Gender and Canon formation in Nigerian Literature in English: A search for a usable past.

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ABSTRACT

This paper concerns itself with how the African literary past connects with the ongoing debate about gender, ideology, and canon formation in contemporary Nigerian Literature in English. In order to achieve this objective, the paper finds in two Igbo proverbs a usable past that illuminates the current thematic constructions of gender formation in Nigerian Literature. These proverbs are, in their English translation, as follows: (1) If a tale is told without mention of the tortoise, the tale is incomplete, and (2) when two tortoises fight the male one will be known.

The tortoise, the spider, the hare, the lion, the dog, the elephant, etc. are, in their ubiquitousness, canonical in many African folktales, but among the Igbo, the dominant one is the tortoise. Its legendary possession of wit and wisdom, its deep complexity (always resisting predictive specificities), its monumental skills in endless manoeuvring and scheming, its resilience, etc., make it a deeply courted, yet unreliable friend in the animal kingdom. Indeed, in Igbo folktales the tortoise stands out as a hermeneutic problematic. Little wonder that the Igbo then affirm that a folktale is incomplete without mention of the tortoise.

When however, the Igbo go on to encapsulate in a proverb the idea that when two tortoises fight the male one will be known, then the issue of dominance stands out. This is because the expectations are that the male tortoise will outwit the female and have its way, riding roughshod over the female one.

Given that women were the dominant storytellers among the traditional Igbo, this paper then attempts to account for the historical displacement of women from this time honoured role. Furthermore, the paper investigates the themes and techniques of canonical Nigerian writers of Igbo extraction writing in English with a view to discovering how their art and preoccupations relate with the ways of the tortoise.