

The Women's Issue in the 21st Century: From the Perspective of Ama Ata Aidoo to the Light of Pain and Suffering

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Abstract:

A Jewish rabbi used to thank God that he was not born a woman. It was no different in Roman and Greek culture two thousand years ago. Education has liberated women to some extent in those two thousand years. Feminism has helped women to think and live independently of men. But the rapes throughout India in recent years, the broken marriages, and the other social ills raise many questions. Where are women now in the patriarchal world? Where do they need to go now? Are they moving in the right direction? Through the female characters in Ama Ata Aidoo's novel *Changes: A Love Story*, this research paper discusses what ails women in the 21st century and how they can solve their problems in a patriarchal world. The existential struggle in the lives of endless educated women in the face of pain and suffering is discussed. Although women's equality and complementarity are real, the social mask and cultural realities in different societies are always against women in a patriarchal world, as we see in the characteristic portrayals of FusenaKondey, Opokuya Dakwa and EsiSekyl, which show the existential struggle of a woman in everyday life. The

pain and suffering endured by the women in Aidoo's novel succinctly portrays the subjugation of women throughout the world.

KEYWORDS: Feminism, Male chauvinism, pain and sufferings, Existentialism, Inequality.

Esi is the protagonist of the novel *Changes: A Love Story*, written by Ama Ata Aidoo, who lives in a polygamous culture. In the novel, her grandmother says, “Women die in too many ways anyway, my sister” (CS, 110). And she also says, “A lot was made of a girl because the whole ceremony (wedding ceremony) was a funeral of herself that could have been” (CS, 110). Surely, this is not an exaggerated statement of the grandmother. Even today, in many marriages, a girl’s “self,” her independence, her rights are blown away before she realizes them. No wonder the grandmother also says: “Men are the first gods in the universe and they were devouring gods” (CS, 110). Women have suffered at the hands of men for centuries. Esi, Fusena, and Opekuya, the wives of Aidoo, suffer at the hands of men in the novel. Education has not changed their lives in a patriarchal society. Women in Africa and in India are well educated, but their marriages become a dead end for them. These women should learn to solve their marital problems or redefine their role in marriage so that they can reduce the pain in their lives. In many cases, this redefinition can lead them to live in peace and harmony.

Balachander created many bold new women during his career. Both as a playwright and director of numerous films in Tamil, Telugu and Hindi, he painted women on a wide canvas, portraying their strengths and weaknesses. He strongly believes in respecting the institution of marriage. His female characters, from *Arangetram* to *Kalki*, are woven in different textures within the confines of the institution of marriage. Like Shaw, he is a great critic of women, but he defends them within the framework of his paintings.

Two thousand years ago, the Jewish rabbis thanked God that they were not born women. The world of Socrates and Plato was the same again. Education has eased the pain and suffering of women to some degree. The feminism of the 20th century made women think for themselves and live independently of men. In these two thousand years, a woman's journey has seen only great pain and unbearable suffering at the hands of the “universal” and “devouring male gods”." Even in the 21st century, women continue to suffer pain, agony and anguish in the male-dominated society. In the 21st century, women have evolved, but how far?

Women are born equal and complement men, but the story of their existential struggle continues. In the next centuries they should find ways and means to solve their existential problems in an appropriate way, like Opokuya, the third female character of the novel.

Esi, the main character of the novel *Changes: the Love Story* works in the Department of Urban Statistics. She is married to Oko, a teacher. She has a daughter, Ogyaanowa. Esi stabs Oko by disappearing from his life. Oko is deeply hurt because Oko loves Esi very much. Esi tells her grandmother that she is leaving Oko because he takes up a lot of her time. Her grandmother warns her not to. Esi has never been a very responsible mother. She is incapable of taking care of her child's emotions and feelings. Unknowingly, yet intentionally, she destroys the child's roof.

According to Plato, “the inviolability of the law is the only true representative of freedom” (inspires me to fly). Esi throws Oko and her child Ogyaanowa out of her marriage indiscriminately. James Dobson explains to his readers in his book *Love must be tough* that one of the most painful moments in a person's life is when a wife or husband leaves the family. The pain is unbearable, and the suffering that accompanies divorce leaves an indelible mark on a man or woman's life (LT, 9). Chellama, a barren woman in Balachander's *Kalki*, is

divorced from her husband Prakash. The pain and suffering that Chellama endures are almost unbearable. In Indian culture, there are many Chellamas who divorce because they are infertile.

Esi, in her selfishness, destroys the roof of Fusena, the wife of Ali Kondey, with whom she enters into a love affair that ends in a marriage of convenience. Aidoo's Esi embodies a kind of fiercely independent feminist. The boundaries of freedom are ravaged by a woman who apparently does not believe in any kind of discipline. At the end of the novel, Esi finds herself trapped by Ali, her second husband. The pain becomes agony for Esi. The fear and anguish of separation confuse Esi.

The individualistic West today writhes in pain and agony in an incomparable way. When the limits of freedom are thrown out the window, it can cause deep wounds that can scar any society. Through the character of Esi, Aidoo paints a very painful picture of how a fiercely individualistic, selfish woman can weaken families and society. Without freedom, love is not possible. It is true that love is vulnerable and causes pain, but isn't love a choice of our will? How can the esis of this world solve their dilemma?

Esi is unable to find her balance between her job and her family. Instead of solving her problems, she flees from her marriage. Unconsciously, but selfishly, she pushes the limits of Fusena, another married woman. Everyone, man or woman, is expected to live within the boundaries of their freedom or marriage. When people cross those boundaries, they cause only pain and suffering to their neighbours.

Esi's mother calls her a witch and asks "how I can call you my daughter when you hate people" (CS, 111). Esi probably does not hate Oko or the child or Fusena, but she has not understood her own limits, her marriage, her freedom.

Fusena has trained to be a teacher. Ali is her classmate. They are drawn to each other like moths to a flame. But for many years they live as friends, sometimes as siblings. After almost six years of relationship with Fusena, Ali proposes to her just before he leaves for his studies in London. The wedding takes place two months before he leaves for London. They lead a happy married life until one day Ali announces he will marry again.

Fusena assumes that Ali will be faithful to her, even though they live in a polygamous community. Instinctively, she has always feared that Ali will one day marry a girl with a university degree. But she has not talked to Ali about fidelity in marriage. Like any other woman, she does not want to be used by a man. Although she has been friends for six years, she has not talked to Ali about what she wants for her marriage. No man or woman will tolerate infidelity in a marriage.

Men have lived unfaithfully for centuries, and yet they will call the shots in their marriages. Women have endured for centuries the torment that men's uncaring lives bring to their lives. As long as families and societies do not inculcate in men the idea of fidelity as the main factor in marriage, women will have to endure the deep wounds of faithlessness in marriages. When marriages break down, societies break down. The disintegration of families in the West has disrupted society. Pain and suffering have become part of the disintegrated West.

Opokuya and Esi were close friends, Opokuya is a conscientious nurse who works for the government. She is Aidoo's traditional figure, balancing work and family. She has a large family to work for. She can hardly take a holiday throughout the year. On New Year's Day, she had to report for duty after only three hours of sleep. Kubi is a traditional husband. He works for the government and comes home late almost every day. Opokuya decides not to doubt him when he goes out with girls or women. Kubi, her husband, is an unequal partner in

Opokuya's marriage. The workload Opokuya takes on is phenomenal. But she endures it silently.

Opokuya and Esi meet unexpectedly at a hotel. Esi tells Oko the news of the divorce, which shocks Opokuya. Opokuya tries to rebuke and placate Esi, but eventually takes pity on her. Both strongly believe that African men and African society are very harsh and ruthless towards working women. Opokuya believes that Esi's hard-nosed professionalism has cost their marriage dearly. Opokuya urges Esi to remarry. At this point in her life, Esi cannot decide whether to remain single or remarry.

How will we solve the heavy yoke of Opokuyas in real life? Women should show their male counterparts the pain and agony of their lives. Very often, in their effort to preserve their marriages, women silently endure the unbearable inequality in their lives, like Aidoo's Opokuya. Only when the pain becomes unbearable does a murmur go through the lives of these women. Most women never try to voice their fears and pain. They become shy, paranoid and fearful when it comes to voicing their problems. It is often the case that men simply ignore these painful sounds. If women do not constantly articulate their unbearable burden to men, they cannot understand women's silent suffering. Marriages need professional counsellors, without whom the complex relationship between husband and wife cannot be easily resolved.

From an early age, a boy or girl should be taught what marriage is. Marriage is the greatest transition in human life. But a man or woman does not prepare for this greatest transition. Instead, a boy or girl only dreams about their marriage. Fusena and Ali have known each other for six years. They are interested in each other. Both never talk about what they want from their marriage. They take each other for granted. A boy or girl should prepare

himself or herself mentally, emotionally, and spiritually before walking down the aisle of marriage, because marriage is the most important transition in anyone's life.

How does Esi fare in this real world? Esi is young, bright and has the ability to get up and walk again. In fact, she has deep wounds, unbearable pain, the agony of betrayal by her husband. Esi could solve the problem of balancing work and marriage. She is too intelligent to repeat the mistakes of the past, and she can build a new life for them. Kalki of Balachander says in one of the scenes with her lover that she, like the air, does not need boundaries. At the end of the film, she recognizes the value of the institution of marriage and freedom and joins her lover, who firmly affirms the values of the institution of marriage. Esi should learn to live within the boundaries of the institution of marriage.

Aidoo's Esi, Balachander's Kalkis are too intelligent to be defeated by the "universal" "devouring gods of the universe". In every culture for more than forty centuries, women have been the subordinates in this world. Man is essentially selfish, domineering and wants to control the women around him. Man should learn to fight his own chauvinistic tendencies in life.

Fusena reacts violently when she learns of Ali's second marriage. But she quietly redefines her role in her polygamous environment. On New Year's Eve, Fusena and her three children await Ali's arrival. Ali is delayed by Esi. But Ali promises to come. He suggests to Fusena that she serve the children dinner and let them go to bed. Calmly, she accepts the suggestion and sticks to it. Balumahendra's Tulasi in the film Marupadiyum leaves her marriage when her husband enters into an adulterous relationship. But she refuses to remarry. She redesigns her life to live in peace and harmony as a single woman. Yamuna in K Balachander's Oru Veedu Iru Vaasal redefines her married life. Yamuna's husband fathers an illegitimate child. Yamuna walks out on her marriage. She decides to bring up the illegitimate

child herself. Thus, modern women should learn to redefine or recreate their marriages, when they run into trouble.

In Indian marriages we can see many opokuyas. There are many women who sacrifice their lives for their families. Like Aidoo's Opokuya, they sacrifice their lives for their husbands and their children. They have their dark, frustrating moments in their marriages, but they take them on in order to live in peace and harmony with themselves and with others.

Sadhusundarsingh tells of an incident in the foothills of the Himalayas when he withdrew to have a closer relationship with his God. In one of the branches of the tree, a mother bird lives with her children in her nest. A fire breaks out. The mother bird becomes restless. The fire closes in the branch of the tree where the birds live. The mother bird spreads her wings over her nest where the babies snuggle together. The branch breaks and the nest collapses. The wise man is worried. He goes to see what has happened to the birds. To his surprise, the children are alive and kicking under the ashes of the mother bird's spread wings. The sage goes on to say that God has placed in every female of every other creature in His creation the sacrificial love of God that can sustain the world even today.

The sacrificial love of women has so far sustained the brittle marriages. In India six wives in a town in Tamil Nadu are interviewed. The questions asked are, "1) How happy are you in a married life? 2) How equally are you treated? 3) Is your sexual life happy in the marriage? 4) Are you respected and understood by your husband? 5) Have you found a solution to your problems?" All the interviewed are educated women. Only one person out of six said that she has a happy married life. The rest of the five interviewed said that the children in the family have helped us sustain our marriage. In one of the cases, she is respected and treated equally. Overall they pull along because of their children. One

interviewed says that bringing up a male child equal to the girl child can resolve the problem of the chauvinistic male world.

Usually the opokuyas are taken advantage of. It is true that love is vulnerable. But love must be tough so that the sacrifices made for love are not trampled upon.

In many cultures, men are pampered and coddled from birth. One of the interviewers thinks that if male children are not coddled and spoiled, and if they are treated like female children, the yolk of unequal partnership can be eliminated in the long run. This is very true. In general, male children are given preferential treatment in Indian culture. Unconsciously, women in India coddle their male children, which eventually leads to the male children dominating the women later in life.

The education system in India should also help boys to behave responsibly towards girls and women. Also, the education system should teach girls that they are equal to male children. It is the responsibility of the system that should not allow one to dominate the other. Girl children should be taught unequivocally that they are equal and complement the opposite sex. In the West, the systems, whether in education or in the judiciary, help both sexes to respect each other in their lives. Individual families should learn to respect women and treat them equally. Society as a whole should create systems in education and justice that help reduce gender inequality. Only then can women live in peace and harmony with themselves and with others.

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