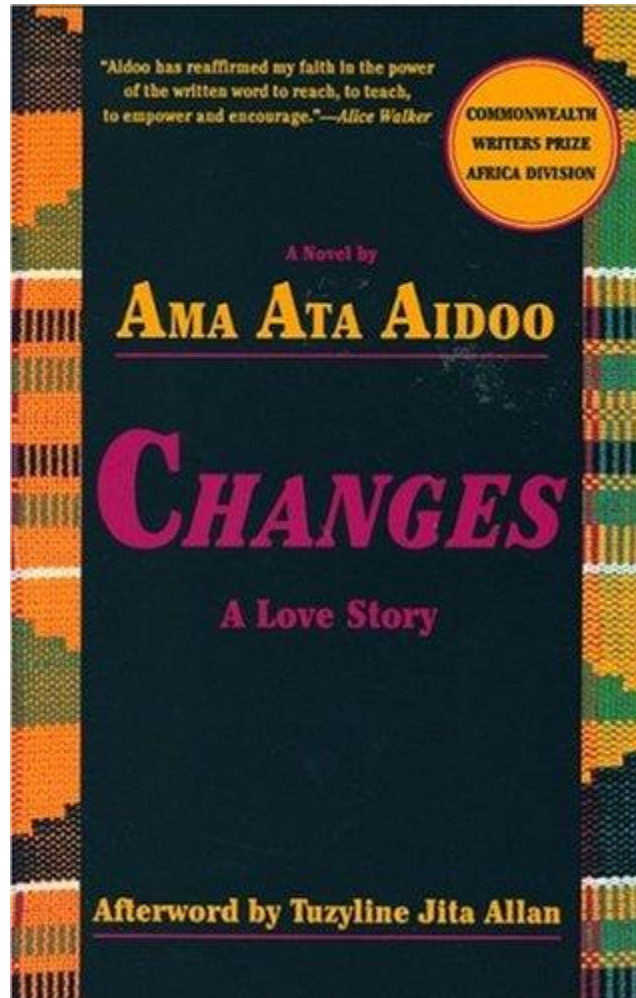


**Modern Women in Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story* –
Esi and Opokuya**

R. Jothi Rathinabai



Abstract

Using the feminist qualified by the sociological critical framework, this paper demonstrates how the psychological disposition of the characters in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story* exhibits the mentality of urban-dwellers, revealing some western culture contact and conflict with traditional African culture. Consequently, it also attempts to analyse how Aidoo artistically exploits the disorganization of social life and the disintegration and erosion of traditional values in post-colonial Africa extrapolating from Ghana for the amelioration of women's condition. Esi and

Opokuya the two middle class modern educate African women are compared and contrasted in this work.

Keywords: Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story*, Love, Marriage, Culture, friendship between women.

Institution of Marriage

Every human society has a body of beliefs that standardize the way people behave and relate to each other in the society. Over the years, these beliefs and mode of behavior are modified to suit the changing circumstances of the society concerned. The customs, traditions and beliefs have, over the years, helped to keep women under subjugation, and to make them feel generally inferior to men and incapable of operating at the same level as men in society. These are: the institution of marriage with its related issues of bride-wealth, child-marriage, polygamy, purdah, widowhood and inheritance of poverty, high fertility and puberty rites with specific reference to female circumcision.

The institution of marriage is a very important one in all African societies. It is primarily a union between two families, rather than between two individuals. Traditionally, marriages are arranged between two families. Love between a young man and a young woman was not in-itself considered legitimate grounds for marriage. A young man and a woman living in Britain, Europe, America or anywhere else outside their own country, would not normally go through with a marriage ceremony until the man's parents have gone to ask for the woman's hand from her family.

Three Types of Marriage

In Africa, there are three types of marriage that a man may opt for – marriage under customary law, in which he can marry as many as he feels he can support financially; Moslem marriage, in which a man can marry up to four women; and Ordinance marriage (including Christian marriage) in which a man can only have one wife at a time. These reflect the three major cultures that have influenced African societies.

Three Types of Marriage

In *Changes: A Love Story* there are three traditional African contemporary figures: Esi, the divorced career woman and absentee mother who nevertheless agrees to become a second wife in a polygamous marriage; Opokuya, ever juggling the dual burdens of women working at home and

outside; Fusena, the educated Muslim biding her time to finally speak out against traditional duties and a culturally-enforced acceptance of polygamy.

Esi

Esi is the first female character introduced by Aidoo to attain fulfillment beyond her domestic role as a mother and wife with a college degree and a prominent career working at the Department of Urban Statistics. Aidoo represents, the so called emancipated women of the city like Esi who before going out to her office, take sufficient time in doing things or making up as stated:

She unwrapped the cloth from her body, moved to the dressing table, took what she would need and brought the things to her side of the bed: some cream for her skin, a deodorant stick, a very mild toilet spray. She sat down, and picking these one by one, she started getting her body ready for the day. (CS 9)

The above quote describes Esi's behavior in terms of dressing up. She is influenced by the western culture. This shows the change brought by the clash of culture and its impact on the African educated class. These representatives of the African elite or intelligentsia sometimes ignore their African role or refuse to do it for their own egoistic purpose.

Oko and Esi

A woman is expected to have children to prove her womanhood, and it is true to say that the respect and status that motherhood confers on a woman is greater than that conferred by marriage per se. The fact is Oko loves Esi. He wants to have another child. In their society a married couple should have more than one child. But Esi is not willing to have one more child. She gives more importance to her work and career. This is the turning point of her life. Oko, Esi's husband, often fights with her on the issues of her work and her role as a wife and mother. Although he loves her very much, he cannot tolerate her air of independence in relation to him. He wants her to spend more time with him in the role of a wife that the traditional society expects from her. Empowered with financial independence, Esi may be trying to claim power over her own self that traditionally belongs to Oko, the male. In the pursuit of authority, self-respect, and pride as a man, Oko rapes her.

Marital Rape?

In an African community like in Accra, Esi's consideration of Oko's sexual violence as "marital rape" instead of a husband's traditional right indicates disobedience although Accra as a big

city is ahead of the country as a whole and that is why Esi behaves more as an Accran than as a Ghanaian in making her demands. 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 the light of postcolonial Africa’s desire to rid the continent of Western ideas imposed during the lengthy colonial occupation. After the rape, Esi feels temporarily trapped, for she had earlier argued:

You cannot go around claiming that an idea or an item was imported into a given culture 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’? (CS 12)

To the best of Esi’s knowledge, there is no indigenous expression for “marital rape” in Akan, Igbo, Yoruba, Wolof, Temne, Kikuyu, Xhosa or any other African language. Still Esi feels soiled and Europe has nothing to do with it:

And here she was, not feeling academic or intellectual at all, but angry and sore. . .
And even after a good bath before and after, still dirty. . . Dirty! . . . Ah-h-h-h, the word was out. (CS 12)

Esi and Oko both refer it to as “the assault,” even as she secretly reminds herself that it was rape.

Esi and Opokuya

The novel focuses on the friendship between the two working women, Esi and Opokuya. Esi and Opokuya are childhood friends. Though they are friends they are extremely different in handling their families. Esi differs significantly from her childhood friend Opokuya. Opokuya cannot really comprehend a woman who complains of a husband being too loving. Yet she also realizes that she has long envied Esi’s ‘freedom movement’, her independence. A nurturing, maternal type, Opokuya struggles to combine successfully her duties as wife and mother of four with her job as nurse and mid wife, a double shift that finds her still weary in the morning and breathless at the end of the day.

Every morning, Opokuya and her husband, Kubi, argue over the use of the car: a dispute that nearly always ends with Opokuya’s defeat. Although Opokuya frequently relents to her husband during this common argument, she describes the matter as “one of the few areas of friction in their

otherwise good marriage,” (CS 17) suggesting that she experiences contentment in other aspects of her relationship with Kubi.

However, Opokuya manages to fulfill all of the roles demanded of her. She begins her days fighting with her husband. The fact that she rarely wins their morning dispute over the car is frustrating:

Opokuya thought this was absolutely ridiculous and even mad. A car is to be used. 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? Was he aware of the amount of running around one had to do to feed and clothe four growing children? (CS 17)

Opokuya is a nurse and midwife at the busy state hospital, working very long hours. Yet, she says,

The children and their father refuse to organize even their already cooked supper when I’m around... you’d think that with me being away on duty at such odd hours they would have taught themselves some self-reliance. But no. when I’m home, they try to squeeze me dry to make up for all the times they have to do without me. (CS 34)

Although Opokuya initially feels that attempts to convince African women to lose weight are intended to cut down their birth rate, she eventually admits that she “felt like a fraud” (CS 15) as a health professional because of her large frame, despite her healthy blood pressure and vitality. In this way, Opokuya has internalized the notion of what a woman’s body should be, which results in female self-policing.

Not the Traditional Submissive Wife

Opokuya in no way personifies the traditional submissive wife. Tired of depending on her husband’s goodwill for rides, for example, she proposes to buy Esi’s old car, thus asserting her physical and financial independence from Kubi, as well as her desire for greater freedom of movement. Nevertheless, the conversations they have, as Esi sips a beer and Opokuya a cup of tea, shed light on the difference in their personal circumstances:

Esi had a beer and Opokuya had tea... She insisted that alcohol relaxed her so much that if she took a sip of anything alcoholic, the first thing she would want to do even

that early in the evening would be to look for her bed... How could she, Opokuya Dakwa, sleep anytime she felt like it? With a fully-grown man, a young growing woman, and three growing boisterous boys to feed? (CS 34)

Serene Marriage?

Opokuya 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 for. 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.

Impact of Social and Economic Statuses

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. Opokuya on the other hand, is genuinely concerned, when Esi tells her of her decision to marry Ali, that is, to enter a polygamous relationship:

Look here, Esi, can you see yourself and Ali's wife getting together?... youknow, for instance getting together about Ali's strengths and occasionally trading gossip about his weaknesses? Can you see that happening? (CS 97)

Women's Friendship

The strength of Esi's relationship with Opokuya saves Esi from further oblivion after her marriage with Ali falls apart. In a vulnerable moment Kubi attempts to console Esi, placing both in a predicament which would certainly have destroyed each person's commitment to Opokuya, one as a friend, the other as a husband. Esi does not allow for such a violation to take place, and for the first time in months Esi summons the strength which she had relied upon so heavily in the past. It is this strength that is always derived from the friendship and insight of the woman who has been so much a part of her life.

Esi realizes that women's friendship is far preferable to sexual satisfaction. One evening, as she is pondering her misery and loneliness, Kubi stops by her house, expecting to find his wife

Opokuya there. Kubi is shocked at the sight of a tearful Esi, holds her close, starts kissing her, and leads her towards the couch. Esi, who has been very lonesome, is erotically aroused; “it also occurred to her that maybe this might be an answer to the great question of how to get one’s physical needs met, and still manage to avoid all attachment and pain” (CS 163). But she also thinks that, by having an affair with Kubi, she would be losing Opokuya’s friendship:

And hadn’t her friendship with Opokuya been, so far, the only constant thing in her life? . . . And to maintain a friendship is a choice? Therefore, not to maintain a friendship - indeed, to kill a friend - is a choice? . . . She, Esi could not afford to shed Opokuya. (CS 164)

Hopeful Moment

This is the most hopeful moments in the novel. Opokuya will always remind the occasionally self-centered Esi that she is not singled out in her dissatisfaction, that the life of all women in Africa leaves much to be desired:

Why is life so hard on the professional African woman? Esi asked, her voice showing that she was a little puzzled. But Opokuya wasn’t having any of her self-pity. So, she countered rather heavily. Why is life so hard on the non-professional African woman? Eh? Esi, isn’t life even harder for the poor rural and urban African woman? I think life is just hard on woman, ‘Esi agreed, trying to calm Opokuya down. But remember it is always harder for some other women somewhere else,’ Opokuya insisted. (CS 50 - 51)

This is the pragmatic, caring advice Esi chooses to keep, as she decides to preserve her friendship with Opokuya. Prior to that, not once had the love struck Esi considered the effect on Fusena of her marrying Ali. Not once had she thought Fusena too might be unhappy, and lonely. Opokuya, whose friendship she values above all else, will not let Esi ignore other women. Together, Opokuya and Esi can conflate the personal and the political, a major achievement in feminist consciousness. And through this coming together of the articulate career woman and the seasoned personal caregiver, the germs of a broader female bonding that may soon bring about the much needed, long overdue changes begin to breed.

Female Status in Patriarchal Relationships

Nana's words as she philosophizes upon the nature of female status in patriarchal relationships are deceptively simple. One could easily be misled by them into taking her as an advocate and supporter of the patriarchal system of polygamous relations. There is double-edged irony underlying her words:

‘My young lady, today you came here asking me a question. I shall try as hard as possible to give you an answer. I shall also try to make it my truth, not anybody else's. . . Who is a good man if not the one who eats his wife completely, and pushes her down with a good gulp of alcohol? In our time, the best citizen was the man who swallowed more than one woman, and the more, the better. So our warriors and our kings married more women than other men in their communities. . . A good woman was she who quickened the pace of her own destruction. To refuse, as a woman, to be destroyed, was a crime that society spotted very quickly and punished swiftly and severely. (CS 109 - 110)

Leave One Man, Marry Another

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. (CS 109)

Nana's lengthy counsel to Esi in 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. (CS 109-110)

Esi as a Second Wife to Ali

Esi's decision to be a second wife to Ali, who "has had a traditional upbringing [and who] seems to exemplify the figure of a modern, Western educated African... a complex, hybrid character" (EA 164), and to live a life as assumed by her is never going to be easy because Ali is also a traditional African man with all his education and profession. As a modern woman, Esi has difficulty seeing herself as an "occupied territory" (CS 91) of Ali. But Ali counters thus: "What difference should that make? And what is this about 'only a second wife'? Isn't a wife a wife?" (CS 89). In fact, Esi is in a world of duality with opposing pulls of tradition and modernity as Simpson claims:

Aidoo circumvents generic constraints in her depiction of the search for what constitutes a modern African female identity. The difficulties attendant on this search are dramatized in Aidoo's portrayal of the character of Esi, a woman who seems to have the opportunity to live her life as she wishes but who must do so within a society still subject to a stereotypical conception of African women and their designated place in the world, a place most often associated with the roles of wife, mother and helping hand or, in more modern terms, the realms of power, financial or academic success. (EA 162)

Downfall of Esi's Second Marriage

Unlike Esi's first marriage when Oko showered her his time, Ali demands little of her time which leads to the downfall of Esi's second marriage, "they became just good friends who find it convenient once in a while to fall into bed and make love" (CS 164).

Esi's relationship with Ali is another instance of male oppression of women. But it is not until the relationship is formalized that Esi realizes in a discussion with her friend that the issue is not whether a woman is part of a monogamous or a polygamous marriage. But that the process and form turning a relationship into an institution is formed around power relations between women and men. So deeply ingrained is the idea of female subservience in marriage that the arrangements which women make in order to find time also for their professional lives or other interests are discussed as improvements on the status of women in marriage. As Esi and Opokuya point out in one of their

discussions, this situation is of course only possible within an ideological and social context that has no place for a single woman:

‘It is even more frightening to think that our societies do not admit that single women exist. Yet . . .’

‘Yet what?’

‘Single women have always existed here too,’ she said with some wonder.

‘Oh yes. And all over the continent . . .’

‘Women who never managed to marry early enough.’

‘Or at all. Widows, divorcees’. (CALs 47)

Yearning for Changes

Esi and Opokuya are each yearning for changes. Their mothers and grandmothers commenting on the lack of it, yet the novel ends on a realistic note, indicating that much has yet to be achieved. In “*To Be a Woman*,” Aidoo avers that a coming together of women, female bonding, is an essential step towards emancipation:

It is obvious that for a long-term answer, if one is at all possible, only collective action would be meaningful. We must organize. Because you are not alone. Out there are all the women from all sorts of economic and social background struggling with different levels of consciousness? (264)

Survival Question

Thus sympathetic women have to adapt to their subordination in order to survive constitutes the basis of the older women’s response to Esi’s situation. The choice is finally not between monogamy or polygamy, “Western,” “traditional,” or Islamic marriages, but between oppressive, exploitative, and alienating arrangements that serve to further social control versus those that are life-affirming and egalitarian.

Changes demonstrate that quality of education improves African women who have returned from work place to view their home from a newer perspective. The conflict of changes is built on the contradiction of the protagonist’s choice to be traditional while ignoring the regulations of tradition. The protagonist considers that her husband Oko makes excess demands on the time she should invest in her career and so disregards his appeal to her to conform to the standard of behavior appropriate to

African womanhood. The narration also shows clearly that Esi is not oblivious to the stigma of being single at her age in the society despite all the changes and social progress recorded. So the problem which Esi attempts to solve by becoming a second wife is how to appropriate the social respect which marriage and family life confer in her society on her own terms rather than on the terms of the society, and because she cannot achieve this desire she becomes lonely. Esi is motivated by a desire for adventure and to express her mind and self in defiance of viable social options. The narrative portrays Esi as wishing to integrate her personal moral choices within the wider social network but without making the required adjustment or concession.

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R. Jothi Rathinabai
D/O. S Maryammal
141/5G Oil Mill Colony
Satchiapuram
Sivakasi 626124
Tamilnadu
India
jothibai18.92@gmail.com