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Ananse as a Paradigm of Identity in Ghanaian Drama

Victor Kwabena Yankah Ph.D

Abstract

*In Ghanaian folktale tradition, the figure of the ubiquitous Ananse is predominant. Although Ananse is also found in some African-American and Caribbean folktales (a confirmation of the fact that the dislocation of Africans from the mainland to the New World has not obliterated their culture in their adopted home), he is unmistakably Ghanaian. In the drama of playwrights like Martin Owusu, Efua Sutherland and Yaw Asare, Ananse is seen as an everyman figure recognized by society as a metaphor for self-criticism. This paper examines the presentation of Ananse in Martin Owusu's *The Story Ananse Told*, Efua Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa* and Yaw Asare's *Ananse in the Land of Idiots*. It discusses the thesis that in these plays Ananse becomes a paradigm for articulating identity traditional, colonial and postcolonial of the Ghanaian.*

Immediately after independence, Ghanaian writers sought novel ways to represent the new Ghanaian personality. Theatrical experimentations by Efua Sutherland and Joe deGraft, two of the earliest post-independence dramatists, led to the evolution of a unique performance style that clearly incorporates Ghanaian folktale traditions. The desire to discover a distinctive Ghanaian voice in drama may have been fostered by the liberation ideology that permeated the society at the time. The philosopher, Franz Fanon (2007, p.253) captures the thinking behind colonialist activity thus: "Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverse logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it." Generally, after independence, there was a desire to eschew any such colonial tendencies, and, though the English language continued to be employed, literature and other aspects of cultural expression were re-orientated towards developing an anti-colonial doctrine. Adéeko (2007, p. 237) has hinted that when different geographical and political entities "share a common language in the articulation of their literatures, the expressed cultural, ethnic and national differences establish their individual identities". Although the post-colonial writer employed the language of his colonial master, his singularity in the expression of his culture in these

Gender Talk or Powerless Female: Eufua T. Sutherland's Edufa and The Marriage of Anansewa as Paradigms

Oludolapo Ojediran (Ph.D Candidate)

Abstract

African female playwrights' works have often been analysed within different female discourse frameworks, but this paper examines Eufua T. Sutherland's Edufa and The Marriage of Anansewa from Judith Butler's view on gender. Sutherland is categorized as one of the first generation of African female writers who creatively explores how gender and woman status within her society is often viewed from the cultural perspective. This analysis of Sutherland's plays will provide a reliable guide to the interpretation of the themes which explains woman's position in the society, how this position affects her perception of identity within the society through language and action, cultural vulnerability and woman's quest for self-expression. This paper analyses Eufua T. Sutherland's plays by exploring the identities of the female characters in relation to that of the male characters whose fear and greed make them victims as well. It also discusses the playwright's view on women gender in relation to their language. Butler's view that gender is Performative is employed in this paper to a large extent hinging on women's capabilities to analyse the relationships between the female and male characters. This enables the discussion of Sutherland's characters exploration of female identity through the language choice of these characters that feminine and masculine is not what we are, nor the traits people have, but effects people produce by way of a particular things they do.

Gender is complex. The willingness to understand the definition of gender is the willingness to struggle within the complexities of the society that defines it. It is essential to understand the difference between gender and sexuality. While Sexuality concerns physical and biological differences that distinguish males from females, gender is what the society makes of these sexualities that have no biological component. Cultures are agents which construct differences in gender. These socio-cultural constructions attach themselves to behaviours, expectations, roles, representations, and sometimes to values and beliefs that are specific to either men or women. Instead of biology, socially agreed upon and constructed conduct, and the meanings cultures assign to that conduct, constitute the concept of gender.

Judith Butler and Sara Salih in *The Judith Butler Reader* argue that sex

construed as a biological category is as heavily socially constructed as gender, and that biological sex itself is a gendered category. Butler insists that while feminist analysis successfully identified the social practices that produce gender as a category of identification, they have failed to see that sex itself is produced as a category that precedes gender. In line with Butler's view, the meanings attached to the female body as an object of scientific scrutiny are determined not just by the practices of science, but in conjunction with other cultural and economic formations, for example, global capitalism, the mass media, institutional racism, or homophobia. Gender however is seen as a means of investigating the variability and contingency of male and female understanding of sexual difference.

In exploring this, Efua T. Sutherland, one of the renowned first generation of African female writers has explored this issue of gender in her works. Through language, her works analyse female issues in the male dominated society. This paper discusses the works of Sutherland's in relation to the female gender's lack of emotional capabilities as portrayed in the female characters. This playwright believes that thoughts, feelings and emotions are the inner attributes which a woman possesses and needs to be expressed but are devalued by the males in her female characters. Such feelings, thoughts and emotions presented are interlinked with the masculine gender that regards females as possessions and emotionless. Sutherland exposes how the male-dominated societies influence female decisions and uses her sexual attributes as a way of enslavement. Simone de Beauvoir's in *The Second Sex* is of the opinion that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman is evidenced in the plays to be analysed. According to Butler, becoming a woman or a man is not something one accomplishes once and for all in a lifetime, but it is an accumulation of what the society constitutes a particular person to be. Deborah Cameron in *Language and Gender: A Reader*, notices that:

Gender has constantly to be reaffirmed and publicly displayed by repeatedly performing particular acts in accordance with the cultural norms (themselves historically and socially constructed, and consequently variable) which define 'masculinity' and 'femininity' (271).

The Performative view of gender allows an interesting discussion in the actuality of gendered speech which Sutherland treats in a way that switches the male characters language to the female characters way of life. This allows her to explore the themes of fear and greed in the two plays. Sutherland's recreates *The Marriage of Anansewa*, the storytelling drama to expose how Ananse denies his daughter from choosing her own husband.

Despite being an oral story which Sutherland translates from the Akan spider tales (Anansem) into a new dramatic structure which she calls Anansegoro, she exposes Butler's view about the construction of gender as a repeated stylisation of the body that is a set of repeated acts within a rigid regulatory frame which congeals over the time to produce the appearance of substance, of a "natural" kind of being' (33). Traditionally, in the Ghanaian setting, Ananse means trickster, the spider that often appears as a man. Sutherland's portrayal of Kweku Ananse in relation to her beautiful daughter, Anansewa is presented as the most valuable asset which the trickster has and if he succeeds in persuading one of the country's chiefs to marry her, he believes he is going to be wealthy.

Language and Character Representation in Sutherland's Plays.

Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa* exposes a cunning and dishonest father, Ananse who sees the female gender as a source of wealth like Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*. As a trickster who can take different forms, Sutherland makes Ananse an old man; Ananse tests the suitors of his daughter, Anansewa, who is a Western-educated urban woman. He tries to gain money by demanding a bride price and playing with the hopes of the four different suitors from various clans. Following the oral technique, the playwright uses a storyteller who stands outside the action and mediates between the actors and the audience. With the actors, the audiences participate in singing or recounting mboguo, musical performances that comment on the story. Ananse disregards her daughter's emotional feelings without considering what she wants for herself and her choice of husband despite being educated.

This is similar to the situation in *Edufa* where lack of feelings and sympathy makes Edufa sacrifice the love and life of his wife in order to align with one of the society's expectations of the masculine gender. Sutherland portrays Edufa as a man of high social status, reputation and prestige who in his quest to maintain and improve it, consults a diviner who saw death hanging over him instead. As the only means of averting this disastrous situation, he must sacrifice something with the power of speech who can swear an oath to die on his behalf. At this point in the play, the playwright questions the positionality of a man in his quest to maintain his societal position and his loss of a dear one in order to maintain this status. Edufa's father, Kankam, reveals the hidden mystery behind his wife, Ampoma's ill-health which is as a result of what Edufa does:

KANKAM: You had willed that some old wheezer like me should be the victim. And I was the first to speak. 'Not me, my son', said I joking. 'Die your own death.

I have mine to die.' And we all laughed. Do you remember? My age was protecting me. [Pause] Then Ampoma spoke. [Pause] Yes, I see you wince the fatal words that day and condemned her life. 'I will die for you Edufa', she said; and meant it too, poor, doting woman. (17)

Ampoma's doting nature makes her the victim of her husband's wickedness. She portrays the love and affection the society expects of a woman towards her husband and children both in actions and words. In her discussion with Edufa, she identifies how the love towards her husband will allow her die young which will deter her from being the mother of her children whom she feels she has greater love for:

AMPOMA: I could not live where you are not. I could not live Without you, my husband . . . Over me, the sun is getting dark. [With great agitation] My husband! Watch the death that you should have died. [She frets from place to place as if escaping from him.] Stay over there in the sun. Children! My children! If I could cross this water I would pluck you back from the mountain side. Children! Hold my hand! (10-11)

Ampoma's lines reveal how a woman's feelings is often taken for granted, regarded as useless, expressionless and treated with triviality. This is noticeable in Robin Lakoff's assertion in *Language and Woman's Place* that a woman's language is often 'tentative, powerless and trivial'. Sutherland portrays Ampoma's language to reveal a woman's vulnerability, powerlessness, and self-expressionlessness in a male-dominated society that silences woman's emotional communication. This corresponds with Messner, (2001) and Julia T. Wood's (2001b) opinion that the qualities men are expected to have such as aggressiveness, dominance, sexuality and strength are identical to those linked with women subjugation and their abuse. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet in *Language and Gender: A Reader* observe that:

Women's language has been said to reflect their (our) conservatism, prestige consciousness, upward mobility, insecurity, deference, nurturance, emotional expressivity, connectedness, sensitivity to others, solidarity. And men's language is heard as evincing their toughness, lack of

affection, competitiveness, independence, hierarchy control. (485)

The above assertion is what constitutes Ampoma's feelings and language. As a woman, her language tends towards the sensitive side than that of the men present at that time in the play which allows the different attributes to become visible in Sutherland's work. The playwright's use of language serves as a form of empowerment which enables her to confront certain culture that limit the female gender and to question the masculine authority, therefore challenging the socio-cultural values.

This form of language is explored in the two different relationships the playwright presents in the characters' use of dialogue. While Sutherland examines the wife-husband relationship in *Edufa*, *The Marriage of Anansewa* exposes the father-daughter relationship. In the father-daughter relationship, Ananse and Anansewa have a good rapport, although there is the socio-cultural perception about womanhood as an object and a source of family wealth. At the beginning of her father's cunning act, she questions his use of words that regards her as an object in the letter she writes to the four different chiefs, but she is subdued and silenced by her father. The money sent by one of the chiefs involved in Ananse's plot so her daughter can get a higher education she desires is used as a means of making Anansewa voiceless despite what she wants. This shows that poverty is another form of female voicelessness in the society.

ANANSEWA: [Searching for the copy] Is it I? Here is the letter. [She reads . . .] 'the object of your interest'. Is that me, father? Am I the object? Oh, I wish, I wish . . . (21).

Ananse's view of his daughter as 'the object of your interest' symbolises women as mere property to be owned and discarded anytime the society feels like, he esteems the chiefs involved in his plan to make them honoured and respected. For example, instead of calling one of the chiefs by the name 'Chief of Sapa', he sees it as too ordinary for a man of high calibre due to his trick in order to find the highest bidder for his daughter, he asks Anansewa to type his letter starting with lots of respects and social recognition that:

ANANSE: . . . [He assumes the stance of an official praise-singer.] 'O Mighty- Tree-Of Ancient-Origin! Mighty-Tree-Of-Ancient-Origin, rooted in the shrine of deity! Countless branches in which benighted wandering birds are welcome to shelter.' (14).

Ananse believes that men need their appellation in order to assume the societal status that they should have. The above six lines rendition is used in place of the single line of 'Dear Chief of Sapa' which is a means of placing the masculine gender in a superior position as depicted by Sutherland. Although Sutherland places Anansewa to question most of these masculine social attributes given, but her poverty and language limits her actions. Anansewa ignorantly believes her father, but she is sad and afraid that her father will not be able to unite the knot he is tying around them to secure a good husband for her and to end his own poverty. The playwright places Ananse in the position of a protective father in the play. Ananse engages in the act of negotiation which Sutherland portrays in a way that innocent Anansewa feels it is to her own advantage while her father engages in a kind of talk with the Chiefs involved that he feels will benefit his daughter in future.

Likewise, the other female character, Christie is taken off by Ananse who plays on her intelligence to get what he wants. Christie explores the plight of a woman seeking love and attention to fulfil one of the social expectations of the female role which is what Ananse uses against her in order to carry out his plans. At first, Ananse does not see Christie as one to solve his problem, but as someone at his beck and call whom he passively engages in detangling his puzzle amongst the four chiefs. Against Ananse's mother's view that sees Christie as an agent of destruction to culture and social norms of womanhood, Christie becomes the active instrument through which Ananse is able to solve his puzzle. Ananse at this point recognises that both genders go through a difficult time in their life time which does not determine what the society makes of gender:

ANANSE: ... if you are merely human like me, you'd better make your laughter brief, because in this world, there is nobody who is by-passed by trouble (61).

The above statement exposes Butler and Salih's view that gender is performative. This acknowledges the instability and variability of gender identities and the behaviour in which those identities are performed through language. At this stage, Ananse becomes what he makes of himself through his cunning ways and not what the society makes of his gender. Although, one should not forget the fact that he does this as an avenue to secure a future at the expense of his daughter, he also wants to align with the social construct of masculinity.

Sutherland's two plays analyses the characters of Ampoma and Anansewa as incapable of making their own choices, asserting themselves and expressing their emotions in the society. While Ananse sees the worth

of her daughter due to the financial gain, Edufa appreciates his wife in order for her to die on his behalf to maintain his position of honour. Ananse sees his daughter as a treasure and at the same time 'the object of a man's interest'. This same object of interest makes the chiefs who are highly respected in their different communities ignore their ego in order to have Anansewa because she is considered as an additional asset for them. Sutherland gives the four chiefs/suitors the names that reveal their social status and how much they are respected at the expense of the feminine gender.

Although Sutherland portrays women's value in a derogatory manner in relation with these chiefs, she also exposes how the female gender can be expressive through her worth in the patriarchal society. Being educated and beautiful, Anansewa is the subject of discourse from the beginning of the play to the end; the male characters see her as the subject of their story which acknowledges the self-worth of the female gender to be appreciated the more. Ksenija Horvat in *Cat on the Hot Tin Roof* sees this as a means for a woman to become the writer of her own 'herstory'. Sutherland allows the female protagonist not only to be seen in relation to the men but also in what she is able to achieve as an individual especially in West African societies that attribute more value to educated women.

As at the time this play was written, some of the people that have come in contact with the missionaries in some part of West African countries like Nigeria and Ghana amongst others believe that education is a means of liberating women from the claws of the socio-cultural injustice against them to a large extent because the woman is able to express herself. Some other group amongst the two mentioned above also believe that education limits the type and category of suitors that wants such a woman's hand in marriage because she is respected, knowledgeable and intelligent which makes men see her as being sophisticated. This idea corresponds with the first messenger's speech in *The Marriage of Anansewa* when Anansewa pretends to be dead in order to untie his father's knot and to know the chief that truly loves her amongst the four:

FIRST MESSENGER: Respected lady, and you, elder of the family, whom we meet here. ... Our royal one, the wealthy paramount Chief of the Mines whose praise name is 'You Are Coming Again, Aren't You', has had many discussions with his councillors about this (sic) marriage he was going to contract. He insisted-against their advice-that if a lady of this quality came into his hands she would give enlightened training to the many children to whom his wives have given birth to (78).

First messenger's lines reveal the nurturing attribute of tending the young ones to maturity associated with the female gender. This allows the Chief of the Mines see Anansewa from two different perspectives of both domestic (private) and academic (public) sphere. The chief does not only see Anansewa as a woman whose education will positively influence his kingdom, but also sees the marriage as a way of maintaining his social prestige amongst his people who will see his new wife as an additional advantage to his kingdom. It is this obsession in maintaining social status that makes him neglect his council's advice not to marry Anansewa.

Similarly, Edufa's obsession in maintaining his position of privilege leads him to stylishly destroy his wife against loss of prestige. Sutherland's play reveals the story of greed, where a man's wealth and societal status surpasses all other things to Edufa who devalues human life in his search for social recognition. *Edufa* is a play filled with so many ironies that attribute some of the feminine qualities to the male gender. Despite what Edufa does to his wife, he still confesses love and shyness which are feminine to cajole her and make people believe in his affection and love towards her. In his discussion with his friend, Senchi about the bouquet of flowers which he asks his sister to take to her, he confesses:

EDUFA: [To Abena] Little one, you who is about to marry, I'm giving you a chance to look at love. Take these flowers in to Ampoma. [He speaks emotionally into the flowers.] Tell her that I, her husband, send them; that it is she who has so matured my love. I would have presented them myself, but I have learned the magic of shyness, and haven't the boldness to look into her eyes yet. (40).

Edufa's lines are romantic and captivating after his evil deeds to his wife which makes his friend, Senchi thinks he is the lovable husband he used to think he is not. Senchi at the beginning of their conversation accuses him of not being romantic enough, but at the end of the lines, he agrees that it is Edufa's first graceful act towards his wife he had ever seen. The song Senchi renders at this point is a praise of womanhood which Sutherland uses to celebrate the female gender's boldness at some point in life.

SENCHI: Nne
Nne Nne
Nne
Nne Nne
O, Mother

Nne
Nne Nne
If I find you
Nne
Nne Nne
I'll have to worship you
Nne
Nne Nne

I must adore you
Nne
Nne Nne
O, Mother
Nne Nne

She's wonderful
She's wonderful
O, Mother
She's wonderful ... (40-41)

Sutherland uses Senchi's emotional song to explore the value of motherhood which makes Seguwa to sob quietly and Edufa to feel the pain of what he has done to an innocent woman who loves him wholeheartedly. When the Chorus finally arrives at the party organised by Edufa to appreciate his wife, Senchi's conversation with them reveals the societal view of women not knowing how to say 'No' even if they do not agree with what they are experiencing. This is similar to what an Italian-Scottish female writer Marcella Evaristi notices in her play, *Commedia* as 'How to Say No Without Guilt' or 'Yes Without Guilt' that allows positive thinking and succeeding in whatever a woman chooses to do single-handedly. Evaristi discusses this through the portrayal of her female character, Elena whose experience in the play affirms Senchi's confirmation of what the society expects of a woman. Despite the fact that Elena wants to stay with her young boyfriend, Davide, she is unable to follow her heart because she does not want to disagree with what the society expects of a woman and a widow which is what leads to Ogwoma's death in Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*. Instead of Elena rejecting the hypocrisy of her sons and the society, she put on with it to become the victim of an unvalued emotional capability.

In this view of unvalued emotional capability, Ampoma and Anansewa's situation is what Jessica Benjamin in *The Bonds of Love: Rational Violence and Erotic Domination* views as lack of women

independence that limits their desire. Her opinion sees that women desires are often dictated by the desire of 'phallus' in the society. As far as Ananse and Edufa are concerned, their female victims expose lack of personal autonomy that is objectified to suit their greedy needs.

The playwright analyses the core idea of female personal autonomy as a self-independent attitude that has to do with self-personal rules while remaining free from the control and interference of others. Such autonomous nature allows a person to act in accordance with a freely self-chosen and informed plan, but Ampoma and Anansewa become enslaved in their own autonomy. These female characters autonomy can be described as a weakened autonomy which makes them incapable of deliberating or acting on the basis of their own volition, liberty, self-determination, independence and self-reliance.

Anansewa's lack of self-sufficiency and emotional capability is used by her father to manipulate and make her readjust to the core expectation of the females in a male-dominated society. Sutherland explores both conscious and unconscious processes involved in what Alice Walker describes as emotional capability. In Walker's view, this emotional capability allows a woman to be bold, audacious, outspoken, brave and independent to express herself in the midst of the masculine forces that dictate who and what she is or becomes. Such masculine forces are norms and principles that establish a woman's role as a mother, wife and daughter which the society accepts as the true nature and expectation of a woman.

Despite the female expectations in the society, Ampoma and Anansewa make additional efforts to assert and express themselves in the midst of a culture that does not cherish their gender which make them become the victims of their own actions and languages. Ampoma's show of love towards her husband through language conveys a sense of sacredness rather than an avenue of a sweet communion that will deepen the bond between her and the husband. Unlike most women's language, Ampoma's language becomes unapologetic for her actions at the end of the play which reveals most of the hidden structure. At this point, she is able to express herself freely without being controlled by her fear and other women's sense of fear that will definitely challenge the socio-cultural values that have always been looked up to as the standard of a society.

This is the standard of love and fear that captures Ampoma's mind in *Edufa* at first which makes her surrender her own life in place of her husband's. Ampoma's realisation of what she has done makes her give an open retaliation to the husband in order to expose his evil deeds of maintaining his societal position. She presents her husband's with waist beads which symbolise one of African feature of female beauty. By so

doing, she attributes Edufa with the societal perception of female timidity that makes him want to hold on to his position by refusing to die.

AMPOMA: [Inscrutable] Women, you understand, don't you, that with this, I mean to claim him mine. And you are witnesses. My husband, wear this in my honour. [She surprises EDUFA by slipping the beads round his neck. His first is of shock.] With it, I declare to earth and sky and water, and all things with which we shall soon be one, that I am slave to your flesh and happy so to be. Wear it proudly, this symbol of the union of our flesh (52-53).

Although Ampoma's action and language seems alien to the guest at the party, but it reveals the degree at which a woman's emotional capability can help her reject the restrictions around her in the presence of what constitutes the society. The standard language accepted by the male-dominated society allows the males to employ female language as a way of enslaving her. Sutherland explores the difference in language and knowledge through the character of Edufa's father, Kankam whose old age and knowledge is able to decipher his son's skim from the beginning of the play when he asks the question which becomes Ampoma's death sentence. This reveals the knowledgeable attributes given to men in the society as opposed to women's gullibility and insensitivity through the use of words and expression of emotions towards her husband.

EDUFA: Father, are you mad?

KANKAM: [Shocked] Nyame above! To say father and call me mad! My ntoro within you shivers with the shock of it!

EDUFA: [Aware that he has violated taboo] You provoked me.

KANKAM: [Moving away] All right, stranger, I am mad! And madness is uncanny. Have you not noticed how many a time the mad seem to know things hidden from men in their right minds? [Rounding up on Edufa] You know you killed your wife that day. I saw fear in your eyes when she spoke. I saw it, but I didn't understand. I have learned that in your chamber that night, you tried to make her forswear the oath she had innocently sworn. But the more you pleaded, the more emotionally she swore away her

life for love of you; until, driven by your secret fear, you had to make plain to her the danger in which she stood. You showed her the charm. You confess to her its power to kill whoever swore to die for you. Don't you remember how she wept? She had spoken and made herself the victim. Ampoma had lived with that danger ever since... (17-18)

The above lines signify that Kankam is aware of Edufa's inhuman nature. It also reveals Edufa as a coward and a disgrace to the masculine gender who is not ready to face the challenges of life as a man. While he commits an abominable act calling his father a mad man, his language enslaves him because he can not control the words he uses out of annoyance. Edufa's behaviour exposes how the cultural imperatives of the patriarchal society coerce not only the women, but also the men. The playwright renders the male characters in both plays to be powerless like the female characters that are at the mercy of their words and actions in the society.

Conclusion

Through these plays, Sutherland exposes the fear of both genders in line with their socio-cultural status. While the female gender sees their language as a means through which they are cheated and defeated, the male gender believes it is an asset they need to value in order to maintain the social prestige. Although Sutherland portrays in her plays that most of the cultural beliefs about gender often deprive women of the virility and the spirit to express themselves due to historical, social and intellectual basis which are not always in favour of their gender, the male gender in the plays also suffers the same predicament. This, however, aligns with Judith Butler's earlier mentioned view that it is possible for both genders to performatively subvert or resist the prevailing conventions associated with their gender which is what Sutherland does in the two works analysed, asserting that femininity and masculinity are not monolithic constructs.

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