

Performing Patriarchy: Symbolic And Material Dimensions Of Female Commodification In Efua T. Sutherland'S *The Marriage Of Anansewa*

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Abstract

This study explores Efua T. Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa* stages and reinforces patriarchal power through symbolic and material performances of female commodification, using Radical Feminist Literary Theory as its interpretative framework. The analysis argues that the play represents patriarchy not merely as individual male dominance but as a systematic structure enacted through cultural rituals, economic transactions and parental authority. By examining Ananse's orchestrated marriage negotiations, the paper reveals how female identity becomes a site of patriarchal performance in which the daughter is transformed into an object of exchange, valued for her economic utility rather than her agency. The study highlights both the symbolic dimensions – such as cultural expectations, ritualized displays and gendered scripts – and the material dimensions including bridewealth, financial motivations and the commodification of the female body. Through the lens of radical feminism, the paper contends that Efua T. Sutherland's play exposes deeply entrenched patriarchal mechanisms that normalize the reduction of woman to property within social, familial and economic spheres. Ultimately, the research demonstrates that *The Marriage of Anansewa* critiques the pervasive and performative nature of patriarchal control while calling attention to the enduring implications of these gendered power structures in African societies.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Commodification, Culture, Property, Control

Introduction

In many African societies, marriage is not simply a union of individuals but a transactional institution embedded in cultural, economic and patriarchal systems. Practices such as bridewealth or bride-price often constrain women's autonomy by embedding female identity into a framework of economic exchange. As Akurugu, Benjamin T., et al (2022: 3) observe, "the marriage payment (bridewealth) frequently "sculpts" women's identities and their social positioning in patrilineal and patriarchal societies. This transforms a women's social status from daughter to wife, a shift that often diminishes her agency within the marital home.

Efua T. Sutherland dramatizes this dynamics in *The Marriage of Anansewa*, transforming traditional Akan folklore into a criticism of patriarchy, economic desperation and the commodification of female bodies. Ernest Mensah and Biney Eradzi (2021: 6) note in the play, "the female body assumes an exchange value status". When economic or social wealth is absent. The father, Ananse, treats his daughter not as an autonomous individual but as an asset to be negotiated through marriage. Similarly, a study analyzing African cultural practices observes that,

“women in most African cultures are seen as commodities, where they are being given out in marriage against their will” (Chikwuye Okonjo Ogunyemi 2018:6).

In *The Marriage of Anansewa*, female commodification demonstrate in two interrelated dimensions. First, symbolic commodification is evident in the cultural rituals, traditional expectations and gendered performances that assign women a social value defined by their exchange-worth. Second, material commodification is illustrated through economic transactions – bride-price negotiations, gifts and material exchanges- that concretize the female body as property. A study on bride-price among the Mambwe people in Zambia notes that “men dominated women … with decision making in marriage”, highlighting how material practices reinforce male authority.

By analyzing Efua T. Sutherland’s narrative, character dynamics and dramatic devices, this paper demonstrates how the play exposes systemic and performative patriarchy. It shows that women’s commodification is both symbolic and material, reflecting broader societal mechanisms that normalize male dominance. In doing so, *The Marriage of Anansewa* criticizes entrenched cultural practices and the reduction of women to property, emphasizing the ongoing relevance of gendered power structures in societies in Africa.

Brief Synopsis of the Play

The Marriage of Anansewa by Efua T. Sutherland is a satirical drama grounded in Ghanaian oral narrative traditions, particularly the Ananse folktale cycle. The play focuses on Ananse, a calculating father who treats his daughter’s marriage as a strategic means of achieving economic and social mobility. Rather than selecting a single suitor, Ananse simultaneously cultivate relationships with several wealthy and influential men, exploiting customary marriage negotiations for personal gain.

As Ananse’s deception escalates, he engineers an elaborate stratagem to resolve the conflict created by his actions. This scheme exposes the ethical contradictions inherent in his behavior and places the suitor within a complex social and moral framework. Through irony and humour, Efua T. Sutherland interrogates themes such as materialism, patriarchal authority and the commercialization of marriage, while also examining the tension between traditional customs and contemporary social change. The play’s integration of music, narration and audience participation reflects its roots in African performance aesthetics and reinforce its critical and pedagogical intent.

Theoretical Framework

This research applies Radical Feminist Literary Theory, which posits that patriarchy is a pervasive, systemic structure embedded in cultural, economic and familial institutions, rather than a collection of isolated acts of male dominance. Within this framework, transactional marriages, bride-price payments and parental control over daughters marriages are tools by which patriarchal societies maintain control over women’s bodies and lives. As one study notes, in several African contexts, “the payment of bridewealth curtails wives’ independence in decision-making”.

Literature Review

The father, Ananse treats his daughter, Anansewa not as an autonomous individual but as a transactional asset, reflecting broader societal norms that assign women value primarily in relation to marriage and male acquisition. Such literary representation aligns with ethnographic studies across African contexts. For instance, Sara Lowes and Nathan Nunn (2017: 6) analysis of

bride price demonstrates that its presence can exacerbate gender inequality by reducing women's bargaining power and autonomy within marriage. These empirical findings provide a social and economic backdrop to Efua T. Sutherland's criticism of patriarchal commodification.

The legal and rights-based dimensions of female commodification are further highlighted in studies addressing bride price and women's reproductive autonomy. Oluwakemi Eniola, et al (2021: 4) affirms that in both South African and Nigerian contexts, bride price "intersects with women's sexual and reproductive rights, often constraining decision making and reinforcing male authority". This suggests that commodification extends beyond symbolic valuation to tangible restrictions on bodily autonomy, an idea mirrored in Efua T. Sutherland's depiction of Anansewa's constrained agency. Similarly, Masele's ethnographic research among the Sukuma of Tanzania identifies that bridewealth, "renders the married woman a man's product", signaling the cultural legitimization of female commodification through social and performative norms.

The symbolic dimension of female commodification is not limited to material exchange. Togarasei and Chitando's edited volume, *Lobola* (Bridewealth) in *Contemporary Southern Africa*, reinforces how the bridewealth rituals operate as markers of social and cultural validation, reinforcing gendered expectations and justifying patriarchal authority. These cultural scripts, they argue, performatively inscribe women into social hierarchies, assigning them value in accordance with their sustainability for marriage rather than individual agency. In this light, Efua T. Sutherland's play exemplifies both material and symbolic commodification: the negotiation of Anansewa's marriage and the dramatization of her perceived value illustrate how patriarchal structures are enacted and maintained through performative practices.

Moreover, sociological studies reveal the broader implication of bride price on women's autonomy. The *Population Association* reports "Bought and Bound" reveals that bride price payments can institutionalize gendered obligations and limit women's decision-making in the household, affectively rendering them subordinate within marital and social hierarchies. This reinforces the argument that economic and cultural transactions, far from being neutral, serve as instruments of systemic patriarchal control, a concept central to Radical feminist Literary Theory. By integrating these insights, the literature review collectively emphasizes that female commodification in African societies is both a material and symbolic process. Materially, bride price, gifts and economic negotiations objectify women and restrict their autonomy; symbolically, cultural rituals and social expectations surfaces patriarchal authority. Efua T. Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa* becomes a critical lens for the intersection of economic necessity, cultural expectation and patriarchal domination, offering a narrative that both critique and illuminates systemic inequalities.

From Property to Personhood: Radical Feminist Readings of Female Commodification in *The Marriage of Anansewa*

In *The Marriage of Anansewa*, Efua T. Sutherland uses traditional theatrical conventions and folkloric elements to stage a biting criticism of patriarchy and the commodification of the female gender.

1. Folklore, Theatrical Form and Social Critique

Efua T. Sutherland's use of the traditional Akan storytelling mode—the so called "Anansegoro" which integrates music, dance, communal participation and audience interaction – creates a public forum where private acts (marriage, negotiations, commodification of daughters) are laid bare in full view. The theatrical tradition itself becomes a tool of resistance and critique:

ANANSE:

The time is up, My soul, Kweku, support me, for I'm weary. Life is really a struggle. Should this moment in which I'm trapped by any chance miscarry, I'm finished. And if care is not taken, I' will moreover, strike the fortune from my daughter's lips and spill it completely. Man is pathetic.

As I stand here, the fear attacking me is overwhelming; still I will take it this way, that's I have seized hold of the fall of a wild beast who will bite me if I let go. So I'm holding on to it. What can else can I do?

I know that not all my ways can be considered straight. But, before God, I'm not motivated by bad thoughts at this moment. I have a deep fatherly concern for this only child of mine. If the world were not what it is, I would not gamble with such a priceless possession (67).

Rather than use Western realist drama, Efua T. Sutherland root her play on local cultural forms to challenge social injustice. Friday Akporherhe and Peter Oghenerioborue Udi (2025: 112) asserts, the dramatist, “incorporate elements of folklore to add flavor and portray their authenticity”, while at the same time adopt it to, “expose the exploitation and objectification of the female gender”.

By situating commodification within a familiar folkloric framework, the play prompts its audience often drawn from the same cultural contexts that value bride price and patriarchal marriage practices to reflect on how cultural tradition can be used to perpetuate injustice. In effect, Efua T. Sutherland turns tradition against itself: the satiric folkloric medium that binds the community becomes the stage for its moral interrogation.

2. Commodification and Parental Authority; Ananse as Patriarchal Trader

At the core of the play is the character Ananse, whose decision to use his daughter as a vehicle for economic gain, deepen the patriarchal logic that equates daughters with property and social transaction. Critical scholarship argues that Efua T. Sutherland portrays Ananse's action as part of a broader socio-cultural pattern, not merely as an individual moral failing. For instance, as discussed in a recent feminist reading, in the absence of wealth or personal property, the female body assumes an exchange-value status.

This statement captures the essence of material commodification: in a context where wealth is scarce, women's bodies- their reproductive capacity, social acceptability and marital potential – become the currency through which men negotiate economic survival and social mobility:

ANANSEWA: (*Recalling*)

Ah-h, that is why! That's why you went to so much trouble to get my photograph taken. You made such a fuss. 'take one of her, full height sit down this time, Anansewa, and turn your face slightly to the right', Oh father, there's cunning in your head. You are to be feared (11).

ANASE: (*Flattered*)

I am glad you don't underestimate me (11).

ANANSEWA:

I have found you out. The week after those photographs were taken – that was when you travelled. I've found you out; you went on tour to see your chiefs (11).

Ananse's orchestration of Anansewa's suitors and bride-price negotiation transforms marriage from a union of individual's into a market transaction.

Moreover, this dynamic is not uniquely fictional. Empirical studies in African societies confirms that the institution of bride price often constrains women's autonomy and entrenched gender inequality. One ethnographic study finds that a 'marriage payment' functions to limit women's power and reinforce patriarchal social order. By reflecting these real social structures through drama, Efua T. Sutherland's play criticizes how cultural customs institutionalize women's commodification.

3. Symbolic Dehumanization: Women as Objects of Exchange

Beyond material transactions, the play also dramatizes the symbolic dehumanization of women inherent in patriarchal practices. In the study of the play and its contexts, one critic argues that many African cultural practices treat women as "mere commodities" given out in marriage against their will.

In *The Marriage of Anansewa*, Ananse treats his daughter not as a human with desires, dreams or agency but as a bargaining chip to satisfy his greed and social ambition.

ANANSE:

Stop just there. You are holding in your hand almost all of the full amount of that thing. That 'thing' is the first solid proof that Chief-Who-Is Chief is not just showing interest with his mouth. He is willing and eager to oil the wheels of custom, and therefore he has sent something for the maintenance of the object of his interest (13).

The repeated references to her "value" the letters to suitors, the disguise, and ultimately the staged "death" – all serves to highlight how female identity is reduced to exchange-value. This dramatization forces the audience to confront the logic underlying this reduction, that a woman's worth is measured by her bride price, her suitability, her capacity to bring wealth or status – not by her humanity:

STORYTELLER:

There you are. As I was saying, it is possible for Ananse to profit from the gifts his daughter's suitors bring, and not be bound by any obligation at all.

What craftiness. Also, he has been careful to explain what his daughter Anansewa stand to gain from his design, but nobody has heard him making any direct hints about what he personally will gain (19).

By doing so, the play aligns with feminist condemnation of patriarchal systems that treat women as objects rather than subjects. Efua T. Sutherland uses dramatic techniques – characterization stage directions and symbolism – to show both the commodification and the possibility of resistance.

4. Resistance, Agency and Ambiguous Liberation

Importantly – and unlike a purely pessimistic critique – the play also gestures toward female resistance and reclamation of agency. In the feminist reading of Raphael Junior Mensah and

Charlotte Biney Evadzi (2025: 322), they note that Ananse's "staged death", her songs and certain symbolic acts within the play shows attempt to reclaim her humanity and assert autonomy in a system that seeks to commodify her.

This ambivalence complicates a purely reductive reading of women as property: Efua T. Sutherland suggests that even within oppressive patriarchal structures, women may resist, subvert and claim their personhood.

ANANSEWA:

I repeat, over my dead body. How can they claim me as their own? (*Laughter chokes her*). They are coming to claim me as their own indeed
They dare not (47).

The performative form of Anansegoro-communal rhythmic participatory-itself allows space for communal reflection and moral questioning, offering not just criticism but possibility for transformation.

5. Theatrical Satire and Audience Confrontation

The play's tone – combining humour, satire and traditional performance-enhances its critical impact. Scholars note that the comedic aspects of the drama engage audiences deeply, making the bitter critique of commodification more accessible and resonant.

ANANSE:

Ah! Togbe Klu. You whom I even forgot sometimes to count among those in the race, lo and behold, it is who turns out to be the one with such good intentions. You should have given me that understanding, for I had no idea it was your desire to live with my child. (*He thinks*).

Have I allowed your messengers to depart? What if Chief-Who-Is-Chief does not come? And if he does, supposing he comes in the manner in which the Mines people and Sapaase people came? What would I do them? If in desperation and torment, I push my child into his hands in that event, I would be pushing her into catastrophe. Oh, has trouble so turned into a fallen tree across my road? Is there no rest at all in this life? Hmm, my mind is exhausted (74).

This use of satire-turning the grotesque logic of patriarchal commodification into comedy-destabilizes entrenched social norms: by laughing at Ananse's schemes, the audience implicitly questions the legitimacy of treating women as tradable assets. The laughter becomes a tool of critical awareness. Theatrical form thus becomes inseparable from social message: the structure, language and performance technique all amplify the play's feminist critique.

Conclusion

Efua T Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa* offers a nuanced and penetrating critique of how patriarchal culture structures the lives of women through systems of material exchange and symbolic valuation. Through a Radical feminist reading, this research has demonstrated that the play dramatizes the interconnected ways in which women's bodies, labour, sexuality and futures are appropriated for male benefit. The manipulation of marriage customs, particularly bride-price, reveals patriarchy not as an abstract ideology but as a lived economic practice that transforms women into commodities circulating within networks of male power. In foregrounding these practices, the playwright exposes the everyday performance of patriarchy: the negotiations,

cultural rituals and social expectations that naturalize female subordination.

The analysis further established that the symbolic and material dimensions of commodification in the play represents broader African sociocultural realities documented in contemporary research. Studies on bride-price in various African contexts consistently show reduced female autonomy, legitimized male authority and the normalization of gendered hierarchies. By situating Efua T. Sutherland's dramaturgy alongside these empirical accounts, this research highlights the continued resonance of her critique and its relevance to ongoing debates about women's rights, agency and bodily autonomy across the continent.

In essence, this study shows that *The Marriage of Anansewa* is a powerful literary site for examining the persistent entanglement of patriarchy, culture and economic exchange. The play underscores how systems of bride-price and marriage negotiation shape women's identities, determine their social value and restrict their freedom. By reading the text through Radical Feminist Literary Theory, this research has emphasized the urgency of confronting these structures and imagining alternatives in which women are recognized not as property or social capital but as autonomous subjects. Efua T. Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa* remains a compelling call for this transformation, inviting readers and audiences alike to envision a world in which personhood is not contingent upon patriarchal performance but grounded in dignity, equality and self-determination.

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