



Female Sexuality in Contemporary African Literature: From Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* to Aidoo's *Changes*

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ABSTRACT

Prior to the twenty-first century, sexuality was often shrouded in customary beliefs and practices that sought to make women ashamed of their sexuality. Female sexuality here is conceived in terms of, first, the woman's awareness of her sexual desire and her striving to satisfy it. Second, as an active and independent personality, she has to recognize her potentialities and identify with her chosen sexual orientation. This study develops from the premise that female sexuality is a theme that has received minimal critical and creative attention in African literature, implying that an important aspect of womanhood has been overlooked or deliberately ignored in much of African literature. Thus, this paper examines the treatment of female sexuality by Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* and Ama Ata Aidoo in *Changes: A Love Story* as a way of establishing the viability or otherwise of this theme in the 21st century African literature.

INTRODUCTION

One's sexuality derives largely from two major factors: first, one's gender as either male or female: second, one's consciousness of what characterizes that gender, how the society regards it, what is expected of it and how it perceives itself. By implication, maleness and femaleness are markedly different; they send out different impressions and are perceived differently. These are natural principles that are recognized globally. Female sexuality has become a topical issue in contemporary gender discourse in which the widespread awareness among women has compelled them to revisit established ethos and examine the credibility and validity of these ethos in the twenty-first century.

Sexual behaviour refers to the sexual acts that people engage in. These acts, according to Pepper Schwartz and Virginia Rutter, involve not only petting and intercourse but also seduction and courtship. Sexual behaviour involves the things that people do alone for pleasure and stimulation and the

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things that they do with other people. Sexual desire is the motivation to engage in sexual acts. A person's sexuality consists of both behaviour and desire. (448-449) These issues were hitherto not discussed at all, or wherever they were discussed, that was done in very hush-tones, and perhaps where women themselves were not represented. Thus, female sexuality was something to be despised and condemned, and any woman who showed an interest in her sexuality was symbolically posing an affront to manhood and had to be redeemed by both men, and in many cases, fellow women. Redemption here is construed as the woman changing her image from the self-conscious, sexually-active and vivacious person to the docile, passive and easily-manipulable one.

However, some specific cultural factors determine the constituents of maleness and femaleness in different regions. In most African cultures, maleness is regarded as superior to femaleness. It is also highly respected and preferred to femaleness. These notions have resulted in women being regarded with disdain by men, and forced into second-class status in the society. To ensure and sustain the second-class status of women in relation to men, several myths have been evolved that are generally accepted and upheld. These vary from one culture to another. Different cultures also evolve female stereotypes that seek to make women believe that their bodies belong to the men: before marriage, they belong to their fathers; at marriage, they belong to their husbands; at widowhood, they are expected to belong to designated male relations of their deceased husbands through levitation. These mean that the woman does not at any time have full rights to herself, her body, and, in fact, her mind. The society makes her to feel ashamed of her body to such an extent that she hides it, believing that it is sacrosanct and should not as much as be admired and loved by the owner. Indeed, if a woman shows much interest in her body, she is suspected of having a lover. The society regards her as a sexual being that should be appreciated by the man and that appreciation should not be overtly demonstrated. Rather, the man internalizes it and if he should discuss any aspect of it, he does so with other men, not with the woman concerned, or other women. Sexuality is rapidly becoming divorced from marriage, procreation and the need to perpetuate the lineage. Ada Azodo and Maureen Eke outline the five historical stages of African literature that affect gender and sexuality in Africa, and argue that they roll one into the other, and comprise "tradition; colonization since the 1940s; political independence since the 1960s; neocolonial/post-independence/modern era since the 1970s and including the 1980s, and the post/modern/global era of the 1990s to the present." (19) These are the basic issues on the sexuality of women that are visible in much of African literature, especially in many writings by men and some women.

Pre-21st Century African Literature & Female Sexuality

Prior to the twenty-first century, many literary writers in Africa evaded the discourse of the sexuality of women. The few that did, did so in derogatory

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terms and used it against the woman/women concerned. Cyprian Ekwensi portrays Jagua Nana in the novel by the same title as neither educated, nor interested in education but very fun-loving, and aiming at nothing concrete in life. Her consciousness of her sexuality is aimed at male extortion. She drifts into prostitution for survival until she confronts reality, and begins later in life to pursue legitimate and decent means of livelihood.

In Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and *Idu*, even though both *Efuru* and *Idu* are committed to their husbands, not much of their sexual lives are explored. Rather, Nwapa depicts them as strong-willed, hard-working and courageous women who are also remarkable and successful traders in their communities. It is really in Nwapa's *One is Enough* that the reader is mostly denied the privilege of the details in the sexuality of Amaka. In this novel, Amaka is betrothed three times and is disappointed accordingly: Obi deserts her and marries another woman, Isaac dies in a car crash and Bob is a play-boy whose unseriousness is repugnant to the high sense of value for which Amaka and her family are reputed. He dies also. Yet after she eventually marries Obiora, the ubiquitous problem of childlessness engages them so much that the issue of sexuality seems irrelevant.

In Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*, there are specific points in the plot at which details that would deal with sexuality are not provided. The points are:

- Modou Fall's efforts at youth to make Ramatoulaye his wife
- Modou Fall's relationship with Binetou, who eventually becomes his second wife
- Mawdo Ba's marriage to Aissatou
- Mawdo Ba's marriage to young Nabou; and
- The reference to Ramatoulaye's youth with Daouda Dieng as her first lover.

At these points in the novel, Ba carefully avoids providing the necessary details that would reveal the active love relationships, and the women's roles in them.

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Buchi Emecheta depicts Ona, the only child of Obi Umunna referred to by her father as "priceless jewel." (II) She should not marry, but is free to have men and if luckily she bears a son, the child would take Ona's father's name, so as to rectifying the omission that nature had made in not giving the family a son. Nwokocha Agbadi, a very wealthy local chief, a great wrestler and a gifted orator, marries seven wives and has two mistresses, one of whom is Ona, who refuses to marry him or live with him. In the novel, Emecheta only mentions that Agbadi's other wives suffer sexual neglect because Agbadi's attention is all on Ona. In fact, some people try to find the cause of Agbadi's senior wife's illness, which results in her death:

... it was bad for her morale to hear her husband giving pleasure to another woman in the same courtyard where she slept, and to such a woman who openly treated the man they all worshipped so badly. (21).

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Despite Agbadi's deep affection for Ona, she is described as "a woman who was troublesome and impetuous, who had the audacity to fight with her man before letting him have her: a bad woman." (21) Ona teases and demeans Agbadi sexually. Emecheta's effort to deal with sexuality in *The Joys of Motherhood* is glaring in:

He [Agbadi] found himself rolling towards her, giving her nipples gentle lover's bites, letting his tongue glide down the hollow in the center of her breasts and then back again. He caressed her thigh with his good hand, moving to her small night lappa and fingering her coral waist-beads. Ona gasped and opened her eyes... (20)

The above seems a proper prelude to the description of a full-blown sex act, but Emecheta leaves the reader to merely imagine the rest of the sequence, and that is typical of much of African literature before the twenty-first century.

However, Nawal El Saadawi, perhaps because of her background, orientation and experiences, makes a different portrayal of womanhood in *Woman at Point Zero*. Firdaus is forced by circumstances she cannot control, to become conscious of her sexuality and utilize it to survive in an environment that makes no provision for poor and orphaned children/youth. She consistently argues that her high school certificate, rather than her sexuality should enable her to secure a job, but Bayoumi demonstrates to her that her sexuality is more valuable to him:

He would come back in the middle of the night, pull the cover away from me, slap my face, and then bear down on me with all his weight. I kept my eyes closed and abandoned my body ... feeling nothing. (50).

Firdaus later meets Sharifa, who introduces her to self-consciousness and how to evaluate her sexuality as a woman and utilize it maximally. In managing Firdaus, Sharifa becomes enriched and Firdaus questions the justification of that arrangement. She protests against being managed by selfish patrons who exploit her sexuality for their gains. She abandons Sharifa, and is shortly confronted by Marzouk, the pimp who imposes himself on her:

Every prostitute has a pimp to protect her from other pimps, and from the police ... There isn't a woman on earth who can protect herself ... (92)

Firdaus is opposed to Marzouk's argument above. She revolts against him and in the heat of their disagreement, she murders him. She is determined to sustain her concept of self dignity even as she is in poverty. She meets an Arab Prince, who gives her three thousand piaster, but she tears up the money,

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and thus symbolically teas up the veil that blurred her vision from reality. Through her portrayal of Firdaus, El Saadawi opens up a new mode of creative writing for African writers, particularly (Arab) women. This mode reveals the sexual potentialities of women and how each woman may manage hers within her context. Evidently, many authors, especially women, who have portrayed female sexuality, are actually filling a vital gap in contemporary African literature.

Female Sexuality in *Things Fall Apart* & *Changes*

At certain points in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the mention of female sexuality has been carefully avoided. The missing parts are some of the untold stories identified by Dan Izevbaye in:

Many of the brief, uncompleted stories [in *Things Fall Apart*] are incidental to the main theme, and readers educated in literary traditions where the causal element is a strong factor of plot may even see these incidental and digressive elements as something of a narrative excess. I see in the presence of these anecdotes a creative choice between the silence of paths taken and the culturally productive act of letting a thousand flowers bloom. (15-16)

Prominently, while reflecting on how Ekwefi gets to become Okonkwo's wife, the omniscient narrator in the novel states that she first married Anene because Okonkwo was then unable to pay her bride wealth and marry her. And then:

Two years after her marriage to Anene she could bear it no longer and she ran away to Okonkwo. It had been in the morning. ... she was going to the stream to fetch water. Okonkwo's house was on the way to the stream. She went in and knocked at his door and he came out. Even in those days he was not a man of many words. He just carried her into his bed and in the darkness began to feel around her waist for the loose end of her cloth. (109)

The above exposition is built up carefully to indicate that though married to Anene, Ekwefi admires and wants Okonkwo. On the other hand, Okonkwo does not resist her when she offers herself to him, yet the reader is left to resolve all the subsequent suggestive events, which the narrator leaves out by the abrupt end of the reunion of Ekwefi and Okonkwo. Significantly, Ekwefi becomes Okonkwo's wife from that point in the novel. She initiates a process of redefinition of self by abandoning her marriage to Anene and co-habiting with Okonkwo. According to Izevbaye, Achebe does not disclose the issues that are unsatisfactory in Ekwefi's marriage to Anene, which make her leave the marriage after two years. Izevbaye notes that the story about Anene ends suddenly "... although it is unlikely that *in reality* Anene would have lost his

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wife and forfeited his bride-price without saying a word of raising a finger.” (14) [Izevbaye’s emphasis]

The narrator in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* does not mention what Okonkwo admires about Ekwefi, which makes him take her in spite of the fact that she is Anene’s wife. Indeed, Okonkwo’s patience with Ekwefi in the marriage may be due to what makes her special to him, which the novel fails to disclose. She is bold enough to bang on Okonkwo’s door to wake him early in the morning: “Of his three wives Ekwefi was the only one who would have the audacity to bang on his door.” (75-76) It is not usual for anybody (definitely not a woman) to disturb Okonkwo’s sleep. That she, among Okonkwo’s three wives can “bang on his door early in the morning,” is significant, yet the space that Achebe allows her is very limited and she is not empowered to realize herself beyond the strict confines that tradition permits. Ekwefi’s effrontery and Okonkwo’s condonment of it surely have implications that the narrator has carefully denied readers of. The relationship between Okonkwo and Ekwefi is the only one that attempts to portray sexuality in the novel, yet much of it is presented covertly rather than overtly

Unlike Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Changes* serves as a means of presenting a full-rounded women, and the omniscient narrator is determined to bare the woman’s nature and reactions to events around her. Though published in 1991, this novel foreshadows the trend and prepares the framework for African literature in the 21st century. Aidoo’s *Changes* is the story of Esi Sekyi, an officer in the Department of Urban Statistics. She is an attractive, vivacious and independent-minded lady, married to Oko and for whom she has a daughter, Ogyaanowa. Esi determines her priorities: she refuses to have another child after Ogyaanowa, implying that she is in control of, and has full rights to her sexual and procreative choices. By refusing to have another child, her values are at variance with her mother’s and grandmother’s. Yet by romanticizing motherhood, Oko as well as Esi’s mother and grandmother seem to imply as Bell Hooks asserts in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* that motherhood is a woman’s truest vocation, that women who do neither mother (or mother inadequately), whose lives may be focused more exclusively on a career, creative work, or political work, are missing out, are doomed to live emotionally unfulfilled lives. (137) But Esi invalidates this notion. She devotes her paramount interest to her career, because through her job, she has traveled extensively – to Geneva, Dakar, Rome, Lagos, Lusaka, etc.

On the other hand, her husband, Oko, a teacher in a co-educational school, loves Esi, wants to have more time with her, but she spends more of her time on her job and really gives him minimal affection. Frustrated from not enjoying his wife’s love and attention, and ashamed of his friends’ taunts, Oko begins to feel insecure. As Clenora Hudson-Weems observes, “insecurity makes him (as the man) fear that the woman may dictate the nature of the relationship and take control of its destiny.” (91-92) In reaction, Oko forces himself on Esi as she is preparing for work, and makes love to her,

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an act that Esi describes as “marital rape,” (II) which causes her to get the marriage dissolved. Esi’s decision to dissolve their marriage is her way of resisting sexism and domination. Since sexism delegates to women the task of creating and sustaining a home environment, Bell Hooks notes in *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* that “it has been primarily the responsibility of black women to construct domestic households as spaces of care and nurturance in the face of the brutal harsh reality of ... sexist domination.” (42) Thus, to create a secure space for herself, Esi vehemently resists sexism, which Oko signifies. Oko moves from Accra to his new posting as school head in a new location, and their daughter, Ogyaanowa is made to stay with Oko’s mother, while Esi remains in the house since it is her official residence. Esi’s economic empowerment and sense of profound independence embolden her to take the kinds of decisions that she does.

As Esi begins a new phase of life, still with the determination to live as she desires, she meets and falls in love with Ali Kondey, the managing director of a travel agency, Linga Hide Airways. It is within the context of Esi’s relationship with Ali that Aidoo captures female sexuality:

Esi and Ali reserved their love-making for the comfort of Esi’s bed.... 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 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)

The narrator depicts Esi’s inclination to walk naked around the house after love-making, regarding her nudity as “one of life’s very few real luxuries.” (74) Esi’s uniqueness derives from her boldness and freedom to be at ease with her body, unlike many women who are weighed down by:

Traditional shyness and contempt for the biology of women; Islamic suppressive ideas about women, English Victorian prudery and French hypocrisy imported by the colonizers... (75)

Esi’s sense of independence makes her different from many other women who behaved as if the world was full of awful things – beginning with their bodies. Ali contrasts Esi with Fusena, his wife, who can never walk naked in the house. Though Esi’s mother and grandmother are opposed to her marriage to Ali because Ali is a Muslim and already married, Esi does not relent in her resolve to live her life the way she feels fit. Her grandmother states:

You are asking me whether you should marry this Ali of yours – who already has got a wife and become one of his wives? Leave one man, marry another, what is the difference? ... You had a husband of your own whom you have just left because you say he demanded too much of you and your time. But ... doesn’t a woman’s time belong to a man? (109)

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Esi has a different opinion from her grandmother's. She goes ahead and receives Ali. Since Ali's job requires his travel to different parts of the world, he buys Esi many gifts:

... gold bangles from the Gulf states and succulent dates from Algeria (or was it Tunisia?) ... huge slabs of chocolates from Switzerland, and gleaming copper things from Zambia and Zimbabwe ... shimmering silk from the People's Republic of China, the Koreas and Thailand ... gorgeous *adires* from Nigeria, as well as other fabrics from Mali, Sierra Leone and the Gambia ... From the Soviet Union, Ali brought Esi some very special amber-inlaid wrought iron jewellery... (157)

From the numerous gifts that Ali gives Esi, she easily imagines many parts of the world. Conversely, she sees less of Ali because of Ali's busy schedule at work and his commitment to his family. Esi refuses to accept the reality of her not having enough of him. Though she is confident of his love for her, she insists "that his fashion of loving had proved quite inadequate" for her (165). She declares that theirs is no marriage because if this is what marriage is about, then she prefers not to have it. The finality of Esi's tone and her actual termination of her marriage to Ali negate her grandmother's arguments: ... remember a man always gained in stature through any way he chose to associate with a woman. And that included adultery. Especially adultery. Esi, a woman has always been diminished in her association with a man. 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. (109-110)

Evidently, Esi's education and exposure constitute an impetus for her to revolt against the obnoxious concept of a good woman as evolved by the society. She reverses the notion that a woman should acquiesce to her destruction.

Female Sexuality and Contemporary African Literature

Aidoo's characterization of Esi in *Changes* reveals not just a woman who is made different by education and the drive to pursue her career successfully, but also a woman for the future in Africa. Her tenacity helps her surmount those strapping of tradition and religion that held down the uneducated and some educated women before her – Efuru in Nwapa's *Efuru*, Idu in Nwapa's *Idu*, Nnu Ego in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, Jagua Nana in Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana*, Firdaus in El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, Ramatoulaye in Ba's *So Long a Letter* and very significantly, the women in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Esi is clearly a decisive personality. By terminating her two marriages, Esi demonstrates that an unpleasant marriage "is no longer inherently tragic for women." (179) She therefore, constructs a new paradigm for the viewing and appreciation of modern womanhood in

Africa. As stated by Tuzyline Jita Allan, Aidoo's *Changes* "pulses with an irrepressible pioneering spirit, clearing the ground for a new tradition of women's writing in Africa. It is a record of the changing circumstances of women's lives in contemporary Africa, but more importantly, it transcends realistic significance and constructs a psychological blueprint for female portraiture." (179) Bell Hooks adds in *Feminism is for Everybody that* female sexual freedom requires dependable, safe birth control. Without it females cannot exercise full control of the outcome of sexual activity. But female sexual freedom also requires knowledge of one's body, an understanding of the meaning of sexual integrity. (86) Contemporary African literature should indicate that there must be a point at which a woman comes to consciousness of what she wants, of what is good for her, regardless of what the society stipulates (if that is against the interests of womanhood). For instance, as Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi contends, it is wrong for women to let their husbands get away with marital rape just because they want to keep the men, and by so doing subscribe to sexual roles. (54) The above notions on female sexuality call for hard work among women, as Esi indicates, so as to ensure self-empowerment. Contemporary writers, especially female, owe women that duty. Within this context may be categorized the writings by Promise Okeke, Yvonne Vera, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and others.

CONCLUSION

By making obvious in *Changes* that women's self-consciousness, which motivates self-assertiveness, also involves female sexuality, Ama Ata Aidoo is rewriting the woman's story, recreating womanhood and reinventing the female sex and beauty stereotypes. This study does not only reveal a refreshing vista of African literature that should be explored by contemporary writers and critics, it also highlights the progression in the depiction of African womanhood in African literature. The women in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and in several other writings are mostly illiterates, and know next to nothing about self-consciousness, self-pride and empowerment. Even in their illiteracy, they show no strength, but exist as shadows, while the men tower prominently in every area of life. These really comprise a figment of the colonial reality. Significantly, Aidoo presents two sets of women in *Changes*: first, Esi's illiterate and rural mother and grandmother; second, the educated and urbanized Esi and her friend, Opokuya, one, a data analyst and the other, a double-qualified and experienced nurse. This paper urges contemporary female writers to transcend the evasiveness that characterizes the portrayal of womanhood in the twentieth century, and present a total woman who is a properly empowered to take her decisions. Herein lies the challenges that Aidoo poses to contemporary writers, especially African female writers.

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