

Of Women and Frogs, by Bisi Adjapon

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Bisi Adjapon's debut novel, *Of Women and Frogs*, tells the moving story of Esi Agyekum, a girl with a Ghanaian father and a Nigerian mother. Esi spends most of her life in Ghana. In her infancy, her father takes her and her brother, Kwabena, from Nigeria to Ghana, leaving their mother in Nigeria. In Ghana, Esi realises that she has four elder half-sisters: Adjoa, Yaa, Abena and Mansah, and a stepmother, Aunt Adelaide.

In an ambitious narrative, Adjapon takes the reader through the histories of Ghana and Nigeria: the political instabilities, which led to both countries driving away the other's nationals at different times in history, and how these instabilities affected the citizens of these countries, especially women.

The novel, which is a *bildungsroman*, details the protagonist's life from her childhood days when she was staying with her family at Kyebi and attending Kyebi Primary School, and her middle school days at Mmofra Turo Girls in Kumasi, to her secondary school days at Wesley Girls High School in Cape Coast. Esi is then presented as a full-grown student at the University of Ghana, where she gets married to Rudolf while still a student and later divorces him.

If novels are about exploring human conditions, then *Of Women and Frogs* is a great success. Esi's narration of the circumstances at her home, school environment and the political instability in Ghana makes readers understand the vulnerability of women both in domestic set-ups and business environments. Esi's stepmother, Adelaide, suffers from the constant abuse of her husband, Mr Agyekum, the educated traditional man, while her sisters suffer the same from their father. The novel also depicts how during

the Rawlings' regime in Ghana, Makola market women were stripped naked and given lashes just for being rich.

Of Women and Frogs questions the idea that women should always be dependent on men. Esi's father, though a well-educated man, is quoted as always saying that "a woman's glory is in her husband" (p. 361). The novel also questions the idea that children should not be heard. Esi's father does whatever he wants to his children, especially the girls. He beats them, uses abusive words when speaking to them and even reads their letters to find out if boys have been writing to them—even though he never reads his son's letters.

Esi sees so much abuse of women but what irritates her most is the fact that women are part of the abuse of their fellow women. It is her stepmother who makes her sit on hot water when she suspects someone "has spread" Esi (p. 28). She also put ginger in Esi's vagina when she caught Esi touching her "down-there, her under-canoes" (p. 24). From childhood, Esi was made to believe that if a frog touches a girl, she will become a boy and if it touches a boy, he will become a girl. At one point, she becomes so disgusted with the behaviour of her fellow women that she wishes it were true that the frogs could change her into a man. She says, "women are so disloyal ... if Papa won't open Kwabena's letters then he shouldn't open mine or my sisters.' But how can I fight when my sisters are part of the problem, when girls join forces with men?" (p. 230).

At the end of the novel, Esi remains a strong woman who rejects what society dictates to women. She says, "I'll never again wish for a frog to turn me into a man. I'll light up my womanhood. I'll help my sisters. I'll help other women ignite their fires, blaze their paths through life and leave behind embers to warm those who will come after them" (p. 404). The novel is a very interesting one.

However, one weakness I find in the novel is that it is replete with sexual overtones which, if these had been dealt with more carefully, would have made the novel better reflect the setting. Even though the novel advocates for girls to explore their sexuality without feeling shy, I think the sexual overtones could have been played-down to reflect the culture of Ghana in the 1980s in which the novel is set. For instance, the protagonist is too sexually active for a Ghanaian girl. This is because it is rare for a Ghanaian girl, especially in the 1980s, to tell a boy to have sex with her as Esi does when she meets Kayode. Esi also gives in easily to Rudolf and has sex with him and later, when she is married to Rudolf, she easily entices Rudolf's friend, Taiwo, to have a sexual affair with her, which I find is something not very common among Ghanaian girls.

Nevertheless, Adjapon's style is beautiful and poetic. Her use of the present tense gives life to the novel and urgency to the issues being raised. The diction is carefully chosen and changes during the narration to represent differences in age, background and levels of education. The novel is a must read.