The Alienation of the Unassertive and the Overbearing Female Characters in Esan Folktakes

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Abstract
This essay examines the subject of alienation as punishment of the unassertive and the overbearing female characters in Esan folktales. To the best of my knowledge, this theme has not been examined in Esan folktales before now. The study collected tales from Esanland transcribed and translated them into the English language. The tales were then subjected to textual and hermeneutic analysis to elicit textual meaning and to contextual analysis to bring out the cultural and historical aspects. The folktales were compared to elucidate the theme of alienation as punishment and the supportive instrumental literary aesthetics and devices. The study found out that alienation is a dominant theme in Esan folktales and that different characters suffer alienation for different reasons. This essay therefore focuses only on the unassertive and the overbearing female characters in Esan folktales. These characters are used to underscore how a female character in Esan culture and community should and should not conduct herself.

Key words: Alienation, Folktale, Unassertiveness, Overbearingness.

Introduction
Alienation is a term that has been in use in the social sciences for centuries. Because of its diverse meanings, it also applies to other disciplines such as Arts/Humanities. It has different meanings in different situations. Some of its meanings are powerlessness,
meaninglessness, normlessness, cultural estrangement, social isolation, self-estrangement (Encyclopedia Britannica). In this essay, it means social isolation “the sense of loneliness or exclusion in social relations (as for example, among minority group members (Britannica). Therefore, the unassertive female character suffers loneliness and exclusion in social relation. That is why she is denied information and lacks knowledge of the happenings around her. She lives an isolated life. Also, the overbearing female character is also often denied information on things that concern her. Other characters watch her till she destroys herself. This is because she will not even listen to advice or caution.

The female in Esan community or culture suffers social alienation when she exhibits any of the following traits: unassertiveness/over-bearingness, laziness and unproductiveness, selfishness and arrogance and lastly adultery. The folktale as we know functions as a tool for sanctioning and exposing characters that are non-conforming or bad. The good characters in folktales are usually not the focus but are used to contrast the non-conforming characters and are rewarded whereas the bad ones are punished. The punishment could be social, psychological or physical. This essay focuses on the unassertive and the overbearing female characters in Esan folktales. These characters are used to underscore how a female character should not behave in her community.

The essay investigates the theme of social isolation/alienation in Esan folktales, the female characters that suffer alienation, the reasons for their alienation and the attitude of the other characters towards them. The essay focuses only on the unassertive and overbearing female characters in Esan folktales
and two tales are used to expose the trait of unassertiveness and over-bearingness.

The theory adopted in this essay is multi-dimensional approach which combines functional, aesthetic and social realism. Multi-dimensional approach is proposed by Richard M. Dorson as against the other well known theories of folklore like Finnish/Historical/Geographical, Cultural/Anthropological, Structural and Psycho-analytical.

The above theories are recorded by Alan Dundes, William Bascom and Ruth Finnegan. They are viewed as defective in the comprehensive interpretation or analysis of folktale because they concentrate on only one aspect of the folktale, either: history, spread, structure, or repressed desires. But the multidimensional approach examines the functions of folktale which includes entertainment, education and information. It also examines the artistic features found in such tale and lastly the social relevance of the tale in the community in which it is found or domicile. A combination of these three approaches gives a comprehensive understanding or analysis of the folktale. Dorson concludes that “the folklore of the future may very likely draw upon all these schools in his quest for a broadly based pragmatic theory” (10).

Isidore Okpewho in agreement with the multi-dimensional approach of analysis of folktale states:

Until very recent time, traditional African art of all genres were studied exclusively by anthropologists and art historians. Often, they did not go beyond identifying the art by region of origin or of distribution. Otherwise, they made rather inadequate attempts to deduce a community’s life and thought from the nature of its art. They seldom tried to get to the roots of the aesthetic principles on which the act
was executed as a result, they generally devised a blanket theory that had an exotic appeal but were incapable of giving us an insight into the fundamental creative spirit that brought such art to be. (1)

In addition, Benjamin N. Colby Irvine also identifies different levels of analysis of folktale and opines that all aspects of the folktale must be considered as against Vladimir Propp’s work which only investigated “the function sequence of folktale which is only one among many systems that figure in the production of folktales” (231). The above reasons inform our use of the multi-dimensional approach in the analysis of the Esan folktale in this essay.

**Esan people**

The Esan people are found in Edo State, Nigeria. The area covers five local government areas namely: Esan West (Ekpoma), Esan Central (Irrua), Esan North East (Uromi), Esan South East (Ubiaja) and Igueben (Igueben). Esan has a population of about five hundred and ninety-one thousand, five hundred and thirty-four thousand (591,534) going by 2006 census. We are quite sure that by now the number would have once gone up appreciably. Economically, the people are agrarian since their land favours cash crops like cotton, palm oil and subsidence rubber crops like maize, yam, cassava, bean, rice and others.

Politically, the ‘Onojie’ is the head of each town in Esan. The Onojie is assisted by Chiefs who help in overseeing the affairs of their different dukedoms. The age-grade system is recognized in every Esan community but only the males are allowed to belong to the three age grade system namely – ‘Edion’ (the elders) men of 45 years and above, the ‘Igene’ (youths) men of between 25-44 years old and the “Egbenughele,” males of between 12-24 years.
Women in Esan are categorized into wives, daughters (Okhuan) “arebhoa” – daughters who stay back in their father’s home to procreate for their fathers who have no male children. This custom of “arebhoa” is no longer popular. The Esan people do not recognizes widows. They believe that a woman who loses her husband should be inherited by one of her late husband’s junior brother, after her mourning period. If she refuses, she is sent back to her family hence the recognition of “Okhuan – returnee”. Christopher Okojie puts it pointedly “without self-deceit, Esan people in every sphere of life maintain that there is no place for the woman in society. Thus, women have no recognized association. Even if there is a meeting of women in the village, only the recognized married women attend.” (57)

Till date, the traditional Esan community still discriminates against the woman. The above beliefs shape the attitude and behaviour of the Esan people which are in turn reflected in their tales. As pointed out in the cultural of the Esan people, the male is held in high esteem and no adult male is expected to possess the trait of unassertiveness or over-bearingness. The males suffer alienation but for other reasons. Males in Esan culture are known to lord it over the females. Even a young male as young as 12 years can tell a female of 30 years old and above when there is any misunderstanding that the female is only a woman.

Review of related literature
Folktale plays a major role in the behavioural pattern of folks in a particular community as the tales are a reflection of what that community approves or disapproves. M.J. Herskovits corroborates the above assertion when he submits that “a substantial body of
A folktale is more than the literary expression of a people; it is in a real sense, their ethnography, which if systematized by a student, gives a penetrating picture of their way of life” (418). In like vain, Francis Mading Deng in the survey of folktales from Dinka of Sudan finds that the tales “reveal Dinka social realities in a dramatic combination of ideals and dramatic consequences of their violation” (7). Ruth Finnegan in her study of Limba (Sierra-Leone) stories concludes that the purpose of Limba stories is that they are told to “give someone sense, showing him in a parable either he had acted wrongly himself or that he, and others should try to act in a certain way in the future” (30). Likewise, Oladele Taiwo in his study of Yoruba folktales reveals that “folktale by nature are predominantly didactic and moralistic and for their contents, they reveal the fierce sense of justice of Africans, their belief in witchcraft, their powers of patience and endurance” (14).

While Abu Abarry in his study of Beron of Plateau State folktales submits that “the didactic aspect of ‘Ya’ tales is meant to promote certain models of behavioural conducts, emphasize the observances of social custom and instill healthy moral principles in the audience” (131). The conclusion reached of this review is that folktales from different communities are used as a means of sanction or praise as the case may be. Two Esan folktales used in this essay agrees with the fact that folktales are used for sanctioning. The unassertive and the overbearing female characters in Esan community are not spared. They are punished with alienation so as to serve as a deterrent to other women who may want to emulate their code of conduct.

The Esan woman in reality resists oppression and suppression and also tries as much as possible to keep to the traditional ethics that bothers on good conduct as laid down by the culture of Esan land. She agrees with the assertion of Nietzsche
that: “the individual has always had to struggle to keep from being overwhelmed by the tribe. If you try it, you will be lonely often (isolated) and sometime frightened. But no prize is too high to pay for the privilege of owning yourself” (Branny Quotes, 4).

The Unassertive and the Overbearing Female Characters
To be unassertive means not to stand up for one’s rights when such rights are trampled upon or violated. The unassertive female character is one who allows other characters in the setting to dominate her and treat her with ignominy. She allows herself to be manipulated to the advantage of the other characters and to her own disadvantage. Bridget Inegbeboh refers to such a character as one who is oppressed and refuses to free herself. Two tales are used to discuss this character. The tales are “The Singing Palm Tree” and “The Twin that was thrown into the Bush.”

In the first tale, “The Singing Palm Tree,” the protagonist Omiogue suffers untold hardship because she refuses to assert her individuality and accepts manipulation. Her son is murdered by another female character, Anohen – the overbearing character – because he took a palm fruit from Anohen’s heaps of palm fruits to eat after being prompted and encouraged by his friends. When Omiogue’s son’s friends were feasting on the palm fruit Anohen did not react. The devilish Anohen deliberately murders Omiogue’s son because she knows that Omiogue will not fight back. In the tale, Omiogue is presented as unassertive; she accepts and takes whatever mistreatment that is meted out to her. She demonstrates this in the following excerpt:

As children usually do, they called Omiogue’s child to come and eat palm nuts. He refused and told them that if he
should eat or touch it, Anohen would break his head with a pestle and he would die …
Anohen came out and saw it (Omiogue’s son picking a palm nut); she took a pestle and hit his head and the boy died. Omiogue came out when she heard the shouts of the other children that Anohen had killed her son but she did not fight back or challenge Anohen for killing her son. She took his body and reported to her husband but her husband drove her away. She reported to the community head but nobody answered her. After crying for some time, she dug a grave and buried her child with the palm nut in his hand. ("The Singing Palm Tree")

In the response of Omiogue’s son to his friends who invited him to come and eat palm fruit, we see the use of foreshadowing. He rightly foreshadows the reaction of Anohen and this really comes to pass. Omiogue’s reaction too is unexpected. One would have expected her to fight Anohen to a standstill for killing her son, her only child but this is not to be. A reaction that is unbelievable, poignant or too true to be believed. What is really strange and stupefying and which renders the audience breathless is Omiogue’s reaction to what has befallen her son. Which woman in real life will behave like Omiogue? Her behaviour is clearly unrealistic. In the context of Esan culture, this unassertive character is used in the tale to draw attention to how the woman should not behave. Through Omiogue’s behaviour, the tale draws attention to an aspect of Esan immorality which is that unassertiveness is an unwelcome trait which no Esan woman should possess. Such a trait cannot but alienate its possessor from her true essence as an Esan woman and a human being.
Psychologically, she is presented as a woman who has lost her moral bearing; a woman who acquiesces to the senseless, evil murder without raising a limb to fight the murderer, a woman like her to a stand-still, is intriguing. Even a hen, fights for her chicks. A woman like Omiogue has alienated herself from her true essence as a woman and from her fellow decent Esan womenfolk and her community at large. It is not surprising that her husband drives her away and calls her names on account of her unimaginable behaviour. The village head also finds her behaviour strange and equally gives the treatment her husband gives her.

As for Anohen – the overbearing character, Omiogue’s mate with whom she shares the same husband, the audience finds her behaviour equally strange. There is something unexplainable about her evil nature which alienates her from herself and her society. There is also something unreal about her nature. In the context of the tale, she serves as the opposite of the unassertive Omiogue but her over-bearing nature which underlines her evil nature serves as a metaphor/symbol for the kind of evil she possesses and radiates all about her. Her behaviour equally alienates her from her fellow Esan womenfolk and her community which frowns at her inhumanity. In the folktale, the audience seems to have been told to make a choice between the two women which of whom women, possess two strongly opposing traits that defy the womanhood and humanity. None of these women of extreme attitude or traits is emulatable from the perspective of Esan morality or culture.

From the two characters, the Esan community clearly frowns at those whose extreme actions and attitudes cannot but alienates them from their fellows. They are rejects of their community. Nobody sympathizes or helps Omiogue to bury her
son. She was expected to fight her oppressor but she did not. In the end, she digs a grave and buries her son herself with the palm nut still clutched to the boy’s palm. A woman should learn to be assertive, bold and courageous to confront whoever tries to oppress her in any form and to align to where she belongs. If Omiogue had married a man of same low parentage like her, one doubts if the man would have treated her in this manner. Birds of a feather should flock together. Discriminations abound in marriages or alliances where one party is superior to the other, except in rare cases.

However, at the end of the folktale, God comes to her rescue in the sense that God decreed that on no account should a woman be made to bury her dead child no matter the status of the woman and till date, that is the tradition in Esan-land: no woman no matter how lowly buries her dead child herself. The young men of the community do it. Suffice it to say that before this decree, Omiogue had suffered social, psychological and physical alienation from the other characters and from the community. In the second tale “The Twin (girl child) that was thrown into the Bush,” Uhunbhun suffers the loss of her twin-girl child because she allows Anohen to manipulate her to believing that it is an abomination to give birth to twins. From the tale, one observes that Uhunbhun, like Omiogue, has suffered so much oppression from the community; from both women and others, including her husband, to the extent that she become estranged, naïve and ignorant of the traditional beliefs and practices of her people.

Uhunbhun, accepts what Anohen tells her about having twins. She is afraid that she will be punished for having a set of twins without asking other characters in the setting. The question is, is she the first to give birth to twins in that community? The answer is certainly in the negative because as the events in the tale
unfold, especially at the discovery and recovery of the twin-girl that was thrown into the bush, Uhunbhun is not punished for giving birth to twins. The other characters in the tale do not also help Uhunbhun’s case. It is like they all connive to ill-treat Uhunbhun because she is unassertive, docile and uncivilized in the tradition/customs of her community. Anohen manipulates Uhunbhun to throw away her girl child because she herself lost the girl child that she bore. She wants a situation where Uhunbhun will not have a girl-child since her own has died. But Uhunbhun is naïve to recognize this fact and therefore succumbs to pressure from Anohen and allows her to throw away the girl-child. What Uhunbhun’s action demonstrates is that a woman who behaves like this should have her head examined. Does poverty or low parental background also affect the level of thinking and association? This is one form of alienation which could be called self-imposed. The unassertive character does not flow with other characters in her setting. She shuts off herself from others and so does not have sufficient knowledge of her culture. This informs why she is easily manipulated. If Uhunbhun had consulted with the other characters in the setting, one doubts if this fate would have befallen her.

The sky-god king (Ogiso) Uhunbhun’s husband, returns from war and meets the atrocity committed by Anohen who threw the twin-girl-child into the bush. It is expected that Ogiso punishes Anohen for her devilish act but Ogiso only concludes that “the child thrown into the bush did not matter since she must have died.” No attempts are made to console Uhunbhun and no punishment goes to Anohen. One begins to wonder what type of husband is Ogiso? He is supposed to be a king and so should be right-thinking and fair to all. But he demonstrates favouritism and uses double standard to judge his wives. One is sure that if
Uhunbhun were the one that committed such crime, Ogiso would have called for her head.

The tale ends with the revelation made by the twin-girl-child when her twin brother goes to her to seek her hand in marriage. She reveals her true identity to the boy and the king, Ogiso, and that is when Anohen’s misdeed is revealed sufficiently and a punishment of banishment, which is a form of alienation, is passed on her. Her rejection is total, her self-induced alienation is catastrophic. Uhunbhun was then rewarded by Ogiso by making her his favourite wife. She is relocated to the 14th room of Ogiso where comfort is highest.

**Conclusion**
The unassertive character first suffers alienation in the manner in which other characters relate with her but in the end she is redeemed and those who first alienated her end up as alienated persons. Anohen, the overbearing female character should be noted as the evil character that appears in various guises in Esan folktale. Everybody recognizes her “strongness” and evil machinations but none, including her husband and the community head seems to have any strong influence on her. Everyone seems incapable of giving her the punishment that is commensurate with her evil and diabolical activities which rubs her of her humanity. But, in the context of the tales and Esan culture as a whole, her rejection in all ramifications and endeavours of Esan communal life seems to be a perfect enough punishment for her. The morality is that no Esan woman should be like her or take after her.

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