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AN EVALUATION OF SELECTED AFRICAN CULTURAL VALUES IN EFO KƆDJO MAWUGBE'S *IN THE CHEST OF A WOMAN* AND MARIAMA BÂ'S *SO LONG A LETTER*

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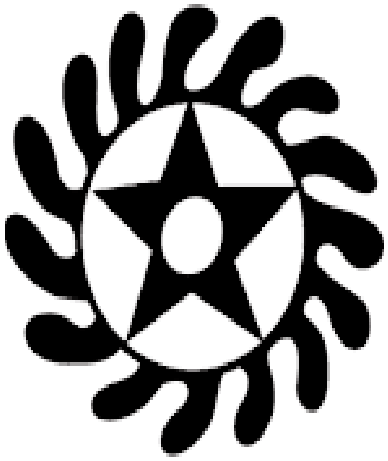

ABSTRACT

Literature serves as a vital platform for expressing the concerns and values of society. As such, culture plays a central role in literary works, since authors are often influenced, both directly and indirectly, by the societal contexts in which they are nurtured. At the same time, literature can shape culture by critiquing social practices or suggesting new directions for societal development. This paper examines selected cultural issues presented in Efo Kɔdjo Mawugbe's *In the Chest of a Woman* (2008) and Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (2004), using frame analysis as a theoretical lens. The central argument is that, because culture is inherently dynamic, outdated or harmful cultural norms must be critically reassessed to promote a more equitable and functional society. The study concludes that literature should not be viewed merely as entertainment or academic material, but as a powerful tool for social transformation.

KEYWORDS

Culture, frame analysis, gender expectations

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Introduction

Culture is a central theme in this paper; therefore, it is essential to first establish a clear understanding of the concept. Bello defines culture as the entirety of a people's way of life, developed in response to the challenges of their environment. It encompasses the social, political, economic, aesthetic, and religious norms that provide meaning and direction to a community, ultimately distinguishing it from others. This definition highlights the adaptive nature of culture; thus, it is shaped by the specific needs of a group and, importantly, subject to change when it no longer serves its intended purpose (189).

Etuk describes culture as a comprehensive way of life that encompasses, among other elements, how people perceive themselves and the world around them, their worldview. It involves the systems they create to organize their lives and ensure their survival (13). This definition emphasizes culture's critical role as a tool for human survival. However, for culture to effectively fulfill this role, it must not remain static. Continuous evaluation and adaptation are necessary; passing it down unchanged from generation to generation may render it obsolete in the face of new societal realities. Peter Sarpong, in his work, *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture*, refers to culture as

> The integrated sum-total of behavior traits that have been learned and have not only been manifested and shared by members of a society but have been passed on from one generation to another in an uninterrupted succession. It is important to note that culture is learned and that it does not depend on inborn instincts or reflexes or any other biologically inherited forms (viii).

Sarpong's definition emphasizes the continuous transmission of culture across generations. However, this paper argues that if such uninterrupted cultural transmission is intended to help a people respond to the unique challenges of their environment, as asserted by Bello, and ensure their survival, as Etuk maintains, then culture must be periodically re-evaluated and adapted to align with contemporary needs. Sarpong also highlights that culture is learned, which implies that elements of culture can be unlearned and relearned in response to changing societal demands. In line with this, (Steger, 8) asserts that culture is inherently dynamic and evolves. As culture transforms, so too does society. Social change, according to Nukunya (2014), often results from the interaction between traditional, indigenous elements and internal or external forces of change. Therefore, change is not only inevitable but also a fundamental characteristic of culture. Sarpong reinforces this view in the following statement:

> The force of social change in Africa in general and Ghana in particular is such that no institutions or patterns of ideas can remain the same for all the people in one society or for different communities of that society. For culture is dynamic, never static, and it will be a mistake to suggest or hope that there has not been any deviation from the status quo. (vii).

Literature serves as a powerful tool for examining and critiquing cultural values. Agyekum describes literature as a reflection of life experiences and worldly realities, expressed through linguistic creativity and imagination (1-2). It provides individuals with the space to pause, reflect, and engage critically with the human condition. Similarly, in the introduction of Quayson's

Calibrations: Reading for the social, he emphasizes, the reciprocal relationship between literature and society, noting that literature not only mirrors social realities but also actively shapes them by interrogating prevailing norms, values, and power structures.

It is clear that there is an intrinsic connection between culture and literature; literary works are not only products of the cultures from which they emerge but also reflective commentaries on those cultures. As such, literature bears both the responsibility and the unique privilege of evaluating and critiquing cultural practices, particularly those that may no longer serve the evolving needs of society. Nukunya (2003), in *Tradition and Change*, highlights that cultural practices are not static; they shift in response to the context and experiences of the people who uphold them. Therefore, for a culture to remain relevant and beneficial, its elements must be thoughtfully examined before being passed on to future generations. This critical evaluation helps prevent the indiscriminate transmission of outdated or harmful practices under the guise of cultural preservation. After all, what value does culture offer if it blindly perpetuates traditions that no longer align with the realities and aspirations of the present generation? Nanbigne underscores the transformative potential of literature by asserting that "literature in any society serves both as an indicator of change and an arena where the change can occur." In this light, literature becomes a dynamic space where cultural reimagining takes place, a platform where society can reflect, reform, and renew itself (22).

The reflective and transformative power of literature is evident in both *So Long a Letter* by Mariama Bâ and *In the Chest of a Woman* by Efo Kɔdjo Mawugbe. Through their narratives, both authors challenge dominant cultural ideologies, particularly those related to gender roles, power, and social expectations. Bâ uses the intimate format of a personal letter or the epistolary form to critique the emotional and societal consequences of polygamy and the marginalization of women in Senegalese society. Her protagonist's reflections serve not only as a personal coping mechanism but also as a broader commentary on the urgent need for cultural reform. Similarly, Mawugbe's play confronts entrenched patriarchal norms by re-imagining leadership through a female protagonist disguised as a male heir. By blending dramatic irony with symbolic action, the play critiques rigid gender constructs and proposes a more inclusive vision of power and identity.

This paper aims to explore how *In the Chest of a Woman* and *So Long a Letter* critically engage with and evaluate various aspects of society. By selecting texts written by authors from different African countries, the study underscores the universality of certain cultural issues across the continent. These challenges are not confined to a single national or ethnic context but are embedded within diverse cultural frameworks, reinforcing the need for critical examination. The chosen texts were deliberately selected for their broad thematic relevance, as they address concerns that cut across generational, educational, gender, and religious lines, touching the lives of the young and old, the educated and uneducated, men and women, as well as traditionalists and adherents of Islam.

Literature Review

Scholarly discussions on *In the Chest of a Woman* and *So Long a Letter* have largely centered on feminist themes, particularly the critique of male hegemony within African cultural contexts. Lare examines how traditional African customs, reinforced by patriarchal structures, deprive women of identity and undermine their well-being. The study argues that patriarchy not only obstructs female

emancipation but also perpetuates the marginalization and oppression of women (103). Similarly, Abdoulaye identifies Mariama Bâ as a prominent voice among post-independence female writers who strongly advocate for women's rights within a landscape increasingly shaped by feminist ideologies. Bâ's commitment to women's welfare is evident in both *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song*, where she foregrounds the struggles and resilience of women in patriarchal societies (147).

Chrappa analyses *In the Chest of a Woman* by deconstructing kinship politics in Ghanaian leadership in relation to gender. This work advocates the need to devise radical approaches to deal with entrenched sexism currently existing in the royal and political system. The paper encourages unorthodox deviance to challenge gender oppression (53-55). Asiedu discussed the contradictions and assertions in *In the Chest of a Woman*. According to the author, Efo Kɔdjo seems to suggest that for a woman to become successful, she needs to exhibit the characteristics of males. In reference to Nana Yaa, one of the characters in the text (Asiedu 128) posits that, "it is almost as if she proclaims that to be a 'real woman' or demonstrate female power, a woman needs to match a male demonstration". She therefore makes the case that the play "is not a celebration of femininity but a ridiculing of feminine imitation of masculinity" (130).

Some scholars have also examined the representation of culture in *In the Chest of a Woman*. For example, Mensah et al. explore various cultural elements embedded in the play, including themes, settings, character names, and symbols. Their study commends Mawugbe's effort to incorporate and indigenize African cultural expressions within the dramatic framework (43-48). However, while the article successfully identifies these cultural features, it stops short of critically evaluating them. This descriptive approach appears to overlook the deeper purpose of the play, which, as suggested by the playwright himself, extends beyond mere cultural representation to include a critique of certain traditional norms and practices. In the words of the author:

> It is not just women I wanted to project. It's about some of our antiquated customs which do not aid our progress. We need to consider things which must change. Customs and traditions are made by men, and they can decide to change them. We need people who can say times have changed, and we must change with the times. That is my message (Asiedu, 2010: 125).

The literature review reveals that both authors highlight aspects of African culture that warrant critical reexamination. This essay argues that socialization, whether consciously or unconsciously, shapes the frameworks through which individuals perceive society and make decisions. However, as society evolves, these established frames must also adapt to encourage new perspectives and challenge longstanding practices that may hinder societal progress. By reassessing these cultural viewpoints, it becomes possible to move beyond outdated traditions and foster more equitable and progressive social structures.

Taken together, existing scholarship affirms the central role of literature in both preserving and challenging African cultural values. By situating *In the Chest of a Woman* and *So Long a Letter* within this critical landscape, this study builds on prior analyses while offering a focused examination of how these texts engage with evolving cultural and gender norms.

Conceptual Framework: Frame Analysis

The concept of "frame" which was first proposed by Goffman and later applied in literary studies has been employed by various scholars in differing contexts, necessitating some clarification. Broadly, there are three primary perspectives on framing. The first views frames as cognitive structures, mental templates that shape how individuals perceive and interpret reality. This understanding emphasizes the role of frames in organizing thought and guiding perception (Goffman 21). The second perspective connects frames to discourse, focusing on how they structure communication. In this context, Gamson et al. define a frame as a central organizing principle that holds together and gives coherence and meaning to a diverse array of symbols. Here, frames function as underlying structures within discourse that shape how texts are constructed. They also serve as interpretive tools used by audiences to decode and make sense of messages embedded in communication (384).

A third sense of the term, frame refers to higher-level cultural constructs. Frames are, in this sense, shared forms of understanding the world. They can be equated to social representations, to which Moscovici made an important contribution. He tells us that social representations are culture-specific. They are conventionalized by each society and attuned to its values. Social representations are also said to be prescriptive, that is, they impose themselves upon us with an irresistible force. This force is a combination of a structure which is present before we have even begun to think, and of a tradition which decrees *what* we should think. Knowledge is considered in relation to the local, social, cultural, and historical contexts in which it is considered and used (181-209). Fisher advances the concept of cultural frames as socio-culturally and cognitively generated patterns which help people to understand their world by shaping other forms of structural discourse. These frames become the angle through which meanings are made and actions taken(88-111). Observably, most people tend to be fixated on the way they see the world through such frames and make decisions which do not accommodate the changing notions and needs of people.

This paper adopts the third framing perspective, which emphasizes that individuals interpret the world and make decisions based on socially constructed representations of culture, representations that are shaped through the process of socialization. For example, societal perceptions of children and women often influence how decisions are made regarding their roles and capabilities. These perceptions, or frames, determine what is considered acceptable or possible for certain groups. However, the narratives in *So Long a Letter* and *In the Chest of a Woman* showcase characters who defy these limiting societal expectations, thereby demonstrating that such frames should not be regarded as fixed or absolute. These examples underscore the need to reconsider rigid cultural assumptions, as personal abilities are not inherently determined by age, gender, or biological makeup. As suggested by the third interpretation of framing, these social representations, deeply rooted in historical, local, and cultural contexts, must evolve in response to the shifting ideas, aspirations, and realities of contemporary society. Furthermore, theoretical approaches such as frame analysis offer valuable tools for interpreting how cultural narratives are constructed, reinforced, or subverted in literature. This framework allows for an exploration of how characters are positioned within specific cultural frames and how shifts in those frames can signal broader social critiques.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach rooted in literary analysis, with a specific focus on frame analysis as the guiding theoretical framework. Frame analysis is concerned with how individuals and societies interpret and give meaning to experiences. In literary studies, frame analysis helps unpack how texts construct, reinforce, or challenge social and cultural narratives. It is particularly useful for examining how characters are positioned within certain ideological frameworks and how authors manipulate those frames to convey critique or promote change. In the context of this study, frame analysis is employed to examine how cultural values, particularly those relating to gender roles, tradition, and societal expectations, are portrayed in Efo Kɔdjo Mawugbe's *In the Chest of a Woman* and Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*. Both texts are analyzed as reflective and critical representations of African societies navigating the tensions between tradition and modernity.

The analysis begins with close textual reading to identify narrative structures, character development, and thematic concerns. Key cultural frames, such as patriarchal authority, female agency, and communal identity, are identified and examined in terms of how they are upheld or contested by the characters and plot developments. For *So Long a Letter*, the epistolary format is also considered a framing device that shapes the reader's access to the protagonist's inner world and social commentary. In *In the Chest of a Woman*, attention is paid to dramatic techniques, dialogue, and symbolic elements that reveal cultural contradictions and aspirations. Secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, critical essays, and books on African literature and gender studies, support the primary analysis. These sources help contextualize the texts within broader scholarly debates and highlight how cultural values are treated across different African literary traditions. Ultimately, this methodological approach enables a nuanced exploration of how literature functions not only as a mirror of cultural values but also as an active agent in critiquing and reshaping them.

An Evaluation of Selected African Practices in the Chosen Texts

In *In the Chest of a Woman*, Efo Kɔdjo Mawugbe explores the tension between cultural expectations and individual ambition through the story of a woman who disguises her daughter as a male heir to ascend the throne, a role traditionally reserved for men. The cultural frame of patriarchal inheritance is central to the conflict. Mawugbe disrupts this frame by presenting a female character who challenges the rigid gender hierarchy that denies women access to political power. In the text, the Queen Mother, on her dying bed, decided to allocate the kingship to her children. As custom demands, she gave the paramountcy to her youngest child, who is a male, and gave three townships to the eldest child, who is a female. Below is a conversation between the Queen Mother and her daughter, Nana Yaa.

> Queen Mother: My daughter Yaa Serwaa,
> Nana Yaa: Yes, Mother.
> Queen Mother: Sit on my left. Take my hand. (She does so)
> Give me the sword. (The sword is placed in her hand)
> Take this sword. (Nana takes it)
> To you, Yaa Serwaa, I bequeath the following townships:
> Brengo, Kyeremfaso, and Anobeng

> And you, my son, sit on my right
> Take this sword
> To you, I give this whole Ebusa Kingdom and everything within it (Mawugbe 18).

This seemingly normal tradition was vehemently rejected by Nana Yaa, who said that "I am the elder child. Customarily, it is I who must succeed you and not my younger brother." Nana Yaa was quickly reminded by an elder that, "Don't forget he is a boy and you a girl". Nana Yaa then responded to the elder's comment by asking, "and but who says the chieftaincy stool is made for only the hard buttocks of men?" (18).

The author's reference to "hard buttocks" can be regarded as a metaphor to describe the qualities of a leader. Thus, a leader is supposed to be resilient, courageous, and have emotional intelligence, among others. As the plot unfolds, the leaders reject Nana Yaa's request, by giving the paramountcy to the younger Brother, Kwaku Duah. This did not deter Nana Yaa's resolve, as she disguises her daughter as a boy, named, Owusu Agyemang, just to make her qualify to inherit the paramountcy when the time is due. Nana Yaa successfully trains her daughter to qualify for the paramountcy. When the time was ripe, she was brought to her uncle in preparation for her rulership. Owusu Agyemang exhibited all it takes to have a "hard buttock". She was courageous, she had emotional intelligence, and did not show any trace of fear or weakness. Through dialogue and dramatic irony, the play questions the fairness and relevance of gender-based leadership roles, suggesting that competence, not gender, should be the determining factor for leadership.

The practice of basing people's qualifications on their gender and not their ability is an issue that deserves serious attention. This is important because taking an entrenched position on how leadership positions are gendered can adversely affect both genders. This gendered notion of leadership also extends to occupations. For instance, men who perform jobs deemed as mostly for females are ridiculed and, in some cases, compelled to perform roles deemed to befitting males. These societal pressures and categorizations lead people into areas where they might not be able to give their best. I witnessed a situation on the University of Cape Coast campus where a group of male nursing students wearing their uniforms were hooted at and ridiculed as, *hoo bema nurse* (shame unto you, male nurse). This is due to the assumption that males are better off as medical doctors and females as nurses. An informal conversation with a respondent on this issue revealed that he had better medical treatment from male nurses than from the female ones he encountered. Likewise, some female medical doctors are on top of their game. These examples clearly show that society should do away with these biological stereotypes and allow people to operate based on their abilities and interests. It is essential to note that since societies evolve, certain cultural practices, particularly those that limit individual agency or reinforce inequality, become subjects of scrutiny.

Closely related to the gendered notions of leadership is the focus on females' appearance or beauty rather than their mental abilities and other contributions they could offer to society. This perception is the basis for comments such as, "a woman should be seen not heard". In the Second Leg of the play, a conversation between two court attendants shows their surprise at the beauty of Owusu Agyemang, who was thought to be a man. "Akosua: Handsome, you say. He is such a beautiful boy. What is such feminine beauty doing in a body like that?" (39). This expectation of females' beauty would have been glossed over and regarded as an issue that does not deserve

attention if one fails to consider what such expectations lead to. There are cases of females making every effort to meet society's expectations of beauty. Some go through surgeries to make up their bodies just to meet these societal expectations. This is not a mere assumption, as (Graphic Online) confirms this. In a report with the headline, *Cosmetic Surgeries on the Rise*, a Surgeon, Dr. Kwasi Debra, notes that,

> Historically, women of African extraction are recognized the world over for having naturally voluptuous bodies. Women with such bodies are often hailed for having desired shapes which are described as a 'Coca-Cola shape', 'hourglass' or a guitar shape. However, it appears many of those who do not have such features are now flocking in droves to have their features enhanced (https://www.graphic.com.gh).

According to the surgeon, these cosmetic surgeries are associated with some risks. Apart from that, these surgeries also come with a high cost. The surgeon mentions the charge to be anywhere from about $5,000. This suggests the extent to which societal expectations have led people to spend money on their bodies, not for medical attention but to fit into societal expectations of beauty. Women who would have wished to meet up with such expectations but cannot afford the procedure will feel less of a woman, and this can affect their psychological well-being. Another concern with this expectation is that some women think the only thing they have is their beauty. This perception gives rise to comments such as a woman must use what she has (beauty or body) to get what she doesn't have. By this, some women engage in transactional sex or prostitution in return for material gains. Issues of sex for grades are very prevalent in institutions of higher learning. Studies, such as Adesoji et. al. (2023), Smart (2023), and Ladebo (2003), confirm the prevalence of sexual harassment in academic institutions. It should be noted that, in some cases, some females present themselves or force themselves onto the male lecturers to gain favors. Smart, for instance, writes that, "a sixteen-year-old female student who allows herself to be ravished by her lecturer may not do it for sexual satisfaction. For her, good grades in exchange for her action is of more benefit" (178). With this in mind, some women consider their bodies as assets which they can use in ways to lure men to their advantage. For instance, as part of the conversations between the two court attendants on how they can win the attention of the "Prince", Akosua said, "Oh how I wish I were a young girl. I shall go before the Prince, smiling and do obeisance before him. I wish I were a young girl. I would pay anything to dance with him. I would give myself to him just for his smiles" (40). The notion that the woman only has her body to offer and not her intellect, or that all the things that the body is exchanged for can only be given by a man, and the woman cannot make personal efforts to get them, is highly problematic. Due to the focus on the female body, some of the men also extend sexual advances to females on the basis that the female body is there to satisfy their sexual desires.

There are various notions that arise from this single frame of focusing on women's beauty. Apart from the sexual advances and women trying to keep up with societal expectations by making up, this perception might be a contributory factor to the reasons why female education was not given so much attention. In *So Long a Letter*, women were discouraged from venturing into education and pursuing white collar jobs. Some of the reasons for this are the socially defined roles, expectations, and images that society has about females. Commenting on this, one of Ramatoulaye's letters in *So Long a Letter* recounts some of the comments about females' education. "Because, being the first pioneers of the promotion of African women, there were very

few of us…Men will call us scatter-brained. Others labelled us devils… school turns our girls into devils who lure our men from the right path" (14-17). One of the societal expectations that a female's education might challenge and for which a female's education might not be encouraged is that schooling and self-employment give the female independence and confidence to challenge decisions that may not augur well with her and make decisions for her physical, emotional, and social being. This is expressed in *So Long a Letter* when Aissatou's husband, Mawdo, married a second wife. This placed Aissatou in a distress to take care of the children alone and cope with the emotional strain of managing her marriage with a co-wife. Contrary to societal expectations to endure emotional abuse, the friend recounted that she had "the surprising courage to take her life into her own hands. Books knit generations together in the same continuing efforts that lead to progress. They enabled you to better yourself. What society refused you, they granted" (32). Highlighting the essence of education and independence for women, Bâ adds that,

> Let us recall our school… let us hear the walls of our schools come to life with the intensity of our study. To lift us out of the bog of tradition, superstition, and custom, to make us appreciate a multitude of civilisations without renouncing our own, to raise our vision of the world, cultivate, moral values in us. Thus, free from frustrating taboos and capable now of discernment (15-16).

It will be a great disservice to society to continue discouraging the female child from pursuing higher learning. It will be beneficial to harness the intellectual and other abilities of females for the benefit of the female, her family, and society. Yet another societal expectation of women, which might be the reason why "too much education" is discouraged, is the females' parental, occupational, and conjugal roles. As Oppong notes:

> The woman's parental or maternal role focuses attention on women's activities as bearers, nurses, and socializers of the next generation. Norms for maternal behaviour include privately held or openly expressed presumptions about what mothers should or ought to do, including the idea that mothers of small children should stay at home and look after them and not try to relegate responsibility to anyone (15).

The role of women as nurses and caregivers has been expressed by Bâ in a way that has not received scholarly attention. From the novel, it has been observed that one of the reasons why Mawdo was forced by his mother to marry a second and younger wife is that the mother needed someone to take care of her in her old age to make up for the vacuum created by her children's marriages. This she expressed thus, "I need a child beside me,' she said to fill my heart. I want this child to be both my legs and my right arm. I am growing old. I will make of this child another me. Since the marriage of my children, the house has been empty" (28). This agenda is achieved in the novel as young Nabou, Mawdo's second wife, was living with her mother-in-law. With this example, Bâ draws attention to an aspect of social welfare, which is aged care. One of the gender roles performed by women is kin care. It is expected that female children or relatives will stay with the aged and take care of their cleanliness and prepare their meals, while the males provide the financial resources. Hitherto, the traditional extended family system in Africa has been crafted in a way to take care of the needs of all its members. Nursing mothers had the benefit of other elderly women who were available to support them with taking care of the mother and continue to support them with the socialization of the children. The proverb, when an elder helps a child to grow their

tooth, a child also helps the elder to lose his/her tooth corroborates this practice. The young people also take care of the needs of the elderly. Orphans had other elderly people who took care of their needs. These social structures have been disrupted by urbanization, formal education, high economic demands, and globalization, which have engaged most women who used to stay at home as housewives to work outside the home. Boateng asserts that another aspect of the changing family in Ghana is the role of women. In the past, women who were considered merely as fit to be housewives and not producers are now featuring prominently not only within the family, but in national development issues (1-4). These changes in social structures have given rise to daycares, orphanages, and aged homes. It is necessary and timely to encourage aged home care services, which will be handled by trained personnel with expertise. Due to societal dynamism, which has affected African social structure, some of the roles of individuals have changed. Society should therefore find ways to adapt to these changing roles and not be fixated on the traditional ways of care. African societies will continue to have challenges if pragmatic solutions are not made to move away from solely relying on informal ways of care to meet changing trends.

In *In the Chest of a Woman*, Efo Kɔdjo Mawugbe subtly highlights a form of care and communal responsibility that warrants closer attention. In the second act of the play, two women, Maame Akosua and Maame Adjoa, are introduced as court attendants. Their dialogue, "Adwoa: It's meals time and I must go and set the table for Daasebre. Akosua: I am going to fetch water for the Princess for her evening bath after meals" (44), reveals their roles in providing daily care and support within the royal household. This depiction suggests a network of women whose responsibilities extend beyond domestic chores to include safeguarding the well-being of royal family members. In one notable instance, after meals are served to the king's daughter and nephew, the king questions the attendants to ensure they had first tasted the food, demonstrating a system of trust and vigilance against potential threats. The exchange unfolds as follows:

> King: Who prepared the meal?
> Adwoa: Your majesty, it is Ekua Bema who did but we assisted her.
> King: What sort of meat was used for the soup?
> Adwoa: The smoked antelope thigh the hunters brought three days ago.
> King: Has the meal been tasted?
> Adwoa: Yes, my Lord, my colleagues here and I tasted it and we are still alive.
> King: Very well my children we can now eat
> (They begin to eat. Adwoa and the other attendants go to stand at the far corner).

From the conversation, Adwoa and the other attendants must taste the food to be sure it is wholesome before the royal family members can eat. The court attendants are therefore used as guinea pigs whose lives are used as an experiment to save or guarantee the lives of others. Thus, the lives of the royal family are presented as more important than those of the attendants. The practice is somehow reflective of the protective mechanisms offered royals and public (political) figures for whom some servants of the political authority are assigned to give their lives for those of such leaders whenever necessary. Alternatively, it draws attention to the practice of people releasing their children or dependents to serve as helpers for others. Sometimes the court attendants are there by custom or as war booty. Whatever the reason for their coming, there should not be any reason why one life can be treated as less important than another. Such treatment partly constitutes

modern slavery and needs to be condemned. Society should have policies that protect everyone, including the less privileged. These social policies should include terms and conditions that take into account the well-being and future safety of such individuals.

Mawugbe's *In the Chest of a Woman* also draws attention to a significant element within the traditional African political system— the role of the elderly woman, often referred to as *Abrewa*, who is consulted on matters that resist easy resolution. In the final act of the play, Awo, an octogenarian, intervenes at a pivotal moment that reshapes the narrative. Following the decision to execute Ekyaa for premarital pregnancy and Owusu for sitting on the judgment stool reserved for males, Awo's voice is heard from outside the palace walls: "I, Abrewanana, who have been listening to the proceedings from outside the palace walls, be allowed to say a word" (97). Her request is immediately met with resistance by Nana Oppong, the father of the accused, who retorts, "You are too old. What better contribution can you make to that which we have already made?" (97). Nana Oppong's dismissal reflects a broader patriarchal bias in African traditions, where the wisdom associated with old age is often reserved for men, while women's intellectual contributions are undervalued. This attitude is rooted in cultural stereotypes that portray women as lacking critical thought. Among the Ewe, for instance, the wife of *Ayiyi* (the trickster spider) is often named *funɔ*, meaning "sufferer," and frequently depicted as easily deceived. Similarly, an Nzema proverb states, *raalɛ ako ɛzɛne yɛɛ ze nrɛlɛbɛ a na tɛ ɔ ti ɔ*—"A woman's wisdom lies in her womb, not in her head" (Nyame & Tomekyin 231). Such narratives reinforce limiting frames that define women solely by their reproductive and domestic roles. Yet, the achievements of women in various spheres today challenge this outdated perspective. Intelligence and wisdom are not the preserve of any one gender or biological makeup. It is therefore essential to value the unique experiences and insights that individuals, regardless of gender, bring to the table. The symbolic exclusion of *Abrewa*, which is a symbolic representation of women's voices, from the decision-making space highlights a broader issue: the systemic sidelining of women's voices in critical societal deliberations. This practice must be challenged to ensure inclusive and balanced development.

As a woman, Abrewanana is attuned to the gendered injustices within the society she inhabits, and her intervention in the play powerfully reflects this awareness. She states: "A plea to you to name the father of that which you harbour in you. Whoever the man is must not be allowed to enjoy his life while you, your unborn baby, and your innocent niece go to meet sunset on your lives at sunrise" (99). This poignant remark exposes the double standards surrounding sexual morality, particularly the tendency to harshly punish women for premarital or extramarital relations while turning a blind eye to the male counterparts involved. The societal expectation that women remain chaste is not, in itself, the central issue; rather, it is the persistent silence and inaction regarding the responsibility of men that reinforces a dangerous imbalance. This silence creates a permissive environment in which men are neither held accountable nor discouraged from engaging in irresponsible sexual behavior, thereby contributing to the rise in unplanned pregnancies. A parallel example is found in Amma Darko's *The Housemaid*, where Kofi Akorti is reported to have impregnated twelve girls with no evident repercussions (30). Such narratives underscore the urgent need to interrogate and reform these skewed cultural expectations.

Furthermore, Mawugbe's *In the Chest of a Woman* draws attention to the place of women within the rhetorical and political structures of African societies. As Yankah notes, there has historically been a limitation on women's expressive power and public speech. He observes that,

"aside from gender-specific art forms where women have a monopoly, the historical tendency has leaned toward male domination. The restriction on women's expression, whether culturally or psychologically conditioned, appears to apply in most African countries" (68). While this observation reflects a widespread trend across the continent, the Akan sociopolitical system presents a notable deviation. Mawugbe's play, situated within the context of Akan culture, highlights this unique cultural nuance, particularly the significant role of women in royal and political affairs. This is exemplified in the character Awo's powerful intervention on page 99, quoted below.

> Abrewanana: My final request, which I make in the name of all women at this durbar and beyond, is a plea. A plea to you to name the father of that which you harbour in you. Whoever the man is must not be allowed to enjoy life while you and your unborn baby and your innocent niece go to meet sunset on your lives at sunrise.

This pivotal intervention significantly redirected the trajectory of the discussion, as it provided Ekyaa with the opportunity to identify Akwesi as the individual responsible for her pregnancy. The platform extended to Abrewanana, coupled with the considerable influence her contribution exerted, highlights the esteemed and authoritative role that elderly women occupy within Akan society. Yankah writes that within Akan traditional lore, the *aberewa* (old woman) is regarded as the embodiment of wisdom, oral history, and eloquence (70). Her voice is not only heard but also carries authority, especially in matters of justice and governance. Mawugbe's portrayal thus reclaims the space of female rhetoric in traditional political discourse and challenges broader assumptions about women's marginalization in African oral traditions.

Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* addresses deeply entrenched stereotypes surrounding women and marriage, particularly the societal belief that a woman's fulfillment is inextricably linked to her marital status. This is poignantly articulated by the protagonist, Ramatoulaye, who states, "Even though I understand your stand, even though I respect the choice of a liberated woman, I have never conceived of happiness outside marriage" (56). This mindset presents several challenges. Firstly, it socializes women to view marriage as the ultimate source of happiness and personal achievement, thereby marginalizing alternative life paths such as singlehood or professional fulfillment. Women who choose to remain unmarried or who prioritize personal growth and societal contribution are often undervalued or stigmatized.

Secondly, the overemphasis on marital identity pressures many women to remain in unhealthy or abusive relationships, fearing social condemnation or the loss of social status associated with divorce or separation. Through the intimate medium of a letter, Bâ provides Ramatoulaye with a reflective space to critique the patriarchal expectations placed upon women. Her narrative explores the emotional toll of polygamy, widowhood, and motherhood, revealing how cultural norms enforce female submission and self-sacrifice. While Ramatoulaye chooses not to remarry and remains within the bounds of her moral convictions, she simultaneously voices her discontent with the limited roles available to women, thus challenging the cultural frame that equates a woman's worth solely with her marital status.

The pressure exerted on Mawdo by his mother to marry a second wife highlights the intersection of cultural expectations and individual emotional well-being. Her assertion, "I will never get over it if you don't take her as a wife. Shame kills faster than disease" (0), underscores

the weight of familial and societal norms that prioritize honor and tradition over personal choice. The emotional toll of this pressure is revealed in Mawdo's visible distress: "For Mawdo, your departure has really shaken him. His sadness was clearly evident. When he spoke about you, the inflexions in his voice hardened" (33). Mawdo's compliance reflects the deeply rooted African cultural expectation of filial piety. Gyekye notes that in Africa, children are taught to be deferential and obedient to their parents, no matter the implications (86).

Polygyny, often viewed as a symbol of male privilege in various African cultures, as exemplified by proverbs such as the Luba saying, "To have one wife is to be one-eyed" (Gbotokuma11), and the Tsonga expression *Masindza ma rila ma ri manyingi* (Bracelets ring when they are many) (Mathumba 10), can, paradoxically, become a burden when it is transformed from an option into a societal expectation. In Mawdo's case, the supposed privilege of polygyny becomes a source of personal grief and inner conflict. Additionally, the masculine ideal that discourages men from openly expressing vulnerability, captured in the Akan phrase *Ɔbarima nsu* ("A man does not cry"), compounds this burden. This example illustrates that hegemonic masculinity, while often associated with power and authority, can also impose harmful emotional constraints on men, challenging the notion that cultural norms only disadvantage women.

A comparable illustration of male emotional constraint appears in *In the Chest of a Woman*, particularly in the character of Owusu Agyemang, who struggles silently with the weight of a long-held secret. Tasked with upholding the deception that places a girl on the throne under the guise of a boy, Owusu Agyemang endures internal turmoil without outward expression. 'His' silence is not only a personal burden but also a reflection of the broader cultural expectation that men must embody stoicism and emotional restraint in the face of complexity. This is evident in 'his' measured and cautious speech throughout the play, often choosing silence or indirect responses when confronted with moral dilemmas. 'His' internal conflict peaks when the consequences of the secret begin to unravel, yet 'he' remains bound by 'his' role, unable to voice his anguish freely.

Like Mawdo in *So Long a Letter*, Owusu Agyemang embodies the masculine ideal that discourages emotional vulnerability, reinforcing the idea that societal expectations of men can lead to psychological strain. Both characters, though situated in different cultural contexts, Senegalese Islamic society and Akan royalty, reveal how cultural norms around masculinity limit emotional expression and complicate personal autonomy. These portrayals challenge the notion that male characters are solely the benefactors of patriarchal systems and emphasize the need to reassess how cultural scripts affect both men and women. Another masculine role that needs to be reassessed is the role of men as providers. This cultural perception is expressed by Chimamanda in her book, *We Should All Be Feminists.* The author gave an example of an experience she had in Lagos, Nigeria, where she gave a tip to a man, and the man rather thanked her male friend who was with her in the car. As Chimamanda pointed out, "The man believed that whatever money I had ultimately came from Louis, because Louis is a man" (Adichie 11-12). Ampofo (2001: 199) writes that, "In the economic and social spheres, males are more frequently allotted tasks that involve leaving home and the emphasis in their training is on public accomplishments, while a girl's tasks are home-oriented". Bâ refers to how this gender frame or expectation can be detrimental to men. Aissatou recounts how her sisters in law comfortably enjoy their husbands' labor by being housewives who were looked after.

Some of my sisters-in-law did not envy my way of living at all. They saw me dashing around the house after a hard day at school. They appreciated their comfort, their peace of mind, their moments of leisure, and allowed themselves to be looked after by their husbands, who were crushed under their duties (Bâ 20). This societal perception is reinforced by Akan proverbs such as *Ɔbaa ho yɛ fɛ a, na ɛfiri ɔbarima* ("If a woman is beautiful, it is because of a man") and *Sika ne barima* ("Money is man") (Diabah & Amfo 188). Such expressions reflect a cultural mindset that equates masculinity with financial power and social dominance. Bâ's depiction of men being "crushed under their duties" highlights the emotional and psychological burden that rigid gender roles place on men, particularly in economically challenging times. The expectation that a man must be the primary provider creates undue pressure on those who are unemployed or financially struggling. Moreover, this cultural script limits both genders. Men are often expected to earn more or hold a higher status than their wives, a belief that restricts women's ambition and upward mobility, as they are frequently advised to temper their aspirations to avoid outpacing potential suitors. At the same time, men may avoid relationships with women of higher social or economic standing due to societal fears of emasculation or disrespect. These dynamics reveal that so-called male privileges in African masculinity often come with heavy responsibilities and societal expectations that can harm men's well-being. In line with the arguments of Mariwah et al. (2023), Diabah and Amfo (2018), and Kiyimba (2010), this paper supports the call for a critical re-evaluation of African masculinities. Such reflection is necessary to unearth the hidden costs behind cultural norms that appear to privilege men but, in practice, limit the emotional freedom and relational choices of both men and women.

Conclusion

This study has examined the portrayal and critique of selected African cultural values in Efo Kɔdjo Mawugbe's *In the Chest of a Woman* and Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*, using frame analysis as a lens to explore how both authors navigate the tensions between tradition and transformation. The analysis reveals that while culture is a crucial part of identity and societal cohesion, it must be continuously evaluated to ensure that it aligns with principles of justice, equity, and human dignity. Both texts offer important critiques of cultural values through narrative and dramatic techniques, challenging readers to reassess long-held norms. In both texts, gender emerges as a central theme, with the protagonists confronting and resisting the limitations imposed by patriarchal cultural norms. Mawugbe's *In the Chest of a Woman*, subverts cultural expectations through the character of the daughter, who embodies both male authority and female empathy, blurring the binary roles society assigns to gender. The deception, while morally ambiguous, is framed as a necessary strategy to expose the arbitrary nature of gender-based exclusion. By the end of the play, the cultural frame of leadership is redefined, not through open rebellion, but through subtle, strategic subversion. Mawugbe further challenges traditional gender roles through theatrical subversion and the reimagining of leadership. Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* also offers a deeply personal and reflective critique of the societal expectations placed on women. Both authors present their female characters as agents of change, whether through rebellion, reflection, or resilience, thereby reframing the cultural narratives surrounding womanhood and power in African contexts. Ultimately, this paper underscores the power of literature as more than a form of entertainment or academic inquiry. It is a transformative medium through which cultural values can be questioned, critiqued, and reshaped. As societies continue to evolve, literary works such as those examined

here serve as vital tools for dialogue and progressive change. They challenge readers not only to reflect on the past and present but also to envision a more inclusive and just future.

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Declaration: I declare that this manuscript has not been submitted elsewhere for publication.

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