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Fairies and Archetypal Characters in Children's Literature: A Study of Muthoni Garland's *The Medicine Girl* and Eytayo Ogunyemi's *Alani the Troublemaker*

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Abstract

Archetypes are found in cultural communities globally. They incorporate symbols, characters, situations, events, social rituals, images, settings and formulas. Archetypes are adopted in African prose-fiction in fairytales, myths, legends, folktales and other narratives. This paper explores the fairies and archetypal characters in children's literature focusing on the lead stories in two collections: Muthoni Garland's *The Medicine Girl and Other Stories* (2009) and Eytayo Ogunyemi's *Alani the Troublemaker and Other Stories* (2004). Relying on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory and Carl Jung's archetypal theory, and applying Senayon Olaoluwa's "logic of ordinarification," the paper uses a qualitative approach to explain how the fairies are universal characters which are used "ordinarily" like human characters in the two narratives. The "logic of ordinarification" used in this paper implies the idea of conceiving the fairies as non-fantastical beings, as well as the belittling of human characters – especially in "The Medicine Girl" – by fellow characters in the text. The paper concludes that fairies as found in *The Medicine Girl and Other Stories* and *Alani the Troublemaker and Other Stories* are archetypes used in a realistic narrative pattern. The paper recommends the use of the multifaceted nature fairytales to educate children and shape their behaviour as they grow into adults.

Keywords: fairies, fairytales, archetypes, children's literature, African narrative.

Introduction

Archetypes are primordial symbols or patterns that reside in the collective unconscious, a reservoir of shared experiences and inherited instincts that all humans possess. These archetypes manifest in dreams, myths, fairytales, literature, and religious symbols; shaping human behaviour, experiences, and cultural expressions. Examples of archetypes include the hero, the mother, the shadow, the trickster, and the wise old man. These archetypes represent fundamental aspects of human existence and experience, transcending individual differences and cultural boundaries. Fairies in children's literature often embody archetypal figures associated with magic, nature, and the supernatural realm. They symbolise the mysteries of the

unconscious mind and the transformative potential of imagination. As Carl Jung states, “the fairies represent the archetypal image of our deepest instinctual and spiritual desires” (64).

Fairies are often depicted through symbolic imagery that evokes themes of enchantment, mystery, and wisdom. They symbolise the human capacity for creativity, imitation, and connection with the natural world. Carl Jung suggests that “the fairy is a symbol of the creative power of the human psyche” (78). They embody repressed desires, fears, and aspirations, serving as messengers from the depths of the psyche. Archetypes carry messages of transformation and renewal. In *the Medicine Girl and Other Stories* and *Alani the Troublemaker and Other Stories*, fairies facilitate the protagonists’ encounters with their own inner conflicts and shadow aspects, leading to psychological integration and self-awareness. Fairies have rich cultural and mythological significance across diverse traditions and historical contexts. They appear in folklore, mythology, and fairytales from around the world, embodying cultural values, beliefs, and fears. Joseph Campbell notes, “The fairy is a universal symbol found in the myths and legends of cultures worldwide, representing the mysterious and numinous forces of the natural world” (210). Similarly, Tete Mark Adiele posits that “Myth, ritual and identity in Ikwerre are significant elements of the people’s culture that form their oral literature.”

In the two narratives, the portrayal of fairies draws on cultural motifs specific to the narratives’ cultural contexts, enriching the stories with layers of cultural romance and depth. Archetypal theory provides a rich framework for understanding fairies as archetypes in children’s literature, revealing their symbolic, psychological, and cultural significance within narratives. By analysing fairies as archetypal figures, scholars and readers can deepen their appreciation of the universal themes, motifs, and transformative potential embedded within these enchanting tales in consonance with Peter Wheelwright’s assertion that “archetypes are universal symbols” (150). The two theories adopted in this paper offer a rich framework for analysing the archetypal models of fairies in children’s literature, shedding light on the symbolic, psychological, and developmental dimensions of these enchanting narratives. By exploring the unconscious dynamics at play in the stories “The Medicine Girl” and “Alani the Troublemaker,” readers can gain deeper insight into the complex interplay between fantasy and reality, within the inner world of the young protagonists.

Fairies and Archetypal Characters in “The Medicine Girl”

The narrative, through the use of dialogue, portrays the tension between characters’ differing worldviews. The author employs a linear narrative structure, which allows readers to closely follow the protagonist’s development. In “The Medicine Girl,” Muthoni Garland transports readers to a rural Kenyan village where traditional beliefs and modern influences collide. The story follows the journey of Njeri, a young girl with a gift for healing inherited from her grandmother, Mama Mwende. As Njeri grapples with the responsibilities and expectations placed upon her, she navigates the tensions between her traditional upbringing and the allure of urban life. According to the text, “Once upon a time, there was a girl called Njeri. She lived with her mother and her stepfather. Her stepfather was a lazy and wicked man, who disliked children especially little girls” (7).

Garland deftly explores several themes in “The Medicine Girl,” including the intersection of tradition and modernity, the power of ancestral knowledge, and the quest for identity and autonomy. Through Njeri’s experience by the healing of the King of the town after many years of disappearance, Garland highlights the complexities of navigating cultural heritage in a rapidly changing world, as well as the resilience of individuals in the face of adversity.

Central to the story's impact is Garland's skillful characterisation and use of symbolism. Njeri emerges as a multidimensional protagonist whose internal struggles embody the conflicting forces of tradition and progress in the community. These mirror the broader societal tensions depicted in the narrative. Mama Mwendu represents a link to the past and a repository of wisdom, while Mwangi and Wanja embody the conflicting forces of tradition and progress. Garland's narrative technique and language contribute to the immersive experience of "The Medicine Girl." Through vivid imagery, sensory details, and authentic dialogue, Garland transports readers to the heart of rural Kenya, inviting them to experience the sights, sounds, and emotions of Njeri's world. According to Garland, "Njeri was very good with plants, she knew which particular flower, leaf, grass and root to be used to make different types of medicine which could cure different illnesses or diseases" (23). Her prose is lyrical yet accessible, capturing the rhythms of everyday life with grace and authenticity. Michael Gamer's emphasis on the nuanced portrayal of fairies offers a valuable framework for analysing how these characters in selected texts convey deeper societal messages, particularly in the context of moral and educational roles, as his study directly explores "how these figures transcend their whimsical roles to engage in complex social and moral discourses" (94).

"The Medicine Girl" serves as a vehicle for Garland to offer incisive cultural and social commentary on contemporary Kenya. She explores issues such as gender roles, education, healthcare, and the clash between tradition and modernity with sensitivity and nuance, prompting readers to reflect on the complexities of societal transformation and individual agency. In "The Medicine Girl" and the broader collection, *Words in the Wind* (2009), Garland demonstrates her prowess as a storyteller and social commentator, inviting readers to contemplate timeless themes of identity, heritage, and the human condition. "The Medicine Girl" stands as a testament to Garland's ability to weave together tradition and modernity, folklore and reality, in a poignant exploration of resilience, hope, and the enduring power of storytelling.

Jack Zipes' *The Oxford Companion to Fairytales* provides insight into the history, themes and cultural significance of fairytales from around the world. It features entries on various fairytale motifs, authors, and critical interpretations, offering a valuable resource for scholars and enthusiasts of children's literature. It supplies a wealth of information and provides readers with a detailed exploration of the historical and cultural contexts that have shaped the evolution of fairytales over time. Drawing on his extensive expertise in folklore studies, Zipes situates fairytales within broader socio-cultural frameworks, tracing their origins from oral traditions to literary adaptations through meticulous research and analysis. Zipes has contributed to the development of fairytales across different regions and epochs. The book examines the recurring themes, motifs, and archetypes found within fairytales. Zipes and other contributors delve into the symbolic significance of motifs such as the hero's journey, the wicked stepmother, and the magical transformation, uncovering layers of meaning and interpretation. By exploring the thematic richness of fairytales, Zipes offers a deeper understanding of the universal human experiences and existential questions addressed by these timeless narratives. Zipes' study is important to this paper because of his symbolic reflection on the hero's journey. This is akin to Njeri's journey in the narrative.

In "The Medicine Girl," as an archetype, the protagonist's development is central to the narrative. She represents the younger generation, tasked with the responsibility of balancing tradition and modernity. According to the text:

When all orthodox medicines have failed, the King with his soldiers ventured to search out the Medicine Girl that healed him. After searching in vain, towards sunset, on their way back to the village, they noticed a small hut made out of tree branches and leaves.

Riding nearer they saw someone coming out of the hut. It was a young girl holding a pot. One of the soldier pointed at her and shouted excitedly, 'that is the girl who brought the medicine to the palace.' (20)

The older characters, such as the village healer, symbolise the wisdom of the past, yet are often portrayed as being resistant to change. The protagonist's struggle to assert herself, while simultaneously seeking the approval of her elders, is a metaphor for the broader conflict faced by many African communities; the reconciliation of cultural heritage with the demands of a globalised world.

Fairies and Archetypal Characters in "Alani the Troublemaker"

Eyitayo Ogunyemi's "Alani the Troublemaker" is part of the collection *Tales of a Troublesome Boy*, the misadventures of a young boy named Alani. Through humour and wit, the story addresses issues of mischief, family dynamics and cultural values in Nigerian society. It is a poignant narrative encapsulated within the collection; a storytelling narrative and nuanced exploration of socio-cultural themes, which presents a captivating tale that delves into the complexities of childhood identity and societal expectations. Through the character of Alani, Ogunyemi navigates the intricacies of adolescent rebellion, highlighting the challenges faced by young individuals as they grapple with societal norms and personal aspirations.

In "Alani the Troublemaker," Ogunyemi crafts a compelling narrative through vivid characterisation and intricate plot development. The author breathes life into Alani, portraying him as a multidimensional protagonist grappling with the pressures of adolescence and the desire for autonomy. Alani's journey is marked by moments of defiance, introspection, and self-discovery, as he navigates the tumultuous terrain of childhood and adolescence. Central to Ogunyemi's narrative is the exploration of societal identity formation. Through Alani's interaction with family, peers, and authority figures, Ogunyemi sheds light on the pressures faced by young individuals to conform to societal norms and expectations. In the author's voice, "Alani saw as tradition of his people to fight in other to show himself as a man" (50). Alani's rebellious nature serves as a catalyst for examining the tensions between tradition and modernity, conformity and individuality, within the context of Nigerian society.

"Alani the Troublemaker" delves into universal themes of rebellion and self-discovery, resonating with readers across cultural boundaries. The author captures the essence of adolescent anger and rebellion, portraying Alani's journey as a poignant exploration of identity, agency, and belonging. Alani's quest for autonomy and self-expression, his movement out of the village into the forest, is a replica of the nature of archetypal characters in children's literature. They attempt to run away from one trouble and engage in a fiercer and more dangerous trouble ahead. Ogunyemi invites readers to reflect on their own experiences of adolescence and the complexities of navigating societal expectations. Set against the backdrop of Nigerian culture and tradition, the narrative offers rich insights into the socio-cultural dynamics of contemporary Nigeria. The author skilfully incorporates elements of Nigerian folklore, language, and customs into the narrative, enriching the story with layers of cultural authenticity and depth. This is aptly demonstrated by the author in Alani's characterisation as a troublemaker who represents the class of troublemakers universally. Through Alani's interactions with his community, the author provides astute social commentary on issues such as family dynamics, education, and generational conflict.

Ogunyemi emerges as a masterful storyteller, weaving together themes of rebellion, self-discovery, and societal expectations with skill and sensitivity. Through the character of Alani, the author invites readers to a captivating journey of introspection and empathy, challenging conventional notions of childhood and adolescence. With its rich cultural contest, nuanced characterisation, and universal themes, the narrative stands as a testament to

Ogunyami's literary prowess and his ability to capture the complexities of the human experience. The critic Jack Zipes, earlier mentioned, situates fairytales within broader intellectual debates and discourses. By interrogating issues of power, gender, representation, and ideology, he invites readers to consider the social and political dimensions of fairytales and their implications in society. In this paper, gender clearly comes to focus in the roles of Njeri and Alani in the two narratives explored in this paper.

The narrative delves into the lives of individuals navigating the complexities of family, community, and personal growth. The story, "Alani the Troublemaker", centres around a young boy whose mischievous nature earns him the disdain of his community. However, the story takes a deeper turn as it reveals that Alani's parents become *estalgic* of their son's absence from home. In as much as the parents are at home unable to decipher the whereabouts of their son, it is an estalgic feeling just as Alani too is nostalgia. This narrative explores the themes of alienation, *estalgia*, family dynamics, and the consequences of neglect. The story challenges the reader to consider how societal labels are often imposed without understanding the underlying causes of behaviour. Ohia and Ogbuagu note that "children's literature covers diverse genres such as types and themes, most of which resembles adult or grown-up ancestors, while its style, sensibility and vision cover a large range of matter, in fact realism and easily broken by intent. It centres on children with its content primarily children's imaginative world, their daily environment, ideas and sentiments" (2).

Alani is portrayed as both a troublemaker and a misunderstood boy. His behaviour is seen as disruptive by his teachers and community members, but the narrative gradually reveals that his actions stem from emotional neglect. Alani's character reflects the emotional complexities of children who act out in response to their circumstances. The other characters, particularly the authority figures in his life, are depicted as well-meaning but ultimately unsympathetic to his struggles. Great persons themselves have their own superhuman models for initiation. In this way, they represent for us the best attempts by humankind to render themselves like gods. Mircea Eliade draws our attention to the fact that in antiquity, there was no hiatus between mythology and history, and that historical personages endeavoured to imitate their archetypes, the gods and mythical heroes. He further explained that one of the major characteristics of myth is the creation of exemplary models for a whole society and that "in this moreover, we recognise a very general human tendency; namely, to hold up one life-history as a paradigm and turn a historical personage into an archetype" (63).

For instance, in Ogbu communities of Rivers state, Nigeria, the connection between fairies and the natural environment in the fairytales highlights the Ogbu people's dependence on and respect for the forces of nature. The reverence shown to such fairies reflects a broader cultural emphasis on harmony with the environment, which is essential for sustaining the community's livelihood. Fairies, as supernatural beings, belong to the spirit category. Spirits are another category of supernatural beings in Ogbu folklore, functioning as intermediaries between the physical and spiritual worlds. These spirits can be either ancestral or wandering, each embodying spirits of distinct moral and ethical dimensions.

In Ogbu, spirits in folklore often take on the roles of protectors or avengers, depending on the context of the tale. For instance, *Nwnaoruke*, a spirit known for guiding lost souls, is portrayed as a benevolent figure who offers wisdom and safety at times of crises. *Nwnaoruke's* presence in Ogbu tales illustrates the people's belief in spiritual guidance, where spirits (fairies) actively intervene in the lives of the living. Conversely, malevolent spirits like *mmo-ojo* serve as cautionary figures, bringing illness or misfortune to those who disrespect societal norms or ancestral customs. These spirits reflect the moral complexities within Ogbu society, reinforcing values such as respect for tradition, social harmony, and personal accountability, especially amongst children.

In his benevolence, *Nwnaoruke* intervenes in times of danger to stop any evil action. Hence the popular maxim in Ogba that *Nwnaorukewureojitu wo whneato la mmo to la mmo, whneapiauhno pia uhno* – meaning that *Nwnaoruke* deciphers on the stoppage of evil action and the establishment of good action on the physical environment of shared humanity. Mythical creatures in Ogba tales evoke awe and fear representing the unknown and often uncontrollable aspects of nature. According to Ohia in his paper “Heroic Archetype Models in Ogba Myths,” “these creatures are crucial for conveying lessons about human behaviour and environmental interaction” (24). Another instance is *Abba a* (ostrich), the giant bird believed to dwell deep within the forest, possessing the power to summon storms when disturbed. *Abba a* symbolises the unpredictable nature of the environment.

In a similar manner as the fairies, Ogba myths also have mythic creatures which are archetypal models. So in Ogba they are mythical archetypes which are fairies that speak volumes of moral and cultural values. By including mythical creatures like *Nwnaoruke* and *mmo-ojo* in their tales, Ogba people emphasise the importance of respecting nature and understanding the potential consequences of disrupting its balance. These creatures not only entertain but also serve as metaphorical archetypes for the natural forces that the Ogba people must navigate in their daily lives, reinforcing the cultural belief in environmental stewardship. As Ohia notes, “the fairies in Ogba tales are not merely fictional characters but symbolic/archetypal representation of the peoples’ understanding of their world. Ogba people believe in the link between earth and heaven which they reflect in their oral traditions” (12). These beings are intertwined with religious, moral, and cultural values, shaping the way the Ogba people interact with both their spiritual and physical environments. The tales involving these fairies function as educational tools, impacting important lessons on social behaviour, respect for nature, and spiritual reverence. Additionally, these tales serve as a repository of cultural memory, preserving the beliefs, customs and values of the Ogba people for future generations.

The fairies play a distinct role in reinforcing the moral, spiritual, and environmental values that sustain the Ogba communities. Through these tales, the Ogba people transmit vital lessons about respect, humility, and coexistence with both the supernatural and natural worlds, ensuring the continuity of their cultural heritage.

Conclusion

In Garland Muthoni’s “The Medicine Girl,” fairies represent sources of anxiety or threats to the protagonist’s sense of security. They initially evoke fear or uncertainty in Njeri, challenging her existing beliefs and defences. However, as she confronts and integrates this anxiety, she develops resilience and psychological insights, and ultimately achieves a greater sense of self-awareness and maturity. Fairies (spirits) serve as intermediaries, guiding moral conduct, preserving social order and emphasising the importance of ancestral reverence in many societies. Mythical creatures, on the other hand, symbolise the unpredictable forces of nature, preaching respect for the environment and reinforcing the community’s environmental stewardship. These tales are essential not only for preserving cultural identity but also for transmitting vital lessons on social harmony, environmental respect, and spiritual reverence. As vessels of cultural memory, they maintain the continuity of a community’s beliefs and practices across generations, ensuring that the community’s heritage endures despite pressures of modernisation and globalisation. However, challenges such as language erosion, generational divides, and the influence of global media threaten the preservation and transmission of these narratives.

The analysis of the two narratives, “The Medicine Girl” and “Alani the Troublemaker,” reveals the profound roles fairies and other mythical elements play in shaping the narratives’

plots and themes in children's literature. These narratives skilfully intertwine African cultural symbols and beliefs with the universal appeal of fairytales, resulting in stories that are both culturally specific and broadly relatable. In "The Medicine Girl," fairies and other supernatural elements serve as metaphors/archetypes for the protagonist's internal struggle between tradition and modernity, symbolising the preservation of cultural heritage amidst the pressures of a changing world. The fairy figures in the story also guide the characters toward self-discovery, personal growth, and moral understanding. The fairies help the protagonist (Njeri), the medicine girl in her choice of herbs for healing.

In "Alani the Troublemaker," the portrayal of fairies and magical beings takes on a more nuanced form, where the mischievous character, Alani represents not only youthful defiance but also the complexities of childhood emotional development. The fairies as they assist Alani in his adventures outside home, act as allegorical tools, helping Alani confront feelings of alienation and misunderstanding within his community. Through both stories, the fairytale elements foster creativity and provide a platform for children to navigate complex emotions, identity issues, and the tension between social expectations and individual desires. The exploration of these stories underscores the importance of mythical figures, like fairies, in stimulating cognitive development and emotional intelligence in young readers.

The roles of fairies in these texts highlight not only their symbolic importance and archetypal representation but also their relevance to the psychological development of children. By acting as agents of change, wisdom, and moral guidance, the fairies enhance the educational value of children's literature, making it a potent tool for personal and cultural reflection. Both stories underscore the lasting power of fairytales in addressing modern concerns while staying rooted in tradition, proving that children's literature continues to be a vital medium for cultural transmission and personal growth.

Recommendations

We have explored in this paper the symbolic significance of fairies, their representation of unconscious desires and fears and their role in the psychological development of the young protagonists, Njeri and Alani. In "The Medicine Girl" and "Alani the Troublemaker," fairies symbolise the protagonists' unconscious desires for guidance, protection, or transformation. This validates the paper's adoption of Jungian psychoanalysis that expands upon Freud's ideas by introducing the concept of the collective unconscious, a reservoir of shared symbols and archetypes that exist across cultures and time periods.

This paper recommends a periodic examination of the dynamics of how fairytales are transmitted between elders and youth within the community. Similarly, there should be an analysis of the archetypal representation of fairies in children's literature. Authors and educators should encourage the incorporation of culturally significant symbols, such as fairies, in children's literature. This practice not only promotes cultural literacy but also allows young readers to connect with their heritage. It is essential to keep traditional beliefs alive in stories while balancing modernity, so children learn the value of cultural continuity in a fast-evolving world.

Schools and parents should consider utilising fairytales, particularly those with complex characters, to foster creativity and critical thinking in children. These tales provide fertile ground for young minds to explore moral dilemmas, cultural identity, and emotional growth through allegorical narratives that are easily relatable. More scholarly attention should be directed towards understanding how African myths, symbols, and fairies can contribute to a deeper global appreciation of diversity in children's literature. Studies like this can highlight the universal relevance of local stories and position African narratives on a global stage, thereby enriching the global literary landscape.

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