

# The Contradictions of Feminist Advocacy in Efo Kodgo Mawugbe's *In The Chest of a Woman*

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## Abstract

*This study critically examines the contradictions inherent in feminist advocacy as seen in Efo Kodgo Mawugbe's In The Chest of a Woman. While the primary goal of the playwright is to address the female question and advocate for women's empowerment, the narrative structure and theme of the play highlights tensions between African feminist ideals and entrenched patriarchal norms. Through the portrayal of the female protagonist and her struggle for liberation within the socio-cultural context of the play, this study reveals how Mawugbe's approach simultaneously critiques and reinforces cultural stereotypes about women. Furthermore, this paper situates the play within the broader framework of African feminist discourse, throwing light on the challenges of reconciling cultural traditions with advocacy for gender equality. This study concludes by interrogating the socio-cultural implications of these contradictions for feminist advocacy in African drama and the pursuit of social change. Finally, this study recommends that there is a need for African playwrights to reevaluate their perspectives on gender, culture and women's empowerment.*

**Keywords:** Gender, Contradictions, Patriarchy and Women Empowerment.

## Introduction

The Nigerian theatre is recognized for its sociological perspective and method in addressing issues. It is a dynamic platform that remains attuned to the prevailing social conditions of its era — a space where socio-political and cultural matters are scrutinized and potentially critiqued to contribute to social change. Nkiruka Akaenyi says that “Playwrights have harnessed the influential aspect of drama throughout history to offer insightful observations on societal events, leading to positive transformations in human lives and their surroundings” (73). Playwrights in this context act as vanguards of the society, carefully observing the happenings in society daily. According to Raymond Williams, the writer begins by being aligned, “born into a social situation with all its specific perspectives ... ” (86). In a similar vein, Osita Ezenwanebe says that “From its inception, Nigerian theatre is deeply committed to issues of immediate social relevance- from the issues of cultural contamination and degradation to those of moral and social decadence including the

inhuman oppression of one class by another (403). One wonders, however, if its level of social commitment has been extended to the yearnings and aspirations of the female gender in our society. Akaenyi submits thus:

The subjugation of women is pervasive across various communities and ethnic groups in Nigeria, where women are perceived as mere extensions of men, occupying a subservient status. Traditional institutions strongly reinforce gender differences, seeing women as inconsequential, the "insignificant other." (86).

Many African playwrights (especially men) have created powerful female characters that have played the significant roles as social reformers; yet little or no attention is given to the plight of these women in the society they labour to reform. It is this state of affairs- a calculated conspiracy to silence women in contemporary Nigeria- that informs the bedrock of this study. Many scholars decry the fact African playwrights fail to give a fair representation to women struggles in the theatre. Ezenwanebe says that "Representations of feminist ideals on the stage are fraught with ambiguities. In Sofola's *The Wedlock of the Gods*, for example, cultural beliefs and traditional practices that oppress women are exposed to the audience only for them to witness their complete submersion in the supremacy of cultural tradition" (407-408). Womanism advocates for a critical questioning and dismantling of certain African customs and social values in the light of contemporary realities. The goal is to establish a genuinely democratic society based on gender equality and justice.

However, this study explores how the Nigerian theatre, with its commitment to social transformation has responded to feminist principles. This is articulated through a critical examination of the Mawugbe's play to gender issues in the context of African socio-cultural reality. This study offers a feminist study of Mawugbe's *In the Chest of a Woman*, which is relevant to the study. The African theatre is aware of the feminist struggle. It has responded to this struggle in various ways. It is its response that is the concern of this study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Feminism, as a literary ideology, examines gender relations with a focus on the oppression of women in society, advocating for their emancipation. Kate Millet in her book *Sexual Politics*

defines patriarchy as "...male dominance over female" and insists that, "it consists of the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power." (118). Therefore, feminist scholars demand that artistic works should reveal the oppression experienced by women and the strategies they employ for their freedom. This study incorporates two fundamental feminist concepts: the oppression of women and their emancipation or liberation.

In life, feminism as an ideology seeks to critically analyze power dynamics within gender relationships. Early feminist movements often adopted a radical approach to unveil the reality of women's oppression. This involves women coming together in sisterhood, distancing themselves from men. This is because the radical feminists believe that the family was primarily set up to keep women perpetually subdued under men. However, African women activists have uniquely adapted the theory by introducing concepts that articulate the oppression and liberation of women within the African context. Notable examples include "Womanism" by Mary Kolawole, "STIWANISM" by Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, and "Motherism" by Catherine Acholonu, among others. These indigenous feminist frameworks serve to analyze the oppression and liberation of women in ways that resonate with African experiences. Womanism, unlike Western Feminism, aims at a general social and cultural transformation. The starting point is not necessarily men. Rather it engages and interrogates culture and sees it as the cite for critical transformation.

Regrettably, feminism has taken on a negative connotation in Africa. Numerous individuals, both women and men, who empathize with women's challenges, are hesitant to use their artistic works to advocate for a cause they genuinely believe worthwhile. According to Ezenwanebe "This ambivalence gives rise to all forms of misrepresentation and confusion in works that address the female question" (189). This study seeks to correct such misunderstandings, encouraging African writers to collaboratively tackle gender imbalance using effective approaches that yield the desired outcome – fostering mutual coexistence between men and women grounded in principles of equity and fairness. This coexistence is crucial for both human and national development.

### **A Critical Examination of Gender Ideologies and Narrative Tensions in Efo Kodgo Mawugbe's *In The Chest of a Woman***

The play opens with two important female characters, Nana Yaa and Owusu, her daughter, although disguised as a boy, playing a game of *Oware*, a traditional Ghanaian game. Nana Yaa, who has virtually won the game, is introduced to us as an intelligent woman, who is well versed

in warfare. She says “Hahahahaha...Only fools plunge into battle without doing any homework about their enemy’s strength. Hahahahaha...Let’s go on with the game. Play my child, it’s your turn”. (p.2). With a logical enunciation of fact, Nana Yaa corrects the triumphalistic posture of men who claim that they have the prerogative and preserve of knowledge in warfare.

The visitation of the messengers from the king to the palace is a living dramatization of Nana Yaa’s reckless display of physical strength. In a harsh commanding tone, Nana Yaa repudiates the Okyeame, who fails to go down on his knees, when addressing her. The Okyeame had come to report the arrival of some messengers from the king, Nana Yaa’s brother, Kwaku Duah 11. These messengers are on a mission, to take Owusu to the palace to commence ‘his’ training as the next king. As soon as Nana Yaa becomes aware of their mission, she begins to panic, because she must now tell her daughter why she had forced her to live as a boy all her life. In a flashback, she narrates the circumstances that led to the death of the Queen mother, her mother, and the former ruler of Ebusa Kingdom to Owusu. The Queen mother has bequeathed the kingdom to her son, Kwaku Duah 11, the younger of the two, in accordance with the tradition and customs of the people. Nana Yaa, refuses to yield to the cultural dictates of her people and maintains her stance on the fact that she is the first child. As the first child, Nana Yaa reasons that the whole kingdom must come to her. Even when she was reminded by an elder that “he is a boy, and you’re a girl” Nana Yaa says “Let my mother know that if I am to rule, I want a whole kingdom and not some piece of barren land with four or five cottages scattered here and there”. (*General murmur of disapproval*). At this stage, one of the elders tells Nana Yaa that “nation building belongs to the energetic” (20). Nana Yaa debunks this belief that men use to marginalize women. She says “And who says you men are the most energetic of the human species? Who says so? Where and when was it said? I want to know” (20). She challenges the patriarchal tradition and seeks to free herself from its enslavement.

The play advocates for the rejection of cultural practices that perpetuate gender inequality. It delves into gender concerns within African traditional society, revealing the ways in which men hold onto power in different facets of their community. Nana Yaa’s fierce resistance to all the obnoxious, false notions and cultural practices about and against women, as enshrined in the Ghanaian culture and propagated by men, does not only manifest in her verbal attack, but also, in a reckless display of physical strength. When the men threaten to cut off her tongue because of her uncontrolled use

of language against them and tradition, she reacts violently. In a demonstration of brute force and aggressiveness, she snatches a knife from an executioner and dares any man to come forward, until Ofori, one of the elders, steps forward, to challenge her. Nana Yaa fights back, and soon gets him pinned on his back, ready with a knife in her hand to kill him. Nana Yaa gets disappointed, when the Queen mother pleads with her to spare her the sight of blood on her death bed. She releases Ofori, still pleading that her mother should have allowed her to “teach these living spectators that courage is not the monopoly of men” (24). Even when she has witnessed the courage demonstrated by her daughter, the queen mother refuses to change her mind. The 1<sup>st</sup> Elder tells Nana Yaa “Well, Princess, your mother insists that never in the history of Ebusa has a woman ruled where there is a man to do so. And so you have to accept...” (20). A flagrant case of the deprivation of women’s right to power is perfectly portrayed here. From the above scenario, the bone of contention is not whether a woman is fit enough to become a leader, but that the men have an intrinsic fear of how women’s power will affect them and the society. Patriarchy has conditioned men to believe that a female’s possession of power—economic, political, social or otherwise is injurious to the existence of the society. This is the reason for the depiction of empowered women as an aberration to the norms of masculinity, especially by African male playwrights. For instance, the playwright, Ahmed Yerima, strongly condemns the abusive exercise of power by Tola and Tundun in *The Portrait and Mirror Cracks*. He condemns the fact that the impressive academic accomplishments of these women are incompatible with the social expectations to fulfill their traditional roles as good wives and mothers. Yerima portrays empowered women in these works as divorcees, highlighting how Tola ends her marriage, leading to a face-to-face encounter with her ex-husband after three decades during Segi's birthday. Similarly, Tundun in *Mirror Cracks* leaves her family, returning only on the eve of her son's burial. Yerima depicts these empowered female characters as unable to sustain marriages due to their deviation from stereotypical feminine attributes. This portrayal reflects the deep-seated apprehension towards women's power within the minds of men. Even though, she’s a woman, the queen mother maintains and perpetuates the oppressive practices that oppress women. Eventually, when she chooses to go along with the convention, for once, in her own words, she sets aside the usual practice to allow any of the two children who first beget a male child to take up the inheritance. Asiedu says that:

Mawugbe's "larger purpose" of advocating for a change of antiquated customs, rather than projecting a feminist agenda is brought into focus here, it is however, worthy of note that the antiquated custom under consideration here was inimical to women and to change it would be in their favor. By aligning this character, who may be said to represent disempowered femininity on the side of antiquated custom, he invites us to consider the need for change, not only in custom, but in women's situation (131)

Nana Yaa's brother, Kwaku Duah 11 is the first to have a girl child, and then, Nana Yaa also gives birth to a girl, whom she forces to disguise as a boy, a ploy to ensure that her offspring becomes a king. In the course of the struggle to break free of any oppressive tradition and norms, Nana Yaa tries to suppress noble emotions that she considers feminine such as the feeling of love, pain and weakness. Deep inside, Nana Yaa is a loving woman and a mother, who has a deep bond with her daughter, Owusu, but she is unable to admit this, because of her idea of love as a weak trait. Her feminine qualities are opulently dramatized when she caters to the welfare of her guests. She asks Okyeame "Were you fed well?" Nana Yaa's caring attitude goes a long way to the fact that she has a degree of tenderness of a mother with which to show care. On the contrary, Nana Yaa poisons her husband, when he deems it right to tell the truth about the true sex of her child. It is recorded in the play that all the nurses and midwives, who know the truth about Owusu's true identity were murdered in cold blood. The terrible and horrific deeds of her mother make Owusu to cry out that she should be allowed to live her life as a girl. Nana Yaa refuses as she turns a deaf ear to her daughter's plea. She insists "You shall be a king, I repeat, king, not queen". Owusu has no choice but to succumb to her persuasions. Asiedu says that "there is a remarkable ambivalence in Nana Yaa's characterization. She appears to pride herself on being a woman and at the same time as being "like a man" (128) Nana Yaa is endowed with masculine traits. Her inordinate display of physical strength, lack of emotion and aggressiveness attest to this. Nana Yaa accepts that she is a woman, but she rejects the stereotypical female attributes. She clearly states that:

I tell you, if there is anything men fear in this world,  
it is a woman who is a WOMAN!  
A woman who accepts challenge

A woman who can shout back when a man shouts  
A woman who is all out to give the command like a man  
A woman who is in no uncertain terms,  
Rejects absolutely the definition of the word feminine to mean home oriented,  
passive, needing to be guided and protected  
To men, such a woman is a real woman and a woe and a vice unto manhood. In  
short, what men fear most is female power in motion (31)

Nana Yaa seems to proclaim that to be a “real woman”, a woman must exhibit masculine traits. Asiedu says that “the actions and words of the lead female character reflect the kind of feminist rhetoric that seeks to present women as capable of rejecting traditional gender stereotypes and thus eliding the necessary and validity of the so-called female gender roles” (128) This rejection of the feminine traits by women is satirized in Oyedepo’s play *The Rebellion of the Bumpy-Chested*. Nana Yaa’s conception of womanhood runs contrary to the traditional objectives of African feminists. Many African feminists strongly reject the idea that a woman should reject her sense of femininity. Buchi Emecheta, a Nigerian novelist, insists that women must not discard their feminine personality in their struggle for equality with men. Emecheta volunteers that:

It is our work to bring the next generation into the world, nurture them until they are grown old enough. It is hard it could be boring and could sometimes in some places be a thankless job. But is it a mean job? What greater job is there? But those who wish to control and influence the future by giving birth and nurturing the young should not be looked down upon. It is not a degrading job. If I had my way, it would be the highest paid job in the world. (11).

Nana Yaa hatches a plan on how to kill her brother, Kwaku Duah 11. She tells Owusu that her motive for throwing a challenge to the men is because she thought that her brother would step forward to defend men so that she will use the opportunity to kill him and ascend the throne. Nana Yaa says to Owusu: “I thought he would rise up to defend the honor of manhood So that I could kill him and succeed our mother But his stars were awake. (30-31).

Nana Yaa’s brother and the king, Kwaku Duah, refuses to challenge her. The atrocious murder of her husband and her conspiracy to kill his brother, in the name of setting women free from their

oppressive condition, is undoubtedly, inconsistent with the ideological underpinning of African feminism, which aims at extolling the virtues of womanhood. An African audience is skeptical about this kind of freedom. Would the elimination of men put an end to women oppression in the African context? Mawugbe seems to say that the feminist movement appears to have empowered Ghanaian women, making them more powerful than men. Women are now challenging men's authority. From all indications, Mawugbe is critical of the feminist movement in Ghana that has so much empowered the Ghanaian woman, making her to become a despot, a tyrant and authoritative. In fact, Emmanuel Nugah is of the opinion that "Nana Yaa has some wicked nature in her which aided in doing some of the things she did in order to keep her daughter's true identity hidden from the public" (87). When her first plan fails, she hatches another plan. Nana Yaa plots to make use of her daughter. Thus, she makes her daughter, Owusu, disguise herself as a boy to outsmart everybody in the kingdom. She confesses her wicked actions to Owusu:

**Owusu:** Tell me whatever I have to know about myself.

**Nana Yaa:** (*Thoughtfully*) Well, you've asked for it. My child, do you know how many people had to lose their lives just to keep your true identity hidden from the public? Do you know that I had to poison your father because at a point he couldn't bear it any longer and swore to tell the world you were a girl?

**Owusu:** what? You mean you...

**Nana Yaa:** Yes, I had to do it. The midwife who stood by my bed. When I was in labor and supervised your birth had to lose her tongue for fear that she might Squeak.

**Owusu:** The gods forbid...

**Nana Yaa:** She is that dumb nurse who serves you. Many servants in the palace who seemed a little bit suspicious and inquisitive about your sex were quickly eliminated or sold into slavery. And I had the singular satisfaction of dispatching the Chief Executioner myself (28-29).

Nugah says that "the above character traits of Nana Yaa in what she says to her daughter come as a dent on her personality, especially being a woman. This may be because such evil machinations which seemed to have been associated with men are being displayed by a woman so accurately" (88). Even Owusu is very disappointed in her mother who indulged in deception, manipulation and murder because of her ruthless ambition for power.



Owusu's feminine traits are encouraged to develop as she feels sympathy for those her mother murdered in cold blood to keep her true sex hidden from the public. She does not hesitate to condemn her mother for her atrocious deeds: "Murderer... Murderer... You are a murderer and..." (29) In Owusu's eye, Nana Kyweretwie is guilty. A truly loving mother would not murder her father. She cries out: Oh, Mother, Is it for this my life has been a lie? Was it that I might cheat my unoffending cousin, Ekyaa of her right...That stool belongs to my cousin, Ekyaa. (27). When Owusu is unable to bear the atrocious deeds of her mother, she cries out "...mother, I can't act a boy anymore..." (27). Soon after that, with a little coaxing from her mother, she sees the big vision and says, "Alright...I'll try and do what you want." (30). Again, Mawugbe summarizes what characterized Nana Yaa as a powerful ruler and a formidable force to reckon with. The first Royal Bard ushering in the Queen Mother during the durbar in the final leg of the play sings her praise with "Hail...Hail...Hail...All hail her majesty. She who bears the leopard's heart. The only woman who treads where men fear to tread but is never harmed. Of her strength, not even the tiger is an equal of her courage, only a loin can compare. Hail her... (*Enter Nana Yaa Kyeretwie and entourage*) Yes here comes the mother of the people. The mother with a chest of a father (76-77). The traits of Nana Yaa as we have seen, above, actually support some her earlier exploits in the play. Though her actions are reprehensible, Nana Yaa's ability to outsmart almost everyone in the kingdom, even the king, makes her a leader with a difference, since her bold step is not too common among women. Asiedu says that "her outward comportment, name, costume and manners are all to some extent, masculine. Underneath these, however, is a deep longing to be feminine" (131).

Mawugbe creates a sense of erotic tension between Owusu and Ekyaa by involving a cross-dressed female protagonist. Akaenyi opines that "The audience is aware that underneath Owusu's clothes is a woman who feels uncomfortable with her male disguise. Owusu feels unhappy with the male garments she is wearing and conveys her emotions in a soliloquy where she also rejects the misunderstandings the male disguise creates. (171). Things start going bad for Owusu when Ekyaa shows up. Ekyaa fall is in love with 'him' but 'he' refuses to co-operate. Ekyaa becomes angry, when she realizes that Owusu is not interested in her. Even when Owusu's manner and 'his' physical appearance are masculine, Owusu's feminine nature is powerfully dramatized, when she laments amidst sobs, after a heated argument with Ekyaa, her cousin "Oh, how I wish I could call her back, and whisper into her ears the whole secret. Yes, the secret that the self within wants to

let loose” (57) Ekyaa plans to destroy Owusu by using sexual blackmail because of Owusu’s refusal to co-operate with her. Ekyaa’s shameful pregnancy sets in motion the conflict of the play, but she has refused to mention the name of her lover to Kwaku Duah, her father privately. Owusu, a heir apparent to the throne mounts the judgment seat at the bidding of his uncle and passes a punitive law against the man, who has impregnated the princess. The penalty for such a heinous crime is instant death, followed by the cutting off of the culprit’s genitalia. Ekyaa grabs this opportunity to punish Owusu as she declares that Owusu is responsible for her pregnancy. The King sees this as a disgrace and orders the palace guards to castrate “him’. There is stasis as death penalty is pronounced upon Owusu Agyeman, Ekyaa and her unborn child. Kwaku Duah 11, helpless in the face of the tyranny of custom, orders the executioner to take the women away. The tension reaches climax. Ekyaa and her cousin are taken away by the executioners. The pronouncement ‘he is a she’ by the executioner on seeing the true sex of Owusu Agyeman amounts to a great pandemonium among the council of elders. Nana Yaa collapses and dies. Upon discovering Owusu's sexual identity, Ekyaa is shocked, having felt a romantic desire for a woman. One notable aspect of Mawugbe's play is its departure from early modern plays that use disguise and same-sex attraction as comedic devices. In this play, the love between the female characters is mutual, and it persists even after Owusu's true identity is disclosed:

**EKYAA:** (*Getting frantic*) No... no Father...

I shall die too.

If my Cousin should die through no fault of hers

but mine,

then, I'll die with her (91).

King Duah seems overwhelmed by the events and decides to quit the throne, to the chagrin of the elders. He starts removing his royal paraphernalia. The elders are shocked and they rush to prevent him from abdicating the throne. Incidentally, the execution was stopped. Then, the abominable act of a woman climbing the judgement is being raised. In the cultural context of the play, it is a taboo for a woman to sit on the judgement stool.

Owusu is pardoned and also Nana Opong is forgiven. The play ends with re-union of the King and his subjects. Although Efo Kodgo Mawugbe is interested in the “female question” his strategy works against the basic principles of the ideology that is concerned with the interest of women and feminism. The fact is that at the end of all her struggles, Nana Yaa fails to realize her dream of

enthroning Owusu as a king. The audience will never like to identify with her character. Ezenwanebe instructs that "Feminist theatre critics insist that creating strong female characters with whom the audience can identify with is one of the most important functions feminist theatre can perform in the hands of a feminist writer" (91). It is sad that feminism has adopted a derogatory nature in Africa. Several women and men who are sympathetic with the predicament of women are too careful in using their work to promote gender equality. This ambivalence gives rise to all forms of distortion in works that address the female question.

### **Conclusion**

This study emphasizes the need for African playwrights to address the issue of gender imbalance with the appropriate styles that will achieve the desired result: effecting mutual co-existence of men and women based on equity and fairness. This co-existence is imperative for human and national development. Mawugbe's intention in this play is to evoke our sympathy for Nana Yaa, a woman who is forced to the sidelines as her brother succeeds their mother, the queen. The negative representation of this female character undermines our sympathy for her. The representation of the destructive tendencies of Nana Yaa, has been used to support patriarchal beliefs that the power of a woman is injurious to the welfare of the society. This negative portrayal of empowered women in African plays undermines the women's status and advancement in the modern African society by suggesting women are prone to abuse of power. African drama and theatre can partner with organizations and families committed to the cause of women by representing women empowerment issues in a more favorable light, with no strings attached.

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