

# DEBUNKING PATRIARCHAL LEGACY IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL SETTING: A READING OF EFO KODJO MAWUGBE'S *IN THE CHEST OF A WOMAN*

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## **Abstract**

This article investigates the critical views of Efo Kodjo Mawugbe on some African traditional customs which deny identity and welfare to women and his literary endeavor to unravel the patriarchal legacy in his *In the Chest of a Woman*. It examines the dictates of patriarchy that militate against females' emancipation and lay a foundation for their marginalization and oppression. It attempts to read Mawugbe's call for gender balance and equal treatment for men and women in modern society. Two sexist practices are targeted: the denial of inheritance rights to female children and the capital punishment of those who go against tradition by becoming pregnant out of customary wedlock. The study asserts that if modern African society should experience a participatory socio-economic development it is urgent to end sexism and gender oppression in families and society, and to give men and women equal opportunities to emerge as fulfilled free beings.

**Keywords:** debunk, patriarchy, gender oppression, sexism, education

## EL DESCRÉDITO DEL LEGADO PATRIARCAL EN EL CONTEXTO AFRICANO TRADICIONAL: *IN THE CHEST OF A WOMAN* DE EFO KODJO MAWUGBE

### **Resumen**

Este artículo investiga la visión crítica de Efo Kodjo Mawugbe sobre las tradiciones africanas que niegan la identidad y el bienestar a la mujer y analiza su interés literario por desactivar la herencia patriarcal en la obra de

teatro *In the Chest of a Woman*. La obra examina los dictados del patriarcado que operan en contra de la emancipación de la mujer y fundamentan su marginación y opresión. En el presente artículo se aprecia la defensa de Mawugbe del equilibrio entre sexos y el tratamiento equitativo para hombres y mujeres en la sociedad moderna. Se apuntan también dos prácticas sexistas: la negación del derecho a heredar de las niñas y la pena capital impuesta a aquellas mujeres que se oponen a la tradición quedando embarazadas fuera del matrimonio. El estudio concluye que, para que la sociedad moderna africana experimente un desarrollo socioeconómico participativo, es urgente terminar con la diferencia entre sexos y la opresión de género en la familia y en la sociedad en general, y dar a hombres y mujeres igualdad de oportunidades para realizarse como seres humanos libres.

**Palabras clave:** descrédito, patriarcado, opresión sexual, desigualdad de géneros, educación

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Literary discourses on sex and gender in African creative writing have insisted on the wrongs done to women by patriarchy on the basis of sex discrimination without specifying the social constructs of gender that give rise to them. Hildegard Hoeller advocates the connivance of fellow women in the plight/oppression of the African woman as she struggles for an emotional, political and moral independence (Hoeller 1998: 36). Liz Stanley and Sue Wize think that the family system that confines women into reproductive and care taking roles is responsible for women's predicament (Stanley and Wize 2002: 75). Susan Okin takes a different position by asserting that "while the concern that the family limits equality of opportunity is legitimate and serious, theorists who raise it have neglected the issue of gender and therefore ignored important aspects of the problem (Okin 2008: 600). Efo Kodjo Mawugbe is one of the contemporary feminist African playwrights who seeks to revisit gender relationship in Africa in literary texts by revisiting some African customs that deny power, identity, and inheritance right to women. His play *In the Chest of a Woman* (Mawugbe 2008: 14) is set in a pre-colonial Ghanaian society—the Akan traditional community to be exact—and reads as a literary attack against male power structures abusively erected, that have confiscated and misused power for the sole glory of patriarchy. The playwright seeks to reposition gender discourse in women's favor in his native Akan traditional society. He puts across the message of the reforms needed in African patriarchal societies' customary laws, mores and traditions to arrive at gender equality and treatment. His grudge is against androcentrism, an ideology which Paul Simpson thinks is the main reproach to be leveled against patriarchy sexist practices:

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Androcentrism describes a male centered world-view wherein male activities are evaluated positively and female activities negatively. The principle extends even to explanations of language itself, so that usages that are attributed to men are regarded more favorably than those attributed to women. (Paul Simpson 2005: 148)

This excerpt raises an important controversy which has developed in African patriarchal societies over the years concerning the relationship between language, sex and gender. The controversy hinges on the degree to which one can assert that the system of language projects sexist bias (Simpson 2005: 148). In this article, my analysis will focus on the following points: first, a critique on African customs of patriarchy; second, the ways in which patriarchal legacy can be debunked in favor of development; and third, Mawugbe's construction of African womanhood. Third World feminist social criticism is the methodological approach adopted in this article.

### **Sexism under Patriarchy: A Critique on African Customs in Traditional Setting**

*In the Chest of a Woman* is a complex story in which Ghanaian culture is interrogated on two fronts: contemporary relevance and the status of women in Ghanaian society with regard to their right inheritance right of family property which is denied them by custom, and the inflexibility of tradition in declaring death penalty to some women who become pregnant out of customary marriage. The play raises succession and inheritance problems in the matrilineal system among the Asante of Ghana. Daasebre Kwaku Duah II, king of Ebusa kingdom, sends a delegation to her elder sister Nana Yaa Kyeretwie to prepare her "son" to come and be trained in the art of kingship and succeed him after his death. Unknown to him and the other inhabitants of the kingdom is the fact that the first child of the sister is a girl: "he is she" (Mawugbe 2008: 87). The secret is dissimulated and the "son" sent to the royal palace for training. The actual king has a daughter and therefore strongly wishes to secure her daughter an offspring of royal descent. He therefore urges her daughter to fall in love with the heir apparent. Rumour spreads among the palace slaves that the king's daughter Ekyaa is "pregnant" when customary arrangements are not yet done. It is a great dishonor to the reputation of the king who is supposed to be the model role player in the observance of tradition. Under such circumstances, the

daughter must be killed, to spare the kingdom the curse of the gods. The king, to seek solution with the counsel of his elders, summons them and all the wise men of the land. The disgraceful pregnant princess is asked to tell publicly the author of the pregnancy. Ironically, Owusu Agyeman, the heir apparent, is asked to sit on the sacred royal stool and pronounce the judgment and death sentence of Ekyaa the wayward princess. Before the sentence is pronounced, she must publicly disclose who the author of her pregnancy is. With much hesitation and abstention, she finally discloses that Owusu Agyeman, the heir apparent, is the begetter. That very news throws the royal assembly into great disarray, much commotion, and confusion, because any person who sits on the sacred royal stool unlawfully must be killed. All the ingredients are then gathered for the two culprits, the princess and the future king, to die, for the custom must be respected. But then, who shall be the future king to ensure the perpetuation of these very customs? For the sake of having a male leader at the top of the kingdom, Agyeman's life is spared and with him Ekyaa. Mawugbe throws the last satirical bomb by having the princess reveal that the heir apparent is a "she". The big question arises whether a woman can become a leader when the custom prescribes that role for only men.

Third world feminist criticism seeks to reduce gender inequality and to negotiate the debate in favor of women. According to Brooke A. Ackerly,

Third world feminist social criticism wrestles to reduce gender inequality. It sees identity as a function of individual choice in the ideal world . . . It sees that the public/private dichotomy has been problematic for women. (Ackerly 2000: 194)

That theory is predicated on the belief that human beings, regardless of their sex, ethnicity, class, cast, religion, country of origin, national identity, aboriginal status, immigration status, regional geography, language, cultural practice, forms of dress, beliefs, ability, health status, family history, age and education, and regardless of how these are socially constructed in various societies, are equally worthy of human dignity and respect (Ackerly 2000: 194). In clearer terms, that theory seeks to dismantle the sexism of patriarchy both in literature and society. Sexism is the fact of discriminating between male and female children, giving priority to male ones. Mawugbe denounces that malpractice in the traditional Akan community in Ghana through his play *In the Chest of a Woman*. Patriarchal society in that society lays too much emphasis on the social functions of men as public decision

makers, heirs of family properties, community leaders, and wisdom keepers, relegating women at secondary positions as home-keepers, childbearers, housewives, in short, the appendage of men. The patriarchal dictates prescribe subordinating gender roles to women.

When women in conflict with tradition because of infidelity or any other sex sin are called to stand trial publicly and even die, their male counterparts should be associated to the punishment. The queen mother on her death bed faces the dilemma of letting her daughter, who exhibited unusual bravery, succeed her against the dictates of tradition and custom. Even when she chooses to go along with convention, she sets aside the usual practice to allow any of the two children, who first begot a male child, to take up the inheritance. When the time comes for Owusu Agyeman, the heir apparent, to go for training in the art of kingship at the palace in Nkwanta, Nana Yaa, her mother, is confronted with the problem of telling the true sex of her child. Mawugbe proves that women are as brave as men.

Such critical analysis is encrusted in the declaration of Nana Yaa: “The only sure talent men have demonstrated is the ability to cheat and suppress us of the opposite sex” (Mawugbe 2008: 19). The Akan society in *In the Chest of a Woman* has a matrilineal system of kingship inheritance: at the death of the king, it is *necessarily* his son’s sister who should inherit the throne, in disregard of his female children. It is patriarchal in that it promotes what Allan G. Johnson refers to as male privilege, that is, being male dominated, male identified and male centered (Johnson 2005: 5). It is also organized around an obsession with control and involves as one of its key aspects the oppression of women (Johnson 2005: 5). It is male dominated since positions of authority—political, economic, legal, religious, educational, military and domestic—are generally reserved for men (Johnson 2005: 5). Critics like Katherine Fishburn think that women under patriarchy have been object of oppression by men through the process of socialization into gender roles (Fishburn 1995: 19). Male dominance promotes the false idea that men are superior to women. This occurs because men generally occupy superior positions. For instance, Kwaku Duah II is king over the Ebusa kingdom while his sister Nana Yaa is simply a married woman shouldering domestic chores at Kyeremfaso. Her role is to produce a male child who will take over from his uncle Kwaku Duah II. Domestic chore roles are also occupied by housemaids, namely Akosua and Adwoa, both females. The military service is ensured by men, the abrafos, who are identified by their bravery and their ability to conquer, dominate and subdue rebellious neighboring armies. Mawugbe indicts that society for

being male centered and male oriented by ostracizing women from the circles of power management. The playwright Mawugbe's criticism is also leveled against the patriarchal system because it is male identified in that core cultural ideas about what is considered good, desirable, preferable, or normal are associated with how people think about men and masculinity in terms of power control, marriage choices, reproductive policies, property owning and management and educational opportunities. Women, if not denied the foregoing privileges, should be told what is good for them in these issues by men.

Male dominance and centeredness unveils misogynist language use which Anne Pauwels terms "linguistic sexism", which is disparaging, but after a period of time becomes abusive and ends up as a sexist slur (Pauwels 2003: 554). Linguistic sexism pervades the social atmosphere of the play. A case in point of this is the widespread use of male pronouns and nouns to represent people: "Nananom the Prince has no male genitals. The Prince is not a Prince but a Princess. He is She" (Mawugbe 2008: 87). It is a paradox or a situational irony because the opposite of what patriarchy expect (a girl is born instead of a boy) has happened. It is a literary device skillfully designed by the playwright Mawugbe that he has Nana Yaa disguise her daughter Owusu Agyeman into a man to become heir of the throne, for a female can never rule kingdom in that community. The playwright exposes that sexist practice as gravely flawed and unbecoming for modern African who aspire to development through the participation of both men and women.

One side of the debate views sexism in language as inherent to the system itself, and considers that by using a system which is intrinsically biased, speakers and writers actively construct the inequality that exists between men and women in African society (Pauwels 2003: 554). The other side proposes that sexism is encoded into language, either consciously or unconsciously, by male users of language (Pauwels 2003: 554). Paul Simpson (quoting Dale Spender) critically observes that men make language, language controls reality, and men control women (Simpson 2005: 14). To corroborate this idea, Jane Sunderland quotes some popular sexist proverbs which debase women's opinions in society: "women and children's opinion", "a woman's tongue spreads gossip fast", "men talk like books, women lose themselves in details", "never listen to a woman's words", "three inches of a woman's tongue can slay a man six feet tall", "silence gives proper grace to women", "how hard it is for women to keep counsel" (Sunderland 2006: 3). It is not far-fetched to say, considering these

stereotypes about women, that language is one of the mediums through which women have been objectified and reduced to non-entities. Women's views and language have been relegated to nothingness, not out of any biologically imposed necessity, but, because of patriarchal socio-cultural assumptions about the so called male superiority. It is to debunk these socio-cultural assumptions and give back to women their rightful place in society that Mawugbe uses critical sexist language to deconstruct male chauvinism. The following is a conversation between Nana Yaa and the village elders, respectively standing for feminist ideology and patriarchy. While the former claims her rights to inherit the kingdom, the latter deny her such rights using the customary law of the patriarchal society as an alibi:

Nana Yaa: I am the elder child. Customarily, it is I who must succeed you and not my younger brother.

2<sup>nd</sup> Elder: Don't forget he is a boy and you a girl.

1<sup>st</sup> Elder: Besides, he will soon grow into a man.

Nana Yaa: And is that going to make him older than me? Tell me, and who says the chieftaincy stool is made for only the hard buttocks of men.

2<sup>nd</sup> Elder: That is what has been practiced since time immemorial.  
(Mawugbe 2008: 18-19)

By saying "I am the elder child and customarily, I must inherit the kingship stool", Nana Yaa is advocating her seniority right as a female, which many societies have adopted as a prerogative to enter in possession of their inheritance due. Yet, 2<sup>nd</sup> Elder, standing for patriarchy, uses sexist language to shut her down, revealing thereby that the Akan patriarchal society depicted by Mawugbe is gender biased. It is in this context that the playwright is advocating the imperious necessity to fumigate, or better, to unravel the sexist language and gender discrimination that militate in disfavor of women both in language and practices. His is a critical approach that aims at redirecting identities, roles, and power delegations to a fairer distributive basis. Susan Okin, a feminist critic rightly observes that

those who discuss the family without paying attention to the inequalities between the sexes are blind to the fact that the gendered family radically limits the equality of opportunity of women and girls of all classes. (Okin 2008: 600)



For the patriarchy epitomized by the elders, man was born to lead and woman to follow, a system which is unfair. Patriarchy derives its force from tradition, custom, culture, even religion which are said to be unquestionable. Never should a woman rule when there is a man to do so. This principle has pervaded for years the Akan patriarchal societies and has conferred on men the leadership prerogative.

1<sup>st</sup> Elder: . . . Never in the history of Ebusa has a woman ruled where there is a man to do so. And so you have to accept... The history of the Kingdom says so. (Mawugbe 2008: 20)

Men have monopolized the power of decision to the extent of writing the constitution in their own favor. One specific custom that militates in women's disfavor is the matrilineal system of kingship inheritance. The matrilineal inheritance system is based on the principle that the prerogative of succession behoves to the elder son of the king's sister. Such customary law was prescribed in total ignorance of the presence of women in the family lineage. In clearer terms, men excluded from their thought the idea that the heir can be a female. Patriarchy even excluded the idea that a female child could be born from the king's sister. For the elders, depository of traditional wisdom, bearing a male child is required to ensure the kingship line. It is an undeniable fact that when men design a constitution it can but be in their favor. Women's interests are disregarded.

Nana Yaa: The customs and history of this kingdom were written by men. (*The men cheer*) the most cowardly of the human species... and the most myopic and glory-loving yet very lazy creatures Odomankoma ever moulded, perhaps by mistake. (Mawugbe 2008: 21)

The playwright Mawugbe indicts patriarchy for its monopoly of the customary law, which it designed to suit its own interests. Gender roles prescribing subaltern roles to women and giving men hegemonic roles stem from that customary constitution. The proviso that men seek to control women from all angles is not an overstatement in the context of *In the Chest of a Woman*. For instance, men control women's speech, women's properties, and women's womanhood. The oppressed and downthrown women react to defend their womanhood: "Think about womanhood... Think about us... Your fellow sisters, all the downtrodden women out there" (Mawugbe 2008: 29). This statement corroborates that men control womanhood in the women, that is, they decide whether a woman's status as

a woman in society follows the patriarchal norms. Gender roles defining and shaping femininity and masculinity are the dictates of patriarchal society. On this point, critic Allan G. Johnson propounds that:

In perpetuating patriarchy, femininity and masculinity are important tools for social control. This works primarily through people's investment in maintaining a socially acceptable gender identity. Everyone needs to have a relatively stable sense of who they are and a secure place in the world. Given the importance of gender identity in patriarchal societies, attacking people as being insufficiently masculine or feminine can do a lot to control them because it both challenges their sense of who they are and makes them feel like outsiders. (Johnson 2005: 92)

For the critic, this means that a society is patriarchal to the degree that it promotes male privilege, by being male dominated, male identified, and male centered. It is also organized around an obsession of control and involves the oppression of women as one of its key aspects (Johnson 2005: 92). This is true of Mawugbe's *In the Chest of a Woman* in that leadership in all these spheres is organized around men: the Daasebre, Kwaku Duah II, is king of the Ebusa kingdom, assisted by his abrafo (soldiers), and a council of elders, all men. What is more reproachful to that patriarchal society is that they deny the woman her lawful rights of inheritance of property for no defensible reason. When Queen Mother was about to die, she called her two children, a boy and a girl, and bequeathed the important towns of Ebusa kingdom to him; giving only leftovers to the girl—Brengo, Kyeremfaso and Anobeng—despite her seniority (Mawugbe 2008: 18). To such unfair sharing of inheritance, Nana Yaa's reaction is spontaneous: "This is nonsense! It is most unacceptable to me, Mother, if this is what you call an honour, then, may I beg to be dishonoured immediately" (Mawugbe 2008: 18).

What the playwright Mawugbe indicts to this Akan society in the play is the fact of giving privileges to men to the detriment of women. Johnson quotes Peggy McIntosh to explain that privilege refers to any unearned advantage that is available to members of a social category while being systematically denied to others. In patriarchy for example, what men say tends to have greater credibility than what women say, even when they are saying the same thing (Johnson 2005: 6). Simply put, male dominance creates power differences between men and women. For instance, men claim larger shares of inheritance, income and wealth, with the pretext that family responsibilities heavily weigh on them. It also means that they do

shape culture, based on tradition, in ways that reflect and serve men's collective interests (Johnson 2005: 92). Nana Yaa rejects male hegemony and questions male misuse of power:

Nana Yaa: I am a woman, I agree, but I am not going to indulge in the fanciful notion that men have a priority on leadership talent the only sure talent men have demonstrated is the ability to cheat and suppress us the opposite sex. (Mawugbe 2008: 19)

The patriarchal society depicted by Mawugbe reserves subaltern roles to women. Such a society is gender discriminatory vis-à-vis women, for instance by refusing the inheritance rights to female children, using the pretext that women are by virtue of customary law unsuitable for inheritance. As Johnson remarks, another aspect of male identification is the cultural description of masculinity and the ideal man in terms that closely relates to core values of society as a whole. Such qualities include control, strength, competitiveness, toughness, coolness under pressure, logic, forcefulness, decisiveness, rationality, autonomy, self-sufficiency, and control over any emotion that interferes with other core values such as invulnerability (Johnson 2005: 7). In contrast, continues Johnson, qualities such as cooperation, mutuality, equality, sharing, compassion, caring, vulnerability, a readiness to negotiate and compromise, emotional expressiveness and intuitive ways of thinking are all devalued and culturally associated with femaleness (Johnson 2005: 92). Male identification amounts to taking men and their lives as the standard for defining what is normal.

The second evil practice orchestrated by patriarchy in the fictional Akan traditional community and which must be debunked and discarded is the practice of killing every girl of the royal family—and by extension of that community—who gets pregnant out of wedlock. Such customary law is anti-life, anti-social and anti-development. The king himself is dismayed when faced with such a law being applied to his daughter:

King: She who stands there before us is a product of my loins. Ama Ekyaa is her name. A daughter of royal blood. She harbours in that protruding flesh a seed secretly and wrongfully sown out of acceptable wedlock . . . I shall therefore ask Owusu Agyeman the heir apparent to take over and pronounce judgment. Take the sword of office. (Mawugbe 2008: 80)

The sword is the instrument to kill the culprit. Mawugbe shows that the guardians of the customs are not better in its compliance than the subjects

on whom they apply these harmful customs. In addition to that, if the one pronouncing the death sentence does not do it in appropriate manner, that is to say according to the rules dictated by tradition and custom, he incurs also a death penalty: “A law as old as the great Oracle of Kyeremfaso which says, ‘if any woman sits for a single instant on the judgment stool before she had been absolutely enstooled and sworn an oath of allegiance in the presence of the people, SHE SHALL DIE’” (Mawugbe 2008: 91). It can be noted that the vibrancy and vitality of the death penalty of these customary laws are issued against women. This shows the extent to which women are persecuted and cheated in their rights in that community. Mawugbe in creating these devices conveys the message that high time retrogressive customs in African traditional societies should be re-examined, overhauled and updated to serve the welfare of society at large and that of women in particular. In consonance with this stand, many critics of traditional society decry the misapplication of the laws that no more help society progress. Kwame Gyekye observes that

The African people like the others value their traditions. Perhaps, they overstate the value of those traditions; hence, the slow rate at which desirable changes in their traditions takes place. It is this slow rate of change in their traditions that has led to the characterization of societies in Africa and in some other parts of the world as ‘traditional’ societies or cultures. (Gyekye 2003: 165)

The sense in which Kwame Gyekye speaks fits in Mawugbe’s criticism of the tenets of African traditional customs: customs belittle women, overlap their freedom, but are never questioned nor openly criticized. Mawugbe attacks and deconstructs the patriarchal legacy which serves the customary law of the Akan people as springboard toward females’ objectification and spoliation. He especially seeks to demote sexist, irrational, and biased prejudices against women. The playwright makes the point that the custom that consists into passing death sentence on marriageable females who do not comply with tradition in their marriage, verges on misogynist practice and is rated naughty. It denies identity and welfare to women. Other critics, namely Awo Mana Asiedu and Akosua Adomako Ampofo, quoting Carole Boyce Davies, show the negative portrayal of women in Ghanaian popular theatre, a stereotypic portrayal taken as normal. They also show how female characters are presented in unfavorable terms and how the treatment meted out to them borders on the misogynic (Asiedu and Ampofo 2012: 221). These critical stands amount to

saying that women's social images are blemished both in literature and society, a situation which needs reversal. Mawugbe is in this logic as he turns the tide in depicting brave characters like Nana Yaa to challenge and defeat men's chauvinist discourse in a patriarchal setting.

### **Debunking Patriarchal Legacy: Bolstering Gender Equity**

To debunk literally means to show that an idea or a belief is false, or to prove that something is not good as people think it is (Hornby 2015: 376). Applied to the play's context, it means the process through which the Ghanaian playwright Mawugbe proves that many stereotypic beliefs about women held by patriarchy are false. He demolishes the social constructs of such stereotypes with dramatic literature. The patriarchal legacy to be debunked in African traditional society—epitomized by the Akan community in Mawugbe's *In the Chest of a Woman*—is the misogyny and sexist ideology that keep women in a so low inferior position, less than humans. Such ideology is reticulated in the beliefs that women do not deserve inheritance, and, in case of their non-compliance with tradition, they should face capital punishment. It is not admissible that at a time when women's rights echo the media around the globe, and legal texts are written to protect them, some retrogressive traditions hold back women in their efforts towards emancipation. It is not understandable that they be viewed as nonentities, commodities to be used by men to serve the power superstructure of male dominance: for example, using women as reproductive engines to breed males who should rule over the kingdom; denying women the right of property inheritance, choosing life partners to women and killing a female in royal family who attempts a marriage out of wedlock, to mention but a few. The idea proposed by Margaret Urban Walker is helpful in understanding how men use power to trample down women's rights and exploit them both in literature and society, a behavior which makes the debunking of patriarchy and a revision of patriarchal literary discourses necessary. Her approach is methodic, using feminist ethics:

Feminist ethics is inevitably, and fundamentally, a discourse about morality and power . . . Feminism's traditional critique challenges morally the coercive, arbitrary, cruel and oppressive power powers of men over women in many systems of gender. Feminism claims for women on moral grounds economic, political, social, sexual, epistemic, discursive, and symbolic powers denied by individual, institutional, and cultural male dominance. Feminism must also oppose domination structured by hierarchies or

exclusions of class, race, sexuality, age and ability for these always partly organize gender. (Walker 2008: 540)

This critical stand provides a fertile ground for understanding the gendered discourse in literary texts which make a discursive unraveling of patriarchal legacy necessary.

The first step towards the critical unraveling of patriarchal legacy in *In the Chest of a Woman* is the creation of female characters and their critical views opposing male chauvinism. This is done through the locating of what I call men's Achilles heel. Despite the authoritative way of ruling orchestrated by men under patriarchy, they are relying on women's silence and reverential fear to abusively misuse their power to bully women. A bold, energetic retaliation from women to refuse to comply with the patriarchal views of women would provoke fear in men and win their respect from men. This critical stance is evident in the following statement of Nana Yaa: "I tell you, if there is anything men fear in this world it is a woman who is a woman" (Mawugbe 2008: 31).

Nana Yaa is an enlightened character, an intellectual by virtue of the sparkling and penetrating truthfulness of her ideas about men's weakness. She holds the view that men do misuse their power against women because women are educated to be silent. A courageous refusal by women to abide by the males dictates would make men think doubly about women's dignity and confer on them their due respect. The playwright also shows that men will not relinquish so easily their privileges if they are not compelled to, by means of exercising a kind pressure that will effect change in men's opinion of women. Carolyn Dinshaw asserts that feminism is an ideology of a modern social movement for the advancement of women and based on principles of equality and emancipation in secular societies (Dinshaw 2007: 11). Mawugbe's modernist pretence of analytical objectivity is ideologically based and politically committed (Dinshaw 2007: 11). Such project aims at the empowerment of African women both in literary texts and in society. It includes a process of contesting the patriarchal and male-centered cultural assumptions that have become gender discriminatory (Weedon 2007: 293). I personally share Mawugbe's view that to arrive at dismantling sexism women should be ready to take up certain challenges. For example, women should not compromise their dignity against favors from men and should not be afraid of suffering to merit a reward, a position, or a salary.

Most of women's denigration and debasement come from the fact that they are not prepared to suffer before deserving what they have. They want

to gain all things through arrangements and favoritism given by men's kindness. Unfortunately very few men would offer help free of charge to women. They want to offer help to women on condition that they accept to sell their freedom, their sex, their dignity and to worship men. Adwoa, a female character in the play, says: "I now see what length men will go to sustain aristocracy in society" (Mawugbe 2008: 44). Men take opportunity to exploit women when they (women) are not prepared to pay the price to deserve what they expect. Thus, to debunk that exploitative system of women and revalue themselves in the eyes of men, women must accept to take up all the necessary challenges. This includes working hard at school, in competitions, properly going through trainings, avoiding undue benefits from men, declining offers to which exploitative conditions are attached. Only hard work and moral honesty can liberate women from being the appendage of men. Women should also select priorities and accept to live a modest and decent life when the means at their disposal are limited. When a woman rejects men's tricky offerings of help and wins her due by merit, men begin to fear her and pay her respect. These ideas are encrusted in the following statements by Nana Yaa:

Nana Yaa: A woman who accepts challenges. 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 in no uncertain terms rejects absolutely the definition of the word feminine to mean home-oriented, passive, needing-to-be-guided-and-protected. To the man, such a woman is a real woman and a woe unto manhood. In short, what men fear most is female power in motion. (Mawugbe 2008: 31)

Nana Yaa goes on to denounce male chauvinism encouraged by patriarchy, and to criticize the displacement of customary laws in chaining women in an infernal dungeon of intolerable servitude. In seeking to unravel the patriarchal legacy, Mawugbe has his characters stay in a certain logic which deserves attention. First, he does a kind of brainwashing to men in a cultural dialogue, because he believes the words of Johnson that

rather than trying to change people, the most important thing [women] can do is contribute to shifting entire cultures so that patriarchal forms and values begin to lose their 'obvious' legitimacy and normalcy and new forms emerge to challenge their privileged place in social life. (Johnson 2005: 231)

This view is also shared by Rosemarie Tong in her *Feminist Thought*, where she asserts that power does not triumph over reason; on the contrary, claims to power—authority—are grounded in reason (Tong 2009: 273). She also believes that finding a way out of patriarchy has to involve men, in part because they collectively control most social systems and resources, but also because men's and women's lives are bound up with one another. On a deeper level though, men can have a unique perspective on the reality of male privilege, just as only women can fully understand the reality of female subordination (Tong 2009: 217). Her criticism is acerbic and declamatory, but realistic. Like Tong, Mawugbe seeks to solve women's problems in a definite way. He advocates for women a revolutionary power that will break the chains of customs and traditions:

Because, such power, seeks to break not only the bonds of customs, taboos and antiquated traditions to which women are chained, but also deals a heavy blow to that age-old myth of male chauvinism (Mawugbe 2008: 32).

The proviso that women should suffer before deserving good reward is the line of thought of Mawugbe, who uses art to impart this message. The philosophy of utilitarian suffering preconizes that suffering should be creative: "Suffering should be creative. It should give birth to something good, substantive, meaningful. Something lovely and lasting (Mawugbe 2008: 29). On this point, Johnson explains that

Neither patriarchy nor any other system will last forever. Patriarchy is riddled with internal contradiction and strain. It is based on the false and self-defeating assumption that control is the answer to everything and that the pursuit of more control is always better than contending ourselves with less . . . If we look at patriarchy as a whole, it is true that we aren't going to make it go away in our lifetime. But if changing the entire system through our own efforts is the standard against which we measure the ability to do something, then we have set ourselves up to fail. (Johnson 2005: 227)

To unravel patriarchal legacy entails cooperative efforts on behalf of both men and women. Gender cooperation is important in that women have male children and men also have female children so that the danger of patriarchy or matriarchy crosses gender borders. Women's future partly depends on men's cooperation and vice-versa. Women should continue sensitizing their fellow women about the necessity of a synergy of actions to promote women's emancipation. It is however important to bear in mind



that patriarchy is not individually based. It is a social system deeply entrenched in ancestral cultural practices. To debunk the system will take time, hard work of sensitization and cultural education. In this process bad customs and traditions should be discarded, modified or reworked on to take women's welfare into consideration. For Okyeame Boateng, customs should be made to serve men, not men to serve the customs: "The customs were made not by gods, they were made by men and therefore can be unmade by men (Mawugbe 2008: 94). And for the King, if patriarchy maintains traditional customs unbent, then even ruling people can be victims of these same customs: "When the custodians of the people's customs, become innocent victims of the custom they have in their custody, life under this colourful umbrella pales into nothingness" (Mawugbe 2008: 101). To actively promote change in society, actions should be pragmatic, objective, rationale and balanced. This doesn't mean a violent somersault of people's cultural practices.

But it is a progressive consciousness awakening where female education encouragement and gender dialogue with men will play a key role. It is also a kind of cultural diplomacy where dialogue actors need to understand that men also gain if patriarchy is debunked, because every man relates to a woman either through filiation or genealogy. Unraveling patriarchal legacy in African traditional context presupposes a cultural revision that takes into account the privileges of both men and women in designing the cultural constitution. Women should be given more and more empowerment in their educational, marital, and professional orientation. The autonomy of the woman in these matters affecting her wellbeing will grant her the freedom of choice. Women should also be encouraged to partake in public debates, political like and decision taking in her community. Customs should be regularly updated in order to suit the imperatives and demands of time and space. In thinking public policies about women's conditions, modernity, technology and ethics should not be ignored. Modernity should be coupled with ethics, moral values that sustain gender cooperation, as Owusu rightly remarks: "The narrow mental footpath of our customs be widened to accommodate the free spirit of reforms, forgiveness and reconciliation" (Mawugbe 2008: 81). This idea is very relevant.

### **Mawugbe and the Construction of African Womanhood**

A look at Efo Kodjo Mawugbe's art shows him as a gender sensitive writer. He promotes the female gender by producing works in which the images of women are renewed. Nana Yaa is a galvanized feminist conscious

character. She grows to endear positive change for women. Such change gives to women their dignified place and credence in African society. Yaa advocates that kind of change:

May you let me live to see the successful end of the wheel of change I have set in motion. A wheel of change that shall leave all men convinced that in the chest of a woman is not only the extension of the breast and a feeble heart but a flaming desire to Possess and use Power. (Mawugbe 2008: 35-36)

Mawugbe no doubt creates strong female characters who are rebellious and defiant against oppression and injustice. His female characters are insightful women who reject the traditional idea of womanhood and who “climb the limelight” (in the words of Udengwu 2009: 200) of change to project themselves in the realm of emancipation. This amounts to saying that Mawugbe is one of the few West African playwrights who escapes feminist indictment for negative portrayal of female characters. While precursor male writers like J. C. DeGraft and Wole Soyinka may be declared guilty of male chauvinism, he cannot. When gender sensitive critics have for some time now decried the negative image of women in West African literature (Ghanaian literature in particular) of dramatic expression, and works of theatre are put under serious scrutiny for signs of gender bias in the form of exclusion of female perspective or negative portrayal of female characters, a writer like Mawugbe stands unaccused. His crusade for gender reconstruction goes beyond the mere sentiment and makes for the door of qualitative reconstruction that will bring into full manifestation the entire potential of women (Owonibi 2009: 236). This energy potential is being harnessed for the African society to experience meaningful revolution. Women are viewed with a new self, a respectful personality. Their womanhood is reconstructed on the new foundations of empowerment, freedom, emancipation and social vitality: this new position is fully fledged in the 1<sup>st</sup> Bard’s statement in the play. A triumphant woman in patriarchal society is metaphorically compared to an energetic leopard:

1<sup>st</sup> Bard: 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 a tiger is an equal; of her courage, only a lion can compare. The mother whose mind is a cistern of wisdom. (Mawugbe 2008: 76)

The foregoing line of argument is what marks out *In the Chest of the Woman* as a revolutionary play. A striking feature of it is its women-based interest. The playwright constructs a different image of womanhood: a woman who is recognized for her achievement and not just for being a woman; a woman who commands and earns respect, honor and praise by taking active roles in debates affecting her future is the idealized woman of his art. Such a woman is the symbol of excellence, the epitome of positive performance, and not a weaker vessel. She is a woman who inspires change, recognizes her energy potentials and taps into it for more empowerment. Such a woman breaks the ugly yoke of stagnation and discrimination.

### **Conclusion**

In this article, my analysis has focused on two key ideas: the harm done by African traditional customs to women and the effort of the playwright Efo Kodjo Mawugbe to debunk that patriarchal legacy *In the Chest of a Woman*. This article has shown how Mawugbe has debunked some sexist African traditions through art: the denial of the right of property inheritance to women and capital punishment for those who do not conform to tradition in marriage. As main findings, the study has proved that in *In the Chest of a Woman*, the social perceptions held about women as weak and immature beings, home oriented and in need of guidance by men are false. Women's rights to freedom of choice in marriage and their economic status should be recognized and respected by both men and women. To arrive at tangible results in dismantling sexism and gender biases, sensitization and education must continue to raise women's consciousness about their emancipatory becoming. In this struggle, both men and women must be involved, since society cannot move forward without both genders collaboration.

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