

GENDER REPRESENTATION IN AFRICAN PLAYS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF FEMI OSOFISAN'S *ALTINE'S WRATH* AND JOHN KOLOSA KARGBO'S *LET ME DIE ALONE*

Evans ASANTE

Department of Theatre Arts,

University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/jolls.v15i2.1>

Abstract

This article undertakes a critical examination of gender representation in African drama, with specific focus on Femi Osofisan's *Altine's Wrath* and John Kolosa Kargbo's *Let Me Die Alone*. Employing feminist literary theory, including both foundational Anglo-American frameworks and African feminist scholarship, as its analytical architecture, the study explores how these plays portray, contest, and in some instances inadvertently reproduce traditional gender roles, stereotypes, and asymmetrical power dynamics in African societies. Through close textual analysis supplemented by contextual and ideological reading, the article examines five thematic categories of gendered representation: the sexual objectification of women, patriarchal authority and its social enforcement, feminist consciousness and women's self-empowerment, misogynist masculinity, and the instrumentalisation of marriage, culture, and religion in the subordination of women. Situating these themes within postcolonial and African feminist debates, the analysis reveals that while both playwrights deploy their dramatic craft to critique patriarchal dominance, their works also reflect the contradictions and tensions inherent in representing gender from within societies and literary traditions that bear the imprint of colonial and indigenous patriarchal ideologies. The findings affirm the significance of African theatre as a site of social commentary and ideological contestation, and contribute to ongoing scholarly conversations in African theatre studies, postcolonial theory, and gender criticism.

Keywords: gender representation, African drama, feminism, patriarchy, Femi Osofisan, John Kolosa Kargbo, postcolonial theatre, women's empowerment

1. Introduction

Theatre has long served as a mirror to society, reflecting, interrogating, and sometimes transforming the values and ideologies that govern human communities. In Africa, drama has historically occupied a central role in articulating social tensions and cultural contradictions, and few tensions are as persistently visible on the African stage as those surrounding gender. As Jeyifo (1985, p. 11) argues, African drama is never ideologically neutral, it is produced within, and in response to, specific social and political formations that shape both its formal choices and its ideological content. The representation of women and men in African plays is therefore not merely a formal or aesthetic concern but a deeply political one, inseparable from questions of power, rights, cultural identity, and human dignity

(Hutchison, 2004).

Contemporary African dramatists have engaged these questions with increasing urgency. Okagbue (2007) and Igweonu (2011) have both noted the growing sophistication with which African playwrights have addressed questions of identity, embodiment, and power, producing bodies of drama that simultaneously draw on indigenous performative traditions and respond to global discourses of gender equality. Among the most instructive of these engagements are Femi Osofisan's *Altine's Wrath* and John Kolosa Kargbo's *Let Me Die Alone*, two plays that, from different national and historical contexts, place female protagonists at the centre of narratives about ambition, oppression, resistance, and selfhood.

This article argues that both plays function

as critical commentaries on the patriarchal structures that govern African societies, deploying dramatic form to expose the mechanisms through which women are subordinated, silenced, and dispossessed. At the same time, a close reading reveals that neither text is without contradiction. As Richards (1996, p. 7) has argued in relation to Osofisan's broader oeuvre, the liberation of female characters in his work is "sometimes articulated in the very terms it sets out to contest", framed, that is, within intellectual traditions shaped by the male-centred culture it critiques. Stratton (1994, p. 5) identifies a comparable pattern across African literature more broadly, arguing that even politically progressive male authors frequently construct female characters whose agency is "delimited by masculine scripts of empowerment." It is precisely this productive tension between critique and complicity that makes these plays valuable subjects for feminist literary analysis.

2. Objectives

The study aims to critically examine gender representation in African drama through a comparative analysis of Femi Osofisan's *Altine's Wrath* and John Kolosa Kargbo's *Let Me Die Alone*. Specifically, the study seeks to:

- i. analyse how gender roles and power relations are constructed and represented in the selected plays;
- ii. examine the ways in which patriarchal structures are reinforced or challenged; and
- iii. explore the forms of feminist consciousness and resistance embodied by female characters.

3. Materials and Methods

The study adopts a qualitative textual analysis of two African dramatic texts: Femi Osofisan's *Altine's Wrath* and John Kolosa Kargbo's *Let Me Die Alone*. The plays were purposively selected due to their thematic focus on gender, power, and female agency within distinct socio-historical contexts. The analysis is based on close reading of the texts, with attention to dialogue, characterisation, and dramatic structure. While drama is inherently performative, this study adopts a deliberately text-centred approach, enabling a precise examination of how gendered

meanings are constructed within the playwrights' own ideological frameworks. Questions of performance and reception, though important, fall outside the scope of the present analysis and are identified as areas for future research.

A thematic approach was employed to identify recurring patterns of gender representation across both plays. These patterns are organised into key analytical categories, including objectification, patriarchal authority, feminist consciousness, and misogynist masculinity. The study is comparative in nature, enabling an examination of how different cultural and historical contexts shape representations of gender and power.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts feminist literary criticism as its primary theoretical framework, supplemented by postcolonial and African feminist perspectives, with the aim of ensuring that the analysis remains attentive to the specific cultural and historical contexts within which the selected plays are situated. Feminist literary criticism, as developed by Millett (1970), Showalter (1977), and Gilbert and Gubar (1979), is grounded in the premise that literary texts are not ideologically neutral but are shaped by the gender ideologies of the societies that produce and consume them. Millett's (1970, p. 23) formulation of sexual politics as the "relationships between the sexes" understood as "political relationships" provides a particularly useful lens for examining the power dynamics that structure both plays. Applied to drama, this framework directs attention to the ways in which playwrights construct, challenge, and reproduce gendered subject positions through characterisation, plot development, and dialogue, while also foregrounding the ideological work performed by dramatic form itself.

A methodological clarification is necessary at this point. Showalter (1977) and Gilbert and Gubar (1979) developed their frameworks primarily to analyse women's writing, that is, the experience of women authors negotiating patriarchal literary traditions. Their direct application to male-authored texts therefore requires adjustment. In this study, these frameworks are not used to examine authorial

experience but to analyse representational ideology: the focus is on how gendered subject positions are constructed within the dramatic text, regardless of the author's gender. This approach aligns with Stratton's (1994, p. 10) argument that feminist literary criticism retains its analytical value when directed toward representation rather than authorship, an argument demonstrated across her comparative readings of male- and female-authored African texts.

The study further draws on African feminist scholarship, particularly the work of Nnaemeka (1998) and Oyewumi (1997), both of whom caution against the uncritical transfer of Western feminist categories to African contexts. Oyewumi (1997, p. 31) argues that gender, as a primary organising principle of social life, is itself "a culturally specific construct" that was significantly reshaped by the colonial encounter in Africa, a process that did not simply subordinate women but reconfigured the very terms through which gender became socially intelligible. This insight underscores the need for contextual sensitivity, requiring that the analysis attend closely to the distinct historical and social settings of the plays: postcolonial urban Nigeria in Altine's *Wrath* and the pre-colonial and colonial context of Sierra Leone in *Let Me Die Alone*. These contexts are not treated as background but as constitutive of the gender relations represented in each text. Postcolonial theoretical perspectives, particularly those of Spivak (1988) and Bhabha (1994), further inform this approach by illuminating how colonial discourse intersects with and reshapes indigenous gender arrangements.

5. Gender in African Theatre: A Review of the Literature

Scholarly engagement with gender in African literature and theatre has grown substantially since the 1980s, shaped by both the global proliferation of feminist theory and the emergence of African feminist scholarship that sought to articulate gender dynamics within specifically African cultural and historical contexts. Ogunyemi (1985, p. 64) was among the first to challenge the uncritical application of Western feminist frameworks to African women's experience, coining the concept of "womanism" to

describe a mode of feminist consciousness rooted in the communal values and historically situated conditions of African societies. Nnaemeka (1998, p. 4) extended this intervention by advocating for frameworks attentive to the intersections of gender with ethnicity, class, colonialism, and religious identity, intersections that are central to understanding the gender dynamics represented in both plays examined in this study.

Within the field of drama analysis Jeyifo (1985) and Etherton (1982) were among the earliest scholars to foreground the political dimensions of African theatre, including its representations of gender and power. Etherton's (1982) comprehensive survey of African drama's development established a critical foundation for subsequent scholarship by Hutchison (2004) and Lihamba (1985), both of whom examine how African playwrights inherit, adapt, and contest colonial and indigenous constructions of femininity and masculinity. More recent contributions by Okagbue (2007) and Igweonu (2011) have shifted analytical attention towards embodiment, performance, and identity, thereby expanding the vocabulary available for gender criticism in African theatrical contexts. Stratton's (1994, p. 5) pivotal study of gender politics in contemporary African literature provides a framework of particular analytical precision for identifying the mechanisms through which male-authored texts simultaneously challenge and reinscribe patriarchal ideologies, a framework that transfers productively to dramatic analysis and is central to the present comparative study.

Femi Osofisan's drama has attracted substantial critical attention, particularly for its Marxist and feminist orientations. Awodiya (1995, p. 43) documents Osofisan's insistence that theatre must function as an instrument of social transformation, highlighting his commitment to exposing the ideological processes through which inequality is sustained. Richards (1996, p. 7) offers perhaps the most sustained feminist reading of Osofisan's work, arguing that his female characters occupy an ambivalent position, simultaneously agents of critique and figures whose liberation is "articulated in the very terms it sets out to contest." Dunton (1992) similarly reads

Altine's Wrath as occupying a complex space between feminist critique and bourgeois reformism, a tension that is central to the analysis developed in this article.

Kargbo's *Let Me Die Alone* has received comparatively limited attention in the international scholarly literature, reflecting the broader marginalisation of Sierra Leonean drama within pan-African theatre studies. Okpewho (1992, p. 185) interprets the play as "a complex meditation on the relationship between power, gender, and cultural belonging," situating it within the tradition of African oral and historical drama and noting how Kargbo reworks the story of Madam Yoko into a vehicle for contemporary reflection on authority and gender. This relative critical gap further motivates the play's inclusion in the present comparative study. Together, the two plays offer a distinctive analytical opportunity: they are separated by historical period, national context, and theatrical convention, yet both stage the same fundamental problematic of female agency within patriarchal constraint.

This body of scholarship shows that gender representation in African theatre is neither uniform nor straightforwardly progressive. As Nnaemeka (1998, p. 4) observes, African women's negotiation of power operates "in the interstices of multiple, overlapping systems of domination," and it is in precisely those interstices that the most revealing moments of both plays are located. The present study builds on this scholarly foundation, bringing the two plays into sustained comparative dialogue and foregrounding the thematic categories through which their gendered politics are most productively analysed.

6. The Plays: Synopses and Social Contexts

6.1 John Kolosa Kargbo's *Let Me Die Alone*

Let Me Die Alone is set in nineteenth-century Sierra Leone and centres on the historical figure of Madam Yoko, an ambitious woman determined to claim the leadership of the Mende people following the death of her husband Gbanya. Kargbo's treatment of Yoko draws on historical records of one of the most remarkable female political figures in West African colonial history, transforming documentary material into a vehicle for sustained reflection on the gendered nature of

political authority. Leadership succession in the play is tied to membership of the all-male Poro cult, a condition that ordinarily excludes women entirely. Yoko's determination to cross this institutional boundary leads her to a devastating sacrifice: the renunciation of motherhood. When Gbanya moves to betray his promise and install a male successor, Yoko asserts her claim with unequivocal directness:

I am my husband's successor. I am the right person to lead. I have proved it. I have been loyal and I know the people.
(Kargbo, 1983, p. 22)

She ultimately achieves power but governs under relentless opposition from male rivals who deploy rumour, accusation, and political sabotage to destabilise her reign. The play ends with Yoko's suicide, a final assertion of agency that is simultaneously a testament to the intolerable conditions imposed upon women who dare to claim political authority. The play's social context is the transitional period of British colonial consolidation in Sierra Leone, a historical moment in which indigenous patriarchal structures were both challenged and reinforced by the colonial encounter. As Oyewumi (1997) argues, colonial rule frequently deepened the marginalisation of African women by delegitimising indigenous forms of female authority while constructing new forms of gendered exclusion justified by Western legal and cultural norms.

6.2 Femi Osofisan's *Altine's Wrath*

Altine's Wrath is set in contemporary urban Nigeria and tells the story of Altine, a woman who laboured to finance the education of Lawal, her childhood lover and husband. Having achieved professional status, Lawal turns on Altine, subjecting her to verbal abuse, domestic violence, and open infidelity. When his colleague Dr Aina challenges the legitimacy of Altine's treatment, Lawal dismisses her objections with a line that crystallises the cultural nationalism at the heart of the play's patriarchal logic:

Return to the western land if you want to behave that way. This is Africa. A woman has her duties. She knows her place. (Osofisan, 1994, p. 14)

Altine's apparent vulnerability is ultimately

revealed as deceptive: she has secretly learnt to read and write, and has accumulated documentary evidence of Lawal's embezzlement of public funds. The play culminates in Altine's vindication, as she exposes Lawal and reclaims her dignity through the power of self-determined education. As Awodiya (1995, p. 43) observes, Osofisan consistently situates female agency in relation to knowledge and consciousness, arguing that "awareness is the first condition of liberation."

The socio-political context of Altine's Wrath is crucial to understanding the specific form that patriarchy assumes within the play. Set in postcolonial urban Nigeria, the text reflects a period marked by rapid social transformation, expanding access to formal education, and the emergence of a bureaucratic middle class. However, these developments did not dismantle patriarchal authority; they reconfigured it. The figure of Lawal exemplifies a distinctly postcolonial formation of bourgeois masculinity, a form of male identity grounded in education, professional status, and access to state resources, yet deeply invested in the preservation of traditional gender hierarchies. His authority is reinforced not merely by cultural custom but by his position within modern institutional structures, producing a hybrid patriarchy in which the language of modernity coexists with, and indeed legitimises, practices of domination in the domestic sphere. Dunton (1992, p. 67) describes this as the "postcolonial patriarchal bargain": a formation in which the formal equality promised by modern institutions masks the deepening of gendered economic and social asymmetry in intimate life.

7. Thematic Analysis

The following sections examine the dominant patterns of gender representation across the two selected plays, attending to the ways in which character interaction, dialogue, and dramatic structure construct, contest, and at times reproduce the ideological conditions of women's subordination. Five intersecting thematic categories are examined in turn: the sexual objectification of women; patriarchal authority and its social enforcement; feminist consciousness and women's empowerment; misogynist

masculinity; and the instrumentalisation of marriage, culture, and religion. In each case, the comparative method is employed to illuminate both the commonalities and the contextually specific differences in how the two plays stage these problematics.

7.1 The Sexual Objectification of Women

Sexual objectification, the reduction of a woman to her body or sexual functions, divorced from her full subjectivity, is one of the most persistent mechanisms through which patriarchal societies regulate and diminish women. As Millett (1970, p. 45) argues, the objectification of women's bodies is not an incidental feature of patriarchal culture but a foundational one, providing the ideological basis for the broader subordination of women in both public and private life. Both plays dramatise this process with considerable clarity, though through formally and contextually distinct mechanisms, and it is precisely this contrast that illuminates the range and adaptability of objectification as a social practice.

Let Me Die Alone opens with a scene that establishes the terms of Yoko's existence within her marriage with disturbing economy. Gbanya summons Yoko from her work with her dancing girls, demanding her immediate sexual availability:

Your girls may need you, but your husband needs you right now, of what better use is a woman to a man?
(Kargbo, 1983, p. 4)

This single line encapsulates a worldview in which female value is defined exclusively in terms of sexual service. The form of the utterance is as significant as its content: framed as a rhetorical question, it forecloses response and thereby performs the very denial of Yoko's subjectivity that it articulates. The ideological violence of objectification lies in this presumption of consent, the way women are made to appear complicit in their own diminishment, with domination presented not as command but as self-evident cultural logic. Later in the play, Yoko demonstrates political intelligence, strategic insight, and leadership capacity; yet male characters continue to evaluate her in terms of

physical appeal rather than political competence. This persistent reduction reflects what Okpewho (1992, p. 185) describes as the systemic nature of the objectifying gaze: its persistence regardless of contradicting evidence.

In *Altine's Wrath*, objectification operates through a related but distinct mechanism, one grounded in the intersection of the sexual, the intellectual, and the economic. Lawal's dismissal of Altine's intellectual capacity is particularly revealing:

*What do you know about anything?
You are a woman and my wife. Your
job is to look after my house and take
care of my children. Leave the thinking
to men.* (Osofisan, 1994, p. 9)

The scope of this dismissal, "what do you know about anything", is totalising. It denies not only Altine's authority but her capacity for knowledge itself. Objectification here is not merely sexual; it is epistemological: Altine is excluded from meaning-making, rendered incapable of knowing rather than merely incapable of acting. Gilbert and Gubar (1979, p. 17) argue that patriarchal culture depends on keeping women outside the domain of intellectual authority, and Osofisan makes this dynamic concrete by linking Altine's epistemological marginalisation to her economic exploitation: her labour finances Lawal's advancement, yet she is denied recognition as a thinking subject. Stratton (1994, p. 22) identifies this conflation of the sexual and the economic as a characteristic feature of patriarchal representation in African literature, and Osofisan's dramatisation of it here serves as both diagnosis and critique.

A comparative reading of the two plays reveals that objectification is not the product of individual male behaviour but a structural feature of the social worlds they depict. In Kargbo's historical setting, it is embedded within formal institutions of marriage and political authority; in Osofisan's contemporary urban context, it is reproduced through cultural ideology, domestic hierarchy, and professional power. What varies is not the existence of objectification but its form, and it is precisely this adaptability, its capacity to reconstitute itself across historical periods and institutional arrangements, that ensures its

persistence.

7.2 Patriarchal Authority and Its Social Enforcement

Patriarchy, understood as a system of social organisation in which men hold primary authority while women are systematically excluded from power, forms the structural condition within which both plays are situated. Osofisan and Kargbo do not present patriarchy as the behaviour of individual men; rather, they depict it as a systemic and socially reproduced arrangement. This aligns with Millett's (1970, p. 25) argument that patriarchy is not merely a set of personal attitudes but "a social constant so deeply entrenched" that it appears natural and inevitable. It also resonates with Spivak's (1988, p. 287) observation that the subaltern woman is constrained not by any single domination but by "overlapping, mutually reinforcing systems of authority", a formation both plays stage with considerable precision.

In *Let Me Die Alone*, patriarchal authority is most visibly embodied in the Poro cult and its control over political succession. The exclusion of women from this institution is not incidental but foundational, ensuring that political authority remains firmly in male hands. This exclusion is most clearly staged in Gbanya's withdrawal of his promise to support Yoko's succession. His justification, "the kingdom needs a man. That is the way it has always been. That is the will of our ancestors" (Kargbo, 1983, p. 19), performs precisely what Oyewumi (1997, p. 31) identifies as a key feature of patriarchal discourse: the transformation of historical contingency into cultural inevitability. What is politically motivated is presented as timeless tradition. The invocation of "our ancestors" is particularly significant: it elevates a political preference into a sacred injunction and thereby frames any challenge to male authority as a threat to cultural identity itself. Yoko's response is one of the most politically charged moments in the play. Rather than accepting the logic of exclusion, she exposes its inconsistency:

*Did our ancestors make the women
who govern in Bumpe and in
Moyamba? Are those kingdoms less*

Mende because women lead them? Tell me that, Gbanya. (Kargbo, 1983, p. 20)

By invoking historical precedents of female leadership in neighbouring Mende communities, Yoko does more than assert a personal claim: she dismantles the notion that female exclusion is natural or universal, restoring history where patriarchy invokes myth. As Nnaemeka (1998, p. 6) observes, African women's political agency has often been erased or suppressed within patriarchal historiography, and Kargbo dramatises this erasure with precision.

In *Altime's Wrath*, patriarchy operates at the level of intimate life, its mechanisms less formal but no less systemic. Lawal's violence, infidelity, and contempt for Altime's intellect are not presented as isolated acts but as expressions of a broader social framework. Dunton (1992, p. 67) describes this as the "postcolonial patriarchal bargain," in which modernisation coexists with the reinforcement of male dominance. This dynamic becomes particularly visible in the exchange between Lawal and Dr Aina. When Dr Aina describes marriage as "modern-day slavery," Lawal responds: "Return to the western land if you want to behave that way. This is Africa" (Osofisan, 1994, p. 14). This response exemplifies what Nnaemeka (1998, p. 8) identifies as the deployment of cultural nationalism as a silencing strategy: female claims to equality are dismissed as foreign importation, with resistance reframed as cultural betrayal, a move that simultaneously obscures the existence of indigenous African feminist traditions documented by both Nnaemeka (1998) and Ogunyemi (1985).

The comparison between the two plays reveals a crucial structural insight. In Kargbo's Sierra Leonean setting, patriarchy is enforced through formal institutions, ritual authority, political councils, and codified exclusion. In Osofisan's Nigerian context, it operates through cultural discourse and everyday practice. One is institutional; the other is ideological. Yet these differences do not indicate divergence at the level of structure. In both plays, patriarchy functions by granting men the authority to define, regulate, and discipline female subjectivity. What varies is not the existence of patriarchal power but the forms

through which it is exercised and legitimised.

7.3 Feminist Consciousness and Women's Empowerment

Both plays present female protagonists who exhibit what Showalter (1977, p. 13) would recognise as an emergent feminist consciousness: an awareness of subordination, a rejection of its legitimacy, and a determination to resist it. The treatment of this consciousness differs significantly between the two texts, however, and it is instructive to examine those differences closely, they reveal not only the distinct formal strategies of the playwrights but also the limits as well as the possibilities of the feminist visions their works project.

Madam Yoko in *Let Me Die Alone* is perhaps the most explicitly political feminist figure in anglophone West African drama. Her ambition is not merely personal but ideological: she asserts the capacity of women to exercise political authority on equal terms with men. When the male council attempts to undermine her claim by questioning her suitability for leadership, Yoko responds with one of the play's most powerful speeches:

Then let a woman rule who has the heart of a man, and I have that heart. I have endured what no man among you has endured. I have given up what none of you was ever asked to give. And still you doubt me. Look at me and tell me what you see that is wanting. (Kargbo, 1983, p. 22)

The rhetorical force of this speech lies in its strategic reversal: Yoko does not merely assert equality but challenges her accusers to identify a concrete deficiency, knowing that none exists, since the obstacle is not capability but assumption. Ogunyemi (1985, p. 64) describes the African feminist heroine as defined by a "will to survive against the odds," a formulation Yoko embodies fully. At the same time, the speech reveals an important tension: Yoko claims legitimacy through the phrase "the heart of a man," thereby adopting the very terms that structure her exclusion. Stratton (1994, p. 29) notes that feminist figures in male-authored African texts often articulate resistance within the frameworks

they seek to challenge, and Yoko's assertion, for all its force, illustrates this constraint.

The play further suggests that Yoko's struggle is not entirely individual. A brief but structurally significant exchange with her attendant Jeneba introduces a wider field of female awareness:

JENEBA: *They will never accept you, Yoko. Men like Lamboi, they would sooner burn the chieftdom than see a woman rule it.*

YOKO: *Then let them burn. I will not hand them the fire.* (Kargbo, 1983, p. 31)

This exchange situates Yoko's resistance within a shared understanding of male opposition rather than treating her as an isolated exceptional figure. As Nnaemeka (1998, p. 7) argues, African feminist agency is most fully realised when it is collective rather than individual, and Kargbo's staging of this dialogue gestures towards that collective dimension, however briefly.

In *Altine's Wrath*, feminist consciousness takes a different trajectory: gradual, internal, and materially grounded rather than overt and confrontational. Altine's empowerment does not emerge through direct challenge to patriarchal authority but through the sustained accumulation of knowledge. This becomes most evident in the scene where she reveals her awareness of Lawal's corruption:

You thought I was nothing. You thought because I could not read, I could not see. But I have eyes, Lawal. I have always had eyes. And while you were busy making yourself important, I was learning. I was watching. I was writing it all down.

(Osofisan, 1994, p. 38)

The power of this speech lies in its insistence on continuity: Altine's repeated assertion "I have, I have always had" reclaims subjectivity from the position of epistemological absence imposed on her. She was never ignorant; she was rendered invisible. The motif of literacy as liberation is therefore central to the play's structure, reflecting what Richards (1996, p. 97) describes as Osofisan's belief in the "transformative potential

of consciousness-raising as both individual and political practice."

Yet Stratton's (1994, p. 30) critique of male-authored African literature is pertinent here. Altine's victory, though significant, is confined to the domestic and juridical sphere: she exposes Lawal and reclaims dignity, but she does not dismantle the system that enabled her oppression. Her triumph becomes personal rather than structural, and this tension is central to Altine's *Wrath*: the play offers a compelling critique of patriarchy, yet the terms of liberation remain circumscribed, agency is achieved, but within limits defined by the very system being challenged. The divergence between Yoko's overt, confrontational, and politically explicit consciousness and Altine's gradual, strategic, and epistemologically grounded resistance is thus not simply a formal difference between the two plays but a structural one: both trajectories reveal that female empowerment in these texts emerges within, not outside, patriarchal structures, and it is this shared condition that gives both plays their sustained analytical significance.

7.4 Misogynist Masculinity

Both plays construct male characters whose misogyny functions not as psychological aberration but as a socially legible and socially rewarded mode of masculinity. By refusing to pathologise misogynist behaviour as individual deviance, both playwrights locate it within the social and ideological structures that produce and reproduce it. This approach is consistent with the framework developed by Ouzgane and Morrell (2005, p. 4), who argue that misogynist modes of male identity in Africa are not residues of traditional culture but "active, contemporary constructions produced in response to the pressures and contradictions of modern social life."

Lawal in *Altine's Wrath* is the most fully realised misogynist in either text. His treatment of Altine encompasses physical violence, verbal humiliation, economic exploitation, and emotional cruelty. The play's most unsettling scene of domestic violence is accompanied by a rationalisation that reveals the ideological character of his aggression:

I made you. Everything you are, I made you. Without me you would still be nothing, a village girl fetching water. And this is how you repay me? By questioning me in my own house? (Osofisan, 1994, p. 21)

The logic of this statement is revealing: Lawal claims to have “made” Altine, repositioning the woman who financed his education as the passive product of his agency rather than the active author of his success. This inversion of historical fact is not mere self-deception but ideological work, it reframes economic exploitation as benevolent patronage and transforms the creditor into the debtor. Richards (1996, p. 118) situates this characterisation within Osofisan’s broader project of exposing the connections between domestic violence and political corruption, arguing that “Lawal’s twin abuses, of his wife and of public funds, are presented as expressions of the same foundational contempt for accountability.” The structural parallel Osofisan draws between the private and public registers of Lawal’s conduct is one of the play’s most formally significant choices, insisting that domestic patriarchy and political corruption are not merely analogous but organically connected, products of the same formation of masculine identity that prizes domination over accountability.

The connection Osofisan draws between misogyny and postcolonial governance resonates with what Jeyifo (1985, p. 33) describes as the “politics of the everyday” in African drama, the ways in which playwrights use domestic and intimate situations to illuminate the broader operations of power. Lawal’s deployment of cultural authenticity as a patriarchal resource is, in Bhabha’s (1994, p. 86) terms, a form of colonial mimicry turned inward: the language of anti-colonial resistance is redirected against women who claim their own rights, producing a nationalist discourse that is simultaneously emancipatory in its orientation towards the colonial other and oppressive in its orientation towards women within the nation.

In *Let Me Die Alone*, Lamboi and Musa are the most explicit agents of misogynist opposition to Yoko. When legitimate political

contestation fails, they resort to accusations that reveal misogyny as political technology rather than personal attitude. In a key scene of private conspiracy, Lamboi articulates the strategic purpose of the witchcraft accusation:

Let the people say she is a witch. Let them say she drinks blood. Once they believe it, all her wars, all her victories, they count for nothing. A witch cannot rule. A witch must die. (Kargbo, 1983, p. 44)

The cold calculation of this speech, “let them say,” “once they believe it”, reveals that the accusation is not driven by genuine superstitious belief but by the calculated weaponisation of popular fear. Okpewho (1992, p. 203) notes that the use of witchcraft accusation to neutralise threatening female authority is “a historically documented mechanism across many African cultural contexts,” and Kargbo’s staging of its deliberate manufacture makes visible what is typically obscured: its character as political instrument rather than cultural expression. Hutchison (2004, p. 45) observes that misogyny of this kind operates as “a repertoire of practices designed to maintain male supremacy against the challenges of capable and ambitious women,” a formulation that Lamboi’s speech dramatises with chilling precision.

Comparing the two plays, what emerges is a picture of misogynist masculinity as a flexible and adaptive formation. In Kargbo’s pre-colonial and colonial setting, misogyny mobilises the resources of customary institution, ritual authority, and supernatural sanction; in Osofisan’s post-colonial urban context, it deploys the resources of modern professional status, cultural nationalism, and juridical power. What Ouzgane and Morrell (2005, p. 4) identify as the defining characteristic of African misogynist masculinity, its capacity to reinvent itself within new institutional contexts while preserving its essential logic of female subordination, is dramatised with considerable analytical precision by both playwrights.

7.5 Marriage, Culture, and Religion as Instruments of Oppression

A consistent theme across both plays is the instrumentalisation of cultural tradition and

institutional authority to enforce female subordination. Amadiume (1987, p. 27) has demonstrated that while African societies possessed complex and varied pre-colonial gender arrangements, including recognised forms of female political and economic authority, the encounter with colonial power systematically delegitimised those arrangements while reinforcing patriarchal structures that served the interests of colonial administration. The cultural institutions depicted in both plays must therefore be understood within this historical frame: they are not pristine expressions of traditional value but formations shaped, in different ways and to different degrees, by the colonial encounter and its aftermath.

Altine's situation crystallises the gendered asymmetry of marital expectation. She devoted her labour to Lawal's advancement; he repaid her with violence and humiliation. The social expectation of female submissiveness, encoded in cultural norms about what a "good wife" must endure, is what initially prevents Altine from resisting. This is rendered most starkly in Altine's confession to a female friend in the play's early scenes:

I cannot leave him. Where would I go? My family would say I failed. The church would say I failed. Everyone would say I failed. When a man beats his wife, they say she must have done something. When a wife leaves her husband, they say she could not keep him. Either way, it is the woman who is wrong. (Osofisan, 1994, p. 12)

This speech renders the social ecology of Altine's entrapment with devastating clarity: it is not only Lawal's violence but the convergence of familial, religious, and communal judgement that constitutes the cage. Dunton (1992, p. 71) reads this element of the play as an indictment of the ways in which culture is selectively invoked in post-colonial Nigeria: cultural values of female deference are preserved and enforced, while countervailing cultural values of reciprocity and communal responsibility are quietly discarded. Stratton (1994, p. 29) argues that the female character who refuses the cultural script assigned to her, who, like Altine, transgresses the

submissiveness that culture demands, performs "one of the most politically charged gestures available to African literature": the refusal to be made complicit in one's own oppression.

In *Let Me Die Alone*, the cultural authority of the Poro cult operates as a quasi-religious institution that sacralises male political privilege. The most devastating dramatisation of what this institutionalised patriarchy costs a woman comes in the scene of Yoko's formal initiation, when the terms of her access to political power are spelled out:

From this day, Yoko, you are Poro. But you are Poro as a man is Poro. You will bear no children. You will nurse no child. The womb that carried life will carry life no more. This is the price. This is the law. (Kargbo, 1983, p. 17)

The formal parallelism of this pronouncement, "this is the price, this is the law", equates cultural legality with personal devastation, presenting Yoko's sacrifice of motherhood not as arbitrary cruelty but as institutional necessity. Amadiume (1987, p. 45) argues that such institutions become instruments of oppression not through their inherent nature but through the historically contingent processes by which they are "selectively deployed to restrict female agency and consolidate male authority." Yoko gains access to the Poro cult, but only by surrendering a form of female selfhood rather than affirming it: the cost of inclusion is exclusion from one's own body.

The comparative juxtaposition of the two plays' treatments of cultural institution reveals an important common structural feature. In both *Let Me Die Alone* and *Altine's Wrath*, women are required to choose between different aspects of selfhood in order to survive within patriarchal structures: Yoko sacrifices motherhood for authority; Altine suppresses her intellectual development until it can be weaponised in self-defence. Both sacrifices are presented as symptoms of systemic injustice rather than as freely chosen expressions of female will, and both are framed in ways that invite the audience to interrogate the cultural frameworks that make such impossible choices necessary. In this, both plays

perform precisely the function that Jeyifo (1985, p. 18) assigns to African drama at its most politically engaged: the exposure of ideological structures through the representation of their human cost.

8. Conclusion

This study has examined gender representation in Femi Osofisan's *Altine's Wrath* and John Kolosa Kargbo's *Let Me Die Alone*, demonstrating that both plays constitute significant, though internally complex, interventions in African dramatic engagements with patriarchy. Through sustained textual analysis the article has shown that each playwright exposes the structural mechanisms through which women are subordinated, whether through sexual objectification, institutional exclusion, epistemological silencing, or the instrumentalisation of culture, marriage, and religion. The analysis has drawn on a range of feminist, African feminist, and postcolonial scholars, including Millett (1970), Showalter (1977), Stratton (1994), Ogunyemi (1985), Nnaemeka (1998), Oyewumi (1997), and Bhabha (1994), to demonstrate that the plays' engagement with gender is both formally sophisticated and politically substantive.

At the same time, the analysis has foregrounded a central tension: while both plays critique patriarchal dominance, neither fully escapes the ideological frameworks it seeks to challenge. Kargbo's representation of Yoko stages a powerful assertion of female political agency, yet resolves that assertion within a tragic logic that risks reinscribing the very limits it exposes. As Richards (1996, p. 14) observes, tragedy as a form has historically served to contain rather than endorse female transgression, and the decision to resolve the narrative of a historically documented female leader in suicide rather than survival, however dramatically powerful, invites the question of whether the play aestheticises defeat in ways that leave the structural conditions of oppression undisturbed. Similarly, and as Stratton (1994, p. 30) would anticipate, Osofisan's construction of *Altine* offers a compelling narrative of self-empowerment grounded in consciousness and literacy, but ultimately confines that empowerment within the domestic and

juridical sphere, leaving broader structural relations of gendered power largely intact. In both cases, female agency emerges as real but circumscribed: enabled within, rather than wholly liberated from, patriarchal conditions.

What these contradictions reveal is not a failure of artistic vision but the difficulty of imagining gender transformation from within historically embedded systems of power. The plays operate within what may be understood as a field of negotiated resistance, where critique and complicity coexist not as opposing positions but as structurally entangled ones. It is precisely this tension that renders the texts analytically productive, as they register the ongoing struggle to articulate feminist possibilities within cultural and literary traditions shaped by both indigenous and colonial patriarchies. As Jeyifo (1985, p. 11) argues, it is the contradictions within African dramatic texts that make them most productive as objects of critical analysis since those contradictions "register the real ideological conflicts of the societies that produced them."

By bringing these two plays into sustained comparative dialogue, the study contributes to African theatre scholarship by extending feminist analysis beyond the identification of oppressive structures to a more nuanced interrogation of how such structures are reproduced, contested, and partially reconfigured within dramatic representation. In particular, the article highlights the importance of attending not only to overt acts of resistance but also to the subtle ways in which gendered subjectivity is constructed and limited within the language of the text itself. Future research might productively examine these plays in performance, attending to the ways in which specific productions, through casting, staging, design, and audience reception, shape, contest, or affirm the gendered politics readable at the textual level. Comparative studies bringing these works into dialogue with contemporaneous drama from East, Southern, and Francophone West Africa, and examining the relationship between gender representation and genre, would further enrich our understanding of the diversity and commonalities of gender representation across the continent's dramatic traditions.

References

- Amadiume, I. (1987). *Male daughters, female husbands: Gender and sex in an African society*. Zed Books.
- Awodiya, M. (1995). *Excursions in drama and literature: Interviews with Femi Osofisan*. Kraft Books.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
- Dunton, C. (1992). *Make man talk true: Nigerian drama in English since 1970*. Hans Zell Publishers.
- Etherton, M. (1982). *The development of African drama*. Hutchinson.
- Gilbert, S. M., & Gubar, S. (1979). *The madwoman in the attic: The woman writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination*. Yale University Press.
- Hutchison, Y. (2004). *South African performance and the archive of memory*. Manchester University Press.
- Igweonu, K. (2011). *Trends in twenty-first century African theatre and performance*. Rodopi.
- Jeyifo, B. (1985). *The truthful lie: Essays in a sociology of African drama*. New Beacon Books.
- Kargbo, J. K. (1983). *Let me die alone*. Longman.
- Lihamba, A. (1985). *Politics and theatre in Tanzania after the Arusha Declaration* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Leeds.
- Millett, K. (1970). *Sexual politics*. Doubleday.
- Nnaemeka, O. (Ed.). (1998). *Sisterhood, feminisms and power: From Africa to the diaspora*. Africa World Press.
- Ogunyemi, C. O. (1985). Womanism: The dynamics of the contemporary Black female novel in English. *Signs*, 11(1), 63–80.
- Okagbue, O. (2007). *African theatres and performances*. Routledge.
- Okpewho, I. (1992). *African oral literature: Backgrounds, character, and continuity*. Indiana University Press.
- Osofisan, F. (1994). *Altine's wrath*. In F. Osofisan, *Midnight hotel and other plays*. Evans Brothers.
- Ouzgane, L., & Morrell, R. (Eds.). (2005). *African masculinities: Men in Africa from the late nineteenth century to the present*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Oyewumi, O. (1997). *The invention of women: Making an African sense of Western gender discourses*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Richards, S. L. (1996). *Ancient songs set ablaze: The theatre of Femi Osofisan*. Howard University Press.
- Showalter, E. (1977). *A literature of their own: British women novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton University Press.
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.
- Stratton, F. (1994). *Contemporary African literature and the politics of gender*. Routledge.