

Representations of Clothing in Selected Ghanaian Literature

Kofi Darkoh-Ankrah

University of Ghana, Legon

Abstract: *In this paper, I explore the choices of clothing made by characters in select Ghanaian literature from the realms of fiction, short-fiction and drama: The Blinkards by Kobina Sekyi (1997 [1918]), The Marriage of Anansewa by Efua Sutherland (1987), Changes: A Love Story by Ama Ata Aidoo (1991), “The Prophet of Zongo Street” by Mohammed Naseehu Ali (2005), Fragments (2006) and Two Thousand Seasons ([1973] 2000) by Ayi Kwei Armah, A Woman in Her Prime (1967) by Asare Konadu and The Clothes of Nakedness (1998) by Benjamin Kwakye. The discussion builds on the assumption that the trope of clothing in the texts communicates more than is thought by their wearers and beholders. How this is represented in the selected Ghanaian texts is what this article seeks to investigate. The discussion observes that the majority of the characters are usually more influenced by external social factors in their choice of clothing than by just covering themselves. I argue that Ghanaian characters are more inclined to making a choice for foreign clothing than their own indigenous clothing. This tendency causes them to rather take up foreign identities other than their Ghanaian identity.*

Keywords: clothes, clothing, identity, Ghanaian, fiction

Introduction

A look at Flugel (1930) in Jones (1995) reveals that whenever humans encounter one another for the first time, they have the tendency to look at their own extremities like faces and hands. Yet, what they really respond to is not so much the body but the clothing of the wearer. He adds that clothes are very important to humans in their social interactions (18). The importance of clothing to the characters of the Ghanaian fictional works included for this discussion leads to the observation that because of contacts with the external world, they often have more inclination to adopting a culture of foreign clothing, while either downplaying their own Ghanaian traditional clothing norms or adopting a hybrid identity.

Beginning, for example, with Kobina Sekyi’s *The Blinkards* in which Mrs. Brofosem, the central character, and her Western influenced counterparts impugn African indigenous customs and traditions, through to Asare Konadu’s

A Woman in Her Prime, in which Pokua does the reverse in cherishing “the beautiful *kente* cloth” (106), till more recent Ghanaian literary pieces of whatever genre, there is a lot to learn from the clothes used by the characters featured. Preference for or rejection of any kind of clothing in the texts all point to some deep cultural, psychological, historical and contemporary underpinnings. For each of the characters, choice and use of clothes come from a variety of reasons, a lot of which, apart from the indigenous, is influenced by contacts with Europe and Arabia. The discussion here revolves around the notion that the choice of clothing by the characters in the selected texts is instructed not primarily by having their nakedness covered but by local Ghanaian social factors which are themselves further influenced by foreign cultures resulting from contacts with people from other parts of the world.

Sekyi’s *The Blinkards*, set in postcolonial Africa in the Fantse community of Cape Coast, addresses issues that arise as a result of contacts between European and African cultures. The central character, Mrs. Brofosem, stays only for a short time in England and returns to Ghana adopting the English lifestyle she has learnt. Besides, not only does she adopt this lifestyle, but she makes it her central mission to convert everyone to practise English ways. With this aim in mind, she starts with her husband, Mr. Brofosem, and forces him to accept a British lifestyle, even though this often creates frictions between them. She extends her mission to other characters like Miss Tsiba who has been brought to her to be tutored in the English lifestyle. Miss Tsiba’s prospective husband, who also learns from Mr. Onyimdze, is compelled by Mrs. Brofosem to fix a white European wedding for the young lady, Miss Tsiba. When Miss Tsiba’s mother, Na Sompaa, hears of their intention to organise a white wedding, she suffers a heart attack and dies as a result. After this tragedy, Nana Katawere, Miss Tsiba’s grandmother, storms the church to prevent the European style wedding from taking place. My discussion hinges on the finding that key to the dissent with the wedding system is the choice of clothing that comes in conflict. The central character, Mrs. Brofosem, is always found dressed in a lorgnette, frock, boots, and holding an umbrella in the hot African sun. Another character, a British trained lawyer named Mr. Onyimdze, on the contrary, does not follow his English training in apparel but sticks to his traditional African clothing. The significance of clothing in portraying one’s identity and culture is one of the key elements in the story that this discussion takes up.

Further reading of other relatively recent texts also reveals characters that have the tendency to adopt European clothing norms rather than African (such as Bisi Adjapon’s *Of Women and Frogs* [2018], or Amma Darko’s *Faceless* [2003]). Additionally, there are yet other characters who tend to adopt a hybrid sense of clothing. What holds these texts together, in spite of their widely spaced years of publication, is the fact that all of them feature characters whose attitudes to their choice of clothing give them away as either having rejected their African clothing norms or having stuck to them. The few characters that

remain resolute in their choice of traditional clothing set the other Western influenced characters apart. The discussion seeks to show that the denigrating influence of colonialism causes the Ghanaian characters to not accidentally, though unfortunately, look down on their own traditional clothing norms. In effect, I hold that in most cases, the majority of the Ghanaian characters have the tendency to adopt a dress culture that focuses on imported clothing more than their very own. The thread of thinking that holds this discussion together is the conception that though a few resolute characters remain stuck to their traditional clothing norms, whenever one picks up a postcolonial Ghanaian text to read, there is the likelihood that the majority of characters will play down their clothing norms in favour of the foreign Other due principally to the gripping effects of colonialism.

Perspectives on Clothing

Generally speaking, we know that it is humans that wear clothes. Indeed, whether these clothes are intended to cover us up, or to ensure that we fit certain social expectations, we simply pick them up and put them on. Yet, however we choose to wear them, our clothes contribute to our identity. In line with this notion, Virginia Woolf (1928) writing on identity, observes that “it is clothes that wear us and not we them” (188). While this might initially sound strange to the listener, Woolf, however, explains further that the best we can do to fabric is to “make them take the mould of arm or breast, but [clothes] mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking” (188). By implication, the fabric is simply an object waiting to be spun, woven, knitted, tailored and used in many ways by humans to suit their interests. In spite of this strong opinion by Woolf on clothing, Sandra Gilbert (1980), referencing W. B. Yeats (1928), observes that “[w]here Woolf’s view of clothing implied that costume is inseparable from identity – indeed, that costume creates identity – Yeats’ metaphor, repeated often throughout his career, posits a heart’s truth which stands apart from false costumes” (391). She notes that, for Woolf, “we are what we wear, but for Yeats, we may, like Lear, have to undo the last button of what we wear in order to dis-cover and more truly re-cover what we are” (391). In other words, where Woolf dwells on the clothed Self to show the identity of the user, Yeats dwells on the unclothed Self to do same. My discussion of the primary texts for this paper, however, takes up the clothed (rather than the naked) body that is presented to the world outside. Therefore, in connection with the Ghanaian literary contexts, my focus is centred on the clothed Self during different kinds of social occasions like naming ceremonies, festivals, work, church, the mosque, the traditional shrine and so on. In my discussion, I note that very often the characters reject their traditional clothing norms in favour of foreign ones, while others adopt a mix of them with a scanty few remaining stuck to their traditional clothing preferences.

According to James Anquandah (2013), in relation to the clothed Self, Ghanaian festivals, for example, show clothing and hair-styles, which portray “traditional royalty and its riches and splendour and communal feasting and merrymaking” (22). In connection with the characters in the select works, when they go to their wardrobes in their nude selves and identities, they wonder which one of the collections of the clothing they need either for the “splendour” or other. In Konadu’s novel *A Woman in Her Prime*, for example, the Odwira festival is in sight and the events that follow must be celebrated in grand style. As the central character Pokua is expecting a baby, she begins to think about sewing beautiful garments for the unborn child but the tradition holds that it is presumptuous to do so. In fact, it is her husband Kwadwo Fordwour who brings her three of his old dress-cloths. Pokua, the central character, tears them up into lengths, washes, folds and gathers them carefully in one of her brass bowls. She believes that these would be enough to keep the baby clean (105). If this represents a welcome preparation even for the unborn baby in her African culture, how much more would one prepare for the born, the living and the dead. Besides, in the preparation for necessary apparel, the characters demonstrate the presence of mind to not only satisfy themselves alone but also others. For this reason, their choice of clothing is made to suit the occasion. This connects with Elizabeth Barber’s (1994) observation that for some twenty thousand years, clothing has become an important vehicle for communicating social messages in a visual, silent, and continuous manner (9). This assertion, generally, affirms the fact that humans wear clothing for several reasons, including warmth, protection, acceptance, portrayal of culture, among others. Their choice is also based upon social, political, religious, academic or other reasons. What they wear is a response to any of the callings of the occasion; or the time and place within which they find themselves. The writers carefully employ a variety of symbols through which they capture their characters’ clothes. For instance, the learned Mr. Onyimdze in *The Blinkards* and Kumi in the short story “The Prophet of Zongo Street” from the collection of the same title revert to wearing African indigenous clothing to social gatherings. By this, they convey the message that there is the need for Africans to reject foreign adaptations and return to their pre-colonial past.

Since my chosen texts are Ghanaian, they reveal Africa’s contacts with the West and Arabia and the possible results of these contacts with regard to clothing. For instance, in the texts, the trope of clothing takes on an affective function so that where there occurs some kind of fusion, suppression or total denial of one’s own clothing culture for the other, the characters involved may often feel either happy, distressed, clumsy, accepted, or rejected and so on. It is therefore evident from the texts that some of the Ghanaian characters think that donning foreign clothing is what is socially preferred; and to be able to do this makes them happy. This gives them a sense of belonging as they feel accepted within the usually foreign dictated social norm group. Others, on the other hand, tend to feel distressed and clumsy in their clothing, as they appear

to have been forced to conform to that which is not their traditionally preferred norm and which they vehemently reject. An example from Sekyi's *The Blinkards* is where Okadu is forced to wear a three-piece suit for his wedding ceremony with Miss Tsiba. This labyrinth of choices and disposition depicted in *The Blinkards* is often found in Ghanaian fiction which is replete with characters who have problems with their choice of clothing because such choice often comes in conflict with transplanted foreign cultures. With such characters, it is obvious that their dress codes, to a very large extent, signify the varied messages that the wearers intend to give off to themselves and to those around them.

Expressing a similar point of view, Phyllis Martin (1994) notes that clothes play a very important role in "mediating social relations" (401) amongst the people of Central Africa. She argues that items of clothing, jewellery and insignia serve to transport the wearer's "identity, status, values and sense of occasion" (401). She further notes the tendency among Central Africans to combine European and African clothing norms through a "fusion of European style and African dress forms" (401). This is so because such a fusion appears to depict the wearer as enlightened, fashionable, or elegant. However, making reference to their past, Martin states that Central Africans already had a strong sense of the "politics of costume long before new sources and ideas of clothing arrived with colonialism" (405). In her analysis, she further asserts that apart from signifying change, clothing also "became a vehicle for change" (426). Thus, she observes that among Central Africans there is a great awareness on issues bordering on the social with regard to clothing. This Central African situation draws similarities with the Ghanaian works under discussion – novels, plays and short stories – because many of the characters appear to adapt foreign dress codes except for the very few who remain consistently unchanging in their stand on their choice and use of traditional dress to portray their African identity. In the following, I will provide a more detailed reading of the selected texts starting with Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story*.

Changes: A Love Story

Aidoo's novel *Changes: A Love Story* is a narrative about the changing patterns of relationships, especially within marriage. The central character, Esi, encounters a number of problems with her first husband, Oko. She, therefore, leaves the marriage and gets into an amorous relationship with Ali who is a Muslim. This new relationship suffers a myriad of complications, one of which is the differing religious and cultural orientations of Esi and Ali. Although the novel is centred on the narrative of relationships, it also takes up the importance of clothing to depict the identities of the main characters. So, for example, the text reveals how Ali purchases for Esi all kinds of costumes to express his love for her. In relation to this, I discuss the importance of clothing to the characters and the influences of their preferences. I also reveal the impact of clothing on the characters' interactions with one another. In the story, the narrator rates the

role of clothing very highly. It serves as a vehicle to depict the nature of the relationship/s among the characters. For example, the narrator reveals that after Esi leaves her marriage, her estranged husband, Oko, feels the impact of his broken marriage through the complete absence of “the usual reminders of Esi around: the subtle aroma that was the sum total of her clothes, her perfumes, her powders, her body and even her briefcase and scribbling board” (85). In this palpable way, Aidoo uses the absence of Esi’s clothes and accessories in their marital home to symbolise the negative effect of the raptured relationship on Oko. Thus, she creates an image of Oko’s disorientation, disbelief and forlornness as he suffers the “strangeness” of having lost Esi who has walked away from their marriage.

Further on in the narrative, Esi is complimented on her clothing by her friend Opokuya who notices that the former has begun to look rather lost and lonely barely a year after getting married to Ali (169). This compliment on her “rather pretty *boubou*” makes Esi feel good. However, it diverts from the real fact of the wearer’s true feelings of despair in her new relationship. In this instance, the dramatic irony of the dress symbol lies in the fact that it serves the purpose of hiding or veiling the true state of Esi’s emotional and psychological crisis, as it portrays her social status of a ‘happily remarried’ woman who is able to acquire beautiful and stunning clothing while on holiday with her new husband. Sadly, though, Esi is far from content, as Ali has settled her nicely and, ignoring her for the most part, is pursuing his “new secretary” whom he has “developed a habit of dropping [...] home at the end of the working day” (168). The function that the *boubou* performs in shrouding Esi’s despair greatly contrasts with Ali’s use of clothing in their relationship as an expression of his love for her. As he travelled around the world, he would bring her many gifts among which were “shimmering silk” from Asian countries, other gorgeous fabrics from African countries, and “imported fabrics of programmed softness and perfected sheen” from other regions. Thus, “he virtually made a collector of the world’s textiles out of Esi as her wardrobe literally overflowed with different types and colours” (188). Nevertheless, in spite of this grandiose collection of fabrics, when Esi becomes fed up in their third year of marriage of his persistent absence, she meets Ali at her front door “only dressed in a single piece of wrapper” which she does not “bother to go and change” and declares her decision to break up with him as she feels abandoned in this marriage characterised largely by materialism (189). In the end, the collection of clothing depicting different cultures is useless in resolving the cultural differences that appear to be at the root of their marital rift. In terms of power relations, Martin (1994) argues that clothing also speaks volumes in “asserting class, gender and generational roles” (426). Drawing on this, it can also be said that history, movement and contact equally affect the choices and uses of clothing. The historical and political impact brought about by colonialism has compelled a certain kind of taste and preference for foreign clothes. In some cases, there is a blend or preference for one over the other; often the foreign over the

indigenous. As Martin clearly indicates, this results from the domineering power relations between the coloniser and the colonised. Extending this notion of power at play in relation to clothing, I argue that clothes have the power to reveal or express things about their wearers that have not been put into words. This implies that although it is humans who determine what they want with clothes, even by doing so, the clothes 'speak' for them. Thus, the clothes we wear determine what kind of messages (perhaps unknown to us) we communicate and what kind of interpretation (perhaps also unknown to us) people read into them.

The Prophet of Zongo Street

A look at the young gentleman named Kumi in Mohammed Naseehu Ali's short story "The Prophet of Zongo Street" reveals that he works at the General Post Office in Kumasi. Kumi is presented at the exposition of the story as clad in khaki trousers which are neatly ironed with a white long-sleeved shirt, for work. Kumi is a tall lanky handsome man who is always 'well-dressed' which from the perspective of most of the characters implies Western style tailored garbs. He is often found in a clean white shirt and a black tie with his neatly pressed khaki trousers. His shoes are black. His hair is neatly kept and he shaves every morning before stepping out. He comes across to the reader much unlike Lawyer Onyimdze in Kobina Sekyi's *The Blinkards*, who would wear the Ghanaian traditional *ntama* (cloth). The way he is presented with a keen focus on how he is attired presupposes a sense of superiority associated with that manner of dressing and a denigration of any alternative to this 'standard'. In the end though, Kumi transitions to his truly African Self by refusing to wear European clothing. In his transformed Self, he appears to be of the same mind and attitude as Lawyer Onyimdze in *The Blinkards*. These characters' choices with clothing support the view that seeks a return to African indigenous ways. Indeed, one of the hints that Aidoo's *Changes* seems to make, apart from the central relationship and love issues, is the changes Ghanaians might make in their choice of clothing.

At the very outset, the narrator in the short story leads the reader to ponder on the influence of foreign cultures precisely from Arabia and Europe, on Africa. The major character, Kumi, rises against the acculturation of Africa. In this work, then, Kumi represents a revolt against foreign intrusion and imposition. Some of the ways in which Kumi carries out his revolt include preaching against the foreigners using the African religion he has founded; and changing his mode of dressing. This latter act of subversion is replicated among some of the other characters as well in their effort to revolt against foreign cultural imposition. However, as a result of the power of foreigners on the community, the people have nurtured certain foreign conceptions about what it means for someone to be 'well-dressed'. Such a conception of appropriate attire at once excludes the likes of Lawyer Onyimdze in *The Blinkards*. Nevertheless, as

the story unfolds, Kumi's dress pattern eventually presents a great contrast from what it initially was at the beginning of the narrative. The narrator tells us that Kumi's previously neatly shaven face has suddenly given way to a thick heavy beard with his hair now curled into dreadlocks. In place of his neatly polished black pair of shoes, he is now barefoot and clad in a long white robe, with a red cotton belt around his thin waist. Earlier, as we hear from the narrator, Kumi is presented in some glistening fashion. But having lived in the community and dressed in this manner for a considerably reasonable amount of time, he begins a study of the history of Africa and comes to the conclusion that many things, including clothing, had gone wrong with the entire system upon contact with Arabia and the West. For this reason, and as an act of subversion somewhat in consonance with Lawyer Onyimzde's style, Kumi finally refuses to wear anything Western or Arabian. He thus goes about wearing his loose white cotton dress with a red belt to match and also carrying a wooden cross as he walks barefoot and preaches his new-found faith, the Afromaddiya, to the Zongo Street community in which he lives.

All of this shows that Kumi – initially 'well-dressed' but later donning traditional garb – speaks back to the foreign order, rejecting their ways. The whiteness of his gown probably signifies the sanctity, victory and purity of the African civilisation. The red belt on the waist could be said to signify the life, energy, and blood of the African culture, and perhaps the fury towards foreign dictates; while the cross he sports represents, as he himself argues, the black Christ who is not Caucasian but an African he refers to as Isama. These come through by means of the clothing choice he makes which represents a shift from the imposed foreign to the indigenous African culture. This choice of clothing also is Kumi's move to return to the sartorial practices of African religions and revamp the energy that was waning. This is to say that Kumi does not allow an external force in any foreign costume to suppress the local, although admittedly, the tension between the two still remains.

Yet, in the same collection of short stories, the story "Mallam Sile" features the central character named Mallam Sile who wears the same clothing every day. He has a white polyester *jalabia* on with a *wando* to match. He also has a loose pair of slacks with strings around his waist. Mallam Sile owns eight of these suits and on each day, he puts on a different one (152). This way, Ali presents Sile as a character who is so stuck to his Islamic faith that he expresses it loudly with his clothing via the *jalabia* he wears all day, all week. There is nothing of the Ghanaian or other African costume that Mallam Sile thinks is befitting for him. Instead, Mallam Sile has totally put Ghana and Africa behind so that, except for his unclothed Self, which in Yeats' terms is Sile's biological Africanness, his clothing only advertises Arabia and not Africa in any way. By representing the character in this manner, Ali, the writer, distinguishes between Sile's identity which is original to Africa but has been submerged and the Muslim Arabian identity which is advertised as the preferred identity. Also, Sile's perpetually shaven head was never seen without his white embroidered

Mecca hat – worn by highly devout Muslims. This is another contrast that Ali presents using Arabian culture as the influencer of Mallam Sile and his other Muslim folk in the text. Represented in this way, it is evident that Sile has fully relegated his African Self, replacing it with the borrowed Arabian/Muslim identity. He does this, principally, through his choice of clothing.

Two Thousand Seasons and Fragments

At the centre of Armah's novel *Two Thousand Seasons* is the history of Africa's contact with Arabia and the West. The text bemoans the unfortunate contacts which have brought in their wake a movement away from what he calls the 'way' of the African. In the narrative, this predicament is already anticipated by the spirit Anoa who states that Africa would experience exactly this. One of the striking outcomes of this encounter is the impact it has on clothing within the African culture. In reference to this, Armah's plural voiced narrator notes that, as elements of their civilisation, Africans engaged in all kinds of occupations including fishing, construction, carving, blacksmithing, leatherwork, medicine, oral literature, clay work, music and sewing garments. According to the narrator, these activities were carried out by the indigenous people in good times during the precolonial times (143). However, clothing, one of the elements that gave African people employment, later became a symbol of deceit and cunning of the colonisers towards the indigenes. As the narrator states, the "veils of the first initiation, the second initiation and the third, all these veils hid parts of the truth from [them]. It was not till the veil of the final initiation had been torn – a terrible tearing – that understanding broke [their] violated soul" (145). Captured so vividly, the repetitive use of the veil, a clothing image, is probably one of Armah's most adept ways of warning against the intensity of the coloniser's desire to blindfold the indigenes and get them to ignore their culture for foreign ones. The attempt by the foreigners to 'veil' the very fabric of the African identity on clothing alone reveals the extent to which they value their own culture as privileged over that of the African, which is better to be 'hidden' away.

Besides, the coloniser tried to make their veils attractive by making a strong claim for their utility in other ways: "One white destroyer, asked about the veils, said they kept insects and diseases away when the white slept outside their rooms on the ship, something they did often because to them this place was unbearably hot" (174). While the foreigners argue that the veil is excellent for keeping off insects and flies, they actually 'veil' its true purpose of supplanting African cultural identities. In the same vein, the narrator reveals that the foreigners gave the chiefs and the people many clothing items and accessories, including jewels, bangles, and anklets of a rare kind, which attracted their attention to the neglect of their own African wear. Having been gripped by the glitter of the gifts, the indigenes get swayed, and blindly accept them. They immediately compare these gifts to their very own indigenous

clothing and accessories, and at once demonstrate a preference for the foreign gifts, perhaps due to their exotic appeal.

In contrast to this gullible attitude described above, we find that Baako the central character of Armah's *Fragments* presents a completely different attitude. When he returns from his study abroad, he is expected to dress in ways that his Ghanaian community deems befitting of a 'been-to' scholar. However, Baako is not in any way inclined to live up to these expectations, and he returns home in what is generally considered very simple clothing. During occasions where he is expected (specifically by his own society) to display even a bit of flamboyance, Baako refuses to do so. Therefore, his mother states: "I wish you had brought a tux, or at least a suit, though. It would have been so fine". To this he responds, "I'm not an ape" (144). While his mother is shocked by his response, Baako remains unyielding in his choice of simple and befitting African clothing, as he insists: "Why else would I wear tuxes and suits in this warm country except to play monkey to the white man?" (145). Although Baako's argument is sound and should readily convince his mother, in spite of his entrenched position, his mother equally refuses to accept his stance and retorts that for a "special ceremony like this", it would have been worth it if Baako caved in and rather wore some Western garb. From her insistence that Baako conforms to their societal standards, it becomes evident the extent to which the external forces of colonialism and its 'post' effect have hugely impacted Ghanaian society, giving rise to standards by which a certain class of people are simply expected to dress.

In his obstinate opposition to such preposterous 'standards', Baako seizes the occasion to educate his mother on the appropriate use of clothing, especially regarding those that are not naturally, culturally African, and are unfit for the weather. He insists on not allowing any foreign 'clothes to wear him' and rebuffs: "I suppose your sacred ancestors laid down the word that we should sweat in stupid suits and tuxes for such ceremonies. Too bad. I'm going to wear clothes that won't choke me" (145). Hurt by his snub, Baako's mother counters that she is only considering what is best for him (145). This extensive interaction reveals the stark difference in views between mother and son, where the mother believes that the best is foreign clothing. Nevertheless, Baako's unrelenting disdain for the community's wrongful adherence to Western clothing standards contends that it is wiser to prefer clothing that Africans were evolved with in response to their climate, and to reject the Western ones that only make them feel uncomfortable. This counterbalance to the Western-centred position held by Baako's mother suggests that clothing norms are tied to specific cultures. According to a study conducted by Tara Smith (2020), a community called the *Satmar* sticks to some very strict clothing patterns or codes in order to tell themselves apart from outsiders. In this community, women shave their heads and wear wigs, stockings and conservative clothing, while the men curate *payots*, or chin-length sidelocks in their hair, and wear suits and *shtrreimels* (fur hats) (Smith 245). As Smith observes, this gives a clear distinction

between what women and men should wear. While Smith's study concludes that there might be cultural underpinnings guiding the social dress code, in *Fragments*, the pressure to conform appears to be driven by the psychological, which, rather capricious in nature, demands that Baako conforms to a socially-accepted standard of dressing expected of a highly educated man as himself.

The Marriage of Anansewa

Drawing from my earlier analysis on the cultural versus the psychological bases for dress attitudes, I extend a similar argument to my reading of Efua Sutherland's play *The Marriage of Anansewa* (1967). From this perspective, I argue that Sutherland explores the socio-economic and cultural hardships that influence the decisions people make in the postcolonial space of the Akan community of Ghana. The play features Ananse, the main character, using his marriageable daughter to attract the attention of prominent chiefs in the community. While each of these chiefs, namely Chief of Sapa, Togbe Klu IV, Chief of the Mines and Chief-Who-Is-Chief, is intent on courting and winning the love of the young lady, Anansewa, her father is secretly conspiring to swindle them of their wealth. Ananse comes up with an elaborate plan which requires that the chiefs present to Anansewa through him their cash, jewellery, drinks and clothing. Keen on publicly displaying their capabilities and the love they profess for the young girl, the chiefs themselves get caught in a contest of wealth. At the end of this contest, Chief-Who-Is-Chief wins the right of betrothal to Anansewa because he accepts full responsibility for what, unknown to him, is only a fake funeral for Anansewa whom he considers his wife already. In this play of deception, which is also a mockery of the chiefs' gullibility, greed and corrupt inclination, my focus is centred on the role of clothing in portraying issues of identity, culture and power. As Ananse plots to swindle the chiefs, he comes up with the idea that he needs to make them see him as a very important person too who is of a similar social status to them. To achieve this, he plans to purchase and adorn himself in expensive foreign clothing:

I'm heading for town on a buying spree,
I'll be seen with the best of spenders,
And when I return expect me to bring
The latest clothing in town
The latest suit in town. (33)

Ananse is seen here to be going for what he calls the latest clothing in town, which is symbolised by a suit, representing a taste for Western clothing. This preference appears to have been influenced by the colonial mentality that anything from the West is of superior value to African goods, and that the ability of a person to acquire and use these foreign goods will ascribe unto such a user the stature of superiority. On the other hand, Aya, the mother of Ananse, who holds fast the traditions of her ancestors, is fretful about her son's

decision to publicly flaunt his daughter Anansewa in splendour when the latter has already become a mature woman. When Aya is first introduced, she is presented as someone who is dressed in a magnificent style as to be compared to one from an old photograph. She speaks: “People of Nanka! I’m going in reverse for you to watch and rejoice. My clothes are going to fade again, my blouse will get ragged enough for my breast to flap through to give you reason to mock me. I knew it would not satisfy you if I didn’t remain in rags to the end of my life” (63). There is also the mention of him sending his cloth of silk, his *kente* from a renowned setting called Bonwire, and his *dumas* cotton cloth, asking that these be used to dress the intended lady’s bed for her (78). All of these happen so that the clothing will communicate the love message to the intended. This way, the clothing is ‘wearing’ the human. The other underlying message is that the wearers have gone beyond merely covering themselves to using clothes to show (off) their social statuses. The African tradition has been elevated here to show that it is still relevant for important contexts of this kind.

The Clothes of Nakedness

The Clothes of Nakedness (1998) by Benjamin Kwakye is a novel which addresses the divide between the rich and the poor in postcolonial Ghanaian society. The poor people depicted in this text are seen as having to endure the difficulties in the country, as they do menial jobs and remain in servitude to those in authority. Among Kwakye’s main characters are Gabriel Bukari, Bukari’s wife Fati, and Mystique Mysterious, a corrupt rich man whose name represents the reality of his dealings with the poor whom he exploits to his advantage. The story is set in an area where there is a sharp contrast in the infrastructure and living standards of their respective residences. The neighbouring residences are the rich Kanda settlement contrasted with the poor dilapidated Nima settlement in the Ghanaian capital city of Accra.

The paradox in the title of Kwakye’s *The Clothes of Nakedness* cautions against being hoodwinked by empty promises. Therefore, if any penniless person promises you the skies, it is important to first pay attention to that person’s economic worth. This caution is largely drawn from a proverb among the Akan people of Ghana which posits that it is possible to determine how much a person is worth by regarding the quality of their clothes. As the proverb goes, ‘Kwatserkwa se obema wo tam a, tsie ne dzin’. This may be translated into: ‘if the nude promises you clothing, you must first listen to their name’. This proverb shows the importance of clothing in communicating the identity of the wearer rather than implying any way/s in which he or she may impact on the clothing they wear. Therefore, when the characters put on clothing or are depicted without sufficient covering of clothing, they reveal messages not only of themselves but also of those who look at them.

For instance, the character Fati is depicted as being pretty poor. However, when she enters her rather small home and sees the supine body of

her sleeping son with his upper torso bare because the cloth he had used as a covering had slipped to his waist, she is filled with love. This sentimentalism stems from a sense of satisfaction that in spite of their destitute conditions and the difficulties they have endured she has been able to ensure that her young son does not catch a cold or fall sick as a result of being naked. In this way, she is able to avoid spending money that she already lacks on hospital treatments. Thus, the image of the scanty cover cloth on her son becomes a trope that reveals more about the character and her life of frugality. In sharp contrast to this picture of lack and thrift, the narrator depicts the central character, Mystique Mysterious, as a vain person who displays his wealth through his clothing and other related vanities. This mysterious character is all over the place showing off his ill-gotten wealth and spending it in equally ill-intended ways:

Mystique Mysterious drew up nearby in a bright red Mercedes Benz. He stepped out of the car and approached them, dressed as always in an expensive dark suit, flashy shirt and shades. This evidence of his wealth aroused the admiration of the other men, but also their resentment. None of them could afford smart clothing. (73)

It would be gleaned from this depiction that clothes, as displayed here by Mystique Mysterious, has become a symbol of oppression, greed, vanity and discrimination. In line with this observation, Nina Felshin (1995) notes that “as a familiar presence in figurative arts, clothing has functioned as both formal and iconographical evidence and as a signifier of class and status” (20). This assertion rings true for the vain Mystique Mysterious who appears to stand out in a class of his own and who also uses his dressing to affirm his social status. A similar confirmation of this is also evident in *Fragments* and *The Marriage of Anansewa* which I have discussed earlier. In these other stories, clothing represents a show of pomp and pageantry in most of the characters’ choices, especially in relation to regalia from the West. In effect, the analyses have revealed that clothing is essential to deciphering information about characters, especially those that are particularly interested in appealing to the acquired Western standards of their communities.

Conclusion

All the characters’ choice of clothing has a lot to show about themselves, either as individuals or as members of their societies. A lot of them simply attempt to meet the pressures of society. As a result of this, it is not they, the Ghanaian characters who necessarily wear the clothes (that is to say, give the clothes meaning), but the *clothes* that wear them (that is to say, give the characters meaning) because the society within which they find themselves dictates what they can wear and what they cannot. Some individual characters at a particular moment in their developments decide, in their epiphanic periods, to change

their choice of clothing for intellectual reasons, and those bordering on revulsion in many instances. Some also wear clothes to show how important their social status is, whereas others wear particular clothes to meet their professional calling. Even the reverse may be the case. What we can garner from all this is the position that when we look at the characters discussed, we find that their choice of clothing comes with a myriad of reasons but, in the end, the influence of the foreign holds more sway over them than the local does. The selected Ghanaian fictional works have revealed that the characters do not just wear clothes to cover their nakedness and keep them warm but on metaphorical and paradoxical levels, they do so to expose their 'naked' cultural identities and the varied responses to them. It, therefore, emerges that the characters put a lot of meaning into making and wearing fabric. The meanings they embed in the clothing finally define them and portray their identities at a variety of occasions. Finally, one may conclude that, except for a few characters like Armah's Baako, Ali's Kumi and Sekyi's Lawyer Onyimzde, most of the characters analysed here tend to yield to a preference for foreign clothing to support the claim that, largely due to Western (colonial) and Arabian influences, the majority of the indigenous characters tend to admire foreign standards in their choice of clothing. They either adopt a strict adherence to the demands of foreign clothing or they make a hybrid choice to fuse the foreign and the traditional. By this, rather than resisting or promoting their very own, they set up indigenous clothing norms to cave in to imposed foreign clothing codes.

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