

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF AFRICANA WOMEN'S CONCEPTIONS OF MARRIAGE IN AMA ATA AIDOO'S CHANGES: A LOVE STORY. (1991).

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Abstract: Contemporary African women writers shift from a “deconstruction” project to a larger “reconstruction” of the society through modern females’ life and experiences. Wilson-Tag asserts that *African women’s writings are marked by gender perspectives that are mediated by history, culture and class* (Wilson-tagoe: 1997:14). This article depicts the African women, with western education, who exercise a measure of authority over their bodies in their marriages. Feminists’ theories inherited from western countries and women’s financial independence are the causes of most marriages failure.

Keywords: *Feminism, Womanism, Empowerment, Marriage, Polygamy*

INTRODUCTION

For years, African women have experienced many predicaments in their social, cultural and economic situations. As such, many African female writers devote their writings to women’s social conditions and denounce a patriarchal system in some African societies. Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Ba and Flora Nwapa respectively in *In the Ditch*, *So long a Letter* and *Efuru*, castigate the drastic and alarming African women’s living conditions. Ama Ata Aidoo publishes *Changes* to display the 21st century African women’s situations in foreign lands and how their western education takes precedence over their marriages. The novel deals with the African women who apply western education and values within their relationships with their African husbands.

This article pinpoints African women educated elites’ marriages. Western theories such as “feminism”, “Womanism” and “Mothering” change the traditional functioning of African marriages. The first part brings to light Esi’s failed relationship with her husband. The second part lays emphasis on Opokuya’s harmonious and successful marriage with Kubi. The final part displays modern African women’s polygamous marriage.

I) Esi and Oko's failed Marriage

Sefi Atta, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Ama Ata Aidoo and Chika Unigwe depict the behavior of the contemporary African women who have been abroad to get Western education. Their homecoming breaks up many stereotypes and marks a new starting point in their lives. They become emancipated in a male-dominated society. Western education causes the loss of their social, traditional, and cultural realities. Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes* retraces Esi's life rooted in western realities, values and practices in her relationship with her African husband, Oko. She is influenced by western womanist and feminist theories. Kolawole presents "feminism" as "*the totality of feminine self-expression, self-retrieval and self-assertion in positive cultural way*" *It foregrounds collectivism and integrative struggle* (Kolawole, 1997). Ayo Kehinde and Joy Ebong Mbipom explore P.C. Taylor's writings and assert:

Feminism as pure Western and goes ahead to label this ideology with the tag 'individualistic', feminism transcends this description and judgment. Despite the fact that self-fulfillment is accentuated by feminism, the over-indulgence of patriarchy with self-fulfillment, as well as other self-centered projects, seems to be ignored (Taylor, 2002:428).

Moreover, Kolawole argues that womanism exhibits and promotes 'collective grouping' and 'positive bonding'. The womanist approach is holistic and inclusive. Most African women writers create specific cultural definitions of womanhood and empowerment. The aforementioned theories engender great changes in African socio-cultural values. They break up the traditional moral values and principals, to establish western cultures and way of life. Esi gets married with Oko in accordance with their social norms. The sacred and institutionalized union known as marriage is not only comprised of two human beings: *the only recognized purpose for marriage was to beget children* (Orwell, 1993: 55).

In African marriages, the wife must be submissive and docile. But such a thing never happens in Oko and Esi's marriage. Esi exercises a measure of authority over her body. She decides the circumstances in which she should have sexual intercourse with her husband. Oko's violent attitude results from his deprivation of sex by Esi. Aidoo describes:

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 her down, 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. Breathing like a marathon runner at the end of a particularly grueling race (Aidoo, 1991:9).

Esi and Oko's sexual intercourse without Esi's consent is among the incentive factors of their divorce. Esi accuses Oko of "marital rape" and goes to her village to consult her mother and grandmother. As an empowered and educated woman, Esi thinks that she has been humiliated. Unwanted sexual intercourse contributes to lowering her standard and making her dirty. She asserts...*And ever a good bath before and after, still dirty...dirty...Ah-h-h-h- the word was out* (Aidoo, 1991: 13). Nana, Esi's grandmother reminds her that in African marriages, man's sexual desires should be satisfied by his wife: *sex is*

something a husband claims from his wife as his right. At any time. And at his convenience (Aidoo, 1991:13).

Esi is corrupted by western education and “brainwashed” by western female theories. Nana tells her granddaughter to respect her husband and meet his expectations. Esi’s mental disorientation emanates from western education. She confesses:

Why had they sent her to school? What had they hoped to gain from it, what had they hoped she would gain from it? Who had designed the educational system that had produced her sort? What had that person or those people hoped to gain from it? For surely, taking a ten-year-old child from her mother, and away from her first language-which is surely one of life’s most powerful working tools-for what would turn out to be forever, then transferring her into a boarding school for three or four years, to a higher boarding school for seven years, then to an even higher boarding school for three or four years, from where she was only equipped to go...with no hope of ever meaningfully re-entering her mother’s world...all this was too high a price to pay to achieve the dangerous confusion she was now in and the country now was in (Aidoo, 1991: 114).

Esi accuses her parents of her assimilation. They have sent her abroad in a cosmopolitan environment. Her mental disorientation should also cause headache in the minds of African educational officials. Does the writer interrogate *who had designed the educational system that had produced her sort?* (Aidoo, 1991:114). Western education destroys the values and languages of the new comer. Esi’s use of the expression “marital rape” is illustrative. Solomon Omatsola Azumurana examines Nada Elia’s work and quotes: *Esi’s mother and grandmother cannot understand “marital-rape” as a problem* (Elia, 199: 136-47). Nada Elia is echoed by Patrick Oloko who vouches that *the promise of problem of an economically empowered African woman is, at a level, the subject of the novel* (Oloko, 2008: 103-13).

Socio-cultural and economic reasons are also among the motivations of divorces. Esi is too busy to take care of children. She prioritizes her job over the need of begetting sons. Making countlessly love so as to have children impedes her from being free. For Esi, taking care of her daughter Ogyaanowa and herself is enough for a modern African intellectual. Aidoo writes: *two solid years of courtships, six years of marriage and what had he got out of it? Little. Nothing. No affection. Not even plain warmth. Nothing except one daughter* (Aidoo, 1991: 8). However, Oko was born to a conservative and extended family. His parents want Esi to have children. Like most parents, Oko’s mother and sisters wish to see their grandchildren and nephews. The conflicting social relationship between Esi and her family-in-law triggers off Oko and Esi’s divorce:

Esi’s family-in-law considers her as a woman who does not make children. “Esi is not a proper woman”...The purpose of the project had been two-fold: to get him to make children because his lady–wife appeared to be very satisfied with only one child, a terrible mistake, a dangerous situation. Esi, we know that we all marry to have children (Aidoo, 1991: 41-44).

The generation gap between wives and family in-laws has become central in the 21st century African writings. In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's, Buchi Emecheta's and Mukoma WA Ngugi's fictions respectively in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, *A kind of Marriage* and *Black Star Nairobi*, authors depict the social conflicting tensions between in-laws. Esi's incapacity of making children leads her in-laws to label her as "semi-barren".

One day, one of his mothers and two of his sisters had marched on Esi, demanding what right she thought she had to start him on a new job with such a bad luck? They had gone to call her a semi-barren witch and told her that they thought their son and brother well rid of her, thank God (Aidoo, 1991: 77).

African women get involved in the activities that were exclusively reserved for men. They become economic actors, political activists, emancipated and empowered women. The improvement of their economic situation makes them financially independent. Financial independence and intelligence bring about their disobedience towards their husbands. Most emancipated African women gain more money than their husbands. Esi's social and economic status turns her into an egocentric and self-sufficient young lady. Aidoo asserts that... *When Esi let it be known that in fact she earned more than he had, their new line of attach was that it served him right, marrying a woman who had more than him. His wife never respects him* (Aidoo, 1991: 42). While African socio-cultural stereotypes become obstacles for Esi in her marriage, her best friend, Opokuya finds African cultures and values as satisfactory contributors.

II) Opokuya and Kubi's Successful Marriage

Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes* mainly deals mainly with love, marriage, divorce, adultery, polygamy, bigamy, friendship, etc. In Aidoo's fiction, Esi and Opokuya's friendship reminds readers of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou's friendly relationship in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*. Esi and Opokuya have both frequented western schools. Nevertheless, their personalities differ. Despite her western education, Opokuya applies Buchi Emecheta's specific cultural definitions of "feminism" to her marriage. She knows who she is and how to behave with her husband, Kubi. In *the Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta explains that African "feminism" cherishes "the inevitable contribution of both men and women in upholding the family" (Emecheta, 1979:71). She writes:

How can a woman hate a husband chosen for her by her people? You are to give her children and food, she is to cook and to bear the children and look after you and them. So what is there to hate? Woman may be ugly and grow old, but a man is never ugly and never old. He matures with age and is dignified (Emecheta, 1979: 71).

Opokuya is a High civil servant with children at home. Her deep rootedness contributes to her successful marriage with Kubi. She knows that African marriages include her in-laws and the extended family. She does not mingle with professional obligations and domestic responsibilities. Opokuya does not display her economic independence and intelligence to Kubi. She remains a submissive and docile African woman who abides by her husband. She works hard at the hospital and when she is at home she does her household before going to bed too late. She considers Kubi's parents and family as her own. The writer explains:

She could make a big pot of Abe nkwan and an equally big pot of jolof rice. And of course, bowls of chips. That way, the family could nibble, and still have regular meals with enough food left over for visiting members of the extended family and friends... A whole load of Kubi's young relatives had arrived...How was she going to cope? Stay up and cook again? Sneak of the bed early enough so that she could wake up early to cook another pot before going to the hospital (Aidoo, 1991: 40-41).

Opokuya's western education does not divert her from her socio-cultural values. She transmits her traditional realities and values to her daughters. Opokuya shows them that western education should not be an obstacle to their African traditional marriage. She is neither "assimilated" nor "mentally disoriented" like Esi whose Western education brings about a *dangerous confusion* (Aidoo, 1991:114). Opokuya's children, Nana and Dada, identify themselves with her: *She told Nana Aba, her oldest child, that she was leaving the whole affair to her and Dada, the older of the two sons. They kept the recipe* (Aidoo, 1991:140).

Aidoo castigates African modern women's personalities in relation to western education and African tradition. The African women who get western education may not feel at ease about their social situations. They defend that the educational system is responsible for their "pains" and "assimilation". Azumurana quotes:

Changes demonstrate that as access to quality education improves for Africans regardless of sex...African women have returned from the workplaces to see their homes from a newer perspective...This...entails coming to terms with the reality of a new life for the woman, a life which significantly challenges the traditional responsibilities of women in an unanticipated way(Azumurana, 2013:10).

Despite her western education, Opokuya has succeeded in her marriage with her husband Kubi in accordance with African social realities, cultures and values. The next section will be devoted to the analysis of African educated women's polygamous marriages within African extended families.

III) African Women Educated Elites and Polygamy

African women educated elites to cope with many difficulties in their marriages. Their long sojourn in western countries have positive and negative impacts on their relationships with their husbands and in-laws. The social tensions within the family become more visible when the husband marries a second woman. This polygamous situation is a pretext for many husbands to cheat on their wives. Most educated women accept polygamous marriages grudgingly. Because of social pressure and intolerance, unmarried women or divorcees seek respectively to get married or remarried. In *Changes*, Aidoo displays that Esi who gets divorced with Oko in her first marriage, seeks another relation with Ali Kondey, Fusena's husband. Ali and Esi become suddenly lovers when they meet in a restaurant. The social pressure of which she is a victim engenders her precocious remarriage. Esi confesses:

Our societies have had no patience with the unmarried woman. People thought her single state was an insult to the glorious manhood of our men. So they put

as much pressure as possible on her until she gave in and married or remarried, or went back to her former husband (Aidoo, 1991: 52).

Esi's remarriage with Ali Kondey is not a willing option. But for the social pressure, she would not have another husband. The reasons for African ancestors to be polygamous are different from African emancipated women's motivations. Traditional polygamous marriage was based on the social survival of the community. Aba explains: *More energy to work the fields, strong legs and better hips to make babies with. It is still beauty and being younger* (Aidoo, 1991: 115). Getting remarried with Ali Kondey displays Esi's acknowledgment of the necessity of man's presence in her life. Her "feminist" and "womanist" approaches own up to their weaknesses within a "patriarchal" system. Ali is a "shelter" or "cover" for Esi. She wants to be accepted by an intolerant society. Opokuya criticizes Esi and tells her:

In a polygamous situation, or rather in a traditional environment in which polygamous marriages flourished, happiness, like most of the good things of this life, was not a two-person enterprise. It was the business of all parties concerned...included the first wife of Ali whom Esi had not even met (Aidoo, 1991:105).

Esi does not cope with the difficulties that her grandmother, her mother and Opokuya expect her to face. As opposed to her marriage with Oko, Esi's remarriage is not that complicated. She finally gets the marriage she wishes. Being a second wife makes the domestic responsibilities bearable. Indeed, Esi lives without pressure. She even takes a part of her job at home to finish it. She is not used like a "sex slave" or an "object" in bed. Ali Kondey's shuttling back and forth between Fusena's and Esi's place allows her to have spare time. She admits:

In all her basic hopes for marrying a man like Ali had been fulfilled. Ali was not on her back every one of every twenty-four hours of every day....She could be concentrated on her job, and even occasionally bring work home (Aidoo, 1991:156).

CONCLUSION

African women writers no longer have a keen interest in women's hard living conditions. The 21st century African contemporary writers like Sefi Atta, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Chika Unigwe and Ama Ata Aidoo deal with women's social, political, and economic achievements in African societies. In *Changes*, Aidoo reveals the extent to which western education transforms African women elites. The writer does not criticize western education. Indeed, the latter trained the African presidents who contributed to their countries' independence in the sixties. Solomon Omatsola Azumurana explains:

It is paradoxical that the above-discussed writers-who are beneficiaries of western education-would condemn it, for it is certain that without western education, they would not have been able to craft their stories. What their narratives, therefore, reveal is that the uncritical adoption of western values (Azumurana, 2013:10).

Aidoo calls African educated women's attention not to be like Esi who loses her roots and traditional cultural values. "Assimilation", "mental disorientation" and "Self-Sufficiency" are mostly the incentive factors of African educated elites' divorce.

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