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Dans un environnement marqué par la croissance, sans cesse, des productions scientifiques, la diffusion et la promotion des acquis de la recherche deviennent un impératif pour les acteurs du monde scientifique. Perçues comme un patrimoine, un héritage à léguer aux générations futures, les productions scientifiques doivent briser les barrières et les frontières afin d'être facilement accessibles à tous.

Ainsi, s'inscrivant dans la dynamique du temps et de l'espace, la revue « **AKIRI** » se présente comme un outil de promotion et de diffusion des résultats des recherches des enseignants-chercheurs et chercheurs des universités et de centres de recherches de Côte d'Ivoire et d'ailleurs. Ce faisant, elle permettra aux enseignants-chercheurs et chercheurs de s'ouvrir davantage sur le monde extérieur à travers la diffusion de leurs productions intellectuelles et scientifiques.

AKIRI est une revue à parution trimestrielle de l'Unité de Formation et de Recherches (UFR) : Communication, Milieu et Société (CMS) de l'Université Alassane Ouattara. Elle publie les articles dans le domaine des Sciences humaines et sociales, Lettres, Langues et Civilisations. Sans toutefois être fermée, cette revue privilégie les contributions originales et pertinentes. Les textes doivent tenir compte de l'évolution des disciplines couvertes et respecter la ligne éditoriale de la revue. Ils doivent en outre être originaux et n'avoir pas fait l'objet d'une acceptation pour publication dans une autre revue à comité de lecture.

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La revue *AKIRI* n'accepte que des articles inédits et originaux dans diverses langues notamment en allemand, en anglais, en espagnol et en Français. Le manuscrit est remis à deux instructeurs, choisis en fonction de leurs compétences dans la discipline. Le secrétariat de la rédaction communique aux auteurs les observations formulées par le comité de lecture ainsi qu'une copie du rapport, si cela est nécessaire. Dans le cas où la publication de l'article est acceptée avec révisions, l'auteur dispose alors d'un délai raisonnable pour remettre la version définitive de son texte au secrétariat de la revue

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A Call for a New Order: The Rise of a New Breed of Women and the Quest for Power in Mawugbe's *In the Chest of a Woman*

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Abstract

The various forms of injustice suffered by women and their lack of self-fulfilling opportunities can lead them to insanity and all sorts of crippling diseases. Efo Kodjo Mawugbe has shown understanding and sincerity in portraying a female character as an active heroine exhibiting her willingness to overthrow unfairness when it comes to women's rights. The playwright skillfully deploys his sense of feminism by questioning the unfairness of tradition regarding women and their means to overcome the weight of it. This tradition put into place by men in patriarchal societies can be unmade by the same men. Taking Mawugbe's *In the Chest of a Woman* as a role model of women's quest for power, this essay argues how they can go to greater lengths – including their self-mutilation – in their quest for power for gender equity's sake.

Key words: Body representation, obsession, power, tradition, oppression.

Un appel pour un nouvel ordre : L'ascension d'une nouvelle race de femmes et la quête du pouvoir dans le livre de Mawugbe, *Dans la poitrine d'une femme*

Résumé

L'oppression sous ses diverses formes et le manque d'épanouissement des femmes peuvent les conduire à la démence et à toutes sortes de maladies invalidantes. Efo Kodjo Mawugbe a fait montre d'une compréhension et d'une sincérité honnête en présentant une héroïne hors pair qui s'est battue contre l'injustice faite aux femmes en revendiquant leurs droits dans *In the Chest of a Woman*. Dans sa pièce théâtrale, le dramaturge a donc habilement déployé son sens du féminisme en questionnant l'injustice faite aux femmes et mis en exergue les moyens que ces dernières utilisent pour renverser le poids de la tradition. La tradition créée par le patriarcat peut également être démontée par les mêmes acteurs. Prenant *In the Chest of a Woman* de Mawugbe comme modèle de rôle de la quête du pouvoir par les femmes, cet essai argumente comment ces dernières ne lésinent pas sur les moyens – y compris leur propre mutilation – pour parvenir à cette fin.

Mots clés : Représentation du corps, obsession, pouvoir, tradition, oppression.

Introduction

For some decades now, women's issues have been at the core of many literary productions because the study of African literature, according to many critics, has long been the preserve of male writers (M. J. Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997: 2). As a weapon in the hands of



writers, literature tends to denounce and correct many aspects of people's lives from socio-political issues down to social challenges.

Most writers, so far, have used their writings to attack and correct some biased institutions established by tradition in order to reconstruct a new society in their creative writings where both men and women can live in harmony. Oftentimes, male novelists have been blamed by female writers and critics for not creating active and strong women in their pieces of fiction. In this respect, Chinua Achebe's trilogy – *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God* and *No Longer at Ease* – is quite revealing. *Things Fall Apart*, for instance, represents a world where the women's key role remains relatively static while the men are confronted with the cultural disintegration brought about by the coming of the whites (M. M. E. Kolawole, 1997: 112 & 118). Furthermore, Modupe Mary E. Kolawole ironically believes that Achebe is no longer at ease in the construction of women with limited roles. The walls of the harem confining women have collapsed and Achebe can no longer hold on to the peripheral roles that are contrary to the reality of the African woman in a changing modern society. Women are therefore seen participating dynamically in an on-going social change. Injustice, oppression with regard to women's rights and their lack of self-fulfillment can lead these women to insanity and depression beyond boundaries.

Unlike Achebe's fiction, Mawugbe's play, *In the Chest of a Woman*, deals with women's quest for power and shows understanding and sincerity in the need to portray a female character as an active individual exhibiting her strong desire to confront the unfairness suffered by women. The play constitutes an interesting effort to redefine the place of women in African society and rearticulates active roles they play and can play in the context of nation-building. Mawugbe skillfully deploys, throughout his play, a commitment to feminism by questioning the unfairness of tradition regarding women and their means to overcome the obstacles of tradition. For him, patriarchal traditions woven by men can be broken by the same stakeholders. In this respect, the early wave of radical feminism strongly questioned and opposed the representations of women in texts by male authors and called for change. This is seen in Anne Koedt (in S. Ruth, 1998: 491-2) who acknowledges that "radical feminism recognizes the oppression of women as a fundamental political reality wherein women are categorized as an inferior class based upon their sex". Radical feminists get organized politically to destroy this sex-class system. For Jonathan Culler (1997: 126), feminist theorists champion the identity of women, demand rights for women, and promote women's writings as representations of the experience of women. Similarly, Ethel Klein



(1984: 86) holds that the formation of a feminist constituency requires a radical change in people's understanding of women's experiences. It demands a rejection of biological explanations for women's roles and an acceptance of the inherent equality between men's and women's rights. In order to claim the said rights, women can sometimes use their bodies as a key instrument for that purpose.

This study examines, on the one hand, women's quest for power by all means, irrespective of the weapon to be used to achieve their goals; on the other hand, it aims at unraveling the obscure role tradition plays in women's enslavement.

1. Nana Yaa, the Epitome of Power

For most female writers and critics, male writers portray in their works the female sex the way they perceive it in real life. From Achebe to contemporary male writers, the representation of strong and self-fulfilled women has not always been a common practice. For Damlègue Lare (2017: 48), patriarchal society lays too much emphasis on the social functions of men as public decision-makers, heirs to family properties, community leaders and wisdom-keepers, thus relegating women to the positions of home-keepers, child-bearers and housewives. In sum, women are an appendage to men. This explains why the space occupied by African women, in contemporary discourse on women, is still a domain that has not been adequately explored by women themselves and men of good will, despite an increasing interest from both the continent and elsewhere (M. M. E. Kolawole, 1997: 3).

Patriarchy, an omnipresent system of female subjugation and male domination (J. Mitchell, 1973: 65), thrives on female oppression. Mawugbe is fully aware of its corrosive effects on women in most African settings both in reality and in literature; hence this playwright's decision to create a brave and outstanding female character, a woman with inalienable rights who takes part in nation-building as a qualified individual, breaking the long-held unbending gender tradition. In his *In the Chest of a Woman*, Mawugbe mainly addresses the problematic of women's inheritance of power in the context of tradition and how the new breed of women struggles to take back what was stolen from them. Kangnivi Kodjovi (2016: 29) concurs that the question of women's right is rather their rejection of the imposed identity – weaker sex, house-keeper, inferior, less intelligent, to mention but a few – men have reserved for them over generations.

What Kodjovi refers to as “the wrong identity” implies the identity imposed on women by male-dominated society, an identity contrasting sharply with women's deep inner feeling.



Entailing social incompetency, moral degradation, lack of possibilities and individual progress (T. Dangarembga, 1988: 118), this identity has been created over the generations by tradition which stands for stability and fixity. The central female character in Mawugbe's play knows that for a woman's life – or any human's life for that matter – to be fulfilled, it needs to be sustained by both physical and symbolic movements. The new breed of women in real life and in literature is getting equipped to initiate these movements. The point being made here is obvious from the following excerpt:

Nana Yaa: (**Rising up sharply, cutting short the applause from the elders**) This is nonsense!

(**There is instant silence**)

It is most unacceptable to me,

Mother, if this is what you call honour,

Then may I beg to be dishonoured immediately.

Queen Mother: Why... my princess, why?

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

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

1st 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.

2nd Elder: That is what has been the practice since time immemorial (E. K. Mawugbe, 2008: 18-19)

The playwright creates a courageous and ambitious heroine: Nana Yaa. The play is set in traditional Ghana where chieftaincy and kingship are at the core of a conflict between siblings – a brother and his sister. Their mother, the Queen Mother, occupies the throne, wearing the crown as the first female ruler of the Ebusa Kingdom. At the threshold of her death she calls her two heirs Nana Yaa and Kwaku Duah. The Queen Mother bequeaths the whole kingdom to the male heir and just some townships to the female heir. Customarily and irrespective of her sex, Nana Yaa is to reign because she is the first-born. Faced with such a horrible injustice, Nana Yaa decides to fight for the throne, using every necessary means.

For Akachi Ezeigbo (1996: xv), the responsibilities and limitations that come with being a female in a male-dominated society constitute realities that every woman is aware of. Raised in a culture in which the strict role of differentiation was and still is strongly advocated by tradition, especially in adult life, the female is always reminded of her so-called "natural" roles as a wife and a mother. For some time now, many critics – both males and females – have been revisiting the "naturalness" of these roles and attempting to



deconstruct them. Charles C. Fonchingong (2006: 144) argues that “with the onset of the feminist movement and the attempts to re-constitute the distorted image of the female gender, most male writers are revisiting their earlier approaches by presenting women in an all rounded perspective.” Cornelius Murphy F. (1995: 16) is of the view that a society is organized along patriarchal lines whenever women are excluded by law or custom from political participation and lack the full legal capacities necessary for the exercise of all civic and personal rights.

To a large extent, tradition aims to deprive women of their rights as modern citizens in most African societies. Nana Yaa’s aim is to put an end to the horrible effect tradition has on females. Her reaction toward the injustice she is facing shows the need to change the status quo in women’s lives. This situation, according to Kolawole (1997: 153), “is closely related to the desire to liberate African women, change their consciousness and recreate a positive self-perception to enhance progress”. For power’s sake, Nana Yaa is prepared to fight the kingdom’s elders. She is verbally bold and physically courageous enough to defeat any male provocation. Briefly put, she is the opposite of what a woman was supposed to be in the patriarchal definition of womanhood, i.e. low level of physical activity, submissiveness to men’s power and physical strength (N. H. Mugambi and T. J. Allan, 2010: 13). If anything, Nana Yaa’s caustic rebuttal to detractors who questioned her sexual status entails that her womanhood is reconstructed on the new foundations of empowerment, freedom, emancipation and social vitality: “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 of the opposite sex. Who are men anyway?” (E. K. Mawugbe, 2008: 19).

In the process of seeking to quench her thirst for justice and fairness, she redefines womanhood by verbally provoking the men around her mother:

Elders: (Shouting angrily) Hey! Watch your tongue! Watch your words!
Yaa Serwaa, be very careful.

Nana Yaa: I’ll say it again and again and yet again.
Men are the most bloodthirsty, destructive, unthinking, childish...

1st Elder: (roaring with anger) Look here, little girl...

Nana Yaa: (very sharply) Who is your little girl? (E. K. Mawugbe, 2008: 21; bold in original)

At this key stage of the play, Nana Yaa is not only revising the master discourse represented by tradition, but also replacing it with an alternative discourse, as shown in the following conversation:



Elders: Look, our man has fallen. (**Nana quickly kicks the knife far off and sits on him and pins him to the ground**) **Nana Yaa:** I have got you now. (**She lifts the knife and is about to bury it in his chest**) I am going to...

Queen Mother: No, stop it!

My daughter, stop where you are. Go not further. (E. K. Mawugbe, 2008: 23-24; bold in original)

After the show of force, the Queen Mother has her name changed from Serwaa to Kyeretwie, meaning “the leopard tamer” – in reference to her masterful handling of Nana Yaa’s anger (E. K. Mawugbe, 2008: 26). A physically strong woman who proves that manhood is not necessarily synonymous with courage, Nana Yaa symbolises power and authority in women’s actions. Mawugbe’s craftsmanship herein grounds Lare’s (2017: 48) admission that women can be as brave as men. To be sure, this playwright has shown his readership a new breed of women endowed with what was traditionally thought to be male inner features (K. Kodjovi, 2016: 29).

2. Psychological Mutilation

In her drive for a new style of power, Nana Yaa psychologically mutilates her only daughter. An outrage which deprives women of their most delicate, precious and important sexual organ, mutilation usually refers to female excision, a widespread tradition found in many cultures across the globe, especially in Africa, Asia and some parts of South America, with devastating consequences on women’s health (S. Salami- Boukari, 2012: 25 & 34). To trust Waris Dirie and Cathleen Miller (1998: 193), these consequences range from immediate complications – frequent bladder infections, damage to the urethra or anus, tetanus, septicemia, hepatitis, etc – to long-term complications, including recurrent urinary and pelvic infections, abscesses around the vulva, difficult urination, frigidity, sterility, depression, etc. Many female activists, writers and researchers denounce that horrible practice inflicted on women, given its lifelong physical scars and psychological harms to women’s health. One of these women, Ezeigbo (1996: 35), wonders why any rational human would expose his or her daughter to such a horrible and traumatising experience. Although Owusu, Nana Yaa’s daughter, was not physically mutilated, she was compelled to disguise herself as a boy. Arguably, Nana Yaa’s behavior is selfish, cruel and oppressive. As Denise Brahimy and Anne Trevarthen (1998: 14) put it, “Il peut arriver aussi que les femmes en lutte ne soient pas sympathiques, et que dans leur volonté de réussite, elles fassent beaucoup de dégâts”¹.

¹ It can also happen that struggling women might not be sympathetic, and with their will to succeed, they can cause much damages. Translation is mine.



Indeed, to quench her thirst for power, Nana Yaa has gone the extra mile and dismally failed to limit her damages. However, to solve the thorny problem of succession and “pacify her conscience” before her death, the Queen Mother skillfully brings an innovation to the succession rule. Challenging her two children, potential candidates to the throne, then, she wisely comes up with one last edict to her heirs’ intention, an edit stipulating “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. [...] My mother, for once, set the custom aside” (E. K. Mawugbe, 2008: 26). This new given prompts Nana Yaa and her husband to visit all the kingdom’s powerful shrines for fortune-telling about their potential progeny’s sex. Against oracles’ predictions of a son, the couple got a baby girl (E. K. Mawugbe, 2008: 26). Also, at the end of the day and for poetic justice’s sake, both heirs have girls as offspring.

Why has the author chosen not to bring in new male stakeholders? Who says women are not intelligent? Nana Yaa rejected her child’s female sex and psychologically mutilated her by disguising her into a boy. From childhood to her current teenage-hood, Ekua becomes a boy, named Owusu. Nana Yaa confesses: “I quickly took steps to hide your true identity so that you could succeed your uncle Kwaku Duah when he died” (E. K. Mawugbe, 2008: 27). The day eventually comes when Nana Yaa has to tell the truth. She confesses to her daughter/son the genesis of her current status. For the purpose of ascending the throne, she was capable of concealing the real sex of her child, even the midwife who stood by her bed when she was in labour had to lose her tongue for fear that she might speak (E. K. Mawugbe, 2008: 28). She further confesses that many people (Owusu’s father included) have to lose their lives just to keep her true identity secret: “Do you know that I had to poison your father because at a point he couldn’t bear it any longer and swore to tell the world you were a girl?” (E. K. Mawugbe, 2008: 28), she boldly told her daughter.

Ekua *alias* Owusu found it difficult to enjoy her womanhood. The child unwillingly becomes a psychological transsexual. A transsexual is somebody who permanently changes genitals in order to claim membership of a gender other than the one s/he is born with, while a transgender is someone who permanently changes social gender through the public presentation of self, without recourse to genital transformation. In other words, according to Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (2006: 4), “transsexuals are profoundly psychopathological individuals who mutilated their bodies and believed in oppressive gender stereotypes and held reactionary political views”. In the current situation, the child does not choose her status. Transsexuality is imposed on Ekua (a girl) turned Owusu (a boy). Anyway,



although Ekua does not go through physical surgery, some elderly women in the kingdom recognise such a feminine beauty in his body (E. K. Mawugbe, 2008: 39).

Furthermore, she is compelled to put herself into a boy's body and to act accordingly. In a complaint Owusu moans: "I... I... want to be a girl and taste the joy of womanhood. I have suffered far too long" (E. K. Mawugbe, 2008: 29). Owusu shows that there are always two sides to a coin and she would like to tell us her side of her own story: this implies the truth about womanhood. As a matter of fact, she feels she is a woman on the inside and at such she is entitled to both the joys and the sufferings of womanhood. Though the female is confronted with her insignificance and subservient role in society and is literally forced to internalise these images condemning her to a life of perpetual dependence and difference (A. Ezeigbo, 1996: 74), Owusu is proud of being a woman, as her longing to taste womanhood – sexuality, marriage and the family – attests to it.

Mawugbe is out to convince any reader that no one needs to change his/her sex to be happy. Nana Yaa's insanity kills her own daughter's being and self-fulfillment, an irreversible damage to her psyche. Nana Yaa, in her search for self-definition, self-valorisation and self-retrieval, convinces her child to be happy in her own terms by evoking female bond:

Nana Yaa: You have suffered, I agree. But nobody likes suffering to no purpose. Suffering should be creative.
It should give birth to something good, substantive, meaningful.
Something lovely and lasting,
And what's that thing?
The STOOL!
Yes, my child, the stool shall be your reward.
The shining trophy to crown your long suffering.
(Passionately)
Will you go ahead and play the game to the end?
Don't think about me! Think about womanhood... Think about us...
Your fellow sisters, all the down-trodden women out there. It is for them you are doing this great sacrifice of honour. Will you do it? (E. K. Mawugbe, 2008: 29; capitals in original)

Seen from Kolawole's (1997: 194) lenses, she advocates togetherness, unity or coalition, the literal meaning of *Umoja*. A Swahili concept which happens to be an apt and relevant African womanist theory, *Umoja* underscores harmony in diversity and underlies the theory that African women's consciousness is a mosaic. Nana Yaa has her only daughter play well the role of a boy to the point that his uncle, the Great King Daasebre Kwaku Duah II, ordered him "to be trained in the art of Kingship" (E. K. Mawugbe, 2008: 8). He becomes a subject of admiration in the kingdom. Even the servants in the palace cannot resist his charm:

Adwoa: Which Prince?



Akosua: The baby leopard... **Adwoa:** Which baby leopard?

Akosua: Nana Yaa Kyeretwie's Prince...Owusu

Agyeman (**Looks round**)

Adwoa: You have seen him too, haven't you? Isn't he handsome?

Akosua: HANDSOME, you say... He is such a beautiful boy. What is such a feminine beauty doing in a body like that? (E. K. Mawugbe, 2008: 38-39; capitals in original).

Owusu has a feminine beauty in his so-called man's body. Housemaids in the palace are in love with him. These statements by Akosua and Adwoa attest to it: "The prince is very handsome. Handsome beyond compare," Akosua declares, a declaration greeted by Adwoa's approval: "Well, for me, it is his face that fascinates me! The way the eyes are set in their sockets, with the nose ridge running down into a beautiful open furnace of flesh above his upper lip.... Only his smile sends me crazy. I am going in for his whole body" (E. K. Mawugbe, 2008: 40). The whole of Owusu is a mystery to people in the palace. Revenge and the quest for power cause madness in Nana Yaa. In the process, she destabilises her daughter's psyche.

3. The Death of a Tradition

Tradition was and still is oppressive to women. With tradition things stand still. There is no room for new ideas or looking at the past in the light of new realities. The individual as a thinking entity does not exist anymore. Only the group does. Tradition stands for stability. At times, stability needs to be questioned. Literature as a weapon usually purports to relieve women of their burden and the power of a tradition imposed on them, with power being the ability to cause things to be. It is the capacity to have people do things your way. This ability is not "natural" or God-given. It is conceived and implemented by humans, i.e. men and/or women. The main roles (marriage, wifehood and motherhood) assigned to women in traditional African societies prevent them from embracing change within a society which still imposes traditional values on them.

Oladele Taiwo (1967: 2) posits that the whole of a girl's life in most parts of Africa is one long preparation for the useful role she is expected. This role pertains mainly to marriage and child-bearing. In Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa* (1970: 12), Badua defines the traditional role of women as follow: "marry a man, tend a farm and be happy to see her peppers and her onions grow. A woman... should bear children, many children so she can afford to have one or two die." Though relegating women to these subsidiary roles is part and parcel of patriarchal traditions set in stone, the new breed of women are challenging these longstanding cultural practices, with all risks, as Nana Yaa has learned it the hard way. Indeed, in the



process of getting rid of the weight of tradition, this protagonist is caught in her own trap. In fact, following her above-revolutionary edit setting the custom aside and dictating that her first grandson shall ascend the stool after Kwaku Duah II (E. K. Mawugbe, 2008: 26), the latter convinces his daughter Ekyaa to lead her cousin Owusu into marriage so that “when he succeeds me as King, you shall be his wife, a queen” (E. K. Mawugbe, 2008: 49). This situation breaks Owusu’s cover but simultaneously reveals women’s inner desire to be treated with equity, to be co-partners of men, to be seen as full participants in society (J. Mitchell and A. Oakley, 1986). Ruling, this new breed women seem to voice, should not be solely men’s turf. Such is the leitmotiv of Tamara, the heroine of Bamford Diana McBagonluri’s *Tears of a Rain Goddess* (2003: 24), a protagonist who is born to rule: “she never mentioned marriage or motherhood. All her dreams were centred on ruling.” To confirm ruling as the sole and unique purpose of her heroine, this novelist entertains that Tamara would not “be able to wear the shoes of an African wife – submission, housekeeping and motherhood”. A true representative of the new breed of women infused with radical feminism, Tamara claims the African woman’s right to be a wife, a house-keeper and a mother by choice.

Society has no patience with women who represent threats to the integrity of the community (F. Kandji-Diouf, 2006: 15-16). In Africa, marriage, motherhood and abnegation are the yardsticks with which women’s experiences are assessed. Mawugbe contradicts, in his play, the traditional image projected on African women. In Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* being brave means keeping the old order unchanged. With Mawugbe, women are saying that life implies movements, taking new initiatives, breaking away from old forms of stability. In sum, life is about changes.

Presumably, Mawugbe’s position in *In the Chest of a Woman* is that tradition and customs are made not by gods; they are made by men and therefore can be broken by men (E. K. Mawugbe, 2008: 94). Any burden put on women can be removed. Humans must control tradition, not the other way round. Ekyaa, Kwaku Duah’s daughter, got pregnant and accused Owusu of being the man behind the pregnancy. According to tradition, “a girl of royal birth should [not] get pregnant out of wedlock [...] It’s an abomination that gods wouldn’t condone” (E. K. Mawugbe, 2008: 70). The truth concerning Owusu’s real sex is about to be discovered. After a long refusal to disclose the man behind her pregnancy, the princess unfairly accuses Owusu of being its author:

Ekyaa: You made me pregnant.

Owusu: It’s a lie. I couldn’t have made you...

Ekyaa: I am bearing your child.



Owusu: You lie! I am not a... Oh!... Mother! (E. K. Mawugbe, 2008: 84)

Owusu pleads with his/her mother to tell the truth about his/her true sex, but to no avail, confirming her self-entrapment discussed above. Once again, tradition has the upper hand with a caveat. Anyone who impregnates a princess out of wedlock must be sentenced to death, after his “male member” – his penis – is “cut off and presented in an *apampa* to all the chiefs, elders and people of Ebusa at a durbar” (E. K. Mawugbe, 2008: 86). So, Owusu, the culprit, must die according to custom. (Un)fortunately and to everybody’s dismay, the “he is a she.” The executioner finds out that the prince is devoid of phallus; he is a princess, not a prince:

Executioner: (Prostrating himself at the feet of the King) Daasebre...

Nana... I... oh... Nana

King: Where is what we asked you to bring? **Executioner:**
Daasebre...I...I... couldn't bring it...

Elders: Where is it?

King: Where is the thing?

Elders: (chanting) We want the thing!... We want the thing!
We want the thing!

Executioner: Nananom, the Prince has no male genitals.

Crowd: (stunned) What!

Executioner: The Prince is not a Prince but a Princess

Nana Opong: Look here, what kind of *Kwaku Ananse* story is that?

Executioner: The Prince, my noble elders, is a girl.

Crowd: Incredible

Executioner: He is a she. (E. K. Mawugbe, 2008: 87).

Nana Yaa collapses and passes away in the process. When Owusu is about to be released, he is then accused of another offence. According to tradition, “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” (E. K. Mawugbe, 2008: 91; capitals in original). Owusu is not totally out of danger, his sex becoming a double-edged sword in this culture prohibiting women’s sitting on the stool before they are enstooled. As a result of Owusu’s successful masking of his true identity, he was embarked on the coronation rituals, with his stool-sitting trial phase already completed. Because the disclosure of her true identity occurred after sitting on the stool, the process is halted: she could no longer sit on the throne. Not only is she denied the crown, but she must also pay a heavy tag price per tradition’s request: death penalty. Fortunately, Mawugbe proceeds to the destruction of such a tradition, using the figure of Okyame Boateng to achieve its symbolic death. Although most elders and male members are the custodians of traditional practices, Mawugbe creates an exceptional and clever man, Boateng, who is for human total liberation and emancipation. According to him, “the customs were made not by gods, but they were by men and



therefore can be unmade by men.” (E. K. Mawugbe, 2008: 94). Under his enlightened guidance, then, the elders ultimately come to a wise agreement, resolving that they shall no longer allow the King “to become a slave to customs and tradition of men” (E. K. Mawugbe, 2008: 102). The elders and the population hence allow their King to break tradition, signing its death.

Conclusion

Set out to explore Mawugbe’s call for a new order in his revolutionary play, this essay has purported to uncover the struggle of the new breed of women who seek to grab power by all means. The study has found that the thirst for power has goaded this category of women to use Machiavellian means in their attempt to reach that goal. *In the Chest of a Woman* features a sample of the new breed’s resorting to mask-wearing as a powerful weapon: hiding the sex of a baby girl and coercing her to act like a boy, with its attendant woes of psychological trauma to the poor victim. Women’s ill-fate in patriarchal culture, the study has theorised, kindles this maroon strategy. Patriarchal diktats still hamper women’s progress by giving absolute priority to men and limiting female rights. To rid womenfolk of secondary status, this heroine has gone to greater lengths in her desperate attempt to snatch her daughter’s fate (symbolising all women’s fate) from men’s custody, knowing well that patriarchy will never relinquish manly privileges, undue gifts granted men for being born “the right sex”.

Devolving from the above, the study has equally found that patriarchal tradition’s preying on women has forced female creative imagination to devise means to overcome obstacles designed to curb female progress or defer women’s dreams. Thus, the morally reprehensible act at the core of the play – passing, identity-masking/shifting, deviation, in sum – calls on African male leaders for power-sharing with women, least they go the extra mile to conquer it – as is the case of this heroine who has mutilated her only daughter in the process. Finally, the essay has established that the protagonist’s feat has prompted tradition-keepers’ revising patriarchal culture for a fair power-sharing. Definitely, her act has brought patriarchy, which accords men inordinate advantages over women (G. A. Makama, 2013: 117), to recognise women as a force to be reckoned with.



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