



**Women, Patriarchy and Gendered Representation in Contemporary African Drama: A
Feminist Reading of Selected Male-Authored Plays**

Samira Hassan Muhammad¹

Email: Samirahassan7373@gmail.com

¹Department of General Education, Maryam Abacha American University of Nigeria, Kano

Abstract

This article examines the representation of women in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Ngũgĩ wa Mĩriĩ's *I Will Marry When I Want* and Ola Rotimi's *Man Talk*, *Woman Talk*, focusing on how male-authored African drama negotiates patriarchy, gender stereotypes, female agency and socioeconomic power. Drawing principally on Marxist feminism while engaging African feminist perspectives, the study adopts qualitative textual analysis to interrogate characterization, dialogue, gender relations, domestic roles and the intersections of gender and class. The analysis demonstrates that the playwrights neither simply reproduce nor completely dismantle patriarchal conceptions of womanhood. In *I Will Marry When I Want*, women's experiences are inseparable from class exploitation: Wangeci's domestic labour and Gathoni's vulnerability reveal how gender subordination intersects with poverty and capitalist inequality. In *Man Talk*, *Woman Talk*, Rotimi transforms gender stereotypes into subjects of comic interrogation by providing competing male and female voices within a quasi-judicial dramatic structure. The article argues that these representations reveal an important transition in African male-authored drama from restrictive constructions of women towards more contested, dialogic and socially conscious representations.

Keywords: African drama; feminist criticism; gender representation; Marxist feminism; patriarchy; female agency

Introduction

The representation of women remains a significant concern in African literary criticism because literature not only reflects social relations but can participate in their interpretation, reinforcement and contestation (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997; Ekwierhoma, 2002). African drama, like other literary forms, has emerged from societies in which gender roles have historically been influenced by patriarchal structures, cultural expectations, economic inequalities and changing social conditions. Consequently, the ways playwrights construct female characters provide important insights into broader attitudes towards women, power, marriage, labour, sexuality and social change (Davies & Graves, 1986; Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997).

Representations of women in African literature have frequently been criticised for positioning female characters around domestic and reproductive roles while allocating public authority, economic control and political agency predominantly to men (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997; Ekwierhoma, 2002). Such representations raise an important critical question: whether male-



authored African drama simply reproduces patriarchal conceptions of womanhood or simultaneously provides spaces in which such assumptions may be challenged and reconstructed. Feminist literary criticism provides an appropriate framework for addressing this question because it interrogates the ideological conditions under which gender identities and relationships are represented. Its concern extends beyond the numerical presence of female characters to questions of voice, authority, autonomy, labour, resources and the behavioural expectations imposed upon women within patriarchal social structures (Bressler, 1994; hooks, 2000).

These concerns acquire additional complexity in African contexts because gender relations cannot always be adequately understood independently of colonialism, class, poverty, culture, family and communal relationships (Steady, 1981; Davies & Graves, 1986). African feminist scholarship consequently challenges universalised models that regard antagonism between men and women as the exclusive foundation of women's emancipation. Instead, it accommodates female autonomy alongside cooperation, kinship, motherhood and collective social transformation (Steady, 1981).

Against this background, this article comparatively examines Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Ngũgĩ wa Mĩriĩ's *I Will Marry When I Want* and Ola Rotimi's *Man Talk, Woman Talk*. Although different in dramatic form and ideological orientation, both plays provide productive sites for interrogating gender relations, female agency and patriarchal representation (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o & Ngũgĩ wa Mĩriĩ, 1982; Rotimi, 2006). The article specifically examines how women are constructed by the playwrights, how patriarchal assumptions interact with class and social structures, and the extent to which the plays reproduce or challenge stereotypical representations of African womanhood.

Feminism, African Womanhood and Literary Representation

Feminism broadly challenges structures and ideologies that produce and sustain gender-based inequality. Feminist literary criticism extends this concern to literary representation by interrogating how texts construct femininity, masculinity, power and social relations (Bressler, 1994; hooks, 2000). It therefore examines not merely what female characters do but the ideological assumptions underlying the opportunities, restrictions and identities assigned to them.

African feminism complicates this discussion by insisting upon historical and cultural specificity. African women's experiences cannot be detached from colonial histories, economic inequality, communal relationships, motherhood, race and class (Steady, 1981; Davies & Graves, 1986). Steady (1981), for instance, foregrounds female autonomy alongside cooperation, kinship and the centrality of children, thereby resisting approaches that conceptualise women's liberation exclusively through antagonistic gender relations.

Such a framework is relevant to African drama because literary representations of women frequently emerge from tensions between inherited gender expectations and changing socioeconomic realities. Women may be represented as wives and mothers while simultaneously functioning as workers, political subjects, economic actors and agents of resistance (Evvierhoma, 2002). The critical issue is therefore not simply whether a woman occupies a domestic role but



whether that role becomes an ideological mechanism for denying her voice, autonomy and access to social power (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997).

Characterization is central to this representational process. Female characters are constructed through description, dialogue, action, relationships and the responses of other characters, while speech and silence may indicate the degree of dramatic authority afforded them (Bressler, 1994). Control over marriage, sexuality, property, labour and decision-making similarly provides important evidence of the gender ideology embedded within literary representation (Beauvoir, 1949; Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997).

Marxist Feminism as Theoretical Framework

This article adopts Marxist feminism as its principal theoretical framework because the selected plays situate gender relations within material and socioeconomic structures. Marxist feminism connects women's subordination to the organisation of labour, property, class and economic power, arguing that gender oppression must also be understood in relation to material structures through which power and resources are distributed (Jaggar & Rothenberg, 1984). Marxism primarily interrogates inequalities arising from capitalist class relations, whereas feminism addresses inequalities arising from patriarchal gender relations. Marxist feminism brings these analytical concerns together to explain how women's experiences may simultaneously be structured by class and gender (Jaggar & Rothenberg, 1984). This convergence is particularly useful for examining female characters whose economic dependence intensifies their vulnerability within patriarchal relationships.

This framework is particularly applicable to *I Will Marry When I Want*, where gender relations operate within struggles involving land, labour, wealth, religion and class (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o & Ngũgĩ wa Mĩrĩĩ, 1982). Gathoni's vulnerability, for example, cannot be adequately separated from the socioeconomic disparity between her poor family and the wealthy household of Kĩoi, while Wangeci's domestic position exists within a working-class household exposed to capitalist exploitation (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o & Ngũgĩ wa Mĩrĩĩ, 1982).

Marxist feminism is supplemented in this analysis by African feminist perspectives so that women's experiences are not reduced entirely to economic class. African feminism permits simultaneous attention to culture, family, community and negotiated gender relationships, thereby providing a contextually sensitive complement to materialist analysis (Steady, 1981; Davies & Graves, 1986).

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach based on close textual analysis of *I Will Marry When I Want* and *Man Talk, Woman Talk*. Qualitative literary analysis is appropriate because the study is concerned with meanings embedded in characterization, dialogue, dramatic action, gender relations and ideological representation rather than the quantitative frequency of textual elements (Bressler, 1994).



The two plays were purposively selected because they are male-authored African dramatic texts that foreground gender relations while positioning women within different socioeconomic and dramatic contexts (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o & Ngũgĩ wa Mĩriĩ, 1982; Rotimi, 2006). Analysis concentrates on characterization, dialogue, gendered power, domestic and economic roles, female agency, stereotypes, marriage and relationships between gender and class.

Marxist feminist concepts of class, labour, material inequality and patriarchal power provide the principal analytical categories, while African feminist concepts inform interpretation of complementarity, family, female agency and negotiated gender relations (Steady, 1981; Jaggar & Rothenberg, 1984). The analytical procedure therefore involves close reading, identification of relevant gendered representations, interpretation through the theoretical framework, and comparative synthesis of the two texts.

Women, Class and Patriarchy in *I Will Marry When I Want*

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Ngũgĩ wa Mĩriĩ locate gender relations within a broader critique of postcolonial capitalism and class exploitation. The drama centres on Kĩgũũnda and Wangeci, poor peasants whose modest property becomes vulnerable to the economic ambitions of the wealthy Kĩoi family. From the beginning, domestic life reveals economic deprivation, thereby connecting household experience to the wider structures of economic inequality (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o & Ngũgĩ wa Mĩriĩ, 1982).

Wangeci occupies the culturally recognisable positions of wife and mother, but reducing her characterization to domesticity overlooks her participation in family deliberation. She questions circumstances, engages Kĩgũũnda and participates in decisions affecting the household (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o & Ngũgĩ wa Mĩriĩ, 1982). Her domestic labour is economically significant even though it remains formally unremunerated, illustrating the Marxist-feminist argument that socially necessary domestic labour may be rendered economically invisible (Jaggar & Rothenberg, 1984).

Gathoni provides an even clearer intersection between gender and class. As the daughter of an impoverished household, her relationship with John Mũhũũni, son of the wealthy Kĩoi, is conditioned not simply by romantic attraction but by unequal socioeconomic power (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o & Ngũgĩ wa Mĩriĩ, 1982). Her eventual pregnancy and rejection expose the precarious position of a young woman situated at the intersection of gender vulnerability and class inequality. Gathoni nevertheless asserts personal agency by insisting upon her right to determine when she will marry. Her position challenges parental and patriarchal control over female sexuality and marriage and symbolically articulates a young woman's claim to self-determination (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o & Ngũgĩ wa Mĩriĩ, 1982). Scholarship has similarly identified Gathoni as a significant site for examining the tensions between female agency, gender stratification and patriarchal social structures in the play (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997).

The play consequently presents patriarchy not as an isolated structure but as one intertwined with material inequality. Wealth enables the Kĩoi family to exercise power over poorer families, while gender inequality increases Gathoni's vulnerability within that class relationship



(Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o & Ngũgĩ wa Mĩrĩ, 1982). A Marxist-feminist reading therefore reveals gender and class as mutually reinforcing dimensions of oppression rather than independent social categories (Jaggar & Rothenberg, 1984).

At the same time, the drama's revolutionary orientation frequently privileges the broader class struggle over sustained exploration of women's independent political subjectivity. The central ideological conflict concerns exploited workers and peasants confronting the wealthy postcolonial elite, meaning that women's gender-specific struggles are sometimes absorbed into a broader discourse of class liberation (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o & Ngũgĩ wa Mĩrĩ, 1982). From a feminist standpoint, this creates an important tension because liberation from economic exploitation does not necessarily eliminate patriarchal relations (hooks, 2000).

Nevertheless, *I Will Marry When I Want* offers more than stereotypical representations of female passivity. Wangeci's participation in household deliberations and Gathoni's assertion of marital autonomy complicate constructions of African women as inherently silent, submissive or dependent (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o & Ngũgĩ wa Mĩrĩ, 1982). The women therefore negotiate gendered and economic constraints rather than existing merely as passive victims.

Gender Stereotypes and Dialogic Resistance in *Man Talk*, *Woman Talk*

Ola Rotimi's *Man Talk*, *Woman Talk* approaches gender relations through humour, argument and theatrical confrontation. Rather than primarily locating gender conflict within economic class, the play dramatises competing stereotypes and assumptions that men and women hold about one another (Rotimi, 2006; Adegaju, 2011). Its courtroom-like or quasi-judicial structure provides a dramatic arena in which gender claims are articulated and subjected to counterclaims.

This structure is important to feminist interpretation because the female position is not simply silenced or narrated by men. Female and male voices are allowed to challenge each other's assumptions, making gender representation dialogic rather than unidirectional (Rotimi, 2006). Recent scholarship similarly interprets this dramatic structure as a form of "fair hearing" in which gender biases and counterclaims are brought into open intellectual confrontation.

Adegaju's (2011) social-semiotic analysis identifies gender stereotyping as a central feature of the play and demonstrates how Rotimi employs verbal and non-verbal signifiers to enact and interrogate sexist assumptions. The study concludes that Rotimi's satirical treatment exposes the absurdity of sexism and ultimately encourages reconsideration of gender relations rather than validating gender chauvinism (Adegaju, 2011).

Humour is therefore an important ideological device in the play. Stereotypes concerning behaviour, sexuality, responsibility and social competence are exaggerated and countered until their contradictions become apparent (Rotimi, 2006; Adegaju, 2011). Men accuse women and women respond with accusations against men, preventing either gender from retaining an uncontested monopoly on moral superiority.

The female voice consequently functions as an argumentative and intellectually capable subject rather than merely an object of male definition (Rotimi, 2006). Yet Rotimi does not resolve

the debate by reversing the hierarchy and granting women dominance over men. Instead, the play moves towards mutual interrogation and coexistence, an orientation consistent with strands of African feminist thought that emphasise gender transformation through cooperation rather than separatism (Steady, 1981; Adegoju, 2011).

However, equal dramatic opportunities to speak should not automatically be equated with structural gender equality. Patriarchy encompasses institutional arrangements affecting authority, property, labour and social opportunities, rather than simply negative stereotypes exchanged between individual men and women (hooks, 2000; Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997). Consequently, Rotimi's comic symmetry is valuable for exposing sexism but may simultaneously soften historical differences in structural power.

Comparative Discussion: From Stereotype to Agency

The two plays reveal contrasting but complementary dimensions of women's representation in male-authored African drama. *I Will Marry When I Want* embeds female experiences within class exploitation and postcolonial capitalism, whereas *Man Talk*, *Woman Talk* foregrounds ideological and interpersonal contestation between the sexes (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o & Ngũgĩ wa Mĩrĩ, 1982; Rotimi, 2006). Together, they demonstrate that male representations of women cannot be reduced to a simple binary between patriarchal stereotyping and feminist liberation.

In Ngũgĩ and Mĩrĩ's drama, women's experiences are materially grounded. Poverty, class hierarchy, property relations and unequal access to resources condition female possibilities, particularly in Gathoni's relationship with John and Wangeci's working-class domestic existence (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o & Ngũgĩ wa Mĩrĩ, 1982). Such representations support Marxist feminism's insistence that gender must be analysed alongside material and class relations (Jaggar & Rothenberg, 1984).

Rotimi, by contrast, gives gender conflict a predominantly discursive and theatrical structure. Women become speaking subjects capable of answering and destabilising male accusations, thereby challenging representations of female passivity (Rotimi, 2006; Adegoju, 2011). The play's satirical strategy has accordingly been interpreted as exposing the absurdity of sexist stereotypes and advocating reassessment of gender relations (Adegoju, 2011).

The comparison demonstrates the analytical importance of distinguishing between **representation, agency and structural power**. A female character may possess a strong dramatic voice while remaining constrained by wider social structures; conversely, domestic positioning does not necessarily eliminate agency (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997; Ekwierhoma, 2002). Feminist criticism must therefore consider the interaction among speech, action, material resources and social institutions.

Both plays ultimately complicate stereotypical constructions of women. Their female characters argue, desire, decide, question and respond to the social environments within which they are located (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o & Ngũgĩ wa Mĩrĩ, 1982; Rotimi, 2006). However, their agency continues to operate within significantly gendered structures, making these dramas sites where patriarchal assumptions are simultaneously reproduced and contested.



Implications for African Feminist Literary Criticism

The analysis demonstrates the value of examining gender alongside class, culture and material circumstances. Women's subordination cannot always be explained exclusively through interpersonal relations between individual men and women because economic systems, cultural institutions, family structures and access to material resources also influence gendered possibilities (Steady, 1981; Jaggar & Rothenberg, 1984).

Marxist feminism is particularly useful where women's experiences are inseparable from property and class, as demonstrated in *I Will Marry When I Want* (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o & Ngũgĩ wa Mĩriĩ, 1982). However, class analysis alone remains insufficient because patriarchal inequalities may operate across socioeconomic classes. African feminism complements this materialist perspective by foregrounding cultural specificity, community and possibilities for cooperative gender transformation (Steady, 1981; Davies & Graves, 1986).

Male-authored African drama should likewise not be treated as ideologically homogeneous. Male playwrights can reproduce patriarchal assumptions, interrogate them or simultaneously perform both ideological functions within a single text (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997; Adegaju, 2011). Critical interpretation must consequently attend to dramatic structure, dialogue, characterization and socioeconomic context before determining the gender ideology of a literary work.

Conclusion

This article has examined women's representation in *I Will Marry When I Want* and *Man Talk, Woman Talk* through Marxist feminist and African feminist perspectives. The analysis demonstrates that female representation in the selected male-authored African plays is considerably more complex than straightforward reproduction of patriarchal stereotypes (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o & Ngũgĩ wa Mĩriĩ, 1982; Rotimi, 2006).

In *I Will Marry When I Want*, gender inequality intersects significantly with class exploitation. Wangeci's domestic labour and Gathoni's experiences demonstrate how women's lives are simultaneously influenced by patriarchal relationships and material inequality, although Gathoni's assertion of marital autonomy challenges the construction of women as inherently passive subjects (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o & Ngũgĩ wa Mĩriĩ, 1982). In *Man Talk, Woman Talk*, Rotimi transforms gender stereotypes into objects of theatrical debate and satire, enabling female counter-discourse and exposing contradictions within sexist assumptions (Rotimi, 2006; Adegaju, 2011). The central argument is therefore that these plays occupy a contested ideological space between patriarchal inheritance and gender transformation. Their women are constrained but not entirely voiceless and socially situated but capable of agency. African feminist criticism should consequently move beyond merely classifying literary images of women as positive or negative towards analysing how gender interacts with class, culture, labour, voice and material power (Steady, 1981; Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997).

The continued relevance of these dramas lies in their capacity to make gender relations visible as sites of conflict, negotiation and potential transformation. More equitable literary representation requires female characters to be understood not as stereotypical appendages to male



experience but as multidimensional social subjects whose voices, labour, aspirations and agency are integral to African social realities (hooks, 2000; Ekwierhoma, 2002).

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