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## Figures of pedagogy in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes* and Buchi Emecheta's *Double Yoke*

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Writers and critics of women emancipation have lifted and advanced the struggle to another phase. The last decade has witnessed feminist writing from female disparagement, subjugation, women as victims craving to be fulfilled wives and mothers endowed with "pretty faces and fertile ova" (Chukwuma), to women striving for empowerment and assertion. A revisit of Buchi Emecheta's *Double Yoke* and Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes* reveals that these inimitable feminist writers, while depicting the women in the abyss of debasement in patriarchal society portray assertive heroines teaching by precepts immanent in pedagogical assets. Economic independence and education are added advantages to factors that make for self-assertion. Self-assertion, seen as a woman's greatest weapon, serves as a pedagogical instrument for equipping both sexes. This article focuses on narrative strategies that evoke images that go beyond women disparagement and marginalisation to female empowerment and self-assertion through close rereadings of Emecheta's and Aidoo's novels. **Keywords:** Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta, education, gynandarists, self-assertion, woman empowerment.

### Introduction

Different pictures of women have been painted by feminist writers, for example Ama Ata Aidoo, Rebeka Njau, Flora Nwapa, Mariama Bâ, Buchi Emecheta, Yvonne Vera, Nawal El Saadawi and several gynandarists. Gynadarist are literary male writers, who in their works exhibit empathy with women. Examples of these writers are Ousmane Sembene (*Gods Bit of Woods*) Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo (*Petals of Blood*, *Devil on the Cross*) Ayi Kwei Armah (*The Healers*). These feminist writers and gynandarists forcefully articulate female marginalisation, debasement, inferiority and poverty. These are themes which have persisted in feminist discourse expressing distinctly the plight of the downtrodden, the woman. The precursor of the concept of gynandarism which Chioma Opara coined in her article entitled "Okpewho's women" posits that gynandarism "is diametrically opposed to sexism and leans towards Socialist tenets of social equality" ("Introduction" 2). Despite the constraints of patriarchy and viewing from the progression of feminist question ignited by Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication on the Rights of Women: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792), Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own" (1929), there has been sustained gains in the strive for change in the affairs of women in personal and socioeconomic spheres.

With committed struggle, writers of women emancipation have at the moment lifted and advanced the battle to another phase. The last decade has witnessed feminist writing from disparagement, subjugation, women as victims craving to be fulfilled wives and mothers endowed “with pretty faces and fertile ova” (Chukwuma xiv), to women striving for empowerment and assertion. Assertiveness has featured in feminist writing prior to the immediate present but has not been a topical interest for African feminist critics. A move beyond certain levels of close reading exhumes more of female experiences and characteristics in a text.

The publication of *Double Yoke* (1982) and *Changes* in (1991) has attracted an impressive number of opinions. Opara (*Mother's Daughter* 56) calls Emecheta a radical woman writer who uses various “modes to break the yoke of a hidebound cohesive culture in *Double Yoke*,” thus exhibiting a woman’s defiance of patriarchy. Micere Mugo in like manner asserts that Emecheta, a black female writer, has risen above menacing fears of “punishment for too much talk” to arm “herself with a mighty pen in the affirmation of female self”. Opara points out that women, especially women of an older generation “cushioned their heartaches in marriage attendant on their husbands’s infidelity and even abandonment” (*Mother's Daughter* 90). Tuzyline Jita Allan (171) amongst Ama’s many critics of *Changes* has the view that “Aidoo and other African women artists bear the prodigious responsibility of holding in check the structures of gender and cultural domination.” The list of critical opinions on these pedagogical works by Aidoo and Emecheta appear to be endless. It is indeed elating and encouraging that their potent pens have triggered women from a level of docility to assertiveness.

A revisit of Aidoo’s *Changes* and Emecheta’s *Double Yoke* reveals that these inimitable feminist writers while depicting the women in what appears to be an abyss of debasement in patriarchal society portray assertive heroines teaching by precepts immanent in pedagogical assets. This study hinges on narrative strategies that evoke images which go beyond women disparagement, the marginalisation to female empowerment and self-assertion through the close rereading of Aidoo and Emecheta’s selected novels. In doing this, the article will portray the strategies these authors have employed to subvert the status quo despite the constraints of patriarchy and thus symbolically lifting the woman from the scourge of what may be called the acronymic D’S—debasement, degradation and dehumanization—to fulfilling existence. The conclusion provides insight into forces injurious to female assertion.

### **Is Esi too an African woman?**

In *Changes* the narrative begins with the protagonist, Esi shown as educated, financially autonomous, forceful and married to Oko Sekyi. Esi is a statistician who holds a Masters degree in Urban Statistics. She has a well-paid dignifying job in the

Department of Urban Statistics where she is an analyst. By the virtue of her job she travels to many parts of the world frequently: "Geneva, Addis, Dakar one half of the year; Rome, Lusaka, Lagos the other half for conferences, seminars and workshops" which she enjoys so much and which has become her "life style" (8). Esi loves her job and she enjoys working with figures. Through her job position she also has the benefit of a whole bungalow assigned to her as official quarters where she resides with her husband. The narrator depicts Esi as intimidatingly assertive and in control. Where she towers in height with her slim straight body, her husband Oko, appears diminutively short beside her. Where she is financially independent her husband earns a lesser income as a school teacher. Esi's achieved, successful and fulfilled status answers Nnu Ego's quest in *The Joys of Motherhood*:

God, when will you create a woman  
who will be fulfilled in herself,  
a full human being not anybody's  
appendage. (186)

In Esi, the dawn of Nnu Egos' yearnings breaks. Esi is that woman whose achievements evoke the communal voice echoing through the intrusive narrator: "Is Esi too an African woman?" (8). Unlike her friend Opokuya Dakwa who is temperate, educated with the credential of a fifteen years career as a registered nurse and midwife, Esi appears distant, uncompromising and ungovernable. In spite of all these, Oko loves and "savours Esi as a liquor" (7). This figuratively connotes Esi's intoxication with power, force and control over her husband. Oko's extravagant love for Esi overwhelms him such that the aroma of her powder, body, and perfume even her briefcase and scribbling board tunes him on erotically. Esi however never loved Oko before they married. Here is the omniscient narrator's commentary: "now looking back she (Esi) dare not admit even to herself that perhaps what she felt for Oko in the first years of their married life was gratitude ... gratitude. In spite of everything he had persisted in courting her" (41).

Esi's acceptance to marry Oko was simply gratitude because her mothers (mother and grand mother) were getting uncomfortable that she had remained single when she ought to had been married. Esi's grand mother, Nana endorses Esi's posture of not being able to love because according to Nana:

Love is not safe, my lady Silk, love is dangerous ...  
Love is fine for singing ... even to dance to. But when  
we need to count on human strength ... love is nothing.  
Ah ... the last man any women should think of marrying is  
the man she loves (42).

Nana's words of caution are proven right in the life of Esi as we progress.

Watching Esi as she dresses for work on this particular morning the author throws Oko's mind open through authorial commentary while the reader gleans this information. They have only one daughter, Agyaanowa. Esi refuses to have another child although Oko yearns to have more children. "Esi definitely put her career well above any duties she owed as wife" (8). Oko laments in his rumination. At this point he takes his wife forcefully, and makes astonishing love to her. Esi becomes quite infuriated. The narrator tells us that Esi's "anger rose to an exploding pitch" such that she accuses her husband of marital rape, a phrase which the intrusive narrator informs us has no interpretative equivalence in any African language. The African man has the right to take his wife any time. By Esi's powerful analysis of the matter she becomes convinced that the marital rape is not only subjugation but also dehumanization. The post rape drama, the narrator observes "finished" Esi. Not only Oko taking the bed cover "left her completely naked" but also the sight of the cloth trailing behind him, "Who looked like some arrogant king" as he walks to the bathroom (10).

### **Metaphor of the marital rape**

Esi, the analyst, sees through the lens of gender and interprets the onslaught as firstly, authority pitted against subjugation; secondly, gallantry pitted against debasement(abuse); and thirdly, as subject pitted against object.

Esi's analytical power as she sat in the office unfolds this metaphor that the rape is an instrument of limitation designed to deny her right as a being, indeed to dehumanize her. From this knowledge springs a decision equipped with forceful self-assertion that consequently splits the marriage by divorce and sends Oko packing from his hitherto matrimonial home, in spite of his pleading and observable remorse. He vacates the home with their daughter Agyaanowa thus making history in the patriarchal norm. The seat of patriarchy is literally dissolved. Lovenduski and Randall have noted that "The women question saw men as the norm and the woman as the other" (8). It was the norm to see the man as the subject, the powerful and authority, the gallant and the exultant. In *Changes* there is reversal of these roles with the use of the symbolic Esi equipped with factors that make for self-assertion. To add Allan's words who observes that

*Changes* pulses with an irrepressible pioneering spirit, clearing the ground of changing circumstances of women's lives in contemporary Africa, but more importantly it transcends realistic significance and constructs a psychological blue print for female portraiture [...] African women diminishment in literature may well be a thing of the past. (179)

Aidoo reverses the status quo where the battered, oppressed wife is kicked out of the home by her husband.

The natural consequence for Esi's action, the divorce, is a vacuum. This brings Ali Kondy, the handsome well-travelled managing Director of Linga Hide Aways, travel and tourist agency to the scene. Esi falls in love with the vibrant Ali Kondy. Their love could be seen as reciprocal because we learn "there followed days when he (Ali) would sit behind his desk at Linga Hide Aways after office hours, pretending he was working, in fact he was thinking of Esi"; "When he learns of her divorce he had silently thanked Allah and set about wooing her" (73, 74). The fact that he is married to Fusena, the wife of his youth and who he affirms "is a good woman" (75) and that they have three children could not deter him from wooing and marrying Esi.

The assertive powerful Esi falls prey to love under Ali's clutches. Driven by uncontrolled love and forgetting Nana's caution that "love is not safe" Esi unwittingly sacrifices her physical and emotional autonomy and gets into a Muslim polygamous marriage with Ali Kondy. She who paid less attention to her conjugal roles when she was married to Oko becomes an astonishing cook such that Ali affirms: "Esi cooked like nobody he knew or had known" (76). Her house becomes a place of lovemaking with Ali, from the doorsteps to the living room and to her bedroom.

Not long after the wedding Ali seldom visits Esi's residence (the "love haven"). Esi is now "occupied territory" (91). For Ali Kondy, home is where Fusena, the wife of his youth and children reside; contact with Esi becomes stolen moments. Esi now burns with love and yearns for Ali's visits and attention without success. She succumbs to the disparaging position of a second wife and falls prey to vulnerability which her mother had well articulated where the position of a second wife is "a sort of come down" (87).

Esi's second marriage becomes an utter sham and she is a total wreck. "All Esi is aware of is desolation" (162) and her personality drastically changes. She becomes reduced to a hysterical paranoid such that she has to see a doctor who prescribes diazepam which she takes and "slept a drugged sleep" on the last hours of the year (141). It is at this point of agony that Ali with his inherent machismo comes and presents her with a brand new maroon pleasure car as a New Year gift.

### **Extended metaphor and other figures**

Aidoo adopts an omniscient narrative strategy and throws open the characters' minds with intrusions, while she employs captivating images and figures to enrich her narrative. As Esi receives this gift with utter amazement, her analytical mind tells exactly what the gift is meant to be: "very special bribe [...] meant to be substitutes for his presence" and abandonment (147). In her monologue she sees her relationship with Ali as "a complete dead end." She is drained of all emotion of joy or anger. She figuratively compares herself to a spirit freshly released from the body that watches the affairs of men but "cannot rejoice [...] cannot hurt" (149). In spite of all these, she

stays in the marriage but its terms radically changed. Esi analyses her situation and decides to remain “good friends” with Ali (164).

Oko’s replacement for irreplaceable Esi is figuratively called “breathing parcel” whom he receives from his mother with a shock and as a mouthpiece of the narrator warns that it is no longer acceptable or possible in this days and age “to get a young woman [...] carried off as a wife to a man she has never met” (71).

Aidoo uses liquor as a metaphor to set the love story in motion. Love is depicted as liquor which intoxicates Oko and leaves him powerless and abandoned. In the same instance Esi’s love for Ali devastates and weakens her strength even her assertive force when she becomes alienated by her lover. This wrecks her liberated self and to quote the character, Nana “love is nothing, it is dangerous” (42). In her marathon advice to Esi, she calls her (Esi’s) wedding ceremony “a funeral of the self that would have been”. Esi’s assertiveness deflates like her house figuratively delineated as having eerie feelings of a ghost in a cemetery. Fusena earlier called Esi’s marriage to her husband a “monster” she had secretly feared since their sojourn in London, and because of childbearing, her difficulties to further her education (100).

Within the framework of the omniscient perspective, Aidoo juxtaposes the conventional form of narration with poetic elements like the rhetoric of the oral bard deploying a sudden change of “narrative gear” (Okpewho 27, 213). An instance is when Esi meets Ali for the first time. At a certain point in their dialogue, Esi prefers to keep silent because “silences sometimes have a way of screaming strange messages.” From here the narrative gear suddenly changes to a poem:

They know that art well who trade in food-pad up  
where resources are scares or just for profit:  
grains for sausages some worms burgers  
more leaves for kenkey (3).

Instances where Aidoo switches from prose to poetry abound, like the one cited below, depicting how husbands virtually seize their wives’ cars “whisking” their girlfriends around

for the whole world to see definitely for  
the whole world to see and sometimes even  
refusing the wife a ride if he should pass  
her on the way (19).

Such poetic passages are numerous in the text. Apart from these the narrative is replete with captivating dialogues. Examples are passages where Ali proposes to Esi (88–92); the dialogue between Esi and her mothers, Nana and Ena (110–14); the skillfully contrived dialogue captioned: “Said Aba to Ama” (101), and the imaginary telephone dialogue between Ali and Esi to explain the reasons for his inability to be with her

(137). The mono-dialogue between Esi and her inner soul is most captivating. Here she is in pain over Ali's affair with his secretary. Hear her as she dialogues with herself:

So what of it if Ali occasionally dropped his secretary home?

But it was not occasional; it sounded like everyday.

So what of that?

But I don't want him to.

Why not?

It hurts

Does, it?

Terribly

Well, just remember that if a man can have two wives

Then, he can have three wives ... four wives ...

And on and on ... plus remember ... (155–56)

Esi's poetic self-analysis serves as the author Aidoo's serious warning to women who go into polygamous marriages: to be preferred as the only well-loved is only ephemeral; they should be prepared for eventual harrowing experiences. All these contrivance and skill enrich the narrative and add interest with Aidoo's mature artistic exposition.

### **Was Nko a virgin?**

Buchi Emecheta's *Double Yoke* is set on the campus of the University of Calabar. The narrative is a creative writing assignment which is given to a class of students by the female lecturer, Miss Bulewao. The male student Ete Kamba "put his biro onto a clean sheet of paper [...] to tell the world how it all began between him and his Nko until Professor Ikot came into their lives" (13). This assignment becomes the instrument the bright but bloated male student uses to expose the moral decadence of bigoted, self-acclaimed man of God, Professor Ikot who steps on Ete Kamba's toes by sexually exploiting his girlfriend, Nko.

The story opens as we meet the protagonists in the village of Mankong at a special thanksgiving service where Ete Kamba and Nko meet each other for the first time—it is love at first sight. Ete Kamba even as a young man, a first year university student, is imbued with patriarchal whims. He is bent on not only marrying a virgin but also wants a woman to own and possess. The thought whether he is the one to deflower Nko or not leaves him in a worrisome state that begins to destroy him. He seeks advice from the Evangelical Campus Pastor, Professor Ikot who abuses his position and seduces Nko. He continues this inappropriate relationship on the pretext of supervising her research project: "Like a wooden doll, she let the man have what he wanted" (140).

Although Nko appears to be a victim she displays assertiveness when she breaks into the male world. She declares: "women know what they want these days and

how to get them" (24). Nko is capable of deep convictions about issues but manages to keep her apparent innocence. This elusive quality mingled with seeming innocence crushes Ete Kamba such that "he knew" her while they stood against a wall of an incomplete building. He is anxious—"But wait a minute, was Nko a virgin?" (53)—and he confronts her: "I wonder what they [his parents] will think of a girl who allowed any man to sleep with her by the wall of half finished house." Dignified Nko responds: "you did not sleep with me, you stood with me" (58). Chioma Opara (59) maintains that the portraiture of Nko in *Double Yoke* "is a statement against sexist myth and the gamut of cultural mystique." Nko rejects not only the bachelor's bed and the narrow student's bed but also the marital bed. She confronts Ete Kamba not as a subjugated bedmate but as an equal who stood abreast in lovemaking leaning against the wall of an unfinished building. Emecheta uses Nko's assertiveness and the question of virginity to wound arrogant male confidence and his bloated ego.

The omniscient narrator makes the reader see Ete Kamba's mind that "he was uneasy because [Nko] was too sure of herself" (124). Her assertiveness crushes him and he begins to suffer "from fractured pride" (122). After their argument over her virginity he learns that he would never "*gain anything arguing*" with Nko (added emphasis, 121). Nko's stance to the dominance of patriarchy is clear, as she reflects on Professor Ikot's demands:

She must either have her degree and be a bad, loose, feminist, shameless career woman [...] do without her degree and be a good loving wife... to Ete Kamba [...]  
O blast it all. She was going to have both. She was going to maneuver these men to give her both. They thought they could always call the tune and women like her must dance to it. With her they were going to be wrong. (135)

Nko, undaunted by any circumstance, is determined to achieve her goals. Her sexuality is exploited but this does not deter her. Even when she is impregnated by Professor Ikot Ete Kamba cannot loosen her grip on him such that he leaves lectures to attend her father's funeral. Nko is not spared the humiliation of a repressive custom; she is 'virilized' with a baby out of wedlock. As Ogunyemi Okonjo (270) puts it: "Woman is virilized and man is feminized."

Miss Bulewoa is another assertive female in the narrative. She is self-confident and knowledgeable, well-known and well-travelled internationally like Esi in *Changes*. She has achieved and is liberated such that the masculine briefcase becomes part of her working garb; she is a light, a store of knowledge to men; she towers to impart knowledge while the men obey. She is an accomplished writer infused with the double yoke of modernity and tradition with unwavering confidence. The significance of Emecheta's depiction of these female characters, Nko and Miss Bulewoa as well as Aidoo's creation of Esi in *Changes*, reveals that equipped with education, the scourge of docility, passivity, poverty, inferiority, and marginalization becomes alien to women.

### **Without a woman's "survival kit" love is nothing**

Aidoo and Emecheta have ingeniously braced up to the challenge to redeem the disparaging image of women. They are convinced that no society can advance progressively if a section of her population is subjugated. They have therefore created Esi, Nko, Miss Bulawoa, Fusena and Opukuya as exemplars of contemporary liberated African women.

After the first few chapters of the narrative in *Double Yoke* we do not see much of Miss Bulawoa again but her creative writing assignment gives birth to the rest of the narrative. The totality of her academic achievement tends to surpass that of any achieving male in the academic world. Men as learners not only dread but also revere her as a knowledgeable lecturer. Nko as a young student is determined to achieve her goals. She is depicted as irrepressible, no impediment can deter her from her goals, even more so when she is exposed to education, she begins to question. The acquired knowledge adds to her assertiveness. At every point in the narrative she debunks any show of masculine superiority. Nko's "survival kit" becomes what she calls "little secrets (that) make us women." Her simplicity mingled with illusiveness unsettles Ete Kamba, such that he begins to wonder if he "could cope with a woman like that" (63). Nko is a survivor. Her undaunted spirit, complex and assertive quality subdue her men, including the lustful Professor Ikot.

In *Changes* Esi's inability to draw a line between home and career exposes her to emotional devastation. At the beginning she is confident and assertive but becomes brittle and broken at the end. Aidoo cautions that women should thread wearily with love because according to her authorial mouthpiece, Nana, "love is nothing" (42). In other words, love can hinder a woman's self-emancipation. Opokuya, a mother of four, compromises on a number of issues especially when she shares a car with her conniving husband. Aidoo endorses this posture in marriage relationship. Opokuya further expresses her financial autonomy forcefully when she purchases Esi's car outrightly without asking for her husband's assistance.

Fusena on the other hand owns a supermarket. "What Fusena's kiosk did not sell was not available anywhere in the country." The business is rumoured to make more money than any other in Accra (67). Her business is a compensatory gift from her husband Ali, who ruined her desire for higher education. Fusena, among the three major Aidoo's female characters, is not only financially autonomous but she and her three children are well-provided for by her husband. However, her response as she learns of her husband's decision to marry a second wife appears unsatisfactory. The reader expects her to mount forceful pressure to defend her marriage and to challenge the status quo of a restrictive Muslim enclave with some measure of assertiveness to boost her image as liberated woman. The appealing echo of Fusena's voice for more upliftment as a woman is quite audible. However, she is not fully actualized and this affects the perception of her assertiveness in the novel.

## Conclusion

The feminist critic is soothed that Aidoo's and Emecheta's women have not plunged into the rhythm of debasement, degradation and dehumanization. Esi's pains are emotional thirst for love. She is neither financially nor physically degraded but emotionally devastated emanating from her inability to nurture a home, to draw a line between home, career and from mismanaged assertiveness. Ali's extravagant material gifts from across the continents and show of love in his own genuine way could not fill the hollow in her and her abode of emptiness. Can this be a retributive justice? Aidoo's luxuriant deployment of figures and skillful juxtaposition of oral narrative with conventional written forms makes her work particularly accessible. It is indisputable that both authors are inimitable storytellers. They have responded in *Changes* and *Double Yoke* to the call that feminist writers should move beyond a literature of abandonment and produce images of assertive independent women. They have demonstrated that women can also oppress, seduce and marginalize. Equipped with education and financial empowerment for women the world ceases to be dominated as a male affair. The authors have produced independent, assertive women who herald the literary phase of transcendence of female performers as subjects rather than objects. The dawn is set for writers to create fulfilled women and critics to recognise autonomous, assertive female figures to combat and expunge age-long patriarchy.

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