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### Gender Identity in Gusii Nuptial Oral Poetry

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**Keywords:**

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Social Norms.

This study delves into the construction and representation of gender identity within Gusii nuptial oral poetry, focusing on how cultural ideals of femininity and masculinity are conveyed through metaphors, imagery, and symbolic language. Rooted in East African oral traditions, the research employs Conceptual Metaphor Theory and feminist literary theory to critically analyze the intersection of culture and identity. Findings reveal that metaphors such as "sweet banana" and "fertile soil" encapsulate the Gusii community's perspectives on gender roles, highlighting the oral tradition's role in preserving and transmitting cultural norms. By engaging with Oyeronke Oyewumi's critique of gender as a Western construct, this study contributes to broader conversations on oral literature, identity, and cultural heritage in East Africa.

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### INTRODUCTION

Nuptial oral poetry among the Gusii community serves as a vibrant cultural artefact, encapsulating

the traditions, values, and social norms that define gender roles within the society (Orera, Kakai, & Gimode, 2023). These poetic compositions, often performed during weddings and other marital

ceremonies, act as a powerful medium for expressing ideals of femininity and masculinity, as well as broader expectations placed upon individuals within a communal framework. Rooted in the oral traditions of East African societies, Gusii nuptial poetry reflects the dynamic interplay between language, metaphor, and cultural symbolism (Finnegan, 1977).

The study of oral poetry transcends its artistic and ceremonial significance, offering deeper insights into the sociocultural constructs of identity. Gender, as an essential element of human identity, is both shaped by and reflected in these oral traditions. Through the use of metaphors, imagery, and symbolic language, Gusii nuptial oral poetry contributes to the perpetuation and reinforcement of cultural norms surrounding gender identity, including the ideals of femininity as nurturing and masculinity as authoritative (Oyewumi, 1997). Such themes, while integral to Gusii traditions, also resonate within the broader framework of East African oral literature (Mazrui & Shariff, 1994).

The study aims to examine how Gusii nuptial oral poetry constructs gender identities, exploring the symbolic language, imagery, and metaphors that shape perceptions of masculinity and femininity. It analyzes how poetic traditions reinforce or challenge patriarchal gender norms, assessing the societal expectations embedded within marriage. Additionally, the study evaluates generational shifts in gender portrayals, comparing traditional and contemporary performances to understand the evolving narratives of masculinity and femininity in Gusii oral traditions. This research employs Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) to analyze how metaphors structure and convey cultural ideologies, alongside feminist literary theory, which critiques and interrogates the representation and construction of gender within literary forms (Showalter, 1998). By engaging with Oyewumi's argument that gender is a Western construct, the study critically examines the tension between cultural specificity and universal gender

frameworks (Oyewumi, 1997). It argues that Gusii nuptial oral poetry uniquely embodies cultural identities and challenges monolithic interpretations of gender.

Ultimately, the research aims to contribute to a richer understanding of East African oral traditions and their role in shaping social identities. By focusing on the Gusii community, this study not only highlights the cultural nuances of nuptial poetry but also opens avenues for broader discussions on the intersections of oral literature, gender studies, and cultural heritage.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs an analytical research design, which facilitates a thorough examination of textual elements such as diction, metaphors, and imagery (Patten & Newhart, 2017). The census method of sampling was used, allowing the inclusion of the entire population of Gusii nuptial oral poems available within the scope of the study (Kumar, 2019).

The tools for collecting data were key informant interviews, non-participant observation and archival data (Finnegan 1997). A total of 30 Key informants were selected using the census sampling method owing to their expertise and cultural knowledge of the Gusii nuptial oral poetry, their direct engagement in nuptial traditions, their diverse perspective across generations and their accessibility and willingness to participate in the exercise.

Non-participant observation was conducted by systematically observing Gusii nuptial oral poetry performances without direct involvement, allowing for unbiased analysis of gender identities in poetic expressions. The data collected was analyzed using the textual analysis method guided by Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and Feminist Literary Theory (Showalter, 1977). The study focuses exclusively on Gusii nuptial oral poetry within the East African cultural context.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Cultural Context: Gusii Community and Marriage Traditions

The Gusii people, who inhabit southwestern Kenya, are among the Bantu-speaking communities of East Africa, known for their rich oral traditions and cultural heritage (Orera, Kakai, & Gimode, 2023). As an agricultural society, they place a strong emphasis on community, kinship, and rituals that sustain social cohesion. Oral literature, including nuptial poetry, serves as a key medium for preserving cultural values and transmitting knowledge across generations. The poetry, traditionally performed during marriage ceremonies, reflects the dynamic interplay between identity, culture, and communal expectations (Akama & Mason, 2006).

Marriage occupies a pivotal position in Gusii society, functioning not merely as a union between individuals but as a mechanism for reinforcing family ties and societal norms (Finnegan, 1970, Orera et al 2023). Traditionally, marriages were arranged with the involvement of families and clans, ensuring continuity of lineage and fostering alliances (Hakansson, 1994). Nuptial ceremonies were marked by elaborate rituals, accompanied by oral poetry that symbolized the responsibilities of the bride and groom, as well as the ideals of femininity and masculinity. Over time, colonial and modern influences have introduced changes to marital practices, yet nuptial oral poetry remains a vibrant expression of cultural identity. Oral traditions are central to African societies, serving as both entertainment and a repository of collective wisdom (Mazrui & Shariff, 1994). In the Gusii community, nuptial poetry is highly performative, involving the interplay of tone, rhythm, and audience interaction. This performative aspect heightens its cultural significance, transforming poetic language into a living, communal experience. The use of metaphors such as "fertile soil" for femininity and "strong tree" for masculinity

encapsulates societal expectations, while the act of performance reinforces communal values.

This study delves into Gusii nuptial oral poetry as a lens for examining the cultural construction of gender identity. Among the Gusii, the roles of both genders were clearly defined; Men were the heads of the households, in charge of discipline and protection while women were expected to give birth and raise children and till land to yield food for the family (Orera, Kakai and Gimode, 2023). Using Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), the research decodes the metaphors embedded in the poetry to uncover their role in shaping perceptions of femininity and masculinity. Additionally, feminist literary theory (Showalter, 1986) provides a critical framework for interrogating the portrayal of gender roles, assessing whether these representations reinforce or challenge patriarchal norms. By engaging with Oyeronke Oyewumi's critique of gender as a Western construct, the study situates Gusii's oral poetry within broader discussions of cultural identity and gender constructs.

Ultimately, this research contributes to understanding the role of oral traditions in preserving cultural heritage while interrogating the intersections of gender, literature, and societal norms. By focusing on Gusii nuptial oral poetry, it offers a nuanced perspective on East African oral literature and its significance in shaping social identities.

### Metaphors of Femininity in Gusii Nuptial Oral Poetry

In Gusii nuptial oral poetry, femininity is intricately constructed and symbolized through a variety of metaphors that highlight cultural ideals and gender expectations. These metaphors often celebrate traits like fertility, nurturing, and beauty, which are central to the societal roles ascribed to women in the Gusii community. The study analyzed the song, *Ing'ererie obokombe*, to examine the metaphors of femininity.

*Ing'ererie obokombe*  
*Nekebago egesera*  
*Ng'ende kwabusera omogondo*  
*Omogondo nyakieni kebariri*  
*Omaiya chingero bonyangero*  
*Omokungu siomia siomia ee ee ee baba*  
*Kayi akomanya bwarugeirwe*  
*Komanya bwarugeirwe ee ee baba*  
*Kai'komanya bwarugeirwe*  
*Gose mboke gose mbwamwana.*

This song constructs femininity using metaphors that celebrate women's nurturing and resourceful qualities. The metaphor of a "beautiful garden with red soils" symbolizes a woman's fertility and her life-giving role within the Gusii community. The "vagrant woman knowing where food is ready" highlights the resourcefulness and caregiving nature of women, portraying them as central figures in ensuring sustenance and family well-being. These

Give me a hoe,  
 With a strong handle  
 I can go and cultivate  
 A beautiful garden with red soils  
 A perfect person sings and sings  
 A vagrant woman  
 She tell where food is ready  
 Where food is ready  
 She knows where food is ready  
 Whether little or for child

metaphors reflect cultural ideals of femininity, emphasizing women's indispensable contributions while confining their identity to traditional roles. From a feminist perspective, while these metaphors elevate women's societal significance, they simultaneously reinforce patriarchal constructs by limiting the scope of femininity to caregiving and nurturing.

The study also analyzed the poem; *Amache Nyambiriato*

*Amache Nyambiriato*  
*Amache nobochege agiteirwe*  
*Nobochege agiteirwe*  
*Amache nyamotika egocha enywe,*  
*Oyotagete emeino ebaba-*  
*Agende Nyamataro obitogia*  
*Nyamataro obitogia ee baba, Nyamataro*  
*Nyamataro obitogia ase emeino Nyamataro,*  
*Borangi yoka ngumbuu ee baba*  
*Yakang'umbu Mogonche chinguba chiana kuoma*  
*Chinguba nchiana kwoma ee baba*  
*Rogoro boisanga renda mache*  
*Nche timbwati ng'ombe-*  
*Nche timbwati ng'ombe,*  
*Monto otagete meino ee baba*  
*Agende bosamaro bomakairo*  
*Bosamaro Bomakairo y'abamura*  
*Basamaro abamura negetonga.*

The water at *Nyambiriato*  
 The water source is fenced off  
 To keep off unwanted users  
 So that *Nyamotika* drinks it  
 One who to knows our songs,  
 He should go to *Nyamataro*  
 praises our ways  
 praises our ways  
 At *Borangi* side of the ridge,  
 Shields are in plenty  
 Shields do not dry up  
 Up at *Boisang'a*, protect waters  
 I've got no cows  
 I've no cows, well is fenced  
 One keen to know our songs  
 Go to *Bosamaro Bomakairo*  
*Bosamaro Bomakairo* of men  
 At *Bosamaro* men are brave

Femininity in this song is represented through metaphors that liken women to water sources—essential and life-giving entities that must be safeguarded. The "fenced-off water at *Nyambiriato*"

symbolizes the protection and reverence of femininity, suggesting societal perceptions of women as precious yet dependent. Similarly, "Protect waters at *Boisang'a*" underscores the

nurturing and sustaining role attributed to women, emphasizing their significance in communal well-being. While these metaphors celebrate femininity as indispensable, they also confine women within constructs of dependency and protection, echoing broader gender expectations within the Gusii community. Conceptual Metaphor Theory and feminist critique reveal the duality in these portrayals, elevating women's importance but reinforcing traditional societal boundaries.

The study analyzed the song; *Eeri ya tata*

*Eeri ya tata*  
*Eremererie Kimonge*  
*Eeri twagorete mbori*  
*Ere nemanwa*  
*Ng'ambono twayegora*  
*Nabono twayerwa bosa*  
*Igoro yo 'bwanchani*  
*Eeri ya tata*  
*Eremererie Kimonge*  
*Eeri twagorete mbori*  
*Ere nemanwa*  
*Ng'ambono twayegora*  
*Nabono twayerwa bosa*  
*Igoro yo 'bwanchani*

Oh, my father's bull  
 Ploughs for Kimonge  
 The bull was exchanged  
 For a goat with her kid  
 And we bought it  
 And today we give it free of charge  
 Free of charge because of love  
 Oh, my father's bull  
 Ploughs for Kimonge  
 The bull was exchanged  
 For a goat with her kid  
 And we bought it  
 And today we give it free of charge  
 Free of charge because of love

In "Eeri ya tata," masculinity is celebrated through imagery that highlights strength, productivity, and provision. The bull, described as ploughing for Kimonge, symbolizes the industrious and reliable traits associated with men in Gusii society. This imagery ties masculinity to the ability to work hard and cultivate prosperity, aligning with the community's agrarian lifestyle. The exchange of the bull for a goat with her kid further portrays men as facilitators of economic transactions, emphasizing their role in providing resources for family and

### Imagery of Masculinity in Gusii Nuptial Oral Poetry

Masculinity in Gusii nuptial oral poetry is constructed using vivid imagery that emphasizes strength, authority, and provision. Through symbolic representations, men are portrayed as the backbone of familial and communal prosperity, aligning with societal ideals of their roles as providers and protectors. The study analyzed two songs in line with the imagery of masculinity.

societal stability. Additionally, the act of giving the bull free of charge due to love elevates masculinity to include selflessness and emotional commitment, showcasing men's ability to extend care and generosity beyond material provision. These depictions illustrate a holistic view of masculinity, combining physical strength with emotional sacrifices for the well-being of the family.

The study also analyzed the imagery of masculinity in the following song;

*Okegori, Omoisia!*  
*Yaa, inkanywoma*  
*Kinde omoke*  
*Etwoni rende yaa*  
*Inkanywoma kinde omoke*  
*Ekegori omoisia yaa*

My age mate you  
 Lad, I married  
 When young  
 I thought I was a cock  
 I married when I was young  
 My age mate you lad



<i>Etwoni rende yaa</i>	I thought I was a cock
<i>Kemunto O'Nyamacharara</i>	Kemunto Nyamacharara
<i>Omoiseke akarora</i>	A lady thought you
<i>Gwaisaneire</i>	Were mature enough
<i>Agancha aikaranse</i>	She decided to stay/settle down
<i>Nkamoseria genda genda!</i>	But you chased her away – go!
<i>Gaikaransa</i>	She had decided to stay put
<i>Kamoseria genda! Genda!</i>	But you chased her away – go!
<i>Kwabeire, Kironchi yaa, Kironchi</i>	You are now an outcast
<i>Otarochi</i>	And you are blind too
<i>Inkorutwa ore omwaro</i>	The bed leg will be thrown into your grave
<i>Otabwati mochi'onde</i>	Because you've got no home.

Masculinity is critiqued using vivid imagery that reflects societal expectations and the consequences of failing to meet them. The speaker's perception of himself as "a cock" symbolizes youthful arrogance and confidence, traits traditionally associated with masculinity. However, as the narrative progresses, the imagery shifts to emphasize the importance of maturity and responsibility, as seen in the woman who decides to settle down, believing the man is capable of supporting her. The man's inability to fulfill this role results in rejection, symbolized by her departure, and societal condemnation, portrayed through the metaphor of being an "outcast." The final imagery of "the bed leg thrown into the grave"

underscores the failure to build a home, a critical masculine ideal within the Gusii community. This song critiques masculinity by showcasing the rigid expectations placed on men to embody strength, maturity, and provision, and the societal repercussions of failing to meet these standards.

### **Symbolic Representation of Marriage and Gender Roles**

Symbolism has been described as the use of an object or a word to represent an abstract idea. In Gusii nuptial oral poetry, symbolism has been used to represent marriage and gender roles as discussed in the following two poems;

*Konde seito*  
*Nkaigwa nyancha abenegete*  
*Onchong'a ominto*  
*Nkaigwa nyancha abenegete*  
*Nyagetwoni akabutora egetinge Nyagetwoni*  
*Kabutora egetinge*  
*Onchong'a kare moyo*  
*Ekonde seito nkaigwa*  
*Nyancha abenegete*  
*Onchong'a ominto*  
*Nkaigwa nyancha abenegete*  
*Nyagetwoni akabutora egetingeNyagetwoni*  
*Kabutora egetinge Onchong'a kare moyo*

While home,  
 I heard He's drowned  
 Onchong'a my brother  
 Has drowned in Lake  
 had cut her leg ring  
 Cut leg ring  
 Yet Onchong'a is alive  
 While home,  
 I heard He's drowned  
 Onchong'a my brother  
 Has drowned in Lake  
 had cut her leg ring  
 Cut leg ring yet Onchong'a was alive

Marriage is symbolized through the leg ring, which represents commitment and stability in Gusii culture. The act of Nyagetwoni cutting the leg ring

signifies a rejection of marital ties or societal expectations, highlighting personal struggles within relationships. This gesture challenges the rigidity of

traditional roles and reflects a desire for independence or escape from communal norms. Additionally, the imagery of drowning in the lake contrasts with the reality of Onchong'a being alive, symbolizing the tension between perceived loss and resilience within marital relationships. The song portrays marriage as an institution that demands

endurance and adaptation, emphasizing both its challenges and its emotional depth.

The study also analyzed the song; *Omoiseke omomwamu nyakebwato ogotira* in line with symbolic representation of marriage and gender roles

*Omoiseke omomwamu nyakebwato ogotira*  
*Komonyene chimori namoroche*  
*Eee! Namoroche baba- monyene chimori*  
*Ing'ererie chimori ntangere nyakebwato*  
*Tanya kona gotira emanga.*  
*Omoiseke Gechemba kore omogenki*  
*Obere Mino tocha kongenkera Sarange –*  
*Ing'ererie ekerori nyakobugeria ---*  
*Nario Sarange atachi ande!*  
*Yaye abana baito – ee kwania Obino*  
*Ase rituko buna riarero!! Ooh!*  
*Abana baito mbarore, mbarore mbarore*  
*Aye soma—*

Dark lady with big thigh  
 Owner of cattle has noticed her  
 He has spotted her  
 Hand me cows to prevent her  
 From roaming at Manga escarpment  
 Gechemba the gossip  
 Be at home, don't incite Sarange  
 Hand to me a flute to sing for  
 To retain Sarange at home  
 Our children pass greetings  
 On a day like this one  
 Our children arise and be counted  
 Get some education

In this poem, marriage is symbolized through practices like dowry and emotional gestures, reflecting cultural ideals and communal roles. The exchange of cattle to prevent the woman from "roaming at Manga escarpment" symbolizes the dowry system, where cattle represent wealth, commitment, and stability. This imagery highlights the material aspect of marriage and the societal value placed on securing relationships. The reference to playing a flute to "retain Sarange at home" emphasizes the emotional dimensions of marriage, portraying affection and harmony as essential for sustaining marital bonds. Additionally, the exhortation for children to "arise and be

counted" and "get some education" ties marriage to familial and communal aspirations, reflecting its impact on future generations and cultural continuity. Through its symbolism, the song portrays marriage as both a personal union and a foundation for societal progress, highlighting the shared responsibilities of men and women.

### Cultural Ideals Reflected in Marriage in Poetic Language

Marriage in Gusii land was regulated with norms that guided its people. These ideals are discussed in the following songs;

*Sweeti sweeti banana*  
*Egetenga kie'ritoke*  
*Seewti sweeti banana*  
*Egetenga kie'ritoke*  
*Ekerorachie gosoka*  
*Ondangerie ngokobe*  
*Ekerorachie gosoka*  
*Ondangerie ngokobe*

Sweet banana  
 A cluster of banana stems  
 Sweet banana  
 A cluster of banana stems  
 On your wedding day  
 Invite me to escort you  
 On your wedding day  
 Invite me to escort you

The metaphor of the sweet banana serves as a symbolic celebration of femininity, emphasizing traits such as beauty, delicacy, and nurturing qualities that are highly valued within the Gusii community. The imagery of the "cluster of banana stems" further enhances this representation by depicting femininity as abundant and cohesive, aligning with the cultural ideals of women as central to family continuity and societal prosperity. Additionally, the reference to inviting someone to escort the bride on her wedding day highlights the

communal aspect of marriage, showcasing harmony and mutual support as key elements of the union. Together, these symbols reflect the complementary roles of men and women in marriage, where femininity is celebrated for its nurturing and graceful qualities, while masculinity involves gestures of support and participation that strengthen the marital bond.

The second song;

*Eroo mbande ero ng'ina omwana rende!*  
*Eroo mbande naye kwaigure buya rero*  
*Eroo mbande baba ng'ina omwana rero*  
*Eroo mbande naye kwaigure buya rero*  
*Eroo mbande omomura ochire mwao rero*  
*Eroo mbande aye soka isiko oiririate rero*  
*Eroo mbande ng'ina omwana kayiare*  
*Eroo mbande kwareteirwe omoyaye rero*  
*Eroo mbande Nomogoko bwoka rero.*  
*Eroo mbande baba ng'ina omwana kayiare*  
*Eroo mbande naye kwaigure buya rero*  
*Eroo mbande gaki nche nainyore rero*  
*Eroo mbande nembura egachicha rero*  
*Eroo mbande ekorokwa erinino ndero*  
*Eroo mbande egaita abanto baito ndero*  
*Eroo mbande gaki nche nainyora yaa*  
*Eroo mbande omogoko bwoka rero ndero*  
*Eroo mbande abang'ina kimbaroche rero*  
*Eroo mbande totenge toiririate omogiro*  
*Eroo mbande motenge buya buya rero*  
*Eroo mbande omomura ochire nyomba mwao*  
*Eroo mbande abagaka monyigwete rero*  
*Eroo mbande twanyorire omoyaye rero*  
*Eroo mbande omong'ina ng'aki oigwete rero*  
*Eroo mbande kwareteirwe omoyaye rero*  
*Eroo mbande gosambe ekeiririato rero*  
*Eroo mbande omogoko bwoka rero ndero*

The song "Eroo mbande" encapsulates the cultural ideal of communal participation in marriage, portraying it as a joyous and shared event. The repeated calls for the bride's mother, women, elders, and the community to dance and ululate highlight

Behold, where is the bride's mother  
 Today you've had happiness  
 Into your house a groom has come,  
 Come out of the house and ululate,  
 Into your house a groom has come,  
 Come out of the house and ululate,  
 Where is the bride's mother?  
 Today, you've got a son-in-law  
 Today all will experience happiness.  
 Where is the child's mother?  
 Today you've had happiness,  
 Today has reminded me,  
 Reminded me of the rains  
 Rains whose name was El-nino  
 The rains which killed our people  
 For even me I recall  
 But today is full of happiness  
 Behold ladies, I can see you  
 Let us dance and ululate  
 Behold, dance, dance and dance  
 Behold a groom has come to you  
 Behold, are old men listening to me?  
 Behold we've been given a groom  
 Behold old lady, how do you feel?  
 Behold a groom has been brought  
 Behold, ululate wildly  
 Behold, today it is joy.

the importance of collective involvement in marital ceremonies. Marriage is depicted as a momentous occasion that brings happiness not only to the couple but also to the families and wider community. The act of ululating wildly,



accompanied by references to dancing and celebrating, reflects the communal support and blessings extended to the union. Additionally, the song emphasizes familial roles, such as the bride's mother and the groom's integration into the bride's household, showcasing how marriages strengthen kinship bonds. By portraying marriage as a communal affair, the song celebrates the shared responsibility and joy that define Gusii nuptial traditions.

### **Findings from Key Informants and Non-participant Observation**

Key informants revealed that gender identities in Gusii nuptial oral poetry are deeply rooted in traditional expectations, where masculinity is framed through strength, leadership, and provision, while femininity is depicted as nurturing, graceful, and tied to domestic responsibilities. Although younger generations challenge these roles, traditional performances still reinforce hierarchical structures. Metaphors and imagery in nuptial poetry symbolize marriage as a binding institution, with elements like leg rings representing stability and dowry (cattle) symbolizing economic security. Additionally, the communal nature of marriage is emphasized through ululation, song, and celebratory rituals, highlighting the shared social responsibility in maintaining familial ties. However, weather metaphors (El Niño rains) and imagery of rejected masculinity expose the emotional weight and societal pressures associated with marital expectations.

Through non-participant observation of Gusii nuptial oral poetry performances, gender identities were visibly reinforced through spatial positioning, symbolic gestures, and linguistic choices. Men dominated central performance spaces, using commanding tones and expansive gestures that signalled authority and leadership, while women engaged in supportive roles, clapping, ululating, or responding to poetic refrains that emphasized nurturing and caretaking. Metaphors and diction within the performances upheld patriarchal norms,

with men depicted as providers and protectors, celebrated for their physical strength, while women were framed as harmonizers of the household, associated with fertility and domestic stability. Audience reactions further validated these gender constructs, with men affirming traditional masculinity through vocal responses, and women reinforcing feminine roles through synchronized movements. However, generational shifts emerged, as younger performers introduced linguistic variations that suggested partnership in marriage rather than hierarchy, subtly challenging traditional gender narratives. While older performances remained rigid, newer interpretations reflected gradual adaptation to contemporary gender ideologies. These observations confirmed that Gusii nuptial oral poetry both preserves and evolves gender identities, showing a dynamic interplay between tradition and transformation.

### **Feminist Perspective on Gender Construction in Gusii Nuptial Oral Poetry**

Gusii nuptial oral poetry constructs gender roles using metaphors and imagery that reflect societal ideals of femininity and masculinity. However, these constructions, when viewed through a feminist lens, reveal the reinforcement of traditional patriarchal norms. Drawing on Oyewumi's (1997) critique in *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, we can explore how these gender constructs are deeply embedded in socio-cultural practices and communal expectations, while interrogating their limitations and broader implications.

Oyewumi (1997) argues that gender in many African societies, including Gusii culture, is not inherently hierarchical but is shaped by cultural practices that intertwine with communal roles and responsibilities. For example, Gusii poetry often uses metaphors such as "fertile soil" to symbolize femininity, celebrating women for their nurturing roles, fertility, and contribution to familial prosperity. Similarly, the metaphor of the "sweet banana" aligns with cultural ideals that emphasize

beauty and delicacy in women. These metaphors elevate femininity as integral to family and community, but they also constrain women's identities, tying their value to reproductive and aesthetic attributes. Following Oyewumi's framework, these representations can be critiqued for perpetuating a one-dimensional view of femininity, reflecting patriarchal expectations.

On the other hand, masculinity is constructed through imagery of strength, provision, and authority. For instance, metaphors like "the bull ploughing fields" celebrate men as providers and protectors, emphasizing their material contributions to familial and societal prosperity. Oyewumi contends that these constructions are rooted in cultural contexts but may have been influenced by external patriarchal systems, particularly during colonial encounters. Such portrayals prioritize men's economic and physical roles, overshadowing the emotional and intellectual dimensions of masculinity.

Feminist critique, as supported by Oyewumi's work, allows us to interrogate these constructs further. While poetry celebrates both men's and women's contributions, it also reinforces rigid gender binaries, limiting individual agency and diversity in identity. For example, the metaphor of women as "fertile soil" reduces them to reproductive functions, while the expectation for men to be unwavering providers creates undue pressure to conform to societal ideals.

Importantly, Oyewumi's call to interpret African cultural traditions within their own frameworks offers a balanced perspective. Gusii nuptial oral poetry must be appreciated as a reflection of communal values and agrarian lifestyles, where gender roles are seen as complementary rather than inherently hierarchical. The use of metaphors tied to nature and productivity reflects the society's dependence on agriculture and collective well-being. However, feminist critique encourages reinterpretation of these metaphors to foster more

inclusive and egalitarian understandings of gender in modern contexts.

In conclusion, incorporating Oyewumi's perspectives enriches the analysis of gender construction in Gusii nuptial oral poetry. Her work highlights the interplay between cultural traditions and patriarchal influences, providing a foundation for both critiquing and reimagining gender roles. By challenging rigid constructs, while respecting cultural practices, feminism offers a pathway toward more dynamic and equitable representations of gender in Gusii society.

### **Insights from Conceptual Metaphor Theory**

Using Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) as a framework, Gusii nuptial oral poetry provides rich insights into how metaphors shape cultural understandings of gender and relationships. This theory posits that metaphors are not just linguistic devices but also cognitive tools that structure how we perceive and interact with the world.

In Gusii's oral poetry, metaphors like "fertile soil" for femininity and "bull" for masculinity reveal underlying cultural ideologies. These metaphors conceptualize gender roles by linking abstract qualities (nurturing, strength, provision) to tangible, culturally familiar images (soil, bull). This systematic mapping between metaphorical source domains (nature, agriculture, animals) and target domains (gender roles) reflects the community's agrarian roots and societal values.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory also highlights how language reinforces societal norms. By repeatedly associating women with life-giving elements and men with productive labour, the metaphors shape gender constructs that align with traditional expectations. However, this framework also opens opportunities for reinterpretation, allowing us to explore alternative mappings that challenge these norms and reflect evolving cultural dynamics.

## Study Limitations

This study faces several limitations that may affect the scope and interpretation of findings. The subjectivity of poetic symbolism presents challenges, as different audiences may perceive metaphors and imagery differently, leading to varied interpretations of gender roles. Additionally, generational and cultural variability influences how informants understand gender constructs, with older generations emphasizing traditional roles while younger performers exhibit evolving perspectives. Despite using non-participant observation, researcher presence may subtly alter performances or audience engagement, affecting the authenticity of the observed interactions. Data collection constraints exist within census sampling, as comprehensive inclusion may limit the deeper exploration of individual perspectives. Furthermore, restricted access to private nuptial performances means certain gender representations within intimate family settings remain undocumented. Lastly, while Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Feminist Literary Theory offer strong analytical frameworks, they may not fully capture nonverbal expressions and improvisation in poetic performances, requiring complementary theoretical approaches for broader analysis.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The analysis of Gusii nuptial oral poetry offers profound insights into how gender identity is constructed, celebrated, and reinforced within this cultural tradition. Through vivid metaphors and symbolism—such as "fertile soil," "sweet banana," and "the bull ploughing fields"—the poetry portrays gender identities in alignment with societal roles and cultural ideals. Femininity is celebrated for its nurturing, aesthetic, and reproductive qualities, while masculinity is associated with strength, provision, and protection. These representations shape the identities of men and women within the framework of marriage, emphasizing complementary roles tied to communal and familial responsibilities.

The exploration of cultural ideals further illuminates how marriage ceremonies serve as key moments where gender identities are affirmed and integrated into Gusii social structures. Themes like communal participation, the transition of responsibility, and family unity highlight the collective affirmation of both individual and relational identities. By focusing on these traditions, the poetry not only preserves cultural heritage but also cements societal norms that define gender identity.

Through a feminist critique, the limitations of these constructs become apparent. Oyewumi's perspective reveals how patriarchal norms may restrict expressions of gender identity, tying women's worth to fertility and men's value to material provision. Insights from Conceptual Metaphor Theory further demonstrate how metaphors cognitively structure societal perceptions of gender, linking abstract traits to tangible domains like nature and productivity, thus reinforcing traditional constructs.

In essence, Gusii nuptial oral poetry serves as both a mirror of cultural values and a framework for shaping gender identity. While it celebrates the roles and contributions of men and women, feminist analysis encourages reinterpretation to foster inclusivity and broader expressions of individuality. This aligns with the objective of examining how oral traditions construct and define gender identity within the Gusii community.

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