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## Womanist Dilemma in Africa: A Study of Changes by Ama Ata Aidoo

Olumide Ogunrotimi

Department of English and Literary Studies Ekiti State University, PMB 5363, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria

**Abstract:** To the exclusion of other socio-political and cultural constructs, African female writers have often concentrated on problematizing the trajectories of feminine experience. They have simultaneously foregrounded the pains and the gains of being a female on the continent. They have, however, shown more interest in thematizing the positive, believing, as such, that what obtains in the work of the male writers is negative presentation of the female. The female writers have also contended that Womanism, the continental variety of Feminism, is more suitable for African women because of its recognition of peculiar contextual and racial vectors. These trajectories, anathema in other contexts, with other races, define an experience that is not only unique, but form a significant core of female experience in Africa. This paper examines the female-centred plot of Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Changes* and concludes that the quandary of the protagonist further externalises the dilemma of Womanism in Africa; to imbibe the individualistic and confrontational values of Feminism or remain true to the tradition of Womanism which celebrates femininity as a complementation to masculinity and venerates motherhood as a unique female facility.

**Keywords:** Feminism; Womanism; Changes; Ama Ata Aidoo.

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### 1. Introduction

Due to the contextual uniqueness of the socio-cultural matrices in Africa, Feminism (or even Womanism) as a movement has no vibrant legacies in Africa and its contemporary history is fraught with disparate attempts by non-governmental societies and government agencies to fight the evils of gender imperialism. Disparate because most of the non-governmental societies and government agencies are avenues for corruption, nepotism, money laundering, and other social vices, and the least of their concerns is actually gender issues. The little that they do is cosmetic and haphazard.

Consequently, female ‘emancipation’ in Africa has proved to be problematic. This is because, apart from the reasons offered above, the deeply ingrained patriarchal attitudes of African societies and the pathetic plight of majority of the womenfolk who solely depend on their husbands for their livelihood, make gender decolonization in this context knotty. While the few women in well-paying employment and high positions might bask in the freedom of pecuniary independence with which to confront the opposite sex’s domination, not so the more numerous non-working housewives who are treated more like appendages. Inevitably, although several African women are uneasy at conforming to prejudicial standards set for them by men, most have too large a stake in the prevalent status quo to challenge in angry protest or open rebellion. Sometimes, albeit the financially independent woman may enjoy an occasional binge, may even enjoy what she imagined to be the manumission of the individualised woman, but she ultimately shrinks from the non-conformist label, fearful of loss of respectability even more than rue the loss of individuality. Hence Buchi Emecheta would continuously deny being a Feminist, and Flora Nwapa would insist on being called a “womanist”. The term ‘womanist’ was coined by the African-American writer, Walker (1983), to reflect the experience of black women as distinct from that of white women. Ogunyemi (1988) deconstructs this brand of feminism by posturing that:

Womanism is black-centred, it is accommodationist. It believes in the freedom and independence of women like feminism ... it wants meaningful union between black men and black children and will see to it that men change their sexist stand.

Posturing that the temperament of gender oppression in Africa is different from what obtains elsewhere, and, in an attempt to better characterize the special 'brand' of feminism that exists on the continent, [Ogundipe-Leslie \(2009\)](#) synopsisizes what she calls 'common' feminist 'denominators' in Africa which create an attitude in women here different from that of women in Western nations:

1. 'That feminism need not be oppositional to men. It is not about adversarial gender politics.'
2. 'That women need not neglect their biological roles.'
3. 'That motherhood is idealised and claimed as strength by African women and seen as having a special manifestation in Africa.'
4. 'That the total configuration of the conditions of women should be addressed rather than obsessing with sexual issues.'
5. 'That certain aspects of women's reproductive rights take priority over others.'
6. 'That women's conditions in Africa need to be addressed in the context of the total production and reproduction of their society and that scenario also involves men and children. Hence, there has always been an emphasis on economic fulfilment and independence in African feminist thinking.'
7. 'That the ideology of women has to be cast in the context of the race and class struggles which bedevil the continent of Africa today: that is, in the context of the liberation of the total continent.' (549)

The name she proposes for this unique brand of feminism is 'STIWA'. This, she explicates, is her acronym for *Social Transformation Including Women in Africa*.

However, although most African female writers seem to prefer the Womanist attitude which is non-confrontational and non-antagonistic, the attitudes they detest in feminism now appear to be creeping into Womanism. Womanists have not only emphasised the motherhood side of Womanism, this has always been presented as the major merit the woman derives from her marital union with a man. But, while this might be enough for some, others are not contented with any compromise that does not involve the man making a concession too. If a man's fatherhood does not make him a better husband, why should a woman's motherhood make her a better spouse? Concerns like these are coming to the fore, and creating a rethink of the womanist ideals in Africa.

## 2. Changes by Ama Ata Aidoo

In *The Companion to African Literature* ([Killam and Rowe, 2000](#)), it is stated that Ama Ata Aidoo, the Ghanaian literary artist, 'has no equal in the African literary tradition of the re-inventing of Africa and the re-imaging and re-imagining of its women' (21). Like most feminist writers, Ama Ata Aidoo does not shy away from commitment. In every novel, play and poem, she displays an undiminished and unending interest in feminist causes; from the cultural insubordination of the female child to the communal degradation of the female writer.

The plot of *Changes* revolves around the experiences of Esi Sekyi, a middle-aged woman who works at the Department of Urban Statistics in a ministry in Accra, Ghana. At the start of the novel she encounters Ali Kondey, who is later to play a prominent role in her life. At the initial stage snippets of protests manifest in complaints by Esi about masculine oppression – taxi drivers shouting 'obscenities about "women drivers"' (3) and 'why couldn't she ever prevent her (male) colleagues from assuming that any time the office secretary was away, she could do the job?' (3) – these, however, do not adequately prepare a reader for the torrent of anti-masculine tirade that will characterize the omniscient narrator's prejudices and Esi's general attitude.

Of course there are enough grounds for the denunciations. Esi's marriage to Oko, a man she already has a girl-child for, is experiencing cracks. Oko is a kind of man who, despite his good intentions toward his wife, is nettled by her egoistical aloofness and use of sex as a weapon. Voices of friends (tradition?) continuously badger him. He finds he could not 'help being caught between the pressure to live up to socially approved notion of manliness and a better sense of judgement' ([Ogbeide, 2012](#)). As the omniscient narrator puts it, he thinks:

It's not safe to show a woman you love her ... not much anyway ... showing a woman you love her is like asking her to walk over you. How much of your love for how heavy her kicks. (11)

It is the masculine streak in him that complies and turns violent in response to her sexual aloofness. Albeit once in a while he vacillates, and most of the time he rues his oppressive and bossy attitude, invariably he conforms to the feminist perception of manliness. For example, moments after the above quotation in the novel, he actually rapes Esi (who has determined not to have sex with him again), and only afterwards does he regret his action and he feels 'like telling Esi that he was sorry' (14). Almost immediately 'he was also convinced he mustn't' (14). Is the writer asserting here that men are as much victims as women are of phallogentric culture? However, if Oko still harbours any illusion that Esi can still be reigned in eventually, his response drastically quickens the dissolution of their marriage. But what really hastens her manumission from Oko's persistent intrusion on her time and attacks on her personal space, is her encounter with Ali Kondey.

Ali Kondey is a man-about-town who is everything Oko is not; charming, graceful, and quite ready to let Esi affirm her independence. Charmed by his sophistication, fascinated by his liberal attitude, she divorces Oko, paving the way for a relationship between her and Ali. That he is married poses no immediate problems. His wife, Fusena, is

the understanding type, and though Ali always tries not to hurt her feelings by keeping his extramarital liaisons secret, she is the unquestioning and compromising wife who is very much ready to depersonalise herself just to make her marriage work. Though she is sometimes assailed by bouts of guilt for not continuing her education which she had abandoned to settle into marriage, Fusena is the acquiescing type and does not possess enough strength of character to initiate moves to regain her identity.

At first Esi finds Ali's indulgence welcoming, a burst of fresh air after her suffocating experience with Oko. Caught in a blaze of love with Ali, who soon proposes marriage, she confides in her friend Opokuya Dakwa, that 'monogamy is so stifling' (117). She readily accepts his proposal, believing that she can successfully combine marriage and work. Since Ali now has two wives, each will explicitly be free of the total 'attention' that would have been a real source of worry in a monogamous home, particularly where the wife combines motherhood with office work. This, of course, is good news to Esi. And, as [Emecheta \(2007\)](#) proposes for women who find themselves in polygamous situations, Esi becomes:

settled in her new life ... her basic hopes for marrying a man like Ali had been fulfilled. Ali was not on her back every one of every twenty-four hours of every day. 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 ... Now she had almost lost the harassed feeling that had attacked her every late afternoon of every working day: that she had to hurry home, or to the market or the shops to buy something, or do something in connection with her role as a mother, a wife and a home-maker. (166)

For her, Ali becomes the ideal man, undemanding, not pushy, not only as a man, but also as a husband. The absence of children in their marriage creates more room for them to have all the time to themselves.

However, the complexion of the relationship begins to change when Esi starts 'to expect ... (Ali) to become more of a husband' (167). For a woman who has always craved freedom from masculine imperiousness and arrogance, particularly masculine drives to control and dominate the total universe of a woman, she, after a while, begins to desiderate companionship and emotional dependence. She begins to attempt a redefinition of their relationship. In the words of the narrator, 'it took her only a while before she began to wonder about the kind of marriage she was involved in' (168).

From then on, she becomes sensitive to his lateness, his lack of concern, and his attitude of stopping by at her house only to later leave for his first wife and children. She becomes irritated with his unconscious habit of referring to his first wife and children as 'home'. Although he purchases costly gifts for her every time he travels out – which is almost every time – she now sees this as an attempt by him to cover up his inadequacies, his inability to be with her every time. If she had only suspected it earlier, she now knows it as a fact that she is 'only' a second wife, a spare, and her house and herself will always have for him that ancillary status.

What she initially refuses to acknowledge but which nevertheless is obvious is that a sort of compromise is required for a marital union to function. According to her grandmother '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' (133). In another context, the grandmother also summarizes her thoughts on the same subject, that 'the best husband is he who demands all of your time' (132). What these contradictions call for is concession, but for a woman who refuses to compromise, every marital liaison inevitably becomes a prison.

As a female character, Esi is the epitome of the unsettled, vacillating female who lacks the strength of character to decide on an issue and carry it through. In the first marriage she could not allow the erosion of her personal identity; she wanted to be socially visible. In the second, with all the time and personal space she desires, she still wants to enjoy the benefits of a family set-up. Her friend, Opokuya, who has abdicated her personal identity so as to have a successful marriage, might not be a suitable image for the rabid feminist, but she decides what she wants and sticks to it. She might envy Esi's independence, but definitely not Esi's position as a second wife even with its enviable accompaniments. Opokuya knows that 'for any marriage to work, one party has to be a fool' (159), and she has decided to be just that. Hence her advice to Esi that 'no man is totally going to accept your lifestyle' (58).

The changes Esi seek in the novel are not forthcoming because of her inflexible lifestyle. Opokuya is malleable, hence she seeks little individual satisfaction within the confines of cultural acceptability apropos the position of a woman in a family. Not surprisingly too, she is the one who apprehends all the attributes expressed by Esi's grandmother but to which Esi refuses to conform. Eventually, she gets what Esi has always wanted; love, a happy marriage, an understanding husband, and promotion at work. In a way, the author contrasts her pragmatic approach to the idealism of Esi.

In terms of female characters Ama Ata Aidoo in this novel has created in Esi a character that epitomises virtues of Western feminism. This version of feminism is evidently unsuitable in Africa. What fashion of love or marriage would prove adequately sufficient for Esi? From Oko to Ali, although both exhibit distinct lifestyles and attitudes, both fail to satisfy her idealism, and at the end of the novel she is more alienated than she was at the beginning because she is too idealistic about marriage.

Oko and Ali Kondey are the chief male characters in the novel. Like all male characters in feminist fiction their weaknesses apprehend arrogance and self-centredness. Oko enjoys the benefits that come with Esi's position in the office; the car, the house, and the several pecuniary allowances and grants accruing from the office. Yet he detests her drive for promotion and her attempts to be competitive in the office. Obviously, he thinks the more promotion she gets at work, the more difficult and self-assertive she will become. Eventually, his fears are confirmed.

Ali Kondey, who fulfils Esi's idealisation of a husband, is just so because he already has a compliant and depersonalised first wife. To him, Esi is an exciting adventurer in need of a companion. The early enthusiasm of their marriage palls, not because he fails to provide more excitement, but because she suddenly begins to desire the normal life of a married couple which he already enjoys with Fusena, his first wife.

However, if Oko and Kondey seem apt representatives of the modern African male, their 'modern' values do not compare favourably with those of Kondey's male progenitors or Esi's grandmother's. Her grandmother manifests an understanding of the matrices of masculine/feminist relations, and posits that a woman is always short-changed in her affairs with man. Musa Kondey, Ali's father, and a strict adherent of Islam, interacts with women according to the dictates of his religion. With these, it is obvious that the attitudes of the old generation are quite unambiguous and similar in the fundamentals. In a similar but different vein, Oko and Ali's perceptions of femininity are analogous, and what connects their attitude is the bewilderment and perplexity they encounter in their relation with women. To them the modern African female is a paradox, a conundrum that continuously manifests inexplicable attitudes that they equate with feminist discontentment.

Though Esi exhibits a sort of Western feminist recalcitrance to phallogocentric imperialism, and will not easily yield her personal identity or allow this to be subsumed by the general and overwhelming impinging self-indulgence and domination of masculinity, the author refuses to proffer easy solutions. What is offered is hope, hope that one day, Esi and women with analogous penchant would get answers to the pressing questions of their lives. When the answers come, perhaps, they would be ready to embrace the *changes* necessary for a better life for them.

For a woman like Opokuya who has found a comfortable zone within the system, she finds it easier and unproblematic to stay in her marriage. Unidealistic, preferring rather 'to toe the path of discussion rather than confrontation' (Ogbeide, 2012), completely unselfish and undemanding, she is amenable to the dictates of the times and the society. Such a woman will strive to keep her family united and insist on making her husband happy, so that the husband will be prepared to serve and protect his family and hence prove himself its head. Though economically superior, rather than attempt to supplant the husband she will complement him. Such a woman would naturally 'not take every display of brusque masculine egoism as a personal affront, rather, she will take it that his behaviour is not meant as a personal insult.' (Firkel, 1963) The fate of such a woman could definitely be contrasted with that of someone like Esi, who:

has been spoilt by her increased efficiency and financial independence through her own earning, and hence will look upon the matrimonial partnership as a kind of competition, with a view to becoming herself the head of the family. (Firkel, 1963)

If anything, Esi's case is a demonstration that a wholesale Western feminism can hardly work in Africa.

### 3. Conclusion

Esi's long-winded anti-patriarchal posit emanates from her inability to compromise, to be comfortable with the reality of marriage. Idealistic about marriage, she refuses to have sex with her husband because he does not recognise 'her personal space'. But when she divorces him and marries another who gives her more than enough space to celebrate her individuality, she longs for the cocooned protectiveness of marriage and the companionship and comfort it offers. Never for once does she think that she could only get these by subordinating herself to the general good of the family. Eventually, her second marriage fails because of this inability to compromise, her desire to have a Western-style marriage but with all the benefits offered by traditional marriage.

The feminist stance of Esi, deviantly Western in outlook, would have been abhorrent to the protagonists of *So Long a Letter* and *The Joys of Motherhood* (novels by other female writers concerned with feminist identities in Africa). The personal values of these predecessors are still traditional, and despite their abhorrence of the oppressive nature of the patriarchal values that dominate their societies, they are not ready to 'burn their brassieres' or jettison their marriages in protest like Esi. They may complain about the inhibitions and the individual discomfort they experience as subordinates in a patriarchate, they may also express their disdain because trapped in the detritus of patriarchal societies, but, short of making a drastic response, they settle down into the system and remain sour and bitter by their own inertia. They prefer, it seems, to rejoice in their 'motherhood' rather than in their femininity. But these female protagonists represent the old order of Womanists, while Esi epitomises the spirit of the new Womanists, who (like Enitan in *Everything Good Will Come*) apparently rejoice more in celebrating feminine individualities.

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