

Female roles in ama ata aidoo's 'changes'



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In her novel *Changes*, Ama Ata Aidoo carefully portrays Esi, Opokuya, & Fusena as the prominent female roles and the different levels of oppression that they face in urban Ghanaian society. Given some of her accomplishments, it is apparent that Aidoo feels strongly about the roles of women in Ghanaian society and their ability to hold powerful positions and express their voices through writing. For example, in addition to becoming a well-known poet, playwright, and novelist, she was appointed as the minister of education in Ghana in the year of 1982. Although this position means a great deal for any individual who is appointed, this position held a higher significance for Aidoo, because she was the first woman to have the opportunity to gain this particular status.

Aidoo has also made significant efforts towards helping other women in her society to make rises in power by supporting the expression of their voices through writing. In the year 2000, she established Mbaasem, which means "women's words," to recognize the needs and voices of African and Ghanaian women. Not only is she the founder of this organization, but she currently serves as the executive director for Mbaasem. Aidoo admitted that she uses her skills in order to incite a positive change in society when she stated, "For us Africans, literature must serve a purpose: to expose, embarrass, and fight corruption and authoritarianism. It is understandable why the African artist is utilitarian." Aidoo is a feminist author that portrays an extremely accurate representation of the female characters throughout her writing. For example, in her novel, *Changes*, she focuses on the hardships that accompany the lives of the three female protagonist characters. She

purposefully reiterates the struggles that each of the women are faced with, and the severity of these conflicts.

In agreement with the previous information, Nada Elia states, "Aidoo presents us with the more "concrete" reality of African women's limiting factors, an unadorned portrayal of the complex web of frustration that makes up the everyday lives of contemporary West African women." (Elia). Aidoo chooses to use literature to tell the rest of the world a story about the society that surrounds them every single day. At times, it is almost impossible to understand the world around us until it is seen from a different perspective. In her novel *Changes*, she not only writes about the world how it is, but she writes about how certain characters should be. For instance, in an interview with Ada Uzoamaka Azodo in 1996, she admitted, "I called the book *Changes*, because I see primarily a character like Esi, the protagonist, as being a part of those who are trying to define, or even redefine women as lovers, wives, mothers, daughters, and even granddaughters." This style of writing causes questioning of the African woman's identity and the processes that they go through in order to find themselves in the context of a marriage. The audience begins to wonder if the modern African woman must lose or submerge her identity in order to find happiness in marriage. Along with that, the audience must also begin to wonder how the African man will or will not cope with the success of his wife, especially if she has a higher salary than him.

These questions are mostly in relation to Esi's marriage to Oko. Esi is this novel's representation of the modern career woman. She is a well-educated woman who is financially independent and has the strength to end the

marriage that she is dissatisfied with. She is somewhat of a female chauvinist and ensures to assert herself and her feelings into any situation she feels strongly about. A few of the leading causes to her failing marriage to Oko were her feelings that she lacked space from her husband and as though he does not respect her commitment to her career. The emotional distance and lack of respect in this relationship is essentially what leads up to the instance of marital rape. Oko feels as though Esi devotes more time to her career than she does to him, and therefore he attempts to assert his dominance over Esi in a forced sexual encounter. This event was the breaking point that led Esi to file for a divorce against Oko. Although the divorce allows her to achieve the space and freedom that she craved, she realized that these two things were still not enough to grant her happiness. In her discontent, she meets Ali, and he convinces her to become his second wife.

Although Esi is shown as a modern woman, even becoming remarried struck her differently. This can be seen in her thoughts following Ali's marriage proposal as it states, " Esi was thinking that the whole thing sounded so absolutely lunatic and so ' contemporary African' that she would save her sanity probably by not trying to understand it. The only choice left to her was to try and enter into the spirit of it." (91). Even though Esi made the decision to take the leap for Ali, this relationship goes downhill as Ali spends most of his time at his home with his first wife, Fusena and the rest of his time is spent either working or galivanting with other women. He attempts to make up for his absence with various expensive material gifts. During these hard times, she confides to her best friend, Opokuya. Opokuya is the

representation of what happens when a woman has both modern and traditional values. She is seemingly the happiest of the three, but still struggles to successfully combine her duties as wife and mother of four as she works as a full-time nurse and mid-wife. She works a domestic and professional double shift tends to leave her exhausted by the end of each and every day.

In order to capture how Opokuya truly feels, Aidoo wrote, "How could she, Opokuya Dakwa, sleep any time she felt like it? With a fully-grown man, a young growing woman, and three growing boisterous boys to feed?" (34). She feels as though she must tend to her family first and give herself any of the time that happens to be left over from that. She attempts to be the woman that "has it all," but she maintains her state of happiness due to an "ignorance is bliss" state of mind. Other than the strife with sharing the car with her husband, Kubi, Opokuya seems to have no complaints about her husband. She admitted that she once has suspicions about her husband's infidelities but chose to keep any affairs out of sight and out of mind. This may have been a situation where ignorance was not bliss, but rather heartbreaking instead. Towards the end, Kubi attempts to sexually assault Esi, insulting his wife's best friend and the loyalty to his own marriage. At the end, Opokuya is given Esi's old car due to Ali's gift of giving Esi a new car.

Opokuya's life shows that the modern woman can have it all on the surface, but not to the roots of their lives. Opokuya remains the voice of reason in others' lives in order to distract herself from any troubles in her own life. When speaking to Esi about the possibility of marrying a man with a first wife, she protests, "Look here, Esi, can you see yourself and Ali's wife

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getting together?...Being friends?...You know, for instance getting together about Ali's strengths and occasionally trading gossip about his weaknesses? Can you see that happening?" (97). Ali's first wife, Fusena is the traditional role that Aidoo portrayed in the novel. She has a shared home with Ali for many years but is still not completely content because it is not wholly her own and can be taken away at any time. She has inner struggles with the instability of depending solely on her husband but does not want to face the higher level of instability of being alone. She acquired education and a degree and was repeatedly frustrated when Ali would refuse to let her work. This is shown as the novel states, " Fusena had stared hard at London and admitted that she has another problem. It was this business of Ali getting more and more educated while she stayed the same. Sometimes she truly felt desperate." (67). Although it is looked down upon for women to remain single, the institution of marriage can be challenging and continually has the ability to hamper the career development for women Ghana. Since the traditional woman is viewed as predominantly being a wife and mother, it is looked down upon for a woman who is a mother to also become an active working woman. The men feel as though their homes and families will become neglected due to the woman's devotion to her work, therefore they choose to only stifle the success of the woman. This practice causes a hiccup in the progression of a properly transforming society.

Patriarchal and traditional values are ones that oppress women in order to excel the success of man. Although each of these women hold a varied set of values, they tend to face similar types of oppression and dissatisfaction. For instance, while Esi is the modern woman that desires freedom, she gains too

much at a cost for her happiness in her marriage to Ali. Next, Opokuya strives to have the loving husband and children, but also aspired to excel in her career, but she puts both feet to far into each door, and her happiness is at the cost of her physical and mental exhaustion from being spread too thin. Lastly, we have Fusena who gets the man that she longs for, but ultimately loses her ambition and freedom to excel in her own personal life, resulting in the sharing of Ali with Esi and other unspoken affairs. Aidoo uses *Changes* to address the substantial weight of the various social burdens that are constantly imposed on the African woman whether they are married, single, professional, or domesticated.

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