



Women' s quest for empowerment in Amma Ata Aidoo's changes and Tsitsi Dangarembga' s nervous conditions

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Abstract

This article is about women's quest for empowerment in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes* and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. Anchored on feminist analytical approach, the study examines how women's writings counterbalance and defy the social norms in African context. The patriarchal system in Africa oppresses women through determined roles which cast women as weak and men are strong. Patriarchy subjugates women in different ways and deprives them from their right and freedom. In addition, this work shows the way Ama Ata Aidoo's and Tsitsi Dangarembga's reveal in their novels women's daily quest for empowerment and freedom in man-oriented society.

Keywords : gender, patriarchy, women, quest, empowerment, sexual identity

Résumé

Ce travail traite de la quête de l'autonomisation des femmes dans *Changes* d'Ama Ata Aidoo et *Nervous Conditions* de Tsitsi Dangarembga. Basé sur une approche féministe, l'étude examine la manière dont les écrits des femmes africaines contrebalancent et défient les normes sociales en Afrique. En effet, le système patriarcal en Afrique oppresse les femmes et les détermine comme des êtres faibles pendant qu'il détermine les hommes comme des êtres forts. Le système patriarcal oppresse les femmes de différentes manières et les prive de leur droit et de leur liberté. Par ailleurs, ce présent travail montre la manière dont Ama Ata Aidoo et Tsitsi Dangarembga décrivent la recherche quotidienne du pouvoir et de la liberté des femmes dans une société patriarcale.

Mots Clés : genre, patriarcat, femmes, quête, autonomisation, identité sexuelle



Introduction

African women's quest for emancipation and empowerment has historical roots in precolonial and anticolonial resistance. But, organized feminist movements for women's activism and empowerment became particularly prominent from the 1970s onward developing distinctive African theoretical and political perspectives. During this period, the struggle for women's emancipation and empowerment has gained unprecedented visibility with the anchorage of feminist movements led by scholars such as Flora Nwapa, Butchi Emacheta and Ama Ata Aidoo, just to name a few. The issue of women's empowerment has become a major concern central to numerous university workshops, seminars and international conferences as well as a key theme for scholars in the literary landscape. Many scholars have attempted to define this concept of empowerment. For C. E. Czuba (1999, p. 57), "empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain over their own lives. It fosters power in people, for use in their own lives, their communities, and their society, by enabling them to take action on issues they define as important". U. Koko (1992, p. 2), writes that "Empowerment of women means developing them as more aware individuals, who are politically active, economically productive and independent and are able to make intelligent decisions in matters that affect them".

Among these scholars who have tried to give substance to the notion of women's empowerment are Ama Ata Aidoo and Tsitsi Dangaremba who through their writings, offer a literary representation of the quest for women's

empowerment. Aidoo's *Changes* and Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* depict women's quest for empowerment and self-affirmation and socio-economic independence. Aidoo's *Changes* draws the picture of Esi, a self-assertive and independent female protagonist who opts out of an oppressive marriage and free herself from a demanding husband. Dangarembga's *Nervous* portrays Tambu as a valiant and self-determining female protagonist in quest for education and socio-economic empowerment.

As "women are the subject of feminism" J. Butler (1990, p.3), in the current paper aiming at studying women's quest for empowerment, the analysis will be framed in a feminist analytical approach to promote women's emancipation and socio-economic independence. In doing so, the following question is reformulated to guide the study: how do Aidoo's *Changes* and Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* construct women's quest for empowerment as a struggle for agency, autonomy and emancipation within postcolonial African societies? To address this research question, the study will examine the patriarchal constraints and forms of marginalization experienced by women in the two novels, it will then explore the role of education and economic independence in their quest for empowerment and finally it will analyze the female agency, resistance and the reconstruction of African womanhood.

1. Patriarchal Constraints and the Marginalization of Women

In reading the chosen corpus, social and cultural constraints on female autonomy are poignantly represented. The social, economic and political life is governed by patriarchal laws that hinder the empowerment of women.



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Within these patriarchal laws, a set of gender-based norms relegates the female condition to the background. Observing this gendered conditioning, Adichie (2014, p. 21) opines: “gender as it functions today is a grave injustice”. Based on Adichie’s current critical standpoint on the implementation of gender ideologies in social relations, there is evidence that patriarchal constraints lead to the marginalization of women.

In Patriarchal African society that “gender matters everywhere” (Adichie, 2014, p. 25), attention should be attached to the definition of gender roles. Given the context of pending social realities when it comes to gender roles in the selected narratives of Aidoo and Dangarembga, the female characters are victims of “a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (S. Walby, 1990, p. 21). As such, women are held hostage in a system of “gender apartheid” (A. Pewissi, 2005, p. 19) where their roles are generally restricted to housechores performing, child bearing, family expectations. In this vein, A.Wolpe, O. Quilan and L. Martinez (1997, p. 23) observe that “African women are trapped in traditional roles because men do not take equal responsibility for family care and will not do what they regard as women’s work”.

Both selected novels by Aidoo and Dangarembga mirror social realities of their respective society. They depict the subjugation of women in order to show their difficult situations and raise consciousness about the necessity to fight for their right. In *Nervous Conditions*, the author draws the pictures of different situations in which female characters are reduced to subservience. They perform domestic and farm tasks such as cooking the meal for the family, fetching water every day and working in farm while men are enjoying life at

will as be illustrated here: "He would drink, sweet black tea while he read his books and we went about our chores". (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 9). This excerpt shows the privilege accorded to the men to the detriment of women. From such a socialization deriving from the gender apartheid, Nhamo as a boy enjoys privileges status when addressing his sisters on gender roles in this utterance: "minding children was not a man's duty. (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 9). This passage recalls that there are duties dedicated to man and woman according to the prescribed gender roles. For Nhamo, it is quite normal for his sisters to take care of him by accepting to do whatever he wants. As a narrator, Tambu summarizes their daily occupations as women below:

The thought of my mother working so hard, alone, always distress me, but in the end, I decided to prepare the evening meal so that she would be able to rest when she returned. For I knew that if there was still work to be done when she finished her watering, she would tire herself further to do it. (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 10).

Indeed, from the passage above, it becomes apparent that women are constrained to perform traditional domestic roles in the society. The performance of such traditional and domestic roles leads a feminist critic such as L. Ogundipe (1987, p.130) to state that women "are imprisoned with domestic injustice on behalf of customs has been nothing but a tyrant hidden in every home (...) They have been owned, used and they have to work as horses because of their marginal status". In the same line of argument, M. Kalawole (1988, p. 223) argues that: "generally, African women are presented as a subaltern group in the margin of the society, docile, and accepting the multiple levels of subjugation



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gracefully.” The acceptance of their subservience accounts for their marginalization in the society.

Another patriarchal constraint on the shoulder of women is valued on their child birthing aptitude. I. Amadium (1987, p.191) maintains: “maternity is viewed as sacred in the traditions of all African societies.” This assertion unveils that a woman who fails to accomplish this sacred act happens to be regarded as fake or useless woman. H. Moore (1986, p. 69), corroborates this standpoint by writing that: “Having children signify the productive potential of his household, the successful nature of his marriage, the continuation of lineage”. In *Nervous Conditions*, the character, Lucia is rejected for assuming a childless status in her marriage. Her condition is narrated as follows: “There is nothing of a woman there. She sleeps with anybody and everybody but she hasn’t born a single child yet”. (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 128). As womanhood is determined by maternity in Lucia’s society, failing to achieve that status is a betrayal. So, succeeding in this reproductive duty is a way to accomplish their duty as women in order to receive men’s attention.

Even if childbearing is highly valued in traditional African societies, there is also a high interest paced on male children because of “their economic contribution to family, the supports of parents in old age (...) While daughters are just desire for companionship and help with domestics’ labors” (K. Newland, 1979, p. 177). The preference of children’s sex leads to family dislocation most of the time. In *Changes*, Esi, the female protagonist, has a female child but for her husband and for the expectations of his family, it is not sufficient. The narrator says: “He wanted other children, at least one more... a boy if possible. (Aidoo, 1991, p. 11). The male child is

valuable because of his status as the heir of the family. So, giving birth to girl is a waste of time and energy for Esi's in-laws family. These expectations on women constitute a heavy burden for them as wives and women.

Some other burden on female characters in the selected novels is revealed through the patriarchal dispensation of powers where a set of gender-based norms relegates the female condition to the background. In this realm of political matters, women are excluded and forced to occupy a subaltern position. L. Ogundipe (1987, p.130) is right to state: "Politics is considered the absolute realm of men; women are not considered fit political positions in Africa nation state, through their enthusiasm and campaign work are exploited by their various political parties". From this quotation, it is clear that women are still confined in gender stereotypes which maintain them at the bottom of the society.

In *Nervous Conditions*, women do have not the right to intervene in the decision-making systems even though the decision concern directly their female conditions. To corroborate this idea, let look at the complaint of the female character, Ma' Shingayi when she protests: "They are accusing Lucia. She should be there to defend herself (...) Everything they do is hushed up and covered. Hidden even from us as though we were children" (Dangaremba, 1988, p. 139). This passage is a perfect illustration of women's exclusion from the realm of decision taking. Male characters such as Babamukuru are described as a patriarchal figure who "had plenty of power. Plenty of power, plenty of power. A lot of education. Plenty of everything". (Dangaremba, 1988, p. 50). Babamukuru is the patriarchal authority and head of the family. Enjoying the status of the patriarch, Babamukuru operates with "the principle of patriarchy"



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according to which “male shall dominate female and elder male shall dominate younger” (K. Millet, 1972, p. 33). From the perspectives of patriarchal principles at hand in the chosen corpus, women are devoid of vocal resonance in decision making process. They have to stand up for their rights and struggle for their vocal resonance in social, economic and political affairs of their society.

2. Education, economic independence and the quest for empowerment

In the two novels, the quest for women’s empowerment is built around education which is seen as a pathway to female emancipation, economic autonomy, self-realization, professional identity and the rejection of dependency. Education is the key for women’s freedom and self-fulfillment. School education brought by colonialism, has positively contributed to women’s quest for emancipation and empowerment in African society. H. Chukwuma (2006, p. 1) asserts in this sense that: “We blame colonization as a whip horse but it is colonization that eventually offered the beacon of light of women’s western education and exposure which propelled us to the outer wider world and recognition of the commonality subjugation world-wide.” Chukwuma’s assertion shows the importance of western education in African women’s emancipation.

In the chosen corpus in this research paper, female protagonists take charge of their lives by challenging the social obstacles to tackle gender disparities which justify their subservience. They believe that education is a human right denied to them because of the patriarchal proliferation of gender apartheid. In *Nervous Conditions*, the character Tambu

experiences the injustice of gender apartheid. Her father refuses to allow her to continue her education simply because she is a girl, choosing instead to prioritize her brother's Nhamo's schooling. Her father clarifies his position when postulates: "Can you cook books and feed them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 16). This extract reveals the extent to which girls are neglected and excluded from educational opportunities. Critics such as J. Nfah -Abbenyi (1997, p. 62) observes that:

The fact that she is gendered female excludes her from education to the boy's comparative advantage. Tambudzai's education can be suspended or terminated just because she is a woman, since women's education is thought to be purposeless. Women stay at home and men go to school.

Through this quotation it is clear for the public opinion that women are denied fundamental right as such they have to stand and push back this gendered discrimination. Seeing the importance of education, Tambu refuses to be submitted to such social injustice. She knows that education is fundamental in her social advancement. Regarding all the women in her surrounding Tambu has opted for a change. She refuses to be like her mother who says that "being a woman was a burden because you had to bear children and look after them and the husband" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 16). However, she notices that Maiguru is a woman like her mother but is totally different and seems more comfortable in her status of woman. The narrator describes in these lines: "Maiguru was driven about a car, looked well-kept and fresh, clean all the time. She was altogether a different kind of woman" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 16). Seeing the life enjoyed by Maiguru as independent, and cultivated woman., Tambu understands that this privileged life is due to education.



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Education gives the necessary knowledge to woman to claim for the respect of their fundamental rights. Knowing that education is a path toward freedom and emancipation Tambu declares boldly that “I shall go to school again” (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 17). Going back to school is the only alternative to be like Maiguru who “was not poor and had not been crushed by the weight of womanhood” (Dangarembga, 1988. P. 16). Tambu is depicted as intelligent, hardworking and inquisitive girl who wants to quench her thirst for education in order to escape the pitiful life that her mother undergoes on the homestead. The gender discrimination she undergoes does not deter her in her ambitions. Her determination, perseverance and hard work help her in this noble quest. She raises her voice against the traditional and patriarchal practices that hinder her life when she puts:

Now I began to see that the disappointed events surroundings Babamukuru’ s return were serious consequence of the same general law that always brought my education to an abrupt, predictable end. It was frightening. I did not want my life to be predicted by such improper relation”. (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 38).

She refuses to comply with this traditional gender apartheid detrimental to her school education. Armed with her determination to do good at school she “came first in Sub A and “was top of her class in sub B.” (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 31).

Due to her good performance at school, Tambu has convinced the patriarchal figures of her family to give an opportunity for school education. Indeed, her good school performance combined with the death of Nhamo leads Babamukuru to consider her as a potential candidate to be

given the opportunity to attend school. Babamukuru agrees that: "Tambudzai- must be given the opportunity to do what she can for the family before she goes to her husband's home (...) She must be given the opportunity". (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 56). This decision is the manifestation of her victory and determination. She is triumphant from these restricted role and subordinated place that is reserved to her as girl. At school, Tambu goes from prowess to prowess that convinces Babamukuru to decide that she must receive the finest education in convent. It is a great opportunity as she says "another step upwards in the direction of her freedom" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 186). As seen with the character of Tambu, education is at the core of female self-realization and consciousness raising. It triggers the development of their intellectual potentialities.

The female protagonist, Esi in *Changes* is portrayed as self-accomplished woman as far as education is concerned. Esi has a master degree in statistics. As an educated woman, she raises consciousness about marital rape that prevails in African. She is aware that it is a crime that she cannot accept. As a result, she breaks up this marriage which tends to maintain her in subservience. She put "I could not bear it exclaimed Esi... another husband to sit on my back all twenty hours of the day? The same arguments about a woman's place is? (Aidoo, 1991, p. 56). If Esi is able to take a decision, it is just because she is an educated woman who knows her value. She is aware of her right as woman and the importance of her job. For her, it is impossible to let her dictatorial husband Oko deprives her from her job which is her source of self-fulfillment. In this context, education enables Esi to impose respect and change the situation in her advantage. Seeing Esi and Tambu's achievement, it is worth maintaining that



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education is very important for women's quest for freedom and empowerment be it economic, social and political.

In the narratives under investigation, education triggers women's quest for empowerment and self-realization. And it is achieved through economic autonomy, professional identity and the rejection of dependency. The joy of Lucia when Babamukuru secures a job for her at the girl's hostel translate her yearning for professional identity and rejection of dependency. Babamukuru announces:

I found something for you to do. Not much. A little job. At the girl's hostel. You will help to cook the food there at the hostel... Babamukuru has found me a job. He has found me a job. She knelt in front of Babamukuru energetically clapping her hands. Thank you Samusha, Thank You Chihwa. (Dangarembga, 1988, p.160).

Lucia's expression of joy translates her quench for economic opportunities and professional identity to better enjoy her life. Securing a job will help her to meet her financial obligations, gain autonomy and fully develop her personal development.

In *Changes*, the female character Esi secures a higher professional position. As a professional in the Department of Urban Statistics, her position requires her to undertake official assignments and travel to various parts of the world, such as "Geneva, Addis Abeba, Dakar one half of the year, Rom Lusaka, Lagos the other half for conferences, seminars and workshops" (Aidoo, 1991, p.12). She is portrayed as a successful professional woman who has gained the "opportunity to enter the most prestigious fields of work" (K. Millet, 1970, p. 85). She enjoys a high degree of economic empowerment and independence. Esi's professional identity

and economic empowerment highlight the importance of women in the African society. Esi epitomizes a symbol of women's professional identity, a role model for women's economic empowerment, independence and agency.

3. Female Agency and the Reconstruction African Women's Sexual Identity

In challenging traditional gender roles for women's empowerment, the female characters involved in the narratives negotiate their identity, sexuality and personal freedom. They redefine African womanhood through the building of new female agency. In building new female agency, the character Esi in *Changes*, negotiates her personal freedom and sexuality. As "Women's pleasure and the denial of pleasure for women has also been one of the thorny issues addressed by feminists." (J Nfah- Abbenyi, 1997, p. 25), Aidoo addresses this issue through the portrayal of marital rape undergone by Esi in her marriage. Esi undergoes a harsh marital rape with her husband Oko who does not care about her pleasure. As M. Kambarani (2016, p.8) argues that "women's the lack of control over their sexuality is also displayed through the rape". Esi undergoes a dark side of a forced sexual intercourse that she qualifies as a "marital rape" Aidoo, 1991, p. 15). This marital rape of Oko on her wife is narrated a follow:

Oko flung the bedclothes away from him: sat up pulled her down, and moved on her, Esi started to protest. But he went on doing what he had been 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. (Aidoo, p. 14).



The description of this brutal act of rape reveals the dehumanization of Esi as a married woman. The rationale behind this act conveys patriarchal assumptions according to which “the patriarchal force also relies on a form of violence particularly sexual in character and realized most completely in the act of rape (...) The patriarchal societies link feeling of cruelty with sexuality, the latter equated with evil and with power” (K. Millet, 1971, p. 44). This assertion explains how sexuality in Africa is the manifestation of cruelty, power and evil towards women who are considered as sexual toys. Oko’s act can be read as a manifestation of sexual, physical and psychological abuse.

After this marital rape, Esi opts out for personal freedom and sexual identity and puts an end to her marriage with Oko. As a contemporary, independent and assertive woman, she finds it impossible to tolerate the abuse inherent in marital rape. She chooses to assert control over her own body. She looks for sexual happiness and pleasure with Ali who seems to meet her sexual desire. The narrator describes Esi’s love story with Ali in these lines:

Each time he touched any part of her body that he found erotic, a massive shudder shook him. It happened with her nose, her moth, her breast. By the time he got her pubic hair, he could hold himself any longer. He moved to part Esi’s legs. But the legs parted for him, willingly. And then he was inside her, feeling his way into carve that was war, of uneven surfaces, wet and dangerously inviting... She wanted to scream and scream. It is not possible to feel like on this earth, she was thinking. (Aidoo, 1991, p. 101-102).

This passage foregrounds the mutual pleasure shared by Esi and her lover during their sexual encounter. The happiness and fulfillment experienced by Esi demonstrates that she has achieved her objective of exercising agency over body and sexuality, thereby constructing and affirming her sexual identity. Through the character Esi, female sexual freedom reaches its fullest expression, as she embodies women's rights to autonomy, self-determination and control over their own bodies and desires.

N. Elia (1999, p.19), observes that "the creation of Esi, Aidoo is breaking the silence on erotica on African novel". It means that with development of female sexual agency through the character Esi, the author breaks the silence about women's sexuality in Africa. In the same vein, B. Hook (2000, p. 86) articulates that: "Nowadays females face so few obstacles inhibiting their expression of sexual desire that our culture risks burying the historical memory of patriarchal assault on women's bodies and sexuality". Esi's sexual agency development shows women's quest for bodily integration, sexual identity and freedom.

With the character of Esi, women's sexual freedom is expressed by the acceptance and appreciation of their body. It conveys that women have to learn and appreciate themselves and be happy with their body. Esi embodies the representation of African women's rights for bodily integration and sexual agency. She challenges the traditional shyness and contempt of women's body rooted in cultural practices. The narrator recounts the way Esi feels at ease with her body in these lines: "He knew very few women from his part of the world who even tried to be at ease with their own bodies, The combination of forces against that had been too overwhelming- traditional shyness and contempt for the



biology of women; Islamic suppressive ideas about women". (Aidoo, 1991, p. 89)

This passage reveals that according tradition and cultural practice, women's bodies are imprisoned because of shyness and religious consideration. Esi's development challenges these tradition and cultural consideration. It frees women's bodies and leads them to the expression of freedom, self-acceptance and self-esteem. Esi had always enjoyed walking around naked after love making. For her, "this was one of life's very few real luxuries" (Aidoo, 1991, p. 89). Through the Esi, African female agency and sexual identity is reconstructed with the alternative of building women's bodily integration, sexual identity freed from traditional shyness and cultural stereotypes.

Conclusion

The paper has examined women's quest for empowerment in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes* and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. It discloses through the experiences of the female characters, the complex mechanisms through which patriarchal societies marginalize women and limit their access to self-rule, self-determination and social recognition. It demonstrates that traditional gender roles and economic dependency are as noteworthy structures of female subordination that women must confront in their struggle for empowerment. The analysis argues that education and economic independence constitute fundamental instruments of women's empowerment. In *Nervous Conditions*, education enables female characters,

particularly Tambu, to challenge the limitations imposed by gender and social tradition, while in *Changes*, Esi's professional and economic independence provides her with greater opportunities to question conventional marriage and female agency. The study contends that Aidoo and Dangarembga spotlight female agency as a critical dimension empowerment. Their female characters challenge the patriarchal and social structures that seek to define their identities and control their bodies, choices and aspirations. In particular, the reconstruction of sexual identity in *Changes*, illustrates the importance of bodily autonomy and sexual self-determination in the broader struggle for empowerment. Women's empowerment is represented as a quest for economic and intellectual independence as well as a struggle for the right to define oneself beyond patriarchal prescriptions. The paper ends up to sustains that the quest for women's empowerment is a struggle for agency, personal freedom and control over one's identity and sexuality. It is an ongoing process rather than a definitive achievement as M. Wanyeki (2012, p. 7-8), puts it: "African women long walk to freedom has only just begun".

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