

## **Examining the role and problems of women in modern African society : A Study of Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes A Love Story*.**

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### **Abstract**

Women are always considered to be inferior or subordinate to that of men in a patriarchal society. They are the marginalized one who has to deal with the various issues such as political, financial, social or may be their own personal issues. To overcome such issues is a real challenge for them. Ama Ata Aidoo, a renowned author and an African feminist from Ghana deals with such issues faced by African female identity in her writings. Aidoo not only portrays the difficulties faced by these women in the postcolonial Africa but also the way through which they are capable of being independent. The role and status of women in the modern African society is a dominant aspect of Aidoo's writings. This paper aims to examine the role and problems of women in modern African society through the novel, *Changes A Love Story* (1991) by Ama Ata Aidoo. It also focuses on the aspect of women being independent by playing various roles such as a daughter, mother and a wife. The women who falls prey to the various cultural conflicts in the society as she voices against some patriarchal notions of the society based on gender, power and equality.

**Keywords :** Women, power, role, Aidoo, problems.

“A powerful novel that explores the complex web of late 20<sup>th</sup>- century human relationships in ways that are both comic and deeply affecting.”- Boston Phoenix

Women 'emancipation' has proved to be problematic from ages. The notion of being a traditional woman is only limited to the roles such as a daughter, wife and a mother. They are

expected to depend on their fathers or their husbands for their livelihood. Men are always considered to be the superior and the stronger sex and on the contrary, women are always the inferior or the weaker sex. In Simon de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949), Beauvoir portrays how the mind is always associated with men and the body is associated with women. He also points out how men are the subjects and women are the objects in the patriarchal society. Here, comes the power inequation between the two sexes. In Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970), Millet portrays how the patriarchal society has given the power to men to control the women for their own means. This power dynamic plays an important role in the novel, *Changes A Love Story* (1991) by Aidoo.

Nada Elia in "To Be an African Working Woman" : Levels of Feminist Consciousness in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes*" portrays how Aidoo in her essay, "To be a Woman", shares her personal experiences of being encountered by her fellow Ghanaian professors to not speak about public matters and to focus on her own writings. This incident shows the difficulties faced by Aidoo in her professional career as an African woman. Mary Modupe Kowalowe in *Womanism and African Consciousness* says :

emergence of women writers as their own voices transformed the depiction of femininity in African literature. Woman as objects and marginal characters gave way to women as subject and positive protagonists. This breakthrough came with women writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo and Flora Nwapa as pioneers. (80)

Aidoo as an African woman writer in this novel portrays her women characters who comes from a middle-class background. The women who have their own different roles to play. The difficulties they had to face evolving from the collision of tradition and modernity which in a way can be considered as a new challenge for the women in modern African society. Buchi Emecheta in her essay, "Feminism with a small 'f'" says, "Sex is important to us. But we do not make it the centre of our being," Emecheta also says, "Sex is part of life. It is not THE life." (176-177) These lines by Emecheta brings in the reference to the marital rape depicted in the novel, *Changes A Love Story* by Aidoo. Marital rape can be considered as one of the emerging issue for women in the modern African society. In the beginning of the novel, Aidoo gives us a glimpse of the marital rape occurring in the novel :

Oko flung the bedcloth away from him, sat up, pulled her down, and moved on her. Esi started to protest. But he went on doing 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 gruelling race, he got off her, and fell heavily back on his side of the bed. He tried to draw the bedcloth to cover both of them again. (Aidoo 9)

Esi is the woman who faces the problem of marital rape in the novel. She is portrayed in the novel as an independent woman who works in the Department of Urban Statistics in Accra. Although she is a wife of Oko and mother of Ogyaanowa, her main focus is her working career. Aidoo portrays Esi not as a typical traditional African woman but the one who is influenced by the western culture. Because of these reasons their “two solid years of courtship and six years of marriage” (Aidoo 8) becomes very complicated. Oko is in deep love with Esi but the main problem is that Oko dislikes the fact of Esi giving more importance to her career than her family. He wants more and more time of his wife. He wants another child from Esi which she refuses. Here comes the turning point in their life. They started to quarrel on a daily basis on matters related to Esi’s role as a wife, as a mother and her working career. Even for their daughter, Ogyaanowa “this had become quite regular”.....“The commotion that was coming out of her parents’ room was terrible.” (Aidoo 5) In a way, it harms the psychology of the little girl.

In a meeting held in Esi’s office, a woman sociologist presents a paper on ‘The Prevalence of Marital Rape in the Urban African Environment’ to some academics. At the end of the presentation, there is an outburst of anger from some of the women and men in the meeting. Esi feels trapped in it and she articulates in the novel :

‘you cannot go around claiming that an idea or an item was imported into a given society unless you could also conclude that to the best of your knowledge, there is not, and never was any word or phrase in that society’s indigenous language which describes that idea or item’? (Aidoo 12)

The academics in the meeting refers to the fact that these ideas are all imported from western feminists. They says, “Sex is something a husband claims from his wife as his right. Any time. And at his convenience.” (Aidoo 12)

Nada Elia says in “To Be an African Working Woman : Levels of Feminist Consciousness in Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Changes*” :

The articulation of the concept of “marital rape” is critical to the conscious development of African feminism, as it allows for a woman’s realization of her rightful ownership of her body under any and all circumstances. Yet it is also problematic in light of postcolonial Africa’s desire to rid the continent of western ideas imposed during the lengthy colonial occupation. (141)

Esi finally decides to get divorced. She even does not take the responsibility of her daughter as she thinks that Oko’s parents would better look after her and she can devote herself fully to her working career. In the novel, Esi can be compared to her childhood friend Opokuya. Being a wife, a mother of four children, a nurse and a midwife, Opokuya manages to fulfill all her duties smoothly. But this does not typifies her as a traditional submissive wife. The fact that Opokuya wants to buy Esi’s old car shows that as a working woman she does not like to depend on her husband. She chooses her own financial and physical independence. Opokuya does not like Esi’s decision of getting divorce from Oko. She says, “my dear, no man is going to accept your lifestyle.....our people have said that for any marriage to work, one party has to be a fool.....You should have tried harder to squeeze out some time for him.” (Aidoo 48-50)

Esi’s mother and grandmother are also very problematic in their views of Esi getting divorced. When she tells them about her divorce and Ali, the black Muslim identity with whom she wanted to get married. Her grandmother says :

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. But remember, my lady, the best husband you can ever have is he who demands all of you and all of your time. (Aidoo 109)

An another problem faced by the women in novel is polygamy. Emecheta in her essay, “Feminism with a small ‘f!’” writes :

In many cases polygamy can be liberating to the woman, rather than inhibiting her, especially if she is educated. The husband has no reason for stopping her.....from going to back to University and updating her career or even getting another degree. Polygamy encourages her to value herself as a person and look outside her family and friends. (Aidoo 178)

Fusena, the first wife of Ali resents polygamy when Ali decides to marry Esi. Fusena and Ali fell in love when they were classmates in the college. After marriage, Fusena has sacrificed her higher education only for her children and husband. She is depicted as an angry, betrayed woman who realizes very late about her being bound to the four walls of the house. When Ali informs her about his second marriage to Esi. She asks, “She has a university degree?” (Aidoo 99) In a way, this shows Fusena’s realization of her own self. But at the end, she is helpless and can do nothing about her situation. It is too late for her now.

After a few days of Ali and Esi’s marriage and their physical intimacy, problems started to arouse between the two. Esi demands a little more time from Ali which he fails to fulfill. The irony of this situation is that in her first marriage to Oko, it was Oko who wanted her time and it results in their divorce but now, it is Esi who demands time from her second husband although she has her ongoing working career. One day when Ali did not come to her, she remembers her mother and grandmother’s advice :

Lying alone in bed with her eyes hard and wide-open in the dark, she remembered some of the advice her mother and her grandmother had given her. They 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 all right. If she broke the rules, then her new marriage would be like a fire that had been lighted inside her.....Above all, they said, there were two things she had to bear in mind at all times. One was never to forget that she was number two, and the other was never to show jealousy. (Aidoo 116)

Esi ended her relation with Ali out of jealousy and frustration. Towards the end of the novel, one can also see some kind of physical intimacy going to happen between Esi and Kubi, Opokuya's husband while Kubi trying to console Esi. But due to Esi's realization of her friendship with Opokuya she stops herself and Kubi from attempting this sin.

Thus, in the novel *Changes A Love Story* Aidoo not only gives us the glimpse of the lives of the characters but also the roles and problems of women in modern African society. Esi, the main protagonist of the novel faces problems in her working career, in her first marriage and even in her second marriage after her divorce. She finds herself trapped and tries to move on after the marital rape which adds to the development of feminist consciousness in modern Africa. Opokuya, Esi's friend is happy in her marriage. She feels it is her duty to fulfill her role as a wife and a mother apart from her professional career. Lastly, Fusena is the woman who did not realize before the consequences of leaving her higher education. But after getting involved in a polygamous marriage, she faces her true self who devoted her whole life for her husband and children and now she is all alone.

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