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E-mail: alameenalfira@gmail.com

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For further enquiries, please contact: Editor-in-Chief

SAJOLLCOS, HOD's Office,

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Gombe State University, Gombe

sajollicos@gsu.edu.ng,

C/o: amgombe2@gsu.edu.ng



LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

Mariam Titilope Olugbodi

Department of English and Linguistics, Faculty of Arts, Kwara State University, Malete, Nigeria.
mariam.gobir@kwasu.edu.ng

Olanike Olaleru

Department of English and Linguistics, Faculty of Arts, Kwara State University, Malete, Nigeria.
olanike.olaleru@kwasu.edu.ng

Anthonia Elejo Dugga

Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages, University of Jos, Jos, Plateau State

Maimuna Muhammad Kabir

Hausa Depaertment, Yusuf Maitama Sule, University of Education, Kano State.
maimunatukabirwali@gmail.com

Fauziyya Muhammad Hassan

Hausa Depaertment, Yusuf Maitama Sule, University of Education, Kano State.
Fauziyyahassan46@gmail.com

Dorcas Omaojo Idakwo

Department of English and Literary Studies, Federal University Lokoja, Nigeria.
dorcasogwo606@gmail.com

Ezekiel Olajimbati Opeyemi

Department of English and Literary Studies, Federal University Lokoja, Nigeria.
opebukola56@gmail.com

Peter Ochefu Okpeh

Department of English and Literary Studies, Federal University Lokoja, Nigeria.
peter.okpeh@fulokoja.edu.ng

Seini Bello

Department of French, Federal College of Education, Yola.
Seinibello1559@gmail.com

Jibrilla Garba

Department of Hausa, Federal College of Education, Yola
garba.jibrilla@fceyola.edu.ng

Obidah Daniel

Department of French, Federal College of Education, Yola.
obidah0164@gmail.com

Atteh, Femi Yinka

Department of Performing Arts, Faculty of Arts, University of Ilorin, Nigeria
atteh.fy@unilorin.edu.ng

Yaouba Ousmanou

Department of French, Federal College of Education, Yola
usmanyauaba@gmail.com

Abubakar Muhammad Baba

Department Of French, Federal College of Education, Yola
auwalbappa746@gmail.com

Seini Bello

Department of French, Federal College of Education, Yola
seinibello1559@gmail.com



Shema'u Abubakar Umar

Department of General Studies, Isa
Mustapha Agwai I Polytechnic, Lafia -
Nasarawa State
shemauari@gmail.com

Muntari Babangida

Federal Polytechnic Daura, Katsina
State
muntaribabangida4@gmail.com

Bamidele Ibiyemi Lydia

Federal University of Transportation,
Daura, Katsina State, Department of
General Studies
lydiabamidele@ymail.com

Esther Nuhu Samuel

Federal Polytechnic Daura, Katsina
State
esthersamuelamba@gmail.com

Kwasau Blessing Shiyin

Federal Polytechnic Daura, Katsina
State
kwasau@fedpolydaura.edu.ng

Ngor, Cornelius Iko-awaji

Department of English and
Communication Arts
Ignatius Ajuru University of
Education, Rumuolumeni Port
Harcourt Nigeria.
ngorc89@gmail.com

Dorcas Chide Abdulsalam (PhD Student)

Department of English and Drama,
Kaduna State University, Kaduna
cdorcasabdulsami@gmail.com

Oladele John Toluhi

Department of English Literary
Studies, Federal University Lokoja
oladeletoluhi@gmail.com

Peter Ochefu Okpeh

Department of English Literary
Studies, Federal University Lokoja
Peter.okpeh@fulokoja.edu.ng

Muhammad Muhammad

Department of English and European
Languages, Kano State College of
Education and Preliminary Studies
muhd4muhd@gmail.com

TELLA Samson Adekunle

Department of English and
Linguistics, Kwara State University,
Malete
Samson.tella@kwasu.edu.ng

Ridwan Akinkunmi RABIU

Department of English and
Linguistics, Kwara State University,
Malete
ridwan.rabiu@kwasu.edu.ng

Nafisat Bolanle AIYELABEGAN

Department of English and
Linguistics, Kwara State University,
Malete
nafisat.aiyelabegan@kwasu.edu.ng

Mustapha Ibrahim Garba

Department of English & Linguistics,
Federal University Dutse
Igmustapha6@gmail.com

Abubakar Isa Abubakar

Ministry for Higher Education,
Science & Technology Dutse – Jigawa
abubakarabubakarbkb@gmail.com

Abdullahi Usman Garko

Department of English and
Linguistics Gombe State
augarko@gmail.com



Suku Hyellamada Kenan

Department of Languages and
Linguistics, Gombe State University,
hyellassuku@gsu.edu/hyellawilbe@gmail.com

Juilet Aluke

Department of Languages and
Linguistics, Gombe State University.

Taiwo Mary Akanmu

Department of English and Literary
Studies, Faculty of Arts, Kwara State
University, Malete, Nigeria.
taiwoakanmu155@gmail.com

Olanike Olaleru

Department of English and Literary
Studies, Faculty of Arts, Kwara State
University, Malete, Nigeria.
olanike.olaleru@kwasu.edu.ng

Mariam Titilope Olugbodi

Department of English and Literary
Studies, Faculty of Arts, Kwara State
University, Malete, Nigeria.
mariam.gobir@kwasu.edu.ng

Aliyu Haruna Muhammad

Directorate of General Studies,
Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University
P.M.B. 0248, Bauchi- Nigeria
aliyuharuna7@gmail.com

Felix Oluwabukola Oladeji

Department of English, Faculty of
Arts., University of Ilorin, Ilorin,
Nigeria.
Oladejifelix94@gmail.com

Rabi Bashir Ph.D

Department Of Nigerian Languages
And Linguistics, Kaduna State
University, Kaduna.
rabiubashi@kasu.edu.ng

Dr. David Mikailu

Department of English, University of
Abuja
davidmikailu@yahoo.com

Asana Kehinde Alemede

Department of English & Literary
Studies, Federal University Lokoja,
Kogi State, Nigeria
alemsjnr@gmail.com

Ifeyinwa Genevieve Okolo

Department of English & Literary
Studies, Federal University Lokoja,
Kogi State, Nigeria
ifeyinwaokolo@fulokoja.edu.ng

Oluwatoyin Barnabas

Department of English & Literary
Studies, Federal University Lokoja,
Kogi State, Nigeria
oluwabar@yahoo.com

Idowu, Stephen Olufemi

Department of English Education,
Lagos State University of Education,
Oto/Ijanikin, Lagos State, Nigeria.
idowuos@lasued.edu.ng

Azeez, Abimbola

Department of English Education,
Lagos State University of Education,
Oto/Ijanikin, Lagos State, Nigeria.
azeezas@lasued.edu.ng

Vivian Chukwu

Department of English and Literary
Studies at Federal University Lokoja

Ifeyinwa Genevieve Okolo

Department of English and Literary
Studies at Federal University Lokoja
ifeyinwaokolo@fulokoja.edu.ng



Abba Abba

Department of English and Literary
Studies at Federal University Lokoja
abba.abba@fulokoja.edu.ng

Okache C. Odey

Department of English & Literature,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
okacheodey@yahoo.com

Peace Chinenye Chidolue

Department of Igbo, Federal College
of Education, Yola
Chidolue.pc@fceyola.edu.ng

Suwaiba Mohammed, Ph.D

Department of Languages and
Linguistics, Gombe State University

Fatima Muhammad

Department of Languages and
Linguistics, Gombe State University
fatimam@gsu.edu.ng

YOHANNA, Gilamdo Kwem

Department of English and Literary
Studies, Ahmadu Bello University,
Zaria
gilamdokwemyohanna@gmail.com

SAMUEL, Joy

Department of English and Literary
Studies, Ahmadu Bello University,
Zaria.
joysammy68@gmail.com

Joshua, Josephine

School of Languages, Department of
English, Adamawa State College of
Education, Hong
Josephinejoshua06@gmail.com

Dathini Yinasimma Bright

School of Languages, Department of
English, Adamawa State College of
Education, Hong
dathinibright@gmail.com

Ali Baba Dada

Department of English and Literary
Studies, University of Maiduguri.
alibdhadha@gmail.com

Ben Ita Odeba

Department of Mass Communication,
Bingham University, Karu, Nasarawa
State, Nigeria
benjamin.odeba@binghamuni.edu.ng

Jummai Mbuzi Waziri

Department of Mass Communication,
Bingham University, Karu, Nasarawa
State, Nigeria
jummaiwaziri74@gmail.com

Desmond Onyemechi Okocha, PhD

Department of Mass Communication,
Bingham University, Karu, Nasarawa
State, Nigeria.
desmondoo@yahoo.com

Akuta Michelle Idialu

Department of Mass Communication,
Faculty of Communication and Media
Studies, Bingham University, Karu,
Nasarawa State
gamboakutamichelle@gmail.com

Farouk Umar Mohammed

Department of Mass Communication,
Faculty of Communication and Media
Studies, Bingham University, Karu,
Nasarawa State
faroukmohammmed@gmail.com



Ruth Barnabas

Department of Mass Communication,
Faculty of Communication and Media
Studies, Bingham University, Karu,
Nasarawa State, Nigeria

Bridget Azenda

Department of Mass Communication,
Faculty of Communication and Media
Studies, Bingham University, Karu,
Nasarawa State, Nigeria

Christopher Anyokwu, PhD

University of Lagos

SAKA, Idayat Oyenike

Department of Yoruba, Adeyemi
Federal University of Education,
Ondo, Ondo State, Nigeria
ridahtullahi@gmail.com

FARINDE, Muibat Abiola

Department of Yoruba, Adeyemi
Federal University of Education,
Ondo, Ondo State, Nigeria
farindemuibat@gmail.com

Prof. Nesther Nachafia Alu

Department of English, University of
Jos, Nigeria
nestherta@gmail.com

Sani, Sylvia

Department of English, University of
Jos, Nigeria
nyuyihyfsylvia@gmail.com

Melchizedec James Onobe, PhD

Department of Mass Communication,
Faculty of Communication and Media
Studies, Bingham University, Karu,
Nasarawa State, Nigeria

Fasehun Mercy Ayò

fasehunmercy@yahoo.com
Faculty Of Arts, Department Of
Yorùbá, Adéyemí Federal University
Of Education, Oñdó

Òjó Ìlúfóyè Fáwọ̀lé

ilufoye@gmail.com
Faculty Of Arts, Department Of
Yorùbá, Adéyemí Federal University
Of Education, Oñdó

Ibrahim Fatima Usman

Department of Languages and
Linguistics, Gombe State University
phartimarhibrahim@gmail.com

Emoruwa, Oluwatoyin Titilayo

Adeyemi Federal University of
Education, Ondo, Ondo State
tititoyin@gmail.com

Melchizedec James Onobe, PhD;

Department of Mass Communication,
Faculty of Communication and Media
Studies Bingham University, Karu,
Nasarawa State, Nigeria

Richard Okujeni, PhD

Department of Mass Communication,
Faculty of Communication and Media
Studies Bingham University, Karu,
Nasarawa State, Nigeria

Emoruwa, Oluwatoyin Titilayo

Adeyemi Federal University of
Education, Ondo, Ondo State
tititoyin@gmail.com

Aliyu Sambo Alhassan

Department of English and
Linguistics, Federal University Dutse,
Jigawa State.
asambo1010@gmail.com



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Between Text and Texture: An Exploration of the Socio-Stylistic Imports in Selected Songs of Ololade Asake Mariam Titilope Olugbodi and Olanike Olaleru	1-10
Home language Dynamics: A Study of Cross – Lingual Households in Jos Anthonia Eleajo Dugga	11-20
Analysis of the Realization of Hausa Sounds Maimuna Muhammad Kabir	21-30
An Overview of Language Acquisition Processes: A Review Approach Fauziyya Muhammad Hassan	31-39
Metaphorical Representation of Ideologies in Media Reportage on <i>Japa</i> Discourses Dorcas Omaojo Idakwo¹, Ezekiel Olajimbiti Opeyemi², Peter Ochefu Okpeh³	40-56
Integrating Hausa Words and Phrases in French Language Instruction Enhances Learning Among Northern Nigerian Students Seini Bello, Jibrilla Garba and Obidah Daniel	57-66
Language, Literature and the Proverbial Tones of Cultural History in Ola Rotimi's <i>Kurunmi</i> Atteh, Femi Yinka	67-77
Evaluation of The State of French Language Teaching and Learning in Public Schools in Adamawa State Yaouba Ousmanou, Abubakar Muhammad Baba and Seini Bello	78-88
Language and Identity in Nigeria's Nollywood Dialogues Shema'u Abubakar Umar	89-102
The Role of Forensic Linguistics in Detecting and Curbing Plagiarism Among University Undergraduate in Katsina State Muntari Babangida, Bamidele Ibiyemi Lydia, Esther Nuhu Samuel and Kwasau Blessing Shiyin	103-113
Influence of L1 on Spoken English in Nigeria: An Assessment of Obolo Vowels Ngor, Cornelius Iko-awaji	114-123
A Pragma-Craft Analysis of Shehu Sani's Selected Tweets/Headlines Dorcas Chide Abdulsalam	124-142



Intertextuality in Bola Ahmed Tinubu's Press Releases on X
Oladele John Toluhi and Peter Ochefu Okpeh 143-165

Lexico-Semantic Analysis of Lassa Fever Reportage in Selected Nigerian Newspapers
Muhammad Muhammad 166-178

A Stylo-Linguistic Analysis of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu "Emi Lokan" Speech
TELLA Samson Adekunle, Ridwan Akinkunmi RABIU and Nafisat Bolanle AIYELABEGAN 179-197

Morphological Analysis of Lexicons in Hausa Dialects
Mustapha Ibrahim Garba, Abubakar Isa Abubakar and Abdullahi Usman Garko 198-207

A Comparative Multimodal Discourse Analysis of MTN and Airtel's Instagram Advertising Strategies
Suku Hyellamada Kenan, Ph.D and Juilet Aluke 208-224

Protest and Politics of Idealization: a Rhetorical Analysis of *òKéDìjì's RẹRẹ Rún* and *QlÁTẹ́jú's Iná Ràn*
SAKA, Idayat Oyenike and FARINDE, Muibat Abiola 225-237

Cohesion in Student's Academic Writing: A Linguistic Exploration of Language Organization and Meaning-Making
Emoruwa, Oluwatoyin Titilayo 238-246

SECTION B: LITERATURE

A Stylistic Exploration of Tanure Ojaides' *Narrow Escapes*, A Poetic Diary of the Coronavirus Pandemic
Taiwo Mary Akanmu, Olanike Olaleru and Mariam Titilope Olugbodi 247-259

Writing and The Voice of Difference: Despondent and Repressed Archetypes in Commonwealth Literature
Aliyu Haruna Muhammad 260-272

Ecopoetic Language And Symbolism In Selected Tomas Transtromer's Poems *The Deleted World*
Felix Oluwabukola Oladeji 273-284



- Social Equality in Hausa Oral Songs: An Overview of [Anmaraya's Song 'Mai Akwai Da Mai Babu' (The Rich and The Poor)
Rabiu Bashir, Ph.D 285-295
- Reimagining Power and Technology in African Science Fiction: Techno-Hybridity and The Aesthetics of Governance in Dilman Dila's *Yat Madit*
Dr. David Mikailu 296-310
- Traumatic Embodiment and Resistance among Persons with Disabilities in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*
Asana Kehinde Alemede, Ifeyinwa Genevieve Okolo and Oluwatoyin Barnabas 311-323
- Science, Myth, and Reality: Deconstructing Nigerian Women's Roles in Traditional and Modern Scientific Discourses through a Literary Lens
Idowu, Stephen Olufemi and Azeez, Abimbola 324-347
- Variations in the Representations of the Igbo Belief in Chi in Chigozie Obioma's *An Orchestra of Minorities*
Vivian Chukwu, Ifeyinwa Genevieve Okolo and Abba Abba 348-359
- Human Trafficking, Organ Harvesting and the Politics of the Body in Ifeanyi Ajaegbo's *Sarah House*
Okache C. Odey 360-370
- Gendered Silence in Igbo Funeral and Marriage Rites: Reclaiming Female Agency Through Cultural Reformation
Peace Chinenye Chidolue 371-386
- Changing Roles of Male And Female Characters in The Twenty First Century Women Writings: An Example of Zaynab Alkali's *The Initiates*
Suwaiba Mohammed, Ph.D 387-403
- The Language of African Literature in the Era of Globalisation
Fatima Muhammad 404-418
- Deconstructing The Narrative of Helon Habila's *The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram Kidnappings and Islamist Militancy in Niger*
YOHANNA, Gilamdo Kwem and SAMUEL, Joy 419-430
- Migration, Modern Slavery And Sexual Objectification Of Women In Nigerian Fiction: A Study Of Unigwe Chika's *On Black Sisters' Street*
Joshua, Josephine, Dathini Yinasimma Brigh, and Ali Baba Dada 431-446



Widowhood Challenges and Expectations: an Analysis of Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *Seasons of Crimson Blossom*
Prof. Nesther Nachafia Alu and Sani, Sylvia 447-459

Otherring in The Genre of Life Writing: a Literary Critique of Awolowo's *Awo: The Autobiography of Chief Obafemi Awolowo*
Aliyu Sambo Alhassan and Professor Nesther Nachafiya Alu 460-471

SECTION C: COMMUNICATION

Influence of Instagram Celebrities' Fashion Lifestyle on Nile University Female Mass Communication Students
Ben Ita Odeba, Jummai Mbuzi Waziri and Desmond Onyemechi Okocha, Ph.D 472-487

Influence of Japanese Animation on Indigenous Nigerian Cultures Among Youths in Abuja Municipal Area Council
Akuta Michelle Idialu and Farouk Umar Mohammed 488-503

Perception of the Undergraduate Mass Communication Students of Bingham University towards Teaching as a Career
Ben Odeba, Ruth Barnabas and Bridget Azenda 504-521

Assessing Brand Awareness of ULesson among Bingham University Undergraduate Students in the Digital Era
Ben Odeba; Ruth Barnabas, Bridget Azenda, and Melchizedec James Onobe, Ph.D 522-545

Evaluating the Effectiveness of Digital Public Relations Strategies for Brand Awareness and Reputation Management by Andela in Abuja
Melchizedec James Onobe, PhD; Richard Okujeni, PhD and Ben Odeba 546-575

Between Heritage and Reform: Traditional Education and Nigeria's Quest for Transformation
Fasehun Mercy Ayò and Òjó Ìlúfóyè Fáwọ̀lé 576-592

SECTION D: REVIEW

Udenta's Revolutionary Aesthetics and The African Literary Process: A Review
Christopher Anyokwu, Ph.D 593-602

SECTION E: CREATIVE WRITING

Humanity is Dead and other Poems
Ibrahim Fatima Usman 603-605



Science, Myth, and Reality: Deconstructing Nigerian Women's Roles in Traditional and Modern Scientific Discourses through a Literary Lens

Idowu, Stephen Olufemi

idowuos@lasued.edu.ng

&

Azeez, Abimbola

azeezas@lasued.edu.ng

Department of English Education, Lagos State University of Education,
Oto/Ijanikin, Lagos State, Nigeria.

Abstract

*This study explores the intersection of science, myth, and reality in the life of Nigerian women, examining how traditional and modern scientific discourses shape and redefine their roles. Through a literary analysis of Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, this research reveals the intricate connections between power, knowledge, and identity in Nigerian women's experiences. Drawing on Feminist theory, intersectionality, and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, the study examines the power dynamics and knowledge production in the selected Nigerian novels. By deconstructing dominant narratives and reasserting Nigerian women's agency in science, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersections of gender, culture, and science in Nigerian society.*

Keywords: Science, Myth, Reality, Nigerian Women, Literary Analysis, Intersectionality.

Introduction

The intersection of science, myth, and reality in Nigerian culture presents a complex and fascinating terrain for examination. On one hand, traditional Nigerian societies have long relied on indigenous knowledge systems and cultural practices to experience the natural world and deal everyday challenges. On the other hand, the legacy of colonialism coupled with the growing influence of modern scientific approaches, has

significantly changed the ways in which Nigerians perceive and relate with the world around them.

At the heart of this connection of science, myth and reality, lies the experience of Nigerian women, whose roles and identities have been shaped and reshaped by the link between traditional beliefs and modern scientific methods. Despite their significant contributions to Nigerian society and culture, the perspectives and experiences of



women have often been marginalised or overlooked in mainstream discussions surrounding science, technology and societal progress.

The study aims to address this gap by questioning how science, myth and reality connect in the lives of Nigerian women. Through a literary analysis of three Nigerian novels - Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. This research examines how traditional and modern scientific records construct and deconstruct Nigerian women's roles and identities.

By examining the ways in which Nigerian women experience the complex terrain of science, myth, and reality, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the gender, culture, and science within Nigerian situations. Ultimately, this research aims primarily to reclaim and re-align Nigerian women's experiences and perspectives, thereby highlighting their agency and contributions to the production of knowledge and culture.

This study adopts a Critical Discourse Analysis approach, to examine language, power dynamics, and knowledge production in the selected texts. By integrating insights from Postcolonial theory, Feminist theory and Intersectionality, this study provides a multifaceted examination of the connection between science, myth and reality in the lives of Nigerian women.

Research Questions

1. How do traditional and modern scientific discourses intersect and impact the roles and identities of Nigerian women, as represented in selected Nigerian literature?
2. What are the dominant narratives and power dynamics that shape Nigerian women's experiences and perspectives in the realms of science and technology?
3. How do Nigerian women navigate and negotiate the complexities of traditional and modern scientific discourses in their everyday lives?
4. In what ways do Nigerian literary texts challenge or reinforce dominant narratives about science, technology, and the roles and identities of Nigerian women?

These research questions provide a clear direction for the study and will guide the analysis of the selected literary texts.

Literature Review

Nigerian culture embodies a rich tapestry of myths and scientific inquiry, demonstrating a complex interaction between traditional knowledge systems and modern scientific practices. This literature review explores the historical and contemporary contexts of science and myth in Nigerian culture, emphasising the reciprocal influences between traditional wisdom and contemporary scientific approaches.

Historical Contexts



Traditional Nigerian cultures have a rich history of scientific inquiry and innovation. Many indigenous knowledge systems predate modern Western science, with practices deeply embedded in local cultures. For example, the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria have a complex system of traditional medicine that has been shown to have scientific basis (Oluyitan, 2024). Traditional medicine practitioners, historically known as Wombai and Gozan among the Hausa and Nupe groups in the north, and as Adahunse among the Yorubas and Dibia among the Igbos in the west and east, respectively, serve as custodians of the medicinal heritage (Sadiku, Chukwu, Ajayi-Majebi, Musa, 2022).

In addition, Nigerian cultures have a rich tradition of myth and storytelling that seeks to explain natural phenomena and the workings of the universe (Jaja 2014). The knowledge and understanding of God, as being supreme, the creator and controller of all creation are acknowledged by various ethnic groups in Nigeria. Expressing this phenomenon through different mythological elements, based on their localities; the fundamental belief in a Supreme Being remains consistent. For instance, Yoruba communities refer to the Supreme Being as Aseda/Eleda/Olodunmare (creator); the Igbos identify the higher power as Chukwu/Chineke (Self creating and everlasting); and the Hausas refer to the divine as Obangiji. These myths have played an important role in shaping Nigerian cultures and worldviews,

influencing political, social, and economic dimensions of life.

Colonialism and the Suppression of Indigenous Knowledge

The arrival of colonialism in Nigeria had a profound impact on indigenous knowledge systems, with many traditional practices and beliefs being suppressed or marginalised (Akpörherhe & Oghenerioborue 2021; Pranay, & Pragyan, 2024). This suppression was often justified on the grounds that traditional knowledge systems were unscientific or backward (Smith, 2019; Wangui, 2024). This colonialistially generated opinion and mindset is totally degrading and not adequately representative of indigenous traditional knowledge.

However, recent research has highlighted the importance of preserving and promoting indigenous knowledge systems, particularly in the context of sustainable development and environmental conservation. Loyangamba and Syed, (2024) assert that myths and folklores shape the consciousness of a culture and enhance its identity, while Idowu & Adenle (2024), observe folklores in literary productions as tools of reclamation of the indigenous practices and preservation of identity. Thus, the Eurocentric concept of primitive or unscientific labels on African indigenous elements of traditions and culture are dismissed.

Contemporary Contexts



In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of indigenous knowledge systems in Nigeria, particularly concerning healthcare and environmental conservation ((Eruaga , Itua & Bature, 2024; Ekeopara & Ugoha, 2017; Olatokun, 2010). The Nigerian government has established a number of initiatives aimed at promoting traditional medicine and indigenous knowledge systems (Alostad, Steinke, & Shafheutle, 2020). For instance, the National Agency for Food, Drugs, Administration, and Control (NAFDAC), currently regulates activities of traditional medicine practitioners and tests many ethno medicinal preparations being marketed in the country (Derby, 2020; Kumar & Isah, 2024).

In addition, there has been a growing interest in the connection of science and myth in Nigerian culture, with researchers exploring how traditional knowledge systems can inform modern scientific practices (Owumi, Kolo, Obemeata, & Adesokan 2018). Some Nigerian Universities offer courses in traditional medicine and conducting laboratory experiments on herbs and plants marketed and used by people. For example, the University of Nigeria Nsuka's Institute for Drug, Herbal Medicine, and Excipient Research and Development (ID-HEM-ERD established in 2017, leverages expertise from multiple faculties, including medical, biological, agricultural, and pharmaceutical sciences, to develop new medicines. Equally, the

University of Medical Science, Ondo, established the Centre of Herbal Medicine and drug Discovery commissioned in 2021. According to the Vice chancellor, the Centre is a product of sustained and strategic interest in advancing herbal medicine from its inception. It is interesting to note that the World Health Organisation has emphasised the importance of traditional medicine and thus organised a global workshop held in China to build skills for supporting access to safe, high quality traditional medicines within health-care systems.

The relationship between science and myth in Nigerian culture is complex and multifaceted, marked by a rich history of traditional knowledge systems coexisting with modern scientific practices. While colonialism and other external factors have had a great impact on indigenous knowledge systems, there is a growing recognition of the importance of preserving and promoting these systems, particularly in the context of sustainable development and environmental conservation.

The Role of Nigerian Women in Traditional Scientific Discourses

Nigerian women have played significant roles in traditional scientific approaches, particularly in the context of indigenous knowledge systems and cultural practices (FAO, 2005). Despite their contributions, Nigerian women's roles in traditional scientific discourses have often been marginalised or overlooked (Bako & Syed 2018; Adegoke, Adegoke, &



Oyedele 2016). This is greatly generating spontaneous and continuous feminist's the reactions today.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Nigerian women have been instrumental in preserving and transmitting indigenous knowledge systems, particularly in the areas of traditional medicine, agriculture, and food processing (Olatokun and Ayanbode, 2009; Ifeanyi-obi, 2023). For example, Yoruba women are renowned for using traditional herbal remedies to treat various ailments, including malaria and complications during childbirth (Ugboma, 2014; Oluyitan, 2024).

Furthermore, these women have played crucial roles in the development and transmission of indigenous agricultural practices, including crop rotation, irrigation, and pest management (Godson, Chikaire, Anaeto, Ogueri). This has helped greatly in sustained food production and ecological preservation and development.

Cultural Practices

Nigerian women's cultural practices have also been closely linked to traditional scientific methods. For example, the traditional textile industry in Nigeria has been dominated by women, who have developed unique dyeing and weaving techniques using indigenous plants and materials (Gausa & Abubakar 2015; Akinmoye & Ogunduyile 2020). This artistic expression not only reflects cultural

identity but also embodies knowledge that has been passed down through generations.

Similarly, Nigerian women have played important roles in traditional food processing and preservation, using techniques such as fermentation, smoking, and drying to preserve food for long periods (Aluko, 2018). This efforts have uniquely helped the rural communities to sustain food production and able to transport some of them to the cities for commercial purposes.

Challenges and Opportunities for Nigerian Women

Despite their significant contributions to traditional scientific discourses, Nigerian women face numerous challenges such as limited access to education and training, cultural and social marginalisation, and lack of recognition and compensation for their knowledge and skills (Gbaguidi, C., Amouzou, L., Tossou, M., & Adjavounvoun, M. 2022).

However, there are also opportunities for Nigerian women to contribute to traditional scientific discourses, particularly in the context of sustainable development and environmental conservation (Mofoluwawo 2014). They have been identified contributing in the area of biodiversity management and food security through indigenous knowledge (Aluko, 2018; Gwandure & Lukhele-Olorunju 2023). It is therefore evident that the roles of women in all areas of human



existence concerning modern developmental programmes cannot be overlooked.

Nigerian women have played significant roles in traditional scientific discourses, particularly in the area of indigenous knowledge systems and cultural practices. Despite the challenges they face, Nigerian women's contributions to traditional scientific approaches offer opportunities for sustainable development, environmental conservation, and cultural preservation.

The intersection of Modern Scientific Discourses and Nigerian Women: Colonialism, Patriarchy, and Marginalisation

Modern scientific practices have been heavily influenced by colonialism, patriarchy, and marginalisation, which have had a profound impact on Nigerian women's participation in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields (Bako & Syed 2018). Despite their contributions to scientific knowledge, Nigerian women have been marginalised and excluded from mainstream scientific discourses (Ogunjemilua, & Familugba, 2015).

This literature review aims to explore the intersection of modern scientific methods and Nigerian women, highlighting the ways in which colonialism, patriarchy, and marginalisation have conditioned their experiences and participation in STEM fields.

Colonialism and the Erasure of Indigenous Knowledge

Colonialism has had a great impact on Nigerian women's participation in science, as it erased indigenous knowledge systems and imposed Western scientific practices (Onoshakpor, Abolle-Okoyeagu, Onoja, & Etukudor 2024). Nigerian women's traditional knowledge and practices were dismissed as "unscientific" and "backward," leading to their marginalisation and exclusion from general scientific discourses (Oyewunmi, 2016).

Patriarchy and the Gendering of Science

Patriarchy has also played a significant role in shaping Nigerian women's experiences in STEM fields. Science has traditionally been seen as a masculine domain, with women being excluded from participation and decision-making (Akanle, Adesina, and Nwaobiala 2018). Nigerian women have had to go through these patriarchal structures, often facing discrimination, harassment, and marginalisation (Lukma & Abdulkareem 2023). A situation which has been resisted and variously challenged through various gender and feminist agenda individually and collectively.

Marginalization and Exclusion

Nigerian women have been marginalised and excluded from mainstream scientific discourses, with limited access to education, training, and resources (Onoshakpor,



Abolle-Okoyeagu, Onoja, & Etukudor 2024). They have also faced significant barriers to participation in STEM fields, including cultural and social norms that discourage women from pursuing careers in science (Adams-Harmon, 2024). This has for a prolong time reduced the number of female practitioners in the science and mathematics related professions.

Resistance and Agency

Despite these challenges, Nigerian women have resisted and challenged these dominant discourses, asserting their agency and autonomy in STEM fields (Okorafor, Woyengidubamo, Kakiri & Okorafor, 2015). They have developed alternative knowledge systems and practices that challenge the dominant Western scientific practices (Mthembu, Baiyegunhi, Mdleleni, Ndlovu, Keal, Waddilove, Yarrow, Kasproicz, Ndung'u & Wong 2023). Women have formed and organised different formally recognized associations, groups and gatherings advancing the course of their female concerns in the present day.

In all, modern scientific discourses have been shaped by colonialism, patriarchy, and marginalisation, which have had a profound impact on Nigerian women's participation in STEM fields. Despite these challenges, Nigerian women have resisted and challenged these dominant discourses, asserting their agency and autonomy in STEM fields.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by feminist theory, intersectionality, and critical discourse analysis (CDA), providing a divergent framework for analysing how Nigerian women's roles are build, restricted, and experienced within the connecting terrains of science, myth, and cultural reality.

Feminist Theoretical Framework

Feminist theory offers a critical lens for analyzing how gendered power structures shape women's experiences, particularly in relation to science, healthcare, and knowledge production. It highlights the ways in which women's bodies, identities, and intellectual contributions have historically been excluded within traditional and scientific records. Drawing on foundational feminist thinkers such as Butler (1990) and Harding (1986), this study explains how women become subjects and producers of knowledge, opposing and accommodating practices that always marginalise or underrate their outlooks.

Feminist theory also questions the cultural practices and demands that define womanhood in Nigerian settings, specifically through themes such as fertility, motherhood, and obedience. By employing a feminist reading to the selected literary texts, this study reveals how women's voices are silenced, celebrated, or oppressively rearranged through explanative strategies. It also



amplifies women's enablement for agency, even within oppressive hierarchy.

Intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality, introduced by Crenshaw (1989), is crucial for understanding how gender connects with other sections of identity, such as class, education, tradition, and religion, to create the practical experiences of Nigerian women. Rather than seeing gender as an isolated group, intersectionality acknowledges the structured and interlinked forms of exclusion and opportunity that different women navigate premised on their personality.

In the novels analysed, the lives of women like Nnu Ego (*The Joys of Motherhood*) and Bolanle (*The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*) are deeply influenced not only by their gender but also by their socio-economic status, educational background, and cultural demands. Intersectionality provides a framework to critically examine how these overlapping identities influence their reach to knowledge, healthcare, autonomy, and social power.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Critical Discourse Analysis, particularly as put together by Fairclough (2015), creates a methodological approach for examining the relationship between language, power, and ideology in the selected texts. CDA deals with how

practice reflects and encourages or supports social hierarchies, while also offering opportunities for resistance and transformation.

In this study, CDA is used to analyse how scientific, mythological, and cultural practices are linguistically structured and how they impact the identities of Nigerian women. Through narrative structures, metaphors, silences, and dialogic patterns, the texts examined show how power operates, particularly in creating what are viewed as legitimate knowledge, who is allowed to speak, and whose experiences are acceptable or disapproved.

By combining feminist theory, intersectionality, and CDA, this study presents an encompassing guideline for understanding how Nigerian women's identities and contributions are constructed in literary records. It allows for a deep exploration of how women relate between traditional expectations and modern scientific justifications, and how literature functions as a ground to criticise, reimagine, and establish their roles in society.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, using literary analysis as the primary method for exploring the intersection of science, myth, and reality in Nigerian women's lives. The study uses a qualitative research design, which involves the analysis of three Nigerian novels - Amos Tutuola's *The*



Palm-Wine Drinkard, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. These novels were selected because they offer a unique insight into the experiences of Nigerian women and the ways in which science, myth, and reality connect in their lives. The data for this study were collected through a close reading of the three selected novels. The novels were analysed for their presentation of Nigerian women's roles in science, traditional knowledge systems, and the intersection of science, myth, and reality. The data were analysed using a qualitative content analysis approach, which involves the identification and coding of themes and patterns in the data. The study does not involve human subjects, and therefore does not require ethical clearance. However, the study acknowledges the importance of respecting the cultural and intellectual property rights of the authors and communities represented in the selected novels.

Case Studies/Literary Analysis

1. The Palm-Wine Drinkard by Amos Tutuola

Mythology, Knowledge, and Gender in Yoruba Narrative Traditions

Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) is a seminal work of Nigerian literature that explores the rich intersection of Yoruba mythology, indigenous knowledge systems, and gender dynamics. As a

pioneer of African fantasy literature, Tutuola's text fuses oral storytelling, spiritual cosmology, and fantastical adventure. When read alongside D.O. Fagunwa's foundational Yoruba-language novel, *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*, we find profound intertextual resonances that illuminate the shared cultural matrix from which both narratives emerge. Together, these works validate indigenous epistemologies and dramatise the complex connection of power, myth, and marginalisation.

Yoruba Mythology

The Palm-Wine Drinkard is deeply rooted in Yoruba mythology, depending extensively on the oral traditions and cosmological structures of the Yoruba worldview. The novel's protagonist embarks on a journey to retrieve his dead palm-wine tapster from the land of the dead, encountering supernatural beings, gods, spirits, and monsters that embody the accessibility of the spiritual and material worlds.

This mythological density finds clear parallels in Fagunwa's *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*, where the narrator Akara-ogun, a hunter by lineage and destiny, declares:

"My name is Akara-ogun, Compound-of-Spells, one of the formidable hunters of a bygone age. My own father was a hunter... It was the spirits who guarded the house when he was away..."



This invocation not only emphasises the role of ancestral and spiritual guardianship but also mirrors the world Tutuola constructs where spirits are ever-present forces shaping human experience. In the text, the boundaries between the physical and metaphysical are fluid, reflecting the Yoruba belief in a multilayered reality.

Similarly, Akara-ogun's traversal of a terrifying, liminal space echoes Tutuola's own mythopoetic landscape:

"Ah, a most evil forest is the forest of a thousand daemons; it is the very abode of ghommids."

Just as the Forest serves as a test of moral and spiritual endurance, so too does the Drinkard's journey through spirit-infused terrains. These mythological structures emphasise Yoruba cosmology's investment in spiritual causality, communal memory, and heroic transformation.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Tutuola's narrative emphasises traditional Yoruba knowledge, particularly spiritual and medicinal systems encoded in nature, divination, and ritual. The protagonist often depends on charms, herbal knowledge, and sacred rites strategies deeply embedded in indigenous epistemologies.

Fagunwa's narrative reinforces these themes. For example:

"He gave me four pods of alligator pepper... in time of danger I should eat a single pepper... I would grow wings and fly like a bird."

This scene illustrates how sacred plants are equipped with spiritual potency, functioning equally as medicine, magic, and knowledge. The same epistemological framework operates in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, where natural elements serve both symbolic and practical purposes, guiding the protagonist through crises and transformations.

Fagunwa further details the spiritual armory of Akara-ogun's father:

"My own father... was also a great one for medicines and spells. He had a thousand powder gourdllets, eight hundred ato, and his amulets numbered six hundred."

Such inventories of spiritual paraphernalia reveal a complex indigenous system of healing, protection, and prophecy systems that Tutuola also incorporates through his character's deployment of charms, amulets, and transformative rituals. These devices challenge the epistemic authority of Western science, offering alternative ways of knowing grounded in Yoruba cosmology.

Feminist Analysis: Gender, Power, and Marginality

While Tutuola's narrative celebrates Yoruba metaphysics, it also reflects the patriarchal structures embedded



in traditional Yoruba discourse. Women in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* are often relegated to peripheral or instrumental roles, revealing gender asymmetries that invite feminist critique.

1. *The Wife of the Palm-Wine Drinkard*

Her characterization reduces womanhood to beauty and moral function:

“True, your wife ought to be beautiful lest you tire of each other quickly... but this is not the heart of the matter. The important requisite is that your wife should not be prone to evil.”

This utilitarian composition agrees with traditional patriarchal practicess that define women in terms of service, moral behaviour, and aesthetic value; erasing female complexity and agency.

2. *The Witch-Mother*

The portrayal of dangerous maternal figures reinforces anxieties around female power:

“What I should have done I have left undone... the creature who deserved to die at my hand I have indulged with praises.”

Fagunwa’s monstrous mother-figure reflects the same tendency as Tutuola’s witches and female spirits, casting female agency as disorderly or fatal. These representations

suggest deep-seated fears of women who disrupt normative roles, casting them as threats to male order.

3. *The Old Woman and Helpmeet*

Not all female figures are passive or negative. The Old Woman in Tutuola’s novel functions as a spiritual guide, while Fagunwa’s *Helpmeet* offers an example of female empowerment:

“I am one of them, and Helpmeet is my name... I go through the world to visit the friends of God and to assist them in all their endeavours.”

Helpmeet subverts gendered expectations by possessing divine purpose and moral clarity. Her role parallels Tutuola’s Old Woman, marginal, yet powerful disruptors of male-centered worlds. Though these women are sidelined in the story structure, they signal alternative models of authority rooted in care, wisdom, and spiritual insight.

Silence, Margins, and Erasure

One of the most prominent characteristics of gendered marginalisation is absence. The Tapster’s Wife in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is mentioned but never appears, her erasure reinforcing patriarchal tendencies to omit women from epic journeys and mythic memory.

This silence finds a structural parallel in Fagunwa’s narrative:



"From the day of my arrival in this town there had been a room in the house where I lived which the woman, my host, would never allow me to enter..."

The woman's authority is ordinary in her withholding of knowledge, still her death dissolves that agency. Access comes only posthumously, describing how female knowledge is often feared, suppressed, or only valued after its disappearance.

D.O. Fagunwa's *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* and Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* are thematically and structurally interconnected. Both narratives reflect a cosmology where spirits shape the human world, where indigenous knowledge systems link the relationship between nature and the divine, and where gender roles are deeply circumscribed yet occasionally disrupted.

By integrating myth, epistemology, and gender critique, these texts offer a compelling window into Yoruba cultural imagination, an imagination that is rich, contradictory, and constantly negotiating the sacred and the social.

2. *The Joys of Motherhood* by Buchi Emecheta

Examining the Intersection of Traditional and Modern Scientific Discourses in Motherhood and Healthcare

Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* is a famous work of Nigerian literature that explores the intersection of traditional and modern scientific discourses in motherhood and healthcare. Published in 1979, the novel is a powerful criticism of the ways in which traditional and modern medical paradigms connect to build the experiences of mothers and healthcare providers in Nigeria. Through the story of Nnu Ego, a woman torn between ancestral expectations and colonial modernity, Emecheta exposes how science, culture, and gender intersect in complex, often contradictory ways.

Traditional Scientific Discourses

The novel highlights the importance of traditional scientific discourses in shaping the experiences of mothers and healthcare providers in Nigeria. The protagonist, Nnu Ego, is a young Igbo woman who is expected to conform to traditional Igbo norms and practices surrounding motherhood and healthcare. These include belief systems rooted in *chi* (personal deities), herbal healing, ancestral veneration, and symbolic fertility rites.



Emecheta's portrayal of traditional scientific discourses is richly woven with references to spiritual and cultural understandings of the female body and reproductive health. Nnu Ego's struggle with infertility is interpreted through the outlook of her spiritual lineage:

"She went from one *dibia* to another in secret, and was told the same thing, that the slave woman who was her *chi* would not give her a child because she had been dedicated to a river goddess before Agbadi took her away in slavery" (*The Joys of Motherhood*, p. 31).

This perspective positions fertility within a spiritual genealogy rather than a biomedical pathology, thereby emphasising the weight of ancestral relationships on a woman's reproductive life.

In the same manner, Emecheta describes the use of fertility rituals involving symbols such as eggs to seek healing:

"At home, Nnu Ego would take an egg, symbol of fertility, and kneel and pray to this woman to change her mind" (p. 31).

Through these passages, Emecheta presents traditional scientific approaches as intimately tied to spiritual authority, community expectations, and ritual healing practices.

Modern Scientific Discourses

The novel also explores the intersection of modern scientific methods and traditional practices surrounding motherhood and healthcare. In colonial Lagos, where Nnu Ego relocates after marriage, her experience with modernity is identified by detachment, alienation, and the impersonal nature of Western medicine.

Despite the introduction of modern medical knowledge, maternal health remains precarious, especially for poor women like Nnu Ego. For instance, during a premature birth, Nnu Ego is left to manage alone without support from traditional midwives or biomedical professionals:

"...with her teeth dug right into her lower lip to prevent herself from screaming, she gave birth to a baby not bigger than a kitten... The child, a girl, was lifeless" (p. 90).

This passage not only reflects the inadequacy of healthcare facility but also the separation from the communal support that traditional practices often provided. It points to a failure of modern medicine to fill the gap left by the erosion of indigenous maternal care systems.

Intersection of Traditional and Modern Scientific Discourses

The novel highlights the complex and often faulty combination of traditional and modern scientific



methods in motherhood and healthcare. Nnu Ego's experiences are marked by a tension between ancestral expectations and urban realities. While tradition emphasises fertility as womanhood's major achievement, the modern setting challenges the usefulness and efficacy of such values.

Emecheta draws attention to the woman's struggle to reconcile these paradigms:

"She had been trying to be traditional in a modern urban setting" (p. 42).

The result is a fragmented self, caught between honouring the wisdom of her ancestors and surviving in a rapidly changing, colonially influenced environment.

Even motherhood, which is exalted in traditional society, becomes economically burdensome and emotionally isolating in the modern city. The clash is not merely cultural but epistemological. Western medicine seeks quantifiable symptoms, while traditional beliefs invoke unseen forces like *chi* and ancestral curses.

Feminist Analysis

A feminist analysis of the novel reveals the ways in which women's bodies and experiences are shaped by both traditional and modern scientific discourses. Nnu Ego's life is one of continuous reproductive labour without reward or dignity. Her identity is defined by

childbearing, yet she possesses little agency over her own body or reproductive choices.

She is publicly shamed for infertility:

"Do you think I don't suffer too?" ... "I have no time to waste my precious male seed on a woman who is infertile" (p. 33).

This moment reveals the patriarchal logic embedded in both traditional and modern systems where a woman's value is conditional upon her ability to reproduce.

Further, her internal anguish is portrayed as a bodily disintegration:

"She knew that soft liquid feeling of motherhood was lacking. 'O my *chi*, why do you have to bring me so low?'" (p. 32).

Here, Emecheta expresses how deeply women's sense of self-worth is tied to reproductive success, a condition sustained by both cultural myths and biomedical neglect.

Moreover, modernity offers little refuge. The urban economy demands from women labour outside the home, yet offers them no support in managing motherhood:

"She had been in Lagos now for more than seven years, and one could not change the habits of so many years in two minutes" (p. 203).

This quote highlights how colonial urban life denies women the social



networks and healing traditions that once grounded their maternal roles.

The Joys of Motherhood is a powerful criticism of the ways in which traditional and modern scientific approaches connect to build the experiences of mothers and healthcare providers in Nigeria. Emecheta shows how these overlapping methods both support and constrain women like Nnu Ego, subjecting them to contradictory practices while offering little emotional or structural support.

The novel is ultimately a feminist meditation on the double bind of African women caught between the weight of tradition and the alienation of modernity, their bodies made legible only through the approaches of fertility, pain, and sacrifice.

3. *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* by Lola Shoneyin:

Analysing the Representation of Nigerian Women in Science and Their Negotiation of Cultural Identity

Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* is a critically acclaimed novel that explores the intricate lives of four women in a polygynous household in Nigeria. Through the eyes of Bolanle, the youngest and most educated wife, the novel queries how Nigerian women experience science, gender norms, and cultural identity in a postcolonial setting.

Representation of Nigerian Women in Science

The character Bolanle, a university-educated woman with a background in science, opposes stereotypes influencing Nigerian women's participation in STEM fields. Her presence in Baba Segi's family is confronted with skepticism, particularly from the other wives, who fight to understand the importance of education. As one of them states:

"These educated types were fed on cow's milk. We, as you know, didn't have that luxury. We suckled our mothers' breasts."

This prejudice foreground the societal difference between educated and traditionally trained women, explaining the problems women face when joining scientific fields.

Furthermore, Bolanle's decision to seek medical explanation about her infertility different from accepting cultural suppositions, describes her reliance on scientific inquiry:

"She had herself tested, and the doctors found nothing wrong with her. She asked Baba Segi to get tested too."

This insistence on evidence-based medicine represents a modern, rational approach always disallowed to women in patriarchal hierarchy that take fate in silence or spiritual explanations other than clinical fact. Here, Shoneyin emphasises the



cultural resistance to scientific advancements, a struggle many Nigerian women in STEM continue to face.

Negotiation of Cultural Identity

Each of Baba Segi's wives experiences her cultural identity in complex ways. For Bolanle, cultural dealing involves existing between two worlds: the independent principles of scientific modernity and the confinement protocols of traditional family life. Her mother counsels her against polygamy, saying:

"Only a foolish woman leans heavily on a man's promises."

Despite her education, Bolanle fights with societal expectations of femininity and fertility, representing the crisis between modern womanhood and traditional responsibilities.

Meanwhile, the other wives, Iya Segi, Iya Femi, and Iya Tope, manipulate traditional expectations to survive. They keep their cultural positions as mothers, while their actions in giving birth to children not fathered by Baba Segi expose a calculated relation of identity that both submits to and opposes patriarchal practices.

"She had filled her emptiness with children, three children who didn't belong to Baba Segi."

These expositions compound cultural explanations of motherhood,

showing how women re-position their responsibilities within oppressive systems.

Feminist Analysis

A feminist reading of the novel shows the manners in which patriarchal practices control women's bodies and preferences. Fertility is key to a woman's value, as Baba Segi declares clearly:

"A woman without a child is like a tree without fruit."

This metaphor highlights how women are weighed majorly by child bearing, limiting their personality to biological responsibility. However, Shoneyin does not abandon her characters powerless. The wives, particularly Iya Segi, create a deceptive agreement to keep their secrets and enjoy freedom over their lives:

"We had to protect our secrets. We had to protect each other."

This alliance among women in a system fashioned to position them against one another, reveals a rebellious form of resistance and resilience.

Intersectional Analysis

Through its different characters, the novel demonstrates how multiple kinds of oppression, gender, class, and tradition connect in conditioning women's lives. Bolanle's class and education separate her from the



other wives, who ridicule her intellect and privilege:

“You think your degree makes you better than us? It doesn’t change the fact that you are barren.”

This hatred reflects the class difference among women and compounds the idea of female togetherness. Similarly, Bolanle’s quietness about her emotional state, having been sexually abused as a teenager is compounded by cultural prohibitions around sexual violence and chastity, showing how oppression operates on multiple, connecting levels.

The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives is a rich and structured novel that opposes prevalent records about Nigerian women. Through Bolanle and the other wives, Shoneyin describes how women relate with science, oppose patriarchal oppression, and experience cultural identity. The novel questions the marginalisation of women from scientific power, the burden of fertility in traditional societies, and the complex struggles of modernity, tradition, and female agency. Ultimately, it establishes the enablement of Nigerian women to be creative, oppose silently, and explore diverse worlds with resilience and ingenuity.

Discussion

This study examined how Nigerian literature defines and redefines women’s roles at the connection of

science, myth, and reality. Employing feminist, intersectionality and critical discourse analysis (CDA) frameworks, the analysis of three novels; *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, *The Joys of Motherhood*, and *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* reveal complex designs of inclusion, exclusion, resistance, and agency inserted in both traditional and modern scientific records. Across the novels, indigenous knowledge systems surface as rich epistemological frameworks through which Nigerian women relate with their environment, health, fertility, and spirituality.

The findings of this study challenge traditional and modern scientific discourses that have marginalized or erased Nigerian women’s experiences. The novels analyzed in this study demonstrate how Nigerian women’s experiences are shaped by a complex interplay of traditional and modern scientific discourse

In *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, Yoruba cosmology proves the metaphysical and medicinal role of women, though their voices are often silenced or restricted through patriarchal controls. The integration of charms, rituals, and herbal medicine positions traditional science as a gendered ground, where women’s knowledge is both valuable and regulated. The novel demonstrates how the protagonist’s understanding of the world is formed by a knotty relationship of traditional and modern scientific discourses



Equally, *The Joys of Motherhood* illustrates how traditional beliefs about fertility and chi are core to women's identity formation. However, the novel also criticises these demands through the emotional and physical obligations they exact on Nnu Ego. Emecheta presents a powerful commentary on how both traditional and Western medical principles exclude women by creating their bodies as locations of duty and sacrifice rather than independence and preference. Here, colonial modernity does not free but complicates women's inconveniences, as Western medicine appears separated from cultural situation and community help.

In *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, Lola Shoneyin queries the connection of education, reproductive science, and patriarchal tradition. Bolanle's reliance on biomedical science to diagnose her husband's infertility demonstrate a distinct difference to the silence and hypocrisy that define the other wives' survival strategies. The novel illustrates how modern science, while presenting reasonable instruments, must still struggle with deep-rooted cultural practices that continually form gender roles and expectations. Bolanle's scientific literacy authorise her, but it also separates her, demonstrating how access to scientific knowledge can equally liberate and exclude women in traditional settings.

Taken together, these literary texts expose the ways Nigerian women

experience conflicting systems of myth, science, and social norms. While colonial and patriarchal structures have historically silenced women's voices and marginalised them from core scientific discourse, Nigerian women in these texts establish agency through resilience, adaptation, and subversive practices. From using ancestral spirits to control fertility practices, they participate in epistemological dealings that question dual distinctions between tradition and modernity, myth and science.

Moreover, the CDA framework helps reveal the explanatory approaches through which power is sustained and questioned in these texts. Language becomes a ground of struggle whether in the silences surrounding infertility, the metaphors of fruitless trees, or the verbal codes of solidarity among women. These texts highlight the importance of re-reading scientific discourse through culturally and gender-sensitive lenses, thus advocating for more inclusive and contextually grounded models of knowledge production.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Nigerian literature presents a strong ground for questioning the joined relationships between science, myth, and gender, especially in the lives of women. Through a comparative analysis of three major literary works, the research demonstrates how Nigerian women's roles are simultaneously formed by



indigenous traditions, colonial legacies, and modern scientific principles. These forces connect in complex and sometimes opposing manners, dictating how women view themselves and are perceived by others in both private and public spheres.

The analysis reveals that while traditional scientific knowledge approves women's roles in healing, agriculture, and reproduction, it often does so within patriarchal confinements. Conversely, modern scientific discourses, though potentially empowering, remain unreachable or excluding to many women as a result of structural obstacles, gender norms, and cultural labels. Nevertheless, the literary representations examined in this study highlight Nigerian women's capacity for resistance, negotiation, and redefinition of identity.

In all, this research contributes to expansive discussions on gendered knowledge systems in African settings. It stresses the importance of infusing indigenous epistemologies and feminist perspectives in science and technology discourse. By focusing Nigerian women's experiences in literature, the study affirms their agency not only as cultural bearers but also as critical participants in shaping the past, present, and future of scientific understanding.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. There is a need to decolonize knowledge production in Nigeria, recognizing the importance of indigenous knowledge systems and cultural practices in shaping our understanding of the world.
2. There is a need to promote intersectionality in analyzing the intersections of gender, culture, and science in Nigerian contexts, recognizing the complex dynamics of power, knowledge, and identity in Nigerian women's experiences.
3. There is a need to reclaim Nigerian women's roles in indigenous knowledge systems, cultural practices, and modern scientific contributions, recognizing the importance of their experiences and perspectives in shaping our understanding of the world.

Future Research Directions

Based on the findings of this study, the following future research directions are recommended:

1. Exploring indigenous knowledge systems: There is a need for further research on indigenous knowledge systems in Nigeria, recognizing the importance of these systems in shaping our understanding of the world.
2. Analyzing power dynamics: There is a need for further research on power dynamics in Nigerian contexts,



recognizing the complex dynamics of power, knowledge, and identity in Nigerian women's experiences.

3. Promoting intersectional feminist frameworks: There is a need for further research on intersectional feminist frameworks in Nigerian contexts, recognizing the importance of these frameworks in analyzing the intersections

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Authors' Biodata:

Dr. Idowu, Stephen Olufemi an Associate Professor of Language Education, records over 30 years of experience in teaching, research, and leadership, with expertise in language education, literature, reading and methodology.

+234 803 408 2450

Azeez, Abimbola is a dedicated teacher who is interested in post colonial African studies. She is an online master trainer with a passion for education, professional development with a focus on academic excellence and innovation.

+234 802 631 3856