, Women Subjugation, and Women Empowerment*

Storytelling serves as a tool for women's empowerment. The story in the passage can be seen as both a reflection of the oppression of women and a tool for women's empowerment. Although it is known that the past cannot be undone, the past can be improved with a suitable empowerment tool. Therefore, the empowering effect of storytelling is discussed more.

#### *As Subjugation*

##### *Strengthening of Cultural Narratives on Gender Roles*

Narratives in storytelling that reinforce traditional gender roles and patriarchal values can contribute to the subjugation of women. Izugbara (2024), notes that the narrative of human fall tragically reinforces the perceived inherent weakness of the "second" gender. This story connects femininity with weakness and inferiority, reflecting how storytelling often perpetuates traditional gender roles and patriarchal values that contribute to the oppression of women. When women are consistently portrayed as passive, dependent, or secondary to men, these roles become normalised, shaping a culture that restricts women's potential and autonomy. As these stories are passed down through generations, they reinforce the perception that these roles are natural and unchangeable, limiting women's opportunities and discouraging them from pursuing careers, education, or lifestyles that challenge these established norms.

##### *Representation and Stereotypes*

Folklore as a tool for subjugation through storytelling is reflected in storytelling when women are portrayed through limiting stereotypes. That is, when storytelling reinforces stereotypes by portraying women as weak, vulnerable or only valuable in domestic roles, it strengthens societal expectations that confine women to these limited identities. According to Alemu (2007), society not only restricts women to the less valued domestic sphere, but also uses storytelling to enhance the amusing effect of these stereotypes. Repeatedly depicting women in such narrow, stereotypical roles can discourage young girls from aspiring to roles outside these traditional boundaries. These stereotypes uphold the status quo by implying that gender roles are naturally fixed. This creates a cultural environment where stepping outside these roles is viewed as unnatural or undesirable, making it challenging for women to break free from these constraints and for society to embrace diverse expressions of gender. Through feminist theory, this ritual can be seen as an ideological reinforcement of gender inequality, supporting the notion that women's identities are defined by their relationships to male figures.

#### *As Empowerment*

##### *Preservation of Women's Voices*

The act of storytelling itself can be seen as a form of empowerment. When these stories are passed down, women assert their voices and ensure that their experiences are acknowledged and remembered. According to Toliver (2021), storytelling preserves family history and ensures that current generations remember the activities and shared experiences of the past. Through passing on these narratives, storytelling becomes a form



of empowerment, allowing generations to connect with their heritage and maintain a sense of identity and continuity. The elder woman's recounting of the story to the narrator serves as a form of resistance against the erasure of women's perspectives, empowering them through the preservation of cultural memory.

### *Resilience and Survival*

Despite the hardships Dangarembga describes in *Nervous Conditions*, the story also reflects the resilience of women in the face of adversity. The fact that these experiences are remembered and recounted suggests a form of empowerment, as it emphasises women's strength in surviving and resisting oppressive circumstances. This is supported by Lawless (2013) in her book "Empowerment through narrative" maintains that she encourages women to tell their stories because these stories are real and true and affirm them and therefore all women. As women tell their stories, they feel empowered.

### *Basis for Call for Change and Economic Empowerment for Women*

Dangarembga, in the text under consideration highlights the consequences of lack of access to opportunities for women and emphasises the need for change. She portrays how women depend on men for economic stability in *Nervous Conditions*, and when that stability is undermined by colonial (external) demands, women suffer the consequences. According to Vlassoff (2007), in developing countries, women who are entirely dependent on their husbands for their economic livelihood are particularly affected when they are exposed to domestic violence.

It can be summarised that the reflection on women's lives and experiences through storytelling can be a source of subjugation especially when it reinforces gender stereotypes, excludes women's voices, or perpetuates patriarchal norms. The reinforcement of patriarchal norms through storytelling is a powerful mechanism that can limit women's potential and autonomy. By perpetuating traditional gender roles and stereotypes, cultural narratives help to maintain a social order that privileges men and subjugates women. These stories shape societal expectations, influence self-perception, and create barriers to women's full participation in diverse aspects of life. However, it also holds immense potential as a source of empowerment, offering women a platform to voice their experiences, challenge oppressive systems, build solidarity, and advocate for change. Eventually, the impact of storytelling on women's lives depends on who controls the narrative, how the stories are told, and the broader cultural and societal context in which these stories are received. When women take control of their own narratives, storytelling becomes a powerful tool for empowerment, helping to reshape cultural norms and pave the way for greater gender equality.

### *Marriage Ritual, Women Subjugation, and Women Empowerment As Subjugation*

#### *Reinforcement of Patriarchal Norms*

In traditional wedding rituals such as negotiating the bride's price (*roora*), men often have the decision-making power, while women are expected to accept the results without having a voice. This exclusion from critical discussions and decisions reflects and reinforces patriarchal structures in which men dominate and control women's lives. Although bride price symbolises the union of two families, it can also turn women into commodities to be traded between male family members (Neema et al., 2021; Deng, 2021). This practice objectifies women and ties their value to material goods, perpetuating a system in which women are valued primarily for their economic or social utility rather than as autonomous individuals (Zhang, 2020). Besides, marriage rituals often prescribe certain roles for women and emphasise their duties as wives, mothers, and caregivers.

These expectations can limit women's opportunities and reinforce gender stereotypes that confine them to the domestic sphere, thus perpetuating their oppression within a patriarchal framework.

### *Cultural Continuity and Resistance to Change*

Folklore is one of the traditional verbal riches of society (Khairani and Wiradnyana, 2023). Baiduri & Khairani (2017) point out that folklore has its origins in the oral tradition of society and is full of valuable and moral messages to be passed on from one generation to the next generation. Folklore is also a form of cultural expression that represents the character of people's lives (Sone, 2018). Such characters allow folklore to grow rapidly and are widely known in society, preserving cultural traditions and practices across generations. When these traditions include rituals that subordinate women, continued adherence to these practices may entrench gender inequalities and counteract efforts to promote gender equity. Cultural continuity in this context can hinder progress towards greater empowerment of women.

### *As Empowerment*

Folklore as empowerment from the perspective of empowering women through cultural agency and identity as well as challenging patriarchal reforms, thus serving as a potential for subversion and reform.

### *Cultural Agency and Identity*

Women's involvement in marriage rituals can be seen as an expression of cultural agency, playing a crucial role in the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage. By participating in these rituals, women contribute to the continuity of their community's traditions, which can be empowering as it confirms their importance in the social and cultural life of the community. Also, wedding rituals often bring families and communities together and emphasize the values of unity, mutual support, and collective responsibility. Mushibwe (2014) states that by participating in these rituals, a woman can be empowered to take more control over her life. Through their role in organising and participating in these rituals, women help strengthen social bonds and create a sense of belonging, which can be a source of empowerment.

### *Potential for Subversion and Reform*

While marriage rituals may traditionally reinforce patriarchal norms, they can also be sites of resistance and subversion. Women can use their participation in these rituals to challenge and reinterpret the meanings and practices associated with them, advocating for more equitable roles and greater agency within the tradition. Similarly, in Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, the portrayal of marriage rituals includes a critique of the patriarchal structures that underlie them. This critique can empower women by raising awareness of the inequalities embedded in these traditions and encouraging efforts to reform them. By questioning and re-evaluating these practices, women can push for changes that promote gender equality and greater autonomy. Apparently, folklore, in the form of marriage rituals, can act as both an enabler of women's subjugation and a source of their empowerment. When these rituals are used to reinforce patriarchal norms, they can perpetuate gender inequalities and limit women's agency. However, when women engage with these traditions critically and actively, they can also find ways to assert their cultural agency, challenge oppressive practices, and work toward more equitable interpretations and applications of folklore.

By linking these findings to feminist and nativist theories, this analysis illustrates the dual role of folklore in African societies. Feminist theory highlights how folklore

perpetuates gender inequality by normalizing women's subordination within cultural practices. However, it also shows how folklore provides avenues for self-assertion and cultural agency through women reinterpreting their roles and challenging patriarchal constraints. Likewise, the nativist theory emphasises the importance of preserving culture and pride and recognise women as custodians of tradition. These frameworks demonstrate how folklore in *Nervous Conditions* functions as both a vehicle for reinforcing and contesting gender norms.

Furthermore, the dual role of folklore has broader implications for understanding gender dynamics in African societies. This study suggests that a critical engagement with folklore can enable communities to preserve cultural values while promoting gender equality. By recognizing folklore's potential to either support or challenge patriarchy, scholars, educators, and cultural practitioners can use it as a tool to empower women and promote social change. This approach highlights the ability of African literature to contribute to ongoing conversations about women's rights and agency, and shows that folklore can evolve to reflect values of equality and resilience.

## CONCLUSION

Pre- and post-colonial African women's narratives and African traditions are sources for reviews of sociocultural practices and experiences that enable women's empowerment or promote women's oppression. Using a textual and interpretive analysis of Tsitsi Dangarembga *Nervous Conditions*, an African literature, this study examined the role of African folklore in the subjugation or empowerment of women. Two women-related folklores (particularly storytelling and marriage rituals) were identified from the text. The results show that while folklore often reinforces patriarchal norms, it also holds the potential to challenge these structures and promote gender equality. That is on the one hand, it enables the subjugation of women, and, on the other hand, it is a source of women's empowerment.

This study revealed the dual role of African folklore in reinforcing and challenging patriarchal norms in women's narratives, as illustrated in *Nervous Conditions*. While elements such as wedding rituals can limit women's agency by perpetuating traditional gender roles, storytelling also serves to preserve women's voices, resilience, and agency. This dual function highlights the complex sociocultural impact of folklore as it simultaneously maintains gender hierarchies and provides opportunities for empowerment. The dual role of African folklore in the subjugation and empowerment of women implies that promoting women's empowerment through folklore requires a strategic and conscious effort. By interpreting these findings through feminist and nativist frameworks, this research highlights the potential of African literature to advocate for gender equality through the reinterpretation of traditional practices. This research contributes to a growing body of work that examines how African folklore, when critically examined, promotes cultural pride while supporting transformative narratives of women's empowerment. Although this study provides valuable insights, the fact that it relies on a single literary text limits generalizability. Future research could examine folklore in several African literary works to draw more comprehensive conclusions.

## RECOMMENDATION

The study recommends that efforts should focus on identifying and disseminating those stories within African folklore that celebrate strong, resilient and independent women. These narratives can serve as powerful tools to inspire and empower women by offering alternative role models that challenge traditional gender roles. Moreover, it is important to critically engage with oppressive narratives by challenging and deconstructing harmful narratives and promoting dialogue and education. It is important

to critically engage with and challenge the elements of folklore that perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes. Through deconstructing these narratives, societies can begin to question and move beyond the patriarchal norms embedded in cultural traditions. Likewise, encouraging open discussions about the roles women play in traditional folklore can raise awareness of how these stories impact gender perceptions. Educational programs that include critical analysis of folklore can help promote a more equitable understanding of gender roles among men and women. Also, targeted efforts should be made to revitalize culture considering the gender perspective. Because folklore is dynamic and every society wants to preserve and revive its cultural heritage, emphasis must be placed on gender equality. The aim is to consciously design the transmission of folklore to future generations in a way that promotes the empowerment of women.

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