

FEMALE CHAUVINISTS AND MALE PATRIARCHS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF GENDER RELATIONS IN AMA ATA AIDOO'S *CHANGES: A LOVE STORY*

Benon Tugume

Kyambogo University, Uganda
btugume77@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

This article examines gender relations in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story*. The novel depicts a gender crisis among the educated and career-oriented women working in government offices in Accra. The focus is on women's education, sexuality, marriage, and marital rape. The three women protagonists, Esi, Opokuya and Fusena, find the institution of marriage challenging and hold the view that it hampers their career development. Esi is highly educated compared to the other female characters. She is a female chauvinist, who feels too powerful to be controlled by a man. She finds herself in the most complicated situation in her marriage, because of her feminist views, which she acquired from Western education. Although she abhors the dominance of men over women, her sexuality naturally brings her into relationships with male patriarchs. Her views about love and marriage are superficial and irreconcilable with the realities of her society. She divorces her first husband because of marital rape and goes into a polygamous marriage, which she also finds unfulfilling. In this article, I argue that Esi's problems in her first marriage are due to her uncompromising character and her inability to engage her husband in order to strike a balance between family obligations and career goals. In addition, I argue that Esi does not realise her expectations in the second marriage because she emotionally and selfishly goes into it without understanding the rules that govern polygamous marriages.

Keywords: female chauvinist; male patriarchs; marital rape

UNISA 
university
of south africa

Imbizo
Volume 7 | Number 1 | 2016
pp. 91–100

Print ISSN 2078-9785
© 2016 University of South Africa

Ama Ata Aidoo, in the preface to *Changes*, states that her novel is not meant to contribute to any debate, however current. But, as Azumurana Solomon Omatsola argues, 'the turn of events in the narration proves otherwise' (8). In fact, Aidoo consciously or unconsciously has contributed to the debate, as Olaussen Maria puts it, 'on the well known theme in African Women's writing of women suffering and confusion due to changing ideas of marriage and motherhood' (61). The novel is set in post-independence Ghana and, as such, it portrays a gender crisis among the educated and career-oriented women working in Accra and by extension in other African cities.

The story in *Changes* is about women's education, marriage, sexuality and marital rape. The three female protagonists, namely Esi Sekyi, Opokuya and Fusena, interrogate and challenge cultural prescriptions in the institution of marriage. They have diverse views on love and marriage. Esi's views, for example, are informed by Western feminist ideology, as compared to other female characters. She has ideals acquired from her Western education, which do not conform to the cultural values of her traditional society.

The novel begins with Esi Sekyi driving her own car to Linga Agency to make travel arrangements for the officials of the Department of Urban Statistics to attend a conference in Lusaka. While on her way, she complains that, with the absence of their secretary, her male colleagues expect her to perform the secretary's duties, because she is a woman and secretarial work is culturally assigned to women. At the same time, taxi drivers are shouting obscenities at her, making fun about women drivers, because she has veered into a man's domain. These two incidents on the first page of the novel introduce to us the patriarchal nature of Esi's society and prepare us for the conflict ahead.

At Linga Agency, Esi meets the Managing Director, Ali Kondey – a handsome, educated, rich and self-imposing male patriarch, whose mission is to conquer and enjoy sex with any beautiful woman that crosses his way. As Miriam C. Gyimah puts it, 'Ali's behavior is representative of the phallogocentric and colonialist attitude which holds that a woman like a vacant land without history, can be freely claimed, occupied and appropriated' (392). Ali looks at women as frail and fears that Esi, together with her old car, might be swept away by the impending storm. As Gyimah further argues, this confirms Ali's position as a patriarchal (pseudo-)colonialist engaging a phallogocentric gaze that identifies Esi as weak and this enables him to undertake the task of possessing her (392). Esi meets Ali when her marriage with Oko is on the rocks because of irreconcilable differences.

To begin with, Esi was never interested in relationships and marriage. She had a negative attitude about men. As the omniscient narrator states:

Esi had known that she would have to work up some enthusiasm in her relationships with men. But how? She had kept asking herself. Now looking back she did not dare admit even to herself, that perhaps what she had felt for Oko in the first years of their married life

was gratitude more than anything else. Gratitude that in spite of herself he had persisted in courting her and marrying her. (*Changes* 40)

This statement makes it clear that Esi married Oko, not because she loved him, but out of gratitude, convenience and, as she later states, because of the pressure from her mother. Her mother complained that Esi may not get children if she waits for too long after puberty to get married, because women of Esi's structure – 'too tall, too thin, a flat belly, and a flat behind have slim chances of bearing children' (40). According to Esi, Oko ought to have been grateful for allowing him, a mere headmaster, to marry her. She has a master's degree, a well-paying job as a data analyst with the government statistical bureau and a bungalow that comes with her job. Although Oko is culturally the head of the household and, supposedly, the breadwinner, Esi earns more money than him and has more freedom and entitlements, because of her status. Esi feels equal to Oko, or even, more powerful than him, too powerful to control as a woman. She is so obsessed with the status of equalisation of women and men that a man of whatever description has no right to impose himself on a woman. According to her, a woman has the right to accept or refuse to have sex with her husband out of her own wish. She enjoys her work and gets bored with her marriage: 'She leaves home at dawn and returns at dusk often bringing work home. Then there were all those conferences: Geneva, Dakar one half of the year: Rome, Lusaka, Lagos, the other half' (8). She virtually has no time for her husband: 'Esi definitely put her career well above any duties she owed as a wife' (8). Oko feels lonely in their marriage and constantly complains about this and Esi's refusal to produce more children for him: 'Look at Esi! Two solid years of courtship, six years of marriage. And what had he got out of it? Little. No affection. Not even plain warmth. Nothing except one little daughter' (7-8). There is no communication between Esi and Oko.

Oko married Esi expecting her to play the roles of a woman and mother as prescribed by culture. His expectations are shattered when Esi denies him time and sex. Oko, as the head of the family, finds himself in a fix. He is constantly bashed by his extended family for allowing his wife to dominate him. He is devalued by his wife and keeps reminding Esi that his friends and family do not consider him man enough. They laugh at him because Esi has denied him more children. Oko is made insecure in the relationship, because his role in the family is certainly not clear. He has been reduced to a sitting duck in his own empire in which society accords him full control. He is denied sex, which is his most basic right as husband, and left to ravish her with his eyes.

The pressure from his friends and family, coupled with Esi's refusal to give him enough sex, injures Oko's ego. Oko rapes Esi one morning, to exert his dominance and restore his manhood, which has been psychologically damaged. Esi's expectations in marriage, which includes freedom from the domineering engagements of the male gender, have been shattered by what she terms as marital rape. She uses this incident to express her protest against Oko's male dominance. She begins talking of her

forced sexual intercourse as a very filthy, demeaning and crude affair, which she can hardly erase from her body physically and psychologically. She becomes hysterical and develops a mental problem referred to in medical terms as schizophrenia. She divorces Oko over an action she calls assault, because marital rape does not exist in the society's culture and current legal framework. As Azumurana states, 'her alienation from her culture is responsible for her conceiving of a Western concept, "marital rape". She herself observes that her mother and grandmother can never envisage such a notion since they are not products of Western education' (8).

The divorce sends Oko packing from Esi's house. He vacates the home with their daughter, Ogyaanowa. The one who looked like a conqueror and, to use Fabura's words, 'like some arrogant King' (21), as he walked to the bathroom after the rape, is eventually stripped of his patriarchal authority, debased and rendered an object by Esi's powerful decision. Esi considers her marital rape as an act of not only subjugation, but also dehumanisation. She is not ready to accept the humiliation, because she has the education, the money and the job that can make her independent of Oko's domineering and patriarchal control. Equipped with factors that make her stand on her own, Esi makes history by challenging and dissolving at this juncture the seat of patriarchy when she divorces Oko.

Nevertheless, none of Esi's relatives and friends approve of her decision to divorce Oko. It comes as a shock to her mother, grandmother Nana and even to her friend Opokuya. They all expected her to have recognised her place in a home as a wife, who would balance her traditional roles with her career responsibilities, even if it were not satisfying. Her career should not have consumed all her time to forget her daughter, Ogyaanowa, and husband, Oko. Considering her education, Esi is not ready to listen to the moribund views of her mother and grandmother.

The divorce leaves Esi free to conduct herself and her business as she wishes, because marriage had imprisoned her physically and mentally. She is free to determine her destiny by choosing a man of her dreams. When Ali Kondey comes into her life and proposes to marry her, as his second wife, immediately Esi feels her dream is fulfilled. As the omniscient narrator states:

In all, her basic hopes of marrying a man like Ali had been fulfilled. Ali was not on her back every one of every twenty four hours of everyday. In fact he was hardly ever near her at all, in that sense she was extremely free and extremely contented. She could concentrate on her job, and even occasionally bring work home. She not only enjoyed the job she was doing, but she actually enjoyed working. She enjoyed working with figures-coordinating them, correlating and graphing. (*Changes* 133-134).

In her first year of re-marriage, Esi is gratified. She has married a man who is ready to accept her lifestyle. While in dialogue with Opokuya, Esi says that she loves Ali, because he is handsome, understands the kind of woman she is, is generous and mature (91). As Angela M. Fabura states:

The assertive powerful Esi falls prey to love under Ali's clutches. Driven by uncontrolled love and forgetting Nana's caution that "love is not safe" Esi unwittingly sacrifices her physical and emotional autonomy and gets into a Muslim polygamous marriage with Ali Kondey. She who paid less attention to her conjugal roles when she was married to Oko becomes an astonishing cook such that Ali affirms: "Esi cooked like nobody he knew or had known". Her house becomes a place of lovemaking with Ali from the doorsteps to the living room and to her bedroom. (22)

Esi's love for Ali blinds her to the fact that Ali is already married to Fusena and, therefore, she cannot claim him or have him anytime she wants. She is soon to become lonely and depressed, only to console herself with the expensive gifts Ali brings to her from his business trips. When he finally gives her a brand new car on New Year's day, and she asks him, 'But what will your wife say?' (143), without getting a definite answer from Ali, she understands the gesture as a bribe to console her and a substitute for his presence. Esi also realises that she is the other woman considered to be the concubine that will only be used by Ali as a dumping ground for his expensive gifts and to show off his wealth and male power. She finds herself in a mixture of emotional stress and confusion. The only way to extricate herself is to take tranquilisers. However, this is a temporary measure that does not in the long run sort her out of the mess she is in currently. Her emotional turmoil, desolation and despair, point to her failure to attain freedom she all along craved for. Whereas Oko complained that Esi did not have time for him and her daughter because of her busy schedules, the irony is that Esi is now complaining that Ali does not have time for her because, first, he is married to his first wife and, second, he is too busy with his business. For Esi, marriage has now become a source of emotional stress, whether in a monogamous or polygamous arrangement. She may have become free to make her own decisions and the choice to have sexual pleasures with someone she loves, but she fails to realise, as the adage goes, that she cannot have her 'cake and eat it'.

Oko loved Esi and was always available for her. Now Ali needs very little of her time and finds it convenient to merely come once in a while to lay her on bed for his gratification. In other words, Esi becomes a sex machine. The tables turn on her in her desire to search for freedom and equality. Regret and moments of self-realisation set in and her true identity dawns on her as the omniscient narrator says:

Lying alone in bed with eyes hard and wide open in the dark, she remembered some of the advice her mother and her grandmother had given her. They had told her to be careful. That being one of any number of wives had its rules. If she obeyed the rules, a woman like her should be alright. If she broke the rules then her new marriage would be like a fire that had been lighted inside her... They said there were two things she had to bear in mind. One was never to forget that she was number two and the other was never to show jealousy. (*Changes* 113)

Esi realises, though too late, that she should have taken her mother's and her grandmother's advice seriously. Instead, she was whisked off her feet by love for

Ali, because the man was handsome and generous, not knowing that love is emotions which often times obscure rationality. As Nana advised her:

Love?...Love? ... Love is not safe, my lady silk, love is dangerous. It is deceitfully sweet like the wine from a fresh palm tree at dawn. Love is fine for singing about and love songs are good to listen to, sometimes even to dance to. But when we need to count on human strength, and we have to count pennies for food for our stomachs and clothes for our backs, love is nothing. Ah my lady, the last man any woman should think of marrying is the man she loves. (*Changes* 41)

Esi disregarded her grandmother's advice and followed her love instincts. Now she begins to understand that she was blinded by love and that for a woman in marriage, responsibility should be first and foremost to the family and her career is secondary. As Waleska Saltori Simpson argues:

While it is true that Aidoo questions the opportunities for happiness afforded married women through her protagonist and other characters in the novel, it should be borne in mind that she also indicated that Esi and Ali's marriage fails because they do not follow the rules governing a traditional relationship. Her suggestion, then, is not that polygamy or by extension monogamy does not work for some women, but rather that clarity on the relationship in question, its opportunities and limits, is required. In entering into a polygamous marriage, Ali and Esi rather naively accept a traditional structure that can only be successful if they subscribe to its codes, and conventions. (165)

While to some extent one agrees with Simpson's assertion above, it is abundantly clear in the novel that it is Esi who enters into a relationship with Ali without understanding the rules, limits codes and conventions that govern a polygamous marriage. Ali understands the rules and refers to Fusena's home as his home. He achieves his objective of marking Esi as occupied territory in order to take control of her sexuality. Esi leaves Oko and regrettably falls into Ali's conquest trap. Ali's claim to love and respect her is, to use Miriam C. Gyimah's words, 'no more than a guise concealing a desire for patriarchal control' (391). He is only interested in exerting his male ego on women whom he feels should just be conquered and marked as territory in which he reigns. Just like his father, Ali has a dubious reputation of juggling women like play things, win their hearts, occupy them and then engage many more in his lustful adventures. When Ali takes Esi to Bamako and introduces her to his family, his father Musa Musa, who is an incurable womaniser, feels that 'he could sleep with her' (131). Although he cautions himself that Esi is his daughter-in-law and therefore forbidden territory, he nevertheless – after his eyes have raked her body – intimates that she is beautiful and a territory to occupy. His thoughts about Esi are the same as his son's. So, when Esi asks Ali why he is giving her an engagement ring, he callously and bluntly tells her that 'she has become occupied territory' (89). This is the naked truth that Esi must live with for the rest of her life. She once again finds herself imprisoned, frustrated and abandoned by the man of her dream. She decides

to stay in marriage with Ali, because her people would not accept any explanations if she annuls this marriage too. As the omniscient narrator states:

So the marriage stayed, but radically changed. All questions and their answers disappeared. If Ali went to Esi's and she was not in, he tried not to question her about when they next met. For Esi, though, things hadn't worked out so simply, she had to teach herself not to expect him at all. She had had to teach herself not to wonder where he was when he was not with her. And that had been the hardest of the lessons to learn. (*Changes* 161)

As this passage illustrates, Esi is legally married to Ali. In reality they are not husband and wife, but sexual partners. The problem is that each of them has their own understanding of love and marriage. As Esi confesses, she knew that Ali 'loved her in his own fashion. What she became certain of was that his fashion of loving had proved quite inadequate for her' (161). She decides to stay in marriage and 'become just good friends who once in a while fall into bed and make love' (160). She finally realises that her predicament is of her own making. It is a consequence of her naivety regarding the rules of polygamy and her determination to follow her heart rather than heed the warning of her grandmother.

Despite the freedom and the space she attains after divorcing Oko, her sexuality plays to haunt her. She is a woman who naturally needs a man as a companion to satisfy her emotional and sexual needs. When Ali starts withdrawing, Esi comes to the realisation that material wealth and career development cannot be substitutes for a warm bed and embrace of a man who is always available for her. She wanted a man who is prepared to accept her lifestyle, not knowing that that position smacks of selfishness on her part. In fact, Esi is a selfish woman, who only gives in when the stakes are in her favour. It is this selfishness that makes her disregard advice from the people close to her. All her tribulations are caused by the desire to always have her way despite the obvious consequences of, for example, becoming a second wife to Ali. Her selfishness coupled with university education which bombarded her with western feminist theories that contradict the realities of the social life that rules the society compromise her sense of judgment. As Azumurana argues, 'in Aidoo's novel, it is characters like Esi, whose education results in dangerous confusion' (8). Opokuya had advised her by quoting the saying that 'for any marriage to work, one party has to be a fool', with the person playing this role naturally being the woman (48). This is the reality she must live despite her educational status. As Gyimah observes, 'despite the so-called formal education of the mind, the sexual politics between men and women is yet the same which governed their ancestors' (285).

It is clear, then, that the gender power politics cannot be abrogated easily. Life is tricky for Esi either as a married or a single woman. She must either contend with the restrictions of marriage or the loneliness of single life. As Opokuya says, 'a woman living a single life is looked down upon by society. She is ostracized, and soon enough she dies of shame, loneliness and heartbreak' (47). Esi opts for marriage even when she abhors men's dominance over women. Her marital problems with her

first husband are partly due to her uncompromising stance against Oko's proposal to give more time to her family instead of focusing entirely on her career. She did not strike a balance between her family and her career in order to enjoy both of them. Her choice of polygamy as opposed to monogamy is quite astounding. She says, 'Opokuya, monogamy is so stifling' (95). She utters this statement desperately trying to justify her choice, but as Opokuya corrects her, 'I suspect you mean marriage', her naivety and limited knowledge about the institution of marriage are exposed. She marries Ali, foolishly thinking that being a second wife is a very convenient arrangement for her as a professional woman.

The other two women characters, Fusena and Opokuya, also find themselves in marriages that fall short of fulfilling their desires and expectations. Opokuya's marriage with her husband, Kubi, has had serious challenges. They have been married for years and have four children, but Opokuya does not feel special with Kubi, as her dialogue with Esi illustrates:

Opokuya went on to tell Esi about the trip she was planning to her mother's
 'Homesick?' Esi asked, trying hard to keep her teasing tone.
 'Yes'. Opokuya answered, too enthusiastically, and fell into Esi's trap.
 'Oh Opoku, shame on you. At your age!'
 'Now you stop it. I miss my mother. You know I haven't seen her for a long time.
 'I did not know.'
 'And I miss, the feeling of being special with someone'
 'You are very special with Kubi'
 'Esi you are very special with Oko' (*Changes* 86-89).

Opokuya does not feel special with Kubi because he does not spend a lot of time with her. Kubi always comes home late from work and she suspects he is cheating on her. However, she does not mind about Kubi's lateness and her "decision to trust her husband had paid off in other ways" (54). She is uncomfortable with his late coming because, firstly, she feels anxious for his safety and, secondly, he parks the car for long hours when she could be using it. She stays in marriage in spite of these problems. She resorts to birth control methods after agreeing with the husband on the number of children to have:

For herself, Opokuya had decided she wanted four children. She had had them, and then brought the matter out in the open to discuss with her husband, Kubi. After they had agreed that, indeed, four were enough, she had gone to one of the gynaecologists she respected; to have the ends of her fallopian tubes tied or singed, whatever, Finish! (*Changes* 14)

Unlike Esi, who takes birth control pills without consulting her husband, Opokuya knows she cannot stop having children without her husband's consent. Nevertheless Opokuya sacrifices herself and her aspirations in order to keep her marriage. Kubi is insensitive to her demand to share the family car and this has had a toll on her life in the exercise of her role as a mother, a nurse and midwife at the busy state hospital. She envies Esi's marriage to Ali, but she is quick to realise that "the best husband

always seems to be the one some other woman is living with” (37). This conclusion on her part seems to suggest that there is no perfect man or woman in marriage. It is this realisation that keeps her in marriage.

Similarly, Fusena decides to stay in the marriage with Ali, despite the fact that he is polygamous and a womaniser. Ali and Fusena were classmates and friends at a teacher’s training college. Their friendship is described in the novel as brother-sister love. Both of them have been involved in love affairs which did not grow. When she eventually married Ali, she realised that, by getting married, she had lost a friend. As the omniscient narrator states:

One rainy day, it occurred to her that life should offer more than marriage. That is, if the life she was leading was in fact marriage. To begin with, she was beginning to admit to herself that by marrying Ali she had exchanged a friend for a husband. She felt the loss implied in this admission keenly, and her grief was great. The first time that this hit her, she actually sat down and wept bitterly. She also knew immediately that there was nothing she could do about her situation...Because having married her friend and got a husband there was no chance of her getting back her friend if she left or divorced Ali the husband...She kept telling herself that given the position of women in society, she would rather be married than not and rather to Ali than anyone else. (*Changes* 65)

This passage illustrates that Fusena is living a loveless life, because she exchanged a friend for a husband. She is frustrated, but cannot divorce Ali because society disregards single women. Besides, her submission that Ali was the best man to marry, shows that there is no perfect man. She gives up her teaching profession, because of her responsibilities as a wife. She felt insecure and jealous in marriage, because “it was this business of Ali getting more and more educated while she stayed the same” (65). When Ali announces that he is marrying Esi as a second wife, Fusena feels betrayed and frustrated. She thinks the reason why Ali marries Esi is because Esi has a university degree. This is not so, because Ali is innately a womaniser. Eventually, Fusena develops a fatalistic attitude towards life. So, instead of divorcing Ali when he marries Esi, she goes to the elders in Ali’s family – the patriarchs of Nima – to complain and weep. As Nada Elia argues, “The fact that she goes to Ali’s relatives, rather than her own, or to a friend, reveals her isolation in the traditional patriarchal structure, where a woman is a man’s appendage” (144).

All the male characters in the novel relate to the three women protagonists through sexual contact. Both Oko and Ali are interested in Esi’s sexuality. Whereas Oko uses violent masculine means to subdue her, Ali uses gifts to bribe her and soften her heart. Kubi takes advantage of her loneliness to get close and, in the process, attempts to fulfil his lustful desire by having sexual intercourse with her. It is after Kubi’s unsuccessful attempt that she realises that all the men who have come into her life, have only been interested in fulfilling their sexual feelings and gratification. The rest of the women characters acknowledge their position in the family. Opokuya balances her professional work and her domestic duties. She cannot prevail over

Kubi regarding her need to have the car for her work. Kubi's refusal to give her the car is a reflection of his attitude towards the idea of a woman's independence. Fusena succumbs to the marriage in which Ali is left to wield power, while Opokuya complains, negotiates and compromises in order to keep her marriage.

REFERENCES

- Aidoo, A.A. 1991. *Changes: A love story*. New York: Feminist.
- Allan, T.J. 1993. Afterword. In *Changes: A love story*, by A.A. Aidoo. New York: Feminist.
- Azumurana, S.O. 2013. The dilemma of Western education in Aidoo's "Changes: A love story", Naylor's "The women of Brewster Palace", and Morrison's "Beloved". *Comparative Literature and Culture* 15(1):2-10.
- Curry, G. 2011. Women from Ghana: Their urban challenges in Ama Ata Aidoo's novel: "Changes: A love story". *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 32(1): 179-198.
- Dzokoto, V., and G. Adams. 2007. Analyzing Ghanaian emotions through narrative: A textual analysis of Ama Ata Aidoo's novel: "Changes". *Journal of Black Psychology* 33(1):94-112
- Elia, N. 1991. To be an African working woman: Levels of feminist consciousness in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes*. *Research in African Literatures* 30(2):136-147.
- Fubara, A.M. 2014. *Figures of pedagogy in Ama Ata Aidoo's "Changes" and Buchi Emacheta's "Double Yoke"*. Port Harcourt: Rivers State University, Nigeria.
- Gyimah, M.C. 1999. A Sexual politics and phallogocentric gaze in Ama Ata Aidoo's "Changes: A love story". In *Emerging perspectives on Ama Ata Aidoo*, eds. A.U. Azodo and G. Wilentz. Trenton: Africa World Press.
- Mc Williams, S. 1999. Strange as it may seem, African feminism in two novels by Ama Ata Aidoo. In *Emerging perspectives on Ama Ata Aidoo*, eds. A.U. Azodo and G. Wilentz. Trenton: Africa World Press.
- Nfah-Abbenyi, J.M. 1999. Flabberwhelmed or turning history on its head? The postcolonial woman-as-subject in Aidoo's "Changes: A love story". In *Emerging perspectives on Ama Ata Aidoo*, eds. A.U. Azodo and G. Wilentz. Trenton: Africa World Press 1999.
- Olaussen, M. 2002. About lovers in Accra: Urban intimacy in Ama Ata Aidoo's "Changes: A love story". *Research in Africa Literature* 33(2):61-80.
- Simpson, W.S. 2007. What fashion of loving was she ever going to consider adequate? Subverting the 'Love Story' in Ama Ata Aidoo's "Changes". *English in Africa* 34(1):155-171.
- Uwakweh, P.O. 1999. Free but lost: Variations in the militant's song. In *Emerging perspectives on Ama Ata Aidoo*, eds. A.U. Azodo and G. Wilentz. Trenton: Africa World Press.