

Feminism Consciousness and Modernity in Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story*

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Abstract

The paper discusses the consciousness of modern African female writers to use novel as a veritable means to fight for their roles, rights and privileges in the African society through a movement called feminism. Hence, feminism as an ideology is explicated in this paper and it shows that it is thriving as a result of modernity and consciousness of women in the African society: also, how the African women joined in the global project to agitate for their rights and privileges. The African women are now aware of their rights and are ready to fight for them. To fully explicate this stance, the researchers considered Aidoo's novels, *Changes: A Love Story* adequate enough to explore feminism ideology and quest of women to fight for their rights and privileges. Aidoo's novel provides a vehement critique of male chauvinism and male domination in African society as typified in *Changes: A Love Story*. Esi Sekyi defies social conventions where a woman bear children to retain her status in the family. Her triumphant amidst the domineering men is worthy of emulation. The paper also discusses the way in which modernity in Ghana affects women's bodies, minds, sexualities and women's dehumanization.

INTRODUCTION

The continent of Africa has its own peculiar experiences and these were issues that the foremost novelists dealt with in their novels. The issue of culture contact and conflict as pioneered by Achebe and later became popular amongst other novelists across Africa, is an example. Other topical issues in the earliest history of African novels in the fifties and sixties were discourse of nationalism, African culture assertion, protest against apartheid system in South Africa and cultural alienation and disposition that later gave rise to negritude among the francophone novelists. Most recently and pertinently is the issue of feminism. Feminism in Africa sprang up from women's consciousness of her situation and various oppressive acts against them in the African society. Although feminism is a global project, the African perspective of feminism reflects experiences and realities of life in the continent that are peculiar and unique to it. It permeates to debunk the belief that feminism and its tenets are not important to African women: African women are submissive; they have sufficient power; men are the rightful owners of their wives' bodies under all circumstances, etc, this situation begs for social readjustment. To this end, African women are not left behind in the global agitation for feminism; they have collaborated with their western counterparts in the discussion of rights and privileges of the female gender in Africa. This can sufficiently be explicated in the novel, *Changes: A Love Story* by Ama Ata Aidoo.

Changes: a Love Story is a novel published by Ama Ata Aidoo in 1991, with a feminist's perspective; it is a novel that chronicles the author's personal life as a woman in a modern African society. The novel explicates a social theory and women's rights and privileges (feminism) that is primarily motivated by experiences in terms of the social status of women in the Ghanaian society and Africa as whole. However, the novel understudy depicts extreme suffering and struggle of the female characters and especially the protagonist, Esi. Esi is an archetype of the novelist herself, Ama Ata Aidoo. Ama Ata just like Esi is highly educated and an extremely career-centred woman who makes daily sacrifices and struggles to fight against an accumulation of oppressive tradition that favours men folk.

The concept of feminism defined according to Igiligi and Ogenyi (140) is “the policy, practice or advocacy of political, economical and social equality for women”. It is a concept that seeks women’s liberation. The New Encyclopedia Britannica defines feminism as a “social concept that seeks equal right for women, giving them equal status with men and freedom to decide their own career and life pattern”. Feminism is a movement and social theory that is influenced by modernity and various position and experiences of women in society. Odinye lends credence to this assertion that “feminism as a social theory and movement is a reaction to such stereotype of women, whereby women are seen as indeterminate human beings, vulnerable, dependent, gullible, voiceless, meant to bear children and to take care of the family”, (41). The position of feminist apologists, in this regards, sought to redefine and also to change the social standard of the women folks.

The biblical postulation in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 is part of traditions and doctrines that feminists have to contend with. Although, there are other practices degrading in a male-dominated culture worse than the biblical postulation, but these practices have aggregately met with stiff opposition in various groups and nomenclature such as “Feminism”, “Black Feminism”, “Womanism”, “Sexism” and “African Feminism” to mention but a few. These groups are geared towards lamenting for womanhood and social re-adjustment of male subjugation. Campaigns, mass media, rallies are few of some of the strategies geared towards re-orientating the people about malapropism of the status of women in society, but literature seems most effective and adequate enough to shoulder the cause of women.

Literature and its responsible propaganda has been a veritable weapon by the female group (feminism) seeking equal opportunity for their fellow women in the male-dominated world. Feminism ideologists explore the opportunity therein in literature to advance the cause of women and womanhood in their literary works by presenting their female characters in such a way that they will encourage self-awareness of the female folks and their sensitivity to the social imbalance. African novels have achieved milestone in this feat by creating ideology that represents the unique experiences, struggles and needs of the women in Africa. This has placed the African novels among the forerunners in the global agitation for equal right for women. For instance, the voice of Mariama Ba in *So Long a Letter* is very loud when she addresses mechanism by which women are “colonized” by men of their own race. The assertiveness of the

female characters in Zynab Aikail's *The Stillborn* cannot be overemphasized. The heroine, having completed her education becomes wealthy and she is able to cater for her children. This is also true of Ada, a female character that succeeds in getting independence in life. Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* is a novel that tries to rewrite the culture of the payment of bride price before the groom is given officially to the bride; this is typified by Akun-nna the heroine of the novel. Also, Buchi Emecheta's second novel, *The Joy of Motherhood* published 1979 narrates the tragedy of marriage when Nne Ego runs away from home because her first child just died, and she has considered suicide afterwards. Nne Ego is frustrated and her husband, Nnaife continues to demand for more children and more wives. The novel is set to debunk the belief of the necessity of a woman to give birth to be able to retain her status in an African society.

Also, Aidoo's novel, *Changes: A Love Story* provides a vehement critique of colonial governance by arguing for the inclusion of female concerns in the political agendas of African nations. The novel is perceived as a modern feminist novel that supports the claim for changes in the circle that entraps women and defines them within restricted spaces that limit the possibilities for female identities. The rest of the paper is devoted to exploring Aidoo's voice in the novel as a social crusader for the rights and privileges of the female gender in the male chauvinistic society.

Language Barrier and Feminist Struggle: a Case of Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story*

Language has been one of the major issues for African writers who have chosen to adopt the language of the colonizer to tell their stories. To write in the colonial languages has been crucial for those who want to succeed in the literary market and find an audience for and reception of their works outside their ethnic groups. Yet, these writers have declared that this is a tough decision and not without constraints. For women, the issue is even more complicated because language is an instrument of both patriarchal and colonial domination.

However, postcolonial feminists' criticisms take into consideration the role of language in postcolonial women's literatures. Ama Ata Aidoo affirms that, for women, the linguistic issue is more problematic than it is for African male authors because European languages do not only mean colonial imposition, but also patriarchal oppression. Though Aidoo is a privileged and highly educated Ghanaian woman, she shows her frustration with women's conditions by affirming that women's situations are delicate because, in most cases, they were excluded from colonial education and had minimal or no access to the colonial language. When the majority of

women are considered uneducated, they become voiceless and disempowered in a context where European languages are crucial for their survival in postcolonial nations. When post independence governments choose to maintain a European language as the national and official language, part of the population is excluded from the decision-making process, and women are the most affected because they are the ones who are least educated.

In Africa, the definition of feminism has undergone many interpretations and nuances. The Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo envisages a feminist movement that would seek justice not only for African women but for all African people, suggesting an inclusive movement that could integrate all people into the construction of the continent.

For her, there is no possibility of African development if women do not take part in the project:

When people ask me rather bluntly every now and then whether I am a feminist, I not only answer yes, but I go on to insist that every woman and every man should be a feminist - especially if they believe that Africans should take charge of African land, African wealth, African lives, and the burden of African development. It is not possible to advocate independence for the African continent without also believing that Africa women must have the best that the environment can offer. For some of us, this is the crucial element of our feminism. (African Woman Today, 39)

For Aidoo, African males should be part of the feminist struggle to empower women in the continent. In her creative writing, Aidoo often presents emerging female characters who are searching for new roles within African nations Aidoo in *Changes: A Love Story* gives us a female protagonist who refuses to be the “African woman” her husband expects. Esi Sekyi defies social convention as she defies stereotypes of a woman who must bear children to have status in her society or protect her marriage at all costs. As she claims her rights to control her own body, she chooses to have pleasure with a man she chooses, but she suffers the consequences of her stubbornness. In post-independent Ghana, women’s lives may be changing but not to the point of accommodating Esi’s needs and aspirations. In this novel, Aidoo discusses the ways in which modernity in Ghana affects women’s bodies and minds.

The novel discusses feminism and women’s rights and provides many possibilities for the examination of issues such as sexuality, motherhood, marriage, and fragments of society’s mosaic. These women struggle to come to terms with the changes happening in Accra, Ghana, especially as they need to understand what happens with their female roles as mothers and daughters in this new environment. For women, circumstances do not change much because of

modernity, as Comaroff and Comaroff suggest modernity “seems to have bred a heightened concern with ‘tradition’; ‘culture’” (12). Esi Sekyi suffers the consequences of attempting to resist cultural expectations and live her life the way she wants to. She makes some unexpected decisions for a woman in her condition or living in her cultural context. She breaks up her monogamous marriage, divorces her husband after a marital rape, and decides to marry again, becoming the second wife of a powerful and handsome businessman. Through the narrative, Esi did not only a feminist, but also a capitalist and an individualist. She becomes frustrated when she realizes that she can no longer communicate with her mother or grandmother or consider the advice of her best friend, Opokuya. Though Esi becomes free to make her own choices, such as investing more time in her career, getting involved in a polygamous relationship, and enjoying sexual pleasure with a man she loves, she also feels impotent when she realizes that her female condition is still a huge barrier and societal conventions keep molding women’s lives in so many ways. Esi eventually finds her path again through an understanding that women, like men, should have equal rights to desire.

Though the fulfillment of her sexual desire is part of her feminist impulse, she realizes that feminist ideology cannot be simply transplanted from one context to another. It must be reinvented to suit the needs of women who have to come to terms with multiple constraints such as patriarchal imposition, imperialism, and religious beliefs.

Female writers like Ama Ata Aidoo who started publishing a few years after the independence of Ghana, often connect literacy in colonial languages to African male privilege, as men were the ones who had the most access to colonial education while women were mostly non-literate.

Women often express their anguish at having to use a language that carries a history of oppression. However, this language must become an instrument of opposition and must question colonial and patriarchal structures. For women, this same language must be used as a source of creativity, an instrument to give visibility to their experiences. For educated women like Esi, language and education become more paradoxical as they put up a crucial discussion about having other children and the future of their relationship,

Esi’s Marriage and the Concept of Marital Rape

Esi's husband, Oko, seems to be a perfect loving husband, thus the concept of marital rape loses meaning in a context where women struggle to be desirable or consumable. Oko grabs Esi, pulls her body to their bed, and forces a sexual relationship on her:

Esi, pulls her body to their bed, and forces a sexual relationship on her: Oko flung the bed cloth away from him, sat up, pulled her down, and moved on her. Esi started to protest. But he went on doing what he had determined to do all morning. He squeezed her breast repeatedly, thrust his tongue into her mouth, forced her unwilling legs apart, entered her, plunging in and out of her, thrashing to the left, to the right, pounding and just pounding away. Then it was all over. (9)

After the episode that came to be known by both Oko and Esi as "that morning," Esi realizes that what happened between them was really a marital rape. In her office after the rape, Esi feels dirty, frustrated, and impotent, and she makes up her mind that marital rape is a good cause for a divorce. By trying to name what happened to her that morning, Esi puts herself in a sociologist's position and tries to analyze her society, mainly male behaviour. She attempts to imagine herself giving a conference for African men and women and questions how an audience would respond to her about the concept of marital rape. Certainly, they would not understand; there would be no word in her language to explain it.

"and, dear lady colleague,
how would you describe
"marital rape" in Akan?"
"Igbo? ... Yoruba?"
"Wolof? ... or Temne?"
"Kikuyu? Or Ki-Swahili?"
"Chi-Shona?"
"Zulu? or Xhosa?" (11)

Esi concludes that the term marital rape cannot be translated into any African language, since in her culture, and that of many other Africans, sex is something that a husband has the right to claim from his wife any time. An experience that cannot be expressed in any African language should not be considered of any relevance for that context. Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi claims that though there is not a specific term in any Akan language for marital rape, by referring to the episode as "that morning," both Esi and Oko agree that something unusual happened between them. Oko's violence against Esi is real, and, though without naming it in her native language, "her experience is inferred, is named in codes that are available in a heteroglossia that is culturally specific, culturally translatable to both Esi and Oko" (292).

This enduring and not too palatable act made Esi to divorce her husband, although her friends and family remain baffled. Esi's attitude elicited a radical departure from the belief and complex struggle between African women and the modern society, "after all, he doesn't beat her". Esi sees the act as the last straw that broke the camel's back in their already deteriorating marriage, her friends and family did not see anything wrong in it, after all he "owns" her. It however portrays how African women see themselves and the reaction by family members in the face of modern dilemma. Esi is distinctively rebellious and she is ready to negotiate between tradition and personal life.

African Womanism: Lessons from Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story*

When Esi does not accept the husband's abusive relationship and rethinks her identity, Oko starts seeing her as a betrayer of her culture. He asks himself: "But, what is an African woman?" (8). In his mind, being an African woman has to do with nurturing the family and attempting to please the husband by all means. He cannot understand how Esi can despise him, a faithful, devoted, monogamous husband. In a context where most men are involved with polygamous relationships and have many concubines, Oko seemed to be a prize.

For Oko, colonial education contributed to transforming women's roles in a way that challenges his masculinity, as he affirms, "I am not behaving like a man" (8). Thus, Oko attempts to define Esi's identity by encapsulating her in the category of "African woman." In urban Ghana, the category Oko has in mind gets troubled, as he cannot recognize its characteristics in his wife. Esi is an African woman living in a village, but she is an educated woman, a professional, and an independent woman who lives in Accra. While Esi seems to accept the contradiction that maintains her identity, Oko remains connected to the fantasy of a stable, united, and indissoluble identity. He becomes paranoid imagining other African men in their community laughing behind his back.

"My friends are laughing at me", he said. "They think I'm not behaving like a man" (8). As Esi begins to redefine her femininity by telling Oko that she will not comply with his rules, her husband's masculinity gets even shakier. He acts to reinforce his masculinity through aggression and violence. As he asks whether or not Esi is really an African woman, he is also trying to make sure that he is an African man. Oko is a desperate man who wants to maintain his status through the control of his educated wife whom he sees "as an adjunct to his ego, a crutch to bolster his

image in the eyes of his co-workers and himself" (Odamtten 163). The only way he finds to let her know that he is still a man is through the rape. The rape becomes a symbolic instrument of power to Oko, as well as of humiliation to Esi. Her husband uses his phallus as a weapon not only to reinforce his masculinity, but also to restore the African femininity Esi seems to have lost in a world where the patriarchal rules assert "what a woman wants is to be desired by her husband and defined exclusively in relation to that desire" (Olaussen 6).

By being considered an empty vessel, an object of her husband's sexual desire, Esi's own sexual desires cannot be taken into consideration. Esi is expected to follow the patriarchal rules and be fulfilled simply by arousing male desire. In this sense, the absence of female desire is expected during sexual intercourse, as Catherine MacKinnon suggests: "If what is sexual about a woman is what the male point of view requires for excitement, for arousal and satisfaction, have male requirements so usurped its terms as to have become them?" (118).

However, when Esi gets the divorce, alleging that she was raped, she claims her role as a participant in sexual intercourse and her right to fulfill her own desires, thus, resisting objectification. In her husband's logic, being a woman means satisfying his needs. As Luce Irigaray states, patriarchy expects women to feel pleasure through their roles of satisfying men, hence women who want to have sexual pleasure do not know how to perform female roles in a patriarchal society:

How can this object of transaction claim a right to pleasure without removing her/itself from established commerce? With respect to other merchandise in the marketplace, how could this commodity maintain a relationship other than one of aggressive jealousy? How could material substance enjoy her/itself without provoking the consumer's anxiety over the disappearance of his nurturing ground? How could that exchange – which can in no way be defined in terms proper" to woman's desire – appear as anything but a pure mirage, mere foolishness, all too readily obscured by a more sensible discourse and by a system of more tangible values? (32)

Irigaray explains that if a woman is considered property and an object, she has no possibility to demand anything, thus, sexual pleasure and desire are considered unimportant. When Esi claims her right to refuse her husband's desire, she destabilizes him, erasing his identity or forcing him to rethink his positionality. In order to deconstruct her identity and reestablish her desire, Esi must confront society and reevaluate herself. Her friends tell her that feeling so desirable to the point

that a man feels out of control and commits an act like that could incite jealousy in other women, as is the case with her best friend Opokuya. Opokuya confesses that she is jealous of Esi because Oko seems to be a perfect loving husband, thus, the concept of marital rape loses meaning in a context where women struggle to be desirable or consumable.

The situation becomes further complicated when Esi's social context is considered, i.e. the Accra urban setting. By deciding to get a divorce, Esi's accusation of "marital rape" appears to be a result of her Westernized education. The years of European education gave Esi a new language, another form to conceptualize and understand the world. She imagines how her ideas would be received by a large audience of intellectuals.

She is entrapped, and she cannot find a way to denounce male abuse without claiming women's rights. Does fighting for women's rights mean being a feminist? Is a feminist somebody who will hurt or destroy African culture? Is she a betrayer of her nation and a Westernized African? In her culture, is denouncing women's suffering a sin? Aidoo's *Changes* ask many questions and creates room to expose women's experiences and interrogate the lives of those who are not able to disentangle the personal and the political. Esi's private issue turns into broader questions of whether denouncing male abuse means importing a foreign feminist ideology, and if women are therefore denying their "African" identity.

Ugly-Pretty Polygamy: A Feminist Point of View

Polygamy has been bitter for Fusena and ugly-pretty for Esi; at the end of the novel, both women understand the practice is not advantageous for women. The narrative cruelly vilifies Esi as it implicitly reiterates that for the feminist, Esi, sex and freedom become so important that she cannot perceive what happens around her even while she becomes lost and displaced in a cultural setting that does not appear to be her own. She misunderstands polygamy and its rules and attempts to take advantage of the system, but in doing so she contributes to another woman's victimization and her own unhappiness.

Esi thinks that she can take advantage of polygamy because of her economic status and education, but in the end, she understands that she is part and parcel of a society that changes while men still have greater privileges. Esi realizes polygamy is a patriarchal structure that reinforces male privilege and women cannot benefit from it.

Aidoo's novel complicates feminism and women's rights, providing many possibilities for the examination of women's issues in urban Accra that are also relevant in many other cities across Ghana and the continent. The narrative renders an ambiguous perspective regarding women's choices in this context. At times, through Esi's life, the novel advocates women's freedom to desire and make choices regarding marriage and sexuality but, in the end, Esi remains unhappy and victimized. At other times, through Fusena's and Opokuya's lives, the narrative polarizes women's experiences. Fusena and Esi represent different fragments of an urban postcolonial society, and they represent opposite and even antagonistic perspectives. In this disturbing context, Fusena becomes the portrayal of inertia, frustration, and tradition, while Esi emerges an individualist and capitalist, a product of the underdeveloped capitalist society of African urban centers.

While Opokuya's desire and pleasure are centred on consumerism, Esi gradually becomes a subject able to make her own choices. Fusena, however, remains depersonalized and objectified by both Ali and Esi. Fusena's womanhood diverges so much from Esi's that Esi's feminist ideal loses meaning, and her political consciousness and struggle for freedom are displaced in urban Accra.

CONCLUSION

The paper has been able to establish the need for feminism consciousness as against the societal assumption that women are relatively weak, passive and dependent individuals through the assertiveness of the characters portray in the novel, *Changes: A Love Story*. The paper also exemplifies various roles assigned to female characters specifically the heroine of the novel such roles in which female writers could not have assigned to the male-oriented novels. It is obvious from the novel that Esi Sekyi's marital instability has propelled her and brought the best out of her: she becomes a feminist, a capitalist and an industrialist. By so doing, she sets a pace as a mother, a woman and feminist worthy of emulation. All these Esi achieved, first by refusing to tolerate her husband's excesses in their marriage. Secondly, she becomes an entrepreneur and a successful woman. Thirdly, she is aware of the roles of women of nurturing the children and being devoted to her family and she is tenacious about it. One would also agree that western education is key to the heroine's liberation; the paper shares the heroine's perspective by

advocating for holistic education, in that education empowers a woman and sharpens her view about the need to seek redress for social injustice and male subjugation.

The paper will be concluded by sharing the view of Igiligi and Ogenyi (149) that “what the feminists and the female writers with feminist consciousness are unanimously saying is: what a man can do, a woman can do it better”.

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