

The Chimeric Coercive Rigidity in African Tradition in Efo Kodjo Mawugbe's *In the Chest of a Woman*

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Abstract

This article examines the rigidity of African traditional law, which often appears dangerous and destructive due to its lack of flexibility and mercy. It specifically examines how Efo Kodjo Mawugbe critiques the tensions among traditional authority, human life, and gender relations. The death sentence, in the name of tradition, to appease the gods, is a valuable case. This rigidity also instates patriarchal norms in society by assigning a second-class role to women. By so doing, women are made mere mother hens to procreate and care for children. Their political role is limited and pruned to mere servants of men. Any attempt to soften such rigidity imposed by tradition by lawmakers, given the imperfection of human beings and their susceptibility to error, is met with vehement rejection by hard-liners of tradition and the law. It is when the uncompromising custodians are victims of the law's rigidity that their intransigence fades. Then they agree to set aside their obstinacy regarding amending the law. The study contributes to scholarship on tradition, patriarchy, and social reform in African drama. The research relies on textual analysis of the play. Four literary theories, such as feminist literary theory, postcolonial theory, new historicism, and cultural criticism, are summoned. The findings reveal that patriarchy is represented as an artificial institution and that reform becomes possible when the custodians of rigid laws experience their consequences firsthand.

Keywords: Artificial, patriarchal norms, rigidity, tradition, uncompromising custodians

Résumé

Cet article se propose d'examiner la rigidité des lois traditionnelles africaines créées par l'homme, lesquelles apparaissent souvent dangereuses et destructrices en raison de leur manque de flexibilité et de clémence. Il analyse plus précisément la manière dont Efo Kodjo Mawugbe met en critique les tensions entre l'autorité traditionnelle, la vie humaine et les rapports de genre. La condamnation à mort destinée à apaiser les dieux au nom de la tradition en constitue un exemple significatif. Cette rigidité instaure également des normes patriarcales dans la société en reléguant les femmes à un statut de second rang. Ainsi, celles-ci sont réduites au rôle de simples génitrices et gardiennes des enfants. Leur rôle politique se trouve alors limité et réduit à celui de simples exécutantes des décisions masculines. Toute tentative d'assouplissement de cette rigidité inscrite dans la tradition par les législateurs, compte tenu de l'imperfection inhérente à l'être humain et de sa propension à l'erreur, se heurte à l'opposition farouche des défenseurs intransigeants de la tradition et de la loi. Ce n'est que lorsque ces gardiens inflexibles deviennent eux-mêmes victimes de la rigidité de la loi que leur intransigence s'estompe. Ils acceptent alors d'abandonner leur obstination quant à la réforme de cette loi. Cette étude contribue aux recherches sur la tradition, le patriarcat et la réforme sociale dans le théâtre africain. Elle repose sur une analyse textuelle de la pièce. Quatre théories littéraires sont mobilisées : la théorie féministe, la théorie postcoloniale, l'approche historique et la critique culturelle. Les résultats révèlent que le patriarcat est représenté comme une institution construite par l'homme et que la réforme devient possible lorsque les gardiens des lois rigides subissent eux-mêmes les conséquences de leur application.

Mots-clés : création humaine, normes patriarcales, rigidité, tradition, gardiens intransigeants.

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Introduction

The rigidity in African traditions is very often enslaving and deadly punitive. Human life is beneath tradition and holds less value than traditional laws. Transgressing traditional laws is mercilessly punished and very often through a death sentence. Designedly, the Ghanaian playwright Efo Kodjo Mawugbe exposes this refractoriness for the impossibility of pardon and flexibility in the transgression of traditional law.

The playwright explains, through the characters of his play, how tradition in Africa places manhood at the top of every sphere of decision-making and reduces womanhood to mere consumers of men's decisions, without any fissure to expose the incoherencies. This leads women like Naa Yaa Kyeretwie to denounce such an injustice and claim gender equality regarding leadership by strongly, defensively, and defiantly arguing that men's supremacy is an abuse by artificial tradition.

In the quest for the restoration of gender equality, feminism fails to draw barriers to falsehood and cheating. Then, some feminist women choose to cheat with the tradition in their fight for gender equality. Mawugbe clearly shows, through the failure of Nana Yaa Kyeretwie's plan – making her daughter pass as a boy to occupy the royal stool – that man's supremacy over woman is a nature-designed masterpiece due to women's incapacity to control their emotions.

Actually, African traditions entail some socio-political measures that are unsuited to the sacrality, valorization, and promotion of human life, due to their inflexibility and mercilessness. The appeal to overhaul the law to make it a bit more flexible and merciful is only feasible and acceptable when the caretakers are once victims of its rigidity. Mawugbe shows this through the character Nana Opong, who vigorously rejects the flexible reading of the traditional law to prevent death sentences for innocents until he himself is caught victim to the rigidity of the law. In light of the foregoing discussion, this study examines Efo Kodjo Mawugbe's critique of patriarchal traditions and his representation of gender relations in *In the Chest of a Woman*. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

- How does Mawugbe represent patriarchy as an artificial tradition in the play?
- How does the play portray women's attempts to challenge patriarchal structures by manipulating or circumventing traditional norms?
- How does the experience of victimhood contribute to the reform of rigid traditional laws and practices in the play?

Methodology

This paper follows a qualitative research method based on textual analysis. Its primary source is the play *In the Chest of a Woman* by the Ghanaian playwright Efo Kodjo Mawugbe, and secondary sources include books, journal articles, and feminist criticism. Quotations from the play are analyzed to interpret the characters' behavior, motivations, and feelings.

Under the feminist umbrella, Mawugbe uses the character Nana Yaa to comment on how African traditions regulate and often oppress women, especially in relation to leadership and authority. As the voice of the voiceless women, Nana Yaa points to the patriarchal structures

that limit female agency in African societies. She invites men, through postcolonial theory, to revisit African traditions, which are not neutral.

As a supporting lens, New Historicism theory helps situate this play under study within specific socio-cultural and historical realities of African societies. This literary theory sheds light on how African traditions function as systems of control. Mawugbe uses this literary genre – play – to fictionalize the theme of Patriarchy in African societies. The character Nana Yaa is used in the play to show how power is embedded in African cultural practices. Traditions, as observed by Nana Yaa, seem to be written by men who refuse official contest with their opposite sex to gain a royal position. They unilaterally grant themselves the privilege of supremacy over the female sex. The absence of contest to gain position sounds in the head of Nana Yaa that men are “the most cowardly of the human species... and the most myopic and glory-loving yet very lazy creatures ...” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 21).

Results

Patriarchy as a Man-made Tradition

The management of African societies was sealed by African-made traditions long before the colonial era. The most important privileges and relevant responsibilities to rule a state are conferred on men by tradition. This, the character named 2nd Elder by Mawugbe in his play titled *In the Chest of a Woman*, makes it clear to Nana Yaa that “That is what has been the practice since time immemorial” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 18), when the latter – a girl – claims “I am the elder child. Customarily, it is I who must succeed you and not my younger brother” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 18).

For Nana Yaa, the legacy is to consider the birthright regardless of sex. In response to the appeal of the 2nd Elder, “Do not forget he is a boy and you a girl” (Mawugbe 18), Nana Yaa formulates the question to know if that is “... going to make him older than...” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 18) her. She vehemently asks: “Where is it written that a woman can not[sic] rule when there is a man?” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 20). However, the 1st Elder and 2nd Elder reply that “Our customs say so” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 20).

There is a myth in the state management that tradition has forged. This myth holds that “Nation building belongs to the energetic” (Mawugbe 20), and that men are considered energetic. Nana Yaa tries to deconstruct that myth. She asks who says that “... men are the most energetic of the human species?” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 20). The elder replies that “The history of the Kingdom says so” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 20). The princess tries to underestimate that disposition of the traditional law by highlighting the role played by women in the fight against enslaving assault by either local enemies or European forces.

In fact, war is part of the history of African states and kingdoms. This fiction by Mawugbe highlights it. Nana Yaa, to whom the royal stool is denied by the tradition with conscious disregard and inconsideration of her birthright, reminds the custodians of the tradition – the Elders – that an agnosia is committed. In contrast, the tradition, in consideration of victorious wars waged, sets man as energetic sex and woman as weak. She proceeds to the recollection of the utility and prowess of women in the fight against foreign domination:

If the customs and the political history of this kingdom are silent over what offices a woman can hold, or the role played by women in the struggle to free ourselves from the domination of the Akwamu, especially the courage and bravery displayed by our mother in our last war against the slave raiders from the north, it only proves one thing" (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 20).

In the history of warfare in Africa, women have been part and parcel of the fight against foreign domination. The "... female soldiers of Dahomey" (Murtala et al., 2022, p. 183) are "... mythical female warriors of great prowess" (Murtala et al., 2022, p. 182) who have partaken in many Dahomeyan wars to free their people from foreign bondage. However, the traditions in Africa seem to be silent on those prowesses by African female warriors: "The history of warfare in pre-colonial Africa mostly celebrates and refers to men's achievement and tends to relegate women to the backyard" (Murtala et al., 2022, p. 176). This mutism on the prowess of fearless female soldiers in Africa only proves, according to the character Nana Yaa, "That men wrote the customs and history of this kingdom" (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 21).

Traditions impose patriarchy, a system "ruled and controlled by men" (Collin, 1988, p. 176), by granting preeminence to the male sex in all the compartments of African societies. The female sex is commonly considered weaker, emotive, and less energetic than men. This ranks women after men. So where a man is, women are made to humble themselves: "...never in the history of Ebusa has a woman ruled where there is a man to do so. Moreover, you have to accept it..." (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 20). In this vein, some scholars write that "Patriarchal society gives absolute priority to men and to some extent limits women's human rights also" (Mbah & Oti, 2015, p. 14).

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By boldly declaring to the whole royal court that "The only sure talent men have demonstrated is the ability to cheat and suppress us of the opposite sex" (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 19), Nana Yaa uses several figures of speech to ridicule the privilege tradition favors men. First, although the word 'talent' is usually positive, it is deliberately used here to create a sarcastic or ironic effect. It is used here to convey negativity. It ironically refers to 'cheat' and 'suppress'. So, the talent of men is to get privileges by cheating and suppressing women. Second, the hyperbole 'The only sure talent' emphasizes criticism. Third, one notices an antithesis of contrast between 'men' and 'the opposite sex' – women – which highlights opposition or conflict between the two groups. Fourth, words like 'cheat' and 'suppress' express dysphemism, which "... emphasizes defects..." (Cuddon, 2013, p. 222). They are strongly negative and intensify the accusatory tone.

In the same vein, the statement "But you are not a man" (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 19) muttered by Queen Mother, in response to the claim of Nana Yaa to rule a whole kingdom, carries meaning beyond its simple structure. There is an ellipsis in this statement to leave the main idea unstated. This implies that Nana Yaa is not a man, so she cannot rule in the presence of her young brother, though she is "... the elder child" (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 18) as she claims. The

conjunction ‘But’ presents a contrast between what Nana Yaa expects or claims and her identity ‘not a man,’ in which the negation appeals to litotes by expressing indirectly the impossibility for her to rule because of being part of womanhood.

Nana Yaa is fiercely exasperated by the stereotyping ‘not a man’, which carries certain limitations regarding society and culture. Then, she rebelliously wants to know “Who are men anyway?” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 19) to feel themselves superior to women. This seems like a real debate question from a neophyte seeking to learn new things. However, Nana Yaa is not actually thirsty. For knowledge on the issue of social patriarchy that denies women the right to rule in the presence of a man. She is not asking for information. Rather, she asks this rhetorical question to challenge, criticize, or express doubt about men. In this question, Nana Yaa uses an implied criticism or insinuation to indirectly criticize men without explicitly stating it. She invites men in the audience to question their value or authority.

As a matter of fact, she refuses to feel inferior to men. She uses provocative words to challenge men: “Men are the most bloodthirsty, destructive, unthinking, childish...” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 21). In fact, she is committed to inflicting shame on men in order to remove the myth of their superiority over women as the most energetic sex.

Fearlessly, when 1st Elder treats her as “... little girl?” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 21) she invites for a fight with an energetic and courageous man in the audience by sticking out her tongue: “Let he who considers himself a true man, a he-man, in this palace, Step out and take this knife and remove with it, This thick red and rough boneless flesh of a tongue from its enclave” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 21). With her tongue out, she insists: “I want a man” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 21).

Nana Yaa, fed up with the patriarchal norms preventing her from rightfully ruling the whole kingdom, decides to challenge men in a contest. Verily, her “I want a man” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 21) is an indirect challenge to her young brother Kwaku Duah. It is not Ofori who offers himself, “Let me have the knife” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 22), that she wants. Nana Yaa recognizes: “It was not the man I wanted. It was a careful trap meant to lure the one with whom I once shared the same womb” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 30). However, Ofori is the one who has accepted the challenge and has failed. Ofori is not finished up thanks to the intervention of Queen Mother: “No, stop it! My daughter, stop where you are. Go not further. Spare an older woman the sight of blood at her last hour...” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 24).

Nana Yaa intends to destroy the myth of male supremacy over the female sex on the grounds of a lack of energy and courage with womanhood. So, she wants to kill Ofori “To teach these living spectators that courage is not the monopoly of men” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 24). The triumphant fight she has had with Ofori stuns her mother – Queen Mother. Nana Yaa relates to Owusu that Queen Mother “... openly confessed that she had indeed underestimated my fighting spirit” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 25).

Consequently, Nana Yaa uses both rhetoric and pragmatism to uncover the illusion behind the supremacy conferred on men by tradition. By defeating a man like Ofori, Nana Yaa confirms the insult she vomits on men. This is proof that women are capable of doing far better than many men. Nana Yaa considers that female dignity is toppled and seeks to restore it. So, she prepares her daughter, Owusu, to be emotionally, mentally, psychologically, and physically

strong in order to reject the male treachery through an illusory superiority of manhood over womanhood.

Cheating with Tradition in the Sake of the Fight for Gender Equality

Feminist scholars and activists are engaged in the fight for gender equality to make traditional laws more flexible and equitable. The rights of women, which seem trampled, are denounced by many scholars, and great efforts must thus be deployed "...to end inequalities and discrimination based on differences such as sex..." (Olatunji, 2013, p. 2). It is an open secret that "... discrimination based on gender..." (Wangrawa, 2022, p. 1) is severely scourging African societal organizations. That is what Efo Kodjo Mawugbe tries to expose with the rebellious role of his character, Nana Yaa.

The Ghanaian playwright engages in a double-faceted denunciation. First, he seeks to reveal the injustice that African traditions inflict on women, as it is reflected in contemporary African political society. Second, he shows through the failure of the plot by Nana Yaa, which consists in making his daughter, Owusu, disguise as a boy to inherit the royal stool from her uncle, King Kwaku Duah II, that the feminist fight for gender equality is to be peaceful, truthful, honest, rightful, and printed with straightforwardness. Feminine power gain is to respect official norms of struggle and must not lead to immoral and criminal shortcuts. Women ought to contribute peacefully to socio-political reforms as recommended by two scholars: "...women could arguably make significant contributions both to the resolution of conflict as well as providing a substantial resource in embedding change processes in conflicted or politically fractured societies" (Ní Aoláin & Turner, 2007, p. 243).

In fact, Nana Yaa points out a flaw in the tradition that needs to be reformed. Preventing firstborn women from occupying political or royal positions in the presence of a man appears like segregating and dehumanizing the feminine sex. Nana Yaa challenges the tradition that silences women in the presence of men. She shows that energy is not only manly by fighting victoriously against Ofori under the shameful eyes of the whole royal court: "Look, our man has fallen" (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 23). This victory over her challenger Ofori convinces the Queen Mother of her "... fighting spirit" (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 26). Her majesty decides to set things right in a very conciliatory way to prevent disunion and enmity from erecting an enraging barrier between her two children, Nana Yaa and Kwaku Duah II. So, the Queen Mother "... made one last edit" (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 26), which is "That my brother be King after her, But after him, any of us who first brings forth a son, Shall have that son ascending the stool after Kwaku Duah" (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 26).

As a matter of fact, the last decision of the Queen Mother soothes somehow the wrath of Nana Yaa. Unfortunately, both Nana Yaa and Kwaku Duah II have given birth to girls. None of them has bred a boy. His majesty Kwaku Duah and his wife Amah Gyamfua "... gave birth to a baby girl, Ekyaa" (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 26). Then, Nana Yaa and her husband "... had to go round all the powerful shrines in the kingdom" (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 26) to have a son. Despite the predictions of the oracles, they also gave birth to a girl named Owusu: "All the Oracles

predicted a son for me. Well, I believed it; but what happened? It turned out to be you” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 26).

Disappointed at the unrealized predictions of the oracles and her dimmed expectation, Nana Yaa shifts to immorality and dishonesty to inherit the throne. She takes measures: “I quickly took steps to hide your true identity so that you could succeed your uncle Kwaku Duah when he died” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 27). She decides to have power in her lineage at all costs. She makes it clear to her daughter, Owusu: “You are going to fight to capture the stool, my child. You have a right to it...” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 27). For the sake of power and honor, Nana Yaa decides to go further. As a scholar says, “In traditional Africa most conflicts arise from disputes about property, power and honor” (Diallo, 1976, p. 388).

In fact, fighting for a throne does not pose any problem. However, the means used in the fight matter a lot. Nana Yaa refuses to accept Nature's verdict and abandon the battle. She is committed to making her daughter king and not queen: “And I am saying you SHALL be King, I repeat KING, Not queen, after my brother, Kwaku Duah and rule our people” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 27). So, for power's sake, the life of her daughter, Owusu, “... has been a lie” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 27). She hides the sex of the young girl and silences all the people who know the truth: “My child, do you know how many people had to lose their lives just to keep your true identity hidden from the public?” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 28).

Consequently, Owusu feels uneasy acting the boy: “I cannot act a boy anymore. I want to be the girl that I really am” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 28). But Nana Yaa brainwashes her: “The whole exercise is a game, and you cannot betray me just when victory is within arm's reach. No, my child, sustain yourself in the role for longer” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 28). Besides, the victims of the plot cannot perish in such a vain. To keep the sex of Owusu secret, Nana Yaa kills her husband “...I had to poison your father...” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 28), inflicts dumbness to the accoucheuse who has helped her deliver “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” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 28), makes untrustworthy servants disappear “Many servants in the palace who seemed a little bit suspicious and inquisitive about your sex were quickly eliminated or sold into slavery” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 29) and kills by her own hands the hit man “And I had the singular satisfaction of despatching the Chief Executioner myself” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 29).

Nana Yaa is highly adept at feminism. This seems to lead her to misandry and “... a woe unto womanhood” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 31). Her feminist fight for gender equality is to restore the dignity of all women in order to make them be “... all out to give the command like a man” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 31). But the approach she uses to defend the rights of “... all the down-trodden women...” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 29) and restore gender equality is immoral. She cheats with the laws in order to feed her mad pride and shows how “...women are increasingly active in the crime...” (Campaniello, 2014, p. 4).

The feminist fight for gender equality must be virtuous and not malicious because “...an equal society would be a more virtuous one...” (Joseph, 2024, p. 7). One may notice a contrast in the claims of Nana Yaa, which consist in denouncing the fact that traditional laws and history “... are silent over what offices a woman can hold...” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 20), which is a crime – injustice – and thereafter her training of Owusu to “... act a boy...” (Mawugbe, 2008,

p. 28) to inherit the royal stool, which is a crime too. For her, she must at all costs have what artificial tradition deprives her of. Ultimately, the plot of her girl disguising as a boy to inherit the royal throne is lighted upon "The Prince, my noble elders is a girl" (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 87) and Nana Yaa passes away through a heart attack for not being able to support its disclosure "Death has taken away from us the key to this complex puzzle" (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 90). Entering into a pact with the devil to fight socio-political patriarchy is an error. The fight for gender equality is a noble fight which must be nobly and honestly conducted to be fruitful and impactful.

Victimity, the best Reformer

Victimity is "the state, quality, or fact of being a victim" (Turvey, 2014, p. 31). Owusu is guilty of acting like a boy. This is a criminal act that violates traditional law. Her mother, Nana Yaa, throws her into the labyrinth for developing such an unquenchable appetite for power. However, she is not the only culprit for violating the tradition. Her cousin Ekyaa – the daughter of Nana Kwaku Duah II – is also caught by the telescope of tradition.

In fact, Owusu, in her disguised gown as a boy, is sent to the royal palace to be trained as the next king. The cohabitation of the disguised prince with the princess Ekyaa leads to a secret disclosure. Ekyaa falls in love with Owusu without knowing the prince is in fact a girl: "... I have tried hard to stay away from your charming eyes for seven market days without success" (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 51). This feeling of Ekyaa for Owusu is wanted by her father, King Kwaku Duah II: "Well, my father also thinks we will be a very good pair" (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 52) to make her "... his wife, a queen" (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 49) when Owusu becomes king after Kwaku Duah II.

Unfortunately, the plan cannot work because Owusu has never been a boy. For this reason, she rejects Ekyaa's love without openly telling her the truth. Felt offended, Ekyaa vows to make Owusu pay: "All right, we shall see" (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 56). In the face of her threat, Owusu remains firm: "You can not[sic] threaten me" (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 56). The young princess becomes pregnant sometime after: "Ama Ekyaa is her name. A daughter of Royal blood. She harbors in that protruding flesh A seed secretly and wrongly sown Out of acceptable wedlock" (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 80).

During the assembly summoned by King Kwaku Duah II, he puts the judgment of his daughter Ekyaa in Owusu's keeping lest he "... do it with partiality" (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 80). Ekyaa is supposed to die. However, Owusu only wants the author of the pregnancy to die in her place: "So, produce the partner of your guilt. And let us deliver him up to the Executioner for him to die in your stead" (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 82).

But Owusu is surprised at what comes out of the mouth of Ekyaa:

Unfaithful Cousin of mine, Do you this day ask me to tell the world whose fruit I bear in this bulging flesh? Need you ask me to tell you? Don't you know? Have you so soon forgotten the nights we shared together in my chamber? (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 83)

Owusu screams: "That is a lie... I have never..." (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 83). Nevertheless, Ekyaa insists by detailing how they have had many sexual encounters. Owusu is lost and turns

to her mother for help: “Mother, save me...” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 83). The one who is asked to pronounce judgment is made a co-partner of the crime that she is supposed to judge by the culprit. Ekyaa does not know that Owusu is a girl. She harbors a grudge against Owusu and seizes this opportunity to punish the disguised prince in order to save herself and the actual author of her pregnancy.

The situation is more complicated than expected. The audience is confused. Many of them struggle to know what the truth really is. Even the king is confused: “The allegations you are leveling against your cousin are very grave. Can you prove them?” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 85). However, the only way she proves those allegations is that she is a girl and Owusu is a man: “Father, am I not pregnant? And is he not a man? What other proof do you need? Perhaps you think I made myself pregnant?” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 85).

In fact, Ekyaa thinks that her allegations can only humiliate Owusu. She never imagines that some custodians of the tradition will be so rude and ask for the execution of the prince, since she herself:

...has decreed on oath that the culprit shall be granted no hearing. And that the morning of the day after his arrest shall not meet his eyes. Furthermore, his male member shall be cut off and presented in an apampa to all the chiefs, elders and people of Ebusa at a durbar... (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 86)

The appeal of Nana Opong is that “... he is made to dance to the music of our custom about this crime” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 86). He refuses a merciful reading of the traditional law. He only wants the prince to die so that his sex be cut off and exposed publicly. However, the executioner realizes that Owusu is rather a girl and not a boy: “Nananom, the Prince has no male genitals” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 87). He tells the elders: “The Prince, my noble elders, is a girl” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 87). In a nutshell, “He is a she” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 87) and she recognizes it publicly: “I am a girl...” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 89).

In such a situation, Ekyaa is doubly guilty for catching an unlawful pregnancy and for lying about the real author of the pregnancy. She is then to die. Owusu is found guilty for arranging for the boy to inherit a royal throne. The king decides to free Owusu: “My nephew, your true identity has saved you from the lies of my rebellious daughter” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 90). However, the intractable and finicky Nana Opong rejects the decision of King Kwaku Duah II: “I protest, and do so most vehemently! She shall not go free!” (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 90). He sticks to the tradition:

... if we, the elders, the custodians of the customs, that bind our people should sit back and allow tradition to be set aside, our ancestors who watch from underneath, and the children of the children’s children whose mothers and fathers are yet to be born, shall never forgive us. (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 90)

Owusu, as explained by Nana Opong, must die for sitting on the royal stool as an uncrowned woman: “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, p. 91). This reminder binds the hands of the king: “My Dear niece, how I wish I could jump over this wall of custom and rescue you from the

anxious jaws of imminent death. But I can not[sic]. I do not have that power even though I am King" (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 91).

Those words of the king are printed with prudence and caution. The way Nana Opong refers to the traditional laws makes the king wary of falling into a trap. If he releases his niece, Owusu, and his daughter, Ekyaa, uncompromising elders like Nana Opong will find him guilty of the tradition and make him perish. Nana Opong finds facility in calling a death sentence upon them in total and unmalleable respect of the tradition: "Aaah!...what are you waiting for? Executioner! Take them away to the forest where blood is shed, and deal with them as the custom says..." (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 93).

Realizing the dehumanizing onerousness and severity of the traditional laws, the other elders ask for a humanist reading and an amendment of the law. They vote for leniency in the application of the law to preserve the lives of the culprits. 1st address: "Nana Opong, why must they die?" (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 94). However, Nana Opong vigorously objects. He only wants them executed. He replies with a question: "What says the people's custom?" (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 94). Then, his colleague Okyeame Boateng intervenes: "The customs were made not by gods, men made them and therefore can be unmade by men" (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 94).

Consequently, Nana Opong hoists by his own petard. He speaks so harshly because he is blind to the criminal dehumanization that some dispositions of the tradition promote. As it happens that the actual author of Ekyaa's pregnancy, which he calls "...unwanted" (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 95), is his own son "Akwessi Amoako, Nana Opong's son" (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 100), he "...tries to escape but he is apprehended and brought to kneel in front of Daasabre" (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 100). His son has disappeared. So he must die in his place. He has energy and rigor in recalling the punishment that corresponds to the violation of any clause of the traditional law and demands that "... the hard bone of customary contention" (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 95) be chewed. Now that he is a victim, he formulates "... pleas for leniency..." (Mawugbe, 2008, p. 100).

It emerges that traditional law does not accord any sacredness to human life and is unmerciful. A second chance to help change the culprit is not part of the tradition. In this condition, those who are not part of royal lineage are crushed by the law. It is only when the executioners are victims of the rudeness of the law that they find it necessary to amend it. Owusu is a victim of her mother's political obsession and deceptive scheming. She wants to get the author of the pregnancy killed to comply, in a merciless way, with the authority that tradition confers her. She has the latitude to inflict a deathless punishment on the culprit. However, she pronounces death for him because she never imagines that she may for a moment be found in the place or position of the sinner. Just to feed tradition, Nana Opong calls for the merciless execution of Owusu and Ekyaa without putting himself in their place to feel their pains and the pains of their biological parents. When his turn comes, he realizes that the rigidity of the artificial law is like a Damoclean sword hovering over everybody's head.

Discussion

This play is mostly realistic and depicts everyday life regarding patriarchal norms in African societies. It emphasizes the verisimilitude "Likeness to the truth, and therefore the

appearance of being true or real even when fantastic” (Cuddon, 2013, p. 755). It is mostly realistic in its treatment of real social issues, especially gender inequality, patriarchy, and women’s rights. It reflects African – Akan – Ghanaian society, customs, and traditions, grounding it in a recognizable social reality. Efo Kodjo Mawugbe criticizes real societal problems and promotes social change. It is a key feature of realism. In this sense, it fits the tradition of social realism, where literature mirrors society and exposes its injustices.

From a feminist perspective, the play's realism serves as a powerful tool for interrogating patriarchal structures that regulate women’s lives. The female characters – Nana Yaa, Owusu and even Ekyaa – are not merely victims of oppression; they become sites of resistance against gendered power relations that seek to confine them to subordinate positions. Through their experiences, Mawugbe exposes the mechanisms through which patriarchy is normalized and perpetuated within the family and the wider community. The dramatic conflict therefore extends beyond individual struggles and highlights the broader contestation between male authority and female agency. By foregrounding women’s voices and aspirations, the play challenges traditional assumptions about gender roles and advocates a more equitable social order. The representation of women’s resilience and determination underscores the feminist argument that gender inequality is socially constructed rather than natural or inevitable. Through the death and the failure of Nana Yaa’s plan to set Owusu – her girl disguised as a boy – on the royal stool, Mawugbe recommends that feminist struggle be done worthily, ethically, and morally.

Through a postcolonial lens, though the narrative focuses on gender relations, the play simultaneously reflects the complexities of postcolonial African societies where indigenous traditions, colonial legacies, and modern values intersect. The patriarchal customs represented in the play are not presented as static cultural practices but as ideological structures that continue to shape social relations in post-independence African countries. Mawugbe critically examines how certain traditions, often defended in the name of cultural authenticity, contribute to the marginalization of women. In doing so, he participates in a broader postcolonial project that questions inherited systems of domination and advocates social emancipation. The text demonstrates that liberation in postcolonial societies involves not only resistance to external colonial oppression but also the interrogation of internal forms of exploitation and inequality. Thus, the play becomes a vehicle for critiquing oppressive cultural practices while affirming the possibility of social renewal.

Furthermore, a New Historicist reading reveals the close relationship between the text and the socio-historical conditions that have produced it. With New Historicism, Mawugbe’s play *In the Chest of a Woman* – a literary work – is viewed as a product of specific historical and cultural contexts rather than an autonomous artistic creation. The play reflects contemporary debates in Ghanaian society, in particular, and in African societies more generally, concerning gender justice, women’s empowerment, and the tension between tradition and modernity. The social realities represented on stage resonate with historical developments, including increased advocacy for women’s rights, changing family structures, and evolving perceptions of gender roles in Africa. At the same time, the play does not simply reproduce historical realities; it actively participates in the cultural discourse surrounding these issues by questioning dominant

ideologies and encouraging critical reflection. The interaction between literary representation and social history demonstrates how the text both reflects and shapes public understanding of gender relations.

By combining realistic representation with feminist, postcolonial, and historical concerns, Mawugbe transforms the play into a significant social commentary. The realistic portrayal of everyday experiences allows audiences to recognize familiar social practices. At the same time, the feminist critique exposes gender-based oppression, the postcolonial perspective interrogates cultural and ideological legacies, and the New Historicist dimension situates these concerns within broader socio-historical processes. As a result, the play functions not only as a work of artistic expression but also as a critical intervention that challenges entrenched inequalities and promotes social consciousness and change.

Conclusion

This paper on the play *In the Chest of a Woman* exposes, in the first part, the rigidity and the dehumanizing dimensions of some African traditional laws. Through the wayward character Nana Yaa, Efo Kodjo Mawugbe criticizes patriarchal norms that deny women leadership positions simply because of their sex. The play reveals that many customs are artificial structures designed to preserve male supremacy rather than justice and equality. Nana Yaa's struggle, therefore, becomes a symbolic fight against gender oppression and the marginalization of women in African societies.

Second, the paper equally condemns dishonest and violent means used in the quest for gender equality. Nana Yaa's decision to disguise her daughter, Owusu, as a boy and eliminate innocent people in order to protect the secret shows that a noble cause loses its value when pursued through immorality, manipulation, and crime. The exposure of the truth and the tragic consequences that follow demonstrate that justice and reform cannot be built on deception.

Third, the paper highlights the cruelty of inflexible traditional laws, which prioritize customs over human life. Through the character Nana Opong, Mawugbe demonstrates that people often defend rigid laws until they themselves become victims of them. It is only when Nana Opong's own son is implicated that he begins to seek mercy and leniency. The article therefore suggests that traditions and laws should not remain static, as human beings create them and must also revise them to promote justice, compassion, and social harmony. Ultimately, the play advocates a balance between respect for tradition and the protection of human life and sacredness.

The paper reaffirms that *In the Chest of a Woman* offers a compelling social critique of African patriarchy and traditions, advocating for gender justice through ethical means and urging flexible, humane reforms of age-old laws.

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AI Statement

AI Grammarly is used to refine its linguistic aspects. The core intellectual content, data interpretation, and conclusion presented are the author's sole work.

Statement of Absence of Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest related to the research, findings, and recommendations. All conclusions drawn are independent and unbiased.

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