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Proverbs, power, and the feminine: A literary-discourse study of imaginaries of womanhood in selected Akan proverbs

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Abstract - Proverbs, as key forms of Akan oral literature, are not merely wise sayings but cultural texts that use literary-discursive strategies such as metaphor, imagery, symbolism, simile, hyperbole, and mystification to encode gender ideologies. This study examined how women are portrayed in selected Akan proverbs through a feminist literary-discourse approach. Using purposive sampling, data were collected from published Akan proverb collections and oral accounts of two Akan elders. The proverbs were grouped thematically into four categories: women as dependents, as dangerous figures, as custodians of lineage, and as ambivalent beings. The findings show that Akan proverbs present women in paradoxical ways — at once central to lineage and family, yet also portrayed as dependent, dangerous, or subordinate. From a literary perspective, the study shows how figurative language functions as a discursive strategy that both conceals and reinforces power relations. However, feminist reinterpretation of these metaphors and symbols opens possibilities for reclaiming proverbs as tools of empowerment rather than subjugation. The study concludes that Akan proverbs are a contested site where cultural memory, literary artistry, and gender ideologies meet. It recommends that educators, scholars, and cultural custodians preserve proverbs and encourage reinterpretations that affirm the dignity and agency of women.

Keywords: Akan proverbs; African oral literature; feminist literary discourse; gender representation; patriarchy; metaphor and symbolism; women in literature; discourse analysis

1. Introduction

Proverbs, as repositories of communal wisdom, play a crucial role in shaping and reflecting cultural values, social norms, and gendered expectations within African societies (Finnegan, 2003; Mieder, 2004). In the Akan oral tradition, proverbs are not mere embellishments of speech but authoritative statements that encode societal ideologies and regulate behavior (Appiah, Appiah & Agyeman-Duah, 2001; Dundes, 1980). These proverbial expressions often embody deeply entrenched perceptions of masculinity and femininity, thereby sustaining patriarchal power structures and influencing gender relations across generations (Oduyoye, 1979; Hussein, 2005). As Achebe (1960) observed in his reflection on Igbo culture, "proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten," underscoring their centrality to African modes of communication and worldviews.

Scholars have demonstrated that, like many African communities, Akan proverbs are highly gendered. They often portray men as rational leaders, providers, and custodians of authority, while women are represented as dependent, submissive, or even disruptive to social

order (Diabah & Amfo, 2015; Gyan, Abbey & Baffoe, 2020). Studies such as Mariwah et al. (2023) and Diabah & Amfo (2018) have shown how proverbs sustain hegemonic masculinities, while others (Hussein, 2009; Anderson, 2012) show how women across Africa are discursively constructed as either domestic caretakers or as threats when they transgress social boundaries. Therefore, the Akan proverb tradition is a fertile site for interrogating how language functions as a vehicle of power, gender ideology, and cultural reproduction (Fairclough, 1992; Baxter, 2003; Sunderland, 2004).

Despite these important contributions, much of the scholarship has privileged analyses of masculinity (Mariwah et al., 2023; Connell, 2005) or examined proverbs mainly as reflections of patriarchy without sustained attention to how *women's representation* can be reinterpreted through a feminist literary-discursive lens. For instance, Diabah and Amfo (2015) explored women's depictions as "caring supporters or daring usurpers," while Gyan et al. (2020) linked proverbial discourse to broader systems of patriarchy. However, these studies tend to either foreground masculinity or approach women's roles only as secondary reflections of male-centred narratives. What is missing is a focused feminist critical discourse analysis that brings women to the centre of inquiry, not as passive subjects of proverbial wisdom, but as discursively constructed figures whose representations reveal the deeper dynamics of gender, power, and cultural identity.

This study, therefore, sets itself apart by combining feminist literary criticism (Guerin et al., 1992; Lazar, 2007) with critical discourse analysis (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002) to interrogate how Akan proverbs frame and fix the identities of women within oral literature. Unlike previous works that emphasise proverbs as linguistic or cultural artefacts, this research treats them as literary texts whose figurative, metaphorical, and narrative dimensions must be unpacked to reveal hidden gender ideologies (Honeck, 1997; Cameron, 2005). In so doing, the study highlights the dual role of proverbs: as instruments of 2ategorized2o (Grant & Asimeng-Boahene, 2006; Okrah, 2003) and as contested sites where feminist reinterpretations can challenge patriarchal meanings.

This study uses Moral or Ethical Criticism, especially in its Neo-Aristotelian form, as its theoretical framework. This approach, based on Aristotle's ideas of poetics and rhetoric, sees literature not just as art but as a tool for teaching moral lessons, shaping character, and guiding ethical behaviour (Shen, 2013; Ford, 1993). Neo-Aristotelian criticism builds on these classical ideas and applies them to modern contexts, showing how story, structure, symbols, and the author's intentions can communicate ethical messages and encourage readers to reflect on virtue and right conduct (Gregory, 2010; Zhang, 2024). An important idea in this framework is collective phronesis, or practical wisdom. It suggests that literature, including oral forms like proverbs, can model ethical reasoning for everyday life (Kristjánsson, 2022). Texts can guide people to act responsibly, support community values, and live ethically.

Neo-Aristotelian criticism also considers the relationship between the implied author, the audience, and the historical and cultural context, showing that moral meaning comes from how texts are received and understood in their cultural setting (Shen, 2013; Ford, 1993). Thus, this approach allows for an ethical reading of masculinity that highlights care, support, and moral responsibility. Proverbs such as *"Ɔbarima yɛ dua a ɔbaa de bɔ ne nkuto"* ("A man is the tree on which a woman grinds her shea") and *"Ɔbarima na ɔma ɔbaa so"* ("A man lifts up a woman") show that strength and provision are morally valuable only when used to help others, especially women. This reading recovers forms of supportive masculinity often ignored in patriarchal interpretations (Zhenzhao, 2023; Shang, 2013). In light of this, using Neo-Aristotelian criticism, this study treats Akan proverbs as both literary and moral guides. It highlights men's roles as protectors, supporters, and promoters of women's dignity, showing how traditional wisdom can inform contemporary discussions of positive masculinity and gender justice in Ghana.

Akan proverbs, long regarded as the moral compass of Ghanaian life, encode social values that shape how men and women are imagined and treated. Scholars such as Appiah, Appiah, and Agyeman-Duah (2001) and Yankah (2012) remind us that these proverbs are not just linguistic ornaments but social instruments—compact philosophies that reflect collective

wisdom. Yet, this same wisdom often carries traces of patriarchy. Studies by Oduyoye (1979) and Diabah and Amfo (2015) demonstrate that women in Akan proverbial discourse are frequently associated with domesticity, dependence, or fragility. Expressions that describe a woman as *a child who does not know her worth* subtly encode paternalistic assumptions about gender hierarchy.

Linguistic and discourse scholars (Fairclough, 1992; Cameron, 2005; Sunderland, 2004) have shown that language both mirrors and manufactures social power. Within this frame, Diabah and Amfo (2018) argue that Akan proverbial discourse constructs men as protectors and moral authorities while casting women as dependents or moral cautionary figures. Hussein's (2009) comparative work across East African contexts reinforces this point—proverbs often "teach" patriarchy under the guise of wisdom.

However, such readings, while illuminating, tend to freeze proverbs as static expressions of oppression. As Finnegan (2003) and Dundes (1980) caution, oral traditions are dynamic and context-bound; meanings shift with social change. What was once a conservative proverb can, under new moral sensibilities, become a site of critique or even liberation. Feminist discourse analysts like Baxter (2003) and Lazar (2007) push this further, suggesting that proverbial discourse can be a terrain of negotiation—where women and men rearticulate power through reinterpretation and creative use. Thus, while much scholarship has documented the patriarchal framing of women, less attention has been paid to the moral flexibility of these texts and their capacity to evolve alongside social consciousness.

Recent scholarship within African philosophy and feminist hermeneutics has begun to challenge these inherited readings by engaging indigenous thought on its own terms. Okere (1995) argues that genuine interpretation must arise from the cultural soil that produced the text; for Africa, this means understanding proverbs through the logic of *communal harmony* rather than Western dualisms of power and domination. Similarly, Wiredu (1980) 3ategorize *biakoye*—unity and complementarity—as the highest moral value in Akan thought, where men and women function as interdependent moral agents.

Building on this, scholars such as Resane (2023) and Baloyi (2022) advocate for the categorized on of theology and moral philosophy through indigenous interpretive methods. They contend that African wisdom traditions, when read hermeneutically, reveal a rich ethical system that values balance, respect, and partnership. Within this same interpretive spirit, feminist scholars like Yitah (2007) and Ssetuba (2002) demonstrate that women's engagement with proverbs is not merely passive. In many contexts, women use proverbs to critique male behaviour, assert agency, and redefine social roles. Mariwah et al. (2023) similarly reveal that Akan proverbs about men can express empathy, protection, and emotional solidarity—features often overlooked in earlier analyses that focused solely on dominance.

Taken together, these studies open up an interpretive horizon where Akan proverbs are not relics of patriarchy but living moral texts capable of re-signification. Yet, most feminist or discourse-oriented analyses stop short of integrating these insights within a broader philosophical hermeneutic framework. This is where the present study intervenes: by combining Cultural Hermeneutics (Okere, 1995) with feminist discourse analysis (Lazar, 2007; Cameron, 2005), it re-reads Akan proverbs as ethical conversations about partnership, mutuality, and care—rather than as mere reflections of hierarchy.

A cursory look at the literature shows the gendered imagery and linguistic framing of women in Akan proverbs. However, it remains largely 3ategoriz: one stream critiques proverbs as instruments of patriarchy (Diabah & Amfo, 2015; Hussein, 2005), while another celebrates their aesthetic and cultural value (Appiah et al., 2001; Yankah, 2012; 1989). What is missing is a middle ground that reads these texts through the lens of *ethical possibility*—acknowledging their biases while recovering their moral insights.

In view of this, I contend that centring women's representation, this study makes three original contributions. First, it shifts the focus from masculinity-oriented analyses (e.g., Mariwah

et al., 2023) to a sustained interrogation of the female figure in Akan proverbial discourse. Second, it integrates literary analysis with critical discourse methodology to uncover how metaphor, symbolism, and narrative devices shape gendered meanings in oral literature. Finally, it situates Akan proverbs within the broader African and global scholarship on proverbs and gender (Hussein, 2009; Ssetuba, 2002; Anderson, 2012), thus enriching comparative understandings of how patriarchal ideologies are both universal and culturally specific.

Issa and Ali (2025) examine how proverbs in two indigenous languages of Gilgit-Baltistan, **Balti** and **Burushaski**, encode cultural values through conceptual metaphor. Using Conceptual Metaphor Theory, they argue that proverbs are not mere stylistic flourishes but cognitive tools that reflect each community's worldview (Issa & Ali, 2025). The study analyzes 40 proverbs (20 from each language) relating to **animals, birds, fruits, and vegetables**, collected from native speakers and published proverb collections. Through qualitative comparative analysis, it identifies both **shared and distinct metaphors** across the two languages, linking them to beliefs, attitudes, and social norms in each community. This gives a concrete window into how everyday figurative language frames ideas such as character, morality, and social relations.

In light of these aims, the study asks: How are women represented in selected Akan proverbs? What discursive strategies are employed in constructing these representations? Moreover, how might a feminist literary-discourse analysis challenge, reinterpret, or subvert the patriarchal ideologies embedded in these oral texts? In addressing these questions, the research seeks to contribute not only to Akan studies but also to the broader fields of feminist discourse analysis, African oral literature, and gender studies.

Specifically, the study sought to (1) examine how women are represented in Akan proverbs (language, images, and symbols); (2) explore the ways traditional views of women can be challenged or reinterpreted. This study is significant in several respects. First, it contributes to the growing body of scholarship on gender and discourse in African oral traditions. However, it distinguishes itself by focusing specifically on the representation of women in Akan proverbs, an area often overshadowed by the emphasis on masculinity (see Mariwah et al., 2023; Diabah & Amfo, 2018).

Second, the research integrates feminist literary criticism with critical discourse analysis (Lazar, 2007; Fairclough, 1992), offering a methodological innovation that treats proverbs not merely as linguistic artefacts but as *literary texts* rich in metaphor, symbolism, and narrative complexity. This interdisciplinary approach enhances the interpretive depth of proverbial studies and opens new avenues for understanding how oral literature reflects and reproduces social hierarchies.

Third, the findings will have broader cultural and educational relevance. Since proverbs function as tools of socialization and moral instruction in Akan communities (Grant & Asimeng-Boahene, 2006; Appiah et al., 2001), examining their gendered implications has practical significance for challenging stereotypes and promoting more equitable gender relations. The insights from this research can therefore inform not only scholarly debates in gender and African studies but also community education, curriculum development, and advocacy for gender equality. This study seeks to deepen the understanding of how Akan oral literature constructs womanhood and provide critical resources for rethinking and reshaping cultural narratives about women in Ghanaian society and beyond.

2. Method

This study adopts a qualitative research design, combining content analysis with literary discourse analysis under the framework of feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) (Lazar, 2007; Fairclough, 1992). A qualitative paradigm is appropriate because it allows for an in-depth interpretation of cultural texts such as proverbs, where meaning is often conveyed through metaphor, symbolism, and narrative structures (Creswell, 2014; Guerin et al., 1992). Content analysis was employed to identify recurring themes, words, and figurative devices in selected

Akan proverbs that reference women, while literary discourse analysis was used to interpret how these proverbs construct gender ideologies through metaphor, allegory, and narrative positioning (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002; Honeck, 1997). Data for the study were collected through purposive sampling, involving both documented sources—such as Appiah, Appiah & Agyeman-Duah's *Bu Me Be: Akan Proverbs* (2001)—and oral accounts from two elderly Akan speakers in Kumasi, to ensure cultural authenticity and address the risk of corrupted online versions. The study adopted data triangulation to enhance credibility, combining oral, written, and scholarly sources in line with Kuranchie's (2020) recommendation that multiple sources improve research trustworthiness. In analysing the data, proverbs were first thematically 5ategorized, then subjected to literary-discursive interpretation to reveal how language encodes patriarchal perceptions of women while offering space for feminist reinterpretation (Baxter, 2003; Guerin et al., 1992).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

Theme 1: Women as Dependents and Subordinates

Proverb (Akan & Translation)	Literary Device(s)	Interpretation
Ɔbaa te sɛ aburoo; ɔntumi n'ankasa n'ankasa, ɔsɛ sɔre kyere hɔ (A woman is like maize; she cannot stand on her own but needs support to grow).	Metaphor, Simile, Symbolism	Encodes women as inherently dependent. Patriarchy naturalises female weakness. Feminist critique: exposes gender ideology that denies women autonomy.
Ɔbaa te sɛ nsuo; se wode bɛyɛ yie a, ɛyɛ a, se wode bɛyɛ basaa nso a, ɛyɛ basaa (A woman is like water; if handled well, it is good, if not, it causes destruction).	Simile, Imagery, Parallelism	Suggests women must be "controlled." Feminist reading: women's agency is depicted as dangerous unless managed by men.
Ɔbaa yɛ abɔfra; ɔnsɔre n'ankasa (A woman is like a child; she cannot rise on her own).	Metaphor, Hyperbole	Infantilises women, portraying them as helpless and incapable of independence. Feminist lens: reveals ideological infantilization of women.
Ɔbaa yɛ abusua boɔ (A woman is the pillar of the family).	Personification, Symbolism	Recognises women as essential but confines them to family/reproductive roles. Feminist reading: women's identity reduced to domestic support.

This table shows how women are repeatedly depicted as weak and incapable of functioning independently. Proverbs such as "*Ɔbaa te sɛ aburoo*" (A woman is like maize) and "*Ɔbaa yɛ abɔfra*" (A woman is like a child) employ metaphors, similes, and hyperboles to infantilise and naturalise women's dependence. The comparison of women to maize — a crop that must be cultivated — suggests that women require constant supervision, while likening them to children denies them maturity and agency. Even positive proverbs like "*Ɔbaa yɛ abusua boɔ*" (A woman is the pillar of the family) appear to praise women but still confine them to domestic and reproductive roles. A feminist discourse reading here reveals how Akan oral literature sustains the ideology that women are incomplete without men, a view deeply entrenched in patriarchal culture.

Theme 2: Women as Troublemakers and Dangerous Figures

Proverb (Akan & Translation)	Literary Device(s)	Interpretation
Ɔbaa na ɔtɔ ɔko gu abusuakuw mu (It is a woman who causes strife in a family).	Hyperbole, Symbolism	Exaggerates women's role as a cause of conflict, stereotyping them as divisive. Feminist reading: blames women for family tensions, ignoring structural issues.

Proverb (Akan & Translation)	Literary Device(s)	Interpretation
Obaa bɛma woawu a, ɔde ne ho bɛma wo (If a woman will cause your death, it will come through her body).	Hyperbole, Imagery	Dramatises women's sexuality as fatal. Feminist reading: encodes fear of women's sexuality as destructive.
Ɔbaa yɛ ɔkɔtɔ a ɔda nsuo mu (A woman is like a crab lying in water).	Symbolism, Imagery	Symbol of deceit or hidden danger — women depicted as unpredictable and cunning. Feminist critique: sustains suspicion toward women's motives.
Ɔbaa yɛ mmoatia a ɔde mmerɛ hyɛ onipa mu (A woman is like a spirit who plants time into a person).	Metaphor, Mystification	Women are represented as supernatural manipulators. Feminist lens: associates femininity with mystery/danger, reinforcing cultural anxieties.

The second table highlights the representation of women as sources of conflict, disruption, or danger. Proverbs such as "Ɔbaa na ɔtɔ ɔko gu abusuakuw mu" (A woman causes strife in the family) use exaggeration to blame women for family breakdowns, reflecting a discourse of suspicion toward female presence. Similarly, "Obaa bɛma woawu a, ɔde ne ho bɛma wo" (If a woman causes your death, it will be through her body) dramatises women's sexuality as a destructive force. These literary devices — hyperbole, imagery, and symbolism — exaggerate women's influence in negative ways, portraying them as fatal temptresses or manipulative beings. Feminist critique here shows how such proverbs reflect cultural anxieties about female sexuality and independence, placing women at the centre of blame for social instability.

Theme 3: Women as Custodians of Lineage and Identity

Proverb (Akan & Translation)	Literary Device(s)	Interpretation
Ɔbaa na ɔma abusua nya din (It is a woman who gives a family its name).	Symbolism, Imagery	Acknowledges women's centrality in lineage. Feminist reading: while positive, it ties women's value to reproduction.
Ɔbaa yɛ ɔman kɛsɛɛ (A woman is a great nation).	Metaphor, Hyperbole	Celebrates women as foundational to society. Feminist reading: symbolic recognition, but risks reducing women to collective "roles" rather than individuals.
Ɔbaa na ɔma fie mu yɛ fɛ (It is a woman who makes a home beautiful).	Imagery, Symbolism	Women are beautifiers and nurturers of the home. Feminist critique: reduces women's identity to domesticity.
Ɔbaa yɛ nkwa so dua (A woman is the tree of life).	Metaphor, Symbolism	Symbolises women as life-givers and nurturers. Feminist reading: recognises a vital role, but primarily in biological terms.

In contrast, the third table portrays women as foundational to family and society. Proverbs like *"Ɔbaa na ɔma abusua nya din"* (A woman gives a family its name) and *"Ɔbaa yɛ nkwa so dua"* (A woman is the tree of life) recognise the essential roles of women in sustaining lineage and continuity. Literary devices such as symbolism and imagery elevate women to life-givers, pillars, and nation-builders. However, even within this positive discourse, women's worth is closely tied to reproduction, caregiving, and family identity. This aligns with Gyan et al. (2020), who argue that proverbs often lock women into narrow domestic and biological functions. Feminist literary-discourse analysis, therefore, uncovers the double bind: women are exalted symbolically yet restricted practically.

Theme 4: Women as Ambivalent and Complex Figures

Proverb (Akan & Translation)	Literary Device(s)	Interpretation (Gender Ideology & Feminist Reading)
Ɔbaa te sɛ nsuo; sɛ wode bɛyɛ yie a, ɛyɛ a, sɛ wode bɛyɛ basaa nso a, ɛyɛ basaa (A woman is like water; if well handled, it is good; if not, it causes destruction).	Simile, Imagery, Parallelism	Ambivalent — recognises women's potential for good or harm—feminist critique: frames women's value as dependent on men's control.
Ɔbaa yɛ ɔsaman a ɔde adeyɛ bɛtɔ onipa so (A woman is a spirit who can influence one's destiny).	Metaphor, Mystification	Suggests women's power is mystical and unpredictable. Feminist reading: reinforces cultural ambivalence about women's authority.
Ɔbaa yɛ ɔsono; se wode bɛba fie a, ɛyɛ a, se wode bɛba ha yiye nso a, ɛyɛ yiye (A woman is like an elephant; her presence can bring dignity or destruction).	Metaphor, Hyperbole	Dual image — both dignified and dangerous. Feminist lens: highlights ambivalence in cultural constructions of womanhood.
Ɔbaa yɛ ahwenepa a ɛnsi hɔ nanso ɛho hia (A woman is like precious beads that may not last but are essential).	Symbolism, Imagery	Represents women as fragile yet valuable. Feminist critique: exposes tension between valuing women symbolically and limiting them socially.

The final table captures the ambivalence in portraying women as both powerful and dangerous, indispensable yet fragile. Proverbs such as "Ɔbaa te sɛ nsuo" (A woman is like water) and "Ɔbaa yɛ ɔsono" (A woman is like an elephant) show that women can be nurturing or destructive, dignified or destabilising, depending on how they are "handled." These proverbs employ metaphors, hyperbole, and mystification to present women as unpredictable and mysterious forces. From a feminist standpoint, this ambivalence reveals the cultural anxieties of patriarchal societies: while women's power is acknowledged, it is simultaneously feared and thus controlled through discourse. This dual positioning reflects what Diabah and Amfo (2015) call the "ambivalence of women's representations" in Akan proverbs.

3.2 Discussion

The purpose of this study was twofold: first, to examine how women are represented in Akan proverbs through literary and discourse analysis, and second, to interpret the paradoxical ways these proverbs construct womanhood within patriarchal culture while offering possibilities for feminist reinterpretation. The discussion below addresses each objective concerning the findings presented in the four thematic tables.

The analysis revealed that Akan proverbs employ a wide range of literary devices — metaphor, simile, hyperbole, imagery, symbolism, and personification — to construct culturally embedded notions of womanhood. For instance, metaphors likening women to maize (*Ɔbaa te sɛ aburoo*) or water (*Ɔbaa te sɛ nsuo*) reduce women to natural elements that require cultivation or control, thus naturalising dependence. Hyperbole, as seen in the proverb *Obaa bɛma woawu a, ɔde ne ho bɛma wo*, dramatises female sexuality as fatal, amplifying cultural anxieties about women's power. Symbolism in proverbs such as *Ɔbaa yɛ nkwa so dua* (a woman is the tree of life) emphasises women's role as life-givers. However, it confines their identity to biological and reproductive functions.

These findings support the positions of Honeck (1997) and Finnegan (2003), who argue that figurative language in oral traditions does more than beautify speech; it encodes social values and power relations. In this case, the literary devices serve as discursive strategies that sustain and legitimise patriarchal ideologies. Thus, while the artistry of Akan proverbs reflects cultural creativity, their meanings are deeply ideological, framing women primarily as dependent, dangerous, or domesticated.

The thematic analysis demonstrated the paradoxical nature of women's representation in Akan oral literature. In the first theme, women are depicted as dependents and subordinates, requiring male supervision (*Ɔbaa yɛ abɔfra*). In the second, they are cast as troublemakers and dangerous figures, capable of disrupting family harmony (*Ɔbaa na ɔtɔ ɔko gu abusuakuw mu*) or even causing death (*Obaa bɛma woawu a, ɔde ne ho bɛma wo*). These depictions sustain patriarchal anxieties about female independence and sexuality, presenting women as risks to social order.

Conversely, in the third theme, women are celebrated as custodians of lineage and identity. Proverbs such as *Ɔbaa na ɔma abusua nya din* (a woman gives the family its name) and

Ɔbaa yɛ nkwa so dua (a woman is the tree of life) acknowledge women's indispensable roles in sustaining family and community. However, these positive representations are still limiting, as they tie women's value almost exclusively to domestic and reproductive capacities.

The fourth theme reveals the ambivalence in women's portrayals. Metaphors like water and elephants highlight women's dual potential to nurture, destroy, dignify, or destabilise. This dual positioning resonates with Diabah and Amfo (2015), who argue that Akan proverbs often construct women as indispensable and threatening. Feminist discourse analysis interprets this ambivalence as a reflection of cultural tensions: while women's power is acknowledged, it is simultaneously mistrusted and controlled.

Crucially, the paradoxical discourse of women as life-givers and troublemakers presents an opportunity for feminist reinterpretation. If women are the "pillars" and "trees of life," they are not passive dependents but essential societal actors. If women are likened to water, then rather than being controlled, their agency should be recognized as both powerful and necessary. By re-reading these proverbs critically, feminist discourse offers possibilities for subverting patriarchal interpretations and reclaiming women's symbolic strength.

The discussion shows that Akan proverbs, as a form of oral literature, operate as ideological tools that sustain patriarchy through metaphorical and symbolic constructions of womanhood. However, the same proverbs also carry seeds of resistance: the images used to constrain women — water, trees, pillars, nations — can be reinterpreted to affirm women's power, resilience, and indispensability. This duality reflects the richness of oral literature as a contested cultural space where patriarchal dominance and feminist re-reading intersect.

4. Conclusion

4.1 Conlcusion

This study has shown that Akan proverbs are more than simple wise sayings — they are cultural texts that use literary-discursive strategies to communicate powerful ideas about women. Through metaphors, similes, symbolism, imagery, hyperbole, and mystification, women are represented in multiple, often contradictory ways. Some proverbs portray women as dependent and childlike, unable to stand independently. Others frame them as troublemakers or dangerous figures whose presence brings conflict. However, some proverbs elevate women as life-givers, lineage custodians, and family pillars.

From a literary perspective, these proverbs function as miniature narratives where figurative language is used to naturalize gender ideologies. For instance, comparing a woman to water or maize uses metaphor and symbolism to suggest that her value or danger depends on how she is "handled." Similarly, describing women as spirits or crabs draws on imagery and mystification to present them as mysterious or untrustworthy. Such discursive strategies shape cultural attitudes while disguising power relations in poetic and memorable forms.

Thus, the conclusion is that Akan oral literature encodes a paradox: women are simultaneously celebrated and constrained, valued as life sources but devalued as independent beings. The artistry of the proverb, with its layered images and symbolic wit, makes these gender ideologies attractive and enduring in the cultural imagination.

The implications of this study are both literary and social. From a literary-discursive standpoint, the analysis demonstrates how figurative strategies — metaphor, hyperbole, imagery, and symbolism — are not neutral. They are used to normalize patriarchal views by making them sound natural, witty, or even beautiful. This means that literature, even in oral form, is never innocent; it carries ideology. At the same time, these very devices open room for reinterpretation. A metaphor that once implied weakness (e.g., "a woman is like a child") can be re-read to expose and critique the cultural infantilization of women.

Socially, this means that proverbs shape how women and men see themselves and their roles. In everyday life, repeating such sayings reinforces unequal gender expectations. However, if approached critically, the same proverbs can become tools of resistance and feminist reinterpretation. For example, calling a woman "the tree of life" can be reclaimed not only to mean a mother but also a leader, provider of wisdom, and source of strength for society.

In African literary studies, this implies that scholars, teachers, and cultural custodians must collect and preserve oral traditions and interrogate their discursive strategies. Proverbs are not static; they are living texts that can be challenged, reinterpreted, and reshaped to support a vision of gender equality.

4.2 Limitations of the Study

Like any study, this research has its limitations. First, the analysis focused on a selected number of Akan proverbs, which means the findings cannot be taken as a complete picture of all Akan oral traditions. Second, the study relied on purposive sampling of two Akan elders for verification, which, while adding authenticity, also limits the range of perspectives. Third, because the research is qualitative and literary-discursive, it cannot claim to measure the exact social impact of these proverbs on all Ghanaian communities. Finally, translating the proverbs from Akan to English may have lost some of the original nuances of imagery and symbolism, though efforts were made to keep the meanings accurate.

4.3 Recommendations

This study makes several recommendations for different groups who engage with Akan proverbs and African oral literature.

First, for scholars of African literature, proverbs should be seen not only as cultural heritage but also as discursive texts that carry deep meanings about power and gender. Researchers need to pay close attention to the literary strategies such as metaphor, imagery, symbolism, hyperbole, and simile, because these are not neutral tools of expression. They are the devices through which patriarchal values are made to sound natural and wise. At the same time, these same strategies can be reinterpreted from a feminist perspective in ways that affirm women's strength and agency.

For educators, especially in schools, proverbs remain powerful teaching tools that can be used to pass on wisdom. However, they should be introduced with a critical lens. Teachers should guide students to question proverbs describing women as weak, dependent, or dangerous, instead highlighting those that celebrate their importance, resilience, and contributions. In this way, education can help the younger generation appreciate oral literature while challenging gender stereotypes.

Cultural custodians such as elders, storytellers, and family heads also have a role to play. While preserving proverbs is important for keeping Akan identity alive, there is also a need to adapt and reinterpret them in ways that respect the dignity of women. If this is done, oral literature will continue to serve society as a source of wisdom without reinforcing harmful ideas about womanhood.

Finally, for future researchers, there is much room for comparative studies. Examining how different African societies use figurative discourse to talk about women will provide a broader and deeper understanding of the role of oral literature in shaping gender ideologies. Such research will add to African literary scholarship and create opportunities for building a more balanced and inclusive interpretation of traditional wisdom.

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