

Women self-affirmation in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes*

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ABSTRACT: *The topic deals with Ama Ata Aidoo's self-affirmation and struggle led by African women in general and Ghanaian women in particular, for the betterment of their life conditions. This Ghanaian female writer puts in exergue, male and female characters to raise the gender issue in a milieu possessed by patriarchal thought and behavior. Women self-affirmation in Aidoo's *Changes*, is discussed heading the socio-political-economical side with an insistence on women's rights. Through her characters, the novelist succeeded in explaining the impact of patriarchy in traditional Africa, and on both male and female characters. That is why she makes a balance by depicting a wife and her husband. This allows her to point out an important aspect of the emancipated Ghanaian women's philosophy, which consists of fighting for equality and justice among sexes or between husband and wife, without parting with traditional family life. In short, Aidoo's main concern is women empowerment through the respect of certain progressive African tradition and customs.*

Key-words: self-affirmation, patriarchy/matriarchy, empowerment.

Introduction

Self-affirmation can be defined as "the act or skill of defining one's self, one's actions, one's rights" (*The American Heritage Dictionary of English Language* 4th ed. (2010). That is the definition of one's identity, character, abilities and attitudes especially in relation to person or things outside oneself or itself.

According to *Webster's New World College Dictionary* (2010), "self-affirmation is the understanding or determination of one's own nature or basic qualities". It is different from self-determination which is "the right of the people who live in a country to make a free decision about the form of their government, especially whether or not to be independent of another country" (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English- New Ed.*).

Self-affirmation in literature is the recognition of oneself as a force or as a person capable of defending one's interest and rights in a perpetual changing world.

The choice of the topic *Women self-affirmation in Ama Ata Aidoo's Changes*, has a link with the present day literature movement. But we will insist on gender criticism, especially feminist criticism. Gender criticism "analyzes different conceptions of gender and their role in the writing, reception, subject matter, and evaluation of literary works" (Abrams, 2005: 113). Emphasis will be put on the struggle for the recognition of women's cultural roles and achievements, and also for women's social and political rights. There is an idea of doing justice to female in a patriarchal African context.

This choice is not casual if we refer ourselves to the several definitions of self-identity we have given at the beginning of this introduction. In fact we want to examine how female writers succeed to create female characters capable of self-affirmation- it is the development and the expression of African feminism through Ama Ata Aidoo's work.

Concept of Patriarchy versus Matriarchy

Matriarchy is "a social system in which the mother is head of the family. It is also a family, community, or society based on this system or governed by women" (*American Heritage Dictionary*).

In my opinion, matriarchy is simply a system in which the traditional inheritance and/or ascendancy process is directly link to the mother in opposition to patriarchy, where the children belong to the father. It is a social system in which the mother is the head of the family. In Ivory Coast in the old days the king's sons could not become kings because of the matriarchal system; the sons of the king's sister are only those who can become kings. According to traditions, these boys have for sure the same "blood" as the king but on the contrary, the king's own sons who can be someone's progeny. As documented by John S. Mbiti (1969) in *African Religions and Philosophy* asserts that:

"The deep sense of kinship, with all it implies, has been one of the strongest forces in traditional African life. Kinship is reckoned through blood and betrothal (engagement and marriage). It is kinship which controls social relationships between people in a given community: it governs marital customs and regulations; it determines the behavior of one individual towards another. Indeed, this sense of kinship binds together the entire life of the 'tribe'..." (104)

Kinship here is the connection by blood, marriage or adoption. The Akan or Ashanti people of the ancient Ghana or Gold Coast, apply also the matrilineal system based on or tracing ancestral descent through the maternal line. To this day, if you go to

these Ghanaian communities, you will note that women are toiling in order to amass riches that they will leave to their children after their death. Their philosophy is different from Muslim societies.

Matriarchy (Having a mother as head of the family or household) can be understood as the public formation, in which woman occupies ruling position in a family (a primary cell of society). Some researchers depart from the premise of a mother-child as the core of human group where the grandmother was the central ancestress with her children and grandchildren clustered around her in an extended family. A recent school of "[Matriarchal Studies](#)" led by [Heide Göttner-Abendroth](#) (2004) is calling for:

“a more inclusive redefinition of the term: Göttner-Abendroth defines "Modern Matriarchal Studies" as the "investigation and presentation of non-patriarchal societies", effectively defining "matriarchy" as "non-patriarchy. Similarly, Peggy Reeves Sanday (2004) favors redefining and reintroducing the word *matriarchy*, especially in reference to contemporary matrilineal societies such as the [Minangkabau](#)” (<http://www.answers.com/>).

In this quotation Heide Göttner-Abendroth insists on the redefinition of matriarchy and sees it as the ‘investigation and presentation of non-patriarchal society’. Peggy Reeves shares the same idea when he talks about contemporary matrilineal societies.

On the other hand, due to a lack of a clear and consistent definition of the word *matriarchy* several anthropologists have begun to use the term *matrifocality*:

“*Matrifocality* refers to societies in which women, especially mothers, occupy a central position, and the term does not necessarily imply domination by women or mothers. Anthropologist R. L. Smith (2002) refers to 'matrifocality' as the kinship structure of a social system where the mothers assume structural prominence. The [Nair](#) community in [Kerala](#) and the [Bunt](#) community in [Tulunadu](#) in [South India](#) is a prime example of matrifocality. This can be attributed to the fact that the community being warriors by profession, were bound to lose male members at youth, leading to a situation where the females assumed the role of running the family. Some consider the use of the term a [euphemism](#), lacking a parallel to patriarchy, which is not redefined in the same fashion” (<http://www.answers.com/topic>).

At this point, anthropologists like R. L. Smith support that, for lack of ‘clear and consistent definition of the word *matriarchy*’, it is better to use a new qualification or a new terminology as *matrifocality* to societies in which women, especially mothers, occupy a central position, and the term does not necessarily imply domination by women or mothers. In so doing, according to us matriarchy in an African context will better be fixable. Especially if we know that in most of African traditional societies, women are considered, at a certain extent, as second class citizens. That is why female writers stand firmly to fight this injustice. “Joan Bamberger (1974) in *The Myth of Matriarchy* argued that the historical record contains no reliable evidence of any society in which women dominated” (<http://www.answers.com/>).

Joan Bamberger has not denied the existence of numerous [matrilineal](#) or [avuncular](#) (maternal uncle) societies but she insists on the fact that male characters are the dominant elements. The debate is on the point that though the matrilineal system is evident in traditional societies, women are not the most important decisions- makers. Men are in general at the ‘front line’.

In opposition to matriarchy, according to *The American Heritage Dictionary*, “*etymologically*, the word ‘patriarchy’ derives from the [Greek](#) (patriarkhia), literally means ‘rule of fathers’, from (patriarkhēs), ‘father’ or ‘chief of a race, [patriarch](#)’ and historically, the term patriarchy was used to refer to [autocratic](#) rule by the male head of a family. However, in modern times, it more generally refers to social systems in which power is primarily held by adult men, and in which men oppress, exploit and dominate women.” Patriarchy is then, a social system in which the father is the head of the family and men have authority over women and children. It can also have a link with a family, community, or society based on this system or governed by men.

In terms of Sociology, patriarchy is a form of social organization in which a male is the head of the family and descent, kinship, and title are traced through the male line (*Collins English Dictionary – Complete and Unabridged*: 2003). In the same *Collins English Dictionary*, patriarchy in general is defined as:

“a community in which the father or oldest male is the supreme authority, and descent is traced through the male line- a government by males, with one as supreme. *Patriarchist* is a society organized to give supremacy to the father or the oldest male in governing a family, tribe, or clan” (2003).

This definition points out the community’s choice of male actors over female characters. If we extrapolate, we can say that patriarchy takes root in traditional African ways. Women, in some areas, are considered as second class citizens though they are playing fundamental roles in the lives of the societies. The example of “La grande royale” in Cheick Hamidou Kane’s *The Ambiguous Adventure* is illustrative. She has urged her people to send their children to go to the Whiteman’s school so that they

will learn all what is good there in order to combine it to all what is good in their tradition. At the end they will acquire a meaningful profitable training. There are other examples like Ani the earth Goddess in Achebe's *Arrow of God*, or Uhamiri the sea spirit in Nwapa's *Efuru*. After having an idea on patriarchy and matriarchy, let us see the link between feminism and patriarchy.

Feminism for female writers is a movement in which they are struggling for equality among sexes on all levels; because they know the basic view is that: "Our civilization is pervasively patriarchal (ruled by the father), that is, it is male-centered and controlled, and is organized and conducted in such a way as to subordinate women to men in all cultural domains, religious, familial, political, economic, social, legal, and artistic. The female tends to be defined by negative reference to the male as the human norm, hence as a kind of non-man, by her lack; of the identifying male organ, of male powers, and of the male character traits that are presumed to have achieved the most important inventions and works of civilization" (Abrams, 1988: 208).

Between feminism and patriarchy, there is a historical background as it is mentioned in the above quotation. In fact our civilization, is ruled by male actors because in general and in some areas women are not involved in decisions-making to an extent. We observe a certain reserve because practically, most of the African writers, both male and female, use both men and women characters in their writings. And each actor plays an important role in the novel. There is a prevailing assumption that the two are in opposition. Could it be that the two are compatible? Well, perhaps, depending on how you define them. The following Clyde Verner's statement can help us to clarify things:

"Let's suppose that men decided they wanted to regain control of their progeny. Let's leave the definition of patriarchy as nothing more than this. Now let's suppose that women decided they were willing to relinquish the control of progeny that they've temporarily had for the past hundred years or so in western cultures. As a result, they are free to pursue professional careers, and are just as free to end a marriage as they are now. In short, they are no man's chattel. So far as family roles go, let's leave the definition of feminism as nothing more than this. Can it happen? The first supposition is a bigger jump than the second. Many men still don't think a father is much more than a money machine. Even today, perhaps most American men still don't know the value of fatherhood. But this could change, and in fact is changing rapidly. Witness the rise in single father homes, joint custody arrangements, and the growing clamor for fathers' rights. The industrial revolution, with its drudgery of twelve hour workdays in a factory, has largely ended. Men are rediscovering family life and fatherhood" (Wikipedia.com).

Verner's statement is edifying. We see clearly that feminism is opposed to patriarchy in the sense that the first fights the second. If feminism movement overcomes patriarchy, women will reach their aim, they will get their rights and de facto equate men. The equality that women are looking for will become a reality; and they will be fully involved in all the community's decisions.

Women self-Affirmation in *Changes*

In Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes*, women self-affirmation can be seen as the way female characters are fighting to free themselves from male subjugation. "The act or skill of defining oneself, one's actions, and one's rights" is portrayed through Esi, Opokuya and Fusena. Aidoo's depiction of these women points out their understanding or determination of their own nature or basic qualities. For that, they take advantage in multiplying their chances and opportunities to free themselves from male patriarchal attitude.

Concept of *Changes*

Before any further development, let me remind that the title *Changes* is purely symbolic. It symbolizes the numerous personal and cultural transformations that lie at the heart of the narrative. When I say 'personal', it has a link with the female major characters used by Aidoo (1991), and representing the so called emancipated women of the city like Esi who before going out to her office, takes sufficient time in doing things or making up as stated on page nine of the novel:

"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" (9).

The above quote describes Esi's behaviour in term of dressing up. According to her depiction, I can guess that she is influenced by the western culture. Through the 'cultural transformation', I want to show the change brought by the clash of culture and its impact on the African educated class. These representatives of the African elite and/ or intelligentsia sometimes ignore their role or refuse to do it for their own egoistic purpose. Here Aidoo depicts female characters fully aware of their objectives. They are acting according to their will and their target. In search of freedom and equality, Esi and the others are determined to succeed no matter how.

The course of the novel takes place at the time Ghana attained its political independence. The way the country is changing politically, economically and culturally, Esi, the main character is also achieving her own independence from her husband and marriage. As a consequence, she freely pursues her own ambition without any constraint of her family and/ or her husband as she is saying to Opokuya at the hotel: "Esi has some principles in life that should be respected" (1991: 58-59).

In a sense, in the above quotation, Esi has transformed herself into a model of the modern woman; she is not only financially stable but also completely independent. She raises the problem of African women conditions with amazement as shown in the following lines:

'Why is life so hard on the professional African woman?' Esi asked, her voice showing that she was a little puzzled... '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 women,' Esi agreed, trying to calm Opokuya down... 'But remember it is always harder for some other women somewhere else,' Opokuya insisted. Both of them sighed. Esi opened her mouth to say something, then she clapped it quickly shut, open her eyes wide...' (1991: 61).

Aidoo in the above lines, seizes the opportunity to discuss rural and urban women's conditions. She is inviting educated women to think about means of changing female conditions. She thinks that women are no longer simply wives and mothers who are dedicated to their own ambitions. Aidoo's women's preoccupation is also shared by other Ghanaian educated women. In the same trend, the Ghanaian female writer, a lawyer by profession, Sheila Minkah-Premo (2001), in her book *Coping with Violence against Women*, assesses the factors that contribute to violence against women; she says that:

"There are many factors that contribute to the incidence of violence against women in our society. However, underlying all the factors is the low status of women in our society. Women are regarded as subordinate to men and there are many cultural norms and religious beliefs that perpetuate the subordination of women" (10).

Some of the factors that have been identified by Minkah-Premo as contributing to violence against women are as follow:

- Socialisation- Females tend to be socialised differently from males and this tends to perpetuate their feeling of inferiority as against their male counterparts;
- Patriarchy- This refers to the headship of men in the family... Women are therefore regarded as minors, who have to be sanctioned when they fall out of line;
- Culture- There is many traditions and cultural practices that contribute to the incidence of violence against women in Ghana;
- Religion- Religious beliefs are sometimes used to justify violence against women;
- Substance Abuse- The misuse of alcohol, drugs and other substances like narcotic drugs;
- Economic dependence;
- Cycle of violence- Tension building, physical violence and/ or sexual attacks;
- Poor communication skills between couples (13-14).

I can notice here certain awareness of educated women on Ghanaian women's suffering. Knowing factors contributing to violence against women is on one hand similar to curing the illness from its roots, and on the other hand to state its consequences. These consequences can include physical injury, death, psychological harm, economic loss, and human rights violation. So, to understand Aidoo's self-affirmation in dealing with female issues in *Changes*, one has to know first the Ghanaian society, second the incidence of violence against women and the consequences of such violence on women's ability to be productive, and to enjoy life to the full.

To sum up, the concept of *Changes* is the Ghanaian educated women's desire to ban violence in all its forms. As stated by Sheila Minkah- Premo (2001), a Ghanaian writer,

“Women do not have to live with violence directed at them because of their sex. In Galatians 3:28 the Bible tells us that there is neither male nor female in Christ, since we are all one in Christ Jesus. We should therefore learn to respect each other, irrespective of our sex and to teach our children likewise. This will go a long way to remove the inequality between men and women that underlies violence against women” (61).

This quotation justifies Ghanaian educated women’s concern to change men’s mentality since in Christianity, there is ‘neither male nor female’. People are religiously equal. For that, time has come to part with non-fruitful traditional religious beliefs. Aidoo uses her main character Esi to point out that issue; especially on pages 85, 86 and 89 when this actress asks for a divorce and sends the divorce paper to her husband for signing or when she chooses to work naked after love affair.

Women’s Struggle in *Changes*

Struggle is defined in *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* as “a long period of time in which you try to deal with difficult problem”. The same struggle is defined in *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* as “a hard fight in which people try to obtain or achieve something, especially something that somebody else does not want them to have.”

This struggle concerns both rural and urban women; and when we say women it is a whole; it includes all female components- young, mature, old, married and unmarried, widows, etc. Aidoo’s *Changes* strikes a kind of radical change in women’s strategies to fight for their freedom and rights. The novel puts in exergue, how women are viewed in Ghanaian society; and this segregation leads women to certain awareness developed by Ama Ata Aidoo through her three female characters Esi, Opokuya her friend and Fusena Ali’s first wife. These ladies are all the three educated. Their fight is to free themselves from male jug as it is the motto in Ghana; they think that they have to get first their economical independence by working hard; they are engaged in all fields that can give them the means (trade, business or governmental service - civil servant).

Aidoo is not the only Ghanaian who is struggling for women rights. Dorcas Coker - Appiah and Kathy Cusack (1999) in their book *Violence against Women and Children in Ghana* reveal certain number of factors which have contributed to children and women’s offence:

“Children can be beaten by anybody in the society... there is nothing wrong with spanking, caning, and banging their heads together when they misbehave, a child is your property to correct in any way that you want...”

...The man thinks that since the woman is his wife, she is his property and therefore he can do whatever he likes to her, likewise children... One thing that has been established by our tradition is the fact that man and woman are not equal... this inequality serves as a catalyst for a man to beat his wife because he is superior and the wife inferior. Tradition allows the superior to abuse the inferior. Woman was created from the rib of a man and hence cannot be equal to man in anyway. Moreover, tradition has assigned specific roles to both sexes, for example; the digging of graves for men and cooking for women and therefore there is no reason for the man ‘not to slap or beat the wife’ if she fails to cook having been given chop money” (14-15)

The parameters within the above quotation, help to understand the starting point of gender problems. Since we know ‘where the rain starts to beat us, to borrow Chinua Achebe’s words, we can decide on how to fight back violence against women; and that is what Ghanaian female writers including Aidoo have done. The issue in *Changes* is to use female characters in fighting back male stubbornness to rule over them. Nowadays even the society does not approve wife beating; it depends on the cause. In the case of wife flirting, the community may look on unconcerned when a beating occurs. “The community will seek an explanation as to what the victim did to deserve the beating, and when they find the reason not tangible, they will deal with the offender”. (*Violence against Women and Children in Ghana*, 1999: p16)

Another cause of gender molesting which is strongly fought by Aidoo is discrimination and favouritism. Human beings are made up of psychological, social, religious, and emotional combinations, which shapes one’s life; and Ghanaian tradition and customs have mixed up with these values to relegate women especially to the background as inferiors. “Even in some religions, like the Muslim mission, women are regarded as inferior and treated as the property of their husbands. This encourages men to treat them as they want. The churches have also played down the active role of women. Instead of humanizing them, they dehumanize them” (*Violence against Women and Children in Ghana*, 1999: p23).

As you see in the preceding quote, apart from tradition and customs, both Islam and Christianity have played a role in the male’s domination over female actresses. But it is important to note that Islamic and Christian religions are not to blame. Very

likely some of the religious leaders try to turn some religious aspects in their male advantages, in order to make women accept their domination.

To conclude this point on women violence in *Changes*, we will recognize that the more things change, the more they remain the same. That is societal values have undergone little change. Women are internalizing the attitudes which they in turn pass on to their daughters or female wards. To use Dorcas Coker - Appiah and Kathy Cusack's (1999) words, there appears little overt resistance to violence even though both adult and adolescent girls have identified it as dehumanizing, harmful and inimical to their welfare (82). This assertion will lead us to the next point which is the educated women vision of self- definition.

Educated Women's Vision of Self-Affirmation in *Changes*

“Generally, the majority of women in Africa live in rural areas, where they constitute the main part of the population. In principle, women in Africa are not taught of as head of households specially, since most African households are not only patriarchal... but also, in many parts of the continent, polygamous” (Njeuma, L. Dorothy. *The Politics of Women's education*, p123).

This sub-title concerns exclusively Esi Sekyi, Opokuya Dakwa and Fusena kondey, three educated women approaching their mid thirties in Ghanaian capital, Accra. These ladies are professional workers; they share in common education, civil servants, and the fight for personal independence from men. Their characteristic is that Esi works as a government staff, Opokuya is a nurse and Fusena who abandon her educational career works as a great owner of a kiosk. These women are determined to end up with male dictatorship on gender. On page 14 for example, Aidoo puts an accent on how Esi parks her car, how she manipulates the engine and how she presents herself:

“One full hour later, she was easing her car into the parking lot of the Department of Urban Statistics. The car came to a standstill. She turned off the engine, removed the keys from the ignition, dumped them irritably into her handbag, got out of the vehicle with an unconscious and characteristic haste, and literally ran to her office on the third floor of the building” (*Changes*, 1991).

The theme of self-affirmation is also raised by the author through the character of Fusena who gives up studies in order to take care of the household while her husband is going to school. Though Fusena is regretting her act after husband's marriage with Esi, she has never lost hope; she succeeds to manage a big kiosk which allows her to be financially independent and self-sufficient. And since money is considered at that time, Fusena can act without any constraint.

Aidoo depicts her female characters as women strongly fighting to be free and not to be independent from their husband. For their independence they are engaged in all fields that can give them the means as we have said so far (trade, business, and governmental service):

“As a novelist, poet, dramatist, critic and lecturer, she [Ama Ata Aidoo] voiced concerns over a variety of social and political issues at the forefront of Ghanaian society in the wake of a mid-20th Century independence movement in her country. She uttered repeated concerns for the plight of womanhood in Ghanaian culture, she endowed the female characters in her literary works with strong wills and distinct personalities through her depictions of the traditional norms of society, she helped to escape the exploitation and disenfranchisement of women, not only from their careers but from the essence of their own identities” (<http://www.AAA.bibliography.answers.com>).

It is true that Aidoo insists on female exploitation and their self-definition to free themselves from the male's 'colonization'- we mean an exaggerated domination. If we consider Aidoo's three female characters, they “continue to live in marriages that are far from fulfilling their personal needs and desires” (<http://www.AAA.bibliography.answers.com>). Perhaps Aidoo's main preoccupation is to assert contemporary African women's fundamental rights based on African realities, not on imported concepts. In *African Women: Then and Now* she says:

“...We are not free and as equal as African men would have us believe we have problems. But we are struggling to be worthy heiresses to our past, to be planners today and builders of a better tomorrow. We need to intensify our struggle... because in our hands lies, perhaps, the last possible hope for ourselves- and everyone else on the continent” (<http://www.AAA.bibliography.answers.com>).

Aidoo's statement is practically true. But theoretically people will think that today's women can live their lives without any constraint. Up to now in some conservative traditional communities, women accept, under the cover of traditional beliefs, to be under the authority of male actors. Despite the harsh realities that the continent of Africa is facing, Aidoo seems to think that "African women can break out of the vicious circle of poverty, oppression and victimization by drawing inspiration from leading female figures in Ghana's history. She invites her fellow countrywomen who are 'worthy heiresses' of their past to follow in their female ancestors' steps" (<http://www.AAA.bibliography.answers.com>).

"In Ghana it seems that power has not always been in the hands of men. Yaa Asantewaa, born around 1840, became queen mother of the Ashanti. When the Ashanti king Primpeh and his mother were exiled by the British to the Seychelles Islands, she led the resistance against the British colonizers. She fought the English troops fiercely even though she was finally captured. Up to this day Ghanaian people celebrate her deeds as the warrior woman who faced adversity against all odds" (<http://www.AAA.bibliography.answers.com>).

The above quotation is a kind of reference to Ghanaian female elites. They want to behave like Yaa Asantewaa who has challenged women to reconstruct a society exploring fully their lives and experience. This lady has had a vision and ideals that she has firmly held on. The gender issue has not constituted a stumbling block in her march towards her vision. What allow her to combine "her various roles of a full-time public career of holding the high office of queen mother of Edweso together with the private role of motherhood, wife and farmer" (<http://www.AAA.bibliography.answers.com>).

Conclusion

To sum up, the story of Yaa Asantewaa can stand as an inspiring lesson for women in Ghana and other African countries. It can be the catalyst for positive changes taking place at the economic, social and political levels. And educated women's self-affirmation in *Changes* is Yaa Asantewaa's philosophy of peace and equality between male and female actors and also women's empowerment.

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