



Research Paper

## Patriarchal Exploitation and the Commodification of Women in the Ghanaian Society

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### Abstract:

*This article examines patriarchal exploitation and the commodification of women in Ghanaian society through a character analysis of Eno Yaa in *The Storyteller's Tale* by E.K. Amponsah. Grounded in African feminist theory and theory and qualitative textual analysis, the study explores how Eno Yaa embodies the contradictions of women's indispensability and vulnerability with patriarchal systems. Her life illustrates how women are commodified through marriage, domestic labour, and reproductive roles, yet simultaneously denied agency and protection. At the same time, her responses ranging from endurance to symbolic acts of resistance reflect ambivalence of female agency in male dominated structures. Drawing on concepts such as Mohanty's "contradictory positioning" of African women and Nnaemeka's Nego-feminism, the article situates Eno Yaa's experience within broader feminist and post-colonial discourses. The findings reveal that while her character highlights systemic disempowerment, she also challenges the hypocrisies of patriarchy and points toward the possibility of reimagining womanhood. The study affirms the role of Ghanaian theatre as a critical space for interrogating gendered injustices and advancing the goals of social transformation.*

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Commodification, African Feminism, Ghanaian Theatre, Gender Inequality, Eno Yaa

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### I. Introduction

In the burgeoning field of African theatre and gender studies, the *Storyteller's Tale* stands out as an artistic expression that interrogates the lived realities of women within patriarchal systems. Set in a culturally familiar yet socially critical Ghanaian milieu, the play by Prof. E.K. Amponsah deploys narrative storytelling and performative techniques to expose and critique gendered injustices embedded within traditional and modern Ghanaian society. Central to this theatrical narrative is the character of Eno Yaa, whose life trajectory, marked by domestic subjugation, social betrayal, and gendered marginalization, functions as both a mirror and a magnifying glass for the broader patriarchal structures that continue to shape women's experiences across the country. As a dramatic figure, Eno Yaa is not merely a fictional creation; she is a symbolic archetype, embodying the socio-economic and emotional tolls exacted on women commodified by familial and societal expectations.

This article situates *The Storyteller's Tale* within the broader framework of Ghanaian literary discourse and sociocultural critique, arguing that the play offers a commentary on gendered exploitation and the commodification of women. While Ghana has made legislative and policy strides toward gender equity, theatre continues to reflect a society wherein women are often positioned as transactional entities, negotiated through marriage, motherhood, and service, rather than autonomous agents (Bhattacharjee, 2025). The play, therefore,

functions not just as entertainment, but as a politicized space that exposes and questions these entrenched norms. As such, it demands critical scholarly attention, particularly through the lens of African feminist theory and postcolonial gender studies.

This study identifies a pressing research problem: the representation and critique of patriarchal exploitation and commodification of women in Ghanaian dramaturgy, using Eno Yaa as a focal case. Specifically, the article seeks to understand how Eno Yaa's narrative arc dramatizes the intersection of gender, power, and economic utility, elements that both structure and constrain female subjectivity in a patriarchal Ghanaian context. Her story raises complex questions about agency, complicity, and subversion within male-dominated spaces. By engaging in a close character analysis, this paper explores whether Eno Yaa conforms to or resists these systems of control, and what her responses reveal about the potential for female resistance in Ghanaian society.

The objectives of this article are twofold: first, to examine how Eno Yaa's character functions as a literary representation of systemic gender oppression; and second, to investigate whether the character's actions, whether of resistance, submission, or ambivalence, offer pathways for reimagining womanhood in the Ghanaian socio-political imagination. In this context, three key research questions are posed:

1. How is Eno Yaa exploited under patriarchal norms within the play's sociocultural setting?
2. In what ways is she commodified by familial, romantic, and communal relationships, and what does this imply about the valuation of women in Ghanaian society?
3. Does she resist, conform to, or subvert the gendered power structures that confine her?

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to African feminist literary criticism, especially in highlighting how creative texts such as *The Storyteller's Tale* engage in gender advocacy through narrative form. Drawing on intersectional feminism and postcolonial performance theory, this article underscores how African theatre can serve as a dynamic platform for contesting hegemonic gender ideologies and reimagining sociocultural realities. More broadly, the study aligns with the global development agenda articulated in Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality), affirming that literature and performance are not merely artistic endeavors but critical interventions in the struggle for justice and equity.

This article proceeds in five sections. The first reviews related literature, drawing on African feminist thought, commodification theory, and postcolonial gender critique. The second explains the methodological approach, grounded in qualitative textual and performance analysis. The third offers a detailed character analysis of Eno Yaa, highlighting scenes and dialogic elements that reflect patriarchal exploitation. The fourth section discusses the broader implications of her commodification and possible acts of resistance. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes the findings and reflects on the role of theatre as a transformative cultural practice in the pursuit of gender equity in Ghana and beyond.

## **II. Literature Review**

### **Patriarchy and Gender Roles in African and Ghanaian Societies**

Patriarchy, both as a structural system and a lived reality, has been widely theorized in African feminist scholarship as a mechanism of gendered control that intersects with colonial, religious, and economic forces (Yacob-Haliso, & Falola, 2021). Saidi, Fourshey, & Gonzales, (2021) argues that gender as a rigid social category is a colonial imposition on African societies, which traditionally structured identity more through seniority and lineage than binary sex. However, Yari, & Extension (2024) contend that while precolonial African societies were not strictly egalitarian, they offered women distinct forms of authority, roles that were later diminished by the patriarchal dualisms entrenched through colonial modernity.

In the Ghanaian context, Tachie, (2023) avers that, patriarchy operates through cultural institutions such as chieftaincy, customary marriage, and inheritance systems. Dodoo, & Vaughan, (2024) states that, these systems define women's identities relationally, often as daughters, wives, or mothers, thereby limiting their agency. Within family structures, Ghanaian women are frequently socialized into roles of submission and domesticity, as affirmed by the pervasive proverb: "*A woman's glory is in her husband.*" This framing is reinforced in many Pentecostal-Charismatic teachings, where spiritual piety and feminine virtue are tied to obedience and service to male authority (Nrenzah, 2024).

According to Ruslin (2022), women operate within patriarchal systems, they also resist, negotiate, and subvert these structures in complex ways. The domestic sphere, often seen as a site of women's oppression, can also become a site of quiet power through economic contribution, child socialization, or even religious influence. Nonetheless, these negotiations often occur within tightly controlled boundaries, where female ambition is circumscribed by social expectations of humility, chastity, and endurance.

Patriarchy in African and Ghanaian societies work both as a system and as a way of life that shapes how men and women relate to each other. It often defines women mainly through their roles as wives, mothers, or daughters, which limits how much freedom they have to act on their own. Cultural practices such as chieftaincy, inheritance, and marriage customs strengthen this order, while religious teachings also tie a woman's value to obedience and service to men. At the same time, women are not simply powerless under these structures. Many

find ways to influence family decisions, contribute economically, and guide social or religious life, even if such influence happens quietly and within set boundaries. The challenge is that these efforts, while showing women's resilience, often do not break the system itself but keep it going by trying their importance to service and sacrifice. In this way, patriarchy continues to shape everyday life in Ghana, leaving women negotiating for recognition while still bound by roles that limit their independence.

### **The Commodification of Women**

The commodification of women in African societies, manifested through practices like bride price, polygamy, transactional sex, and economic dependency has been a recurring subject of literary and ethnographic critique (Akurugu, Dery, & Domanban, 2022).

In sociological analysis of marriage in Ghana, bride price occupies a central position as both a cultural symbol and a contested practice. On one hand, it is traditionally understood as a gesture of respect, a way of formalizing the union of families and affirming the social value of the woman within her kin group. On the other, when examined through a feminist lens, the practice reveals a transactional logic that reduces women to commodities of exchange. The act of transferring resources from the groom's family to the bride's family implicitly attaches an economic value to the woman, which can foster expectations male entitlement to her body, labor, and obedience within marriage. This framing risks positioning women less as partners in a mutual relationship and more as assets acquired by men, whose worth is measured in economic rather than personal or social terms. As a result, the institution of marriage in Ghana often becomes a site where gender inequality is normalized, with women entering unions under the shadow of commodification, even while the cultural narrative continues to emphasize respect and tradition.

In Amma Darko's *Faceless* and *Not Without Flowers*, female characters are caught within urban poverty and gendered exploitation, often forced into sex work or abusive marriages (Okolo, & Ogbele, 2024). In Amma Darko's *Faceless* and *Not Without Flowers*, women's lives reveal how poverty and patriarchy intersect to commodify the female body. Forced into sex work, abusive marriages, or exploitative labor, their worth is reduced to what they can provide for survival. Darko underscores that commodification is not symbolic but a daily reality for women whose agency is constrained by economic need and gendered control.

Adeetuk & Yeboah (2025) mapped how economic vulnerability makes women susceptible to transactional relationships, particularly in urban Ghana. The phenomenon of "sugar daddies" or "blessers," though framed by some as expressions of female agency, often mask structural dependencies born from gendered inequality and limited opportunities. These practices mirror and perpetuate a commodified view of femininity where women's value is linked to their sexual availability, reproductive labor, and aesthetic appeal.

### **Intersection of Literature and Society**

African literature does not merely reflect gendered realities, it interrogates them, sometimes subtly, sometimes overtly (Saqlain, 2024). Ghanaian authors, particularly women, have turned to fiction as a space for social critique and reclamation. Writers like Ama Ata Aidoo foreground female characters who disrupt patriarchal logics through intellectual, emotional, or even spiritual defiance. Aidoo's *Changes* is a striking example of a modern Ghanaian woman who seeks love outside marriage, challenging both Islamic and Akan gender scripts. Yet even this freedom is fraught with tension, revealing how deep patriarchal structures constrain even the most 'liberated' women (Arhin-Asamoah, 2023).

African literature functions not only as a mirror of gendered realities but also as a site of interrogation, exposing the contradictions and tensions embedded within patriarchal cultures. In Ghanaian writing, particularly by female authors, fiction becomes a space for critique and reclamation, where women characters resist social scripts imposed on them. Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes* illustrates this vividly, with its portrayal of Esi, a woman who seeks love and fulfillment outside marriage, thereby defying both Islamic and Akan gender expectations. Yet, her so-called liberation is unstable, for the deep structures of patriarchy continue to shape her choices, relationships, and social perception. What becomes clear is that resistance alone does not dismantle entrenched hierarchies. A critical dimension often overlooked in both literature and sociology is the intergenerational transmission of patriarchal values, where mothers, through socialization, perpetuate the very systems that limit them. In *Changes* and other Ghanaian texts, maternal figures often instruct daughters in obedience, endurance, and marital submission, thus reproducing the cycle of female subordination. This recursive pattern suggests that literature's interrogation of patriarchy must account not only for the overt domination of men but also for the subtle complicity of women who, shaped by their own oppression, pass on patriarchal norms as cultural inheritance.

### **Gaps, and Future Directions**

Despite the richness of African and Ghanaian feminist literature, several silences remain. First, rural women's experiences are often subsumed under generalized narratives, leaving their specific socio-economic struggles underrepresented. Secondly, there is a dearth of literary and academic work that incorporates queer perspectives or non-Christian cosmologies in discussing gender and commodification. Given Ghana's diverse

religious and cultural landscape, such omissions limit our understanding of how gender operates across belief systems.

Furthermore, while the commodification of women is widely critiqued, few studies explore how economic structures such as capitalism and neoliberalism reinforce patriarchal exploitation. The shift from traditional bride price to modern consumer relationships, where love is measured by economic security, demands a critical rethinking of how patriarchy adapts to contemporary economies.

The analysis of Eno Yaa in *The Storyteller's Tale* seeks to fill some of these gaps. Positioned at the intersection of sexuality, power, and survival, Eno Yaa embodies the lived contradictions of commodification. Her character provides a lens through which to interrogate not only patriarchal exploitation but also the complicity of societal institutions, families, churches, and communities in sustaining the commodification of women. This study thus contributes to a growing body of feminist scholarship that seeks to reclaim African female subjectivity not through idealization but through critical engagement with the systems that shape and constrain it.

### **III. Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative research approach grounded in textual analysis. By *examining The Storyteller's Tale* as a primary source, the study aims to explore how patriarchal systems exploit and commodify women through literary representation, particularly in Ghanaian society. Textual analysis is appropriate as it allows for an in-depth interpretation of the language and character (Chew, Bollenbacher, Wenger, Speer, & Kim, 2023).

The study is situated within the framework of feminist literary criticism, with a focus on African feminist perspectives. Feminist theory challenges dominant patriarchal narratives and seeks to amplify the voices and experiences of women (Kumar, & Daves, 2024). Specifically, African feminist thinkers such as Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie and Ama Ata Aidoo are critical to this analysis, as they emphasize the unique intersections of gender, tradition, and postcolonial identity in African contexts. Ogundipe-Leslie's concept of "*stiwanism*" Social Transformation including Women in Africa provides a lens for understanding the socio-political and cultural underpinnings of female oppression in African literature (Okpokwasili, 2025).

The primary analytical methods used are character analysis and thematic analysis. Through close reading, the study examines the portrayal of Eno Yaa, paying attention to her relationships, choices, and narrative function within the play. Key themes such as marriage as a transactional institution, women's economic dependence, societal expectations of femininity are critically analyzed to demonstrate how patriarchal systems commodify women.

Eno Yaa is chosen as the central character for analysis due to her complex representation as both a product and victim of patriarchal expectations. Her narrative arc offers insight into the psychological and culturally impact of commodification on Ghanaian women.

Secondary sources and scholarly critiques on African feminist theory and Ghanaian literature will support the analysis, helping to contextualize the findings within broader socio-cultural discourses.

### **Analysis and Discussion of Eno Yaa**

Eno Yaa's characterization in *The Storyteller's Tale* dramatizes the systemic exploitation and commodification of women within a patriarchal Ghanaian context. Introduced as a "gift" given to Agya Adwuma by a god in exchange for sparing an antelope, she enters the narrative not as an autonomous agent but as a transactional reward. This act of transfer situates her within what Gayle Rubin (1975) terms the "sex/gender system," where women's identities are defined by their utility to men and by their circulation as social capital in patriarchal economies. Within Agya Adwuma's household, Eno Yaa's identity is narrowly circumscribed by domestic labor and reproduction. Her value lies in her ability to cook, nurture, and bear a son role consistent with patriarchal expectations of women as the foundation of the home but not its owners. Her lament after stepping on the fish bone, *Agya, you couldn't protect me, you couldn't protect us, you couldn't protect all these; your fortune, Agya, everything is ruined*, highlights the fragility of women's wellbeing in patriarchal societies. Although central to her husband's prosperity, she is also the most vulnerable, reflecting what Mohanty (2017) critiques as the "contradictory positioning" of African women as indispensable yet systematically disempowered within kinship and economic structures. Eno Yaa's characterization brings to the fore the deep contradictions within patriarchal systems. She is central to her husband's prosperity, as labour, loyalty, and sacrifices provide the foundation for his social and economic advancement. Yet, this indispensability does not translate into protection or empowerment; rather, it exposes her to heightened vulnerability. Yet, this indispensability does not translate into protection or empowerment, rather, it exposes her heightened vulnerability. This aligns with Mohanty's (2017) critique of the contradictory positioning of African women as both celebrated and disempowered within kinship and economic structures. What makes Eno Yaa particularly significant is that her presence not only highlights systemic exploitation but also points to the possibility of resistance. Her responses whether through silent endurance, hesitant negotiation, or subtle acts of defiance become moments that question and expose the hypocrisy of a system that thrives on her contributions while denying her agency. Thus, Eno Yaa is not merely a victim but a

critical lens through which we see both the persistence of patriarchal exploitation and the potential, pathways for women's autonomy and reimagined roles within society.

At the same time, moments of resistance emerge. Eno Yaa's attempted departure with Oyinka constitutes a symbolic challenge to patrilineal inheritance systems that typically vest children in the father's lineage. By asserting maternal authority over her son, she momentarily subverts patriarchal lineage claims. Yet her resistance is thwarted, reinforcing Nnaemeka's (2004) observation that African women's negotiations of patriarchy often manifest as "Nego-feminism," a strategy of compromise and survival within oppressive structures. Her oscillation between conformity (accepting domestic roles), grievance (lamenting her marginalization by Auntie Peasem), and resistance (seeking to claim Oyinka) illustrates the ambivalence of women's agency under patriarchal constraints. Through Eno Yaa's fate, the play critiques systemic gender inequality. She is commodified as capital, burdened with blame for male failures, and rendered disposable once the patriarchal contract collapses. Her plight resonates with SDG 5's targets, particularly the elimination of discrimination (Target 5.1), the recognition of unpaid care work (Target 5.4), and the assurance of women's autonomy over family life (Target 5.6). As Bertolt (2018) reminds us, African gender systems are not mere reflections of Western patriarchal models but operate through distinct cultural logics. Yet, *The Storyteller's Tale* shows how these logics converge in the commodification of women, whether through kinship exchange, domestic labor, or reproductive control.

In conclusion, Eno Yaa symbolizes both the exploited condition of women in Ghanaian society and the possibility of resistance that, though stifled, gestures toward transformation. Her story underscores that cultural narratives do not only reflect gender norms but also provide critical sites for reimagining womanhood and advancing gender justice. By situating Eno Yaa's characterization within SDG 5, the play bridges literature and social critique, affirming that dismantling patriarchal valuations of women is integral to broader societal transformation.

#### IV. Conclusion

This study has shown that patriarchal exploitation and the commodification of women are deeply rooted in Ghanaian society and remain visible in cultural narratives such as *The Storyteller's Tale*. The character of Eno Yaa reflects how women are valued mainly for their labour, obedience, and ability to reproduce, while their individuality and agency are often ignored. She is treated as property, first given away as a gift and later reduced to her role as wife and mother. These conditions make her central to her husband's success yet leave her exposed and vulnerable when his fortune collapses. At the same time, Eno Yaa's experiences reveal that women are not only victims but also negotiators of their circumstances. Her attempts to claim authority over her son and her small acts of defiance show that resistance, though limited, is always possible. This connects with the idea of nego-feminism, which explains how African women often survive patriarchy through negotiation and compromise rather than outright rejection of cultural systems.

The play therefore does more than tell a story; it becomes a tool for questioning how women are treated in Ghanaian society. It invites us to think about change, reminding us that dismantling patriarchal structures is necessary for building a society where women are valued as full human beings and not as commodities. In this way, theatre serves not only as entertainment but also as a cultural space for reflection, critique, and transformation toward gender justice.

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