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HUMOUR IN GHANAIAN DRAMA AND ITS IMPACT ON AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT AND ENJOYMENT: A STUDY OF EFUA T. SUTHERLAND'S *THE MARRIAGE OF ANANSEWA*

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This paper examined Efua T. Sutherland's play *The Marriage of Anansewa* to examine how humour can engage and entertain audiences in Ghanaian drama.

Design/Methods/Approach: The study adopted a qualitative research approach and a narrative research design. It employed the purposive sampling technique. The data analysis involved textual analysis, which helped uncover the effectiveness of humour in audience engagement.

Findings: The results of this study underlined the significance of humour in engaging the audience throughout the performance of *The Marriage of Anansewa*. The humorous elements in the play captivate the audience's attention, keeping them engrossed in the narrative. Moreover, these elements contribute to the overall enjoyment of the audience. The witty dialogues, amusing situations, and playful characters provide entertainment, making the play enjoyable for the audience.

Research Limitation: The paper was limited to Efua T. Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa* play. Hence, measuring subjective elements of enjoyment and engagement is challenging.

Practical Implication: The study will aid teachers, students, readers, examiners, curriculum developers, and textbook publishers of Literature-in-English in mastering the skill of identifying humour in the acts and scenes of any drama book.

Social Implication: Preserves Ghanaian oral traditions through theatrical adaptation. It Strengthens community bonds through collective entertainment and fortifies intergenerational cultural transmission.

Originality/Value: The study is based on the authors' ability to exhume instances of humour from portions of the selected text and assess their impact on audience engagement and enjoyment.

Keywords: *Anansewa. audience engagement. humour. play. theatrical*



INTRODUCTION

Several approaches are deployed for analysing texts in language and literature studies. Some language authors (for example, Botchwey & Owusu, 2024; Rockson et al., 2023; Opoku et al., 2022) have used genre analysis to appreciate some texts, examining the language of a literary text as a means of gaining sufficient understanding and appreciation of the author's artistic realisation (Botchwey et al., 2022; Tetteh & Quansah, 2017).

One conspicuous literary device in Efuwa T. Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa* is Humour. This device has always played a significant role in Ghanaian literature by adding a vibrant and entertaining element to narratives, infusing stories with a unique and delightful charm, and adding a vibrant and lively element to the stories and characters.

Nkrumah (2013) believes Ghanaian writers have beautifully woven humour into their stories, using it as a powerful tool to engage readers and deliver social commentary with a touch of amusement. This blending of humour and social commentary entertains readers and is a powerful tool to provoke thought and initiate conversations about the pressing issues Ghanaians face. Nyarko (2018) maintains that the role of humour in Ghanaian literature is not merely to entertain but to illuminate and challenge societal norms, making it an essential and integral element of the literary landscape in Ghana.

According to Opoku (2017), the inclusion of humour in Ghanaian literature not only adds depth and relatability but also serves as a powerful tool for social critique and commentary. It showcases the resilience and creativity of Ghanaian writers in addressing pressing issues while keeping their readers engaged and entertained.

Adomako (2012) agrees that through clever wordplay, witty dialogues, and humorous situations, Ghanaian writers skillfully navigate cultural nuances and capture the unique essence of Ghanaian society. Whether it is a satirical commentary on politics, hilarious portrayals of everyday characters, or amusing anecdotes that shed light on cultural practices, humour in Ghanaian literature can entertain, educate, and provoke thought. It adds depth and richness to the storytelling and fosters a deeper connection between the reader and the characters, making the narratives more relatable and memorable. Addo (2016) claims Ghanaian authors skillfully employ various comedic elements to entertain readers while shedding light on social, cultural, and political issues.

Ultimately, the role of humour in Ghanaian literature goes beyond mere laughter; it is a powerful tool for social commentary and cultural exploration, leaving a lasting impact on readers long after



turning the last page of reading material. By this, humour adds a unique flavour to content and distinctly engages readers. It is a powerful tool for social commentary, often reflecting Ghana's cultural nuances and societal issues.

Ghanaian authors skillfully infuse their works with wit, satire, and playful banter to illuminate various aspects of life. Through humour, they navigate complex topics such as politics, religion, and gender dynamics, making them accessible and relatable to readers. This approach allows for a deeper exploration of sensitive subjects and encourages critical thinking and introspection. Additionally, humour in Ghanaian literature creates a sense of camaraderie and a shared experience among readers, fostering a strong connection to the narratives and characters. It also serves as escapism, providing moments of lightheartedness and laughter amidst the challenges and realities of everyday life.

Humour in Ghanaian literature enriches the storytelling experience, making it entertaining and thought-provoking and presenting the research gap it fulfils. The research objective(s) should be clearly stated in this part.

THE PLOT OF THE TEXT

Efua Theodora Sutherland, a popular Ghanaian playwright, authored *The Marriage of Anansewa*. *The story is presented in a typical Akan setting. It begins with Ananse, who is seen running away from the rain. He also laments the hardships of life compared to the rain he is running away from.*

Extract 1:

While life is whipping you, rain also pours down to whip you some more.
(Efua T. Sutherland, *The Marriage of Anansewa*, p. 9).

He decides to save himself and his only daughter from the cruel arms of life by proposing to marry his daughter to four chiefs.

Extract 2:

Ananse: [With pleasure] And now we shall see. My daughter, now we shall see which one of those four chiefs will make the best husband for you.
(Efua T. Sutherland, *The Marriage of Anansewa*, p. 18).



Coincidentally, all four chiefs decide to marry Anansewa on one day. In undoing the knot of calamity that seems to be hanging in the not-distant future, Ananse quickly outdoors his daughter and makes his family members who come to support them leave almost immediately with the lie that their cocoa farm in the village is in flames.

Extract 3:

Yes, our hometown Nanka itself. Someone has just reported to me that ... that enemies have set fire to our hope. Our cocoa farm.

(Efua T. Sutherland, *The Marriage of Anansewa*, p. 62).

Ananse now convinces his daughter, with the help of a woman named Christie, to feign death, and he goes on to break the news of the supposed death of his daughter to the chiefs. All chiefs refuse to perform the rite of passage for the unfortunate lady as a bride except Chief-Who-Is-Chief. To erase doubts, Ananse performs libation to the gods, and Anansewa springs back to life, claiming she heard Chief-who-is-Chief calling her, as she remarks after her awakening:

Extract 4:

Father, I could hear Chief-Who-Is-Chief calling me.

(Efua T. Sutherland, *The Marriage of Anansewa*, p. 91).

Eventually, Chief-Who-Is-Chief is the suitor who gets the opportunity to marry Anansewa.

METHODOLOGY

The design of this study is the qualitative research approach. This approach was chosen as it focuses on exploring and understanding the participants' experiences and perspectives deeply and comprehensively (Creswell, 2009). Thus, we aim to investigate how humour is used as a tool for engagement and enjoyment in Ghanaian drama in Efua T. Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa*. For the sample selection, the research employed purposive sampling, also known as judgmental or selective sampling (Kumar, 2011), in selecting the text - *The Marriage of Anansewa* – from which various contents on humour were exhumed and discussed. By focusing on this specific play, we thoroughly analysed how humour is employed as a tool for audience engagement and enjoyment within the Ghanaian drama context. The study utilised textual analysis to analyse the data. This technique involved a close examination of the text to identify and interpret the humorous elements used by the playwright. The text for comedic devices, dialogue patterns, and other elements contributing to the play's humour were analysed. Regarding ethical considerations, the study



ensured proper credit was given to all the relevant journal articles and books from which primary and secondary information were extracted.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Humour In Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa*

Humour is a powerful tool that adds an extra layer of engagement and enjoyment to Ghanaian drama (Adomako, 2012). Sutherland does not seem to deviate from this opinion. This is expressed through her incessant use of humour in her work. An instance in her work under study is when the audience is greeted by Ananse shouting his daughter's name. The nasalised tone Ananse calls his daughter with is enough of a humorous expression. Ananse does not end there, as he calls his daughter to bring the typewriter, the price of which nearly drove him to sell himself.

Extract 5:

Ananse ... [Taking off his raincoat and calling again] Anansewa-----a!

Where is that typewriter, I bought for you at a price that nearly drove me to sell myself?

Bring it here. [He closes the umbrella].

(Efua T. Sutherland, *The Marriage of Anansewa*, p. 10).

The absurdity of a parent needing to sell himself to buy a typewriter for his daughter to practise with is humorous. Addo (2016) opines that humour in Ghanaian drama not only entertains the audience but also serves as a means of connecting with them on a deeper level. Addo (2016) does not seem alone in this, as Sutherland shares their views. Ananse, the text's protagonist, has arranged marriages with four different chiefs for his daughter and received their approval. Ironically, these arrangements have been made with Akan chiefs, the cultural guardians and custodians of the very essence of Akan values. It is amusing to think that Ananse, a nobody, may have succeeded in getting such people to fall for his scams with just an image of his daughter. The comedy does not end there, as Ananse devises elaborate plans to avoid the disaster that would have otherwise followed his clever exploits. Christy helps Ananse disguise his daughter as a dead person, and all the chiefs but one break tradition to complete the ceremony intended to signify that the supposed dead woman is in matrimony with the chiefs, a ceremony for the fictitious female as if she were a bride.



Extract 6:

FIRST MESSENGER: ... Finally, he desires to do for Anansewa what a husband does for a wife...
(Efua T. Sutherland, *The Marriage of Anansewa*, p. 87).

Readers will not have to stretch their imagination to see the humour in extract 6. The chief, a guardian of tradition, goes against custom by carrying out the funeral rites a husband would usually carry out for his wife. He did this on the advice of his elders, who are supposed to advise him on matters of custom, even though neither he nor his elders have ever seen the woman in question. The sense of humour here is essential and relates to the issue of comic timing in literature, which is the art of perfecting actors to skillfully deliver punchlines, gestures, or reactions at precise moments to maximise the impact of humour. So, Sutherland's use of humour in that predicament shows how important humour is to the growth of Ghanaian literature. The chiefs accept Ananse's photograph marriage by sending monies to the latter to take care of the supposed 'object of their interests.'

Extract 7:

Messengers: And he asks us to place this money in your hands. He says he is placing it in your hands so that if the object of his interest should need anything you will have the wherewithal. ...
(Efua T. Sutherland, *The Marriage of Anansewa*, p. 19).

Extract 7 is part of the interaction that ensued when one of the chiefs, the chief of Sapaase, sent his messengers to bring money to Ananse. When Ananse realises that the reality of the knot he has successfully tied looms in the not-distant future, he feigns the death of his daughter and duly informs all his prospective sons-in-law about this unfortunate incident. All of them but Chief-Who-Is-Chief agree to perform the funeral rites of the lady he had not seen before.

Extract 8:

First Messenger: ... He is Chief-who-is-Chief and he has sent us to the respected Mr. George K. Ananse. He says that he makes no error in calling this man his father-in-law because had Ungenerous Death not snatched this child from his hands, it would be in order so to address him.
(Efua T. Sutherland, *The Marriage of Anansewa*, p. 86).



In extract 8, Sutherland masterfully employs humour to bring a refreshing and entertaining twist to her narrative. One of the most notable aspects of her use of humour is the clever incorporation of African folklore and mythology, particularly the character of Ananse, a trickster spider. Thus, humour is used in extract 8 to highlight gender dynamics, traditional expectations, and the power dynamics within a marriage. By blending humour and social commentary, Sutherland creates a thought-provoking and enjoyable experience for the audience, proving that laughter can be a powerful tool in addressing important societal issues.

Another instance of the use of humour in Sutherland's work is when the audience is introduced to a young guy named Akwasi and a young lady named Akosua, who are, by specific standards, lovers. Akwasi demands Akosua's service of whatever kind the audience is not privy to. Interestingly, he demands submission from the lady because he has spent money on her.

Extract 9:

*AKWASI: I will not let you go,
I will not let you go.
You cannot spend my money and treat me so...
(Efua T. Sutherland, *The Marriage of Anansewa*, p. 27).*

The lady assertively refuses the guy's advances and puts him right. She clarifies to him that he does not have the right to the submission he demands, as if the little money he has spent on her entitles him to it.

Extract 10:

*AKOSUA: You funny man.
Don't you know
I'm not your wife
Am I your wife?
(Efua T. Sutherland, *The Marriage of Anansewa*, p. 27).*

At the end of the argument, the lady is freed from Akwasi's grips, a turnout that he does not seem to enjoy. The lady goes on to tell him to come and pay her 'head drink' (bride price) if he expects her submission.



Extract 11:

*AKOSUA: And about time too, don't you think? [He lets her go]
Ah, now you're letting me go. That's better. I've gained my freedom. Bye!
Anytime you are ready bring my head drink to my parents.
And after that, I will stop when you call. I will take care of your house
(Efua T. Sutherland, *The Marriage of Anansewa*, p. 27).*

Sutherland's use of extract 11 could be attributed to humour's role in getting people who perceive themselves as correct, though they may go wrong, to realise their errors. It also stands to reason that in the Akan community, the most important way to attract a lady's submission to a guy for good is for the guy to honour the traditional tenets of marriage. Therefore, we assert that humour in Ghanaian literature draws people's attention to the traditional requirement of certain choices in life.

Extract 12:

*Akosua: Anytime you are ready, bring my head drink home to my parents.
And after that, I will stop when you call. I'll take care of your house...
(Efua T. Sutherland, *The Marriage of Anansewa*, p. 27).*

Excerpt 12 is an excellent example of how the famous Ghanaian dramatist Sutherland uses comedy to captivate and delight her audience. Underneath the surface, however, Sutherland deftly uses comedy to address the difficulties of love and marriage. The comic peak of this incident is when even Akosua, a girl who cannot be described as having a comprehensive knowledge of the tenets of tradition, prefers a man perform traditional rites of marriage before she attends to him. The humour Sutherland employs, in this case, lies in the fact that when honouring customs, even a little girl has more regard for them (customs) than the chief, who prides himself as the guardian and symbol of customs.

With this extract (12), Sutherland shows how some leaders who are seen as custodians of some practices and are obliged to protect a community history may opt to minimise the public confidence placed in their hands. Again, in the text, Sutherland uses humour to draw attention to serious social problems. Thus, there is significant evidence that humour has been crucial to the growth of Ghanaian literature. Another instance of humour Sutherland employs is Ananse's remark after he can escape the bitter treatment the rains had made him go through.

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Extract 13:

Ananse: [When the song is over] While life is whipping you, rain also pours down to whip you some more.
(Efua T. Sutherland, *The Marriage of Anansewa*, p. 9).

The expression of humour in extract 13 lies in the playwright's use of a device that personifies life, like a human punishing Ananse for reasons best known to the one who holds the whip.

Extract 13 aligns with Nkrumah (2013), who believes that humour effectively creates memorable moments and fosters a sense of camaraderie between the performers and the spectators. Nyarko (2018) also maintains that humour transcends language barriers and cultural differences, making Ghanaian drama accessible and enjoyable to diverse audiences. Through her clever use of wit and comedic situation cited in extract 13, Sutherland creates a captivating and entertaining narrative that explores themes of the love of a father that makes him endure the harsh realities of life, the tradition of responsibility to children, and societal expectations. Sutherland's skilful incorporation of humour allows her to tackle such serious topics lightheartedly, making it easier for the audience to connect with the characters and their supposed struggles to make life count.

Humour in Ghanaian literature could also be a form of motivation for readers, especially children. Many readers are easily demotivated in their reading adventures. This happens to be an issue that needs an address. Leaving it unaddressed is likely to impact the academic environment of a nation. In such regard, Adomako (2012) believes that humour is a powerful tool that adds an extra layer of engagement and enjoyment to Ghanaian drama. It is noteworthy that if an author wants to attract readers from different groups of people, they may want to consider embedding different traits of humour in the literature.

To Asante (2014), humour in Ghanaian drama is not just a tool for entertainment but a vehicle for audience engagement, cultural expression, social commentary, and education. Efua Theodora Sutherland seems to share in Asante's (2014) opinion that the 'traits' of humour she embeds in her text (*The Marriage of Anansewa*) will most likely attract an easily demotivated audience to read. A precise instance is when Ananse demands sympathy after spinning a web that the storyteller describes as 'rest-requiring' and realising the gravity of the consequence of the knot he has tied.



Extract 14:

Ananse: Whatever it was that man did wrong at the beginning of things must have been awful for all of us to have to suffer so.
(Efua T. Sutherland, *The Marriage of Anansewa*, p. 9).

From extract 14, Ananse seems convinced that the severity of life's treatment could be attributed to a grave offence that might have been committed in the distant past. It is worth noting that Sutherland's use of extract 14 could be attributed to humour's role in relieving life's anxieties. Therefore, we assert that humour in Ghanaian literature is a means of relieving the anxieties of life.

Again, in most Ghanaian literature, humour is usually deployed in creative content to release anxiety on the part of the audience. Life, in general, is full of anxiety. These anxieties manifest themselves through different aspects of life. Some come from professional frustration, and others emerge due to emotional disappointments and academic uncertainties. According to Essien (2019), Ghanaian drama, with its unique blend of satire, wit, and slapstick comedy, has mastered the art of tickling the funny bone of its audience.

Lamprey (2015) also claims that comedy is not merely used for entertainment purposes but also as a vehicle for social commentary, which addresses pressing issues in a light-hearted yet thought-provoking manner. Essien (2019) and Lamprey (2015) do not seem to be alone in their concern for this perception, as Sutherland's text also seeks to make a similar assertion.

Extract 15:

*Ananse: [Calling PROPERTY MAN] Man, I need a headache pill.
Don't you have any sympathy for a man struck by an earthquake of a headache?*
(Efua T. Sutherland, *The Marriage of Anansewa*, p. 43).

In extract 15, Ananse humorously describes himself as having been struck by an earthquake or a headache. Here, the humour is clear. Ananse, the mischievous and cunning spider in African folklore, never fails to amuse with his peculiar demands for sympathy, especially when he is the sole reason behind the situation, he finds himself in. One such instance is when Ananse finds himself in a predicament that he has brought upon himself, but instead of taking responsibility, he demands sympathy from those around him. It is in these moments that the comedic genius of



Ananse shines through. With his quick wit and charm, he tries to convince others to feel sorry for him, even though he is the architect of his misfortune.

The irony of Ananse's plea for sympathy adds an extra layer of amusement to the tale, as his manipulative nature is exposed, and his attempts to garner sympathy are met with laughter. Ananse's demand for sympathy in a situation of his own making serves as a reminder that sometimes the best way to approach life's mishaps is with a sense of humour and the ability to laugh at our follies. His exaggerated expressions of self-pity and dramatic lamentations make it impossible not to chuckle at his audacity. It is as if he believes that by emphasising his suffering, he can divert attention from his responsibility in creating the predicament.

Ananse's demand for sympathy in such situations adds a delightful layer of irony and humour to his character, reminding us that laughter is never far away, even in the face of self-inflicted trouble. In this case, his manipulation and attempts to elicit sympathy become a source of great humour. Relative to the context of Sutherland's depiction of Ananse, the cunning Ghanaian folklore hero in another story is said to have decided to play a prank on his fellow animals by pretending to be in distress. He concocts an elaborate story about being trapped or in danger while secretly, he is relishing the chaos and confusion he is causing. However, when his plan backfires, and he finds himself in a sticky situation, he suddenly becomes the epitome of a poor, helpless creature, pleading for sympathy from anyone who would listen.

The irony of his demands for compassion in both cases is complex to ignore, and this self-inflicted predicament, coupled with his shameless plea for sympathy, makes Sutherland's text comical and entertaining. Ananse's demand for sympathy in a situation of his own making, as Sutherland presents, serves as a reminder not to take life too seriously and to find humour even in one's foolishness. His request for a pill to cure a headache that he describes as an earthquake of a headache is also humorous, partly due to the imagery created to stress the severity of the ache. Another instance of the use of humour in Sutherland's work is when Ananse convinces four chiefs to marry his daughter with a mere photograph. This is illustrated in extract 16:

Extract 16:

Anansewa: I have found you out. The week after those photographs were taken –that was when you travelled. I have found you out; you went on tour to see your chiefs.
(Efua T. Sutherland, *The Marriage of Anansewa*, p. 19).



Another humorous moment in Sutherland's writing is when Ananse, perhaps due to poverty, persuades his daughter that being affluent is undesirable. He eventually comes around to praising the affluent way of life. A stunned Anansewa shares her shock with Ananse during a discussion about the same topic:

Extract 17:

ANANSEWA: [Hesitantly] So father, do you desire all those things? Haven't you condemned many of them often and often? You have pooh-pooed them, haven't you?
(Efua T. Sutherland, *The Marriage of Anansewa*, p. 13).

The humour in extract 17 comes from Ananse brainwashing his only daughter by fiercely denouncing some items he deems expensive since he cannot afford to offer them to her. Interestingly, his crafty traps pay off, and he can afford them now, so he boasts about having acquired items he had despised before. The contradiction between his condemnation and current bragging leaves his daughter shocked as she asks him about it. It is worth noting that Sutherland's inclusion of extract 17 may have been motivated by the fact that humour effectively calls attention to people's hypocrisy. Therefore, humour in Ghanaian literature can be deduced as a tool for encouraging individual responsibility for one's actions.

Another incidence of humour worth noting is when Mr. George Kwaku Ananse gets Togbe Klu to send him (Ananse) a postal order. The postman who is bringing the order (in an attempt to locate the correct address for his delivery) asks if the storyteller is the house number (AW/6615 Lagoon Street) the postman is looking for:

Extract 18:

POSTMAN: [Approaching him] Are you house No. AW/6615?
The storyteller also asks the postman a question that sends the latter apologising.
STORY TELLER: Do I look like a house?

The playwright's use of extract 18 expresses humour in diverse ways. Its humorous role in the text seeks to address the Ghanaian form of seeking information, which sometimes overrides the beauty of our traditional communication structures. Therefore, we can deduce that humour is employed in Ghanaian literature to help correct specific faulty communication structures in Ghanaian society.



The study found that using humour in Efua T. Sutherland's play, *The Marriage of Anansewa*, is an effective tool for audience engagement. The study also found that humorous elements in the play grab the audience's attention and keep them engaged throughout the performance. Again, humour in the play contributes to the enjoyment of the audience. The witty dialogues, amusing situations, and playful characters provide entertainment, making the play enjoyable for the audience. Furthermore, the humour in *The Marriage of Anansewa* helps to break the tension in intense or emotional scenes.

The play offers comic relief by injecting humour into these moments, allowing the audience to relax and release any built-up emotions, ensuring a better viewing experience. Consequentially, the humour in the play serves as a cultural expression of Ghanaian society. Sutherland cleverly uses traditional Ghanaian folklore, including the character Ananse, a trickster spider, to infuse humour into the play. This highlights the importance of cultural references in creating humour that resonates with the Ghanaian audience. The humour in *The Marriage of Anansewa*, thus, promotes social commentary. Sutherland uses satire and irony to depict societal issues and challenges. Through the lens of humour, the play addresses topics such as arranged marriages, gender roles, and social expectations. By this, she allows the audience to reflect on these issues lightheartedly.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings of this study demonstrate that humour is an influential tool for audience engagement and enjoyment in Ghanaian drama, specifically in the case of Efua T. Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa*. The study further concluded that humorous elements in the play effectively grab the audience's attention, provide entertainment value, and offer comic relief in tense moments. Additionally, humour as a cultural expression and a vehicle for social commentary adds depth and relatability to the play. Therefore, incorporating humour in drama can enhance the audience's viewing experience and make the performance more engaging and enjoyable.

Practical Implication

The study will aid teachers, students, readers, examiners, curriculum developers, and textbook publishers of Literature-in-English in mastering the skill of identifying humour in the acts and scenes of any drama book.



Social Implication

It preserves Ghanaian oral traditions through theatrical adaptation, strengthens community bonds through collective entertainment, and fortifies intergenerational cultural transmission.

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