
Staging Patriarchy: Gendered Power and Female Devaluation in Alex Roy-Omoni's *Morontonu*

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Abstract

This study interrogates the dramatic representation of patriarchal authority and female devaluation in Alex Roy-Omoni's *Morontonu* through the theoretical lens of African Feminism, supplemented by insights from Radical Feminism. While African Feminism provides a culturally grounded framework for examining gender relations within indigenous social structures, Radical Feminism sharpens the critique of patriarchy as a system of institutionalized male dominance. The paper argues that the play stages patriarchy not merely as a background social condition but as an active organizing principle that regulates power, worth and identity within the polygamous household. Through dialogue, characterization and domestic conflict, male authority is normalized, while female value is measured in relation to obedience, fertility and competition for masculine validation. The study further contends that polygamy functions in the play as a dramatic site where jealousy, rivalry and betrayal are not accidental moral failings but structural consequences of gendered hierarchy. By exposing how women internalize and reproduce patriarchal logic even as they suffer under it, the play reveals the cyclical nature of female marginalization within culturally sanctioned systems. In essence, this paper demonstrates that *Morontonu* offers a critical theatrical interrogation of gendered power, making visible the cultural mechanisms that sustain female subordination in traditional African society.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Identity, Conflict, Marginalization, African, Society

Introduction

African drama has consistently served as a cultural arena in which questions of gender authority and social hierarchy are staged and contested. Within many traditional African societies, patriarchy operates as an organizing principle that privileges male authority while situating women within structures of dependence and limited agency. African feminist scholars argue that such gendered arrangements are neither natural nor inevitable but are historically produced and culturally maintained systems of power (Molara Ogundipe-Leslie 1994: 15). Rather than adopting Western feminist universalism, African Feminism insists on examining women's experiences within indigenous socio-cultural contexts, recognizing both the constraints imposed by patriarchy and the strategies women deploy to negotiate survival and dignity (Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo 2012: 3).

Radical feminist theory further deepens this criticism by conceptualizing patriarchy as a

pervasive political system embedded in social institutions, including literature and performance. Kate Millet (1970: 25) defines patriarchy as a structure in which "male shall dominate female" across ideological and material domains. From this perspective, literary texts do not merely reflect gender inequality but actively reproduce, legitimize or challenge it through narrative form, characterization and symbolic representation.

In Alex Roy-Omoni's *Morontonu* patriarchy is not a distant cultural abstraction but a lived domestic reality dramatized through polygamous family relations. The play foregrounds how masculine authority is normalized, while female worth is measured through obedience, reproductive capacity and proximity to male approval.

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie observes, African women's subordination often operates through internalized cultural expectations that compel women to participate in sustaining patriarchal norms (1994: 19). In *Morontonu*, rivalry, jealousy and

betrayal within the polygamous household emerge not as personal moral failings but as structural consequences of a gender hierarchy that distributes value inequality.

By invoking African Feminism as its primary theoretical lens, supported by Radical Feminism's structural analysis of male dominance, this study examines how *Morontonu* stages patriarchy as both cultural script and performative reality. The play ultimately reveals how gendered power is constructed, dramatized and reproduced within domestic space, thereby offering a critical theatrical interrogation of female devaluation in a traditionally sanctioned social order.

Theoretical Framework

This study is theoretically grounded in African Feminism, with supplementary insights drawn from Radical Feminism. African Feminism emerges as a critical response to the universalizing tendencies of Western feminist discourse, insisting that African women's experiences must be interpreted within historically

specific cultural, social and economic contexts. Rather than rejecting tradition wholesale, African feminist thought explores how cultural systems simultaneously enable communal identity and sustain gendered hierarchies (Molara Ogundipe-Leslie 1994: 28). It recognizes patriarchy as embedded within kinship structures, religious practices and customary laws that regulate female sexuality, labour and social mobility.

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie's conceptualization of "Sitwanism" (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa) is particularly instructive as it frames women's marginalization as structurally linked to political, cultural and economic institutions rather than merely interpersonal bias (1994: 36). Within this framework, patriarchy is not an abstract ideology but a lived social arrangement reproduced through everyday practice. Similarly Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's "Snail-sense Feminism" emphasizes strategic negotiation and resilience, arguing that African women often

maneuver within oppressive systems in subtle but significant ways rather than through overt rebellion (2012: 12). These perspectives are especially relevant to dramatic texts where female characters may appear submissive while simultaneously revealing the tensions and contradictions inherent in patriarchal domestic structures.

African Feminism also interrogates the politics of polygamy without reducing it to a simplistic moral binary. While acknowledging its cultural embeddedness, scholars argue that polygamous arrangements frequently institutionalize unequal power relations that privilege male authority and generate rivalry among women competing for emotional, economic and reproductive validation (Chioma Opara 2006: 52). Such rivalry is not merely psychological but structurally induced, reflecting what African feminist critics identify as the internalization of patriarchal value systems.

To reinforce this culturally grounded framework, Radical Feminism provides a structural analysis of patriarchy as a system of male dominance. Kate Millet's foundational argument that patriarchy operates as a political institution shaping ideology, representation and sexual relations remains central to feminist literary criticism (1970: 23). Radical Feminism exposes how literary texts may normalize male supremacy by integrating it within narrative logic and characters construction. It further contends that gender hierarchy is sustained through symbolic representation, making drama a particularly potent site for examining how authority is staged and legitimized.

The convergence of African Feminism and Radical Feminism allows this study to balance cultural specificity with structural evaluation. African Feminism position *Morontonu* within indigenous socio-cultural realities, while Radical Feminism illuminates the systemic mechanisms of female devaluation installed in patriarchal

domesticity. Together, these frameworks facilitate an analysis of how gendered power is dramatized, internalized and reproduced within the polygamous household. By combining contextual sensitivity with structural interrogation, this theoretical approach enables a nuanced reading of the play's representation of masculine authority and female subjectivity.

Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with gender dynamics in African drama has expanded significantly over the past three decades, exploring how theatrical texts both reflect and criticize socio-cultural constructions of male authority and female subordination. Early critical literary works in this area highlighted the ways in which African drama often mirrors societal norms that privilege male voices and marginalize women, calling attention to the performative reproduction of gendered power structures on stage. For instance, Eustace Palmer argues that gender representations in postcolonial African plays frequently enact

traditional; roles that reinforce patriarchal hierarchies, even as they gesture toward modernity and social reform (1979: 102).

Subsequent studies have applied feminist lenses to reveal the ideological underpinnings of gendered characterizations in specific literary works. In her analysis of polygamous domesticity in West African theatre, this study demonstrates that women characters are often positioned in relation to male protagonists, with their identities constructed around matrimonial loyalty, fertility and obedience rather than autonomous subjectivity. Similarly, Ademola Dasylva's assessment of postcolonial patrilineal narratives shows how dramatic language and plot structure can naturalize masculine authority, thereby making male dominance appear culturally legitimate rather than socially constructed (2017: 47).

Within African feminist criticism, scholars have moved beyond descriptive accounts of gender representation to interrogate how

cultural norms shape both authorial perspective and audience interpretation. Molara Ogundipe-Leslie's seminal literary work on indigenous feminist praxis emphasizes that Africa women writers and dramatists often navigate patriarchal cultural terrains by producing literary texts that expose contradictions and tensions within gendered power relations (1994: 21). This approach resituates drama as a site for contesting normative gender roles rather than merely replicating them.

In the context of polygamy and intra-household conflict, critical voices such as Chioma Opara highlight how competition between co-wives in African narratives can be interpreted as both a symptom of patriarchal structures and a source of female agency, complicating simplistic readings of women's oppression (2006: 56). These debates resonate with the recent scholarship of Rosemary Diala, who contends that jealousy and betrayal in polygamous households, while appearing as personal moral dilemmas, are

structurally produced by unequal access to economic and emotional resources, which are themselves gendered (2020: 134).

Despite this growing body of literary works, there remains a relative paucity of research that specifically examines contemporary Nigerian plays through the dual lenses of African Feminist and Radical Feminism. Existing studies tend to either adopt a broad postcolonial framework or focus on canonical texts from East and Southern Africa, leaving West African dramatic texts under-theorized. In addressing this gap, some critics have begun to explore how Nigerian theatre negotiates traditional values and modern feminist insights arguing that such literary texts reveal the complexity of navigating cultural heritage while critiquing gender inequality (Wale Adebaniwi 2018: 209). This line of inquiry aligns with the current study's focus on *Morontonu*, foregrounding how gendered power operates within culturally sanctioned practices such as polygamy and how dramatic

representation can both mirror and challenge gender hierarchies.

The literature surveyed here thus provides a robust foundation for analyzing *Morontonu* within ongoing critical conversations about gender, culture and power in African drama. Through the use of these scholarly standpoints, the present study frames the play in a comprehensive discourse that recognizes both the cultural specificity of gender constructions and the structural mechanisms through which patriarchy is dramatized and contested.

Dramatizing Patriarchy: Masculine Authority and Female Marginalization in *Morontonu*

Alex Roy-Omoni's *Morontonu* dramatizes the cultural and structural mechanisms of patriarchy by depicting how masculine authority is institutionalized within the domestic sphere and polygamous household. From the opening scenes, male characters are portrayed as the ultimate arbiters of decision-making, with their authority rarely questioned by female characters:

KING: But or no but, I am sad to inform you that my fourth wife has given birth to the twenty third princess (6).

BALOGUN: Kabiyesi, they will be here any moment from now, Regarding the other aspect of our discussion may be you are not doing your homework properly. I mean may be you are always tired before the race begins (6).

KING: Balogun, what else can a man do when such action is only subject to natural laws? But remember, the paddler with just a paddle in the middle of the river needs more than his strength to land him to safety without breaking his only paddle (6).

KING: Balogun, what pains me most is that my enemies are rejoicing over my predicament and something keeps telling me that they have a hand in the matter (7).

The play positions the male head of the household as both morally and socially superior, enforcing obedience and loyalty among the women in his family:

BALOGUN: If it is the work of the enemy, then we have cause to rejoice because we can always call the oracle to tell us what to do in order to defeat our enemy as Orisa-nla has been doing in the past (7 -8).

KING: Imagine a whole me, trying four wives and each failing to produce a male child (8).

BALOGUN: We must be optimistic and not pessimistic Kabiyesi. Our prayer is that may

our enemies live long to see what we shall become in future. Your case is not exceptional Kabiyesi. Remember king Ayegbege who produced fifty daughters with ten wives but no son and lived peacefully till his death (8).

KING: Who will continue the expansionist policy when I am gone? Who will? Do you now understand why I am troubled? (8).

This hierarchal structuring aligns with African feminist criticism that emphasize how cultural norms legitimize male dominance while devaluing female agency:

KING: Welcome to you all, my people. I sent for you in order to brief you of matters that constitute a cog in the beautiful wheel of our traditional heritage. I hereby announce to you the birth of the twenty-

third princess and to add to this, the mother named her Inumidun, that is, “My soul rejoices”. *The chiefs turn to glance at one another.* Tell me, is there any possibility of rejoicing when that name keeps reminding me of my incapacibilities and inability to produce an heir? (9).

Female characters in *Morontonu* are defined in relation to men, often reduced to their roles as wives, mothers or sources of household labour. Their personal desires and ambitions are subordinated to the expectations imposed by the patriarchal household, illustrating what Radical Feminism identifies as systemic female marginalization (Kate Millet 1970: 25). The tensions arising from polygamy – jealousy, rivalry and betrayal- further exemplify how women internalize patriarchal values, competing for the approval and resources allocated by male authority figures:

LABAKE: Abeni, nine months are over. Morontonu has achieved what we could not achieve. She has produced the heir to the throne. Now, the king’s attention is on her because she has succeeded where we all have failed. She has been delivered of a baby boy (45).

ABENI: We all tried our bests to produce a male child, but Orisnla, the giver of children has refused to give us (45).

LABAKE: Do you know that since Morontonu put to bed, Olori Awelewa has not been happy at all? She greets nobody; she is very aggressive and deadly (46).

ABENI: Don't mind the old witch. You can imagine, the person to whom a case is reported says she is in trouble. Tell me, what does she want the affected in the case to say? (46).

For instance, the rivalry between co-wives over recognition and the favour of the patriarchy demonstrates that the domestic conflict is not merely interpersonal but structurally enforced.

Alex Roy-Omoni uses dialogue and stage directions to show the normalized power of men and the limited autonomy of women. In one scene, female characters are explicitly instructed to seek permission before engaging in household decisions, reinforcing their subordinate status:

IYA MORO: *(After a moment of silence)*
Morontonu my daughter, please when you get to the palace, make sure you comport yourself. Remember the

daughter of whom you are, Always mind your business. As the king's favourite wife, the other wives may be jealous of you. Don't make trouble with anybody. All you need to do is to mind your business. Greet them all time, be respectful to them and obey them (16).

The language of the play often highlights men's authority as natural and unquestionable, while women's speech is constrained, reflective of their marginalized positions. This dramatization of power reflects both the cultural specificity of African patriarchal systems and the broader mechanisms through gender inequality is reproduced, echoing Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie's assertion that women's subordination is both socially constructed and culturally reinforced (1994: 36).

Moreover, the play foregrounds the psychological consequences of patriarchal domination. Women's self-worth is shown as contingent

upon male recognition, which drives the competitive and sometimes destructive interactions between co-wives:

KING: Oh Orisa-nla! What is all this about? In spite of my large kingdom, popularity and influence, minor situations keep me restless. My troubles are more than I could bear. What am I to do next and where do I go from here? After all these years of trying with four wives there is no male child. Who will succeed me? (44).

LABAKE: I suspect Olori Awelewa seriously. Something in me keeps telling me that she is out to plans some evil against Morontonnu (47).

ABENI: The lizard that nods his head for the downfall of his colleagues will die of a

stiff neck. If she plans evil against Morontonnu or evil against the child, she should also expect evil (47).

AWELEWA: It is Morontonnu she has done what I forbid. The child I carry should not see the light of day. It is a gift I brought for you for dinner. Roast him, kill him and devour him. That is the mission (52).

The dramatization of jealousy and betrayal thus serves as a criticism of patriarchal structures, showing that the marginalization of women is systemic rather than merely individual. According to Chukwuka Eugene Ofie, "In both Nigeria and the wider African context, women have consistently faced systemic gender-based inequalities. This is largely due to entrenched socio-cultural norms that perpetuate the oppression, marginalization and devaluation of the female population through various institutional and interpersonal mechanisms". (2025:

38). By illustrating the intersection of male authority, cultural norms and female subordination, *Morontonu* provides a vivid theatrical exploration of how patriarchy operates across systemic and relational dimensions.

Anchored in African Feminism and strengthened by Radical Feminist analysis, *Morotonu* can be read as a deliberate dramatization of patriarchal authority and feminine devaluation. Alex Roy-Omoni's portrayal of domestic hierarchies, polygamous rivalry and the regulation of women's agency underscores the ways in which gendered power is culturally scripted and performed.

Conclusion

The study has examined how Alex Roy-Omoni's *Morotonu* dramatizes the structures and consequences of patriarchy within the culturally sanctioned framework of the polygamous household. Grounded in African Feminism and reinforced by Radical Feminist analysis, the paper has demonstrated that patriarchy in

the play functions not merely as a social backdrop but as an organizing principle that regulates authority, identity and value. Masculine dominance is constructed as normative and culturally legitimate, while female worth is measured through compliance, reproductive capacity and proximity to male approval.

By examining these dynamics through African Feminism, the play does not simply portray women as passive victims; instead, it reveals how patriarchal systems induce women's interactions with one another, fostering rivalry and competition within a structure that limits their autonomy.

Significantly, *Morontonu* transforms the stage into a critical arena where entrenched gender hierarchies are made visible. The dramatic form exposes the fragility beneath seemingly unquestioning male authority and highlights the psychological and emotional costs of sustaining gendered inequality. In doing so, the play encourages

reflection on how cultural traditions can simultaneously preserve communal identity and perpetuate structural imbalance.

This study therefore positions *Morontonu* as an important contribution to contemporary African drama, one that questions the intersection of tradition, power and female subjectivity without resorting to simplistic cultural condemnation. Through its nuanced representation of domestic life, *Morontonu* clarifies the enduring relevance of feminist literary analysis in uncovering the subtle mechanisms through which female marginalization is affirmed and perpetuated.

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