



Exploitation of the Urban African Novel for Women's Liberation in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story*

Monique O. Ekpong

Department of Language and Linguistic Science, Cross River University of Technology, Calabar – Nigeria
Email: Mekpong2001@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to analyse Aidoo's novel *Changes* as an urban African novel against the back-drop of a disorganized social life and disintegrated traditional values within the urban setting of Accra, Ghana. The study examines how the novelist Ama Ata Aidoo, extrapolating from Ghana, artistically explores this disorganization of social life and the disintegration and erosion of traditional values in the post-colonial Africa to expose their impact on the contemporary African woman. Using the sociological qualified by the feminist theory and practice, this paper reveals that *Changes* is an urban novel because most of the episodes are situated in the city, even though part of the action, influence and narrative do flow, once in a while, from the town to the country-side. For characters that migrate to the city from the countryside, the foreign or non-indigenous elements dominate the rural and traditional. This helps to corroborate the novel's urbanity. The findings also reveal that *Changes* is an African novel because, like most other items of cultural borrowing which are undergoing change, this novel reflects values which belong to both the oral and literary traditions. For instance, female characters like Esi the protagonist and her friend Opokuya, in spite of attempts to assert their independence and autonomy because of their economic empowerment as wage – earners in the city, still treasure the African traditional values of marriage. To corroborate the fact that foreign or non-indigenous elements dominate the rural and traditional, Esi fashions out for herself in the city a modified form of polygamy which enhances her liberation.

INTRODUCTION

As a western by-product of literacy, the novel is the only major literary genre that has no strict equivalent in the African oral tradition. The novel has

Exploitation of the Urban African Novel for Women's Liberation

emerged in West Africa as a result of the social factors which determined the change from the old oral traditional culture to the modern, literate, industrial and technological culture subsequent upon the introduction of western education and literacy. Before the introduction of western literary education in the coastal, then predominantly non-literate parts of West Africa, the literary form was exclusively oral. The entire cultural repertoire of the people at that time was contained in their oral tradition constituted of various genres made up of folktales, praise-songs, parables, proverbs, riddles, myths, legends, dirges, incantations, and a wide range of drama festivals, among others. The African novel, like most other literary forms of African literature, reflects features which belong to both the oral and the literary traditions. The union of both traditions is consequent upon the peculiar circumstances of colonization which caused the meeting of Europe and Africa. The juxtaposition of both the oral and literary traditions and the evidence of lingering vestiges of traditional values are consequent upon the peculiar circumstances of colonization which caused the meeting of Europe and Africa. The blending of the two traditions does not only give the novel *Changes* its texture and distinctive local colour, but also injects a truly African sensibility and flavour into it as an African novel. However Aidoo exploits this disorganization of social life and the disintegration and erosion of traditional values to the advantage of the contemporary African woman. Ali and Esi's romantic and erotic love affair is an evidence of western cultural contact which seems to be approved of by the novelist Aidoo because it enables the woman to feel liberated and enjoy coitus without shame or inhibition as would have been the case in a completely traditional rural environment. Esi's reason for accepting Ali reveals her liberation. She is satisfied with just having an affair with Ali and staying permanently as his mistress, whereas the indigenous traditional African culture would have insisted on marriage. Esi's contempt of Oko's crude approach to erotic love or sexuality which she tags "marital rape" is as a result of her western cultural contact and liberation which now conflicts with the indigenous African cultural approach to sexual or erotic love, or Oko's attitude of male superiority towards a wife. Urbanization allows Esi to strive for self-fulfilment and self-actualization which reflect her liberation. These findings corroborate the theory that the novel *Changes* is indeed an urban African novel and that urbanization is exploited in Ama Ata Aidoo's African novel *Changes: A Love Story* for the enhancement of women's liberation.

Definition of Terms

Urban refers to an area constituting a town or a city. **Urban settlements** in West Africa were created as a result of colonization, the introduction of western education and literacy. Western urban settlements were usually low-density areas which were initially established by the colonial government to house its high-level man-power originally constituted of white administrators

Monique O. Ekpong

or colonizers. As indigenous West Africans started receiving western education and obtaining the required administrative and professional qualifications, they began to gradually replace the whites as senior civil servants or bureaucrats both in government offices and in residential reservation areas which constituted the westernized urban areas. The urban settlements brought together many Africans from different ethnic groups into urban aggregations.

The westernized urban area is usually noted for its good mechanized roads, electricity, pipe-borne water, water sewage system, waste evacuation system, schools and other educational institutions, good residential houses, health facilities like hospitals and medical centres, commercial houses such as banks and insurance houses, and industries. There are also the law courts, the police or law enforcement agents, and the fire service department, among others. Most urban areas are dependent, at least in part, on municipal governments for their public utilities and other services for which the residents are taxed by the government.

The Urban Novel

Like most other items of cultural borrowing, the novel is still undergoing change. According to Emmanuel Obiechina:

The novel is the only major literary genre which has no strict equivalent in the oral tradition of West Africa, partly because it is a product of literacy, but also because the social factors which determine its rise and define it as a distinct literary form are also the factors which marked the change in the West itself from the old traditional culture to the modern industrial culture. In West Africa however, the form has been borrowed and assimilated to a new cultural reality in which the old indigenous culture and the new technological culture have been and still are being painfully married (Obiechina 34-35)

Novelists like Chinua Achebe and Ama Ata Aidoo who have lived both in the rural and urban environments tend to locate their novels or each of their literary works within either or both settings. However, for a novel to be classified as urban, most of the action should be situated in the city. The psychological disposition of the characters should exhibit the mentality of urban or city dwellers, revealing some culture contact and conflict. For most of the city-dwellers who originate from the village and migrate to the urban centres, the non-traditional element should dominate the rural and traditional. The peculiarities of thought, action and feelings in the urban novel approximate to the bureaucratic, commercial, industrial and individualistic urban situation. All the same, the influences and narratives do flow once in a while from the town to the country-side.

The African Novel

The blending of the oral and literary traditions has given the African novel its texture and distinctive local colour and this helps to inject a truly African sensibility and flavour into the African novel. Like Achebe in his historical novels, Aidoo records in *Changes A Love Story* local speech habits, beliefs, customs and mores in order to give a distinctive quality of life and action which reflect African realities. The African novel, a good example of literature of commitment, referred to in French as *la littérature engagée* explores the problems of society. In a typical African novel, the writer indicates the social reforms which she would want to see through the aspects of the contemporary African life criticized. In this case, Ama Ata Aidoo criticizes the disorganization of social life and the disintegration and erosion of traditional values in the post-colonial Africa to expose their impacts on the contemporary African woman. According to Emmanuel Obiechina:

The West African novel tends to show individual characters not through their private psychological experiences but through community or social life; and [to portray] activities of a collective or general nature with individual sentiments; and actions deriving force and logic from those of the community (Obiechina 36)

The best way to describe the domestication or indigenization of the African novel is to recognize the disparity between the rural and the urban African novel.

Theoretical Framework

Using the sociological critical framework qualified by the feminist literary theory and practice, this study explores Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story* as an urban African novel, based on Obiechina's view-point which states:

The disorganization of social life within the urban situation, especially the disintegration of traditional values, before there is time for them to be replaced by new ones, has left people at the mercy of social and economic forces (Obiechina 116).

This paper attempts to analyse Aidoo's *Changes* as an urban African novel against the back-drop of a disorganized social life and disintegrated traditional values within the urban environment of Accra, Ghana – and by implication the post-colonial Africa. The study also examines how Ama Ata Aidoo, in the novel, *Changes*, extrapolating from Ghana, artistically explores this disorganization of social life and the disintegration and erosion of traditional values in the post-colonial Africa to expose their impact on the contemporary African woman.

Analysis of *Changes* as an Urban African Novel

Aidoo's *Changes* is an urban novel because most of the episodes like Esi and Ali's erotic relationship, Esi and Oko's and Opokuya and Kubi's marital lives are situated in the city. However, part of the action flows once in a while to the rural area, like Esi's consultation with her mother and grandmother in the village to seek their opinion whether or not to get married to Ali Kondey. Other instances when the influences and narratives flow from the town to the countryside include: when Ali goes with his Deputy Manager to see Esi's parents; when he goes to his own relations to ask them to accompany him to see Esi's people, and later when he goes with Esi for their traditional marriage.

Most of the principal characters in the novel are bureaucrats. For instance, Esi the protagonist is a top civil servant and head of the Federal Unit for Urban Statistics. Ali Kondey who later becomes Esi's lover is the Managing Director of Linga, a travel agency that books flights for Esi and her colleagues whenever they travel abroad on duty. Oko Esi's first husband is a school headmaster. Kubi is a senior civil servant or a professional surveyor; while his wife, Opokuya, is a nurse in the General Hospital. As top civil servants, Esi and Kubi are each allocated a car and a house. Kubi, one of the African elite who have replaced the colonizers has his official quarters at the Sweet Breeze Hill, a Government Reservation Area and a typical western urban settlement which was first inhabited by early white colonizers or administrators who were sent "to administer the territories on behalf of their Royal Majesties and generally civilize the natives" (Aidoo 16). The words in quotation-marks represent the white colonizers' mentality and point of view, insinuating that Africans were primitive and without an indigenous culture before the arrival of the colonizers. This shows that Aidoo is satirical of the white colonialists.

Like Achebe, Ama Ata Aidoo intends through this novel to teach her audience that Africa, before colonization, was a viable and cohesive entity. This is most obvious in her representation of the wisdom of women like Esi's mother and grandmother, and the intelligence endowed upon Mma Danjuma, Ali Kendey's auntie who brings him up after his mother's death, and who initiates the idea that he should undergo western education. The endowment of female African characters with such wisdom is noteworthy. This shows that Aidoo is writing with feminist consciousness. African women, initially doubly oppressed - first by indigenous patriarchy and sexism, and then by colonialism - are now depicted by Aidoo as wise and humane.

To corroborate the fact that the setting of *Changes* is urban, there are magnificent edifices such as the Hotel Twentieth Century, the General Hospital where Opokuya works, the government ministries where Esi and Kubi have their offices. There is electricity in the Hotel Twentieth Century for use by "more deserving members of society" (Aidoo 43). Aidoo's sarcasm of the authorities for not providing social amenities for the poor is

Exploitation of the Urban African Novel for Women's Liberation

note-worthy in the reference of the urban elite as stated above. Such users of hotel lobbies include female characters as Mrs Esi Sekyi and her friend, Mrs. Opokuya Dakwa. It is only urbanization that can liberate the contemporary woman enough to enable her to relax in a hotel lobby. She would ordinarily be inhibited by the indigenous traditional African culture. As earlier stated, Aidoo indicts the African post/neo colonial authorities, successors of the white colonizers for their insensitivity to their fellow Africans, and their neglect of the urban proletariat and rural poor by depriving them of electricity and other amenities. The third-person omniscient editorial narrator adds:

But the nearby fishing village did not have electricity. In fact, all that the fishing community knew of that facility were the huge pylons that stood in their vegetable patches, and the massive cables passing over the roofs of their homes (43).

The juxtaposition of the well-built western urban settlement with its bright lights side by side the slum-like nearby fishing village with no electricity is satirical of the hegemony of the super-structure of the society. The neo-colonial African elite and the authorities are also indicted for the lack of maintenance of most of the facilities such as telephones which are non-functional.

Just as Aidoo would prefer better treatment of the people on the lower rung of the social structure, so also would she want a fairer treatment of women by the society. For instance, Ali Kondey's initial insensitivity to Fusena his first wife is a case in point. Whereas Ali does not encourage Fusena to undergo a university education while they are abroad, he informs her later on their return to Africa that he wants to take Esi, a university graduate and Christian as his second wife. All such criticisms of the society corroborate the fact that the novel, *Changes* is an African novel of commitment with strong feminist tendencies.

Esi and Ali's relationship powerfully brings into focus western culture contact through urbanization and culture conflict with their different indigenous African values. Ama Ata Aidoo consciously compares and contrasts the urbanized and rural cultures in relation to man/ woman or Ali and Esi's relationship, thus:

The relationship between them soon became what could have been described as steady. If it had been in the village and within strictly traditional settings, this was the point where some of her fathers would have marched on Ali to ask him what his intentions were. In the city, it only meant that Ali could take her out to dinners and such (74).

For some time Esi serves as Ali's concubine – a situation which is against the traditional African culture, but which is very liberating for Esi as a result of

urbanization. For instance, Ali would leave home and pretend that he is travelling abroad for two weeks to a place like Las Palmas, but would end up spending the time with Esi. He would instead send his deputy manager to the meeting. Esi's reason for accepting Ali reveals cultural conflict. She is satisfied with just having an affair with Ali and staying permanently as his mistress, whereas the indigenous traditional African culture would have insisted on marriage. Ali and Esi's romantic and erotic love affair is another evidence of western culture contact which seems to be approved of by Aidoo because it enables the woman to enjoy coitus without shame or inhibition. Esi's contempt of Oko's approach to erotic love or sexuality which she tags "marital rape" is as a result of her western cultural contact which now conflicts with the indigenous African cultural approach to sexual or erotic love, or Oko's attitude of male superiority towards a wife, especially during coitus. Urbanization allows Esi to develop her own individual interest or self-realization which now overrides or subsumes that of the patriarchal village communality or collectivism.

Even Oko, Esi's first husband, realizes afterwards that perhaps some alternative approach exists which would have been more acceptable to Esi in the sexual encounter, rather than the brute force he uses that Monday morning which has such unfortunate and negative repercussions. For Esi that alternative style of enjoyable love-making is found in Ali who, having been exposed to a French background in a *lycee* or secondary school in Burkina Fasso and a British university education in the United Kingdom, has obviously acquired the western approach to romance and erotic love, as is evident in his relationship with Esi.

Whereas Oko regards Esi as a sex object, only good enough to satisfy his own sexual urge and as a "baby manufacturing machine," conversely, Ali considers Esi as a partner in the sexual game in which Esi's sensual reaction helps to heighten his own sexual arousal. This is really liberating for the contemporary African woman. This is how the third person omniscient narrator corroborates this point:

It is not possible to feel like this on this earth, she [Esi] was thinking. And nothing is as sweet as being inside a woman, he [Ali] was thinking. Then both of them were moaning and moaning and moaning (85).

This western culture contact distinguishes Ali from Oko and makes all the difference to Esi, as is corroborated thus by the third person omniscient narrator:

Esi and Ali reserved their love-making for the comfort of Esi's bed. This nearly always followed an outing, as well as any time he came just to be with her . . . They would immediately fall into each other's arms and hold her welcoming kiss from the front door through the length of the sitting room, through her bedroom

Exploitation of the Urban African Novel for Women's Liberation

and on to her bed. Then for the next hour or so it was just grunts and groans until, quite exhausted, they fell quiet (74).

Aidoo's message here is that coitus or sex can and should be enjoyed by women as well, and not by men alone. This exhibition of sexual freedom by Esi and Ali which is now possible as a result of urbanization is usually inhibited in the traditional African ethos where women are expected not to enjoy sex themselves, but to only satisfy the sexual needs of their husbands and produce babies for them. The use of Esi's home and bed for their love-making reveals Aidoo's feminist tendencies in this novel, and that is liberating for the contemporary African woman. Whereas, traditional African culture would have inhibited Esi from walking about naked even in her bedroom, her urbanized western culture contact allows her the pleasure to do so as we are told by the third person omniscient narrator: "Esi had always enjoyed walking around naked after love-making. For her, this was one of life's very few real luxuries" (74).

According to Aidoo, some of the forces which oftentimes combine or work separately to wreak havoc on the mind of a contemporary African woman like Fusena, Ali Kondeys first wife, to have contempt for her own body include: traditional shyness and contempt for the biology of woman, Islamic suppressive ideas about woman, English Victorian prudery and French hypocrisy imported by the colonizers . . . (75). All these sources of inhibition have been jettisoned by Esi. Rather than allow her personal interest and joy to be stifled or subsumed by village traditional values which inculcate in woman shyness and contempt for her body, she causes her urbanized individualism to dominate such inhibition.

The findings of this study reveal that there is an original revolting spirit inherent in all humans within the self. This is true of women. After Esi's deep consideration of the various forms of injustice experienced by the African woman through her double subjugation by indigenous sexism, gender hierarchy or patriarchy on the one hand, and foreign misogynistic values, imported through colonization on the other, she decides to revolt against the system because she is influenced by urbanization, literacy, the mass media and her world travels. Unlike in the village situation where the world is seen in terms of one's circumscribed milieu which is only accessible through traditional rural or indigenous informal African education, the urbanized Esi who has imbibed analytical education can now appreciate experiences beyond her immediate environment.

Urbanization and cultural contact with western civilization enables Opokuya, though an African woman, to drive a car. In the traditional village environment, the luxury of driving a car would have been the exclusive reserve of the man, and therefore, a taboo to woman due to male hegemony. Perhaps, it is as a result of that traditional sexism and male hegemony resulting in cultural conflict that Kubi often deprives his wife Opokuya the use of his official car whenever she needs it.

Monique O. Ekpong

The generalization about the unfair treatment of women, especially in marital situations, is buttressed by Esi's subjugation by Oko in her first marriage. Owing to inexperience in the modern urbanized approach to erotic love, Oko Esi's first husband, simply mounts on her when he needs sex, without any emotional or psychological preparation of his wife through fun-play. He is anxious to satisfy his own sexual needs and not those of his wife, Esi. This is how his love-making is described by the third-person omniscient editorial narrator:

Oko flung the bed-cloth 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 (9).

Even Aidoos ability to overtly describe this act of coitus is liberating for the contemporary African woman who would ordinarily have been inhibited to do so by traditional values which inculcate in woman shyness and contempt for her body, or by Victorian prudery, that is, shock at the mention of sexual matters, imported during colonization. The use of such words as "pulled her down," "thrashing," "protest," "squeezed," "thrust," "forced," "plunging" "pounding," is remarkable because they convey a sense of brutality or violence from Oko and unwillingness from Esi. It is note-worthy that the repeated squeezing of Esi's breast and thrusting of his tongue into her mouth, though modern modes of fun-play are only mechanical, and not attempts to positively arouse Esi or involve her emotionally in the sexual experience. That type of sexual encounter can be contrasted with Ali's gentle and more considerate approach which is described as follows by the third-person omniscient editorial narrator:

Ali, Ali, Esi cried his name again, this time in a whisper. He nearly started to snore and the thought amused him so much he himself began to laugh. "Oh you," exclaimed Esi, coming to sit by him. He tried to pull her down to him. She resisted firmly but unaggressively. He released her, and sat up (76).

Even Oko's approach cannot be described as completely African. It is a selfish attitude developed by husbands in urban centres where communal values have been eroded and where there is no censorship of husbands' sexual behaviour by village elders, for instance. It is no wonder then that Esi anticipates writing an academic conference paper on "The Prevalence of Marital Rape in the Urban African Environment" (11). There is evidence of western or urbanized cultural conflict when Esi refers to Oko's sisters' children as their daughter's, Ogyaanowa's, cousins. This

Exploitation of the Urban African Novel for Women's Liberation

prompts the following remark and rhetoric question from her mother-in-law, Oko's mother:

You know that in our custom, there is nothing like that. Oko's sisters' children are Ogyaanowa's sisters and brothers. Are we Europeans that we would want to show divisions among kin (68)?

Ogyaanowa's loneliness in her mother's bungalow is as a result of urbanization, colonization and western education which give a woman like case Esi the right to an official residence, isolated from neighbours and other people. The child's loneliness is in conflict with the traditional African culture which allows for extended family members to live with their relations and validates the custody of a child by her grandmother, like Ogyaanowa is. At her grand-mother's, "there were lots of other people nearer her own age for her to play with" (68). Extolling the extended family system Aidoo states:

Esi didn't want to admit that the arrangement suited all (the) parties concerned. But it did. Just like any mother, she found it difficult to accept that her child could be happy in any environment other than the one she had created. How-ever, the truth of the matter was that if Ogyaanowa had been still at the bungalow, she would have felt at least a little funny, bringing in Ali so soon after virtually throwing Oko out (69).

Whereas Esi simply needs a gallant young man like Ali for fun and company, her mother wants her to be properly married as is expected of every woman in the traditional African culture. Esi suspects that although her mother may not approve of her being someone's second wife, she may prefer that to nothing.

Esi is prepared to marry Ali because, according to her, "Ali is wonderful. And so understanding of the kind of woman I am" (94). Ali's understanding reveals, according to Gay Wilentz, the anticipated growing consciousness of the society concerning women's possibilities and capabilities (Wilentz 266). Opokuya consents to attending the post-marriage party without Kubi, but nicely turns down accompanying Esi to the village for the traditional marriage because she does not approve of Esi's divorce of Oko and marriage to Ali as his second wife. Instead of responding whether she thinks Esi should have remained married to Oko, Opokuya avoids that question and rather asks Esi what her mother thinks. Esi replies: "My mother thinks that with all the education I've had, I should have everything better than she has . . . You see with her, it's a question of one having my own husband" (95). Opokuya's objection to the second marriage is that the rules of polygamy have not been adhered to. Whereas Fusena, Ali's first wife's consent should have been sort by Ali, Esi confesses to Opokuya that she has never met Fusena and she cannot imagine discussing Ali with her as a co-wife.

All these facts add up to prove that *Changes* fulfils the requirements of an urban novel. The psychological disposition of the characters like Esi and Opokuya exhibit the mentality of urban or city dwellers, revealing some culture contact and culture conflict. Even though Opokuya's thought tends to coincide with that of Esi's mother concerning the disapproval of Esi's marriage to Ali, Opokuya still pretends some consent to coincide with her role as a town-dweller.

Ama Ata Aidoo the novelist exploits Opokuya's visit to Esi to satirize the imbalance between African trade with the Western world. Opokuya drives into Esi's compound as Ali is driving out. Opokuya marvels at Esi's engagement ring and lots of gifts from Ali. Through the trifles or "ticky-tackies" that make-up Esi's gifts, Aidoo ridicules African countries for the trade imbalance and the acceptance of junk consumer-goods from Asia and the western continents. Ironically, whereas the Royal Majesties of the colonizers receive rich African resources, Esi receives trifles from other continents that trade with Africa. Satirically dramatizing how the royal majesty of the country of the colonizers feels when she receives the rich resources looted from the colonized territories, Esi states:

I must confess that at this moment I feel very much like an empress receiving tribute from an over-anxious warlord' and Opokuya replies: Well, enjoy them, your Royal Majesty (94).

The peculiarities of thought, action and feelings in the urban novel approximate to the bureaucratic, commercial, industrial and individualistic urban situation. All the same, Ali and Esi's visit to the village is a good example of how the narrative flows once in a while from the town to the countryside.

In accordance with a typical African novel, *Changes* tends to depict individual characters like Esi and Opokuya not through their private psychological experiences but through community or social life; and to portray activities of a collective or general nature with individual sentiments and actions, deriving force and logic from those of the community. That is why Opokuya who appears to be more knowledgeable than Esi concerning the indigenous traditional ways of life states:

In a traditional situation, it is not possible for a man to consider taking a second wife without the first wife's consent. In fact it is the wife who gives the new woman a thorough check-over right at the beginning of the affair. And her stamp of approval is a definite requirement if anything is to become of the new relationship (97).

Opokuya continues:

In a polygamous situation, or rather in the traditional environment in which polygamous marriages flourished, happiness like most of

Exploitation of the Urban African Novel for Women's Liberation

the good things of this life, was not a two person enterprise. It was the business of all parties concerned. And in this case, it should have included the first wife of Ali whom Esi had not even met (98).

This corroborates the fact that the indigenous African values cherished humaneness which has been jettisoned by urbanization and western values.

Since change is constant in a typical African novel like *Changes*, the protagonist Esi is not represented principally through her private psychological experiences, but through community or social life. That is why she asks her friend Opokuya: "Why is life so hard on the professional African woman" (50)? Her friend, realizing that the effect of social injustice is not only on the professional African woman but also on all contemporary African women, retorts with the question: "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" (50)? "I think life is just hard on women", Esi agrees, trying to calm Opokuya down" (51). Here again *Changes* fulfils its role as a typical African novel or a piece of literature of commitment by criticizing the ills of the society and revealing their negative impact on the contemporary African woman.

Like a good example of literature of commitment, referred to in French as *la litterature engage*, *Changes* explores the problems of society. The novelist, Ama Ata Aidoo, indicates the social reforms she would want to see through the aspects of the contemporary African life criticized. As Opokuya says that Esi is brave to want to try an alternative life-style in urbanized polygamy, the characters tend to demonstrate Aidoo's own approval of alternative life-styles for the contemporary African woman. Esi is ready to try urbanized polygamy because even though she was formerly accused of lacking passion, especially for her first husband Oko, she now is very happy with Ali. She complains that monogamy is very stifling, but Opokuya retorts saying: "I suspect you mean marriage" (98). That appears to be the novelist's Ama Ata Aidoo's stance that each woman's life should not be stiflingly regimented or inhibited by socio-cultural norms as is the case in marriage. Esi is prepared to experience an alternative life-style. She is not prepared to be tied down permanently to a regimented life as a wife and mother in a monogamous marriage, or as a first or privileged wife in a polygamous marriage, or as a divorcee, or a single woman or permanently as a second wife in a polygamous marriage. Esi has tried nearly all of these positions. In the end she accepts her situation as linked with a man, Ali, a one-time husband whom she allows to continue to satisfy her sexual and emotional needs. However, she remains free enough to pursue her career vigorously. This is in consonance with the views of Grace Okereke who states that "African feminism is not separatist. Rather it is disposed to man as a sex, and marriage, not as the sole choice and ultimate ambition of every

woman, but as one of the alternative choices for the contemporary African woman” (Okereke 105).

African feminism, like womanism, upholds a close relationship between African men and women for their mutual benefit. Esi is allowed to make mistakes and learn from them if possible, the way a man like Ali does. She is not allowed to remain permanently so restricted, inhibited or protected by traditional values or societal norms that she does not have first-hand experience of most aspects of life like the traditional African woman. Even Fusena who is depicted as such in her early life changes later and becomes a trader on her returns to Africa when she gets Ali her husband to buy her the biggest kiosk in Accra. It is this alteration of life-style that Ama Ata Aidoo envisions and advocates for all contemporary African women so that they may participate actively in nation-building and the decolonization process just as their fore-mothers contributed their quota in the family and the wider society in the pre-colonial era.

CONCLUSION

Changes: A Love Story is an urban novel which is exploited by the novelist Ama Ata Aidoo for women’s liberation because most of the episodes are situated in the city. Aidoo artistically explores the disorganization of social life and the disintegration of traditional values in an urban environment in the post-colonial Africa to expose their impact on the contemporary African woman. The psychological disposition of characters such as Esi, Ali, Oko and Opokuya exhibit the mentality of urban or city dwellers, revealing some western culture contact and culture conflict with the traditional African ethos. For characters like Esi and Opokuya who originated from the country-side and migrated to the urban centre, the non-traditional element dominates the rural and traditional. The peculiarities of thought, action and feelings of most of the characters in this novel *Changes* approximate to the bureaucratic, commercial, industrial and individualistic urban situation. All the same, part of the action, the influence, and narrative do flow, once in a while, from the town to the countryside like Esi and Ali’s visits to Esi’s relations or Musa Musa’s visit to his sister Mma Danjuma. This proves that *Changes: A Love Story* is an urban novel.

On the other hand, since this novel reflects features which belong to both the oral and the literary traditions, criticizes social ills, and tends to depict individual characters not through their private psychological experiences but through community or social life, and to portray activities of a collective or general nature with individual sentiments, it can be concluded that Aidoo’s *Changes* is indeed an African novel. The blending of the oral and literary traditions does not only give the novel its texture and distinctive

Exploitation of the Urban African Novel for Women's Liberation

local colour, but also injects a truly African sensibility and flavour into it as an African novel.

To corroborate the fact that this novel explores urbanization to expose its impact on the contemporary African woman for her liberation, Aidoo exploits the disorganization of social life and the disintegration and erosion of traditional values in the city to the advantage of the contemporary African woman. Esi enjoys coitus with Ali without shame or inhibition as would have been the case in a completely traditional rural setting. Their love affair reveals the liberating effect of urbanization on a woman like Esi. This seems to be approved of by the novelist Aidoo because it enables the woman to assert herself and feel liberated. Esi's reason for accepting Ali demonstrates her independence and autonomy. She is satisfied with just having an affair with Ali and staying permanently as his mistress, whereas the indigenous traditional African culture would have preferred marriage. Esi abhors Oko's crude approach to erotic love or sexuality which she tags "marital rape" and Oko's attitude of male superiority towards a wife. Urbanization allows Esi to strive for self-fulfilment and self-actualization which now override or subsume village collectivism or communality. These findings corroborate the fact that *Changes* is indeed an urban African novel and that urbanization is exploited in this African novel for the enhancement of women's liberation.

WORKS CITED

- Achebe, Chinua (1966). *A Man of the People*. London: Heinemann.
- (1960). *No Longer at Ease*. London: Heinemann.
- (1958). *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann.
- (1975). *Thoughts on the African Novel*. *Morning Yet on Creation Day*. London: Heinemann, 49 - 54.
- Ada Uzoamaka Azodo, and Gray Wilentz (1999). *Emerging Perspectives on Ama Ata Aidoo*. Trenton: Africa World.
- Aidoo, Ama Ata (1993). *Changes: A Love Story*. New York: The Feminist Press.
- Obiechina, Emmanuel (1975). *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Okereke, Grace (1991). *The Independent Woman in Selected Novels of Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, Mariama Ba and Zainab Alkali*. Dissertation. University of Calabar, Nigeria.
- Shroder, Maurice Z. (1967). *The Novel as a Genre. The Theory of the Novel*. Ed. Philip Stevick. London: Collier Macmillan, 1967. 14 - 22.
- Wilentz, Gay (1999). *African Woman's Domain: Demarcating Political Space in Nwapa*.
- Sutherland and Aidoo (1999). *Emerging Perspectives on Ama Ata Aidoo*. Eds. Ada U. Azodo and Gay Wilentz. Trenton: Africa World.