




Gendering Leadership, Mediating Feminist Political Futures: Mawugbe and the Decolonial Proposal in ‘In The Chest Of A Woman’ (2008)

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Abstract

A careful reading of Efo Kodjo Mawugbe’s *In the Chest of a Woman* reveals two predominant issues in relation to the style and ideology of the text: female sexuality and politics. This notwithstanding, the burgeoning literature on Mawugbe’s play has overlooked the radical ways in which the playwright reframes the discourse on the participation of women in politics by the intimate metaphorical connections he makes regarding Ghana’s uneasiness with evolving genders. This paper is thus guided by two pivotal questions; how can the African woman fully participate in politics and inscribe her claims within a male-dominated domain? What proposals does Mawugbe offer amidst the call for empowerment and structural change? Situating the discussion within the context of decolonial thought and feminist literary theory, this paper demonstrates how Nana Yaa becomes Mawugbe’s articulation of mediated relations towards women’s inclusion and recognition in political leadership. The paper concludes that the play summons a new feminist politics by interrogating the historical precedence of the pre-colonial tradition and initiation, through radical imaginations, a new locus for rethinking gendered politics and women in leadership, particularly within the Ghanaian geopolitical space. The paper is significant for policy formulation and feminist pedagogy.



Keywords: decolonial, gender, leadership, Mawugbe, politics, women

Introduction

The African theatre is known as a productive space for articulating universal human concerns, following the example of the ancient Greek and Elizabethan traditions. The Ghanaian theatre in particular has been phenomenal in dealing with socio-cultural and political contradictions within the Ghanaian context (Yankah, 2012; Balm and Hakib, 2023; Ismaila and Akakpo, 2024). While its entertainment commitment is not superseded, the Ghanaian theatre engages with and comments on the total experience of being human in an inhuman age. Moving from an indigenised, focused orientation to today's realities of the colonial impact on cultures, the Ghanaian theatre has been impactful and forceful in ensuring community cohesion through its radical re-telling of traditional and historical tales (Agovi, 1990). This quality of Ghanaian theatre brings us close to reality to a point where the infinite quest for newness becomes striking.

Efo Kodjo Mawugbe is an important Ghanaian dramatist whose theatrical practices have assumed canonical stature due to the seriousness and the revolutionary artistry he adopts. Mawugbe's craft has been hugely influenced by age-long inequalities beginning from intimate spaces to historical and public spaces. This motivation propels the robust and radical imagination in his works. While the critical standpoints in his plays appear unfavourable to the status quo, they appear to depersonalise systemic inequalities in ways that indicate the possibility of alternative frameworks with a crucial emphasis on women's political freedom. The subject of politics is one of the fields that have been generally misconstrued as a 'man's world'. Globally, the participation of women is overwhelmingly low compared to their male counterparts. Despite major efforts by countries to ensure a balance in the representation of the genders in politics, there seems to be a lot yet to be done and Ghana's case is critical. Bauer and Darkwah (2020) have shown that the representation of women in Ghana's legislative, executive and judicial domains from the local to the national

level is insignificant. Such political imbalances are what Mawugbe's *In the Chest of a Woman* tackles.

Efo Kodjo Mawugbe's 'In the Chest of a Woman' is a tale of three generations of women from the same lineage who are called upon by circumstance to play 'male roles' (Asiedu, 2010). The play opens in the palace of Nana Yaa Kyeretwie. Nana Yaa Kyeretwie is the queen and ruler of Brengo, Kyeremfaso and Anobeng. She is the mother of Owusu and the sister of the paramount chief of Ebusa Kingdom, Nana Kwaku Duah. She covets the Ebusa throne and cunningly plots to have her daughter, Owusu succeed Nana Kwaku Duah upon his demise. As the dominant and pivotal dramatist persona, she sets in motion events that are central to the development of the plot and emerges as an arena for contesting, subverting as well as (re)thinking societal rules, norms and conventions which are deeply entrenched and rooted within patriarchal ideology and practice. Her daring act and bravery to question existing ideological practices that subjugate women is encapsulated in her being renamed as Kyeretwie, the 'leopard tamer' by the dying queen mother of Ebusa.

As the play opens, Nana Yaa Kyeretwie is seen playing ludo with her 'son', Owusu. It is interesting to envisage what she saw as the hidden lessons in the game; the game serves as a lesson for warriors having to encounter an opposition and the dynamics for success therein embedded. Although Nana Yaa was trying to train Owusu to get abreast of the dynamics in wars since 'he' was eventually going to be king, the playwright subtly exposes us to the strategies women have put in place to subvert their subordinate status. It is not surprising, therefore, the steps that Nana Yaa takes to protect the real identity of her daughter. For a woman who is capable of killing her husband and also killing the midwife who delivered her baby in order to shelve the 'actual' sex of her child to protect her interest, Nana Yaa was indeed not ready for any truce! (Asiedu, 2010; Akaenyi, 2023).

Mawugbe topples issues by suggesting that the cultural set-up in traditional Africa is no longer masculine in nature (Kuumba, 2006); male dominance is gradually giving way

to not just female dominance but a rather gender-neutral space which provides equal opportunities for both actors. The provoking challenge Nana Yaa throws to the men in Kyeremfaso – contesting the fact that kinship is not male preserve – is an indication of the degree of boldness and defiant mechanisms put together to correct certain skewed notions associated with gender roles. The purpose of this paper is to explore how the African woman can fully participate in politics and inscribe her claims within a male-dominated domain and the proposals Mawugbe offers amidst the call for empowerment and structural change. The paper is structured into three parts. The first part looks at the theoretical foundations of the study. In the second section of this paper, the focus is on Mawugbe's radical agenda for system change by illustrating the practical proposals he makes for mediating the future of feminist politics. In the final section of this paper, the paper argues that Ghana's nervousness with the call to legalize evolving genders functions as an extended metaphor for gendering leadership in Ghana.

Theoretical Base

Thinking decoloniality is to envisage “struggles to bring into intervening existence another interpretation that brings forward, on the one hand, a silenced view of the event and, on the other, shows the limits of imperial ideology disguised as the true (total) interpretation of the events” in the making of the modern world (Mignolo, 2007). In other words, the concept ‘decoloniality’ is an ideological practice committed to raising black consciousness about the realities of ‘coloniality’ and colonial domination (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015) thus the texture of decoloniality is revolutionary and one that discontinues oppressive epistemes and opens up routes to liberation. Maldonado-Torres and Cavouris's (2017) seminal essay, *The Decolonial Turn* has formed the basis for most Afro-academic debates in recent times. The commitment in the decolonial thought; to undo, unmask, reframe and reproduce new ways of thinking about Africa and its related epistemes is resourceful to the call for mediating feminist politics in contemporary times. This is because the decolonial approach is a counterpoint that is not merely accusatory, rather, it resists

and transgresses notions of marginality in ways that support renaissance in being and knowing (Lugones, 2010). On this score, the tenet of decoloniality resonates with Mawugbe's intention in *In the Chest of a Woman*, especially in the ways in which the play makes an urgent intervention for women's political participation using Ghana's context as a frame. Feminist literary theory, on the other hand, has broadly been concerned with the exploitation and marginalisation of women by a phallogentric or patriarchal society. Irigaray (2004) has argued that the phallogentric order views women as commodities and mediums of exchange in a male-dominated economy:

“Women are marked phallogentrically by their fathers, husbands, and procurers. And this branding determines their value in sexual commerce. Woman is never anything but the locus of more or less competitive exchange between two men” (Irigaray, 2004: 35).

The implication of this recognition has resulted in two dominant approaches in feminist literary discourse. Firstly, some feminist critics like Prah (2007) and Chrappah (2012) have focused on the 'deconstruction' of texts in order to expose textual complicity in the marginalisation of women. This is based on the argument that narrative is not a neutral space; it participates in the reproduction of dominant values. Secondly, some pro-feminist writers like Ama Ata Aidoo, Efua Sutherland, Amma Darko, Peggy Opong and others have deployed counter-discursive strategies in their writings to combat the erasure of women in order to accentuate the experiences, voice and subjectivities of women. Mawugbe's *In the Chest of a Woman* (2008) must be viewed in this category and it is in the light of this second concern that Irigaray poses the poignant question “How can women analyse their exploitation, [and] inscribe their claims within an order prescribed by the masculine?” Spivak (1988) in a provocative essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” concludes that a woman as a subaltern cannot speak. Spivak (1988) contends that “the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow”. Caught in

this liminal space, the critical question for Spivak becomes “With what voice consciousness can the subaltern speak?” Cixous, Cohen and Cohen (1976) also argue that women’s writings “create spaces that can serve as springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structure”. This paper contends that a woman as a subaltern, can speak, with the ultimate aim of re-inscribing her voice and subjectivity into the larger discourse.

Patriarchy is a key concept in feminist literary theory. Although there is no consensus on the definition of this term, Hartmann (1981) and Walby (1986) have put forward precise formulations of the concept that can be considered as working definitions. According to Hartmann, patriarchy is:

“a set of social relationships between men which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence or solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women. ...The material base upon which patriarchy rests lies most fundamentally in men’s control over women’s labour power” (Hartmann, 1981).

Hartmann (1981)’s definition draws attention to the domestic sphere and the workplace as sites where men profit from women. This paper argues later that Efo Kodjo Mawugbe places greater emphasis on the domestic and the public sphere as ignoble spaces for women’s marginalisation. Drawing on Marxist and radical feminist theory which foregrounds personal relationships, sexuality and power, Walby on the other hand defines patriarchy as: “a system of interrelated structures through which men exploit women. The key set of patriarchal relations is to be found in domestic work, paid work, states, male violence and sexuality” (Walby, 1986).

It is clear from the Hartmann (1981) and Walby (1986) definitions, that patriarchy is a crucial conceptual tool for analysing gender and power relations. Pro-feminist writers like Mawugbe have demonstrated their awareness of the dominating power of patriarchy over women and have written narratives that present women characters who subvert patriarchal systems.

The concept of political participation

Political participation is an evolving concept and as such, attempts to define it usually fall short of capturing the entirety of the concept, however, it is an important indicator of how citizens are involved in governance and the role they play in impacting policy. In their influential work, *Voice and Equality*, Verba, Scholzman and Brady (1995) define political participation as an ‘activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action – either by directly affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies’. In other words, political participation goes beyond conventional and legally accepted activities and it is intended to influence government policies (Boateng, 2015; Huntington and Nelson, 1976, van Deth, 2014). The context of women’s political participation according to Akiyode-Afolabi (2018) is one that goes beyond ‘women asking for seats at the tables where public policies are being discussed’. In other words, it is not a question of presence, it is a matter of both inclusion and fairness such that all the voices at the decision-making table would be heard, regardless of age, sex, ethnicity, sexual orientation, nationality among others and also that the decisions made at the table would sit well with all the voices present. Within the Ghanaian context, Darkwa (2015), Ocran (2014) and Sossou (2011), have indicated the progress in the demographics of political participation despite the minimal impact as far as the gendered dynamics is concerned. They confirm that despite Ghana’s commitment in ratifying treaties such as Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Affirmative action (Gender Equity) (Act, 2024) and the provisions of the country’s 1992 constitution, which are geared towards reducing or eradicating gender disparities in both the public and private sector, these frameworks simply create “a false sense of equality” (Darkwa, 2015). Thus while conventional modes like voting in elections, contacting a public official or taking party membership is on the increase, the core of women’s political participation is still bedevilled by systemic patriarchal injunctions. In line with the general thesis of this chapter, this paper argues that Mawugbe’s *In the Chest of a Woman* makes two important

contributions to our understanding of political participation; that political participation is not simply inclusion - finding space in 'baby' democracies that do not, in principle recognize the female's contribution and that political participation is a deliberate attempt to challenge the hegemonic texture of governance and a commitment to redefine such democratic spaces. The play proposes a blueprint by creatively calling for a shift from conventional modes of political participation and seemingly suggests that attempts of inclusion by the systems are simply ways of white-washing hierarchical ways of being in society. Thus, by creatively engaging with the crisis of governance in Ebusa, Mawugbe stages radical alternatives at achieving equity as far as representation and participation in politics is concerned. Ocran (2014) affirms this call when she urges women to adopt more radical approaches to political participation and outlines, among other things, the need to boycott national elections as a means of registering resistance to systemic biases against women. Mawugbe's call in the play, *In the Chest of a Woman*, ties in with the ethical vision of decolonial feminism - to reject a political agenda that is at once an imposition and does not serve the interest of womenfolk.

Women Inclusion in Governance Revisited: Mawugbe and the Radical Agenda for System Change

Efo Kodjo Mawugbe's *In the Chest Of a Woman* tells the tale of Nana Yaa Kyeretwe, the queen of Kyeremfaso in her quest to reclaim her birthright as the rightful ruler of Ebusa Kingdom. The play, like most of Mawugbe's works, reviews existing norms and practices that are rooted in patriarchal ideology. In this play, Mawugbe fervidly contests the male-monopolised Akan traditional system of governance through Nana Yaa Kyeretwe's daring act of challenging the chauvinistic practice of male inheritance. The Intestate Succession Act (Law, PNDCL 111, 1985) as amended by PNDCL 264 remains the existing law guiding family inheritance in Ghana. These inheritance rules are executed among the two main ethnic groupings; the matrilineal and the patrilineal groups. Among the matrilineal group, who are mostly Akans and the largest meta ethnic group in Ghana, kinship and inheritance are

traced through the girlchild while the patrilineal group does so through the sons. In the matrilineal context, which filters into Mawugbe's creativity, kinship and inheritance is passed on from a man to his sister's son (Awusabo-Asare, 1990). This is why the character of Owusu is crucial to our understanding of feminist agency within the context of women's inclusion in governance.

Unable to ascend the Ebusa throne after her mother's demise despite being the first-born child, Nana Yaa Kyeretwe schemes her recoup by disguising her daughter as a male (Owusu) who becomes the heir apparent to the Ebusa throne and next in line to succeed Nana Kwaku Duah II; the younger brother of Nana Yaa Kyeretwe, father of Ekyaa and the monarch of Ebusa. Owusu is sent to the palace to be trained in the art of leadership, where he encounters his cousin, Ekyaa, who makes seductive advances toward him (something he vehemently rejects owing to his hidden gender). Ultimately, he (Owusu) is unable to ascend the Ebusa throne as the play ends with the unravelling of his gender as well as the naming of Akwasi Amoako as the father of Ekyaa's unborn child.

Critical commentary on Mawugbe's play, *In the Chest of a Woman*, suggests that although Mawugbe tries to debunk patriarchal legacies through his radical vision of female emancipation, there appears to be a premature penetration into the public space since the Ghanaian political enclave is not ready for female leadership. In "Debunking Patriarchal Legacy in African Traditional Setting: A Reading of Efo Kodjo Mawugbe's *In the Chest of a Woman*", Lare (2015) looks at the critical views of Efo Kodjo Mawugbe on some African traditional customs which deny identity and welfare to women and the ways in which such patriarchal legacies hinder female emancipation. Lare (2015) further contends that *In the Chest of a Woman* dispels myths that society has about women as being helpless, weak, immature, domesticated and in need of male direction and concludes by suggesting that "to arrive at tangible results in dismantling sexism and gender biases, sensitisation and education must continue to raise women's consciousness about their emancipatory becoming. In this struggle, both

men and women must be involved, since society cannot move forward without both genders' collaboration" (Lare 2015).

Nugah (2013) also sets out to investigate the gender roles and portrayal in two plays: Efua Sutherland's *Edufa* and Mawugbe's *In the Chest of a Woman*. He pays attention to the problems of gender imbalance and the corresponding lessons in the plays and he argues that while both dramatists recognise the unnatural trends in female subordinations and the vicious cycle of patriarchal domination, Sutherland's play *Edufa*, attempts to empower Ghanaian women in indirect ways; Mawugbe's play does the same in a forceful manner. Nugah concludes that the "life of men without women will be a mini hell full of agony and loneliness" (Nugah, 2013). Close to the critique in this paper is what Awo Mana Asiedu (2010) attempts in her paper titled, "Masculine Women, Feminist Men: Assertions and Contradictions in Mawugbe's *In the Chest of a Woman*". The paper examines Mawugbe's play as a model for celebrating the achievements of women through an analysis of the three female characters in the play: the Queen Mother, Nana Yaa Kyeretwe and Owusu Agyemang with the aim being:

"to question the motivations of male feminists or pro-feminist men, such as the playwright appears to be, and whether they need to be reoriented in order to fully achieve their aim of celebrating the female for all she is and can be" (Asiedu 2010).

While she appears to commend Mawugbe on the forceful motivation to propose a radical framework for female empowerment, Asiedu contends that such framings constitute an impersonation of masculinity and argues that for Mawugbe, to be a real woman is to impersonate male demonstrations of power which in a sense restricts the realities of a woman's being. While her contention is somewhat justifiable in terms of the unusual characterisation of Nana Yaa and the fact that she comes across as a woman with an uncommon boldness, which is a quality that is perceived not to be atypical of women, the argument within the ambits of Halberstam's (2002) notion of female masculinity, Mawugbe's women do not hide behind the male body to assume

recognition of existence. Rather, Mawugbe's artistry is a deliberate attempt to decouple masculinity from men to recover and secure the place of women in cultural and political spaces. Such a nuanced interpretation is crucial in how we reach the playwright's commitment to revisiting the politics of women's public life in postcolonial Ghana.

Mawugbe's characterisation should not be read as an overt contestation of male domination but as a covert intelligence to rethink approaches to female liberations, women's private and public life as well as the emergence of a gender wave of change in Ghana. Chrappah (2021) study is one of the current literature on Mawugbe's *In the Chest of a Woman*. She attempts a deconstruction of kingship politics in Ghanaian West-African Culture by showing how the tension between women and power amongst the Akans of Ghana. She argues that the concept of throne, which is the symbol of headship in traditional leadership remains masculinised and that a move towards women's inclusion would require unorthodox approaches. While her conclusions are worthy, especially as she recognises the radical character of Mawugbe's craft, the burden is that she "revisits the power issues that women suffer from historical times until present Ghana" (Chrappah 2021), giving little attention to the way forward. While the need to revisit the past as a basis for the present examination is acknowledged, the call for women's participation in politics requires practical implications for activism.

Although the consciousness to include women in political decision-making at all levels is not an entirely new concern, particularly when Ballington (2008) affirms the fact that the participation of women in politics remains a substantial democratic gain, the road to Ghana's commitment towards the inclusion of women in politics has been arduous and herculean. While the isolated instances of feminine awakening in terms of the measured rise in female political representation in the nation's body politics is obvious, Ghana is yet to make significant strides, sixty years after independence. Women make up 12.36 percent of politically appointed offices, 12.7 percent as parliamentarians, 19.25 percent as cabinet ministers and 17

percent as Municipal and District level appointees (Dzradosi *et al.*, 2018). Indeed, Global indicators for measuring the growth of women's inclusion in politics, like the 2020 Global Gender Gap Report and the UN's Women Agenda (2023), reveal Ghana's commitment as ineffectual as it is ranked 107 out of 153 countries for the gender index on politics (Women's Political Representation and Affirmative Action in Ghana, 2019). The critical questions begging for answers remain Mawugbe's argument in *In the Chest of a Woman*. Mawugbe's play carefully discontinues dominant oppressive traditional governance systems that are inimical to the African woman's political gains. The play thus contests and de-affirms 'naturalised' notions that erroneously equate leadership to masculine potential. Consequently, the play envisions the possibility of a new order of governance especially through the judgment of Owusu and the symbolic cutting of the phallic organ.

Mawugbe's play makes a radical change by rethinking the place of women in leadership and emasculates patriarchal articulations of female and being. *Mawugbe's In the Chest of a Woman* helps to unravel the power and hegemonic antecedents that frustrate feminist political futures and how a resilient subaltern woman's commitment becomes redemptive and liberatory. Thus, Mawugbe's piece is arguably an advocacy campaign and a radical move towards formulating a women's manifesto for Ghana whose proposal begins with a call to redefine the category of woman. He appears to argue that the problem of exclusion begins with patriarchal and colonial definitions of femininity and the fact that such definitions virtually compel female subordination and inferiorities. In other words, for Mawugbe, the starting point of liberation and by extension, inclusion regarding the political rights of women, should begin with liberal characteristics of womanhood. And this is why Nana Yaa's assertions hold significance for consideration. She confirms that:

“If there is anything men fear in this world it is a woman
who is a WOMAN! A woman who accepts challenges

A woman who can shout back when a man shouts

A woman who is all out to give the command like a man

A woman who in no uncertain terms, Rejects absolutely the definition of the word feminine to mean home oriented, passive, needing-to-be-guided-and-protected.

To men, such a woman is a real woman and a woe and a vice unto manhood. In short, what men fear most is female power in motion!" (Mawugbe, 2008).

Nana Yaa's attempt to redefine women is not a lazy affirmation of binary oppositions which suggests little or no critical departures from established traditions. We find, in this new category of woman, a quality of impudence which defies cultural stereotypes and deflates male ego. In other words, womanhood assumes meanings beyond patriarchal estimations, not scraps of dominant masculinities but a new way of being that is altogether valid without recourse to the man. It is important to recognise that although the semantics of 'like' ordinarily lay grounds for comparison and by far re-echoes the problematics of binary categories, the chapter's argument is that beyond the surface signification of Nana Yaa's physical appearance, there is an ideological production of power, autonomy and agency that is reached in the definitions of the 'real' woman. The praise singer forcefully unsettles the challenge of any probable masculine compensation through the use of animistic metaphors (Asiedu, 2010; Chrappah, 2021).

"She who bears the lion's heart

The only woman who treads where men fear to tread but is never harmed
Of her strength not even the tiger is an equal

Of her courage, only a lion can compare. Hail her. . . . Hail the mother whose mind is a cistern of wisdom. From which the younger ones take gentle sips . . . Yes here comes the mother of the people

The mother with a chest of a father" (Mawugbe, 2008)

The praise singer mediates our understanding of womanhood by framing the category of woman beyond the limits of

vulnerabilities to cunning predators who are poised to domesticate their adversaries. The animistic qualities of the tiger and the lion, as jungle heroes, are used as important metaphors and a subversive strategy to produce a counter-narrative that seeks to contest notions of impersonation, binary relations and essentialist reasoning. Mawugbe's redefinition of womanhood transcends victimhood to a complex status of conquerors and devourers (Asiedu, 2010). Recovering such alternative ways of knowing womanhood, what Mignolo (2007b) considers epistemic de-linking, is the starting logic to women's political rights and freedom for Mawugbe. In the opening scenes of the play, Mawugbe arouses our desire and suspicion about the fortunes of feminine power through the game motif. Part of this strategy is to discontinue the framing of womanhood using the male as an ontological referent.

Crucial to Mawugbe's propositions for a new feminist politics in *In the Chest of a Woman* is the call to approach politics firstly as an ideological war which is not simply won with a demand for fair representation but as a paradigm that is imbricated in the interest of continued feminine relevance and survival. This conclusion is deduced taking cognisance of the operations of the game motif. Although Chrappah (2021) argues that the game motif "is evident that possessing a mentality of politics as a game is crucial and helps engage circumspection approaches in order to realise one's dreams". She overlooks the progressions to victory imbued in the game of oware as the analysis will show. The stages in the oware game; picking up, sowing and harvesting arguably summarise Mawugbe's debate. In picking up seeds, which is marked by emptying the content of the board game, Mawugbe proposes scrutiny of the decolonial remains of the woman matter as earlier argument has shown. Unpacking such subsisting components, for Mawugbe, is preparatory for the launch of a counter discourse as the onset of new feminist politics (i.e. exemplified in the counterclockwise direction in sowing). Indeed, while the play grapples with feminist political gains within the dynamics in the public sphere, Mawugbe draws attention to strategic manoeuvring as it is safer for sustained inclusion.

“In your desire to capture these two marbles by hook or crook, **you’ve left your rear unguarded** thereby giving me two clear options; either to let you capture two of my soldiers and I take six of yours out of two, or I rescue my two soldiers to allow you to marshal your forces. (pause). No! It is a stupid battle strategy to allow your enemy time to reconsolidate his position. **Go in for the kill** whilst the troops are still in utter disarray. **(Emphasis is mine)**. That way, you are assured of sweet, quick and lasting victory.

Hahahaha.... So I am going in for the six, whilst you have the two out of one if you still want it. (Plays, but Owusu seems not to be responding). What’s the matter with you my child? Aren’t you going to play the game?” (Mawugbe, 2008)

As a pro-feminist, Mawugbe demonstrates awareness of impending challenges that are carefully orchestrated by colonial power relics and the suspicious male gaze. The playwright makes two proposals: ‘not leaving the rear unguarded’ and ‘going for the kill’ (i.e. the last stage of the game which is the harvesting) are cautiously constructed around the woman’s ability to look beyond consolatory gains and firmly insists on mainstream advocacy geared towards systemic change. Akiyode-Afolabi (2018) corroborates this position when she talks about the need for building critical consciousness and challenging the hegemony of patriarchal structures in politics as a means of negotiating and redefining the democratic spaces. Mawugbe’s counsel is crucial especially in the ways in which the failed 2015 New Patriotic Party (NPP) women’s seat initiative, the nomination of Eva Naa Merley Lokko, Ghana’s first vice-presidential candidate on the ticket of the Progressive Peoples’ Party (PPP) in the 2012 Presidential as well as the Parliamentary elections and the nomination of Professor Naana Jane Opoku-Agyemang as the first female vice-presidential candidate of the main opposition party, The National Democratic Congress (NDC) into perspective. The two women are an embodiment of Mawugbe’s ideal woman for the new postcolonial Ghana’s body politics, especially because the former president John Dramani Mahama (the Flagbearer of the National Democratic Congress) describes Professor Naana Jane Opoku-

Agyemang as “a distinguished scholar, a conscientious public servant and a role model who has contributed to shattering the many glass ceilings that have held women down for generations” (Mahama, 2020). The argument is that the nomination of these women is a marketing strategy to buy political integrity beyond a true affirmation of their inevitable contribution to the project of leadership and governance.

Gendering Leadership: Juxtaposing the Inclusion of Women in Politics and the Challenge with Evolving Genders

Ghana in recent times has experienced a crisis with calls to legalize homosexuality and part of this crisis is a result of the highly polarised religious twist and the need to protect the cultural heritage of the Ghanaian people. Issues of sex and sexualised identities as far as the Ghanaian context is concerned are restricted to discussions on the traditional genders. Esia-Donkoh, Kumi-Kyereme, Awusabo-Asare and Stillman (2017) acknowledge that although the general perceptions of Ghanaians about sexual education are relevant, it is rooted in a fear-based approach which is why its educational content is limited to an emphasis on morality as opposed to lessons on the use of contraceptives and family planning related content. The historical rationale, therefore of accommodating evolving genders, is intolerant to anything unorthodox and dissenting position. Mawugbe’s attempt at creating a she- male character is therefore fundamental to re-visiting discourses of inclusive sexualities and re-framing the politics of being in contemporary Ghana.

While it appears that Mawugbe intends to set up “a new culture that should give chance to women for new identification as full humans despite the seeming exaggerated role of Nana Yaa” (Kodjovi, 2016), the point to note is that his radical quest for the disruption of gender norms and gendered references is an extended metaphor for revisiting the participation of women in politics and thus, Mawugbe’s call for inclusion should be read from both private and public spheres. Although Mawugbe’s revisionary style may appear intrinsically masculineist,

especially with his Owusu, Mawugbe's broader contention is understood within Butler's concept of stylisation and the radical feminist framework. Butler (2002) as cited in Salih and Butler (2004) explains that:

“Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender” (Butler 2002 as cited in Salih and Butler 2004).

What Butler (2002) suggests is that the subject is not free to choose which gender he/she is going to enact since such performance is already pre-determined within the regulatory framework and thus, the subject has restricted choices in stylisation. Mawugbe's attempt at re-assigning the constituted dominant role to the marginalised is therefore not simply an attempt at masking masculinity as Asiedu (2010) observes. By the creation of he/she, Mawugbe does not only radically disrupt the masculine signifying economy and the binary categorisations of the subjects, but he also re-imagines the Ghanaian society in ways that support women empowerment, deconstructing indigenous royal politics, its biases and an ultimate implication for nonconformist sexualities.

The character of the he/she (Owusu) in Mawugbe's *In the Chest of a Woman* intimates new feminist politics in terms of probing the possibility of women at the helm of governance and the accommodation of alternative genders in contemporary Ghana. While we recognise Owusu's discomfort in his strategic identity role, which is possibly an indication of the national uneasiness with queer identities and by extension male suspicion of women in power, we acknowledge Mawugbe's effort at calling for effective cultural change for women's political emancipation. He appears to de-emphasise the prejudices of

'abnormality' in Ghanaian society by reconfiguring discourses on Ghana's political history and sexual subjectivities through the admirable quality of the character of Owusu. Mawugbe proposes a revision of Ghana's putative heteronormative practice to embrace evolving trends in sexual self-definition within the broader framework of cultural integration and belongingness. He also advances the need to recognise the political rights of women using Nana Yaa as an archetype. Asiedu explains that:

"Owusu appears to be the hope of a balanced combination of both (masculine and feminine) traits, she emerges from her ordeal of forced impersonation of masculinity into a new freedom to be who she truly would like to be." (Asiedu, 2010).

Beyond the variance with the point of impersonating masculinity, Asiedu's assertion remains crucial in terms of re-reading Owusu's characterisation as a way of mediating the future of women in politics. By mediation, Mawugbe fails to subscribe to institutionalized apparatuses that relaunch female subordinates in ways that seem heroic. And this is evident in the counsel Nana Yaa provides:

NANA YAA: You are going to fight to capture the stool, my child. You have a right to it just as anybody. (Boldly). And I am saying you SHALL be King. I repeat KING, Not queen, after my brother, Kwaku Duah (Mawugbe, 2008).

Nana Yaa's bold insistence on making her son-daughter king and not queen is important for two reasons. On the private level, Mawugbe contends that supposed gender-sensitive referents are in themselves insensitive to the emancipatory agenda for women and that such signifiers succeed in widening the already stratified layers of being. In other words, to be queen is to compromise on the very foundations of equality and equity and this is why Nana Yaa appears dissatisfied with 'Some pieces of barren land with four or five cottages scattered here and there'. On the public level, the office of the queen mother inaugurates the motif of a second-in-command position which is of consequence to the

ethos of women empowerment as far as the place of women in nation-building is concerned. While some critics acknowledge the second-in-command status as negotiating entry into a bonafide masculine territory, the emphasis on 'you shall be KING' is a careful disapproval of re-launched patriarchal schemes to keep the woman perpetually second to the man.

NANA: Let my mother know that if I am to rule, I want a **whole** kingdom and not some piece of barren land with four or five cottages scattered here and there. (General murmurs of disapproval)

QUEEN MOTHER: But you are not a man. NANA: I am a woman, I agree, **but 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

we

[sic] the opposite sex. Who are men anyway? 1ST ELDER: You must know how you talk before us!

NANA: I only asked a question, or does my womanhood deprive me of that right too? (Pause) I want to know whether the art of nation building is the prerogative of men alone. Isn't that a legitimate question to ask?

2ND ELDER: Nation building belongs to the energetic.

NANA: (Very Sharply) And who says you men are the most energetic of the human species? Who says so? Where and when was it said? I want to know! (Dead silence. Queen Mother confers with 1st Elder)

1ST ELDER: Well, Princess, your mother insists that never in the history of Ebusa has a woman ruled where there is a man to do so. And as such you have to accept. . . .

NANA: Tell her I say NO. {**I don't want to be honoured then**}. Tell her that. Where is it written that a woman

cannot rule when there is a man? I want someone to tell me
(Mawugbe, 2008: 20). (Boldened for emphasis)

The above interaction provides an important opportunity to better understand how leadership is stratified based on gender distinctions. Nana Yaa's responses reveal how historical and patriarchal constructions of leadership are harmful to the politics of inclusion. To begin with, leadership continues to be prioritised as a masculine prerogative qualification to political leadership and is judged against hyper masculine traits both in rhetoric and in behaviour, which is why women who 'dare' to venture into this preserved domain for men are considered 'unusual'. Mawugbe further problematizes the mitigating measures (compensation offered to Nana Yaa) as a rebranded male strategy to remain in control. Indeed, the failed affirmative action of 2015 is simply an indication of the waning masculine benevolence towards the political chances of women (Abagre and Bukari, 2013). The playwright proposes an equal and competitive political terrain for both men and women.

Moreover, the idea of 'whole', something that is complete, unabridged and intact, as Nana Yaa's demand shows is an indication of her disapproval of her assumed consequential position. In other words, to demand a whole kingdom is to demand a full recognition of her self-worth as a woman which should not be explained in relation to the man's. Thus, her initial insistence on ensuring the son-daughter as king should be read as an affirmation to prioritise the ability of the woman to live beyond traditional essence. In other words, accepting to be queen, as the dialogue shows, is an attempt to legitimize female subjectivities as fixed and natural. What is more revealing, is how Mawugbe stresses the alterations in being, through the power of gender referents. The polemics of 'he', as per the significance of the he-she character, unsettles the rigidity in gender categorisations as the pronoun 'he' no longer becomes exclusively masculine. The ideological motivation for Mawugbe's choice is an invocation of required sincerity in learning to live independently. Mawugbe's conceptions of doing gender are thus located in how he unpacks gender systems by

muting reinforced essentialness of sex differences and social mappings that heighten power dynamics between the genders. Mawugbe advocates a transition from gender dualism to gender pluralism so that there is little bureaucracy in the structural circumstances of the sexes.

Conclusion

What this paper has sought to do is to argue that beyond the dominant discourses of women's oppression, kingship and the option of disrupting hegemony as earlier scholars have established, Mawugbe's 'In the Chest of a Woman' is a prototype of a woman's manifesto for political inclusion in postcolonial Ghana. Arguing from the decolonial and feminist frames, the paper begins by demonstrating that defining femininity in relation to masculinity exacerbates the prevailing cultural circumstances of the African woman, particularly concerning individuality and dependency issues. Secondly, this paper has made clear the fact that the strategic move of creating a he/she (in the person of Owusu) and the transgressive acts displayed by Nana Yaa are indicative of the new dimensions of gender roles. The paper has highlighted, among other things, the need for rethinking womanhood and re-conceptualizing politics as an ideological war, not just of representation, but as a game that requires strategic manoeuvring to stay counted and recognized. The paper has also demonstrated that the political terrain in Ghana and the West Africa sub-region demands an unorthodox feminist approach rather than a continued negotiatory and by far compromising tactics juxtaposing Ghana's cultural uneasiness with evolving sexualities as a functionally extended metaphor for gendering leadership in contemporary times. The paper recommends gender mainstreaming as a systemic strategy for resolving the crisis of women's exclusion in politics and places Mawugbe's play within the frame of speaking narratives that have an intrinsic commitment to combat female subjectivities and inaugurates new feminist politics.

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