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Full Length Paper

Women, Religion and Patriarchy in African Drama: A Feminist-Theological Analysis

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Abstract

African literature provides an important platform for examining the complex relationships among religion, culture, identity, and social transformation. This study explores the representation of Christianity, indigenous African spirituality, and postcolonial identity in African literary texts, with particular attention to how writers negotiate the tensions between traditional belief systems and Christian influences. Drawing on postcolonial theory and African religious perspectives, the study examines how literary representations of Christianity reflect the historical experiences of colonialism, cultural resistance, religious adaptation, and the continuing search for African identity. It considers the ways African writers challenge the assumption that Christianity and indigenous spirituality are necessarily incompatible, while highlighting the influence of colonial power relations on religious practices, cultural values, and literary expression. The study also examines how African literature functions as a critical space for reclaiming indigenous knowledge, interrogating imported religious ideologies, and negotiating the coexistence of different spiritual traditions. Through a qualitative interpretive approach to literary texts and relevant scholarship, the study contributes to discussions on postcolonial representation, African Christianity, and cultural identity. It argues that African literature offers valuable insights into the complexities of religious transformation and the continuing significance of indigenous spiritual traditions in contemporary African society.

Keywords: African literature, African Christianity, indigenous spirituality, postcolonialism, cultural identity, religious syncretism..

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INTRODUCTION

African drama has long served as an important cultural and intellectual space for interrogating the social institutions, belief systems, traditions, and power relations that shape African life. Within this dramatic tradition, the representation of women is particularly significant because questions of gender are frequently intertwined with marriage, family, sexuality, religion, customary authority, economic dependence, and communal expectations. The stage therefore becomes more than a site for entertainment; it becomes a space in which inherited assumptions about what women should be, how they should behave, whom they should marry, and what obligations they owe to family and community can be examined and contested. This is especially important in

African contexts, where religion, culture, and social organisation often intertwine. African women's theology has consequently emerged as a significant intellectual intervention because it places women's lived experiences at the centre of theological reflection and questions forms of religious and cultural interpretation that have historically privileged male experiences (Maseno; Phiri and Gunda).

The emergence of African women's theology is particularly relevant to a study of African drama because it provides a framework through which women's experiences of subordination can be examined without reducing African women to passive victims of either culture or religion. Masenya explains that feminist

theology developed partly in response to the exclusion of women from serious theological reflection and argues for interpretive approaches capable of addressing the experiences of Black and African women (Masenya). Similarly, African women's theology has been concerned with the emancipation of women and with the ways African cultural contexts shape women's experiences of spirituality, community, sacrifice, identity, and subordination (Maseno). Phiri and Gunda further observe that African women's theologies deliberately prioritise women's experiences in theological reflection, thereby challenging approaches in which male experience has traditionally been treated as universal. Such scholarship is important because it prevents the study of African religion and culture from assuming that women's experiences are identical to men's experiences or that religious traditions have only one uncontested meaning (Phiri and Gunda).

The question of patriarchy is central to this discussion. Patriarchy may be understood not simply as the presence of men in positions of authority but as a system of social relations in which power, decision-making, property, sexuality, family structures, and cultural legitimacy are disproportionately organised around male authority. In African contexts, however, patriarchy requires careful and historically sensitive analysis. It cannot be treated as a uniform system operating identically across the continent. Gunda's discussion of African women's theology demonstrates the importance of examining the intersections between precolonial, colonial, and Christian gender ideologies, as well as the continuities and discontinuities among different forms of patriarchy (Gunda). This perspective is particularly useful for literary analysis because African dramatists frequently represent tradition as partially oppressive and partially liberating. Instead, dramatic texts can reveal contradictions within cultural and religious systems, showing how the same community may provide women with identity, belonging, and spiritual meaning while simultaneously restricting their autonomy.

Feminist theology therefore provides a productive interpretive lens for examining the relationship between religion and patriarchy. Its importance lies in its capacity to question interpretations of religious texts, practices, institutions, and traditions that normalise women's subordination. Dreyer's study of feminist theology and patriarchal marriage, for example, demonstrates how a feminist hermeneutic of suspicion can expose the assumptions embedded in patriarchal understandings of marriage and women's identity (Dreyer). The method is particularly appropriate for dramatic literature because drama does not merely describe social structures; it dramatises them through characters, dialogue, conflict, ritual, action, and consequences. A feminist-theological reading can consequently ask not only what religious or cultural beliefs are represented in a play but also whose interests those beliefs serve, whose voices are authorised to interpret them, how women's bodies and choices are

regulated through them, and whether women can appropriate or resist those structures.

These concerns are particularly visible in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa* and Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*. Although written in different national and cultural contexts, both plays place women at the centre of conflicts involving marriage, social expectations, authority, sexuality, cultural values, and individual agency. Aidoo's *Anowa*, first published in 1970, presents a female protagonist whose refusal to conform easily to prescribed expectations makes her an important figure for examining gender and social authority in African drama. Scholarship on the play has already established the significance of its treatment of femininity and gender relations. Djimet and Koussouhon, for example, demonstrate that *Anowa* challenges conventional literary representations of women by presenting a female character who possesses verbal and intellectual agency rather than functioning merely as an object within a male-dominated narrative (Djimet and Koussouhon). Their analysis is significant to the present study because it demonstrates that Aidoo's dramatic construction of *Anowa* can be read as a challenge to conventional gender relations. Al-Khafaji similarly identifies patriarchy, African feminism, motherhood, marriage, and the relationship between men and women as central concerns in the play (Al-Khafaji). These studies establish an important foundation, but the present research extends the discussion by placing *Anowa*'s gendered resistance within a specifically feminist-theological framework.

Anowa is particularly valuable for such an investigation because the protagonist's struggle cannot be reduced to a simple conflict between a rebellious woman and a patriarchal society. Her choices bring into question the expectations attached to womanhood, marriage, motherhood, sexuality, family obedience, economic success, and social respectability. The play, therefore, permits an examination of how cultural and religious worldviews shape the construction of acceptable female behaviour. Rather than assuming that tradition itself is the enemy of women, a feminist-theological reading interrogates the particular interpretations and applications of tradition through which women's autonomy is limited. This distinction is important for an African-centred study because it avoids imposing a simplistic opposition between "modern" feminism and "traditional" African cultures.

Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* provides a complementary dramatic context. The play is deeply rooted in ritual, marriage, widowhood, communal authority, and traditional religious conceptions of death and social obligation. Sofola's own dramatic world engages with African traditions and explores conflicts involving traditionalism, modernity, religion, and gender. Her *Wedlock of the Gods* centres on Ogwoma, whose marriage and widowhood are governed by communal expectations that sharply restrict her freedom to determine the course of her life. The dramatic conflict

consequently develops around the tension between individual desire and socially sanctioned obligations. The play's title itself is suggestive of the relationship between intimate human decisions and supernatural or communal authority.

The significance of *Wedlock of the Gods* to the present study is strengthened by the fact that recent scholarship has identified the play as a site for examining gendered violence and discriminatory cultural practices. Emenike and Asuzu's study identifies forced marriage, widowhood practices, bride-price structures, male-child preference, and victim blaming as practices through which women's vulnerability is produced within the world represented by the play. Their findings confirm the relevance of *Wedlock of the Gods* to feminist analysis, although their study is primarily concerned with African feminist interpretations of gender violence. The present study moves the discussion in a different direction by asking how religious and ritual meanings interact with patriarchal power and how women's resistance can be understood theologically rather than exclusively through a sociological or feminist-literary lens.

This study addresses the central problem of the relationship between religion and patriarchy. It would be inadequate to assume that religion is inherently oppressive or, conversely, that religious tradition is inherently liberating. African women's theological scholarship demonstrates that religious experience is complex and that women negotiate faith, culture, community, and gendered power in diverse ways. Phiri's examination of African women's theologies, for instance, situates the field within broader liberation-theological traditions while emphasising the necessity of theological and practical responses to the concrete experiences of African women (Phiri). Gunda likewise emphasises that African women's theology must confront the intersections of different gender ideologies and the historical processes through which women's disempowerment has been constructed (Gunda). These perspectives make it possible to read literary representations of religion critically without dismissing African religious traditions as primitive or treating Western feminist categories as universally sufficient.

Within this context, African drama becomes a valuable site for theological reflection. Dramatic characters embody conflicts that abstract theological discourse may discuss only conceptually. Anowa and Ogwoma dramatise questions about female autonomy, marriage, obedience, sexuality, social reputation, communal authority, and religious legitimacy as lived experiences. Their struggles demonstrate that patriarchy is not maintained only through physical or political power; it can also be reproduced through beliefs concerning what constitutes a respectable woman, a legitimate marriage, appropriate female sexuality, proper mourning, family honour, and obedience to communal expectations. Conversely, drama can reveal moments in which women resist, reinterpret, negotiate, or expose the contradictions of those expectations.

This study argues that *Anowa* and *Wedlock of the Gods* use female-centred dramatic conflicts to expose how patriarchal authority can become embedded within cultural and religious systems. At the same time, the plays complicate any interpretation that reduces African women to powerless victims. Anowa and Ogwoma are represented as women who make choices, express desires, challenge prescribed roles, and reveal contradictions within the systems that seek to regulate them. A feminist-theological reading, therefore, makes visible a double movement in the plays: the exposure of structures that constrain women and the emergence of female agency capable of questioning those structures.

The study ultimately proposes that African drama can make an important contribution to feminist theological reflection because it transforms abstract questions about gender and religious authority into embodied dramatic conflicts. Through the experiences of Anowa and Ogwoma, Aidoo and Sofola invite audiences to reconsider the relationship between tradition and justice, religious authority and human dignity, communal obligation and individual freedom, and cultural continuity and gender equality. The plays thus provide an important literary space for rethinking how African religious and cultural traditions can be interpreted in ways that recognise women's agency, dignity, voice, and full humanity.

Statement of the Problem

Although African women's theology has developed substantial critiques of women's subordination within religious and cultural structures, and feminist literary scholarship has examined the representation of women in African literature, the intersection between feminist theology and African dramatic representation remains insufficiently explored in relation to Aidoo's *Anowa* and Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*. Existing scholarship on *Anowa* has examined femininity, patriarchy, colonialism, and gender relations, while studies of *Wedlock of the Gods* have drawn attention to cultural practices, marriage, widowhood, and gender-based violence. However, these approaches do not fully address how religious beliefs, ritual practices, and theological assumptions participate in the construction, justification, negotiation, and resistance of patriarchal authority.

The problem is therefore not simply that women are oppressed in the selected plays. A more complex question concerns how oppression acquires cultural and religious legitimacy and how female characters respond to that legitimacy. If marriage is understood as a sacred or socially sanctioned institution, what happens when a woman's freedom conflicts with the expectations attached to it? If communal rituals are regarded as necessary for social and spiritual order, what happens when those rituals place disproportionate burdens on women? If cultural authority is represented as divinely or traditionally sanctioned, how can women challenge it without being represented as challenging the entire moral order of their community? These questions reveal the need for an

interpretive framework that can examine both the religious structures of authority and the female experiences produced within them.

The present study, consequently, argues that *Anowa* and *Wedlock of the Gods* do not merely portray women struggling against men; they dramatise conflicts over the interpretation and authority of cultural and religious values. A feminist-theological reading makes it possible to examine how patriarchal structures are legitimised, how women's experiences expose their limitations, and how female agency can challenge established understandings of religion, marriage, tradition, and communal obligations.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The central aim of this study is to examine the representation of women, religion, and patriarchy in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa* and Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* through a feminist-theological framework.

Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Examine the representation of religious and cultural authority in *Anowa* and *Wedlock of the Gods*.
2. Analyse how patriarchal structures shape women's identities, relationships, sexuality, marriage, and social roles in the selected plays
3. Investigate the ways in which *Anowa* and *Ogwoma* negotiate, resist, or challenge patriarchal and religious authority.
4. Examine the implications of women's lived experiences for feminist-theological interpretations of African religion and culture; and
5. Compare Aidoo's and Sofola's dramatic representations of female agency, religious authority, and patriarchal power.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following questions:

1. How are religion and cultural authority represented in *Anowa* and *Wedlock of the Gods*?
2. In what ways do patriarchal structures influence the lives and choices of women in the selected plays?
3. How do *Anowa* and *Ogwoma* resist, negotiate, or challenge patriarchal and religious authority?
4. What does a feminist-theological reading reveal about the relationship between women's experiences, religion, and cultural tradition in the selected dramas?
5. What similarities and differences characterise Aidoo's and Sofola's representations of women's agency and patriarchal power?

Significance of the Study

The study is significant at the intersection of literary studies, theatre studies, gender studies, and theology.

For African literary and dramatic scholarship, it demonstrates how drama can function as a critical space for interrogating gendered assumptions embedded in cultural and religious structures. The study also provides literary evidence that allows for an examination of women's experiences of religious and cultural authority beyond exclusively theological texts. It also contributes to African women's theological discourse by treating African drama as a form of cultural reflection capable of revealing the tensions between communal values and women's lived realities.

The study is further significant because it avoids a reductive interpretation of African culture as inherently patriarchal or African religion as inherently oppressive. Instead, it recognises that African societies contain competing values, voices, interpretations, and forms of agency. Such an approach is consistent with contemporary African women's theology, which seeks not simply to condemn African cultural contexts but to interrogate the structures within them that deny women dignity, participation, and freedom (Maseno; Gunda). The study therefore treats the selected plays as sites of negotiation in which religion and culture may simultaneously function as sources of identity and as instruments through which power is exercised.

Scope and Methodology

The study is limited to Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa* and Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*. The selection of these plays is deliberate because both foreground women's experiences within systems of marriage, family, cultural authority, and communal expectations while providing substantial material for examining female resistance and agency. The study does not attempt to generalise the experiences represented in these two texts to all African women or all African religious traditions. Rather, it offers a focused comparative reading of two West African dramatic texts.

Methodologically, the research adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach based primarily on textual analysis. Selected scenes, characters, dialogues, conflicts, symbols, rituals, and dramatic actions in the two plays will be examined through the concepts of feminist theology, African women's theology, patriarchy, female agency, and hermeneutics of suspicion. The analysis will be attentive to the distinction between religion, culture, and patriarchy while also recognising the ways these categories intersect within the dramatic worlds of the selected texts. Feminist theology is employed not merely to identify female oppression but to interrogate the theological and cultural assumptions through which women's experiences are interpreted and regulated. The study consequently reads the selected dramas as contested spaces in which questions of authority, identity, morality, gender, and religious meaning are negotiated.

2. FEMINIST THEOLOGY, PATRIARCHY AND AFRICAN DRAMA

Feminist theology provides the principal theoretical framework for this study because it places women's experiences at the centre of theological reflection and interrogates systems of thought in which male experience has been treated as normative. Rather than accepting inherited religious interpretations as neutral or universally applicable, feminist theology asks how theological traditions, religious institutions, and interpretive practices have shaped the lives and identities of women. Its concern is therefore not merely with increasing women's participation in existing religious structures but with examining the structures themselves and determining whether they promote or restrict the full humanity of women. Dreyer observes that feminist approaches to theology are fundamentally concerned with women's experiences and the power discrepancies that produce their marginalisation. She argues that a genuinely liberating feminist approach must expose the problems produced by such discrepancies and investigate the damage caused by patriarchy (Dreyer 2). This emphasis on experience and power makes feminist theology particularly appropriate for the analysis of dramatic texts in which women's identities and choices are negotiated within religious and cultural systems.

A central contribution of feminist theology is its challenge to the assumption that social and religious arrangements are naturally or divinely fixed. Dreyer demonstrates that social expectations can restrict women's autonomy and consequently reduce their sense of identity. In patriarchal societies, women have historically been assigned prescribed roles that limit their capacity to determine their lives, while religious discourse can contribute to the normalisation of such roles (Dreyer 1). Her analysis is particularly useful for the present study because *Anowa* and *Wedlock of the Gods* both dramatise women's lives within social systems in which marriage, sexuality, family obligations, and communal expectations carry moral and religious significance.

Feminist theology also employs a critical method commonly associated with the **hermeneutics of suspicion**. The approach requires the interpreter to question assumptions that appear natural, authoritative, or unquestionable. Dreyer explains that a hermeneutics of suspicion becomes particularly important when examining concepts such as marriage, because religious and social institutions can acquire an appearance of permanence even though they are historically and culturally constructed (Dreyer 3). She argues that marriage, sexuality, and religion have frequently operated in an interconnected manner and that feminist criticism exposes the ways in which this connection can contribute to the victimisation of women within patriarchal institutional structures (Dreyer 3). This methodological position is central to the present study because it permits the researcher to question the religious and cultural authority represented in the selected plays rather than

simply accepting such authority as legitimate because it is presented as traditional or sacred.

The hermeneutics of suspicion also requires attention to the experience that readers bring to a text. Dreyer explains that feminist interpretation cannot be reduced to an abstract analysis of textual structures because women's stories and experiences contribute to the process of meaning-making (Dreyer 2). This is especially relevant to dramatic criticism because drama presents human experiences through embodied characters and social conflicts. A feminist-theological interpretation can therefore examine not only what religious traditions are represented in a play but also how those traditions affect women and how women's experiences challenge dominant interpretations of religious and cultural authority.

The study focuses on African women's theology and contextual feminist thought.

This study specifically draws on African women's theology, which serves as the broader theoretical foundation for feminist theology. The distinction is important because African women's theology developed in response to the need for theological approaches that take African women's particular historical, cultural, social, and religious experiences seriously. Maseno notes that African women theologians began using feminist approaches more systematically in the late 1980s and identifies women's experience as an important source of African women's theological reflection (Maseno). The development of African women's theology therefore represents not simply the transfer of Western feminist categories to Africa but an attempt to formulate theological reflection from within African women's own contexts.

Maseno emphasises that African women's theology is committed to the emancipation of women and engages with questions of community, spirituality, sacrifice, ecology, ecclesiology, and other dimensions of life in Africa. Importantly, she argues that African women's theology recognises women as a distinct category while also acknowledging diversity among African women themselves (Maseno). This position is significant because it prevents the study from treating "African women" as a homogeneous group. Different cultural, religious, economic, historical, and geographical circumstances shape women's experiences. Consequently, a feminist-theological analysis of African drama must remain sensitive to the particular contexts represented by individual playwrights and texts.

One of the most important interventions of African women's theology is its critique of idealised representations of the African community. Maseno observes that African theology has traditionally emphasised the positive dimensions of African community and the preservation of cultural heritage. However, this emphasis sometimes resulted in insufficient attention to oppressive elements within African social structures (98–99). African women's theology therefore asks a more critical question: what kind

of community is being preserved, and whose interests are served by it? *Anowa* and *Wedlock of the Gods* both dramatise the tension between individual female experience and communal expectations, making this question directly relevant.

Maseno further notes that certain practices within African communities can diminish women's status and reproduce androcentric relationships. She identifies practices such as bride-price, forced female circumcision, polygamy, and unequal inheritance arrangements as examples that require critical examination rather than automatic celebration as expressions of African cultural identity (104–105). The significance of this argument for the present study lies in its rejection of the assumption that cultural authenticity necessarily requires the preservation of every traditional practice. African women's theology instead provides a framework for distinguishing between cultural values that promote human flourishing and those that reproduce gendered domination.

When considering religion and culture together, this distinction becomes particularly important. African women's theology recognises the importance of African cultural heritage while simultaneously questioning aspects of that heritage that deny women their full humanity. Maseno notes that many African cultures are patriarchal and that patriarchal relations can legitimise domination and subordination by presenting gender differences as natural (110). The theological task, therefore, is not to reject African culture but to critically evaluate the power relationships operating within it.

Women's Experience as a Theological Source

Women's experience constitutes another important principle within the theoretical framework of this study. African women's theology does not treat women's everyday experiences as secondary to formal theological knowledge. Lived experience serves as a significant source for evaluating religious and cultural structures. Maseno explains that African women theologians draw substantially upon women's experiences because their theological reflection is intended to remain connected to everyday life rather than becoming remote from women's actual circumstances (126–127).

This principle is particularly valuable for the interpretation of drama. Dramatic literature represents lived experiences through character, action, dialogue, conflict, and consequence. Therefore, we can approach the experiences of *Anowa* and *Ogwoma* as interpretive sites that challenge the assumptions of their respective communities. Their experiences enable the researcher to ask whether the cultural and religious structures surrounding them promote mutuality and dignity or whether they reproduce unequal relations of power.

Maseno also observes that African women's theological reflection incorporates experiences involving sexual exploitation, oppressive hierarchical structures within churches, oppressive customs, and marriage

structures (127). These concerns resonate strongly with the dramatic worlds of *Anowa* and *Wedlock of the Gods*, where marriage and gender expectations constitute major sources of conflict. The significance of the feminist-theological approach, therefore, is that it allows these conflicts to be interpreted not merely as personal tragedies but as manifestations of broader questions concerning gender, authority, religion, and social organization.

Women's experience also challenges the tendency to treat male experience as representative of the entire community. Maseno argues that traditional African theological approaches to community have sometimes equated men's experiences with women's experiences, thereby allowing the male perspective to function as the presumed human perspective (183–184). African women's theology challenges this imbalance by insisting that women's experiences must be included in theological reflection. This theoretical principle is central to the present study because the selected dramas place women at the centre of social and moral conflicts that are frequently defined by patriarchal communities.

Patriarchy and Religious Authority

The second major concept underpinning this study is **patriarchy**. Patriarchy refers broadly to systems of social organisation in which authority and decision-making are structured around male dominance and in which women's roles, sexuality, labour, property, and social identities are regulated through gendered hierarchies. Within feminist theology, however, patriarchy is not understood simply as a political or social arrangement. It can also become embedded within theological interpretations and religious practices, thereby acquiring an appearance of divine legitimacy.

Dreyer's discussion of marriage demonstrates how this process can occur. She explains that traditions relating to identity, sex, marriage, and ethnicity may become so deeply established that they appear immutable or "God-given," even though they are historically and socially constructed (Dreyer 3). She further observes that marriage can function as a religious and social institution in which sexuality, religion, and social expectations become interconnected (3). This insight is particularly relevant to *Anowa* and *Wedlock of the Gods*, where marriage is not simply a private relationship between individuals but an institution through which family and communal expectations are imposed upon women.

A feminist-theological approach, therefore, distinguishes between religion as a system of faith and the patriarchal interpretation of religion. This distinction is crucial because the study does not begin with the assumption that African religion or Christianity is inherently oppressive to women. Rather, it investigates how religious beliefs are interpreted and used within particular social structures. The question is whether

religious authority promotes mutuality and human dignity or whether it is invoked to justify unequal relationships.

African women's theology makes this distinction especially important. Maseno argues that African women's theologians have challenged idealised understandings of African community by exposing the patriarchal power relationships that can exist beneath claims of communal harmony. She notes that the dominant emphasis on community can conceal practices that subordinate women and deny them full participation and autonomy (177–187). Thus, the existence of a practice within a traditional community does not automatically make that practice just or theologically legitimate.

This theoretical position has direct implications for the analysis of *Wedlock of the Gods*. We can examine the power relations created by the play's treatment of marriage, widowhood, ritual, family authority, and communal expectations. The feminist-theological question is not simply whether the practices represented in the play are "traditional", but how those practices affect women's capacity to exercise agency and whether the religious and cultural meanings attached to them reinforce or challenge patriarchal authority.

Religion, Marriage and the Construction of Female Identity

Marriage occupies a particularly important position within this theoretical framework because it connects religion, culture, sexuality, family, and gender. Dreyer demonstrates that marriage has historically been understood through several overlapping models, including religious, social, contractual, and naturalistic perspectives (3–4). From a feminist-theological perspective, the problem arises when one particular model of marriage is treated as permanently ordained and therefore beyond critical examination.

Dreyer argues that feminist hermeneutics exposes the relationship between sexuality, religion, and marriage and questions the assumption that established forms of marriage are necessarily unchangeable (3). This argument provides an important theoretical basis for examining *Anowa* and *Wedlock of the Gods*, since both plays represent marriage as a social institution through which women are expected to conform to particular expectations.

African women's theology similarly demonstrates the significance of marriage to women's social identity. Maseno notes that in some African communal contexts marriage is treated as a fundamental marker of social maturity and continuity, while women's identities may become constructed in relation to family and community expectations (94–95, 156–160). Oduyoye's perspective, as discussed by Maseno, is particularly important because it challenges the assumption that women's movement into marriage necessarily represents social fulfilment. Instead, it calls attention to situations in which

women may have limited power within the communities to which they belong (156–160).

This perspective provides a productive basis for reading *Anowa*. Her refusal to conform to established expectations concerning marriage and womanhood can be understood not merely as individual rebellion but as a challenge to a social system that attempts to define female identity through prescribed relationships. Her struggle raises questions about whether a woman's worth should be determined by marriage, motherhood, economic dependence, or conformity to communal expectations.

Similarly, Ogwoma's experiences in *Wedlock of the Gods* can be interpreted through the relationship between marriage, social obligation, and religious authority. Her situation raises the question of whether communal and religious expectations can legitimately override individual female agency. A feminist-theological reading therefore treats her experience as an important source of knowledge about the consequences of patriarchal structures.

African Drama and Feminist Representation

The theoretical concerns outlined above are particularly relevant to African drama because dramatic texts provide a medium through which social, cultural, and religious contradictions can be made visible. Drama does not merely state that a society is patriarchal; it demonstrates patriarchy through relationships, dialogue, conflicts, rituals, decisions, and consequences. The female body and voice serve as crucial platforms for dramatising competing social values.

Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa* is especially relevant because it challenges conventional expectations concerning female behaviour, marriage, and social conformity. Existing scholarship has examined the play through feminist perspectives, identifying the protagonist's independence and the play's engagement with patriarchal relations as significant features of Aidoo's dramatic construction. The feminist-theological approach adopted here extends that conversation by asking how the social expectations surrounding *Anowa* acquire moral and cultural legitimacy and how her resistance exposes contradictions within those expectations.

The same approach is applicable to Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*. The play provides an important dramatic representation of the consequences that arise when women's desires conflict with socially prescribed marriage arrangements and communal expectations. Its treatment of ritual, marriage, widowhood, and social authority makes it particularly suitable for a study that places religion and patriarchy in direct conversation.

African drama consequently becomes more than an illustration of theological concepts. It becomes a **site of** theological questioning. Through dramatic conflict, audiences are encouraged to consider whether traditions are necessarily just because they are old, whether

religious authority should be immune from criticism, and whether communal stability can legitimately be maintained at the expense of women's autonomy.

The Hermeneutics of Suspicion as an Analytical Tool

The present study therefore combines African women's theology with the feminist method of the **hermeneutics of suspicion**. The purpose is not to reject religion or tradition but to interrogate claims of authority critically. Dreyer explains that a hermeneutics of suspicion requires attention to what lies behind a text or concept, what occurs within it, and what readers bring to it. Such an approach can reveal assumptions that might otherwise remain invisible (Dreyer 2–3).

Applied to African drama, this method requires several questions. First, what cultural and religious assumptions structure the dramatic world? Second, who has the authority to define acceptable female behaviour? Third, how are those definitions justified? Fourth, what consequences do they have for women? Finally, how do female characters respond when the established order conflicts with their experiences and desires?

The method is particularly appropriate to the study of marriage. Dreyer argues that concepts such as marriage should be examined critically because their social and religious meanings can have consequences for people's lives (3). The same principle can be applied to the dramatic representations of marriage in *Anowa* and *Wedlock of the Gods*. The study therefore investigates not only what marriage means within the texts but also how marriage functions as an institutional mechanism through which female identity, sexuality, and social responsibility are regulated.

Review of Existing Scholarship and Research Gap

Existing scholarship establishes a substantial body of research on feminist theology, African women's theology, patriarchy, and the representation of women in African literature. African women's theology has demonstrated the importance of women's experience as a source of theological knowledge and has challenged theological approaches that overlook gendered power relations (Maseno 122–130). Feminist theological scholarship has likewise developed methods for interrogating patriarchal assumptions, particularly through feminist hermeneutics and the hermeneutics of suspicion (Dreyer 1–3).

Maseno's work is especially important to this study because it identifies the limitations of approaches that romanticise African communities without sufficiently examining women's experiences within those communities. African women's theology, she argues, reveals the unequal power dynamics that idealised portrayals of communal life can obscure (177–187). Her conclusion that African women's theology seeks communities characterised by reciprocity, mutuality,

partnership, and the rejection of hierarchical relations between men and women provides an important normative basis for the present study (190–195).

However, a gap remains in the sustained application of this theological framework to African drama. Much of the existing scholarship treats women's representation in African drama primarily through literary feminism, gender studies, cultural criticism, or analyses of social oppression. These approaches are valuable, but they do not always examine how religious and theological assumptions themselves participate in the construction of patriarchal authority.

The present study addresses this gap by bringing African women's theology into direct conversation with African dramatic criticism. Rather than treating religion as merely a background cultural element, the study examines religion, ritual, marriage, and communal authority as structures through which women's identities and choices are negotiated. The focus is therefore on the intersection of three dimensions: women's lived experiences, religious-cultural authority, and patriarchal power.

The comparative study of Aidoo's *Anowa* and Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* further contributes to this gap by placing two major West African dramatic texts within the same feminist-theological framework. The purpose is not to claim that Ghanaian and Nigerian cultures are identical but to examine how different dramatic contexts represent related questions concerning women's agency, marriage, cultural expectations, religious authority, and patriarchal control.

Theoretical Position of the Study

On the basis of the foregoing discussion, this study adopts African feminist theology/African women's theology, supported by feminist hermeneutics of suspicion, as its principal theoretical framework. The framework rests on three interconnected propositions.

First, women's experience constitutes a legitimate source of knowledge. The experiences of *Anowa* and *Ogwoma* are therefore treated as important sites from which the cultural and religious structures represented in the plays can be evaluated.

Second, the study employs a hermeneutics of **suspicion** to question apparently naturalised or sacred claims concerning marriage, gender, sexuality, obedience, and communal authority. The approach recognises that social arrangements may be presented as divinely ordained even when they are historically and culturally constructed (Dreyer 3–5).

Third, the study adopts an African contextual orientation that neither romanticises nor rejects African cultures. African women's theology provides a framework for identifying elements of African communal life that promote mutuality and human dignity while critically examining practices that subordinate women. Maseno's formulation of an African community based upon reciprocity, partnership, and the rejection of hierarchical

gender relations is particularly useful for this purpose (190–195).

The framework therefore enables the study to move beyond a simple opposition between “religion” and “women's liberation.” Instead, it examines the complex ways in which religious beliefs, cultural traditions, and patriarchal structures interact, and it considers how women within these systems negotiate, resist, reinterpret, and challenge established forms of authority. Through this theoretical lens, *Anowa* and *Wedlock of the Gods* can be read as dramatic spaces in which questions of religious legitimacy, gender justice, female agency, and cultural transformation are contested.

Ultimately, feminist theology allows African drama to be approached as a form of theological and cultural critique. The selected plays do not simply present women as victims of patriarchal societies; they give dramatic form to women's struggles to define themselves within systems that attempt to define them for them. The experiences of *Anowa* and *Ogwoma* therefore provide a basis for examining whether religious and cultural traditions can be reconstructed around mutuality, dignity, agency, and justice rather than hierarchy and domination.

3. RELIGION, GENDER AND PATRIARCHAL AUTHORITY IN ANOWA

Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa* presents one of the most complex representations of female independence, marriage, gender expectations and social authority in African drama. Set in nineteenth-century Gold Coast society, the play centres on a young woman who refuses to accept the conventional choices prescribed for women by her family and community. *Anowa* rejects the suitors selected for her, chooses her own husband, participates actively in economic life, questions the institution of slavery and refuses to measure her worth entirely through conventional expectations of marriage and motherhood. Through these conflicts, Aidoo exposes the tension between individual female agency and the cultural structures that seek to regulate women's choices. The play is therefore not simply a story about a rebellious daughter or a failed marriage; it is a sustained interrogation of the ways in which gender, culture, morality and communal authority intersect in the construction of womanhood.

From a feminist-theological perspective, *Anowa* is particularly significant because it does not present religion as an isolated institution separate from everyday social relations. Religious beliefs, cultural traditions, ancestral expectations and communal values overlap in ways that influence how women are understood and disciplined. This corresponds with the broader feminist-theological concern that apparently sacred or culturally sanctioned arrangements must be examined critically when they produce unequal relations between women and men. Feminist theology, as discussed in the preceding section, therefore provides a useful framework for asking who

possesses authority, whose interpretation of tradition is privileged and how women respond when religious or cultural expectations conflict with their dignity and agency. In *Anowa*, Aidoo places these questions within the intimate spaces of family, marriage and community.

Anowa's quest for independence challenges conventional notions of womanhood.

Anowa's most significant characteristic is her refusal to accept a predetermined model of womanhood. From the beginning of the play, she distinguishes herself from the expectations of her parents and community. Her refusal to accept the husbands proposed by her parents is not merely an act of youthful disobedience; it represents her insistence that marriage should be based on personal choice rather than social arrangement. Aidoo consequently establishes female choice as an important site of resistance to patriarchal authority.

Anowa's independence is especially significant because the social order surrounding her understands a woman's identity primarily through relationships to others. She is expected to become a wife, manage a household, bear children and conform to the wishes of her family. Her mother, Badua, embodies many of these expectations. Although Badua is herself a woman with considerable strength and influence, she reproduces the social assumptions that define acceptable womanhood. Her concern about *Anowa's* refusal to marry according to conventional expectations demonstrates how patriarchy can operate through women as well as through men. The pressure placed upon *Anowa* is therefore not simply male pressure. It is a wider social system in which women may become agents of the same values that constrain them. This complexity is important to a feminist-theological reading. Patriarchy should not be understood merely as individual male domination. It can also become embedded in family structures, communal expectations, moral language and cultural interpretations of what constitutes a respectable woman. Oduyoye's discussion of African women and patriarchy similarly draws attention to how culture and religion can socialise women into patterns of conformity while presenting those patterns as natural or morally desirable. In *Anowa*, the social demand that *Anowa* become an acceptable daughter and wife operates precisely through this process of normalisation. Her refusal consequently becomes a challenge to an entire structure of authority rather than to a single individual.

Anowa's independence also appears in her willingness to work. Rather than embracing a narrowly domestic conception of marriage, she participates in the economic activities through which she and Kofi Ako establish themselves. Her willingness to undertake difficult work unsettles the assumption that respectable womanhood requires dependence upon a husband. Aidoo thus constructs a heroine whose sense of self is not completely dependent on male protection or economic

provision. Recent scholarship similarly identifies the play as a critique of patriarchal domination, particularly through its treatment of relations between men and women, husbands and wives, and women and motherhood (Al-Khafaji).

Anowa's independence, however, is not presented as uncomplicated liberation. Aidoo deliberately makes her heroine contradictory. Anowa can resist patriarchal norms in one area while upholding some in another. This complexity prevents the play from becoming a simplistic opposition between a completely liberated woman and a completely oppressive society.

Marriage as a Site of Patriarchal Authority

Marriage constitutes the central institutional space through which the conflict between Anowa's autonomy and patriarchal expectations becomes visible. Anowa chooses Kofi Ako for herself, thereby rejecting the authority of her parents and the wider community over her marital future. Her decision initially appears to represent a victory for female autonomy. She chooses a husband because she wants him rather than because he satisfies the economic and social requirements preferred by her family.

Yet the marriage gradually reveals the limitations of individual choice within a patriarchal society. Kofi Ako initially accepts Anowa's independence, but tensions emerge as their economic circumstances change and as expectations concerning gender roles become increasingly difficult to reconcile. The marriage therefore becomes a space in which the question of who has authority over the woman's body, labour, sexuality and reproductive capacity is repeatedly negotiated.

The different meanings Anowa and Kofi attach to marriage intensify their conflict. For Anowa, marriage involves companionship and a shared life in which both partners should retain a degree of moral independence. For the society surrounding them, however, marriage carries broader social obligations, particularly the expectation of children. Marriage is consequently not simply a private relationship between two individuals. It is an institution through which the community reproduces its values and regulates gender.

This dimension of the play is consistent with scholarship that identifies parental and communal pressure as significant forces in Anowa's marital conflict. Studies of the play have emphasised that marriage in the dramatic world is deeply connected to family expectations, social approval and the reproductive responsibilities assigned to women. The tragedy of Anowa and Kofi therefore emerges partly from the collision between individual choice and collective expectations.

The play also exposes an important contradiction: Anowa initially challenges conventional marriage arrangements, but when the marriage encounters difficulties, she herself begins to appeal to conventional

cultural solutions. Her concern about childlessness eventually leads her to consider the possibility that Kofi should take additional wives. This moment is particularly significant because it demonstrates that resistance to patriarchy does not automatically produce complete freedom from patriarchal assumptions. Anowa has rejected the marriage prescribed for her, yet she remains influenced by a social system that associates successful womanhood with fertility and family continuity.

This contradiction deepens Aidoo's feminist critique. The problem is not simply that Anowa is oppressed by men. She has also internalised aspects of the social logic that defines women as mothers. Her anxiety about childlessness demonstrates the power of reproductive expectations even upon a woman who has otherwise rejected many conventional roles.

Sexuality, Masculinity and the Politics of the Body

Sexuality becomes another important arena through which Aidoo examines patriarchal authority. In Anowa's world, social expectations regarding masculinity, femininity, marriage, and reproduction shape sexual identity. The inability of Anowa and Kofi Ako to produce children becomes a source of increasing tension, exposing the extent to which reproductive success is used as a measure of marital and gender identity.

The social expectation of fertility primarily targets women, making Anowa's situation particularly revealing. A woman who does not become a mother risks being regarded as incomplete, unsuccessful or socially problematic. The play consequently exposes the gendered burden of reproduction. Although both partners are involved in reproduction, society disproportionately attaches the cultural consequences of childlessness to the woman.

At the same time, Aidoo eventually complicates this assumption by revealing a crisis in Kofi Ako's masculinity. His apparent economic success and social authority conceal a profound personal vulnerability. The disclosure concerning his sexual incapacity reverses the conventional distribution of blame. The childless woman is not always to blame for her lack of children.

This reversal is important because it challenges the assumption that male authority is naturally grounded in sexual and reproductive power. Kofi has accumulated wealth, social influence and domestic authority, but these achievements cannot conceal his vulnerability. Aidoo therefore exposes masculinity itself as a socially constructed performance requiring continual confirmation.

The treatment of sexuality also demonstrates why a feminist-theological approach must examine not only women's oppression but also the wider system of gender relations. Patriarchal structures restrict women, but they also impose rigid expectations upon men. Kofi's inability to fulfil the dominant expectations of masculinity contributes to his insecurity and ultimately to the destructive consequences of marriage. The tragedy

therefore emerges from a gender system in which both male and female identities are measured against restrictive social ideals.

Motherhood and the Construction of Female Worth

Motherhood occupies a particularly important position in *Anowa*. The expectation that Anowa should marry and have children reflects a wider understanding of female identity in which motherhood functions as evidence of womanly fulfilment. A woman may possess intelligence, strength, economic ability and moral conviction, but these qualities do not necessarily protect her from social judgement if she fails to become a mother.

Aidoo's treatment of motherhood is critical because it exposes the difference between motherhood as a personal possibility and motherhood as a compulsory social expectation. Feminist theology is especially useful here because it questions theological and cultural interpretations that define women primarily through reproductive functions. When motherhood is transformed from a possible vocation into a measure of female worth, women who remain childless are positioned as deficient.

Anowa's experience illustrates this problem. Her value is repeatedly evaluated in relation to what society expects a wife to accomplish. Her failure to produce children becomes increasingly central to the interpretation of her marriage. The pressure does not remain confined to the private sphere; it becomes a form of communal judgement. The woman's body thus becomes a social object over which the community claims interpretive authority.

The play also demonstrates how women may participate in maintaining such expectations. Anowa's concern about childbearing reveals the psychological consequences of a society that closely links fertility to female identity. She eventually considers polygyny as a possible solution to the problem, suggesting that even a woman who rejects conventional gender roles may still struggle against the internalised authority of those roles.

This is one of the most productive aspects of Aidoo's characterisation. Anowa is neither a perfect feminist heroine nor merely a victim of patriarchy. She is a woman negotiating competing systems of belief. Her choices reveal both resistance and internalisation, as well as freedom and constraint. Such complexity is consistent with Aidoo's wider contribution to African feminist writing, in which women's experiences cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between tradition and modernity.

Religious and Cultural Authority

Religion and culture in *Anowa* are closely intertwined. The play does not present religious authority in the form of a single institutional church imposing doctrine upon the characters. Instead, spirituality, traditional beliefs, ancestral expectations, priestly authority and communal

customs form part of the social environment within which the characters make decisions. This is important because it shows that patriarchal power can operate through cultural and religious systems even when there is no explicit theological argument for women's subordination.

Anowa's relationship to religious authority is established through her rejection of the expectations associated with the priestess tradition. Her parents disagree over the possibility of her becoming a priestess, and this disagreement reveals different assumptions concerning what her future should be. The religious institution consequently becomes part of the wider struggle over female identity.

The issue is not simply whether religion is oppressive. Rather, Aidoo asks what happens when religious or cultural institutions are used to define the limits of a woman's acceptable choices. From a feminist-theological perspective, this distinction is crucial. Feminist theology does not necessarily reject religion; instead, it interrogates interpretations of religious tradition that legitimate unequal power relations. In this sense, *Anowa* invites readers to distinguish between spirituality and the social uses of religious authority.

The community's judgement of Anowa is particularly revealing. The Old Man and Old Woman, who function as a communal chorus, repeatedly comment on the characters' behaviour. Their presence gives social expectations a collective voice. The Old Woman, in particular, embodies attitudes that police Anowa's behaviour and reinforce conventional expectations of femininity. Contemporary scholarship on Aidoo emphasises the significance of this communal voice and identifies the old woman as a figure through whom internalised patriarchy becomes visible.

The chorus therefore performs an ideological function. It does not merely provide commentary on the action; it represents the social gaze under which Anowa lives. Her behaviour is continually observed, interpreted and judged. The community becomes a mechanism of discipline, ensuring that individuals who depart from accepted norms are reminded of the consequences of nonconformity.

Anowa's Resistance to Patriarchal Expectations

Despite the pressure placed upon her, Anowa consistently demonstrates moral and intellectual independence. Her resistance is visible not only in her refusal to accept an arranged marriage but also in her opposition to Kofi Ako's participation in the slave trade. This second form of resistance is particularly important because it moves the play beyond the question of gender.

Anowa's opposition to slavery reveals an ethical consciousness that is stronger than her desire for economic success. Kofi's increasing wealth stems from the exploitation of enslaved people, which Anowa deems morally unacceptable. Her resistance therefore demonstrates that female agency in the play is not simply

about obtaining freedom for herself. It is also connected to her capacity to make moral judgements of the communal chorus; all reveal larger questions about authority, gender, and the society in which she lives.

This dimension of Anowa's character strengthens Aidoo's critique of patriarchal authority. Kofi's power is based partly on economic accumulation and social status, but Anowa refuses to accept wealth when it is obtained through human exploitation. Her ethical position places her in conflict with both her husband and the community that benefits from his success.

The relationship between gender and slavery is significant because it prevents the analysis from treating patriarchy as an isolated domestic problem. Aidoo connects the oppression of women to wider systems of domination, exploitation and dehumanisation. Recent scholarship similarly identifies *Anowa* as a text that addresses both patriarchal domination and the historical problem of slavery, demonstrating how gender and other forms of power intersect within the play (Al-Khafaji).

Anowa's resistance nevertheless carries a tragic cost. Her refusal to conform does not produce immediate social transformation. Instead, she becomes increasingly isolated. Her marriage deteriorates, her moral opposition to Kofi's economic practices places her in conflict with him, and her failure to conform to reproductive expectations intensifies the pressure upon her. The tragedy therefore raises a difficult question: what happens to women who resist oppressive structures when the surrounding society provides insufficient space for alternative forms of female identity?

Patriarchal Authority and the Tragedy of Anowa

The tragedy of *Anowa* ultimately derives from the failure of the social order to accommodate a woman who insists upon defining herself. Anowa does not fit comfortably into the categories available to her. She is not willing to become the obedient daughter, submissive wife or unquestioning mother demanded by conventional expectations. Yet the society around her provides few alternative identities through which her independence can be recognised.

Her tragedy should therefore not be interpreted simply as punishment for disobedience. Such an interpretation would reproduce the very patriarchal logic that the play interrogates. Instead, her destruction can be understood because of the conflict between individual agency and restrictive social structures. Aidoo uses tragedy to expose the human cost of a society that demands conformity while failing to recognise women's autonomy.

Anowa's own contradictions further complicate the tragedy. She is not entirely outside the system she criticises. She internalises some of its assumptions concerning marriage and motherhood, and she sometimes attempts to solve personal problems through conventional cultural mechanisms. Her characterisation, therefore, demonstrates that patriarchy operates not only through external coercion but also through internalised expectations.

This is particularly relevant to feminist theology. Feminist theological analysis asks readers to examine the beliefs through which social arrangements become legitimate. If a woman's worth is defined by obedience, marriage, fertility or conformity, those assumptions acquire moral force and become difficult to challenge. Anowa's resistance exposes these assumptions precisely because she refuses to accept them as unquestionable truths.

Religion, Culture and Female Agency: A Feminist-Theological Interpretation

A feminist-theological interpretation of *Anowa* therefore requires a careful distinction between religion itself and patriarchal interpretations of religion and culture. Aidoo does not construct a simple opposition in which tradition is entirely evil and individual freedom is entirely good. Rather, she demonstrates that cultural traditions are contested spaces. They can provide identity, belonging and moral orientation, but they can also become instruments through which social conformity is enforced.

Anowa's struggle demonstrates that female agency often develops through questioning inherited assumptions. Her refusal to accept predetermined marital arrangements, her participation in economic activity, her opposition to slavery and her insistence upon making moral judgements for herself all demonstrate a desire to become an active subject rather than an object of social expectations.

At the same time, the tragedy of her life suggests that individual resistance alone may not be sufficient to dismantle patriarchal structures. Anowa can refuse one arranged marriage, but she cannot by herself transform the community's understanding of womanhood. She can challenge Kofi's moral choices, but she cannot prevent the social system from evaluating her through motherhood and marital success. Her individual rebellion consequently exposes the limits of personal resistance in an environment where patriarchal values remain institutionally and culturally powerful.

This insight connects *Anowa* with the central concerns of African women's theology. African feminist theologians have emphasised the importance of re-examining cultural and religious structures from women's lived experiences rather than assuming that inherited interpretations are automatically just. Phiri, for example, emphasises the continuing importance of African women's theological reflection in confronting gendered inequalities, while Gunda emphasises the necessity of interrogating inherited gender ideologies within African theological contexts. These perspectives provide an interpretive framework through which Anowa's struggle can be understood not simply as rebellion against tradition but as a demand for a more just understanding of women's humanity.

Aidoo's achievement is, therefore, to make the personal political and the domestic ideological. The arguments between Anowa and Kofi, the disagreements between Anowa and Badua, and the judgements of the communal chorus all reveal larger questions about authority, gender and morality. The female body, marriage, motherhood and sexuality become sites upon which competing definitions of womanhood are negotiated.

In conclusion, Anowa's analysis reveals the interconnectedness of religion, culture, and patriarchy, rather than treating them as separate forces. Aidoo depicts a society where family relationships, marriage customs, reproductive expectations, communal judgement, and traditional religious understandings sustain gender expectations. Anowa's independence challenges these structures, but her resistance is complicated by the fact that she has internalised some of the values she contests.

The play's significance from a feminist-theological perspective therefore lies in its refusal to provide an uncomplicated account of liberation. Anowa is neither simply a victim nor an entirely liberated feminist subject. She is a complex woman attempting to negotiate personal autonomy within a society whose definitions of femininity remain strongly regulated by marriage, motherhood, sexuality and communal expectations.

Ultimately, *Anowa* exposes the danger of treating cultural or religious traditions as beyond criticism. Traditions become oppressive when their interpretations deny women the capacity to make moral choices, determine their own futures and possess authority over their bodies and lives. At the same time, the play suggests that genuine transformation requires more than individual rebellion. It requires the re-examination of the cultural and religious assumptions through which patriarchal authority is reproduced. In this respect, Anowa's tragedy becomes a wider call for the recovery of female agency and for forms of religious and cultural interpretation that affirm, rather than diminish, women's dignity.

4. WOMEN, RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PATRIARCHAL CONTROL IN THE WEDLOCK OF THE GODS

Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* presents a powerful dramatic examination of marriage, traditional religious beliefs, female sexuality, family authority and the consequences of patriarchal social control. Like Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa*, Sofola's play places a woman at the centre of the conflict between personal desire and communal expectations. However, the circumstances of Ogwoma and Uloko are shaped by a particularly restrictive system in which marriage is closely connected to family honour, ancestral expectations, widowhood, sexuality and religious sanctions. Through these structures, Sofola demonstrates how a woman's body and

marital choices can become matters over which the family and community claim authority.

A feminist-theological reading of *Wedlock of the Gods* makes it possible to examine the relationship between religious belief and patriarchal power without reducing traditional religion to an inherently oppressive institution. The play instead demonstrates how religious beliefs and cultural practices can be interpreted and mobilised to regulate women's lives. The central tragedy develops because Ogwoma's personal desires conflict with the expectations imposed upon her as a wife and widow. Her experience reveals the consequences that may arise when communal interpretations of morality leave little room for female autonomy.

Marriage and the Regulation of Women's Lives

Marriage is the primary institution through which women's social identities are regulated in *the wedlock of the gods*. Ogwoma's marriage to Adigwu is not presented primarily as a relationship grounded in mutual emotional fulfilment. Instead, it is connected to family arrangements, social obligation and communal expectations. Her personal feelings are subordinated to the interests of the families involved in the marriage.

This understanding of marriage reflects a patriarchal system in which the woman's consent and emotional well-being can become secondary to collective interests. Marriage functions not only as a private relationship but also as an institution through which families establish alliances, preserve social status and reproduce cultural expectations. The woman's body consequently becomes part of a wider social arrangement.

Ogwoma's suffering reveals the consequences of such a system. She is expected to remain faithful to a marriage that does not provide emotional fulfilment, while her personal relationship with Uloko is treated as an unacceptable violation of communal morality. The difference between Ogwoma's desires and the community's expectations creates the central conflict of the play.

Sofola's treatment of marriage is therefore important to feminist analysis because the institution is shown to have both social and ideological dimensions. Ogwoma's marriage to a man she does not love is not the only issue. More fundamentally, she has limited authority to determine the conditions under which she will live as a woman. Her marriage is treated as a social institution whose requirements must be obeyed even when they conflict with her individual desires.

The title *Wedlock of the Gods* intensifies this problem. The word "gods" connects the institution of marriage to religious authority, suggesting that the consequences of violating marital expectations extend beyond ordinary social disapproval. Marriage becomes connected to supernatural sanction. This association gives additional authority to patriarchal expectations, as disobedience can

be seen not only as social misconduct but also as an offence against the spiritual order.

Traditional Religious Beliefs and Patriarchal Authority

Traditional religious beliefs occupy an important position in the dramatic world of *Wedlock of the Gods*. The community understands individual actions within a moral universe governed by ancestral and spiritual forces. This worldview means that social behaviour is not evaluated solely based on individual preferences. Actions are also interpreted according to their consequences for the family, community and spiritual order.

From a feminist-theological perspective, the important question is how such beliefs are interpreted and by whom. Religious systems can provide moral meaning and communal identity, but they may also become instruments of social control when particular interpretations are used to restrict women's choices. In the play, religious and cultural beliefs reinforce the seriousness of the prohibitions surrounding marriage and sexuality.

The religious dimension of the play is especially significant because the characters cannot simply separate their personal decisions from the perceived consequences for the community. Ogwoma's relationship with Uloko is therefore not understood as a private matter between two consenting adults. It becomes a violation of established expectations with consequences that are imagined in spiritual as well as social terms.

The play consequently demonstrates how patriarchal authority can acquire sacred legitimacy. Once a cultural expectation is associated with ancestral or divine sanction, questioning it becomes considerably more difficult. A woman who challenges the expectation may be represented not simply as disobedient but as morally dangerous to the community.

This does not mean that Sofola portrays traditional religion as inherently oppressive. Rather, the play invites an examination of the ways in which religious interpretations interact with existing gender hierarchies. The problem lies partly in the fact that women have limited authority to define or reinterpret the rules that govern them. Religious meaning is embedded within a patriarchal social structure, and the resulting interpretations frequently place greater restrictions upon women.

Female Sexuality and the Politics of the Female Body

Female sexuality is one of the most important sites of patriarchal control in *The Wedlock of the Gods*. Ogwoma's sexual relationship with Uloko becomes a matter of intense social condemnation because it challenges the community's understanding of marital fidelity and sexual propriety. Her sexuality is therefore not treated as an aspect of personal identity over which she possesses complete authority.

The treatment of Ogwoma demonstrates a broader patriarchal pattern in which women's sexuality is subjected to collective regulation. A woman's sexual behaviour is interpreted in relation to family honour, marriage, morality and communal reputation. Her body becomes a symbolic representation of the values of the family and community.

The consequences of this arrangement are particularly severe for Ogwoma because she is judged according to standards that leave little space for personal desire. Her emotional attachment to Uloko cannot be acknowledged without threatening the social structure that defines her as Adigwu's wife. The conflict between love and social obligation consequently becomes a conflict between female agency and patriarchal authority.

Emenike and Asuzu's study of *Wedlock of the Gods* similarly identifies gender relations and violence as central dimensions of Sofola's drama. Their analysis demonstrates how the play exposes the destructive consequences of gendered expectations within African cultural contexts (Emenike and Asuzu 124–48). Therefore, the gender system that dictates what women can and cannot do is inseparable from the violence surrounding Ogwoma's relationship.

A feminist-theological reading further asks why female sexuality becomes a particularly important object of social regulation. When women's sexual behaviour is connected to notions of purity, family honour and religious morality, patriarchal control can become normalised as moral protection. The language of morality may consequently conceal the unequal distribution of power between men and women.

Widowhood and the Continuation of Patriarchal Control

The treatment of widowhood in *Wedlock of the Gods* further reveals the vulnerability of women within patriarchal structures. Ogwoma's position after the death of her husband is not simply a private experience of bereavement. Widowhood places her within a network of social and cultural expectations concerning mourning, loyalty and future relationships.

The widow is expected to demonstrate continuing loyalty to the deceased husband, even though the husband is no longer alive to participate in the relationship. Such expectations illustrate the extent to which the woman's identity remains attached to the husband beyond his death. Her autonomy is therefore not automatically restored by widowhood.

This is significant from a feminist perspective because it demonstrates that patriarchal control can survive changes in marital status. A woman may cease to have a living husband and yet remain socially defined through her relationship with him. The family and community can continue to regulate her choices regarding sexuality and remarriage.

Ogwoma's situation also reveals a contradiction within the social system. The community expects her to accept the consequences of her husband's death, but it does not necessarily recognise her emotional or sexual needs as legitimate. Her desire for Uloko is therefore treated as a threat to the social order rather than as an expression of her humanity.

The restrictions placed upon widowhood consequently demonstrate how cultural practices can become mechanisms of gender discipline. When the community determines how a widow should behave, how long she should mourn and whom she may love, the woman's individual agency becomes subordinate to collective expectations.

Family Authority and the Social Control of Women

Family authority is another major mechanism through which patriarchal power operates in the play. Ogwoma's choices are not understood as belonging exclusively to her. Her marriage, sexuality and subsequent relationship with Uloko are treated as matters affecting the honour and stability of the wider family.

This reflects a social conception of individual identity in which the individual is closely connected to the community. Such communal belonging can provide support and social identity, but it can also limit individual autonomy when collective interests are used to justify control over personal decisions.

The family therefore becomes an institution of surveillance. Women are expected to behave in ways that preserve the family's reputation, while deviations from accepted behaviour may result in punishment or exclusion. Because the family is regarded as a legitimate source of moral authority, resistance to it can be interpreted as rebellion against the entire social order.

Ogwoma's predicament demonstrates the particular consequences for women. Her personal desires cannot be treated independently of the family's expectations because her sexuality is regarded as a reflection of family morality. The male members of the community consequently possess considerable influence over decisions that directly affect her body and future.

Sofola's dramatic method exposes the violence that can emerge when family authority becomes absolute. Instead of protecting the individual, the family becomes one of the mechanisms through which the individual is constrained. The tragedy therefore raises an important feminist question: at what point does communal responsibility become an instrument of oppression?

Women's Agency and Resistance

Despite the oppressive circumstances surrounding her, Ogwoma should not be understood merely as a passive victim. Her relationship with Uloko represents an attempt to exercise personal choice within a system that

restricts such choices. Her desire for a different life is itself an expression of agency.

Her resistance is important because it reveals that patriarchal systems are never completely successful in eliminating women's capacity to desire, choose and act. Ogwoma refuses to allow social expectations to determine every aspect of her emotional life. Her decision to pursue her relationship with Uloko therefore represents an assertion of subjectivity.

However, Sofola does not romanticise this resistance. Ogwoma's agency occurs within extremely restrictive conditions, and her choices have tragic consequences. This complexity is crucial. Women's agency should not be measured only by whether a woman successfully escapes an oppressive structure. Agency can also appear in the decision to question, resist or refuse imposed identities, even when the surrounding system makes successful resistance difficult.

Uloko's role also complicates the question of female agency. Although he shares Ogwoma's desire, the social consequences of their relationship are not experienced in identical ways by the two lovers. Patriarchal societies often regulate women and men differently. Women's sexuality is more directly associated with family honour and reproductive legitimacy, while men may enjoy greater freedom to exercise sexual choice.

The unequal consequences of their relationship therefore demonstrate that gender is central to the tragedy. Ogwoma is not simply punished for committing an act that Uloko also participates in. The gendered social structure determines how her actions are interpreted and how her body is judged.

Religious Sanctions and the Fear of Transgression

The connection between religious belief and punishment imparts *the Wedlock of the Gods* and its tragic intensity. The community's understanding of supernatural consequences reinforces the seriousness of violating established norms. Religious sanction therefore functions as an extension of social control.

From the perspective of feminist theology, this situation raises the question of whether divine or ancestral authority is being used to preserve justice or to preserve existing power relations. When religious beliefs are interpreted exclusively through patriarchal structures, the sacred can become a justification for the unequal treatment of women.

The play's tragedy demonstrates the danger of such an arrangement. Rather than creating a space for reconciliation between individual desire and communal morality, the religiously sanctioned social order intensifies the conflict. The characters are trapped between personal experience and collective belief.

This is where feminist theology offers an important critical intervention. Feminist theologians do not necessarily reject religious traditions; rather, they

interrogate interpretations that normalise women's subordination. The question is therefore not whether religious belief should exist, but whether religious interpretation can accommodate women's dignity, agency and moral subjectivity.

The wedding of the gods heightens the urgency of this question, as it presents the devastating consequences of violating the community's expectations. The title itself suggests that the institution of marriage has acquired supernatural authority. A feminist reading must therefore ask whether the sacred is being used to protect human dignity or to preserve a gendered social order.

The title "Social Control, Violence and the Female Subject" highlights the themes of societal regulation and the impact of violence on women.

The violence surrounding Ogwoma's story is not accidental. It develops from a system in which individual choices are subordinated to collective expectations. When those expectations are threatened, social control can become coercive.

This relationship between gender, violence and culture is central to Emenike and Asuzu's analysis of the play. Their study identifies gender relations and violence as important dimensions through which Sofola represents the consequences of patriarchal cultural expectations (124–48). The significance of this argument lies in its recognition that violence does not emerge only from individual hostility. It can be produced by social structures that define certain forms of behaviour as unacceptable and then authorise punishment.

The violence against women in such circumstances may therefore be physical, psychological, social or symbolic. A woman can be controlled through threats, shame, exclusion, moral condemnation and restrictions on sexuality even before physical violence occurs.

Sofola's tragedy consequently exposes the destructive potential of a social system that leaves women few legitimate avenues for negotiating conflict. Ogwoma's desire cannot easily be accommodated within the existing structure because the structure itself has been designed around assumptions about female obedience and marital loyalty.

Comparison of Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* and Aidoo's *Anowa*.

Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* and Aidoo's *Anowa* share a fundamental concern with women who experience conflict between personal agency and patriarchal social expectations. Both Ogwoma and Anowa challenge aspects of the gender roles imposed upon them, and both plays demonstrate the consequences of a society that grants women limited authority over their personal and reproductive lives.

The two plays, however, approach these questions differently. In *Anowa*, Aidoo presents a woman who actively constructs an alternative identity for herself from

the beginning. Anowa rejects the husbands selected by her parents, chooses Kofi Ako and participates in economic activity. Her conflict with patriarchy is therefore closely associated with independence and self-definition.

In *Wedlock of the Gods*, by contrast, Ogwoma's resistance is more directly connected to sexuality, marriage and emotional attachment. Her struggle emerges from an existing marital relationship and from the restrictions placed upon her after her husband's death. Whereas Anowa challenges the process through which society defines an appropriate wife, Ogwoma challenges the authority of the marital and communal system after she has already been placed within it.

The difference can be broadly represented as a difference between **choosing marriage** and **challenging the limits imposed by it**. Anowa insists on choosing whom she will marry; Ogwoma confronts a social system that refuses to recognise her right to determine whom she should love after marriage.

Both plays nevertheless demonstrate that marriage is never merely private. In both texts, marriage is connected to family honour, reproductive expectations, sexuality and communal authority. The woman's marital status becomes a public concern, allowing family and community to exercise authority over intimate decisions.

Similarities in the Representation of Patriarchy

One of the strongest similarities between the two plays is the connection between patriarchy and the regulation of women's bodies. In *Anowa*, Anowa's body becomes a subject of social concern because of the expectation that she should become a mother. In *Wedlock of the Gods*, Ogwoma's sexuality and widowhood become subjects of communal regulation.

Consequently, both Aidoo and Sofola demonstrate that patriarchal authority partly maintains control over reproduction and sexuality. Women are judged according to their ability to conform to expectations concerning marriage, sexual fidelity and motherhood.

Another similarity is the role of communal judgement. In *Anowa*, the old man and old woman articulate social attitudes toward Anowa through their collective voices. In *Wedlock of the Gods*, the community similarly evaluates Ogwoma's choices within its moral framework. The community therefore functions as an ideological institution: it defines what is acceptable and punishes deviations from the established norms.

Both playwrights also complicate the relationship between women and patriarchy by showing that women can participate in reproducing restrictive gender expectations. Badua's expectations of Anowa in *the play "Anowa"* illustrate how women can act as agents of cultural conformity. Similarly, the expectations surrounding Ogwoma's marital and sexual behaviour are not necessarily imposed exclusively by men. Patriarchal values become communal values and can therefore be reproduced by both women and men.

Differences in Women's Resistance

Despite these similarities, Anowa and Ogwoma represent different forms of female resistance. Anowa's resistance is characterised primarily by intellectual independence, personal choice and moral questioning. She actively challenges the assumptions governing marriage, economic life and social respectability.

Ogwoma's resistance is more intimate and emotionally driven. Her relationship with Uloko constitutes a challenge to the restrictions placed upon her sexuality and emotional life. Her resistance is therefore located more directly within the private sphere of marriage and desire.

The different forms of resistance also affect the way the two tragedies unfold. Anowa becomes increasingly alienated because she refuses to conform to the roles expected of her. Ogwoma becomes endangered because her personal relationship violates a religiously and culturally sanctioned conception of marital fidelity.

Yet neither woman can achieve meaningful freedom within the social structures surrounding her. Their tragedies, therefore, reveal a common limitation: the surrounding community's refusal to recognise women's rights to define themselves constrains individual agency.

Differences in the Treatment of Religion

The role of religion also distinguishes the two plays. In *Anowa*, religious and cultural beliefs form part of a broader social environment in which questions concerning marriage, spirituality and communal identity are negotiated. Aidoo's critique often emerges through irony, dialogue and the conflict between Anowa's moral independence and communal expectations.

In *Wedlock of the Gods*, religious sanction is more directly connected to the central conflict surrounding marriage and sexuality. The spiritual consequences attached to the characters' actions intensify the tragic dimensions of the story. Religious belief therefore operates more explicitly as a mechanism through which the social order defines transgression.

Nevertheless, both plays demonstrate that religious authority cannot be separated from questions of gender. The meaning of religious tradition depends partly upon who has the power to interpret it. When patriarchal assumptions dominate interpretation, religious beliefs can be transformed into mechanisms of gender discipline.

Feminist-Theological Significance

A feminist-theological reading of *Wedlock of the Gods* and its comparison with *Anowa* demonstrates that the central problem is not religion or culture in isolation. The deeper issue is the unequal distribution of interpretive and social authority.

Both plays ask who has the right to determine the meaning of marriage, sexuality, motherhood, widowhood and moral behaviour. Women are expected to live according to rules that are frequently interpreted by structures dominated by patriarchal assumptions. Feminist theology provides a means of questioning these assumptions by beginning with women's lived experiences.

From this perspective, Ogwoma's suffering becomes a theological and ethical question. If a religious or cultural system produces conditions in which a woman's emotional and bodily autonomy is denied, then the interpretation of that system must be critically reconsidered. The sacred cannot be invoked simply to make patriarchal authority immune from criticism.

Similarly, Anowa's tragedy demonstrates the need for interpretations of culture and religion that recognise women as moral agents. Both women possess the capacity to make choices, interpret their circumstances and evaluate the moral structures surrounding them. Their voices therefore become essential to any serious understanding of the traditions within which they live.

African feminist theology is particularly useful in this context because it insists that women's experiences within African cultural and religious contexts must be taken seriously. Rather than simply replacing African traditions with external feminist models, African women theologians seek ways of interrogating oppressive practices while retaining and reconstructing dimensions of communal and spiritual life that affirm human dignity.

Finally, *Wedlock of the Gods* presents marriage, religion and family authority as interconnected structures through which women's lives are regulated. Ogwoma's experience demonstrates how patriarchal expectations concerning marital fidelity, sexuality, widowhood and family honour can restrict female agency. Religious and cultural beliefs intensify these restrictions when they are interpreted as unquestionable moral obligations.

Yet Sofola's play does not reduce Ogwoma to a passive victim. Her desire for Uloko represents an assertion of personal agency in a society that attempts to determine the limits of her emotional and sexual life. The tragedy lies partly in the inability of the surrounding social order to accommodate that agency.

When compared with Aidoo's *Anowa*, Sofola's play reveals both commonalities and differences in African women's dramatic representations of patriarchy. Anowa challenges patriarchal authority through independence, marital choice and moral resistance, while Ogwoma challenges it through emotional and sexual self-determination. Both women, however, encounter social systems that regulate women's bodies, relationships and identities.

It goes to say that, the two plays suggest that family expectations, communal judgement, and religious sanction significantly bolster patriarchal authority. Their

feminist significance therefore lies in their exposure of the human cost of treating inherited gender arrangements as unquestionable. By placing women's experiences at the centre of their tragedies, Aidoo and Sofola create dramatic spaces in which cultural and religious assumptions about womanhood can be questioned, reinterpreted and challenged.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study has examined the relationship between women, religion and patriarchy in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa* and Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* through a feminist-theological framework. The analysis has demonstrated that both plays use the experiences of women to interrogate social arrangements in which marriage, sexuality, motherhood, family authority and religious or cultural beliefs become mechanisms for regulating female behaviour. Although Aidoo and Sofola employ different dramatic contexts and narrative strategies, both playwrights reveal the tensions that emerge when women's individual agency comes into conflict with patriarchal expectations.

In *Anowa*, Aidoo constructs a female protagonist whose independence challenges conventional assumptions about womanhood. Anowa refuses to accept a marriage chosen for her, insists upon making her own decisions and questions the moral consequences of her husband's economic activities. Her resistance demonstrates that women's agency extends beyond the domestic sphere and includes the capacity to make independent moral, economic and personal choices. Nevertheless, the tragedy of Anowa also reveals the persistence of patriarchal expectations. Her identity continues to be judged in relation to marriage, motherhood and social conformity. Her inability to fit comfortably within these categories contributes to her increasing alienation from the community.

Wedlock of the Gods similarly demonstrates the consequences of restricting women's personal and sexual agency. Ogwoma's experience reveals how marriage, widowhood, family honour and traditional religious beliefs can combine to limit a woman's freedom to determine her emotional and sexual life. Her relationship with Uloko represents an attempt to assert personal desire against a social system that regards marital and sexual behaviour as matters subject to communal regulation. The tragedy that follows reveals the destructive consequences of a social order that reinforces patriarchal expectations through religious and cultural sanctions.

A comparison of the two plays reveals significant similarities. Both Aidoo and Sofola portray marriage as more than a private relationship between a man and a woman. Marriage functions as a social institution through which families and communities regulate women's sexuality, reproductive capacity and social identity. Both

plays also demonstrate that women's bodies can become sites of communal control. Anowa is judged partly through expectations surrounding motherhood, while Ogwoma's sexuality is regulated through expectations concerning marital fidelity and widowhood.

The plays also demonstrate that patriarchy is not sustained exclusively by men. It can become embedded within families, communities and cultural practices and can consequently be reproduced by both women and men. Anowa's mother and the communal expectations surrounding Ogwoma exert pressure, illustrating how patriarchal values can become normalised within everyday social relations. This observation is important because it moves the analysis beyond a simple opposition between male oppressors and female victims. Patriarchy is presented as a system of beliefs and practices that can be internalised and reproduced across generations.

At the same time, neither play suggests that African culture nor is religion inherently oppressive. Such a conclusion would oversimplify the complex relationship between religion, culture and gender in African societies. Rather, the plays demonstrate that the **interpretation and application of religious and cultural beliefs** are central to the production of gender relations. Religious traditions can be used to legitimise existing hierarchies when their interpretations are treated as unquestionable. Conversely, cultural and religious traditions can become resources for ethical reflection, community, dignity and resistance when they are interpreted in ways that recognise women's humanity and agency.

The feminist-theological framework is therefore significant because it does not require the rejection of religion. Instead, it provides a critical method for examining whose voices are heard, whose experiences are considered authoritative and whose interests are protected by particular interpretations of religious tradition. From this perspective, the experiences of Anowa and Ogwoma become important sources of knowledge. Their suffering, resistance and attempts at self-definition expose assumptions about womanhood that might otherwise remain unquestioned.

The study consequently argues that African drama provides an important space for interrogating the relationship between religion and gender. Aidoo and Sofola do not merely represent women as victims of tradition; they dramatise women as thinking, desiring and morally conscious subjects who negotiate, resist and sometimes reproduce the structures surrounding them. Their plays therefore complicate conventional understandings of African women's oppression by showing that agency and constraint can coexist within the same individual experience.

Ultimately, *Anowa* and *Wedlock of the Gods* illustrate that simply identifying religion or culture as the problem does not lead to women's liberation. A more productive approach involves critically engaging with the interpretations, institutions, and practices that transmit cultural and religious values. The central challenge is to distinguish between traditions that affirm human dignity

and interpretations that legitimise inequality. Such an approach allows African feminist theology and African dramatic criticism to engage culture critically without treating African cultural identity itself as inherently incompatible with women's liberation.

Recommendations

1. Promote Gender-Sensitive Theological Interpretation

Theological interpretation in African contexts should pay greater attention to women's lived experiences. Religious texts, traditions and practices should be examined critically where their interpretation contributes to the normalisation of women's subordination. Gender-sensitive theological approaches should recognise women as active interpreters of religious traditions rather than merely subjects to whom those traditions are applied.

2. Encourage Inclusive Cultural Practices

Cultural practices relating to marriage, widowhood, sexuality and family responsibilities should be critically evaluated where they restrict women's dignity and agency. The preservation of cultural identity should not require the preservation of practices that deny women equal moral and social standing. Inclusive cultural approaches can retain valuable communal traditions while allowing space for women's participation, consent and self-determination.

3. Strengthen Women's Agency in Religious and Cultural Institutions

Women should have greater opportunities to participate in institutions responsible for interpreting and transmitting religious and cultural values. Increased female participation in religious leadership, community decision-making, cultural organisations and educational institutions can contribute to more inclusive interpretations of tradition.

4. Integrate African Feminist Theology into Literary Scholarship

African literary scholarship should make greater use of African feminist theological perspectives when examining representations of women, religion and culture. Such approaches can complement established feminist and postcolonial frameworks by drawing attention to the spiritual and theological dimensions of women's experiences in African societies.

5. Provide Greater Attention to Women's Agency in African Drama

Future scholarship on African drama should avoid

interpreting female characters exclusively through the categories of victimhood and oppression. Characters such as Anowa and Ogwoma should also be examined as agents who make choices, negotiate constraints, challenge authority and construct alternative understandings of themselves. Attention to agency produces more nuanced interpretations of women's representation in African literature.

6. Encourage Further Comparative Research

Future studies could extend this analysis by examining other African playwrights and dramatic texts that explore the intersections of gender, religion, culture and social authority. Comparative research across different African societies could reveal both common patterns and important cultural differences in the ways women negotiate patriarchal structures.

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