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Written *Over*, Written *Out*: The *Gendered* Misrepresentation of Women in Modern African Performance

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Abstract

In general, African theatre relegates women's cultural and historical contributions to their societies to a cursory footnote. This is partly due to the perception in certain quarters that women are disposed to being silent, peripheral figures in the socio-political order. Secondly, and a much more militating factor, is society's construction of women along socially constricting roles of daughter, sister, wife and mother. The two positions reveal the machinations of a patriarchal system that distorts women's contributions to society. The fact is that, although African histories and theatres often mythologize women, they still distort, ignore or refuse to celebrate their heroic achievements as part of a far-reaching, culturally instituted gender inequality that is designed to benefit men. A lot of modern African plays, even at the hands of women playwrights, are guilty of this gendered invisibility and misrepresentation of women. While their *narratives* chronicle events, rituals and cultural practices that perpetuate male-domination, women characters rarely reach the complexity and heroic heights ascribed to men. This is to the effect that when women's contributions to society are not written out altogether, they are romanticized to abstraction, blurred or systematically written over. This essay will use Efua Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa* (1987), Tess Onwueme's *The Missing Face* (1997) and 'Zulu Sofola's *The Sweet Trap* (1977) to interrogate the misrepresentation of women in modern African performance. It will explore women's complicity in perpetuating their own relegation to subsidiary, decorative roles (Dolan, 1991) and suggest ways of redressing gender imbalance in performance.

Introduction

African theatre presents women generally as silent, marginal figures with little individuality, as part of a collective and often confined to the social roles of sister, daughter, wife or mother. This historical representation has three major implications in how African performances profile women's experiences and celebrate their contributions to society. It

distances women from the very political processes designed to document their collective and personal experiences and denies them the platform from which to create their own *narratives*. Thirdly, deliberate misrepresentations subordinate women to a male-dominated patriarchal order in which they are effectively presented as the marginal *other*.

Historically, the images of African women have been subjected to the kinds of politically motivated representation that gave birth to feminism (Dolan; 1991); but whilst women's resistance against male domination (and gaze) yielded *' feminisms'* around the world, 'each of which implies distinct ideological interpretations and political strategies' (Dolan; 1991: 3), it either faltered in Africa or took an ineffectual turn altogether. Postcolonial writings have tended to address many of the cultural imbalances of pre-colonial and colonial Africa but many of these reveal a lack of interest in and stamina for contesting gender inequality. Although African women are prominent in ritual performance, especially when cast in the service of community and men, this prominence has not been used as a platform for their emergence on the political stage as many writers have done with men. Mohammed ben Abdallah's *The Fall of Kumbi and Other Plays* (1989), Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa* (1987), Sutherland's *Edufa* (1987) and Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1980) depict women in significant roles but their biased approach to characterisation still leaves women in the shadows of men.

Other than Femi Osofisan (see Amuta, 1989; Ukaegbu, 2006) and to some extent 'Zulu Sofola in *The Sweet Trap*, African playwrights have generally refrained from interrogating gender relation with any radical fervour. They have neither presented women in the kind of revolutionary light men have received and seem accustomed to nor explored their development as characters beyond culturally constructed, subordinate roles. Women playwrights such as Sofola, Aidoo, Sutherland and Onwueme place the spotlight on women but by using the same ritual materials and historical narratives that celebrate men and society, as their male counterparts do, they repeat through their own actions, the same stereotypical misrepresentations that celebrate men. Invariably, narratives by women playwrights end up serving conservative aims and stop short of confronting gender inequalities. Their women characters, usually subordinated to patriarchal designs, are consequently often relegated to anonymous, marginal roles as this essay will demonstrate.

Stereotypical Representation in Efua Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa*

In *The Marriage of Anansewa*, Sutherland (1987) deploys her considerable storytelling skills to a reworking of *Anansegoro*, the story of Ananse, the cunning spider, a stupendous trickster and one of the most

enduring characters in Ghanaian folk tradition. In the play, Ananse exploits his daughter to improve his personal circumstances. He sets his plans in motion by sending Anansewa to the E. P. Secretarial School for prospective brides whilst introducing her (her picture to be more exact) to four carefully selected rich local chiefs from whom he is most likely to derive a huge bride price. In sending Anansewa (meaning Ananse's daughter) to school to prepare her for marriage, Ananse presents himself as a loving father. His action is, however, not entirely altruistic; it is comprehensively mercenary and an investment from which he would only gain and suffer no material loss. The suitors approve of what they see in Anansewa's picture and declare their interests, a response through which Sutherland explores Ananse's selfishness, greed, and roguery. Having smelt the tantalising whiff of triumph with his scheme, Ananse becomes unstoppable and raises the stakes in his escapades to alarming proportions.

Ananse urges each suitor to demonstrate his interest in Anansewa in real material terms by sending letters of the same manipulative vein to all four suitors. He thus masks his legendary greed for material wealth in the guise of custom and social ritual:

> Ananse: .... 'Now, I know that you who are seated on the ancient stools of our land know the a. b. c. of all our cherished laws, all our time-honoured customs…. Since forwardness has never been one of my faults, I will not even dare to drop a hint that the way is open for you now to begin oiling the wheels of custom. You who do not pay mere lip service to law and custom but really live by them, need no prompting from anyone' (14).

Ananse's 'timely' reminder for the suitors to oil 'the wheels of custom' (14) brings lavish gifts, but like all inveterate tricksters, he asks for more, over-reaches himself and plunges his carefully woven deception into crisis. Ananse has hardly savoured his ill-gotten wealth when his web of deceit is threatened by an unexpected misfortune in the form of all four suitors choosing the same day to conclude marriage arrangements to take Anansewa as wife.

Faced with three difficult decisions, choosing the best husband for Anansewa, dissuading the rest from following through with their intentions, and stopping the suitors from calling in their gifts, Ananse returns to familiar ways. Firstly, he recalls and brainwashes Anansewa into playing dead in the hope of extricating himself from the web closing in around him. Secondly, he recruits Christie, the proprietor of the school for prospective brides, into his scheme. He sets himself up as chief mourner in a mock funeral scene and with Christie's support draws on his considerable acting skills to fool the suitors. On receiving news of Anansewa's 'death' the suitors send mourners to Ananse. With each delegation revealing unpalatable secrets about their master in their speech,

the 'lamenting' Ananse judges Chief-Who-is-Chief to be the best of the suitors. In the end, Anansewa plays her role to perfection; she rises from *death* and on cue to Ananse's 'prayer and libation' for her to wake up on the evidence of the strong love displayed by Chief-Who-is-Chief. She obliges, honours her father's wish and marries Chief-Who-is-Chief.

> Ananse: .... [He falls back into somebody's arms.] ....
> Give me drink to pour libation myself.
> Give me the drink my child's lover has sent....
> [He goes into an even deeper trance]....
> Ancestors, I am pleading with you, / If it is your desire
> As it is ours / That Chief-Who-Is-Chief
> Should marry Anansewa,/ See to it that she returns to life!
> .... And returns to become a bride!.... My child is waking up (87 - 90)
> Anansewa: Father, I could hear Chief-Who-Is-Chief calling me... (91)

Ananse retains his wealth and despite his mother's opposition, marries Christie both out of necessity and as payment for her loyalty. He is the real winner, not Anansewa whose decisions are neither sought nor given, but who is instead presented as a mindless article pawned to the highest bidder of her father's choosing. Sutherland attempts to problematize marriage through Akwasi and Akosua, a young couple whose fractious relationship fails to mount a successful interrogation of the seriously misunderstood 'seller-buyer' notion of marriage and parental influence. The uneducated Akosua challenges Akwasi's claims on her affections because of his cheap gifts to her father, yet she surrenders the freedom secured by her arguments to tradition. Women are the real losers in the play. Christie's school does not educate, it prepares women to fit marriage bills prescribed by years of cultural conditioning and patriarchal gender construction. Such training stunts women's capacity to question tradition, as Anansewa demonstrates. In fact, like Titubi in Femi Osofisan's *Morountodun* (1982), Christie surrenders her independence very quickly, scheming her way into marrying Ananse, a character who secures material improvement through the unwholesome bargaining of his own daughter.

In every respect, the marriages in the play are contracted for the wrong reasons or for no other reasons than for material comforts. Real love is hardly factored in them. In foregoing the opportunity to interrogate the nature of marriage and a woman's place in it, Sutherland follows the familiar path of surrender to custom and convention that sustains men's domination of women. This is unfortunate given the tremendous capacities that the Ananse archetype, the marriage institution and storytelling theatre offer as sites for gender debate. Although all three - Ananse archetype, the art of storytelling and marriage - are brought up to date in the play, Sutherland's theatrical images perpetuate patriarchal stereotypes. None is interrogated in the context of changing social realities, yet all three reveal sizeable fractures. In fact, other than presenting patriarchal social

constructs as cultural norms and failing to interrogate institutions like marriage and performance (in this case storytelling), she ignores the opportunity of deconstructing gender inequalities and the misrepresentation of women that characterizes them.

Storytelling theatre has the capacity to contest history, but Sutherland's theatrical idiom in this play limits the form and the characters to conservative modes of action and thinking. Sutherland does not set out a radical agenda for the *The Marriage of Anansewa*, her narrative re-affirms the same patriarchal order and gaze, and the gender inequalities that traditional folktales and fairytales perpetuated in their day. The narrative framework is by nature, a political site and storytelling theatre offers incredible opportunities to contest dominant narratives as well as the latitude to re-interpret folktales and old stories in new frames. Storytelling theatre is a powerful platform for theatre-makers to re-contextualize their societies' histories and socio-cultural environments. Playwrights may seek to re-shape their societies on more acceptable, more equitable models, as Osofisan attempts in *Once Upon Four Robbers*, but most often, they at least point towards what they hope for. *The Marriage of Anansewa* neither attempts this political objective, nor does the narrative indicate that Sutherland subscribes to the notion that as a writer, she owes it to her society to use her considerable storytelling skills to stir debate in the direction of gender discourse.

Writing of the needs to view all forms of narration as political and for women in particular to reclaim their own narratives, Shari Stone-Mediatore (2003) argues that it is not every story that reinforces the 'dominant ways of interpreting the world' and that 'narrators can challenge and recast received moral and political concepts when they creatively explore aspects of a historical phenomenon that escape conventional categories' (p. 35). *The Marriage of Anansewa* does not challenge or recast the patriarchal construction of women in Akan (Ghana) society. In the very act of re-contextualizing the Ananse story in drama, Sutherland spotlights theatre's role in re-interpreting events but she does not actually utilize storytelling theatre's capacity to contest dominant, oppressive narratives as 'Zulu Sofola does in *The Sweet Trap* and, as Jack Zipes (1995) and Angela Carter (1995) demonstrate very robustly in their re-interpretation of Western folk and fairytales..

Whatever else the play intended, its handling of gender relations perpetuates the myth about women in Africa lacking the enthusiasm for radical feminism. The play suggests a pattern of dependency on men that is hard to ignore, yet history indicates that whenever they choose, African women have independently risen to heroism, as Osofisan's Titubi in *Morountodun* and ben Abdallah's (1989) portrayal of Khunata in *The Fall of Kumbi*, another play set in Ghana, demonstrate. Sutherland's characterisation restricts Ananse and Anansewa to culturally defined roles; presenting the former as a figure of hegemonic, autocratic authority,

while the latter is cast, not as a fully human personality but merely as daughter and object of exchange. Earlier on in the play, Christie portrays women as capable of fulfilment outside marriage but her part in the deception and later marriage to Ananse himself contradict this. The location of the story in the traditional storyteller who is also the Chief's official spokesperson is an effective theatrical device. Unfortunately, the political clout the character wields and the play's resolution give the marginalisation of women the cultural legitimacy the play ought to question but which the playwright ignored.

In effect and contrary to Zipes' (1995) suggestion that creative storytelling is radical and presents, as well as challenges the canonization of dominant structures such as the representations of gender inequality as a constant, Sutherland's plot and narrative are neither radical nor do they present a challenge of the status quo. In fact, *The Marriage of Anansewa* neither engages nor does it contribute to what Herbert Kohl has referred to as "creative maladjustment" (1994: 130) in which a folktale or any story for that matter, may in addition to questioning conventions, be deployed to the task of consciously 'breaking social patterns that are morally reprehensible, taking conscious control of one's place in the environment, and readjusting the world one lives in based on personal integrity and honesty' (130).

Ideological Surrender in Tess Onwueme's *The Missing Face*

In *The Missing Face* (1997), Onwueme's exposition of repression in North America with its long history of political struggles for racial and gender equality reveals the continuing implication of some cultural traditions in the marginalisation of women in Africa. The play follows the journeys of 36-year-old Ida Bee, an African-American woman and her son, Amechi, both abandoned by Momah, husband, father, and former student. All three characters search for cultural and racial identity within the up-rooted, brutalised consciousness of African-Americans. Troubled by incidents of African-American men drifting into the destructive worlds of drugs and violent death, Ida Bee concludes that her son's destiny lay somewhere in Africa. She draws strength for her actions from an ancient statue, one half of a face of the 'Ikenga' willed to her by her father as a bridge to the racial roots she first sought in her marriage to Momah. (The Ikenga is the symbol of spiritual and cultural authority in Igbo society in Nigeria. The ontological confusions that her long-dead father and father to Momah create in the play are a different matter altogether). Ida Bee's mythical journey in search of the missing half of the face reconnects her with her roots severed firstly by transatlantic slavery and secondly, by Momah's act of betrayal:

> Ida Bee: .... this object you call a "Thing" is your legacy? It was passed down..., onto my father who gave it to me on my 21st birthday.... Daddy's last words were, "Hold on to this Ikenga. Some day, you will mend the splintered face of our people, and we'll be whole again." (7)

Starting from Milwaukee, Ida and Amechi reach the mythical kingdom of Idu in Africa on the eve of the Iwu festival, a communal regeneration ritual for which, although welcomed by other members of the community, they are initially rejected by Momah for being 'foreigners'. Drawn by some mysterious powers, the two join the festivities with Ida Bee going through personal and painful rituals of exclusion and restoration. Ida Bee and Amechi are eventually re-united to their root:

> Odozi:.... Before you all, my kinsmen and women, strangers stand reflecting images of us in their eyes.... Here they are to tell stories of their beginning, ending their search....Trace the link. Pick up the thread that we may find the loose ends and tie the knot from this very end (24).

Returning to her roots, Ida surrenders the independence that served her successfully in America to a tradition that undervalues and undermines all her struggles, her resilience and the rugged independence she developed and demonstrated in her decision to journey to her roots. When the time came to reconnect the two parts of the face, neither of the two men, Momah nor Amechi, was suitable. It fell to Ida Bee, whose metaphysical battles turned out to be the conduit and bond connecting past and present with infinite time. As the purveyor of 'the missing half of the face', Idu's anticipated regeneration depended exclusively on Ida's unappreciated efforts and sacrifice. Having been nurtured on the survival tactics of dysfunctional African-American families, Ida is left to battle alone, with neither the support of the men in her life nor that of the community to which she returns in her search for the true meaning of *communitas*.

Ida's experiences should form the bedrock of a new community and womanhood, but they count for only the period of struggle, for soon after, she enters the 'hall of anonymity' with mother-in-law, Nebe. She becomes part of the communal weave, willingly surrendering her individuality, she walks 'over to join Nebe at the loom' and 'the two women begin weaving together' (59). Ida Bee does not instigate a new cultural or political order for women through her heroic struggle. As an *outsider* with a wealth of experience she fails to weave her independence and new ways to the communal loom. Instead, she gives up her freedom and independence to an uninspiring life in the shadow of Nebe, the old matriarch and custodian of an unchanging tradition in which women regress or remain dormant with little chances of change.

Questions remain as to why Ida undertook the burden of unifying Idu

single-handedly, while Amechi waits in the wings to assume control following his ritual of initiation into manhood, and why she, instead of Momah, becomes the prototypical ritual scapegoat and carrier. The reluctant Amechi is spared the harrowing experiences reserved for his mother, but his initiation into manhood culminates in him being chosen to lead the future. Ida returns to the husband that abandoned her and to a culture she neither understands nor is equipped to survive in. Surprisingly, her reintegration robs her of the capacity to question the system that caused her earlier separation from Momah and that launched her traumatic search and journey. The playwright's decision to marginalise Ida is disheartening, especially as she repeats the now familiar pattern of surrender by ceding power to Amechi. On his part Amechi undertakes the ritual act of joining the two parts of the face, thus, not only completing Ida's quest but positioning himself selfishly as the main inheritor of a better future, a future that is carefully stage-managed to men's advantage as this stage direction shows:

> Odozi finds Momah's hand, and Momah takes up Amechi's. The men form a semi-circle around the women as they weave. Amechi and Momah lift the matching faces of the "Ikenga". Drum voices rise as Amechi lifts up the Ikenga "slowly", slowly until it attains a final height. Idu voices erupt in song, and they dance. (59)

Amechi replaces Ida in an act that is nothing short of gender displacement for while her gender and *foreignness* disqualify her from any meaningful role in the new order, Amechi becomes the custodian of a new order intent on preserving patriarchy. Is it any wonder that some cultural systems disregard women's protests and men like the young Amechi think that women owe them a living? Like Sutherland, Onwueme ignores the dialectics of gender relations. The actions of her protagonist, Ida, and all the other women in the play, suggest that African women reject the revolutionary option and freedom for life in the shadows of their sons and husbands. Sadly, this perception is, in reality, challenged by women in various other ways that performances ignore.

Gender Resistance and Opposition: Sofola's *The Sweet Trap.*

The Sweet Trap is the most revolutionary of the three plays discussed in this essay. Set in a place and at a time when university campuses all over Africa served as sites for various ideological struggles, the play is significant for two main reasons; it was well ahead of its time and is set in a new institution generally associated with social transformations and the nurturing of progressive ideas.

In the play Mr Ajala, a university don, plans to 'teach' his estranged wife a lesson before eventually dissolving their marriage. His plan with

Okebadan celebrants to disgrace his wife before a respectable gathering backfires when they trace Mrs Ajala to the home of fellow academic, Dr Oyegunle. The hirelings disrupt the birthday anniversary organised for Clara Sotubo by Mrs Ajala's women's committee whose defiance of their husbands on all gender issues is the strongest affirmation of their feminist manifesto. Costumed and made-up in garish imitation of ladies of fashion, the Okebadan celebrants ridicule Mrs Ajala and femininity in general. Okebadan is a traditional Yoruba (Nigeria) fertility festival which, in Mrs Ajala's opinion, was transformed 'into a rowdy display where men could take revenge for their bruised egos' when 'women began to resist male domination and brutality' (*The Sweet Trap*: 2). In the play, Sofola comes closest than any other playwright, man or woman, to upsetting 'tradition' by using Mrs Ajala to articulate women's concerns that traditional festivals like Okebadan and marriage were an excuse for perpetuating gender inequality to the advantage of men:

> Mrs Ajala: .... The government is run exclusively by the male species .... Okebadan festival is a ridicule of the female organs and nothing could be more exciting to the men than a legalised opportunity to take a swipe at us women.... (2)

Clara, a university don herself and a true convert to Feminism, has high hopes of seeing meaningful progress on gender relations. Her confidence that 'the movement is on' (3) in the shape of Mrs Ajala's women's front runs into stiff opposition at every level, especially in the university where such ideas should thrive:

> Dr Sotubo: I believe that the battle of the sexes never existed in their (forefathers') times. The roles were so clearly defined and each person so meticulously upheld the *status quo* that nothing like the confusion of roles was ever dreamt of. Everyone knew his place and stayed there. (4)

The women have little problem with social roles *per se*, but are infuriated about using gender inequality to define and sustain marital relations that reduce and subordinate them to men. Threatened by feminist attempts to undermine their powers, the men resort to tested patriarchal weapons in the Okebadan celebrants, thus disrupting the one space where women have the freedom to be who and what they choose. Their very presence in a supposedly private, almost hallowed space shocks the women and undermines their solidarity. Other than using the intrusion to cause misunderstanding among them and to fragment their movement, men deploy other 'traditions' in the form of Mrs Sotubo's uncle and aunt to intimidate the women into submission. In their panic to return to the roles of dutiful wives, the women abandon the cause, leaving Mrs Ajala who unfortunately learns 'more new things in the last few minutes' than from her 'entire life' (61) to articulate their collective disappointment.

Mrs Ajala's unflinching resolve is jolted by the ruthlessness of patriarchal power and by women's timid surrender of the revolutionary initiative. Her position is weakened from within and without firstly, by the surrender of once faithful lieutenants; secondly by Okebadan masquerades, a traditional instrument of social control and thirdly, by a reaffirmation of traditional notions of gender relations. Her shock is all the more after seeing her staunch comrade and friend, Mrs Sotubo, humiliated by her uncle and aunt and made to kneel and apologise to her husband for questioning his authority. Mrs Ajala may have tried to ambush male dominance, but in the end, she falls into the trap set by her own husband. The feminists' defeat is significant for occurring in the very institution that was for long considered to be capable of engineering radical changes in society. The women's surrender is compounded by the fact there appears to be no light at the end of the tunnel; there is no redress from family, not from colleagues, not from women whose battle it is and, definitely not from men who stand to benefit from a restored *status quo*.

Sofola attempted what Aristophanes did for Greek theatre, something no African male playwright had considered hitherto. Her progressive agenda is undoubted, for as Holderness (1992) points out, the primary 'responsibility of a progressive drama' is to challenge dominance, 'by showing that the existing order is not 'natural' but politically constructed and fundamentally unjust' (14). History is clear that African performance developed primarily to cater to and reinforce patriarchy and so is suspicious of gender renegotiations, whether these come from within or without. *The Sweet Trap* demonstrates in very clear terms that any meaningful challenge to gender inequality will come from within Africa itself and from both sexes. As Carlson (1996) points out in some detail, when 'the performative situation is recognised as already involved in the operations of the dominant social systems, directly oppositional performance becomes highly suspect, since there is no 'outside' from which it can operate' (172).

Unlike Sutherland and Onwueme, Sofola launches a frontal assault on patriarchy. In launching her attack on a new social order and at the highest levels of society, Sofola understood the value in attacking from within, the very institutions that are responsible for or that remain silent in the face of glaring inequality (Carlson, 1996). However, like Sutherland and Onwueme, she is constrained and is 'unable to move outside the operations of performance (or representation)' (Carlson, 1996:172) but unlike them, she questions conservative codes of behaviour and refuses to endorse cultural assumptions and indifference to gender inequality. Sofola is like a performance activist who destabilises cultural conventions and ruptures class boundaries. *The Sweet Trap* took the battle for gender equality furthest of the three plays and in it, her exposition of the alignment of traditional festival performances and patriarchy in general may have failed in subverting both 'from within' (Carlson, 172) but it

succeeds in placing men before the critical spotlight. She reveals undeniable facts about men's unwillingness to re-negotiate a gender inequality that favours them. The play's main success lies in this exposition.

Historical Marginalisation: Women and African Performance

The Sweet Trap is the only one of the three plays that has a defined feminist agenda. The other two are about women in a patriarchal setting but present no arguments to challenge the conditions of the women characters or the representation of women in general. Cima argues that a feminist play should 'break the narrative and expose the representational framework of the play' (1993: 8) as *The Sweet Trap* does in its depiction of men as misappropriating the Okebadan celebrations, a traditional festival, for their own ends. Sofola confronts gender inequality in the play. She goes further than questioning why a communal festival framework should be employed as a weapon for marginalising women. She problematizes the play's plot and characters, using as it were, both plot and characterization to achieve Cima's prescription for a feminist theatre that deploys 'strategies that deconstruct onstage the workings of narrative' (1993: 8).

Sofola's political stance on gender is in stark contrast to the images of women acquiescing in their own marginalization in Sutherland's *Anansewa* and Onwueme's *The Missing Face*. Sutherland and Onwueme's women are content in traditional roles in which all of their energies are directed towards maintaining the gender inequalities that disenfranchise them and subordinate them to men. None of them functions outside the dominant conventional order or offers an alternative view of women as other than subject to men, whether as fathers, sons, and husbands. The women are not only content in their subjugation, both Christie (in *Anansewa*) and Ida Bee (*The Missing Face*) flounder as individuals and seem to find fulfilment in marriage, especially in men's shadows. This kind of depiction does the women characters little favour and if anything, it echoes Deborah Thom's(1992) view that the uncritical representation of women in historical conservative images merely serves the interests of men. If that was the intention, the political purposes of both plays are neither served nor explored, and as Thom asks about writings in which historical convention is used as justification for women's marginalization:

> Would women do better just to get on with doing history competently and professionally…? No, because the central concern of feminism, which is to explain and thus undermine the oppression of women, in no sense can be guaranteed by the fact that a woman is doing it…without an assumption of value, of political purpose, there seems little point in simply knowing more about women….' (1992: 49).

What *Anansewa* and *The Missing Face* lack and which *The Sweet Trap* has in abundance is politicizing women's experiences and making their stories a reclaimed narrative requiring radical interpretation. This approach, which could well be employed by directors of these plays, will radicalize women's experiences and enable performers to use women's 'their' stories in the more productive, more political manner that Stone-Mediatore (2003) articulates. The result is that in the hands of women playwrights, women's stories ought to be used:

> ….not simply to confirm their oppression but to affirm historical "actors" that encompass heterogeneous and strategically chosen allegiances, historical "actions" that are performed by people with limited public power, and "historical events", the impetus and significance of which are inseparable from so-called private lives. In so doing, they do not only recast basic narrative categories but also help to build a resistant politics that is anchored in the realities of people's everyday lives. (Stone-Mediatore, 2003: 143 -144)

Although Cima (1993) is much more prescriptive in her suggestion that the preferred response for feminist writings is 'to favour non-narrative scripts (those that employ plots like the Brecht Collectives, with episodes that break the narrative and expose the representational framework of the play', or 'those that borrow certain techniques from French feminism' (p. 8), these are not the intentions of the three playwrights whose works are discussed here. Theirs has been to explore women in African settings with different political infrastructures in which both radical and conservative options are possible. The problem is in the choices individual playwrights make. The stories of Anansewa herself, Akosua and Christie (*Anansewa*), Ida Bee and Nebe (*The Missing Face*), and the revolutionary but ill-prepared women in *The Sweet Trap*, all seeming to succumb to the lures of marriage and an acceptance of their subordination in that institution, offer readers what J. W. Scott describes as 'evidence of the fact of difference' (Scott, 1991: 777) without deconstructing the reasons and the effects that this institutional difference has on gender relations in different African societies.

Thus, there are links between the under-presentation and misrepresentation of women in African performance and patriarchy's tenacious hold on performance narratives, on production processes and reception strategies. Despite the huge contributions that African women have made, especially from early 1950s and 1960s when many African countries achieved political independence, performance narratives have not often recounted their achievements with the same celebratory enthusiasm accorded men's exploits. This situation has historical and cultural precedents in indigenous masking where women are still disadvantaged in both production and reception, usually being the butts of

satire and often relegated to the worst viewing and participating spots.

The reasons cited for women's marginalisation in masking reveal blatant gender bias. In Igbo society, for example, women are still excluded from many aspects of masking on such frivolous excuse that the form 'is a symbolic re-enactment of the social structure of the land which is principally vested on the male gender' and that since the institution is designed 'as a symbolic and tangible presentation of the organisational order of the traditional community', it provides the justification for relegating 'the women to the background and periphery' (Onyeneke, 1987: 81). Onyeneke's defence is indicative of gender polarisation in performance throughout Africa. The few exceptions are the performances created specifically by and for women such as the Gelede women's ritual masking in parts of western Nigeria and the sacred Mende women's Sande masquerade society in Mokonde, Sierra Leone in which women wear masks (see Harding, 1996).

Men have always dominated performance in Africa. For long, women's peripheral involvement left the most important aspects of production and reception to men who also influenced aesthetic developments. Men developed performance narratives and images that catered to their own tastes whether these derive from ritual or fiction, or from archetypal sources. In masking, the presentation of women by men and their infrequent appearance denied women the space to create their own narrative and images. Globally, theatrical masking distinguishes role and personality (Ferris, 1990) but while this enabled men to define performance spaces and conventions in Africa and to distinguish themselves from their theatrical roles, women, historically denied such distancing devices, have relied on images of themselves created and performed by men. Although the narratives of modern play scripts such as Aidoo's *Anowa* (1987) and Sutherland's *Edufa* (1979) highlight women's predicament in collective socio-cultural settings, they remain patriarchal tools; their resolutions shackle women and reinforce their subordination. The authentic representation of women would depend ultimately on changes to narrative, the forces that control it and the effect it is designed to accomplish on theatrical images. According to Sue-Ellen Case (1988) patriarchal narratives hardly favour women since 'the form of the narrative itself is complicit with the psychocultural repression of women' (in Cima, 1993: 8).

The shortcomings in narrative function and tokenistic representation are merely a part of a much more complex gender construct. Other features of this construct stem from the fact that African performance discourse rejects Western archetypal gender constructs; 'the penitent whore', 'the speechless heroine', 'the wilful woman', and 'the golden girl' (Ferris, 1990) but by depicting women in the less aggressive gowns of Ferris' 'speechless heroines' and 'golden girls' it cleverly evades associating women's

marginalisation with gender relations. While not ignoring the subject altogether, African performance discourse hides behind cultural praxis, thus making the targets for women more evasive and their oppressors more difficult to identify. The result is that with their limited power in performance, women are not only robbed of a dissenting voice, they are denied the platforms from which to contest their marginalisation.

Imaginings: the Future of Women in African Performance

Ferris describes Western theatre as a stage in which for women, 'the self is absent, and the *femme vacante* becomes integral to the representation of women in patriarchy, where women are rendered invisible within the dominant narratives of history' (1990:73). This description rings true of many African performances for while African novels, such as Buchi Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen* (1994) and Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1980) etc, have interrogated patriarchal constructions of women, African performance has neither contested the subject sufficiently nor tackled gender inequality systematically. DeShazer is indeed correct when she says that meaningful resistance against the forces that repress women is contingent on 'the development of an integrated analysis and practice' (1989: 88-89). In the case of African women and performance, what is required is a setting for women to contest narratives, production strategies and all the cultural and philosophical systems that collude in their marginalisation.

Gender inequality in African performance is about changing perceptions, democratising narratives and rendering gender imbalance irrelevant. This kind of transformation, according to Hobsbawn and Ranger (1983), would create a condition in which 'old traditions and their institutional carriers and promulgators no longer prove sufficiently adaptable and flexible, or are otherwise eliminated: in short, when there are sufficiently large and rapid changes on the demand or the supply side (1983:4 - 5). In 21st century Africa Hobsbawn and Ranger's constants exist in a different context for, whereas the demand for gender balance is muted, the 'supply' (inclusive of the narrative) has not been contested vigorously. There is a lack of revolutionary appetite in the populations to reconfigure the still popular communal performances that privilege gender divides. Only one of our three examples confronts gender politics. Sofola deals with more complex women but by subordinating the gender imperatives to the collective will, she leaves women like Mrs Ajala (*The Sweet Trap*) clutching the mirage of their revolutionary dreams. Such plays that fail to liberate women or destabilise their oppressors to the point of redress, like their traditional counterparts, constitute 'a prison-house of art' for women, both in their representation on stage and in the female actor's preparation and production of such roles' (Case, 1988 in Cima, 1993: 8).

By implication, performances that reinforce the status quo 'make the ruling order seem a 'natural' condition ('there is no alternative') rather than a system requiring justification by political argument' (Holderness, 1992: 14). This is one of the reasons why, despite the glaring case for radical intervention and the authentic representation of women, contemporary performances struggle to break free altogether from traditional forms and their misrepresentations of women. Sofola challenges this *norm* and is rightly critical of all conservative institutions and the 'theatre of the status quo' (Holderness, 1992: 14) such as the Okebadan festival performance that oppresses women. The cited plays indicate that the battle for women's rights in African performance is yet to be fully engaged and that it would involve women reclaiming their heroic struggles for their own self-actualisation. Cima (1993) suggests that acknowledging and honouring the substantial contributions of women in theatre are preconditions for their rehabilitation in performance. This requirement is most essential in conventions where historical distortions and gender imbalance have led to the outright misrepresentation or grudging acknowledgement of women, as is still the case in African performance.

Conclusions: through the Prism of Women's Gaze

Apart from their misrepresentation, women are also under-represented. As spectators in their own lives and histories, women have been restricted to archetypes designed to perpetuate their repression. Dolan (1991: 2) contends that archetypal staging portrays women 'acting passively before the specter of male authority'. Their presentation as 'marginal and curiously irrelevant, except as a tacit support system or as a decoration that enhances and directs the pleasure of the male spectator's gaze' (2) is reminiscent of their depiction in the three plays. Dolan's reading of women as play-makers and participants may have derived from western feminism and theatre but it holds lessons for other societies too:

> Finding herself compromised if she allows herself to identify with these women, the feminist spectator contemplates the option of participating in the play's narrative from the hero's point of view. She empathises with his romantic exploits, or his activities in a more public sphere, but has a nagging suspicion that she has become complicit in the objectification or erasure of her own gender class (2).

Mrs Ajala (*The Sweet Trap*) echoes Dolan's sentiments in her closing remark and, like the other women in this study, is denied the chance to determine her own fate. She is no different from Ferris' archetypal strong-willed, 'evil' women who question men's domination of society and 'are punished for daring to question, to seek autonomy, to make their own choices' (1990: 130). Ferris wonders whether women everywhere 'have the

freedom and power to define themselves or if as in the case of Medea and Miss Julie, the 'classical image' of the 'wilful' woman teaches 'that female autonomy will always be punished' (130). Sutherland's Christie and Anansewa neither understand nor challenge their conditions, Onwueme's Ida Bee traded in her freedom, not because of threats but for the 'joys' of domestic chores while Sofola's Mrs Ajala failed due to patriarchal pressures from within and from without.

The three plays show that African women are trapped in 'the relations of men with women' and not that other truly-democratic-possibility: 'the relations of men and women' (Ferris, 1990: 131). Women are doubly marginalised by a combination of economic and social forces but should resist the temptation to see their condition as Osofisan's Alhaja does, as one in which 'nothing changing.... Only my story starting anew. Like before, like always, like ever more' (*Once Upon Four Robbers*, 80). To ensure the authentic representation of women African performance should adopt the same revolutionary vision and strategies it has successfully implemented in Theatre-for-Development where women are beginning to have a much better say and representation.

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