

## DEPICTION OF WOMANISM IN AMA ATA AIDOO'S *CHANGES: A LOVE STORY* AND AMMA DARKO'S *FACELESS*

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### Abstract

This study explores womanism as portrayed in the works of Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes: A love story* and Amma Darko's *Faceless* with a view to examining how contemporary African female writers reconstruct the image and agency of women within African societies. This study is anchored on African womanist theory which focuses on the African women's gender-based orientation and experience in the context of African worldview. Adopting a descriptive qualitative methodology, the research engages in close textual analysis of the selected novels to identify recurring themes, character constructions, and narratives strategies that articulate womanist ideals. This theoretical lens enables a culturally grounded interpretation of female subjectivity beyond Western feminist paradigms. The texts studied show that women in Aidoo's and Darko's works are portrayed as dynamic agents of social transformation who negotiate, resist, and redefine their roles within complex socio-cultural environments. The study concludes that there is a paradigm shift in the literary representation of womanhood in contemporary African literature. This shift is characterized by evolving perspectives on gender roles, identity, and relationships, reflecting broader socio-cultural transformations.

**Keywords:** Womanism, womanhood, social change, gender roles, marginalization.

### 1. Introduction

In African literature, women have not been given fair treatment in terms of their impeccable role in the African society by the early African writers. Both the male and female writers were perhaps writing from the perspective of Western feminism. No wonder, in the trilogy of Chinua Achebe – *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God* and *Man of the People*, women were presented as docile, weakling and male appendage. These early writers presented women as helpless victim of perpetual male domination and oppression. The misrepresentation of women in African literature by these early writers led to misconception of the role women play in the evolving social change.

The emergence of contemporary female writers in the landscape of African Literature has brought a new dimension in countering the negative views of African women in the lenses of African womanism. With the rise of female writers and critics such as Ogunidipe Leslie, Akachi Ezeigbo Adimora, Catherine Acholonu to mention but a few, womanism has become an emerging literary theory aimed at countering earlier negative perception about an African woman. The coming of these modern female writers and critics into the literary scheme has changed the style of presentation established by male writers and critics.

One of the prevalent significances of the 21st century literature is the rise of female writers especially the novelists like Akachi Ezeigbo, Kaine Agary, Chimamanda Adichie and host of others whose works explore African woman who balances the role of wife, caregiver, mother, civil servant, business woman and at the same time plays a key role in the socio-economic development of her immediate society. Bruner (1993) believes that African female writers are definitely on the war part to redeem their image and to reclaim the identity and integrity of their ancestors. This is because the works of early writers downplayed the African woman's intelligent, hard work and independent spirit.

In the earlier works of Achebe and his contemporaries, women were presented as docile and inactive beings. African Society's failed to recognize women's position as the foundation of their immediate family and the larger society. However, Achebe, in his article, "The Truth of Fiction" asserts that the belief that men are superior to women and so on, all are fictitious generated by imagination. So, female writers by extension created a world of realities through their writings. Today, female writers and critics have attempted to repudiate their perception against radical feminism because its principle is not in alignment with African esteemed cultural norms. It is on the basis of this scenario that Ogbonnaya and Besong (2018) describe radical feminism and womanism as gender war between the sexes. For the proponents of radical feminism, sexes see each other as opposites and work to pull each other down. On the side of womanism, sexes see each other as complements. They work to rekindle their bonds of relationship as encapsulated in their cultural norms, beliefs, and cultural orientation.

This work interrogates womanism in the two novels under study. The aim of this study aims to examine woman's perspective in Aidoo's, *Change: A Love Story* and Darko's *Faceless* in order to counter erroneous beliefs about women in African Literature. This study attempts to interrogate the Western disposition of feminism in contrast to womanism by these two Ghanaian female writers.

## 2.1 Theoretical Framework

Womanism is a theory that was developed out of feminist movement. The remarkable figure in the womanist movement was Alice Walker. It is anchored on the womanist aspect of African feminism. In her book titled "In search of our mothers Garden" Womanist proves to theorize the African woman's life, experience and gender-based predicaments in society. She holds that the experience shared by women of colour are unarguably and theologically oriented. Walker (1983) further states that western feminism segregates the African woman.

Based on ideological differences, walker posited that the womanists are not in power tussle with the man. The tenets of womanist theory is complementarity and collaboration. These women seek the freedom to grow and build themselves for the good of their various societies. Womanism, therefore, is a theory that acknowledges women's natural contributions to their immediate society. It is a reaction against western style of feminism which does not pay attention to the black woman's culture, beliefs and blackness. Thus, Western feminism and womanism differ considerably in terms of socio-cultural values, perspectives, world view. African proponents of womanism posited that gender inequality and patriarchal maltreatment against African women were masterminded by the colonial masters. Koffi (2017) states that before the advent of colonialism, African women were never marginalized by their men. So, they never felt aggrieved and made

any move for gender balance or equality. The womanists lay emphasis on gender complementarity between men and women, justice equal opportunities and shared responsibility. Kolawole (1997) insists that womanism, is collective rather than introspective and individualistic.

### 3. Discussion

#### 3.1 Depiction of Womanism in Aidoo's *Change: A Love Story*

Aidoo's depiction of women in her works shows how the heroine, Esi represents the 21st century Akada, self-styled and economically buoyant women in changing African society, who are greatly influenced by western education, culture and feminist ideologies, and beliefs. Because of foreign culture, Esi prefers her career to family bond-husband and daughter. She depicts lukewarm attitude towards her husband, Oko against cultural acceptable behavior. For her refusal to conceive and bear another child for the family, Esi's action shows Western influence on women in changing African society. Again for her refusal to meet Oko's sexual urge and accept his decision as the head of the family is against the womanist tradition which support and uphold women's sexual obligation to her husband. The womanist ideology sees a woman as a wife, mother, child bearer and home builder. This conforms to Ghanaian African culture. On one occasion, Oko forcefully makes love to Esi and she calls it rape despite her protest:

Oko 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...

When she presented a case of mental rape to her academic peers, she is booted on the ground that her Ghanaian culture does not consider forced sexual intercourse with one's husband as an act of rape. The reaction she got from her learned academic peers clearly shows that most contemporary educated African women uphold womanism over the western feminism. Esi is alienated. Her negative perception about her Ghanaian society in terms of sexuality, marriage and family system brings to bear her stereotype. She has nowhere to seek redress for various acts of marital injustice meted out to her by her husband. When she reported the incidence to her mother and grandmother, she is scolded as being selfish for not giving her body to her husband. The reactions of Esi's mother and grandmother are informed by Ghanaian's cultural norms and beliefs about marriage, sexuality and gendered role.

Esi represents the news woman in changing African society. She finds fault with various aspects of Ghanaian culture and with her religious precepts and practices. At the beginning of the novel, Esi expresses her resentment for masculine oppression by rejecting taxi driver's disproof of women drivers, she also condemns her male colleagues for not assuming the duties of the female secretary in her absence only because he is male. Despite finding fault with various aspects of Ghanaian culture and religious ideals, Esi marries Ali Kondey as a second wife, without finding fault with polygamous marriage system. In this context, she sees polygamous as a means of giving herself a personal comfort, happiness and wellbeing. From the African womanist lenses, she prefers polygamous marriage to monogamous system which invade into her privacy, career and personal dignity.

The writer presents another womanist perspective from the characters of Fusena and Opokuya, Esi's friends. Despite the clash interest between them and their husbands, they make resolution to build a happy

home. Fusena has forfeits her teaching dream to become a responsible housewife. Also, Opokuya too, a professional nurse, midwife combine her career responsibility with home management. Being a womanist, it enables Opokuya to tolerate certain marital issues. She believes that there is no absolute perfect and peaceful marriage anywhere in the world. Opokuya represents the womanist conception of marriage as complementary relationship between male and female.

The cultural and ideological differences lead to the marital problem between Esi and Oko. Consequently, Oko has to take up the domestic role of caring for their daughter while his friends make jest of him because a man who does such work is not behaving like a man. This implies the cultural conception of gendered roles whereby a man indulging in such behavior attracts ridicule from family and friends. Oko forces Eke to have sex with her because of the ridicule he receives from his friends and family. Oko's action leads to divorce and he suffers alone while his friends sustain their marriages.

### 3.2 Depiction of womanism in Darko's *Faceless*

Amma Darko captures the plight of the African female child in the Ghanaian society. From the perspectives of womanism, Darko is concerned about a failure in parenting by both female and male parents of the street child. In the text, it can be seen that the events of the street child phenomenon results from the effort of the children to cater for themselves when their single mother could not. The womanists feel that there are complementary gender relations and roles. They therefore blame both married couples whose separation often exposes the children of their union to the street to cater for their needs.

Darko's *Faceless* depicts the street children in post-colonial Ghana. It shows how children are left to feed themselves on the street at the expense of their lives and welfare. The author uses characters like Fofu, Baby T, Odarley and other characters. Fofu once remarks;

I led my own life on the streets.... I was on nobody's control ....i went to sleep when I wanted. I watched any film I wanted. Whatever money I made on the streets, I kept for myself. I spent it as and when I wanted.

The major female character in the text is Baby T whose life is lost to street life. The parental negligence of Baby T by her parents – Kwei and Maa Isuru is shown as major cause of children living on street. Darko captures this scenario in this way: With the consequences of acts of some irresponsible parents which result in children leaving home to live on the streets, the vices of Sodom and Gomorrah gained momentum.

The text contains the name of a place called Sodom and Gomorrah as the home of the street children. The name symbolizes lawlessness where atrocities take place uncontrollably. Darko describes the nature of the place: It is characterized by life of misery; there is one toilet in which people queue up in turn. While queuing up and waiting for too long, some persons defecate on themselves. The dump is where those who cannot wait on the queue usually go to for open defecation where no form of morality is observed. Just as adults and children mingle, take drugs and drink local gin (Akpateshie) together, and abuse one another so also, they use the one general toilet and the dump together respectively. -

In *Faceless* Darko attempts to show women and girls especially adolescent girls as the most vulnerable to socio-economic hardship and abject poverty. This ugly situation leads vulnerable children to take to street life as the only alternative means left for them to cope with societal circumstances. The author tells a story of the Kayayoos, Northern Ghanaian girls who come down South to work as potters in the market. These are among the most vulnerable victims of rape, sexual assaults and various vices including alcohol and drug abuse.

Mama Abidjan and some other older women are into recruiting girls for prostitution in urban areas. They normally tell lies to the poor rural parents that they have good job offers for their children. They deceive many rural parents with peanut money in envelopes for which young children are let out to them. When they arrive at urban cities, they are forced into prostitution. This is how Baby T got to Sodom and Gomorrah. After Maa Tsuru received an envelope, she let out Baby T to Mama Abidjan. At last, Baby T lost her precious life to Poison, one of the two street capons. African womanists see everything wrong with the involvement of elderly women in crimes such as recruitment of vulnerable young girls from rural areas to urban areas for prostitution which is done by women and not men. However, men are their accomplices by virtue of patronizing women who keep and use these vulnerable adolescent girls for prostitution. Darko, therefore, shows how both male and female adults are the causes of the plights of street children.

In Darko's "Faceless", the author presents the case of parental irresponsibility. Maa Tsuru, Babby T's mother is the one who collected an envelope and pushed her to the street which led to her gruesome murder. The economic condition of married women seems to be more vulnerable than the condition of the street girls. Despite the fact that Fofo is a street girl, her mother has more economic challenges than she has. Besides this malaise, Darko creates a character called Dina who divorces her husband and starts an NGO, MUTE where she addresses society's turbulent issues more critically. The writer presents a situation where only women work in this organization. This support womanist position that educated women in African society can perform same role as men.

Another character worthy to explore in the novel is Kabria. She is married with three children but she often disagrees with her husband's point of view. Her husband holds the view that he is not supposed to do any other work in the house as long as he has a job and also provides for the family. Kabria, opposes his view on the ground that she too has a job. She combines it with house chores, taking care of the children and always running off from work to pick them from school. Womanism is rightly captured in Kabria's character who advocates complementary role in the African family system.

#### 4. Conclusion

Womanism as a concept in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes: A love story* and Amma Darko's *Faceless* aim at creatively project the image of their new African women as against Western feminism whose viewpoints negate the cultural values of the relationship between male and female gender, the depiction of characters like Esi, Fusena, Opokuya and Kabria in both *Change: A love story* and

*Faceless* draws the attention of the readers that women have the capacity to occupy and maintain good position in the society. The depiction of Female characters in the novels reviewed reflects societal transformation and contributes to the development of Womanism, which promotes a non-gender-biased perspective.

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