

The dynamics of female representation in changes by ama ata aidoo

[Sociology](#), [Feminism](#)



NAME: FRANK YAW AMEWUGA THE DYNAMICS OF FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN CHANGES BY AMA ATA AIDOO Swimming against the tide has always been an uphill task especially in a male dominated terrain. And it goes without saying that West African writing has been male dominated in terms of volumes produced. In representing females, therefore, the tendency may be to consciously or unconsciously relapse into stereotyped representation of females in the literature produced by male and sometimes female writers. Consequently, there are stereotyped images of women as victors or victims which Ama Ata Aidoo makes an attempt to break from in her novel. In *Changes*, she seems to portray African women in stronger images and symbols who in addition to actively participating in decision making also accept responsibility for their fate. *Changes* discusses a range of feminist issues such as women's perception of their role in marriage, women's reaction to societal expectations, women's sexuality and the conflicts that exist as a result of combining women's role as mothers, wives and career professionals. This work dramatizes and subverts the male power notions which disempower women. This paper sets out to analyze how Ama Ata Aidoo represents women and the dynamics involved in such representation. A careful reading of *Changes* shows that Ama Ata Aidoo represents women in certain patterns which we shall presently discuss. According to The American Heritage Dictionary of English (4th Ed) 'dynamics' is 'the forces and motions that characterize a system.' It goes on to further define the word as 'The social, intellectual or moral forces that produce activity and change in a given sphere.' It goes without saying that Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes* contains social, intellectual and moral issues that pose questions against the status

quo and by implication asks for change. Indeed, the title is indicative of this standpoint. The theoretical basis of this discussion is steeped in key proponents of African feminism as Alice Walker and Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi. Among other things these feminists posit that: ♀ feminism needs not be in opposition to men; ♀ women need not neglect their biological roles; ♀ motherhood is idealized and claimed as a strength by African women; ♀ the total configuration of the conditions of women should be addressed rather than obsessing wife sexual issues and ♀ women's conditions in Africa are peculiar in comparison to that of the western world. Walker and Ogunyemi prefer to refer to feminism as African Womanism and hasten to explain it as 'the coming of age of a young female woman which brings about the emergence of femaleness.' Having conceptualized feminism, it will be needful to summarize Changes and then situate it in the theoretical framework outlined above and then draw relevant conclusions based on the evidence adduced. Changes is about the protagonist Esi Sekyi who resolves to terminate her first marriage to the apprehensive Oko after he 'rapes' her to 're-assert his position as head of the home. The bone of contention is that Esi is more lettered than her spouse as is evidenced by the Masters degree she holds. Matters are 'worsened' by the fact that Oko moves in to stay with Esi as the bungalow in which they live comes with her job. Her fondness for her profession and sense of liberty is an uncomfortable matter in the couple's relationship, and Oko, incapable of containing his wife's focus on her job as a statistician, is left wondering whether his wife was truly an "African woman." Finding Oko's attitude suffocating, Esi falls in love with Ali, a married man with an already established family and opts to

marry him since polygamy, paradoxically, for this modern educated woman, seems an arrangement that will offer her more freedom. However, she fails to understand the complicated nature of the African culture and her own unpredictable personality and eventually, while opting not to divorce Ali, Esi is ultimately stranded and left wondering what she has done wrong. Changes takes on a feminist theoretical approach as outlined above. Aidoo achieves this primarily by the way she portrays Esi Sekyi, Pokuya and Fusena." Esi, the protagonist of the novel is in many respects representative of the modern, liberated woman in that she is educated, financially independent, has a satisfying career and is therefore in no way dependent on her husband. She is a statistician with a master's degree and she earns more than her husband. Further, she is sexually unashamed and in charge of her own reproductive life as is evidenced by her choice to have one child and then opting to use contraception without seeking her husband's consent. Compared to the other women in the novel and in Aidoo's previous works, Esi has a high degree of freedom. Curiously, Esi's position as a woman in diverse ways creates sore points as her freedom and independence is challenged and curtailed by the canons of a communal society that is female gender unfriendly. Esi's relationship to Oko, her husband, at the beginning of the novel, underscores the tensions of her status. While she is financially independent, earns more money than he and provides the house in which they live through her government job; he nevertheless sees himself as the head of the house by virtue of his gender and must therefore assert his position by force rather than mutual respect. He resents her independence and that of all of women in positions similar to her. This is perceptible when

he muses, " Is Esi too an African woman? She not only is, but there are plenty of them around these days ... these days... these days." (p. 8). He loathes Esi and women like her for not submitting to the traditional role of the woman as wife and mother and thus, attempts to rule her to assert his masculine superiority. Clearly, Aidoo seems to castigate the communal notion that the woman must be subservient, dependent and unquestioning of the man. Esi is Aidoo's caveat against male dominance and chauvinism. She is economically, intellectually and emotionally independent of Oko, her husband. Aidoo uses Esi to debunk the traditional African notions of womanhood as being fit mainly for the kitchen and the bedroom. However, Aidoo is quick to point out that such female ' rebelliousness' will not pass without conflict from society in general and male chauvinists such as Oko in particular. The conflicts between the two come to a head in the scene of marital rape in the second chapter of the novel, which mirrors Oko's effort to ' tame' his wife. Esi is enraged and yet, she is aware that according to the customs of society this is not a crime but that which he is entitled to. When she realizes that what has occurred was in fact marital rape, "[s]he began to laugh rather uncontrollably" (p. 11) due to the realization that the concept does not even exist in Ghanaian society as is exemplified by the fact that there is no indigenous word for it. As she says, " But marital rape? No. The society could not possibly have an indigenous word or phrase for it. Sex is something a husband claims from his wife as a right. Any time. And at his convenience." (p. 12). Esi realizes in this scene that despite her independence, she is still constrained by marriage and by her role as a wife whose body belongs to her husband. As a result, she radically decides to

sack Oko from her house thus asserting her independence and resistance to the dictates of communalism for women. The fact that Esi is able to force Oko to leave her house demonstrates that despite the limitations of communalism she was in fact ready to swim against that outmoded tide. It must be noted, however, that Esi's ability to assert her independence is contingent on her economic status and is not an option for the majority of women in similar positions. As Nana, her grandmother says to her when she decides to marry Ali, " Leave one man, marry another. Esi, you can. You have got your job. The government gives you a house. You have got your car. You have already got your daughter. You don't even have to prove you are a woman to any man, old or new. You can pick and choose" (106). While Aidoo clearly demonstrates the ability of women to reject the roles imposed on them and assert their independence, it is equally clear that Esi is able to do so because of her position of privilege and because she does not face the material restraints that the majority of women do. A couple of gender issues crop up from the incidents just recounted. First, Esi is Aidoo's idea of resisting societal pressure and damning all the consequences. She seems to suggest that women should rise up and fight, irrespective of the sacrifice it entails. Second, Aidoo is calling on society to revise its treatment of women particularly within the confines of marriage. She seems to suggest that the societal canon that subsumes the sexuality of the woman to that of the man and which gives the latter unbridled access to the body of the woman is inhuman and should be done away with. To Aidoo, a man who violates this right, within or without the institution of marriage should be undeserving of a woman's love and therefore banished from having access to the woman.

After Esi leaves her marriage with Oko, she falls in love with Ali and decides to enter into a new marriage with him, this time a polygamous one. Here, we observe the intense individuality of Esi and the contradiction extant in her personality. Here was someone who so craves her independence as to sack his first lover from her home. One would have thought that she would savour her liberty by remaining single and pursuing her career goals to the maximum, unhindered and unrestricted by the demands of marriage. To play second fiddle to Fusena on the excuse that such marriage will place less demands on her is neither here nor there. Could not she have remained single and still have 'fun'? To me, Aidoo falters in assigning this particular role to Esi for it gives one the impression that a woman cannot assert her independence without marriage. She must necessarily marry to gain a modicum of respectability, irrespective of her economic, intellectual and career success, Aidoo seems to say. And I do not agree with her. Once again, in this second marriage, Esi's emotional needs are unmet and soon realizes that as a second wife, she will never have the same attention and prominence in Ali's life as does Fusena, his first wife. While there is clearly a criticism of polygamous marriages in this episode it is not so much the practice of polygamy itself that is under scrutiny, but rather Aidoo's attempt to demonstrate that in dynamic Accra, it is untenable. This is partly attributable to the fact that traditional customs have been, by and large, an ignored issue, because Fusena's permission was never asked and consequently, there is no established relationship between the two wives - a key requirement in a polygamous family structure. The tensions that ensue are typical of what Aidoo calls the " contemporary malaise in relationships

between men and women. The factors which made polygamous marriages work have been broken down in the urban environment." However, Esi's unhappiness in this marriage as in her previous one is not just the result of the failure of polygamy to function in a modern urban environment. Rather, it illustrates the suppressive nature of the institution of marriage of the female gender in a communal society. Nana's lengthy counsel to Esi in Chapter 14, clearly reveals that marriage is not beneficial to women but rather is the means by which women are detrimentally made the property of their husbands. As she says, 'My lady Silk, remember a man always gained in stature through any way he chose to associate with a woman. . . . a woman has always been diminished in her association with a man. 'My lady Silk, it was not a question of this type of marriage or that type of marriage . . . it was just being a wife. It is being a woman. . . . when we were young we were told that people who were condemned to death were granted any wish on the eve of their execution. . . . Anyhow, a young woman on her wedding day was something like that. She was made much of, because that whole ceremony was a funeral of the self that could have been.'(p. 106-107) This indictment of marriage clearly reflects Aidoo's views on the institution as expressed in other essays, for example as she stated in "To be a Woman": 'As the very foundation of the family, marriage has maintained a chameleon-like capacity to change its nature in time and space and to serve the ignominious aims of every society: slave-owning, feudal, or modern bourgeois. Throughout history and among all peoples, marriage has made it possible for women to be owned like property, abused and brutalized like serfs, privately corrected and, like children, publicly scolded, overworked,

underpaid, and much more thoroughly exploited than the lowest male worker on any payroll.' Aidoo is surely demonstrating through the story of Esi's loves and marriages, that despite societal 'changes' which have allowed women such as Esi to gain a higher economic and social status, and achieve a certain degree of independence, the institution of marriage has not changed in that it still relegates women to a subservient position. While Esi may not be economically dependent on Ali, it is crystal clear that he has a much higher degree of mobility and independence. She must wait for him and accept what he offers without demanding that which she actually desires. He gives her expensive gifts, but is unable to fulfill her emotional and psychological needs. She soon begins to see the gifts for what they are, bribes, which he pays her to compensate for his inability to give her that which she actually needs. As she says, " he had brought the car for her, and she understood the gesture as a bribe. A very special bribe. But a bribe all the same -- like all the other things he had been giving her." (p. 143).

Despite Esi's privileged status, marriage has a detrimental impact on her if not in material terms then, in psychological terms -- it signals a loss of her sense of self her sense of independence, as is pointed to in Opokuya's remark that " there was something slightly lost in Esi's eyes [that] never left her friend's eyes" (136). Aidoo seems to decry the canon of communal co society that rules that a woman needs a man to succeed in life: any woman who resists this norm is cut out for failure even in the eyes of an urbanized, liberal society such as Accra. In contrast to both Fusena and Esi, Opokuya symbolizes the working class woman who is mainly antagonized by material inhibitions to her freedom. Opokuya who is educated and has a career as a

nurse incidentally is far less financially successful than the other two women. She has a seeming serene marriage which is, on probing deeper, plagued by constant squabbles with her husband over control of the car which becomes a symbol of the independence Opokuya craves. The car is symbolic of her need to fulfill her role as a working woman, a mother, and a wife and signifies to some extent the daily fight of the working class woman against the material restraints imposed upon her by a communal culture unwilling to change with the changing times. As she says of the daily battle with her husband Kubi over the car, " it was one of the few areas of friction in an otherwise good marriage." Opokuya abhorred broaching it but she had to: " How was she to work full-time and medical work at that, and look after a family as big as theirs without transportation of her own?" (p. 14)

Opokuya's and Esi's perceptions of the car demonstrate the differences that pull them apart notwithstanding their companionship and obviously indicate the very different goals that their social and economic statuses engender. For Esi, the new car from Ali represents a bribe which symbolizes the failure of her marriage to fulfill her psychological needs. For Opokuya, Esi's new car evokes a sense of resentment and jealousy of the freedom the latter enjoys and symbolizes the failure of her marriage and her hard work to fulfill her material needs which could allow her independence. As Opokuya says upon seeing the car, " Where was her luck? What was it she had gotten out of life and out of marriage? Answer: a very faithful husband. Four fine children. Endless drudgery at work. And the state, who was her employer, paying salaries so low you were convinced the aim was to get people like her to resign and go to work for doctors in private practice. Now look at her and

look at Esi ..." (p. 149-50) Opokuya cannot fully understand Esi's worries and unhappiness because they are the whinings of a woman who already has much more than is necessary. Her preoccupation points to the concerns of working class women who are so wrapped up in meeting basic needs such that the emotional or psychological fulfillment that Esi desires fizzles out into insignificance. The contrast is clear: Esi seeks psychological fulfillment in marriage while Opokuya seeks material fulfillment in it. Aidoo discusses the phoniness and superficiality of the national government and that of pivotal Western agencies in Africa in dealing with women's issues through Opokuyaa. She queries the premium placed on issues such as overpopulation vis-a-vis women welfare in Africa. As Opokuya notes, the emphasis placed on population reduction is such that contraceptives are supplied plentifully and forced on women while medication which could address the much more serious medical needs of Africans is down-played. As she notes, " You know we would never run out of the routine drugs if they were also contraceptive and we gave them to all patients, including men and children(...)" (p. 13). Aidoo lambastes the hypocrisy latent in this type of Western intervention which works under the guise of aid to Africa and questions the docility of the national government which is dominated by the petty bourgeoisie whom she labels as " beggars". Clearly then, Ama Ata Aidoo is waxing strong here as an African feminist who is asserting that western feminists have no idea of what women in Africa go through and that feminism in Africa should be tied to the issues of neo colonialism and not just women concerns. As Opokuya says, 'Meanwhile our governments are behaving like all professional beggars. They have learned the rules of

effective begging, one of them being that you never object to anything the giver likes. And they know the giver likes one thing now: that there should not be too many of us. Under such circumstances, how does the beggar tell the giver to go and stuff his dangerous and experimental contraceptive pills, capsules and injections? Yes injections. And they call their murderous programmes such beautiful names: " family planning" and " mother health" ... all to cover up...' (p. 14) Likewise, she takes a swipe at the emphasis placed on weight loss for women and in particular the negative depiction of overweight African women in particular: 'The days when being fat was a sign of prosperity and contentment are long over. You and I know that these days the only fat people in the world are poor uneducated women in the so-called Third World and unhappy sex-starved women in the more affluent societies who are supposed to eat for consolation.' (p. 35) Opokuya is obviously not only conscious but also highly skeptical of the treatment of women in her society, the privation on their lives not forgetting the hypocrisy in the handling of these problems. Indeed, these aid programmes serve, in the main, to shift attention from the more serious concerns and thus, fail to actually improve the lot of women. By this portrayal, Aidoo seems to be saying that the privations of women in Africa are not only internally generated but also externally engineered by western nations and their institutions whose policies have far - reaching effects on the well-being of women in Africa. Another female representation, Fusena, poses an interesting contrast to that of Esi. While there are striking similarities in the difficulties they encounter, the decisions they make are markedly at variance. Fusena is, like Esi, an educated woman who meets Ali while they

are both teachers in Tamale and again like Esi, Ali is attracted to her precisely because she is an interesting woman who is reasonably independent. She decides to marry Ali because of their mutual love and respect for each other. To do this she rejects a marriage offer with a wealthy and powerful man, the Alhaji. By this she rejects the communal canon of marriage as a kind of business agreement and asserts her liberty despite the disapproving glare of society. Once married to Ali, however, she discovers, just as Esi does, that the marriage involves a ceding of a portion of liberty. While Ali continues his education and his career, Fusena stagnates so as to be able to fulfill her role of wife and mother, a patriarchal injunction. In the fray, the semblance of equality and mutual respect that had existed between the two of them before her marriage is lost, as she says, " It was this business of Ali getting more and more educated while she stayed the same," for " 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." (p. 65). Ali opposes her wish to pursue her career as a teacher and instead gives her a kiosk to run in Accra which while a prosperous business is not the career which she had chosen and been educated to pursue. Unlike Esi, Fusena accepts this role as wife and mother and while she is equally aware of the loss of liberty that it holds she remains married for, as she says, Leaving Ali was not only impossible but would also not be an answer to anything. Because having married her friend and got a husband, there was no chance of getting back her friend if she left or divorced Ali the husband. She would only have an estranged husband. Nor did it help matters much that in the middle of all her frustrations, 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.(p. 65) Fusena thus, suppresses her rage and disappointment at her situation and conforms to the role expected of her, in the process, sacrificing herself, her ambition and her independence for a sense of security. In this sense, both Esi and Fusena are confronted with the same dilemma but the choices they make are diametrically opposed. While Esi rebels openly, Fusena accepts her lot grudgingly and rues her decision to marry Ali. In the end, however, neither one of them achieves fulfillment or happiness which seems to insinuate that the position of women is such that emotional or psychological fulfillment and complete independence is impossible. This indeed seems to be an indictment on communal society and its conservative, apparently women unfriendly dictates. Aidoo seems to suggest that no matter what decisions bold and independent minded or submissive, though, discerning women make, they are both bound to fail if the wider society does not shed its conservative posture. From the foregoing discussion Aidoo submits that women play an important role in contemporary African society and that they make positive contributions to the changes taking place. Aidoo pinpoints the subjugation of women in African society to the influence of Christianization, Islamization and indigenous traditions, bulwarks of communal dominance which must be changed. • Aidoo creates Esi , among other things, to symbolize the futility of females to lead successful revolutions of a social hue. It seems to me that Esi was doomed to fail because a woman cannot survive a revolt in a communal culture. • Again, Esi is symptomatic of female ostracization for the violation of established family values. She divorces her husband, Oko and

hence suffers an unsuccessful second marriage. Society is least concerned about what precipitated the divorce. The fact that she has the guts to sack his husband carries enough justification for portraying her failure subsequently. • Pokuya and Fusena are symbols of the silent majority of females who bear the brunt of the brutishness of men while the rest of society looks on unconcerned or inactive. Aidoo seems to be saying it is time to wake up and redeem such victims of abuse. I have no doubts at all, that if humanity is to make strides in the next century, it must wake up to the clarion call being sounded by such brave but lonely feminist writers as Ama Ata Aidoo . REFERENCES: Aidoo, Ama. (1999). *Changes*. Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers. Bryce, Jane. (1999). " ' Going Home is Another Story': Constructions of Nation and Gender in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes*." *West Africa Review* 1 . www.africaresource.com/war/vol.1/jane.html Elia, Nada. (199). " To be an African Working Woman: Levels of Feminist Consciousness" in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes*." *Research in African Literatures*. 30(2): 30(2): 136-47. Ndiaye, Ibrahima. ' Space, Time and Empowerment in Ama Ata Aidoo ' s *Changes*'. *Jourvert: A Journal of Post Colonial Studies*. 6(3): 31 2002 Spring. Odamtten, Vincent O. (1994). *The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo* . Univeristy of Florida Press.