Gender Ambiguity and Identity Politics in Efo Kodgo Mawugbe's *In the Chest of a Woman*

Akaenyi, Nkiruka Jacinta
Department of Performing Arts, Faculty of Arts, Akwa Ibom State University, Nigeria

Abstract
The disguised heroine is a common plot element employed by playwrights to construct pleasurable homoerotic situations between women. Cross dressing shields the characters from the kind of hostility directed at homoerotics in non-fictions because the attraction can be excused as error rather than intent. The representation of homoerotic attraction in Efo Kodgo Mawugbe's play, In the Chest of a Woman, is seen in the Owusu – Ekyaa affair, along with the erotic scenes involving the female servants. The theme of homoerotic attraction between these female characters does not function as an uncomplicated promotion of a modern category of sexual orientation, but it rather serves as a means of dramatising the socially constructed basis of a sexuality that is determined by gender identity. With the deployment of queer theory as the analytical framework for this work, the paper examines some aspects of the social issues raised in Mawugbe's play in context. This study finds out that the focus of this play is on the cross-dressed Owusu and the emotions she arouses than previously had been acknowledged.

Keywords: Homoerotic, Queer, Transvestism, Cross dressing, Gender identity, Sexuality.

Introduction

A thorough investigation of literary and historical evidence shows that since the advent of queer theory in cultural studies, cross dressing has in recent years been the focus of considerable research, especially in the studies of the English renaissance theatre. María del Rosario Arias Doblas asserts that:

> Recent criticism of Shakespearean comedies has significantly focused on topics such as cross-dressing and the role of the boy actor. Feminist scholars have undertaken especially the study of comedies like *The Two Gentlemen of Verona The Merchant of Venice, As*

> *You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*, in which the female protagonist disguises herself as a man. (284).

William Shakespeare *in Twelfth Night* explores the issue of cross-dressing and the homoerotic tension it generates. According to Doblas "Twelfth Night is an excellent play in which to explore issues such as transvestism, gender and the importance of clothing" (284). Viola appears disguised as Cesario in the very first moments of the play and remains so.

Many scholars have challenged the practice of considering the trope of the cross-dressing protagonist figures additionally as a queer trope. Alice Walker says that "Given that the practice of cross-dressing can take a variety of different forms, it cannot be conceptualized in accordance with any singular logic" (35). Studies have shown that cross-dressing can, of course, play an important role within gay and lesbian culture, but, as Marjorie Garber argues, it would be foolish to restrict its influence and significance to this sphere. Walker says that:

> , and he or she might do so as to be part of a gay or lesbian identity, but the cross-dresser might just as easily seek to operate as an unquestioned insider within heteronormative society (37). To do so would be to deny the role of individual choice: the individual may cross-dress to subvert sexual norms and expectations

In a similar vein, Garber says that "to restrict cross-dressing to the context of an emerging gay and lesbian identity, is to risk ignoring, or setting aside, elements and incidents that seem to belong to quite different lexicons of self-definition and political and cultural display" (5).
Besides the renaissance theatre, literary evidence of female-female desire existed in sixteenth century England which were available to playwrights and at least the educated members of their audience. African theatre is not an exception as we discover that the focus of Efo Kodgo Mawugbe's play, *In the Chest of a Woman,* is on the cross-dressed Owusu and the emotions she arouses than previously has been acknowledged.

Theoretical Framework

Queer theory which is the tool for critical analysis of this work, constitutes the bedrock of for understanding of postmodern practices of sexism and gendered cultural politics. Queer theory is heavily influenced by the work

of Gloria Anzaldúa, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, José Esteban Muñoz, and Lauren Berlant, and it builds both upon feminist challenges to the idea that gender is part of the essential self and upon gay/lesbian studies' close examination of the socially constructed nature of sexual acts and identities. Queer theory is grounded in gender and sexuality. According to Tamsin Spargo, "the term describes a range of critical practices and priorities: readings of the representation of same-sex desire in literary texts, films, music, images, analyses of the social and political power relations of sexuality" (9). The discourse on sexuality has generated controversial debates. For instance, the first volume of Michael Foucault's *History of Sexuality* was written in 1970s, towards the end of the so-called sex-revolution in Western culture.

According to Spargo, "it offered a powerful and provocative counter-narrative to the long established story about Victorian sexual repression giving way to progressive liberation and enlightenment in the 20th century" (11). Foucault was not the first to argue that sexuality is socially constructed. Judith Butler's essay, *Bodies That Matter: on the Discursive Limits of Sex* is a vociferous attack on conventional normative ideals. Butler states that the cultural meanings that attach to a sexed body--what we call gender--are theoretically applicable to either sex. According to Butler, "We cannot even assume a stable subjectivity that goes about performing various gender roles, rather, it is the very act of performing gender that constitutes who we are" (1).

Butler debunks the idea that there is an essential, pre-discursive subjectivity that attaches to the biology of either male or female, arguing that the "production of sex as the pre-discursive ought to be understood as the effect of the apparatus of cultural constructions designated by gender" (2). In other words, what she calls the law--the cultural, social, and political imperatives of social reality--actually produces and then conceals the "constructedness" that lies behind the notion of an immutable, pre-discursive "subject before the law" (2). Butler's attack on the concept of biological inherence is followed by an equally strong indictment of the "metaphysics of gender substance"--the unproblematic claim that a subject can choose a gendered identity, that the self can "be a woman" or a man" (21). Butler insists that the major way that the categories of sex are both established and disrupted is through a process of what Butler calls "performativity," the means by which the norms of sex are naturalised and substantiated simply by their continual pronouncement as foundational

and ideal--by the sheer weight of their repetition. Yet, because this reiteration necessarily creates erasures that are the very cites of deconstructive possibilities, the interrogation of those exclusions is one strategy by which the symbolic hegemony of sexuality can be challenged. Although performativity is primarily a discursive practice derived from the notion of the performative in rhetoric, Butler acknowledges cross-dressing as a performative practice in which the "sign" of gender is parodically reiterated in a potentially subversive way. The performance of cross-dressing can be disruptive, Butler argues, to the extent it "reflects the mundane impersonations by which heterosexually ideal genders are performed" (231) or "exposes the failure of heterosexual regimes ever fully to legislate or contain their own ideals" (237).

Judith Butler's critique of the view that there are fixed identities based on the existence of genital difference provides a useful model for understanding how Mawugbe in *In the Chest of a Woman* uses the vagaries of erotic attraction to disrupt paradigms of sexuality.

Constructions of Female Homoerotic in *In the Chest of a Woman*

This article examines how the cross dressed heroine, Owusu, evokes homoerotic images in the play. The action of the play begins by presenting two very important characters – Nana Yaa Kyeretwe the queen mother of Kyeremfaso and her daughter, Owusu who she disguises as a boy. Nana Yaa as the playwright would have her is an intelligent, bold, ambitious, courageous, daring and very confident personality. She confronts everyissuewiththeself-assurance thatshe would win. She uses the game of Oware to prepare Owusu's mind on war strategies. She does everything within her power to cajole Owusu onto her side in order to interrogate traditions and customs of her society. It is clear in her lines that she took inspiration from her mother who is also brave. She says:

> if the customs and political history of this kingdom are silent over what offices a woman can hold, or the role played women in the struggle to free ourselves from the domination of the Akwamu, especially the courage and bravery displayed by our mother in our last war against the slave raiders from the north, it only proves one thing (20).

The conflict of the play revolves around Nana Yaa's intrigues as she succeeds in outsmarting everybody in the kingdom by hiding the true

identity of her daughter, so as to prove the strength of her womanhood. Nana Yaa is a woman who is denied the right to succeed her mother, the queen. The Queen mother has bequeathed the kingdom to her son, Kwaku Duah 11, the younger of the two, in accordance with the tradition and customs of the people. Nana Yaa, refuses to yield to the cultural dictates of her people. Even when she was reminded by an elder that "he is a boy, and you're a girl" Nana Yaa says "Let my mother know that if I am to rule, I want a whole kingdom and not some piece of barren land with four or five cottages scattered here and there". Nana Yaa's fierce resistance to all the obnoxious, false notions and cultural practices against women as enshrined in the Ghanaian culture and propagated by men, does not only manifest in her verbal attacks and a reckless display of physical strength, but she engages in deceit.The king, Kwaku Duah 11 is the first to have a girl child, and then, Nana Yaa also gives birth to a girl, whom she forces to live her life as a boy, a ploy to ensure that her offspring becomes a king.

Nana Yaa poisons her husband, when he deems it right to tell the truth about the true sex of her child. It is recorded in the play that all the nurses and midwives, who know the truth about Owusu's true identity were murdered in cold blood. Eventually, Owusu is taken to the palace to commence 'his' training as the next king. The real intention of the king by summoning Owusu to the palace is to ensure that the wealth of the kingdom remains in the family through the marriage of both cousins. The king makes his real motive known to Ekyaa, his daughter, when he says "I ostensibly brought him under the pretext of studying the art of kingship, but the real reason is for you to win his heart forever. That way, when he succeeds me as a king, you shall be his wife, a queen. That is the hidden political angle to the whole enterprise" (49). The servants, Adwoa and Akosua even realise the intention of the king as seen in their conversation:

> **ADWOA**: Why would the *Daasebre* want the two cousins to marry?
>
> **AKOSUA**: Very simple. That way the stool and wealth of the kingdom remain in the family for good (44).

Throughout the play, Ekyaa follows Owusu trying to win 'his' love while Owusu continues to spurn 'his' female lover. Ekyaa laments "Oh Owusu! You mean, you haven't noticed the efforts I have been making day and night to get at your heart? …." (53). The scene presents both the comedy of

misdirected affection and the pathos of unrequited love. The desire Ekyaa directs at Owusu is fostered by that character's perception of Owusu's sex, which she has read through the sartorial codes of gender signification. Owusu's body must be male since she displays masculine gendered clothing on that body. Since the disguised Owusu's sartorial codes signify her as a male, Owusu becomes a potential object of desire for Ekyaa.
Mistaken sexual identity works much in the same way in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and *As you like it.* Walen (2002) observes that "Olivia's attraction to Viola is predicated on the belief that Viola is a male page… Phebe's attraction to Rosalind is similarly constructed in *As You Like It*" (420-421).

While *Twelfth Night* continues to be one of the major textual sites for the discussion of homoerotic representation in Shakespeare, interpretive conclusions about the effect of same-sex attraction in this comedy are divided, especially in light of the natural "bias" of the heterosexual marriages in Act 5. The relationship between Antonio and Sebastian has proven the most fertile ground for queer inquiry; for example, Joseph Pequigney recently has set out, in New-Critical fashion, to prove the "sexual orientation" of these two characters as unquestionably "homosexual" in a play whose "recurring theme" is "bisexuality." Although Pequigney's observations are refreshing as well as important, "The Two Antonios and Same-Sex Love" unproblematically applies contemporary constructions of sexual identity to an early modern culture in which the categories of homo- and bisexuality were neither fixed nor associated with identity. In fact, the researcher argues that *Twelfth Night* is centrally concerned with demonstrating the non-categorical temper of sexual attraction.

The other main focus of queer study in this drama continues to be the relationship between the Countess Olivia and the cross-dressing Viola/Cesario, though critics, tellingly, have discussed the lesbian erotic that are integral to the first three acts of the play much less often. In her recent *Desire and Anxiety: The Circulation of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama*, Valerie Traub has acknowledged the lesbian overtones of the erotic scenes between Olivia and Viola as part of what she calls the play's "multiple erotic investments" (121) but her careful and ground-breaking study warns us that Viola's homoerotic investment is not celebrated in the play and concludes that *Twelfth Night* is less "comfortably" open in its representation of the "fluid circulation" of desire than *As You Like It*. The researcher is of the view that the Olivia-Viola affair is more central to

Twelfth Night than previously has been acknowledged. This centrality--along with the homoerotics found in relations between Antonio and Sebastian as well as between Orsino and his page--establish same-sex erotic attraction as a "major theme" in the play. In Efo Kodgo Mawugbe's play, Owusu's mistaken identity alleviates Ekyaa's guilt over her feelings for and actions toward a fellow woman. Dorothy Walen says that "cross dressing shields the characters from the kind of hostility directed at homoerotics in non-fictions because the attraction can be excused as error than anintent. The disguise presents ambiguous sexual tensions that allow an audience to perceive the homo-erotic attractions as benign and therefore acceptable" (412).

Owusu might enjoy 'his' position as an object of women's desires, but he does not act on that position with as much gusto as the flirtation of Dorothea in Robert Greene's play *James IV* or the reciprocal passion of Phyllida and Gallathea in John Lyly's romantic comedy *Gallathea*. Several times, Owusu becomes emotionally traumatised and wishes to reveal her true identity, but she cannot in order not to betray her mother. The female protagonist reveals her nature when she laments "Look at me now, ye spirits…I am a thief…Yes, a thief disguised and sent into a palace through an opened window by the mother to steal a stool and sit on it" (56-57). The audience is aware that underneath Owusu's clothes is a woman who feels uncomfortable with her male disguise. Owusu feels unhappy with the male garments she is wearing and conveys her emotions in a soliloquy where she also rejects the misunderstandings the male disguise creates. Owusu has no female companion to share her worries with, so she makes use of asides and soliloquy to turn inward psychologically. Owusu does everything possible to conceal her identity to an extent that she had to hit Ekyaa so hard when she tries to touch her chest. The ambiguity of the cross-dressed character in the imaginative world of drama gives her the freedom to engage in homoerotic tensions and still remain the sympathetic heroine.

A striking aspect of the play is that unlike early modern plays which allow its heroines to desire one another mutually, homoerotic investment in Efo Kodgo's *In the Chest of a Woman* is not celebrated. If Owusu had been comfortable dressed as a man, she might become a sexually transgressive figure and be viewed unsympathetically. Owusu cries out against Nana Yaa when she says "No, Mother, I can't act a boy anymore. I want to be the girl that I really am". (28).

The cross-dressed heroine is not represented as a lesbian, but as feminine, ultimately a heterosexual woman stuck in awkward situations. In response to Ekyaa's love overtures, she blurts out:

> **OWUSU**: *(Furiously)* I explained everything to you seven markets ago, didn't I? I told you to forget about me And find yourself a new man.
> A REAL MAN! (54)

The theme of homoerotic attraction between these female characters does not function as an uncomplicated promotion of a modern category of sexual orientation, but it rather serves as a means of dramatising the socially constructed basis of a sexuality that is determined by gender identity. Walensays that "Only Gallathea allows its heroines to desire one another mutually: however, its erotic construction is more emotional than sexual and is driven by the eventual sex change promised at the play's conclusion" (429).

The homoerotic attraction of Adwoa and Akosua to Owusu begins early in the second leg of Mawugbe's play as Adwoa and Akosua discuss 'his' physical attributes in extensive details. The play reveals that the two female servants are not drawn to stereotypically masculine attributes but to 'his' feminine qualities. Akosua says:

> **AKOSUA**: HANDSOME you say…He is such a beautiful boy. What is such a feminine beauty doing in a body like that?
>
> **ADWOA**: Are you saying that *Odomankoma*, the creator made a mistake?
>
> **AKOSUA**: Mmm…well, possibly. Perhaps, after moulding a female body in clay, *Odomankoma got* up to attend a call and before he got back, one of his assistants, an angel, had sneaked in to breathe into the clay a male breath (39).

The repeated flirtations of the female servants create a homoerotic tension. Adwoa declares:

> Eei Akosua…well, for me it is his face that fascinates me! The way the eyes are set in their sockets, with

> the nose ridge running down into a beautiful open furnace of flesh above his upper lip…
> And if you should see him smile …Oh God! …. It's as if you've had cold water poured on your very body after a tedious work under the scorching sun. You feel it right beneath your skin and if you're lucky, you could see the feeling running into your arteries and veins, going up to your heart…. Aaah…only his smile sends me crazy (39-40).

Adwoa and Akosua are attracted to the female attributes, to the woman beneath the disguise rather than to male characteristics the disguise might represent. This firmly establishes the homoerotic nature of their desire. Walen says that "constructing an eroticism for the audience but not within the characters themselves or fashioning it as an element of adolescence are other narrative devices, like the cross dressed heroine that allows female homoerotic to emerge without negative recriminations" (429).

When rejected, Ekyaa plans to destroy Owusu. As a result of this, Ekyaa refuses to mention the name of her lover to Kwaku Duah, her father privately. Owusu, a heir apparent, mounts the judgment seat at the bidding of his uncle and passes a punitive law against the man, who has impregnated the princess. The penalty for such a heinous crime is instant death, followed by the cutting off of the culprit's genitalia. Ekyaa grabs this opportunity, as she declares that Owusu is responsible for her pregnancy. The King sees this as a disgrace and orders the palace guards to castrate "him'. The pronouncement 'he is a she' by the executioner on seeing the true sex of Owusu Agyeman amounts to a great pandemonium among the council of elders. The discovery that Owusu is a girl who sat on the judgement stool is considered an abomination and so calls for her death.When Owusu's sexual identity is revealed, Ekyaa is appalled at having desired a woman. A significant element of Mawugbe's play is that unlike the early modern plays that employ disguise and exploits same-sex attraction as a comic device, the love between the female characters is mutual and is not rejected when Owusu's true identity is revealed:

> EKYAA: (Getting frantic) No… no Father…
> I shall die too.
> If my Cousin should die through no fault of hers
> but mine,
> then, I'll die with her (91).

Finally, the researcher argues that Owusu is a figure who can be thought to question not only sexual difference but also gender identity.

Conclusion

In Efo Kodgo's play, *In the Chest of a Woman,* the desire is specifically homoerotic. Owusu's sexually ambiguous figure has led the researcher to privilege some issues such as eroticism and homoerotic feelings in studying the play itself. The erotic scenes between Ekyaa and Owusu as well as Adwoa and Akosua's long description of Owusu obscures the male lover as irrelevant to their erotic reverie making the same-sex eroticism of the scene more prominent. The homoerotic attachments come to an end towards the end of the play when her true identity is revealed. Within the context of modern theatrical culture, Mawugbe's *In the Chest of a Woman* functions as a dramatic critique of the ideal norm of imperative heterosexuality in two interrelated ways. First, the effects of Owusu's cross-dressing point to the socially constructed nature of gender in Efo Kodgo Mawugbe's play. Secondly, Mawugbe's drama interrogates the exclusionary nature of the constructed categories of sex and challenges the symbolic hegemony of heterosexuality by producing representations or "citations" of same-sex love between Owusu and Ekyaa.

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