



## Research Article

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## Shift in Gender Roles in the Contemporary African Society

Calvin Mawuli Attricki\*<sup>1</sup>, & Alberta Aseye Ama Duhoe<sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup>Department of Languages, Peki College of Education, Peki, Ghana<sup>2</sup>Department of Literature, Linguistic and Foreign Languages, Kenyatta University

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**Abstract:** Gender roles are socially and culturally reinforced practices that are borne from repeated acts and naturalized through repeated practices. In the African society, the roles of women and men have always been gendered with the men being the protectors, the providers, and aggressors. They have been traditionally charged with making sure that the family have shelter, security, and that any heavy financial burden of the family is met. On the other hand, women have been the caregivers, the nurturers, and the home keepers. This was true even in the pre-colonial era where the roles of men and women were complementary. However, since colonization contributed to gender inequality and oppression of women, there have been key changes as women strive to overcome the negative effects of patriarchal systems. In this paper, two books; *Changes by Ama Aidoo* and *What it Means when a Man Falls from the Sky* by Lesley Arimah are examined to determine the shifts in the roles of males and females in the contemporary African society. The paper find that women are fighting to free themselves by getting educated, being economically empowered, and demonstrating intelligence both in their personal and professional lives. The dynamics in homes are changing as women are taking more proactive roles in their academic and professional lives. They are spending time making money and gaining financial independence. Consequently, men are feeling threatened and from the books, are threatened by the changing status quo.

**Keywords:** Gender, Role, Contemporary, Protector, Caregiver, African society.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the African patriarchal society, gender is a term that refers to the structural meaning attributed to biological sex (Fongang, 2014). It is derived from the biological traits and the attributed that men and women use to play their respective roles, culturally, socially, economically and politically.

According to Allgbe & Allagbe (2015), ‘While men are expected to play such stereotypical roles as fatherhood, husband hood, and leadership, women are traditionally expected to be mothers, housewives and subservient.’ Further, Abachi also states that people learn to perform gender through repeated acts where they naturalize their gender performance. Cultures and social norms have played a key role in raising the expectations of what is appropriate gender performances. It has also defined ways to make sure that these expectations are met (Msuya, 2020).

The experiences of African women in the political, social and economic spheres are fundamentally distinct from those of men (Medi, 2019). The main reason for this difference according to feminists and non-feminists is gender. However, in the traditional African societies, men and women played different roles in contributing to the social, economic, political and educational developments in the societies. The African society did not attach importance to gender issues, because each individual had a role to play within the family and in the larger society (Afisi, 2010). Each

gender had its own traditional roles where the position of women was often complimentary to that of the men. there was non-existent issues of gender inequality. This stems from the fact that each role, regardless of who performed it was equally important in contributing to the inherent goal of the community and familial survival. This means that the pre-colonial or the indigenous African people played different roles to ensure the smooth functioning of the society (Fongang, 2014).

However, despite the complementary role that women played to the men, the dynamism that prevailed was that there was the patriarchy system where the men were the heads of the family and also the leader of the society. In this case, the gender roles were ore of complementary to each other where either gender had an inherent role that contributed to the growth and development of the society (Msuya, 2020). In traditional Africa, women had the power to organize the family and the society. The women had the power to bind the society together and the survival of the family and the marriage depended greatly on the African woman. Each gender had its roles and responsibilities. The women were transmitters of language, history and oral culture, music, dance, habits and artisan knowledge. The men transmitted knowledge to the youth regarding the earth, the environment, ceremonies and traditions. At the same time, women were treated with unparallel respect because they could create life by giving birth (Fongang, 2014). Therefore, they had the sacred responsibility of caring for the needs of the

future generations. One inherent characteristic of the agrarian Africa was polygamy which was done to ensure the continuation of the society and to provide for the needs of women and the children. The unmarried women, who lost their husbands in war, disease or any other reason, were provided for through the polygamy system (Msuya, 2020). This ensured that no children were without fathers and no woman was without a man to care, provide and protect her.

Medie (2019) argues that the colonization of Africa led to the gender inequalities plaguing the African and world societies today. She argued that there were no records of gender inequality in the traditional African society. Women played a complementary role to the male. However, today, the complimentary role of women in men's life in both the social, economic and political shapers is non-existent. Hunter argues that;

*But since the era of colonialism, women have been placed on the lower rungs of the proverbial ladder by the dominant forces of capitalism, and now globalization, which emphasizes this need for power, superiority and compartmentalization of roles and responsibilities with different values attached to them (Hunter, 1973).*

Based on this argument, it can be deduced that owing to the influence of colonialism, women's oppression from men begun and were largely influenced by the shackles imposed by religion, attitudes, laws and customs which forced women to play second fiddle. Women no longer got a chance to exercise any power except where they are supervised by men. the rights and obligations of the African woman were eroded and left women with passive roles where they had no rights (Olaussen, 2002). The role of the men as the providers of a safe environment for the women and children, being the head of the family, the protectors.

As the debate rages on the issue of gender role, most men take a defensive stance and associate the women's call for equality as a quest for societal control and power-seining exercise. Tietcheu (2005) argues that men do not want to lose their historical role as being the 'chief' of the family and the colonially acquired trait of being the commander' of women. Women in the African society have fought for and continue to fight for equality and empowerment socially, politically, educationally and economically (Okrah, 2015). These struggles have led to many changes in the social, economic and political spheres. Women are increasingly spending long hours studying, working or partaking in leisurely activities. These are efforts by women who are seeking independence from the oppressions of the patriarchal shackles (Afsi, 2010). The progress of the African woman in fighting the patriarchal system is evidence by the increasing changes in the roles of the females and males in the society. Men are used to being in control, were traditionally the

providers and the protectors. This is changing in the contemporary society as men are demanding the respect and control in a manipulative and oppressive manner. Their roles are being taken over by women who are either single mothers, women in marriages where they are breadwinners or just as single, unmarried women by choice.

In African literature, the new wave of female writers, who are either womanist or feminists have set to reconstruct the distorted images of women and their roles in the African society (Fongang, 2014). These women are trying to subvert or reverse the image of the subjugated, worn down and distressed woman oppressed by patriarchy. The African pioneer male writers such as Fonchingong (2006), such as Chinua Achebe, Elechi Amadi, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Cyprian Ekwensi (p. 135) depicted women in a reductive war. They perpetuated the myths of women being subordinate to men. this tendency has been taken up by contemporary male writers. However, female writers are changing this representation of women. So, this aim to examine how female writers are showing the shift in gender roles in the 21<sup>st</sup> century African societies.

## METHODOLOGY

The aim of this paper is to examine how the shift in gender roles in the contemporary African society. In this paper, two books; one from Nigeria by Lesley Nnneka Arimah 'What it means when Man Falls from the Sky' and Ama Ata Aidoo's 'Changes; A Love Story' will be analyzed. The two stories were purposefully chosen because they are written by West African Artists and reflect the issues facing women in the contemporary African Society. Alma Aidoo is a seasoned African writer who witnessed the 1957 transition of Ghana from a colonial country to and independent state. On the contrary, Arimah is a young contemporary artist. On the other hand, Lesley Nneka Arimah's story collection is her debut.

The study is qualitative in nature and relies of data collected from the two books to identify key patterns and themes in relation to gender roles in the African society. The two books used in this paper were chosen because they address issues of femininity, family roles and the struggles facing the women in Africa during these times.

## FINDINGS

Changes; A Love Story (1993) by Ama Ata Aidoo is a compelling novel. It delves into the complex issues facing the contemporary African urban woman. The issues explored in the book are mainly common issues that faces families and individuals in this era. Aidoo does not only portray her characters as being 'victims of circumstances' but portrays them as

assertive women who have an active political agency over their own lives amidst all the challenges they face.

The story is set in modern-day Ghana and revolves around the lives of two well-educated Ghanaian women; Esi is an urban analyst while her friend Opokuya is a registered nurse. Esi's trouble marriage with her husband Oko and the unresolved issues between her friend and her husband Kubi that are addressed in the novel (Aidoo, 2015). These struggles help to put into perspective the conflicts and expectations of the African families and societies in this contemporary time. In the novel, Aidoo is able to integrate personal movements to reveal the large political, social and economic issues that face both genders in the contemporary Ghanaian society.

During their conversation at the bar, Esi and Opokuya raise three pertinent issues that characterize the gender roles in the African society (Olaussen, 2002). The first is the compulsory obligations that women have to marriage. They can either get married or suffer death through shame, loneliness and heartbreak. Two, is the image of dependency and fragility played by women. This point brings about the issue of the African patriarchal beliefs and values. The third is on the classism that affects sisterhood. These are the economic oppression and subjugation that put African women against each other.

On the other hand, *What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky* is a 2017 is a short collection of stories. The short stories are written by Nigerian author Lesley Nneka Arimah. The short stories explore the ties that bind families together. It explores the parental-children ties, husband-wives ties, and lover-and friends.

### **Singlehood vs Marriage**

In *Changes*, Aidoo raises the issue of marriage whose alternative is death through loneliness, shame or heartbreak. Traditionally, Africans have always placed great value in marriage and family. For a family to be firm and to progress, a man, and a woman or more than one woman had to be joined together in marriage (Olaussen, 2002). The man served as the head of the family while the women either subjugated to or complemented the roles of the husband. However, as Opokuya and Esi converse, it becomes evident that Esi's relationship is a source of apprehension and concern because it is perceived as being abnormal for a woman to be single. Opokuya argues "...Esi, what are you going to do now? After all, you are human. You must get lonely sometimes? (47)" "Really, why throw away a perfectly good husband for the loneliness of a single woman's life? (Aidoo, 46)"

From these statements, it can be seen that the notion of adulthood happiness is often misconstrued as coming from marriage. Opokuya believes that a woman can only be happy when she is married and cannot find

satisfaction outside of marriage. When Esi remains adamant about her failed marriage, Opokuya is quick to suggest a divorce, but with a remarriage. However, Esi argues that "I could not bear it...Another husband to sit on my back all twenty-four hours of the day? The same arguments about where a woman's place is? Another husband to whine all day about how I love my work more than him? Ugh, Opokuya, I couldn't. (46)"

Evidently, Esi felt burdened by her marriage, she could not fully enjoy her work or have peace in her home. She says 'have another husband to sit on my back all twenty-four hours a day (48).' The demands of marriage was too much for Esi. Opokuya further argued 'But mind you...unlike so many cities abroad, there isn't much here that a single woman can do to relieve the loneliness and boredom of the long hours between the end of the working day and sleep. (48)" She does not believe that single women can have an enjoyable and fulfilling life. Yet, this is not the case as many women in contemporary African societies are embracing the life of a single woman. They pursue their careers and enjoy their hobbies. They provide shelter, clothes and food and any other material needs for themselves.

In the story 'Glory', Arimah addresses the traditional roles of women in the opening pages of the story. The author writes 'She would learn to cook like her grandmother, her father added, to which her mother countered, why not like her mother, and Glory be to god's father hemmed and hawed till his wife said maybe he should go and eat at his mother's house.'" These are the roles that a girl was supposed to learn. These are also the 'type of life well-situated Igbos imagined for their children. She would be a smart girl with the best schooling. She would attend church regularly and never stray from the Word, (Arimah, 2017).' The author shows the expectations the African society has on girls and women and the clearly set boundaries within which they are expected to act upon. Despite these well-laid out plans and hopes, Glory is a single woman at thirty, living alone in Minneapolis and working at a call center. Glory's life is full of disappointments and failed dreams. However, these dreams are mostly her parents' and not her own. She doesn't finish law school as her parents expected her to. Her parents, even her mother, are sorely disappointed in her.

### **Fragile and Dependent Masculinity**

In *Changes*, the characteristics of the African man to embody fragile and dependent masculinity is evident. The men in this era feel a need to be able to control their women (Oloko, 2008). Any perceived loss of this control is equated to a loss of their manhood. For the men, being in control is equal to being the dominant and controlling partner in the relationship. As Opokuya states "...it is easy to see that our societies have had no patience with the unmarried woman.

People thought her single state was an insult to the glorious manhood of our men. (49)” the single women are seen as a threat and an insult to African men’s manhood and masculinity. This is because the single woman, especially those who do it by choice, seeks her self-sufficiency and independence (Aidoo, 2015). These traits have been traditionally attributed and claimed by the African man. Therefore, when a woman pursues her independence and self-sufficiency outside of marriage, the African man cannot comprehend.

Esi embodies the changing gender roles in the African society. She seeks to earn and sustain her independence and lifestyle. The women now want to enjoy their personal freedom while being happy.

### **Women’s Economic Independence**

Esi, is a paradigm of a strong and independent woman. As an urban analyst, she earns more than her husband. She also own the home in which she lives. More so, she is a highly educated woman with a masters’ degree. Esi also enjoys her career and advancing her career is a priority for her just as having a family. However, given the traditional role women are expected to play, that is prioritize being a wife and mother, Esi faces trouble fitting in with the societal expectations. She has a strong will and in independent. She is a perfect representation of the emerging feminine identity where women compete equally with men in regards to financial and personal security (Aidoo, 2015). She wants to have the freedom to pursue her career. This is trait that is common among the young African women. They are competing with the males on different fronts and are seeking to becoming financial independent and self-sufficient. Girls, despite the inequalities prevalent in the society, compete with the boys for a place in the education system and later into the career field (Curry, 2011). Others take on different routes such as becoming entrepreneurs or farmers. Their purpose is to achieve economic independence which most see as the best way to do away with the shackles that come with being dependent on men. Women are also coming to enjoy their careers, especially in the fields that were traditional reserved for men. Esi for instance, is an urban analyst, and she immensely enjoys her career (Aidoo, 2015). With her master’s degree, she can work to get promotion at work. She embraces the challenges of her work and competes with her male colleagues for acknowledgement.

As the women embrace their intelligence, economic independence and career advancement, the dynamics of gender roles are also changing. Women now have the economic empowerment to make investment decisions and invest to better their future. This is, however, not entirely accepted by the males in the African society (Curry, 2011). As argued earlier, some men view women’s independence and self-sufficiency as a threat to their masculinity. This was the case with Oko Sekyi, Esi’s husband. He loves Esi and

admired her intelligence, independence and economic empowerment. At the same time, he also resents her for her independence and intelligence. His friends make comments about him (Aidoo, 2015). The friends regard him as being less of man because his wife does not rely on him for financial assistance. This is reflective of the perception of some men in regards to the changing gender role. The men associated with strong independent women are viewed as being less of a man. To reinforce his place as the ‘head’ of the family, Oko rapes his wife.

This leads to another portrayal of women’s independence in the contemporary African society. Esi decides to get a divorce as Oko does not even apologize for his actions. He, just like most people, is struggling to understand and embrace the changes in the gender roles as they unfold in the society today (Arimah, 2017). His mother, feels that he should have a traditional Africa wife, and gives him a young girl who can be compliant and obedient.

Ali’s character in Aidoo’s book is the opposite of Esi. He is intelligent, wealthy and handsome. He is a worldly man whose job as the head of a travel agency takes him to different places. However, Ali has a wandering eye. He is always in pursuit of new experiences and new women. This can be attributed to the world he was raised in. He was raised in the western world where he was educated (Okrah, 2015). Just like his father, Ali strongly believes that he can still practice polygamy (Msuya, 2020). He believes that he can possess as many women as he wants and can also marry as many women as he desires. This is why he gets married to Esi as a second wife, even though his first wife Fusena is not in total agreement. He limits Fusena’s ambitions and does not allow her to complete her degree as part of his ability to limit her intellectual and economic independence. However, even after marrying two wives, Ali is not satisfied (Aidoo, 2015; & Curry, 2011). He does not meet his wives’ emotional and physical needs as he continues with his philandering ways. He embodies the traditional male in a male-dominated society where men perceive such behaviors as being understandable. However, he could not maintain any of his marriages. He could no sustain a relationship with two contemporary women whose needs go beyond provision of a home and material possession (Misuya, 2020).

### **Single-Parenthood**

In the short story *Light*, a single-parent home is explored. However, instead of the normal practice where it is the man who leaves the home and the care of the children at the hands of the mother or wife, is it Enebeli Okwara who raises his unnamed daughter in Port Harcourt Nigeria. The unnamed mother is a career-driven and less nurturing woman and mother who went to the United States to pursue her degree. Enebeli is left with his eleven-year-old girl, in the brink of teenage

hood to raise by himself (Arimah, 2017). Contrary to what most African men would do in a traditional setting, Enebeli does not remarry nor does he find himself a second wife to help him raise his daughter. He single-handedly tries to deal with the challenges of raising an adolescent girl who has started showing an interest in boys. He deeply loves his daughter and does not punish her for sending notes to boys in school. Rather, he cherishes her company as she grows and matures into an adult. This is a major shift in the gender roles. Mostly, it is men who left home to pursue their careers or to further their education (Simpson, 2007). The women were left behind to nurture their children and take care of the family.

Even more significant is the way the father and daughter share their roles. Despite having a female house help, Enebeli is afraid to order the sullen house help around preferring to do the household chores by himself. This is a main shift in the gender roles, even though the household is not his wife, sister, mother or relative (Simpson, 2007). However, it would be expected that the house help would do the household chores and be assisted by the daughter. 'What do you mean Daddy made you breakfast, you are old enough to be cooking...And speaking of chores, father and daughter share them, each somewhat inept, each too intimidated by their sullen house girl to order her around (Arimah, 30).'

However, in this short story, Arimah shows the changing dynamics of familial roles. The mother leaves her family behind to pursue her career and the man embraces the role of caring for and nurturing an adolescent daughter. The independence of women is also evident in the short story 'Second Chances.' In the story, Uche is an independent woman who lives in Houston. When she has to ask her father for help in purchasing a mattress, she is slightly ashamed that she requires his assistance because she is a postgraduate student who should be able to meet her needs adequately.

In the story *Buchi Girls*, Buchi, a mother of two children, 12 year-old Louisa and six year-old-Damaris Arima addresses the issue of inequality in the society and its influence on gender roles. Here, Buchi loses her husband Nnamdi in a car accident. Buchi is left a single mother and is forced to move in with her sister and her husband. As a single mother, Buchi is forced to make tough choices to have a roof over her daughters' head and to provide food for them. As a single mother with no roof over her head and no money to sustain herself and her children, she is forced to ensure the arrogance of her sister and her husband.

Buchi tries to make the best out of the situation and she is forced to make decisions that no mother should have to. She asks her daughter Louisa,

"Do you know why I had to listen to Uncle Dickson?"

Because we are destitute.

Because your father was a fool and, yes, money is everything.

Because the consequences of disrespecting a man like Dickson are always

Disproportionate to the sin. A grenade in retaliation for a slap. A world undone for a girl's

mistake (Arimah, 2017).

Here, the struggles that come with being a single mother with no husband to support her weigh down on her. Her sister is mean to her and her husband feels entitled to abuse her because he has given them a house. This is vastly different from the traditional African roles where the men protected the women rather than abuse them.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to examine how the shift in gender roles in the contemporary African society. Two books were selected for analysis. Based on the book's findings, it can be argued that in the contemporary African society, the gender roles of men and women are changing. This change is mostly driven by women as they aim to attain independence and self-sufficiency. As Allgebe & Allgebe (2015) argue, the roles of men and women in the society are social and cultural structured. The African society had traditionally fashioned the role of men and women in a complementary manner. Each gender played a role which met the overall goals of the community. Their roles balanced each other and worked towards the good of the family and the society. However, as colonialism prevailed, the patriarchal system already in place distorted the role of men and women. The systems, laws, customs, beliefs and attitudes in place led women to be seen as subservient to men. They were treated as second class citizens. The prevalence of these attitudes was evident in the gender roles as women strove to be independent where men feel threatened. The book shows that women are increasingly earning more money than the men, purchasing their own homes and living independently of any support from the men. Similarly, women are actively pursuing education, and even sacrificing their time nurturing and caring for their children to pursue higher education and better career opportunities. This is the case in 'Light' where Enebeli, is forced to raise his daughter alone as his wife moves to the US. Similarly, Esi is an independent woman with her own financial capabilities. Her husband resents her for this. Generally, these stories show that the African contemporary society is changing and women and men's traditional roles are blurring. There is no longer a clear-cut line on what each gender is expected to do.

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