

Narratives of Dissidence: Desire and the Female Protagonist in Retold Folktales in Contemporary Ghana

Helen Yitah

*Department of English,
University of Ghana, Legon*

Introduction

In this paper, I look at ways in which the content and form of Ghanaian folktales are being subverted in contemporary retellings in order to articulate the female protagonists' desire for power, agency, money, or the divine. I examine the folktales from the perspective of narrative theory, specifically gender theories about narrative agency and action. Narrative theorists with a focus on masculinity, notably Sigmund Freud, have tended to view narratives such as the Faust legend as "pre-eminently the representation of man's unquenchable striving" (Brooks 54), while feminist narrative theorists such as Julia Kristeva look to female characters in fiction, e.g., Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899); Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* (1915); Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* (1937); and Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983), for examples of female narrative desire.

Such theories, derived as they are mainly from works in the written Western literary canon, have excluded African oral narratives. Even when narrative theorizing and criticism involve the folktale, the focus is usually on adaptations of Western tales in prose fiction. For example, Angela Carter's adaptations of fairytales in her writings have come to define theory and criticism of this genre to the extent that scholars now categorize the field into "fairy tale studies before Angela Carter" and "fairy tale studies after Angela Carter" (Haase 2010). But as I shall demonstrate in this paper, traditional oral tales have undergone a profound transformation in the light of contemporary felt realities. Just as Western feminists such as Judith Viorst (1986) have written and published retold versions of staple folktales like *Cinderella*, some storytellers in Africa are transforming this genre within the oral performance context in ways that require critical attention.

Modern technology is thought to have transformed the world into a global village. Yet different societies and peoples respond to its stimuli in different ways due to their different circumstances and experiences, and their narratives constitute one important area of everyday practice which reflects such changes. Therefore, in

folklore studies oral folktales are as important as those adapted into written literature, and both deserve attention in narrative theory and criticism if we are to uncover what new possibilities of understanding and action they reveal about human societies.

The folktales I examine in this paper are from my native Kasem culture in northern Ghana. I focus on four purposely selected folktales out of seventy-two stories told in the past six years (2010-2016): two by adult females to adult female audiences and two others by teenage girls to a mixed adult audience. All the tales were told at night during indoor farm-related activities such as plucking or cracking groundnuts or sorting cobs of millet—activities that begin after dinner has been cooked and eaten and young children have gone to bed. The absence of children on both occasions meant that the performers could feel at ease to recreate narratives using more complex plots that might be difficult for children to grasp. As Goody (1992/1993: 51) has pointed out, adults may adopt more complex modes for communicating among themselves, while for communicating with children they may use simpler levels of interpretation. I shall use interchangeably the terms “recreated” and “retold” to refer to these innovative folktales and contrast them with the traditional communally owned corpus since these relatively recent retellings do not yet seem to have entered the “mainstream.”

In order to narrow my focus, I have selected tales that foreground consciously created female narrative desire. Such individual strivings, in my view, have implications for narrative theory, as they tend to initiate action in the folktales—usually dissident action intended to subvert or challenge male authority. Therefore, I call these retold folktales “narratives of dissident desire.” I examine narrative intention and action through (1) open-ended plots that break the presumed “stylistic consistency” of the folktale and leave meaning fluid—a revolutionary structure that reflects the equally radical subject matter; and (2) characters who inscribe themselves and their desires into a ‘modern’ world which is a far cry from the traditional fantasy world typically associated with the folktale, thus attaining subjecthood through performing their desire. If, as Peter Brooks (1984:38) has theorized, “striving *creates* narrative,” it would be instructive to examine how these representations of dissident desire problematize narrative theories about the relationship between individual desire and narrative action.

The Kasena

The female storytellers involved in this study have minimal or no literacy. This situation however is changing now with more girls staying in school (Mensch et al. 1999: 97). The women live in and around Nogsenia village, a largely rural area that surrounds central Navrongo, the small district capital, where they earn livelihoods through subsistence farming and petty trading. However, their access to the radio and television, the cinema, concerts, and women's organizations such as the 31st December Women's Movement is often overlooked by scholars who have worked on the Kasena. For example, Alex Nazzar et al (1995: 310), in their paper on developing a culturally appropriate family planning programme for the people of Navrongo, claimed that Kasena women were effectively isolated from new ideas and institutions.

My observation reveals that with the availability of the radio and television, these women who previously were being stifled by convention are now in tune with changing trends, especially issues that affect their individual rights and roles in society. Their hunger for growth and mobility, as demonstrated in their recreated folktales, indicates their level of gender consciousness. This consciousness enables women to merge cultural desire, that is, the individual wish for articulation and recognition, with cultural justice, that is, the claims of a particular social group (in this case, women) for gender equity in particular aspects of conjugal and community life. Their folktales thus reveal the connection between the cultural dimension of power relations and the political dimension of cultural activity.

Kasena society is patrilineal, which means that the man's place has always been assumed to be with his father, through whom he will "theoretically trace [his] descent and determine [his] rights to hold traditional office and inheritance" (Owusu-Sarpong, 2000: 75-76). In her review of Albert Awedoba's (2000) anthropological work on Kasem proverbs, Owusu-Sarpong (2000: 75) refers to this system as the Kasena "proverbial representation of patrilinealism." The woman's place, unlike the man's, is neither with her father nor with her husband—hence the proverbial image of a Kasena woman as potentially or actually "a dog of two houses." The image refers to her place both as a daughter in her father's house, which she must leave upon marrying, and as a wife in her husband's house where she is expected to live thereafter, but where she is also faced with constant reminders, not always in jest, that her father's house is "where she comes from." In her ambiguous place in traditional Kasena society, the woman has no rights to political office or inheritance, although she is expected to

fulfill productive, reproductive, and cultural roles in whichever social unit she finds herself. Within marriage, the woman is kept under male control and punished if she acts contrary to male expectations. These cultural systems and practices inform the traditional corpus of folktales in Kasena society, and they may help to explain why heroines in the recreated folktales reject the desires that motivate the marriage plot and take on other desires.

Although many scholars agree that in African oral genres “performances are often overtly concerned with deconstructing dominant ideologies and expressive forms” (Bauman and Briggs 1990: 66), there is little research on this subject with regard to Ghanaian folktales. Besides, the available research on Ghanaian folktales has been mainly on Akan folk narratives. Kwesi Yankah’s (2000) work on the Akan sung tale is instructive in drawing attention to the close relationship between song and tale, but it does not give attention to narrative desire. Kwawisi Tekpetey (2006:76) looks at Ananse the trickster figure in Akan folktales, arguing that “Ananse is an incarnation of the id with little intervention of the superego.” Kwadwo Opoku-Agyemang (1995) takes an interesting perspective on Ananse’s role in Akan society against the backdrop of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and slavery. In his view, the trickster is “a figure of strict moral injunction. His life is a lesson, a model of behaviour and conduct” (Opoku-Agyeman 1995:10). Ananse, who uses his wiles to overcome powerful adversaries, is considered an appropriate figure for demonstrating the logic of escape from captors.

Naana Opoku Agyemang (1999) has examined the way that the tale, drawn from the past, is made to represent the realities of the present, and how remarks by storytellers such as “I was a witness to this even” or “You should have been there to see this for yourself” meet the improvisatory element in the folktale. Opoku Agyemang makes some noteworthy comments about the way the narrators can use their creativity to modify existing tales or create new ones altogether:

The tale’s narrator has the added option, apart from fleshing out the details of a known tale, to create an entirely new tale... Thus the number of folktales in a given culture has the potential for expression and for tuning the content of the tale to meet current realities (1995:116).

Nonetheless, she does not illustrate this claim, but instead goes on to discuss some written works that have adapted a common folktale but represented it in different ways, especially with regard to gender roles.

Of northern Ghanaian folktales, Balsa folk narratives have received some attention in the work of scholars such as Rudiger Schott and Sabine Dinslage between the mid-1960s and the late 1980s, supported by the German Research Organisation. Thousands of tales were collected and categorized into motifs and themes. In addition, Schott (1992) has looked at the role of the dead in real life compared to the part they play in Balsa folktales, concluding that although the dead, as ancestors, are an integral part of daily Balsa life, they do not feature much in folktales in this culture. Dinslage (1995) has examined erotic folktales among the Balsa, drawn from Schott's collection and others that she collected. She finds that the tales "demonstrate and explain the natural attitude of the Balsa towards sexuality and their uncomplicated and permissive manner of handling sexuality" (1995:243). No similar work has yet been conducted on Kasena folktales.

I shall now discuss the relevant theories of narrative desire and action, especially feminist narrative theory. Based on this review, I will examine ways in which the fluidity of women's open-ended oral narratives, and their use of heroines who "rage against their status as [women]" and "seize speech for [themselves]" (Du Plessis 51), create instances of disequilibrium, and therefore the need for things to happen. The characters *make* something happen and thus, fall into narrative, translating their desires into forward-moving narrative action. I will then analyse ways in which the folktales can extend our theorization of desire as a fundamental social relation that structures encounters between self and other/difference, and how this might serve to decolonize "our minds and methods" (Kim 2012: 234) with regard to the study of African cultures.

Theories of Narrative Desire

In studies of the folktale/fairytale and in narrative theory, desire is frequently conflated with erotic love or sexual attraction. James McGlathery's (1991) *Fairy Tale Romance* is an example of such one-dimensional interpretations of the folk/fairytale. Such interpretations are not out of place, for erotic love is a common subject in the fairy tale, as Dinslage's (1995) paper on Balsa erotic tales cited above indicates. In Western fairy tale traditions, the young prince's attraction to Sleeping Beauty or to Snow White, or the attraction of the frog to the princess in "The Frog King" whose golden ball he restores—all these appear to be not only evident but integral to the story. But such interpretations, no matter how insightful, only take us so far. For example, in his discussion of "Rumpelstiltskin," McGlathery's (1991) interpretation of erotic elements gives some insight into the three gifts which the miller's daughter gives to

Rumpelstiltskin as payment for his spinning, but does not explain why he wants a child. Thus, as one reviewer observes, “It seems that the grid [of erotic love] is to be used even when it does not fit” (Schmidt 1992, 44). Other similar studies include Ussher (2000), Fullagar (2004), Lopez (2007), and Hammers (2015).

As already mentioned, much of the theory and criticism related to narrative desire is derived from written literature from the West, and it straddles psychoanalytic and feminist theories. For some scholars, including Sigmund Freud, the Faust legend is the master narrative of how masculine desire and activity relate to narrative. Faust is seen to lay claim to desire and in fact to predicate his life narrative on the ability to desire endlessly. As Peter Brooks (1984) observes, Freud (1954: 54) refers to Faust in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as “pre-eminently the representation of man’s unquenchable striving.” According to Brooks’ (1984) theory of narrative, this Faustian striving creates narrative. Brooks (1984: 38) points out that “desire is always there at the start of narrative, often in a state of initial arousal, often having reached a state of intensity such that movement must be created, action undertaken, change begun.” Faust’s expression of his desires and of his will to desire generates narrative action, the striving forward according to a linear, teleological movement.

According to feminist assumptions about how women’s stories should be structured, conventional narratives such as the Faust Legend, and in fact the narrative itself, are incapable of expressing feminine desire and thus, must be rejected in favour of other forms, specifically the lyric. In contrast to the masculine, linear narrative desire described by Brooks (1984: 103) as “the arousal that creates the narratable as a condition of tumescence, appetency, ambition, quest, and gives narrative a forward-looking intention,” feminist theory posits a lyric timelessness connected to women’s bodies and *feminine* desire. Julia Kristeva (1986: 191), for example, avers that “there are cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm which conforms to that of nature and imposes a temporality whose stereotyping may shock, but whose regularity and unison with what is experienced as extra-subjective time, cosmic time, occasion vertiginous vision and unnameable *jouissance*.”

The derivation of lyric desire from the pre-Oedipal, that is, from before the subject’s entry into the linear time of history and narrative, further emphasizes lyric timelessness (see, for instance, Susan Stanford Friedman (1989)). Thus, on the one hand we have narrative, committed to linear time and informed by masculine desire; on the other hand, we have lyric, committed to timelessness and

eternity, and informed by *jouissance*. It would seem that linking women's experience to timelessness and transcendence affords them a form of knowing which is independent of the temporal, linear, and hence patriarchal structures to which women have for so long been denied access. It is a mode of being that is not tainted by difference.

Yet the lyric and its association with pre-Oedipal Edenic timelessness raises questions about subjectivity. For instance, since one can only gain the status of subject when one leaves the pre-Oedipal and enters linear time, then women are forever denied this status. It endorses narrative as masculine. Moreover, if we transfer what we know about female desire (which is known only after language and sexual difference and is therefore implicated in the symbolic order) back to the pre-Oedipal, we are potentially replicating patterns of masculine desire. Furthermore, desire, in the Lacanian sense of lack, is a function of language, produced in the gap between need and articulated demand, and is implicitly post-Oedipal. One who desires will never develop into a subject, and a person without subjecthood depends on those who are subjects. Thus, claiming lyric and pre-Oedipal desires reinforces female dependence.

My reading of Ghanaian folktales indicates that these feminist theories, derived as they were from written Western texts featuring middle class heroines, would be inadequate for examining the heroines in the oral tales which depict characters from a community of subsistence farmers and petty traders. Apart from the romanticization of female desire as erotic love, such theories overlook experiences such as those of the folktale heroines and the narrators of their stories—experiences that do not fit in with the lyric paradigm.

“Reading” the Folktales

Out of the many folktales I have recorded, I have selected four for close study. This is to allow for the kind of focus that will make it possible to theorise these unusual tales. In the world of the recreated folktale, the storytellers choose what to repeat and what to recreate, and they do not seem to have any need for mimetic verisimilitude. Thus, in their recreated stories one finds people flying aeroplanes, though this does not necessarily preclude the magic mats often ridden by characters in the communal corpus; schools offering Western formal education are established on the same plot of land where traditional shrines and their priest(esses) are located; policemen in uniform investigate the misdeeds of the hare, the trickster figure in northern Ghanaian folktales; and ballot boxes for

elections are procured and accounted for by the hyena who is typically credited with little or no intelligence—a foil to the hare.

Yet these contradictions alone would not tell us much about what is interesting or shocking in the stories. Folktales consist of infinite repetition but also infinite variety. The repeated parts stay close to the mythical/fantasy world. The “varied” parts allow elements such as modern technology, formal education and the rule of law to make incursions into the mythical/fantasy world. And while repetition can excite interest, in these narratives of dissident desire it is the departures from the communal tales that often constitute a necessary condition. Such departures include scenes such as that of a young mother shooting a man with an AK47 from an aeroplane to avenge herself for the violence and abuse she suffered from him, even after she finds out that he has become the king of the village and is her current husband’s uncle; another woman establishing her own shrine in protest against a family shrine which has continually disappointed her; a young mother of “wild children” who, to save them from their murderous father, escapes with them by taking a long bus ride away from home, only to find that the bus is full of monsters; and a wife who is mistreated by her husband and dies, returns as a ghost and insists on living with him and his current wife, unless he divorces her in a court of law.

Story No. 1: “Mother and Pumpkin Child”

In the traditional version of this tale the female protagonist, a teenager, suffers abuse from a king whose power keeps her in bondage, until towards the end she is rescued by a young boy from the royal family who kills the king using a pumpkin as a magic weapon. In the recreated version the woman escapes from the king on her own, only to meet and marry his nephew, but she does not find out her husband’s identity until she is holding up the king with her AK47. The gun, being of foreign origin, is an interesting detail, a phallic symbol that emboldens the heroine to pursue her desire for revenge, even at the cost of her happy marriage. She is thus a complex character: on the one hand, she liberates herself by trading domestic servitude (at the hands of the king) for stability, economic security from a prince, and autonomy. It would seem that, in the words of Brooks (1984: 38), female desire has “reached a state of intensity such that the [teleological] movement must be created, action undertaken, change begun.” Or as Ruth, Fay Weldon’s heroine in *She-Devil* (1983: 11), puts it, this folktale heroine has emerged “out of the gutter of wild desire onto the smooth lawns of married love.” On the other hand, she ends up a fragmented person, unable to realise her desire

for revenge without ruining her relationship with her husband, and unable to come to terms with doing battle with her own child.

In the battle, poetic justice and personal vendetta meet and merge, but her two year old daughter, the product of the king's rape, descends from higher up on a magic mat to challenge her own mother to single combat, with two pumpkins as her only, albeit symbolically powerful weapons. In northern Ghanaian folklore and belief, the pumpkin symbolizes a child. For example, among the numerous items in a soothsayer's bag there is always a pumpkin (or its seed) that stands for a child, although if during the process of divination the soothsayer's staff points to this item, the client will typically ask further questions to clarify what is being revealed about which child. In addition, in the communal folktale corpus, whenever a child has to confront a malevolent force, it is usually a pumpkin with supernatural powers that is deployed by the child.

Thus, we can surmise that the battle between mother and daughter, if carried out, will be a formidable one: on one side we have a weapon that is the result of modern technology; on the other side we have a mythical, even supernatural force. At the end of the story the audience, like mother and daughter, are left suspended in midair, no closer to a resolution of this multifaceted conflict than they were before the battle lines were drawn. In narrative terms, not only is the grammar of emotion in this tale much subtler than a simple proposition regarding discipline and punishment, but also there is an underlying rhetoric of social criticism: If rulers are so great and so powerful, why are they so abusive, so irresponsible and so licentious as to be almost demonic in their wickedness? And why do such kings get support from innocent victims of their callous acts? These are questions that the story raises but does not answer directly. However, they direct listeners' attention to the exercise of power, or more specifically, unchecked power in society. Beyond this, they point to the nature of life's paradoxes, from which neither the ruler nor the ruled can escape.

Story No. 2: "The Childless Woman and the Shrine"

In the traditional version of this story the female protagonist, a childless wife, encounters a mysterious supernatural being at the village river who promises her a child but warns her to keep the child's origin a secret. The creature gives her a fruit that turns into a child three days later. Her husband gets drunk one night and throws the boy's origin in his face, whereupon the child, in tears, returns to his maker. This story invites us to interrogate the trope of "biology as destiny" in feminist narratology, because the protagonist's life and her identity seem to be

circumscribed by her inability to bear a child. Having suffered humiliation from her own family and her husband's for her barrenness, she embarks on a quest to fulfil her utmost desire: bear a child. She goes by all the rules of a patriarchal marriage, serving her husband in all, as she offers regular prayers and sacrifices to her family's shrine, presided over by the village priest. Years pass by and she enters middle age, but her tears, prayers and sacrifices do not bring the desired result. Finally, near despair, she establishes her own shrine nearby and invites a half-woman whom she met in the land of shamans to serve as priestess.

In this tale we encounter desire as lack. The protagonist suffers from several forms of hurt and disappointment: barrenness, which in a her patriarchal African world is a great tragedy for a woman; taunts from the women in the village, including her own co-wives whom her husband married after he abandoned her; a canker sore on her leg that has resisted every known cure (except some *taloŋa* [herbal medicine] obtained through the help of the half-woman); disappointment from the family shrine and its priest; and heartache over her quick transformation from beloved bride to abandoned wife. She stays married but devotes herself to her own shrine.

In the worldview of the Kasena, as in the case of the Balsa described by Schott (1992), there is belief in the supernatural powers of the sky god, *wé* and his wife, the earth (*katiga*). *Wé* is often identified with God—the lord of the sky or the heaven, but it also refers to a religious concept denoting the alter ego or personal god of an individual. After a person's death, his or her *wé* will continue to be addressed in prayers and receive sacrifices from the eldest male descendant of the dead person. The *wé* thus represents a person's "life substance" which survives the person's body and soul. The *wé* is usually represented by sacred stones mounted on a clay altar in front of the house. It is thought to lie dormant and is usually awakened by the touch of a descendant's warm hand or by family members talking to the altar. Women are usually excluded from offering sacrifices to their ancestors, though on some special occasions the presence or participation of the eldest daughter is required, for example, when the family lineage is on the verge of extinction and their shrine has to be transferred to a related lineage.

The protagonist's action of establishing her own shrine in the folktale world should also be viewed from the point that it is the duty of the lineage elders to consult the soothsayer when there is hunger, sickness, death, or infertility, whether of the soil or their wives. Thus, ancestor worship plays an important role in the daily life of the Kasena. The ancestors are offered water, millet flour water

or pito, which is beer brewed with guinea corn or sorghum. Sometimes animals are sacrificed to them. The living in turn expects the ancestors to fulfill their demands for good health, long life, children and wealth. If their wishes are not granted, the living may rebuke their ancestors, although they do not typically replace an ancestor for failing them. It would seem that rather than confront or affront divinity, the female character creates for herself a third space that alters and realigns agency and power in the mythical, spiritual and emotional realm. She commits the ultimate insult that can be directed at a Kasena ancestor.

Patrick Hogan, in his eloquently argued paper, “A Passion for Plot” (2010), makes a convincing case for examining a narrative beyond the linguistic level. According to Hogan (2010: 73), “we do not fully understand thematic roles or their relation to story structure if we treat them in a purely linguistic manner, rather than relating them to emotion systems”. Using the sentence “Othello murdered Desdemona” as an example, Hogan argues that if we are simply considering this sentence, Othello is merely the agent. But when we think of a character as fulfilling a thematic role, rather than just considering grammar alone, we notice that part of the tragedy of Othello “derives from our sense that [he] increasingly loses his agency in the course of the play. We sense how much he is reduced to an *instrument* in the hands of Iago...that the experience is deeply tragic for him” (emphasis in the original).

Conversely, when we look at the protagonist’s role in the story structure we find that though she is a much maligned and neglected childless woman, she is not a helpless victim of her circumstances but a highly conscious individual who acts in her own interest. The underlying criticism here is best viewed through the mind of this female protagonist: “I have kept myself clean and pure for you, my husband. I have endured the taunts of other women for your sake. I have remained dignified and allowed you to continue to marry more wives, as long as I am treated with respect. I have cooked and cleaned for you all these years. I have even obeyed the unequal and baseless rules of patriarchal marriage. What do I get in return?” The resounding, indicting answer is: nothing. It is easy to see that for anyone to give nothing for all this complex of sacrificial giving is not only unfair but also irrational. Yet this is more than just a physical/human conflict: the storyteller brings in the family shrine—one that should mediate on matters of fertility and oversee procreation, thus empowering the protagonist, who falls into narrative, into linearity; she moves from stasis into action by articulating and acting on her desire to establish her own shrine, thus challenging the norms of the conventional narrative which do not permit such an action to be performed by a woman.

Although a woman's soul or spirit may reside in a family shrine (either in her father's or her husband's house), it is the males in the family who perform the necessary sacrifices on behalf of the females. Therefore, the males in her family, including her own husband, and the ancestral shrine, have failed her in not fulfilling her greatest desire. In this sense, the female characters in this tale (i.e., the woman and the half woman), though depicted as ordinary everyday people on one level, are in other ways atypical: the one for creating a shrine, and the other for serving as priestess at a "non-traditional" shrine. Also unusual is a long journey that the protagonist makes to the netherworld, where she narrowly escapes death at the hands of the monsters who dominate that world, and experiences other adventures before obtaining the cure for her canker sore with the help of the humane half-woman.

Story No. 3: "The Wild Children"

In both the original and the retold versions of this story, the woman gives birth to fraternal twins who turn out to have unusual powers. Each day, when their parents go to the farm and leave them with a care taker, they bind the latter up and push her into a room. The boy then takes charge. He goes into the millet barn, fetches a basket of millet for his sister and orders her to thrash it, grind it and prepare food for both of them. As they carry out these adult activities the children take turns to look out and make sure their parents do not catch them in the act. While they cook and clean, they sing the following song:

Kasem	English Translation
Nta la nta la zon limes nso Zon limsi	My sister, my sister, Go up and look out for my father
To si wa zom limsi nso Zom limsi	Take this millet, then go up and look out for my father
ɔbira si la lam maama ya lam maama	Eating millet with fresh testicles
Fom nɔɔ ka niire la nyu tolingiri yaa Nyu tolingiri	Are you not grinding millet with umbilical cord dragging?
Ta baase lage taaba yaa Lage taaba	When food is ready we shall both eat

Each day, after eating the children clean up, then they untie their caretaker, and when they notice that their parents are approaching the house, they begin crying loudly. Too terrified to reveal what happened, the caretaker keeps quiet and takes a beating from the children's father for neglecting them. At first, the parents do not suspect anything, but soon enough they realise that all is not well in their home. One morning, the father leaves home at the time he usually goes to the

farm, but this time he hides in a nearby bush to find out what is happening. When he sees what the children have been doing he tells his wife that he plans to kill them with a burning spear. From this point the two versions differ. In the traditional version the children are killed by their father and the story ends there. In the retold version, however, the mother decides to save her children and therefore runs with them into a bus, ready for a long ride to safety. After they have journeyed for a while she notices that the bus is full of ghosts.

This recreated story is quite intriguing, as it ends with the woman and her children apparently stranded and in peril in a strange land. A significant point is that among the Kasena the ancestors may appear in the form of *chira* (ghosts) to inflict punishment on people who disobey social norms of the society. In this context, the woman, by preventing the ritual killing of her “wild children,” also sometimes referred to as *chichurru* (monsters) who are thought to cause an imbalance in the “normal” system, has acted contrary to social norms. Bourke (1995: 571) cites similar “accounts of child-changelings being placed on red-hot shovels” in nineteenth-century Ireland. She adds that “[m]any societies practice infanticide in such cases, often with some sort of belief narrative to absolve adults from guilt” (Bourke 1995: 571). The question then is, have the female protagonist’s ancestors appeared in the form of the busload of ghosts to punish her for her “crime”? Are we to interpret this situation as her entrapment between two patriarchal forces?

My argument that the recreated folktales perform modernity, desire and selfhood provides one plausible explanation for the open ending of this story. The traditional story keeps within a rural, ‘traditional’ world view—including the belief in spirit children and attitudes towards such children. Spirit children do not only exist in folktales in the culture; in traditional society they are a daily reality among the people. The general belief is that they are evil and if they are allowed to live they may kill their parents and other family members. Therefore, a soothsayer is consulted whenever such children are born, not least to find out what needs to be done with them. The revised story implicates a different context: a contemporary (urban?) setting that does not accommodate belief in spirit children, though paradoxically monsters exist in it. What should have been a quick and safe escape appears to have become a matter of life and death, since in Kasem folktales monsters, even if they are revenant ancestors, are depicted as deadly creatures. But the female narrator, who is a Christian, is unlikely to implicate in her tale such a traditional belief in the supernatural; a more plausible interpretation of this final scene would be that the genderless ghosts provide a haven for mother and children. One thing however is clear from this retold

folktale: dissident desire is not erotic desire put a mother's striving to save her children's lives; and this indicates that narrative desire does not have to be represented in sexual terms. [Indeed, this heroine "falls into narrative" by straying from the romantic/sexual paradigm.

Story No. 4: "The Ghost Wife"

This story is about what I would call "unpermissible desire" on the part of the female protagonist. She is a "ghost" wife who presents her husband with an unusual request: live with me or divorce me in a court of law. In both the traditional and recreated versions the man neglects the protagonist and marries a second wife, compelling the heroine to move out and return to her parents' house. After a short while she falls ill and then dies. From this point the two versions differ. In the traditional version, on his wedding night the husband falls asleep in a chair in his inner yard. Upon waking up, he sees his ghost wife standing over him. He calls out to his new bride to bring a basket in which he can trap the ghost and dispose of it, but it flees. In both versions the heroine demonstrates a high level of consciousness in her resistance to inequitable domestic arrangements, and she is credited with subjectivity and given a voice. In the recreated version she understands modern concepts like the rule of law enough to know that her "ghostly" presence will not stand up in court. Nevertheless, she seeks justice by reinserting herself into the marital home from which she was unjustly expelled.

Through the use of her ghost, this story places its action between the everyday and the supernatural, between life and death. The woman is on a quest for recognition, even in death, and this quest, in the words of Peter Brooks (1984: 39), is "a force that drives [her] forward" towards fulfilling her desire for life in death. In striving towards her goal, she transcends the limiting conventional Kasem narrative, in which women who deviate from the linear patriarchal plot are punished by male figures in the natural or supernatural realm. This suggests that narrative (and narrative desire) is not a quintessentially masculine terrain. Yet she does not experience the pre-Oedipal desires posited by feminist narrative theorists—desires that, as I have already explained, only reaffirm female dependence. Instead, she achieves subjecthood through the revolutionary form of the retold story, embracing her (non)existence, refusing to accept that female narrative desire is "off limits".

Conclusion

In the Kasem folktale tradition, a storyteller announces the beginning of a folktale thus: "Asinsola kampo!" [lit. "my story bursts forth" or "my story explodes"], to

which the audience typically responds “Kandiŋ” [lit. “let it be intact”]. This formula is ironic in the light of the folktale innovations discussed in this paper, which do not keep the original tales “intact” but instead break with the traditional/communal mould, transforming it into the paradox of “the tradition of the new,” or innovation through tradition. This new trend in African folktales complicates the search for homogenizing universality that has characterized most of the research on folklore/folktale. Innovation in Ghanaian folklore has played an important role in imaginative writing, performance genres and other related literary activities. For example, *Anansegoro*, the most dominant modern theatre art form in Ghana, typically adopts both the body of Ananse stories (called *Anansesem*) and the story-telling art itself, including the omniscient narrator who owns the story, the traditional formalized exchanges between the narrator and the audience, and opportunities for the audience to interrupt the story in order to sing a song.

Yet the kind of revitalizing and regeneration of folklore that I examine here occurs, not through the medium of writing and scripting, but within the arena of oral folktale performance in traditional storytelling contexts. The adapted stories also tend to direct attention away from the more overtly didactic and less complex forms of folktales often adopted by adults for entertaining and instructing children. The reconstituted stories tend more towards open-endedness and ambivalence regarding moral questions. Such innovations therefore call for serious critical analyses of the innovative folktales. By examining these oral texts, I hope to establish that many of them speak directly to a desire for social justice—whether in the form of equity in love and marriage or a balance in agency and power in the larger socio-political realm. By uncovering the underlying grammar of emotions in these folktales, which breaks the traditional mould and reveals its absurdities and contradictions, we can contribute to a theory of narratives of desire.

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