WOMEN'S CONFORMISM TO PATRIARCHAL VALUES AS AN IDENTITY IN THREE SELECTED AFRICAN PLAYS

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Abstract
Women have always been portrayed in African literature as being victims of subjugation and oppression since Africa is a patriarchal-oriented society. But it turns out that contemporary writers, notably dramatists, represent women who call for female characters to abide by patriarchal norms, since it is any woman's burden. This leads to wondering if conformity to patriarchal norms is what makes a woman's identity. However, this article aims to show how women's conformity to patriarchal norms shapes their identity, represented in Faustina Brew's *The Prisoner*, Tsitsi Dangarembga's *She No Longer Weeps*, and Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa*. To that end, the work relies on Judith Butler's Gender Performativity as a theoretical framework. The study reveals that women voluntarily accept living according to patriarchal values and prejudices to be well appreciated and perceived by the community, and for fear of being ostracised and isolated.
Keywords: *Conformity, Patriarchy, Women, Identity, Gender*

LE CONFORMISME DES FEMMES AUX VALEURS PATRIARCALES COMME UNE IDENTITÉ DANS TROIS PIÈCES DE THÉÂTRE AFRICAINES

Résumé
Les femmes ont toujours été représentées dans la littérature africaine comme des victimes de la domination et de l'oppression, puisque, en Afrique, la société est patriarcale. Mais il s'avère que les écrivains contemporains, notamment les dramaturges, représentent des femmes qui appellent les personnages féminins à se conformer aux normes patriarcales, car cela constitue un fardeau pour toute femme. Cela amène à se demander si la conformité aux normes patriarcales est ce qui constitue l'identité d'une femme. Cependant, cet article vise à montrer comment la conformité des femmes aux normes patriarcales façonne leur identité, représentée dans *The Prisoner* de Faustina Brew, *She No Longer Weeps* de Tsitsi Dangarembga, et *Anowa* d'Ama Ata Aidoo. À cet effet, le travail s'appuie sur la performativité du genre de Judith Butler comme cadre théorique. L'étude révèle que les femmes acceptent volontairement de vivre selon les valeurs et les préjugés patriarcaux afin d'être bien appréciées et perçues par la communauté, et par crainte d'être ostracisées et isolées.
Mots-clés : *Conformité, Patriarcat, Femmes, Identité, Genre*

Introduction

The question of patriarchy in African societies has, for a long period, emphasised male domination as the main source shaping gender inequality. Men have been seen as the primary architects and heirs of patriarchal structures, while women were portrayed as passive victims, upon whom men imposed social, economic, and cultural subjugation. That is, in the projection of the realities of women's condition, fictional writers mostly focus on the way this patriarchal system is entrenched in men's attitudes that they use to subjugate and discriminate against women. Writers like Buchi Emecheta (1979) in her work *The Joys of Motherhood* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2006) in *Purple Hibiscus* have explored how women are represented in African traditional society, highlighting the marginalisation, discrimination, and subjugation of women by patriarchal systems that are rooted in African societies.

However, while feminist writings aim at dismantling the prejudice that women face, it turns out that women themselves also attempt to participate in the maintenance of the patriarchal system through their deliberate acceptance of conforming to patriarchal norms as a means of shaping their

identity. This, therefore, constitutes the main problem that the present article attempts to address. Thus, this article seeks to demonstrate to what extent women contribute to their own subjugation as portrayed in the selected plays. To handle this gap, turns out to answer the following research question: Why, despite the harmful effects of patriarchal values on women, do they deliberately conform to the patriarchal system? As a hypothesis, the study assumes that this conformism is mainly due to women's desire to be accepted and valued by the African community. So, the main objective of this article is to demonstrate how women accept conforming to patriarchal norms to be accepted by the community or to shape their identity as a good African woman, as portrayed in the selected plays. To that end, the study relies on Ruth Buthler 's Gender Performativity as a theoretical framework. According to this theory, the fact that women perform repetitive actions engendered by patriarchal norms, women end up integrating these norms into their daily habits in such a way that they identify themselves through these actions. In line with this, the critics highlight that:

> Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time, identity instituted through a stylised repetition of acts…If gender attributes, however, are not expressive but performative, then these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to be expressed or revealed(R. Butler, 2020, p. 528).

Judith Butler emphasises that gender is not a fixed or inherent identity but rather a significant process shaped through repeated actions and behaviours. She argues that gender does not originate from some stable fundamental principles within a person, but is constructed through stylised acts and performances that are repeated over time and through which gender identities are continually produced and reinforced. So, when she says that gender is constructed performatively rather than expressively, she means that the roles attributed to women or men do not necessarily reflect the real organisation of society because attributes are not inborn but rather, they result from ongoing performance of actions that end up being legitimate, and that each social layer adopts as the hallmark of its identity. So, the use of this theory allows us to analyse the selected plays by focusing on significant women's attitudes to show women's conformism to patriarchal norms that they adopt as what shapes their identity. The issue of women's conformism as an identity to be preserved, which facilitates their oppression, is experienced by female characters in all the selected plays and expressed through diverse forms that the following lines of the article are devoted to analysing.

1. Women Claiming their Womanhood as a Means of Shaping their identities

One of the main patriarchal oppressions that women face is the fact of being victims of stereotypes, which restrict their roles to domesticity and motherhood. That is, according to patriarchal perception, the main role of a woman in society is to produce children and to take care of the family, implying that the place of the woman is at home. But the fact that society is structured in such a way that women's identity becomes defined by the expectation that the African ideal woman accepts these social norms in her daily conduct. In other words, the patriarchal system codified gender issues in such a way that women, by performing these domestic activities, end up seeing them as the hallmark that shapes their identities.

Female characters claim their role in motherhood within the community. That is, despite the limitation of women's role in society as mothers, women themselves find it to be their duty and burden, and the only condition to be called 'woman'. African tradition associates women's characteristics with a set of roles, so that all women who live accordingly are regarded by society as women of high values who deserve respect and honour from the whole community. Somda Nadine (2024), in her dissertation, demonstrates how Emecheta, in her novel *Double Yoke*, strongly criticises the way women's identity is shaped by womanhood in African traditional society, so that if a woman is not married, she is seen as a failure, whatever her achievements (Somda, 2023, p. 46).

By the same token, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her letter, in which she makes fifteen suggestions to a mother on how to help her daughter to be a feminist, tells the mother that she needs to teach her daughter that "Motherhood is a glorious gift, but do not define yourself solely by motherhood…Your sister-in-law (can) say you should be a 'traditional' mother and stay home…People will selectively use 'tradition' to justify anything(C. Adichie, 2017, p. 2). In this letter, Adichie is drawing women's attention to what society expects from them in terms of their roles in the community, and women have to reject this stereotyped attribution for their empowerment. But, unfortunately, women, in their aim to avoid being regarded as a failure or a disgrace in the community, are compelled to conform to their traditional roles. In this section, the main aim of the article is to demonstrate in the selected plays how the selected playwrights portray women's alignment with womanhood as a form of fashioning their image.

In Brew's *The Prisoner*, the female character who sees conformism to domesticity as an identity is Ruth. In traditional Africa, girls were marginalised compared to boys insofar as, while the boys have the right to schooling, the girls, in contrast, were deprived of this privilege because traditional African society has always been one that values marriage and produces children. Logically, each girl should fight against this misconception and discrimination, but Ruth's attitudes, Ruth attititues as shown in the coming discussion, demonstrate her acceptance of this patriarchal value.

> RUTH. (*To Ruppert*) Smith and I have decided to get married.
> RUPERT. … Silly talk… After spending all that money on you…and very ready to spend more… So, that is why you refuse the offer to go abroad for further studies.
> RUTH. I am a woman; I must marry and have children(F. Brew, 2021, p. 83-84).

In this discussion between Rupert and his daughter Ruth, we notice two opposing trends as far as Ruth's future is concerned. While Rupert wants Ruth to pursue further studies abroad to a higher degree, which can surely reinforce her agency, Ruth refuses her father's offer under the pretext that she wants to marry. This is paradoxical, because in African societies, women are mostly obliged to give up their studies since they are given to early marriage, but in Ruth's case, she does not find studies more important than having a child. Her attitudes contradict what African feminist writers have always denounced in their work of art, which is the fact that in patriarchal society, women are often denied access to schools in favour of male children.

Ruth's conformism to the role of motherhood is even shared by most women in the play, insofar as they support Ruth in her perception of the role that women should play in African society. This is clearly stated in the following dialogue between a group of women and Rupert:

> EBESUAPANYIN. … The girl *(Ruth)* is grown, and at this, she needs some guidance... A woman is trained by a woman…I can't see how a man can train a woman to grow into a responsible wife.
> RUPERT. I am not training her to be just a wife
> 1ST WOMAN: She must be taught how to dress like a woman…How to wash
> 2ND WOMAN. She must learn how to cook…How to clean and maintain a home(F. Brew, 2021, p. 53-54).

This dialogue is held when Diana's relatives come to take Ruth to provide her with what they call an adequate education based on patriarchal norms. Through the discussion, two contradictory views are raised related to the role of women in society. While some traditional men rooted in patriarchal norms such as Ebesuapanyin still see the responsible woman as one who can handle domestic chores, some like Rupert think that an accountable woman is the one who is graduated from university which is why he says that he has not educated his daughter to be "just a wife" that is, a woman whose role in the family is to produce children for her husband and do house chores.

However, what is amazing in this debate is the women's position. Indeed, they share Wofa and Ebesuapanyin's views about the necessity for Ruth to abandon her further studies and be taught what they call a 'how to be a good woman', whose mission is to do domestic activities. Through their reactions, women contribute to their oppression, and they are deeply attached to the role of womanhood as prescribed by patriarchal norms, and this leads Rupert to argue: "Children! Children! Is that the only thing that matters to a woman?" (38). In this rhetorical question, Rupert expresses his worries about women's strong desire to achieve their burden, whatever the price, which therefore reinforces patriarchal domination.

Alongside Brew, Dangarembga in *She No Longer Weeps* also evokes women's conformism to patriarchy through the acceptance of their traditional burden, which is only to marry a man and take care of the family. In fact, the playwright denounces the fact that women's values are evaluated through marriage by the community, insofar as marriage becomes a duty that a woman should accomplish to be accepted by the community, as Martha's words in the following excerpt of dialogue attest:

> MARTHA: (*Stands to look out of the window.*) They say you are my husband. (*Silence.*) …They say I must be with my husband.
> FREDDY: I'm not your husband. I haven't married you.
> MARTHA: But you must, Freddy, please, you must…Just so I'm respectable and people can't talk …"What I know," says my mother, "is that when a woman is old enough, she gets married so that she can have her babies'(T. Dangarembga, 1987, p. 9-10).

This conversation reveals Martha's deep willingness to get married by any means to conform to what society expects from her. When Freddy tells her not to see him as her husband because he has not yet married her, Martha's answer is very significant since she shows that for a woman to be responsible, she needs to marry a man. Insisting that Freddy must marry her emphasises patriarchal social values in which marriage becomes the marker of a woman's social standing. So, forcefully seeking to be in this dynamic of social expectation, women open the door to their subjugation since men take advantage of their obsession with marriage to ill-treat them.

Besides, mentioning that her mother says: "When a woman is old enough, she gets married so that she can have her babies" highlights that this perception is transmitted from mother to daughter, which on the large-scale comfort men in their quest for women domination and this is what even leads Martha's mother to tell her: "You are not even thankful that this man is free to make you his wife". Through this assertion, she reveals an inner patriarchal norm that characterises marriage as being the barometer of women's existence because women's honour and dignity are tied to their marital status. This, therefore, leads women to accept their restricted roles in the community as mothers, decreasing over time their agency due to conformism.

Besides, another situation in the play that shows that women are at the basis of their oppression is their involvement in the implementation of patriarchal norms against themselves. In the case of Martha, her sister finds it fair that she is being expelled from her parents' home because of her pregnancy outside marriage, and this is perceivable through Martha's words:

> They don't want to hear, none of them. Not even my sister, who's younger and ought to know better— she shouldn't be so set in her thinking. "There are some things" she told me... and I swear she looked just like my father... "'there are some things," she said, "that simply aren't done. Decent girls don't sleep around or at the very least they don't get pregnant. You have done both. you will have to suffer the consequences. I wish I could help you," she said, "but I can't keep you here. Our father and my husband both say you must go." I cried

> and cried. I begged her, I begged her to let me stay, but even she believes that since I'm expecting, I must have a husband somewhere. Somewhere there must be a man to go to(T. Dangarembga, 1987, p. 10).

Martha is explaining here the suffering that she has undergone after being pregnant before marriage. What hurts her is the fact that her sister, whom she expected to express solidarity or compassion with her, goes along with their father to blame her. When she was thrown away, she went to her sister to ask for assistance and compassion; her sister's reaction is very significant since, for Martha's sister, Martha has to reap what she sows. She clearly shows her strong connection to patriarchal norms and finds her sister guilty of not being able to abide by the societal traditional norms regarding women's marital affairs.

Martha's sister's attitudes show a lack of solidarity among women themselves, contributing to worsening their case because men profit from this complicity to reinforce their supremacy. As such, Martha is compelled to be with a man for protection as she acknowledges: "I must have a husband somewhere. Somewhere there must be a man to go to". For her, the lack of support from her sister makes it imperative for her to have a man with whom she can live.

Consequently, it paves the way for domestic violence since Freddy realises how much Martha's existence relies on him, which then leads to Martha suffering from Freddy's domestic violence. This, in turn, prompts Martha's mother to argue that "Usually a woman feels she must have a man to be something. Her man becomes her life, and if she loses him, she feels as though she is losing her life" (37). This statement strongly suggests that women's lives are connected to men in such a way that the beauty of their image depends on men, a situation that often leaves them in a subordinate and dependent position.

In sum, the analysis of this section of the analysis highlights that both Brew and Dangarembga recognise that women, through Ruth and Martha, who consider marriage and womanhood as their burden, shape their identity.

2. Conformism to Sexual Objectification as an Identity

Women's conformity to patriarchal norms, as their identity is also expressed through their temptation to confirm what tradition thinks about them. In fact, patriarchy has always seen women as the weaker sex who must be under men's domination. This biased perception of society toward women gives room to women's objectification, which is seen as the manner in which men regard women as sexual objects or goods that can be sold for specific purposes. This pejorative image of women leads to their dehumanisation, and as noted by Lola Crône (2022), feminist philosophers see objectification as women's exploitation by men and for men, and they strongly criticise this practice against women because it is dehumanising(L. Crône, 2022, p. 15).

However, despite the struggle to correct this distorted image of women pictured by the patriarchy, women end up being fashioned by their objectification in such a way that they tend to adopt it as one of the social norms that they have to align with to fully express their womanhood. In line with this, Barbara L. Fredrickson and Toni-Ann Roberts (1997) are of the view that the fact that women are constantly judged by the patriarchal system as being objects and end up internalising it as an accepted living standard for them paves the way to women's self-objectification (B. Fredrickson and T. Roberts, 1997, p. 1).

Therefore, the internalisation of objectification in women's daily attitudes has grown with the strong influence of patriarchal norms, which is an indication that women are in a position of conforming to patriarchal norms. In Brew's *The Prisoner,* the question of women's self-objectification is seen through Vivian's attitudes. When she married Rupert, she found that Rupert was busier with his professional duties, and this led her to posit: "I have to look for a man who will satisfy my sexual needs. I am a sexually active human being; I cannot suppress my feelings forever"(F. Brew, 2021, p. 36). By asserting that she must find a man to satisfy her sexual

needs, she acknowledges her own sexual agency but simultaneously emphasises her role as a sexual object primarily aimed at satisfying a man's desires.

Her statement reflects an internalisation of patriarchal norms that often associate women's worth with their sexual availability and responsiveness, reducing her identity to that of a sexually active human being. This perspective emphasises how women can see themselves as objects for pleasure, rather than autonomous individuals with their own intrinsic value. It also highlights the pressure women face to conform to a certain sexual identity, which can lead to self-objectification, where they prioritise their sexual function over their personal agency.

By the same token, in Dangarembga's *She No Longer Weeps*, this question of women's self-objectification is also tackled, and it can be seen in the following dialogue:

> MARTHA: (*Becoming annoyed and therefore being particularly polite.*) Would you like a drink... tea ...a cold drink?
> GERTRUDE: So, this is how you are trying to catch him —with these (*Raising a cushion by its corner between thumb and forefinger*), and these (*She tugs at a chair-back, leaving it crooked.*) Hey, woman, our men don't care for this—just let them drink and let them fuck. Let them fuck anybody and everybody and they'll stay with you forever (T. Dangarembga, 1987, p. 19).

In this dialogue, Gertrude attempts to reveal how women should behave if they ever want to have their man for themselves. When she notices that Martha tries to find good manners to take care of her husband, she indicates that a woman's body is a powerful instrument that women can use to entertain a man. In other words, a good woman must sexually satisfy her husband. So, by saying that what matters in a couple for a woman is her capacity to entertain her husband sexually, turns her into a 'sexual object' in the service of her husband.

Besides, saying that Martha must "Let him 'fuck' everybody and anybody" posits that another best condition for women to possess their husbands for themselves is to tolerate and accept men's unfaithfulness, a manner of promoting adultery. The use of the term 'fuck' testifies to Gertrude's vulgarity and perversity related to sexual issues, which calls for a common perception that women should share, which is the need to integrate into their minds the sense of self-objectification as a sexual instrument for men. A mindset that therefore facilitates their subjugation by men, because they are doomed to obey what men dictate as principles.

3. Women's Acceptance of their gender inferiority as their identity

The question of women's conformity to patriarchal norms as a source of reinforcement of their subjugation is also expressed in the selected plays through women's recognition of their biased status structured by patriarchal society. One of the stereotypes of women defined by traditional society is the fact that women are more emotional, irrational, powerless, and unwise than men, leading men to see women as inferior to them. That is why women are expected to be dependent on women in terms of decision-making as well as needs because men's image as stratified by tradition is always linked with rationality, wit, bravery, and wealth, on which women have to rely for their well-being. Catherine Lynette Innes (1992) writes that Okonkwo prizes manliness above all and judges actions and talk by that criterion, classifying everything he admires as 'manly' and everything he despises as 'womanly'(C. Innes, 1992, p. 26). For the critic, Okonkwo evaluates his attitudes and actions through the binary lens since he associates his achievements with manhood and what he dislikes or hates in women, which clearly draws a gender-based lens.

However, these inferiority and dependence traits are attributed to women by patriarchal norms, which becomes a sort of women's distinctiveness insofar as they internalise this disempowered habit in their daily life, and this is portrayed in Aidoo and Imbuga. In Aidoo's *Anowa*, she shows that women internalise their complex of inferiority in such a way that they find it abnormal that a woman challenges a man's authority and the Old woman's following words illustrate it: "As the sourdest yam is better than the sweetest guava, the dumbest man is always better than a woman.

Or he thinks he is! And so Kofi shall teach Anowa. He is a man!" (A. Aidoo, 1966, p. 102). In this assertion, the old woman claims a deep commitment to patriarchal norms because, for her, the question of women's inferiority to men is inborn, and any man must find ways to dominate his wife. The Old woman's assertion discloses that men are intrinsically valued over women, even though men perceived as less intelligent are superior just because of their gender. This proverbial expression shows that women caution and accept their inferiority.

By the same token, another element in Aidoo's *Anowa* that shows that women have already integrated the perception that men are superior to them is seen through the following dialogue:

> OSAM: How unhappy she is about those slaves, and how they quarrel from morning till night.
>
> BABUA: So! I didn't know she was a fool, too. She thought it is enough just to be headstrong [*laughing drily*]. Before she walked out that noonday, she should have waited for me to tell her how to marry a man....A good woman does not have a brain or mouth (A. Aidoo, 1966, p. 93).

This dialogue between Badua and her husband, Osam, is related to Anowa's marriage matters. For Badua, their daughter is happy in her marriage because their affairs are prospering. However, her husband, Osam, expresses his concern about the problems that she comes across in her marriage. For him, their daughter is unhappy because her husband does not want to listen to her pleas, which is therefore the basis of repetitive conflicts between them. To that, Badua says that this happened because Anowa had not been able to provide her with advice on "how to marry a man". In other words, she discloses that she would be told that "A good woman does not have a brain or mouth". So, by claiming that a good woman does have a 'brain', she denies women the capability to make decisions or to have independent thought, and as for the term "mouth", she attempts to say that a perfect woman is the one who is voiceless and knows how to keep silent in front of her husband. This situation, therefore, reinforces internal misogyny in which women themselves contribute to paving the way to their oppression and subjugation.

Conclusion

The analysis shows that women's identity within patriarchal societies is heavily influenced by 'unconscious' conformism, where they internalise and uphold norms that create barriers to their agency. As demonstrated in the three selected plays, notably *The Prisoner*, *She No Longer* Weeps and *Anowa*, the playwrights criticise how female characters are compelled to consistently assume prescribed roles of motherhood, objectification and dependence on men. It is through repeating these roles that women begin to see them as part of their identity. They do this not only to shape who they are but also to gain respect and acceptance from the community. This is seen as paradoxical because women's conformity to patriarchy, as a way of forming their identity, systematically compromises their autonomy and sustains cycles of oppression.

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