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**Folklore and Commodification of the Female Gender in Efua Sutherland's
*The Marriage of Anansewa***

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Abstract

African writers, specifically the dramatists, skillfully incorporate elements of folklore into their artistic writings to add flavour and portray their authenticity. Folklore includes myths, folktales, legends, festivals, ritual ceremonies, oral poetry, ethno-cultural music, art and crafts, among others. The characters, actions and settings in folklore are creatively presented to the audience for entertainment, character moulding, social cohesion and didactic purposes. In this study, the researchers examine the commodification of the female gender in Efua Sutherland's play *The Marriage of Anansewa* adapted from Akan folktales, with a view to establishing the intellectual but cunning strategy adopted by the protagonist, Ananse, as a strategy for poverty alleviation in a patriarchal society. The research adopts the radical feminist approach, focusing on the exploitation and objectification of the female gender. In the play, Ananse's wretched condition is alleviated by commodifying his daughter, Anansewa who is expected to marry four prominent chiefs. Sutherland's adaptation of the Akan folktale is expository, entertaining and didactic, but the study concludes that poverty triggers dysfunctional thoughts, emotions and behaviours in society.

Key words: dramaturgy, commodification, marriage, adaptation, poverty

Introduction

Over the decades, African literary writers have been incorporating their folklore into their literary productions to show their authenticity and for purposes of documentation. Most literary products, particularly those written by renowned writers such as John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo, Wole Soyinka, Gabriel Okara, Chinua Achebe, Niyi Osundare, Efua Sutherland, Zulu Sofola, Ngugi Wa Thiong'O and so on, contain elements of the oral traditions of their people which gives them a sense of belonging in their cultural societies. Ademola Dasylva and Jegede Bimpe note that "oral literary tradition although often described as belonging to non-literate society transcends the boundaries of time and it still exists side by side with written literature in most nations of the world

today” (39). The inclusion of oral resources into their works promotes and also preserves the rich cultural heritage of their people.

The term oral tradition is used synonymously with orature, folklore, traditional literature, oral literature and folk literature, to mention a few. In this study, oral tradition is used interchangeably with the above concepts. F. B. O. Akporabaro notes that in terms of forms and techniques “African oral literature has not been borrowed from external cultural traditions, and are by and large uncontaminated by western influences. For this reason, they constitute the most authentic expression of the creative intelligence and world-view of the African people” (18). African literature is a vehicle utilized by writers to convey the indigenous knowledge of the people to the outside world. Bade Ajuwon observes that “the oral medium served the people as a bank for the preservation of their ancient experiences and beliefs. Much of the evidence that related to the past of Nigeria therefore could be found in oral tradition” (306). The elements of oral traditions have greatly been infused into creative works of African writers from time immemorial, hence their writings are woven with folklore materials to project African cultures and values.

The term, "folklore" is categorized into material and non-material types. But using the concept of oral literature, we find that there are three broad areas of oral performance: (i) oral narratives that involve myths, legends, riddles, proverbs, and tongue twisters; (ii) oral poetry which covers dirges, work songs, circumcision, marriage, war, hunting, ritual and funeral song-poetry, and (iii) traditional dramatic performances which include cultural festivals, ritual rites, masquerade dance, and so on. All these are integral aspects of folklore acquired and transmitted to successive generations for documentation, character moulding, entertainment, preservation, projection, social cohesion and other purposes. This study, therefore examines folklore and the commodification of the female gender in Efua Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa*. It will specifically explore (i) female gender as a commodity, (ii) the girl child and western education, (iii) folkloric elements in the narrative, and (iv) dramatic techniques used in the play

Research Methodology

This study is library-based. The primary text, Efua Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa*, is purposively selected for this study because of its thematic relevance. The arguments and viewpoints contained in the discourse are adequately substantiated with previously researched articles that are related to the current work. Significant excerpts from the primary text are subjected to literary analysis, and the study finds that poverty triggers dysfunctional thoughts, emotions and behaviours in society.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the radical feminist approach that focuses on the exploitation and objectification of the female gender in social-cultural settings. Remmy Oriaku defines Feminism as “an attitude as well as a movement both of which are informed by a notion of male dominance of society and a concomitant marginalisation of women” (130). The issue of patriarchy and marginalization of women has continuously received criticism from writers and researchers over the decades. Despite the intensified agitation for equal rights and opportunities for both men and women in the society, significant progress remains elusive as literary writings have shown in recent times. I. A. Ibeku notes that feminism is “women-oriented and concentrates on issues that concern women. It is a literary movement that tends to bring about a change in the society especially on how women are treated; it tries to discourage discrimination and humiliation on women; it focuses its attention on emancipation of women” (427). Ebunoluwa Mobolanle finds that; “whether as a theory, a social

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IUO-JELS, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 109-118 (2025)

movement or a political movement, feminism focuses on women's experiences and highlights various forms of oppression which the female gender is subjected to in the society" (5-6). Gloria Fwangyil observes that women struggle for several reasons to:

liberate themselves from male oppression and dominance and also to better their lot in the society, women have tended to organize themselves into socio-political groups...through this process, they strive towards emancipating themselves and ensuring the attainment of equal social status and access to opportunities with the men. (262)

The oppression, subjugation and exploitation of women are products of patriarchal systems socially constructed to men's advantage. Jonas Akung and Eto Simon observe that: "The victimisation, oppression and marginalisation of women in Africa has remained a global concern. This is because women throughout Africa have continued to face different forms of injustice, which often infringe on their fundamental rights" (51).

Grace Okereke notes that "the acute awareness and deep sensitivity to society's definition of masculinity and femininity is based on the attribution of specific traits, behaviours, abilities and roles to men and women. It refers to the awareness of patriarchal society's pigeonholing of individuals into two major opposing groups based on sex – men and women" (161). The researcher further reveals that "while masculinity is accorded positive attributes of strength, boldness, subjectivity, activeness, power and therefore superiority; femininity is accorded the direct opposing negative attributes of weakness, timidity, objectivity, passivity, powerlessness and, therefore, inferiority" (164). In similar research, R. Seldon and Peter Windowson observe that, "discrimination and bias against women have been in the human society since early times as reflected in the teachings of the influential philosophers such as Aristotle and St. Aquina" (203). Modupe Kolawole asserts that "the hold that tradition has on some African people is so tremendous that they will place cultural acquiescence over existing laws designed to facilitate women's mobilization" (2). The researcher further notes that the reasons "for bride price in Africa include viewing it as a sign of appreciation to the parents of the bride and also as a sign of bond that ties the two families together." The payment of bride price is an archetypal practice that spreads across various cultures in Africa, including the Akan in Ghana. This theoretical framework is therefore relevant to the present study since it explores the thematic concerns that border round the exploitation of the women gender in a patriarchal African society.

Literature Review

In this study, illuminating scholarly works will be reviewed in order to add value to the current research.

Anne Adams and Efua Sutherland-Addy note that "the terms 'oral literature', 'oral tradition' 'orality', 'orature' and for that matter, 'folklore', is sometimes used interchangeably to mean 'elements such as language and belief systems that are shared by a group; that which gives a community its cultural and national identity'" (2). This study, however, adopts the concept of folklore which is broader in scope. Charles Nnolim argues that: "By folklore we mean the unrecorded tradition of a people as they appear in their popular fiction, custom, belief, magic, ritual, superstition and proverbial sayings. Folklore also includes myths, legends, stories, omens, charms, spells found among a homogeneous group of people" (35-47). The scholar however argues that "the most inclusive part of folklore is the folktale; a popular tale handed down by oral tradition

from a more or less remote antiquity and usually told either about animals or the common folk, to draw attention to their plight and to teach a lesson.”

Kammampool Bawa et al. state: “Folklore is an oral history that is preserved by the people of the culture, consisting of traditions belonging to a specific culture. These traditions usually include music, stories, proverbs, history, legends, idioms, folktales, riddles, myths, customs, legends, beliefs, magic, folksongs, charms, spells, incantations, superstitions and myths” (33). Owomoyela Oyekan, corroborating the statement of Bawa et al., notes that “there is hardly any phase of tradition and life that is not affected or regulated by some aspect of the folklore, because it is the medium through which the behavioural values of the community, the cumulative wisdom and technology devised by bygone ages are made available to the present generation and preserved for posterity” (272). The above research adds value to the present study, particularly the folktale as a dramatic text. Gloria Worugji and Effiong Effiom explore female freedom in the selected plays of three African female playwrights, which include Zulu Sofola’s *Wedlock of the Gods*, Efua Sutherland’s *The Marriage of Anansewa* and Tess Onwueme’s *Then She Said It*. From the perspective of African feminism, the scholars establish that “female freedom and her total emancipation from traditional claws and the leverage to aspire to her fullest potentials is the focus” (39). Rosemary Asen examines the issues of bride price practices projected in the plays of two African playwrights, Sutherland’s *Marriage of Anansewa* and Sofola’s *Wedlock of the gods*. The scholar finds that “in the former play, Ananse uses his daughter as a means of solving his economic problems through her bride price while in the later play, some consequences of exorbitant bride price are projected” (32). The study illuminates the present research since the subject matters of bride price and woman exploitation are common to both studies. This research however deviates from the foregoing by examining the commodification of female gender in the dramaturgy.

Bawa et al. establish that “*The Marriage of Anansewa* is an adaptation and exploitation of the indigenous Akan storytelling tradition. The paper also establishes that, both content and technique of contemporary African drama is a reflection of the oral story telling performance. It concludes that the contribution of these writers have played a huge role in sustaining the African tradition and culture” (33). Again, this research adds value to the current study by focusing on storytelling tradition in Akan society. Mary Adebayo notes that, “*The Marriage of Anansewa* is an adaptation of the oral story telling performance in Ghana known as Anansesem. Efua Sutherland’s intention is to preserve oral tradition and by doing this, the culture and core of African values are embedded in this play” (33).

The foregoing studies add significant value to the current research since they focus on folklore and illuminating previous works on the selected primary text. Scholarship shall be extended by exploring the commodification of women in the adapted African play.

Female Gender as Commodity

Folklore, especially storytelling, is an integral aspect of culture that cuts across various societies because of its utilitarian functionalities. Among the Zulu of Southern Africa; the Malinka spread across West Africa; the Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, Urhobo and Ijaw speaking people of Nigeria; and Akan-speaking people of Ghana, storytelling abounds for entertainment and transmission of indigenous knowledge to other generations. *The Marriage of Anansewa* as a dramatic work begins and ends with song performance which is common in African storytelling settings. It presents Ananse and his daughter, Anansewa, who are battling with impoverishment and how to overcome the untold hardship confronting the family. In order to elevate the family above the shackles of abject poverty and humiliation, Ananse devises a web-like trick of offering his daughter, *IUO-JELS*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 109-118 (2025)

<https://jels.iuokada.edu.ng/current-issue>

Anansewa to four wealthy chiefs. The objectification and commodification of the female gender started time immemorial, as could be found in the Akan story telling art known as “Ansesem.” It has been a bailout or escapist route employed by parents who experienced economic hardship in patriarchal societies. Studies have shown that in African societies, women are often marginalized, subdued and exploited by their male counterparts. Olabisi Aina finds that “women have always lived under the domination of men as a lower group and have endured marginalization. They were considered inferior to the male folks through a combination of gender-based culture and traditional practices in favour of men” (qtd. in Dagunduro and Adenugba).

The plight of Ananse in this play is universal because some parents still indulge in arranged marriages which correlates with the commodification of the girl-child. The drama opens with Ananse complaining about his wretchedness and how nature connives with poverty to deal with him:

While life is whipping you, rain also pours
down to whip you some more. Whatever
it was that man did wrong at the beginning
of things must have been really awful for
all of us to have to suffer so. (1)

The protagonist has observed that in human existence, nature and socio-economic background are conditions that can degrade man. He finds that poverty is an archetypal condition that has brought torment and psychological suffering to humanity. Poverty is a universal phenomenon but Ananse’s condition appears to be extra-ordinary since he finds it difficult to feed, pay his daughter’s school fees, and attend social functions and church activities.

Female Gender and Western Education

The dramatic performance also reveals the economic importance of educating the girl child, unlike what was practised in some cultural societies in the past. In retrospect, women were seen as sex-objects and baby factories in socio-cultural settings. However, by the time this narrative was composed, the Akan culture and society had likely experienced the impact of western education and modernization. Ananse trains his daughter and also seeks her knowledge and acquired skills of typewriting to produce the letters for the four prominent chiefs and suitors he has arranged to marry Anansewa without her consent. He calls his daughter for quick services:

Anansewa-a! where is the typewriter
Of yours? Bring it here. I ‘ve been thinking,
Thinking and thinking, until my head is
Earthquaking. Won’t somebody who
Thinks he has discovered the simple
Solution for living this life kindly step
Forward and help out the rest of us? (2)

The impoverished state of Ananse’s family causes him mental fragmentation as he becomes confused and helpless to unravel the mystery behind his penury and the possible measure to alleviate it and escape his emotional distress. In the above excerpt, Ananse seeks the opinions of the audience and society at large, asking if there could be everlasting solution to the existential struggle that has engulfed his family in particular and the society in general. The silence of the

IUO-JELS, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 109-118 (2025)

<https://jels.iuokada.edu.ng/current-issue>

listeners, however, affirms that human existence is characterized with turbulence and disillusionment. He asks: "Brother, could it be you? Mother, how about you? Nobody?" The foregoing does not provide the expected response to Ananse which depicts the hardship that mars the world of humankind.

Marriage and Social Mobility

The outcome of Ananse's plot-web also includes an elevation from the lower social class to the envious wealthy and celebrated class where he could meet social and religious obligations in society. He asserts thus: "I haven't finished. Apart from things like that, and above all, when you return, will there be a better, leak-proof roof over our heads? Let alone some comfortable chairs to sit in? A fridge in the kitchen? A car in the garage?" (4). Ananse further intimates his daughter about the need for social mobility to the upper class, hence, he asks Anansewa: "My name on invitation lists for state functions? Embassies' parties? Tell me, tell me. Will I be able to go to memorial services, this week in a fine cloth, next week in a suit or different cloth? Will I be able, if I go, to thrust my hand confidently into my pocket in public and take out a five-guinea donation?"

The impoverishment of Ananse's family prevents him from church and social activities. The playwright employs the dramatic work to expose the wretched plight of some Christians in the hands of religious priests, especially where worshippers "rise, walk up, and deposit their money in the plate." According to the skimmer and protagonist, he has skipped church services severally: "Tell me, how many times have I missed going to church because there is nothing in my pocket to deposit in full view of the public? And after you have gone out and returned home, here, will I be any better off for going to church?" (4). The commercialization of Christianity resonates in this dramatic work because of its effects on every individual in the society. Efua Sutherland exposes the diversion of the focus of the church from soul winning for Jesus Christ to an inordinate quest for material wealth. Most of the members, represented by Ananse, who could not afford the financial obligation have resolve to remain at home. The churches are expected to promote righteousness, love and harmonious co-existence. All these emanate from the unconscious mind, which is the storehouse of instinctual drives, repressed feelings, and experience. According to Freudian view, "the mind is responsible for both conscious and unconscious decisions based on drives and forces. Unconscious desires motivate people to act accordingly" (Shahwan 1). The decision of Ananse in the adapted folktale is informed by his impoverishment and the embarrassment in society.

Efua Sutherland, through this artistic work, further exposes the cultural practice of Africans, especially that of the Akan in Ghana, during funeral ceremonies. Ananse draws the attention of his daughter to the occasion of his funeral thus: "Finally, when I breathe my last and die, will my coffin be drawn in a fine, private hearse instead of a municipal hearse? Will the people who come to my funeral eat salad and small chops ...? Tell me? (5). The Centre for Rights Education and Awareness 2013 claims that "the wealth received compensates them for time and trouble taken to raise a daughter who will be sent off to live with another family. For others, it is viewed as compensation for loss of a daughter's economic services or for the children she adds to her new family" (7). Ananse's plot in this adapted play is designed to address his basic necessities and make life meaningful to Anansewa and himself.

Anansewa has therefore been reduced to a sexual object and a commodity through a carefully arranged marriage without her consent. Ananse asks, "How can I ever forget that you have done me great honour? To show my gratitude I will guard the object of your interest...with all the vigilance in my power" (6). The playwright through this dramaturgy activates the

consciousness of readers about the primordial practice of arranged marriage even though it is against the dreams and desires of women. Samuel Okafor, a critic, finds that, “societies world over have different interpretations and values for sexual union such that, while others see it as sacred and impinging on a group’s norms and value, many more see it as an individual affair which has little or nothing to do with a group’s norms especially in the modern societies” (1). In this play, Anansewa’s attempt to resist this age-long imposition proves abortive:

ANANSEWA: Of course what? You ‘re making me
feel like crying. What have you done to me,
eh? Eh? Who said I wanted to marry a
chief, eh? Who told those old chiefs of yours?
Have they ever seen me?

ANANSE: Who told you they are old? You ‘ve
never set eyes on them. They, of course, have
seen you.

ANANSEWA: Where?

ANANSE: They have seen your photographs. (11)

Sunita Peacock notes that “the character of Ananse has a loss of memory of his culture because of his need for a fridge, a fan, and funds for church; thus embracing the colonial ideal of western materialism. But on the other hand, Sutherland also gives her universal audience Ghanaian culture adapting its past to its decolonized present” (403).

Libations and Atonement

The playwright infused the traditional practice of pouring libations to ancestors which is a common practice across African societies. In the play, Ananse pours libation to plead with his ancestors to restore Anansewa’s life and to enable her marry the suitor, Chief-Who-Is-Chief, who has genuinely shown love to her. Anansewa as a character is beautiful, devoted, intelligent, humble and submissive to her father despite the untold hardship the family experiences. However, her death is considered as a great loss to Chief-Who-Is-Chief and according to his First Messenger:

This Chief-Who-Is-Chief, who was eager to blend his blood with yours and
become a member of your family, wishes me to inform you about the
painful grief, and add that he accepts responsibility for everything
concerning the woman who had but one more step to take to enter his home.
Therefore, from his hands to yours here are all requirements for her funeral.
(76)

To demonstrate his profound love to Anansewa, Chief-Who-Is-Chief buys her an engagement ring, and gives Ananse a bag of money for her funeral ceremony and beautiful cloths to prepare the bed. He provides drinks, including “a bottle of Schnapps with which the farewell libation is poured when his beloved one is being placed in the coffin” (77). The Chief singlehandedly purchases and sends “his coffin, one made of glass” which he feels befits the status of Anansewa. The conflict of the plot is resolved when Ananse pours libation and pleads for his ancestors to restore Anansewa back to life:

You who are lying there!
Anansewa!
I 'm calling you!
Listen with the ancestors;

Chief-Who-Is-Chief
The-man-fit-for-a-husband
Has sent his money
Has sent his cloths
Has sent his drink
Which I hold in my hand;

The above pronouncements are meant to activate the mental consciousness of Anansewa to return to life and marry Chief-Who-Is-Chief who Ananse strongly believes to be qualified to marry his daughter. He does not only provide all the items for the funeral ceremony, but also buys the coffin and sends the money, "far more than what custom prescribes for him" (79). This rite portrays the belief of Africans about the dead and their expected responsibility. Ananse dubiously exploits the customary rites of head-drink ceremony to acquire wealth and become famous in his society.

Dramatic Techniques in the Text

In the play, Efua Sutherland employs various dramatic techniques to convey her subject matter and advance the plot- structure. The play begins with the existential philosophy about life. The PLAYERS in their popular songs provide insight into the content of the dramaturgy. The song reveals the existential concepts of struggle and pain which characterize human life thus: "Oh life is a struggle, /Oh life is a pain; /Oh life is a struggle, / Oh life is a pain/ In this world" (1). The above excerpt foretells the wretchedness of the protagonist, Ananse, whose low socio-economic background adversely affects his family wellbeing. The Mboguo musical performance provides an interlude and contributes toward the development of actions and plots of the drama. There are eight Mboguo song performances throughout the play and it is observed that Mboguo songs led by specialist groups often begin storytelling sessions among the Akan. Sutherland reveals that "Anansesem musical performances are called *Mboguo*. Many of the Mboguo are part and parcel of the stories themselves and are performed in context, led by the storyteller" (vi). The playwright further states that "the singing of Mboguo song is usually accompanied by hand-clapping with slightly cupped hands and drumming, with castanets and a gong instrument providing the rhythmic control" (vii).

Another dramatic device employed is the storytelling technique. The storyteller narrates the entire story adapted from the folktale of the Akan people at regular intervals. As the dirge is performed, the players and the storyteller provide insight into the events in Ananse's family. The deployment of the storytelling style gives the dramatic work an authentic flavour of the African tradition of oral narratives, particularly the folktales. The technique of audience participation is also introduced into the play as could be found in most socio-cultural settings especially during moonlight. Since Africans are lively people, there is also the tendency for the audience to participate actively in storytelling but such involvement must be brought under control by the storyteller.

Conclusion

The study shows that African writers adapt various aspects of folklore in their literary writings. Some writers draw on myths, legends, folktales, festivals, and rituals, to mention a few. Efua Sutherland has demonstrated her creative skills through adaptation and dramatization of the Akan folktale for an audience. Her portrayal of artistic ingenuity and imaginative skills has transported folklore, particularly folktales that are currently facing threat of extinction to another phase of development in her society. Tales are not only narrated in traditional societies but also preserved and showcased to the outside world through dramatic production. Usman Bukar emphasizes the need “to revive the age-old practice of telling children intrinsic tales by preserving in writing the best folktales, many of which are believed to be fast disappearing as their human repositories pass on” (34). The adapted play revolves around Ananse who designed a web to escape from the stronghold of abject poverty by arranging marriage for her daughter, Anansewa. The creative work portrays a society where the female gender is subjugated, objectified and commodified for the advantage of their male counterparts.

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