

African Women between Subversion and Compliance: A Critical Study of *Ama Ata Aidoo's Changes: A Love Story*

Donisongui TUO
Peleforo Gon Coulibaly University
nagalourou_2007@yahoo.fr

Abstract: Colonial and post-colonial history has indubitably disrupted gender relationships in African societies. In the light of Alice Walker's *Womanist* approach exposed by Chikwenye Ogunyemi Okonjo's *Womanism* and *Odundipe* Leslie-Molara's *Stiwanism*, the current study purports to analyze gender relationships between male and female characters and explores the gains, pains, and worries of these post-colonial characters and the ensuing tension.

This contemporary text offers a glimpse into the Ghanaian society at pains in reconciling both traditional norms and western values. In the process, I will focus my attention on how the novelist constructs the female gender and what informs her position and its implication in a fragmented Ghanaian society. Aidoo, from a female perspective, tells a woman's story by re-creating and reconstructing the battered image of the female gender permeated by the ability and capacity to re-negotiate her womanhood against the backdrops of her tradition and culture in her quest for a harmonious society through collaboration and complementarity with her male counterparts. More specifically, it highlights how Esi Sekyi the main female protagonist strives to re-negotiate her womanhood against the backdrops of her tradition and culture.

Keywords: Subversion, motherhood, gender conflict, polygamy, re-negotiation, re-definition, Womanism.

Résumé: L'histoire coloniale et postcoloniale a indubitablement perturbé les rapports de genre dans les sociétés Africaines. A la lumière de l'approche *Womanist* d'Alice Walker exposée par le *Womanism* de Chikwenye Ogunyemi Okonjo et du *Stiwanism* d'Odundipe Leslie-Molara, cette étude entreprend d'analyser les rapports de genre entre les personnages masculins et féminins. Elle explore les gains, les peines mais aussi les inquiétudes de ces personnages postcoloniaux et la consécutive tension.

Ce texte contemporain offre une lucarne sur la société Ghanéenne à l'épreuve de la réconciliation des mondes traditionnel et moderne. Dans le déroulé, je porterai mon attention sur comment la romancière construit le genre féminin et ce qui le particularise, sa position et son implication dans une société Ghanéenne fracturée. Aidoo, dans une perspective féminine, narre une histoire de femme en récréant et en reconstruisant l'image ternie de la gente féminine tout de même pénétrée par la capacité de renégocier sa féminité contre les fondamentaux de sa tradition et culture dans sa quête pour une société harmonieuse à travers collaboration et complémentarité avec ses frères. Plus spécifiquement, elle analyse comment Esi Sekyi, la principale protagoniste lutte à renégocier sa féminité contre sa tradition et culture.

Mots-clés: Subversion, maternité, conflit de genre, polygamie, renégociation, redéfinition, Womanism.

Introduction

Christina Ama Ata Aidoo's novels focus on gender oppression and the marginalization of women in contemporary Ghana and the conflict of cultures as the legacy of colonization. Many things have been said and written about her, and as time passes by, more and more critics agree that she is one of the forerunners of African female literature. Douglas Killam and Rowe Ruth in *The Companion to African Literatures* confirm it when they write, "Ama Ata Aidoo, the Ghanaian literary artist has no equal in the African literary tradition of the re-inventing of Africa and the re-imaging and re-imagining of its women." (2000:21). This comes to be true simply because of her ability to deal with both out of date (*The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965), *No Sweetness Here* and *Anowa* (1970) and up-to date *An Angry Letter in January* (1992); *The Girl who Can and other Stories* (1997) African gender issues.

Gender issues seem to be at the heartland of Aidoo's writings especially how African women live separately and then with their men in both traditional and post-independent settings. She constantly explores the experiences of women as mothers, the different vicissitudes of their lives as wives in mono and polygamous families, their daily relationships with other women and their permanent struggle to build new identities in a fast-changing world.

In the light of some post-colonial African feminist concepts such as *Stiwanism* by (Odundipe Leslie-Molara), and *Womanism* by (Chikwenye Ogunyemi Okonjo); the work examines the directions the lives of post-colonial African women and men are taking, the exigencies, the patriarchal traps and the ensuing challenges these directions face. The paper analyses the attitudes of these women and men face to the challenges on their way to self-invention, self-accomplishment and psychological equilibrium.

Thus, to bring this to fruition, the work falls into two parts, the first part deals with the patriarchal system and women's resignation, the second articulation deals with the author's *womanist* perspectives in post-colonial Africa.

1- Patriarchal System and Women's "Resignation"

Patriarchy seems to be an ever-present notion in most of Aidoo's writings. In her lifelong probing into women's lives experiences, concerns and aspirations, she presents patriarchal ideals as being so entrenched in women's inner beings that they end up believing that it is a life duty to abide by these patriarchal norms. This skillful implementation of patriarchal ethics eventually turns women into resigned individuals for whom any action to



subvert them is doomed to failure. This moral formatting is achieved through the stereotypical division of labour aiming at stratifying the society into weaker and stronger entities.

These stereotypes that psychologists such as Jorge Moll, Rolandd Zahn, Ricardo de Oliveira-Souza and Jordan Crafman (*Moral Psychology vol.3: The neuroscience of Morality emotion, brain disorders, and development* 2008) qualify as “moral mistakes” and misconceptions about a particular group of individuals are programmed and performed within the social institutions such marriage and motherhood. Kwadwo Kombate and Prince Obeng-Himah explain clearly enough when quoting Jandt Fred in their article. They pen that psychologists:

Have attempted to explain stereotyping as mistakes our brains make in the perception of other people that are similar to visual illusions. It is a generalized view or preconception about attributes or characteristics that are or ought to be possessed by members of a particular social group or the roles that are or should be performed by members of a particular social group. (Kombate and Prince, 2020: 17)

For ages, men have used different stereotypes to confine womenfolk in voicelessness, silence and resignation.

1-1- Stereotypical Gender Roles

Aidoo’s rendition of patriarchy, in this contemporary work, convinces the reader that this system is ageless and that there seems to have no way out for women. She presents patriarchal ethics as solidly ingrained in women inner psychology with which they must cope on their way to actualize their subjective identity. The novel opens with some patriarchal practices in contemporary Ghana that triggers the main protagonist’s anger. “Esi was feeling angry with herself” (Aidoo, 1991:1). The gender division of labour into feminine and masculine is still vivid. Esi Sekyi’s anger finds roots in this ideology against which any enterprise to debunk and subvert seems to be vain. Why is she angry with herself as an African, an educated, a married woman? This question communicates the tensions and the challenges that await Aidoo’s protagonist in the course of the story. Her anger coupled with the material worries (the car,.....) foreshadow that life for modern African women particularly Ghanaian women is thorny.

Besides her job as a statistician, Esi Sekyi is compelled to perform the role of their secretary whenever the latter is on leave of absence. From the first page, Aidoo presents patriarchy as a die-hard practice against which women have long resigned because they have



been made to perceive it as ‘natural and normal’. The narrator clearly explains this resignation and lack of strength of women face to the ‘monster’ of patriarchy in these terms: “in spite of how strongly she felt about it all, why couldn’t she ever prevent her colleagues from assuming that any time the office secretary was away, she could do the job? And better still, why couldn’t she prevent herself from falling into that trap?” (Aidoo, 1991:3) Through this quotation, the author communicates the weight of this patriarchal ideology upon women, the voicelessness and inaction of womenfolk. If Esi “couldn’t prevent herself from falling into that trap”; it is because the system of patriarchy is solidly built by men with the ‘complicity’ of women. As a result, she finds herself morally and socially constrained to perform the act. The ideology has been skillfully instilled in women’s mind to the point that they no longer perceive their being caught in a perpetual “trap.” It appears to them as something natural and inescapable.

In the same line of thought, Esi resents the way men treat her as a persona non grata in their office. Intoxicated with patriarchal ideals, they give no value to women at the workplace. Since the Urban Statistics Department has no regional branch in Kumasi, Esi has to make do with a lesser position. The narrator testifies:

In the end the only option left her, which she had had to take, was to be seconded to the regional census co-ordinating office. She had ended up keeping the Birth and Death register. Surely, one doesn’t need a Master’s degree in statistics to do that? she would fume and rage daily. Oko ignored her complaints. The truth was that he didn’t feel that sympathetic. And neither did the men in the office. In fact, they let her know that she was unwelcome, and a burden they did not know what to do with. ” (Aidoo, 1991:49)

The attitude of men clearly shows the extent to which patriarchal ideals pervade in every sphere of life. One could wonder how in the twentieth century, people still clutch to these degrading stereotypes. Patriarchy, in the eyes of these men, is a die-hard system that crosses generations. Their assumption is that women should be confined in the ‘private sphere’ only to perform feminine roles and tasks. The narrator expresses men’s supremacist view in these terms “having to deal with a man who is over-qualified for a job is bad enough. To have to cope with an over-qualified woman in any situation is a complete misfortune.”(Aidoo, 1991:50)

This daily and ever-presence of patriarchal practices have eventually turned women into compliant individuals with the system. They end up believing that any attempt to combat or denounce it is vain. Obviously, for any system of domination to work, the ruling group generates in advance the active consent of the dominated group by making them believe that they both have common interests. In this sense, the patriarchal ‘hegemony’ turns women into



active participants in constructing their 'subaltern identities'. Arguing about this 'hegemonic process', Steve Jones in his book *Antonio Gramsci* writes: "Rather than imposing their will, dominant groups (...) generally govern with a good degree of *consent* from the people they rule, and the maintenance of that *consent* is dependent upon an incessant repositioning of the relationship between rulers and ruled." (Jones, 2006:3)

Gramsci's statement clearly shows how a psychological work is done upon women to make them willingly accept their domination. About the encroachment and *modus operandi* of this ideology of domination Denise Thompson writes, "domination is routinely maintained through the willing, albeit manipulated consent of populations." (Thompson, 2001:22). Since any ideology is intended to be made true and practical, Thompson sees patriarchy as an ideology that functions to 'legitimate' women's domination to the extent that women themselves perceive and accept the reality of their subaltern position as natural and unalterable. She puts forward that in doing so, "they resignedly desire its continuation and even fear its destruction and end up believing that it is their own meaningful existence." (Thompson, 2001:22).

To Esi's anger about gender stereotyping roles, Ali Kondey's answer is clear and once more confirms the society's position about gender roles division in this post-colonial setting. The narrator testifies "but there is nothing tragic about that, is there?" here, at the structural level, it can be stretched that Kondey's question tag at the end of his question aims at forcing Esi to respond by the affirmative. Kondey/society want womenfolk to admit patriarchal practices as normal and natural. In fact, through Ali Kondey's answer Aidoo makes the reader notice that no matter the period or the status of men and women, they continue to believe that there are some tasks that are 'naturally' feminine and others masculine. As a modern and educated man, Ali could have understood that some stereotypes need to be rejected with time and space. Unfortunately, he is still clutched to this ancient ways of seeing things.

Aidoo raises another aspect of patriarchal practices between Opokuya and her husband Kubi that triggers gender conflict between them. This culminates in the use of the car the family has. In fact, there are daily hot arguments about the user of the car and this seems to create a dissension between Opokuya and her husband. Kubi sees in the car the space where he must express as the man his domination over his wife by having full control of the car. The car symbolizes a source of masculine power that Kubi intends to use over his wife. He does not escape from the belief that as the man, he must impose his dictate over his family. The narrator justifies this through these words "Kubi felt that like his colleagues in the office and the civil



service generally, he should be able to drive his car to his place of work.” (Aidoo, 1991:22) Here, it can be inferred that Kubi is not acting as an individual but he seems to act on society’s behalf ‘like his colleagues and the civil service generally’. Thus, Opokuya’s failure to secure the car for her errands is simply because she is a woman. Justifiably, to Opokuya’s disapproval of being prevented from using the car despite her numerous tasks her husband responds that “it’s a question of ethics” (Aidoo, 1991:22). Here again, Aidoo clearly states the complicity of women in the implementation of patriarchal ethics. Opokuya’s female colleagues paradoxically disapprove of her complaint about the situation with her husband over the car. In their opinion, Opokuya has no right over her husband’s car since the car is part of Kubi’s office advantages and a symbol of his masculinity. The attitude of these women renders the task arduous for women emancipation. Aidoo seems to deplore this lack of cohesion and consensus of women to face what hinder their well-being. The narrator distresses “whenever Opokuya complained about her husband’s ‘unreasonable attitude’ about the car to any of her female colleagues, they would nod sympathetically in front of her, and laugh at her behind her back. As far as they were concerned, it was Opokuya who was unreasonable or mad.”(Aidoo, 1991:23) This category of women fully reproduce what has been instilled in their mind in terms of patriarchal ethics if not, it is incomprehensible that one chooses to suffer when the conditions of her comfort and well-being are established. For them, Opokuya is meant to perform at all cost her wifely and motherly roles such as taking care of her children and husband with no intention to seek ways to alleviate her suffering.

As far as Ali Kondey and his wife are concerned, Fusena has to cut short her studies to devote herself to her wifely roles that of giving birth to children to his husband. Ali Kondey is the one who must have a promising career at the expense of her wife’s. The narrator explicates “then she (Fusena) became pregnant with the second baby. So from then it was being pregnant, nursing the new baby; looking after Adam and Ali, and staring at London’s bleak and wet views.”(Aidoo, 1991:78) Here is the life that Fusena deserves when she decided to join her husband in London. In spite of being a graduate, her social role is to stay at home and beget children. Ali Kondey’s intention is to reduce Fusena to her status of a woman if not, how could he prevent her from taking over teaching? ““But, Fusena, teaching is out of the question”” Ali would insist during the regular discussion they had on the issue. ‘There should be a more lucrative job you could do and still have time to look after the children.’” (Aidoo, 1991:80) Through this quotation, Ali’s position on the issue is clear enough and bears patriarchal ideals. Women’s primary roles are to ‘look after the children’; no matter the period, they are dragged

back to these gender roles. The reason being that there are some jobs that are said to be 'reasonable' for women than others. Ali Kondey's will to buy his wife a big kiosk to start trade justifies this assumption. The narrator makes us read about this position "Look, quite often, the first thing a man who marries a woman mainly for the quickness of her brain tries to do is get to change her job to a more "reasonable" one. (...) The pattern never, never changes." (Aidoo, 1991:54-55)

Through this attitude, Aidoo notices that in terms of gender issues, the space and the period has no effect on men's position vis à vis what they label as feminine and masculine roles. It is therefore worth mentioning that Aidoo does not openly condemn the patriarchal system as such but she seems to teach her African sisters how to better cope with the ever-changing conditions of their lives. For harmony and social cohesion, the older women opt for 'resignation' and sum up it as follows "it was a man's world. You only survived if you knew how to live in it as a woman." (Aidoo, 1991:130)

In the African context, patriarchy does not seem "to intrude oppressively in African women's lives" (Rose Mezu). This system and some of its harsh practices do not forcibly impinge on women's lives in a way to curtail their influence and authority. Since the society that Aidoo portrays in her novel is at the basis matrilineal, most of these patriarchal practices might have come with colonialism. In this sense, men to some extent are usurpers of women's power and authority.

Aidoo's position on gender issues in Africa squarely differs from that of her western gender theorists. She is probably in line with Ifi Amadiume who posits in *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* that "Black women are not refusing White women's support and alliance, for there are massive campaigns in which White women can help without leaping into the forefront and usurping a people's struggle and anger." (Amadiume, 1987:10). This position of Amadiume infers that it belongs to African female writers to account for their experiences as African women not under the taken-for-granted assumptions of westerners. This amounts to re-examine and re-negotiate some gender-related issues in order to "re-invent and re-create themselves" to use Oyèrónké Oyěwúmi's terms.

1-2- Re-negotiating Marriage and Motherhood in the Post-colonial Era

In her *Changes: A Love Story*, Aidoo tries to see how contemporary women perceive themselves in a non-stable environment separately and with others. Since gender is a dynamic notion that varies over time and space, these female characters are engaged in constructing new identities in their contemporary settings. In fact, one cannot lose sight on the recurrent fact that Aidoo creates a tension between her female characters and their society as far as gender issues are concerned. They seem to be torn between building subjective and objective identities within two culturally opposed worlds. On the one hand, the traditionally entrenched values and on the other, the newly acquired exigencies. In an interview with Azodo Uzoamaka Ada, Aidoo comprehensively states “I called the book *Changes*, because I see primarily a character like Esi the protagonist as being part of those who are trying to define, or even redefine woman as a lover, as a wife, as a mother as a daughter, even as a granddaughter.” (Azodo, 1996: 5)

A notable point in Aidoo’s fiction is that gender discourse in Africa and particularly in her Ghanaian setting should not be done heedless the Akan cultural worldview. Social institutions such as marriage and motherhood stand for vital importance for them.

“As an African female writer writing from an African standpoint” (Ogundipe, 1987:10), the issues of marriage and motherhood stand high for Africans in Aidoo’s fiction. From *A Dilemma of the Ghost* up to *Changes*, she never ceases relating the position of African women face to these social institutions. She diagnoses the society of *Changes* to work out whether despite the new changes brought by education and western ways the cardinal notions of gender that regulate relationships between men and women in this Ghanaian setting are impacted.

Marriage in the post-colonial era stands high for Aidoo. It is central because it is inside the marriage links that the relationships between men and women are put to the fore; elsewhere, it is within the marriage that the notions of wifehood/motherhood, manhood/ husbandry, masculinity/femininity are revealed and discussed as for how they determine power relations between them. Aidoo informs how in a fast-changing society, men on the one hand struggle to maintain and reinforce patriarchal hegemony upon their wives and on the other, how the latter strive to create their new spaces, new identities and self-achievement. In this perspective, the novel presents us three parallel narratives of marriage with varying degree of appreciation.

The first marriage Aidoo presents is that of Oko and Esi Sekyi. The narrator portrays Esi as a self-asserted educated woman with a well-paid job. This economic independence allows



her to fend for herself, she drives a car; has a house, a housewife to manage her house; “their home was generally run by an elderly house help.” (Aidoo, 1991:12) The presence of the ‘house help’ is not fortuitous; it aims at dispensing Esi with her roles as a wife and mother. The justification of the narrator clearly illustrates it “she was a great cook, who complained endlessly any time she had to enter the kitchen.” (Aidoo, 1991:12) In so doing, Esi is seriously opposed to one of the fundamental roles of women within marriage (cooking).

Understandably, the bone of contention between Esi and Oko starts with her refusal to live up to the expectations of her husband and community. The rejection or re-definition of gender roles is what her husband and community abhor. Roles such as cooking, ministering to her daughter and husband, bearing children are perceived as hindrances to her personal fulfillment. Falling short of performing such womanly roles convinces the reader about Esi’s individualistic approach of marriage. This “westernisation” of gender roles in African context greatly contrasts with the African conception of marriage.

In Africa, people have a teleological conception about marriage, for them the goal of any union between a man and a woman is procreation. Unfortunately, Aidoo presents Esi Sekyi as an African woman suffocated by western imported ideas about marriage and procreation. This misconception of her primary roles as first an African woman and then an educated is pointed out by Arnd Susan in “The Dynamics of African Feminism”: *Defining and Classifying African Feminist Literatures*, quoting Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo: “Feminism conjures up visions of aggressive women who try to be like men, dress carelessly and abandon essential feminine attributes; feminism is often equated with radical feminism and this in turn with hatred of men, penis envy, the non-acceptance of African traditions, the fundamental rejection of marriage and motherhood (...) to invert the relationship of the genders.”(Arnd, 2002:27)

In fact, Esi is not a ‘radical feminist’ as such; she is not opposed to marriage and motherhood she only needs a re-definition and re-negotiation of these social institutions. She can bear children but at her desired pace and will; she also wants to control her sexuality within the marriage. Her unilateral decision to put herself on pills after the birth of the first and only daughter Ogyaanowa shows this intention. In the African context, she is an egoistic and self-centered who only worries about her personal well-being at the expense of her family.

Arguing with her grandmother about the importance of children in a family, Esi’s opinion about the matter is surprising, “but Nana, that is an old and worn-out idea! Children can be born to people who are not married.” (Aidoo, 1991:51) This sentence transports Esi’s

inner vision about marriage and motherhood, her attitude in considering motherhood as a choice is in line with western approach and in so doing, she “turns her culture on its head.”(Aidoo, 1991:16)

Admittedly, Aidoo discloses French Materialist Feminism in the character of Esi. This feminism that took its muse from Marxism in the 1970’s sees marriage in terms of “contract” in which women are appropriated by men. Christine Delphy and Colette Guillaumin are some of the defenders of this wave (the French Materialist Feminism) who believe that there is “appropriation” of women’s time, body, sexuality and freedom of movement by their husband within the marriage. In «Pratique du Pouvoir et idée de Nature: l’appropriation des femmes» in *Questions féministes* Colette Guillaumin writes “when women are materially appropriated, they are at the same time mentally dispossessed.” (Guillaumin, 1978:18)¹ The use of women’s body is essential in the marital relationship. For her, “in the case of marriage the physical use is not limited by any form of contract; it goes up to all possible physical uses, the sexual use as well.” (Guillaumin, 1978:13)² Esi’s attitude in her relation with her husband Oko is in perfect congruence this western conception of marriage and motherhood. She believes that Oko is robbing her from her time and willing to control her body and sexuality. Through the character of Esi, Aidoo warns her African sisters about the pitfalls of rigid and radical feminism. For her, there is no meaningful and objective analysis of gender issues outside the worldview of the targeted people. Nfah Abbenyi and Juliana Makuchi justifiably warn in these terms:

She (Esi) needs to ascribe her sexuality within the larger context of historical and cultural Ghanaian practices that obviously do govern even modern ‘alternative lifestyle’. She must learn to see her body as a contested terrain where sexuality and cultural politics converge and find expression in a dialectical relation. (Abbenyi and Makuchi, 1999: 295)

In the sphere of marriage, sexuality is one of the pillars; Africans conceive it as a fundamental element without which no marriage can work. If procreation is a matter of choice in the western world, it is a cultural exigency in African societies. Solomon Omatsola Azumurana rightly puts:

As an African, the cultural prescription and expectation is that she should be ready at all times and in whatever circumstances to fulfill her husband’s sexual pleasures and desires. But as a western educated woman, Esi thinks otherwise.

¹Original version : « Lorsque les femmes sont appropriées matériellement, elles sont dans le même temps dépossédées mentalement d’elles mêmes. «Pratique du Pouvoir et idée de Nature : l’appropriation des femmes» in *Questions féministes*, Paris, 1978, p18

² Original version : « dans le cas du mariage l’usage physique n’est limité par aucune forme de contrat ; celui-ci est étendu à tous les usages physiques possibles, y compris l’usage sexuel » op cit. p.13



She believes in opposition to her culture and in tandem with her western education, that a woman also reserves the right to exercise a measure of authority over her body and decides when and how she can and should make love with her husband. (Omatsola, 2013: 7)

This misapplication of western ideals in an African context worsens the conflicting relations between Esi and her husband. She fails to acknowledge that in her Ghanaian society, marriage and procreation are intricately linked and therefore, the husband has a cultural, sexual right and authority over her wife.

Through the tension that Aidoo creates between Esi and her community, she probably intends to warn African women that there are many stumbling blocks on the way to re-creation and re-invention. Of course, she is not opposed to this; still, African women must make this quest armed with their socio-political values to avoid moral disorientation. In the Ghanaian's conception of sexuality within the marriage, the narrator ends the debate in these terms "sex is something a husband claims from his wife as his right. Any time. And at his convenience." (Aidoo, 1991:16) Here, the structure of the sentences informs about the non-negotiability of this right.

Consequently, the "marital rape" (Aidoo, 1991:16) that occurs in Esi and Oko's marriage stands to rehabilitate this right and authority that she tries to question. In fact, Oko's violent sexual act can be analyzed in two ways.

First of all, Oko is fed up with his wife's attitude in privileging her work at the expense of her marital duties. Therefore, he decides to rehabilitate his sexual rights over her. In the same self-way re-affirm his masculinity and patriarchal hegemony that his wife tramples down. The reason is that "Esi definitely put her career well above any duties she owed as a wife." (Aidoo, 1991:12) Therefore, this marital rape stands as a threat and punishment for her to reconsider her overzealous and egocentric attitude about her career. The description of the relationship between Oko and his wife Esi testifies to Oko's bitterness and his feeling to lose any grip over his homestead. The narrator underlines: "look at Esi. Two solid years of courtship, six years of marriage. And what had he got out of it? Little. Nothing. No affection. Not even plain warmth. Nothing except one little daughter!" (Aidoo, 1991:11) The narrator portrays Esi as a self-centered character who only fight for self-assertion and self-achievement. The use of words such as 'little, nothing, no affection' conveys Oko's wrath against her 'bookish' wife.

The psychological trauma of this situation seems to emasculate and castrate Oko because his manhood is under threat. The narrator explains his moral debasement "with all that



going in his head, his penis, which had by then become really big and hard, almost collapsed.” (Aidoo, 1991:11) The ‘collapse’ of his ‘penis’ (the anatomic reality) and phallus (the symbolic function the penis takes on), (Freud, 1916) the very symbol of his manhood and masculinity does teach about Esi’s questioning of patriarchal and phallogocentric ideals.

Face to these violations of her duties as wife and as mother, (because Esi has abandoned her only daughter for Oko’s mother to take care of and educate) the marital rape appears as a coercive means to restore Oko’s manhood and masculinity. In fact, through her desire to control both her body and sexuality, Esi subverts her society’s ideals and expectations about marriage and motherhood. The narrator explains, “Esi had never stated categorically that she didn’t want any more children. But she was on those dreadful birth control things: pills, loops or whatever.”(Aidoo, 1991:11) Of course, in the twentieth century we cannot be opposed to birth control methods nevertheless, it should be done out of common consent between wife and husband.

The second axis is at the societal level; Oko’s “rape” is meant to reassert his society’s views about the prescriptions that govern marriage and motherhood. His family and society as well, see their authority being sabotaged by his wife. Such actions tend to make him lose any credibility in his society. Oko is therefore confronted to three different pressures, his personal anxiety, the familial and social pressures that he must ward off. The narrator puts forwards “the fact that his mother and his sisters were always complaining to him about the unsafety of having only child only made him feel worse. (...) my friends are laughing at me, he said. (...) They think I’m not behaving like a man.” (Aidoo, 1991:11-12) In their conception, ‘behave like a man’ amounts to have full control over one’s wife, make her subservient and obedient, dispose at her conveniently, that any man who fails to do that is not worthy of the status. As we already mentioned it, Aidoo’s female and male characters are involved in a gender conflict with each strives whether to subvert norms or reinforce or have perpetual grip over the other. In this sense, Oko represents the community/family and must consequently have his wife abide by this patriarchal ethos no matter the period or place.

“Is Esi too an African woman?”(Aidoo, 1991:11-12) This sentence discloses Aidoo’s desperate outcry about Esi and her likes who are career-centered. This centeredness on their professions and jobs blind them from their social responsibilities as African women. They wrongly believe that assertiveness and personal achievement amount to scarifying one’s womanly and motherly roles (cultural requirements) on the altar of personal dreams. Of course,

Aidoo and Ogundipe promote education as the main tool and weapon for women's liberation and subsequent emancipation but they abhor that some African women opt for roles' reversal. They posit that the development the African society will be possible through both sexes' commitment. Esi's rigid and inflexible attitude in balancing both her career and womanhood leads her astray. Ogundipe Leslie-Molara sums up in these terms:

I wanted to stress the fact that what we want in Africa is social transformation. It is not about warring with the men, the reversal of role, or doing to men whatever women think that men have been doing for centuries, but it is trying to build a harmonious society. The transformation of African society is the responsibility of both men and women and it is also in their interest. (Ogundipe, 2007:545)

Esi's obstinacy in creating herself new space and build a subjective identity leads her to divorce Oko who appears to be a hindrance to her self-accomplishment. Esi therefore epitomizes this category of African women who desire to cut the umbilical cord with their African socio-traditional norms. They no longer perceive some social institutions under the social perspective but under their personal view. Esi's decision to divorce her husband and opt for a polygamous relation aims at achieving a personal goal.

1-3- Post-colonial Women and their New Outlook of Polygamy

In *Changes* Aidoo explores the issue of polygamy under a new vision that fundamentally contradicts western position about this African social institution. Some western gender theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Christine Delphy and Colette Guilaumin analyze polygamy under the lens of objectification and exploitation. They put forwards that polygamy tends to prevent African women from self-realization and then hampers their emancipation.

However, the portrayal of Esi Sekyi, the main protagonist, teaches us about the limits of such viewpoints. Aidoo presents Esi as a norm-breaker, a transgressor who demonstrates her individuality come hell or high water. Esi is a norm-breaker because as a Christian it is not obvious that her religion favours polygamy worse still, her intention to marry a Muslim. Elsewhere, her transgression of the norms is perceived in her individual freedom to implement her personal choices. Her choice to become Ali Kondey's second wife easily demonstrates that polygamy is not an institution forced on African women and that they can use it to fulfill personal interests. For Esi, polygamy is not an alienating institution on the contrary; she uses it as a tool and weapon to resolve her marital problem with Oko.

Esi's troubles, in her first marriage, find roots in the fact that her husband is too possessive and in this doing prevents her from space and time to easily pursue her professional career. In fact, Esi is thoroughly immersed in a gender conflict with her male colleagues as she avows "but in fact, considering how much I put into my job...sometimes I even take home data to analyse! I never get that much from it, not half as much as those men...and even with the promotion; they passed me over a couple of times..." (Aidoo, 1991:60) the points of suspension make read about Esi's unfinished thought and deep concern about her desire to equally compete with men. Thus, she believes that meeting all the social requirements in terms of motherhood and wifeness is likely to debar her from being equal or on the top of her men.

In the character of Esi, Ama Aidoo fleshes out how her post-colonial African women use polygamy to their advantage. Understandably, in deciding to marry Ali Kondey as a second spouse, Esi Sekyi pursues her personal interests and well-being. In *Anowa*, the main protagonist, asks her husband Kofi Ako to marry a second wife for her to become a 'mother' and also have a helping hand.

As an African *womanist*, Aidoo does not reject polygamy but she suggests that African women use it for their benefit. In this sense, both Esi and *Anowa* use polygamy as an ally to personal achievement and happiness. That is why some of the procedures to enter into it are violated.

In their desire to redefine polygamy, both post-colonial men and women disregard the fundamental principles of polygamy. Ali Kondey wants to profit from the pleasures of polygamy but trivializes its procedures and exigencies. Here is a modern educated man who is totally disconnected from his traditional and religious spheres in terms of marrying a second wife. As a Muslim, he should have known that no second marriage could be performed without the consent of one's first wife and that any negotiation for the union itself must be conducted by the husband to be's parents. The narrator accounts for Ali's trivialization of these prescriptions "Ali looks the deputy manager of Linga Hide Aways with him and drove to Esi's village. They were going to see her (Esi) people." (Aidoo, 1991:125)

Aidoo casts a searching light on the post-colonial male and female characters who struggle to create themselves new spaces in egoistic and egocentric perspectives. The ignorance and belittling of Ali Kondey and Esi of some traditional prescriptions as far as polygamy is concerned clearly illustrate this. Esi is in a blind pursuit of personal happiness. She believes that her union with Ali is exclusively meant to bring her the desired joy and heart-peace.



Furthermore, the polygamous union between Esi and Ali is devoid of its fundamental meaning; both are profiteers of this institution with each using the situation for personal advantage and interest. They both decide to choose among the available traditions and customs to create their own idea of polygamy. They opt for personal libido and reject procreation that is the fundamental purpose of marriage in traditional Africa.

Consequently, after choosing to marry two wives, Ali is torn apart between balancing his works' exigencies and his time and emotions between Fusena and Esi as required by traditional polygamy. Aidoo presents Ali Kondey as a wealthy, educated and handsome character and a daily traveler. All these qualities prompt him as a philanderer. His attitude towards women infers that he desires to take from traditional and contemporary life what is advantageous for him. For instance, in marrying Esi he wants to satisfy his libido on the one hand and on the other, he conceives Esi as "an away match" (Aidoo, 1991:127) and "an occupied territory" (Aidoo, 1991:109)

In this urban setting, Ali is aware that women like Esi are enamoured by materials and therefore decides to substitute his love, time and affection by gifts and telephone calls. About the instrumentalization of love, the narrator says:

Ali phoned regularly to announce his imminent departures, (...) he also sent gifts. And what gifts! He brought her gold bangles from the Gulf States and succulent dates from Algeria (or was it Tunisia,?). He brought her huge slabs of chocolates from Switzerland, and gleaming copper things from Zambia and Zimbabwe. He brought her shimmering silk from the People's Republic of China, the Koreas and Thailand.(Aidoo, 1991:188)

Through this quotation, one clearly perceives that Ali's relation with Esi is a spurious love. He tries to rob her affection with gifts. In using gifts and phone calls in what Ali sees as a "sexual adventure" (Aidoo, 1991:127) to compensate his absence, he is able to have access to Esi's body which she prevented her first husband to possess.

From a 'too a demanding' husband to a 'non-demanding' one. From an ever-present husband to a fugitive. From a man who "demands too much of her and her time" to a man who gives her too much time. Esi is mentally traumatized and cannot keep the pace. She feels lonely and miserable. Her mental disorientation and eventual schizophrenia are perceptible in the narrator's rhetorical questions, "what was she to do?" where did she go from here? Through these questions, we perceive a morally cracked up character who succumbs under some existential pressures. About this incapacity of some blacks to balance western values and African worldview, Frantz Omar Fanon in *Black Skin White Masks* observes, "when the Negro

makes contact with the white world, a certain sensitizing action takes place. If his/[her] psyche structure is weak, one observes a collapse of the ego. ” (Fanon, 1986:154) Esi is therefore in the shoes of this Negro whose psyche is fragile to stand both pressures videlicet traditional requirements and western exigencies. Crushed by these too demanding worlds, Esi throws in the sponge and confesses to the doctor that “she couldn’t cope with work and her private life.” (Aidoo, 1991:173)

This seems to be the crux of the narrative; Aidoo presents a modern, sophisticated and educated woman who is at pain with reconciling professional life and her womanhood. She is unable to go up to this maturity of balancing things so as to live in psycho-physical stability. Nobody is against her emancipation and self-achievement, as she wrongly believes. She accuses her husband and society to be some stumbling blocks on her way to self-assertion. Her ensuing and eventual schizophrenia is squarely due to her incapacity of having a clear-minded judgment of post-colonial realities. As Achebe puts it on the closing page of his *Arrow of God*, “no man however great was greater than his people. That no one ever won judgment against his clan.” (Achebe, 1964:230) As a matter of fact, Esi was programmed to fail because she was assailed by a plethora of pressures going from her household up to the large society. Though physically tough and economically resilient, Esi is morally and psychologically “frail” (Aidoo, 1991:7) to stand these pressures.

Through Esi’s rebellion against a so entrenched system, Aidoo warns her African sisters against the danger of ‘swallowing’ western imported notions and practices in terms of gender roles. Consequently, the effects of her self-ostracism lead her to visit a doctor for mental rehabilitation. Her resorting to a practitioner accounts for a mental dislocation that needs repair. The metaphor of darkness that the narrator mentions makes read about her state of mind. The whole world seems to crumble around her, the narrator testifies:

All Esi was aware of was desolation. As for her mind, it was completely blank. She did not know what to do and was not sure whether she had to do anything (...) Because when she looked out the window, she couldn’t see anything at all. Night had fallen without her being aware of it. She realised that she was sitting in the dark, and her bedroom was not the only place without lights. There were no lights anywhere in or around the house.(Aidoo, 1991:194)

The use of tranquilizers such as “Diazepam,” (Aidoo, 1991:174) means that Esi is mentally and psychologically depressed due to two factors. Firstly, the loneliness and vacuum she creates around her by divorcing Oko and subsequently loses the companionship of her



daughter Ogyaanowa; secondly, this psychological emptiness she creates by the fake love of her new husband Ali Kondey.

To cap this part all the narrator's question on the closing page of the novel sums up Esi's troubles in the marital landscape of her society. "So what fashion of loving was she ever going to consider adequate?" (Aidoo, 1991:198) Esi is totally lost between monogamy and polygamous relationship; she does not know what strategies she needs to adopt to achieve her life.

This question foreshadows Aidoo's *womanist* leanings. By creating individual tensions between her female characters and their communities, Aidoo seems to recommend that gender issues in Africa be analyzed by taking into account the particular concerns, worries and aspirations of African people. In this sense, she seems to discard herself from the over-generalized term of Feminism. Through the character of Esi, she seems to recommend collaboration and cooperation between both sexes.

2- Fostering Gender Mutualism

Ama Ata Aidoo does not singularize her writing enterprise to women's concerns in Africa. Her writing encompasses all the problems and challenges that the continent faced and is still facing. We have inter-alia, colonization, imperialism, neocolonialism and cross-cultural influence for she strongly believes that women's victimization and oppression find roots in these scourges. For her, to better solve the problems of African women one needs to go up to these phenomena, to paraphrase Chinua Achebe, to better investigate a crime, the investigator needs to go up to the very smith who made the knife.

Indeed, these scourges that befall Africa do not spare one sex, both male and female characters are victims of this serial exploitation. Of course, female characters are doubly victims because they face internal and exogenous oppressions.

Contrary to some of her African female writers who portray their male characters as eternal impotent and nonentities, Aidoo seems to create male characters always supportive to some extent female cause. Buchi Emecheta with Francis in *Second Class Citizen*, Amma Darko with Akobi in *Beyond the Horizon* etc...present men as their enemies. Aidoo believes that the



advent of western civilization has profoundly disrupted African systems and the fierce patriarchy that men exert on women is a copy of white patriarchy.

Some of African societies are by essence matrilineal where men rule by proxy. Any misunderstanding of this internal dynamics of the relationship between the gendered spaces and functions can obviously lead to a misdiagnosis of the status of women in some of African societies. The Ghanaian society, which is the muse of Aidoo, is no exception. As such, it stresses collectiveness, mutualism, collaboration and a balanced construction of life. In this sense, her intellectual enterprise is to confront radical patriarchy as an oppressive political and cultural system in order to sweep it away. Aidoo comes back on the importance of women in the Akan setting in an interview with Wilson-Tagoe Nana; she says, “I got this incredible birds-eye view of what happens in that society and I definitely knew that being a woman is enormously important in Akan society.” (Wilson-Tagoe, 2002: 48)

In *Changes*, both male and female characters are culturally alienated in this postcolonial society where each seeks to re-define him/herself. The ensuing tension between them stem from their attempts to imitate and comply with the new civilization. The gender war in which both sexes are engulfed seems to be meaningless for to better resist white imperialism and neocolonialism, Aidoo fosters gender mutualism and collaboration.

Beyond gender conflict, the great challenges that Africans face is indubitably those of the restoration of their dignity, identity and fight for economic and political freedom. Thus, face to these challenges, what Aidoo envisions is that men should reject oppressive practices over women and reconnect themselves with good African values of brotherhood and togetherness. As *womanism* promotes anti-oppression Aidoo and Layli urge men to reject all kind of oppression. Layli puts forwards: “*womanism* is identified with liberationist projects of all sorts and that *womanism* supports the liberation of all humankind from all forms of oppression and subservience. Indeed, *womanism* seeks to enable people to transcend the relations of domination and oppression altogether.” (Layli, 2006:28)

For Layli, *womanism* does not only intend to liberate women from domination but also men from their desire to dominate women. He believes that for long, men have been obsessed with the desire to dominate and oppress women; this ‘inserted’ desire needs to be chased from their mind for a stable life. Africa being different in vision, culture and civilization, we need not blindly imitate western ideologies but we must keep what is good in our cultures and add what is good in western civilization. Any failure to do that is likely to lead Africans astray. Ana

Monteiro Ferreira in “Patriarchy” sums it up: “By imitating the white male patterns, the black men could not, would not or were unable to affirm themselves as the alternative male model that black women would legitimately have expected to join in the consolidation of a cohesive African tradition of respectful communal values.” (Ana, 2004: 396)

For Ferreira, since men are the perpetrators of oppression over women, there is a great need for them to re-examine their positions and opt for better understanding, and cooperation between the sexes.

Conclusion

In *Changes*, Aidoo deals with the impact of colonialism, post-colonialism and neo-colonialism on the bodies and psyches of her African male and female characters. Under this triple cross-cultural influence, she depicts characters in a constant search of re-definition and re-examination. Morally and psychologically disoriented, Aidoo calls upon them to re-connect themselves with African consciousness. For the recurrent failures of some of her female characters in their gender conflict against their communities, partly stem from their lack of appreciation of both traditional norms and western values. The psycho-traumatic end of Esi the main protagonist is due to the fact that she put her professional career above the expectations and exigencies of her society in terms of wifhood and motherhood. Thus, through the character of Esi, the Ghanaian writer is warning her African sisters to beware about the ‘modern traps’ of post-colonial era.

Of course, as an optimistic writer, change is not out of reach still, womenfolk need in a surge of female bonding and sisterhood to re-examine their status in this fast-changing society and try to comply with the existing norms. Because uprooting an entrenched system will certainly cost a great amount of sacrifices and time.

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