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WOMANISM, AGENCY AND SOCIAL PROGRESS IN AMA ATA AIDOO'S *OUR SISTER KILLJOY* AND *CHANGES: A LOVE STORY* AND ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE*.

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Disclaimer

I hereby declare that the substance of this dissertation (thesis) is entirely the result of my investigation and that due reference or acknowledgement is made, whenever necessary, to the work of other researchers.

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Abstract

This dissertation is concerned with the issue of feminism in three important novels belonging to post-colonial literature, and rarely studied in conjunction. By exploring feminine enunciations in the works of the African writer Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy, or Reflections from a Black-eyed Squint* and *Changes: A Love Story* and the African-American Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, I examine the stylistic and thematic features which reflect the common concerns of African and African-American women writers by focusing on the way the characters, themes and women's issues are dealt with in their fiction. This study postulates that even though the lives of the African and African-American women are shaped by different historical forces and social traditions, situations and issues intersect –as revealed by Aidoo and Walker's writings –because of a common background of patriarchal domination.

Through the course of this study, an attempt is made to draw a comparison between the black women portrayed in the literary works of the two writers, how African female protagonists have fared, as compared to their African-American counterparts. Furthermore, the various issues affecting these protagonists' lives are analyzed, insisting on the specificities of race, class, nationality and sexualities that intersect with gender.

In the process of critically discussing the novels, the emphasis is laid on the socio-cultural and historical factors, such as patriarchy, slavery, racism and sexism, as being the causes of the resentment or dissent noted in the females' behaviors. Then, this study examines the extent to which these constraints succeed in silencing and marginalizing the 'subaltern' women by reducing them to an inferior status. I also examine their degree of resistance in the novels, and consider to what extent the female protagonists react and reject the silence imposed by these dominant ideologies.

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Introduction

Introduction:

The goal of this comparative and cross-cutural approach is to bring together the two important black women novelists that I have selected for study, one African and one African-American, and to examine their common challenges against the double bind of sexual and racial discrimination which place them in an extremely difficult position, as well as to find ties in their imaginative strategies for social change.

Black women writers from Africa and the African Diaspora have opened up a whole new world of opportunities and awareness concerning women and the black race in general. More than ever before, they have become more conscious and aware of their situation and of the need to create their own identities and movements. Black women's access to education remains the most effective tool for their empowerment and awareness. After being silenced and made invisible, black women have started to emerge on the literary scene and fight hard to be recognized by the publishers, critics as well as their male counterparts. Through their writings, they try to depict black women's experiences and struggle in the postcolonial context in terms of racial, cultural and gender issues.

In her editorial introduction to the issue of "the black scholar" in a conference entitled: "*The Black Woman Writer and the Diaspora*" at Michigan State University, Gloria T.Hull writes:

> One of the most dramatic changes in the literary world over the last decade has been the blossoming of a large corps of female writers, poets, critics. It is not that black women writers did not exist prior to this period, but the black literary scene had historically been predominantly a male preserve. On the one hand, a white, male-dominated publishing industry hadn't seen fit to publish the works of black women writers; on the other hand, even among the black intelligentsia, only the male articulation of the black experience had been viewed as worthy of literary expression. In conjunction with the growth of a movement for women's liberation, however, this situation has dramatically been reversed in recent years….In the process black women are currently making a valuable contribution to the U.S literary landscape, bringing their own experiences as women to life in the

> form of exciting female characters who confront not only a racist world but a sexist one[1]

Black women have a long history of activism that can be traced to pre-colonial Africa. Those women who are writers have challenged the status quo in the cultural, political and spiritual realms of their communities by using their craft to present women defying traditional roles and resisting strictures of oppression[2]. Black women writers bring to their writings representations of women that are more dynamic than the images of subordination often presented by both black men and their white counterparts. In fact, Black women are both victims of white hegemonic ideology which devalues them because of their race and patriarchal ideology which devalues them because of their gender. Carole Boyce Davis claims that black women's existence is marginalized in the terms of majority–minority discourses within the Euro-American male or female canon or black male canon[3]. In her book *In Feminist Theory: from Margin to Center*, Bell Hooks states that

> Black men may be victimized by racism, but sexism allows them to act as exploiters and oppressors of women. White women may be victimized by sexism, but racism enables them to act as exploiters and oppressors of black people. Black women have no institutionalized 'other' to discriminate against, exploit, or oppress[4]

The majority of black women's texts overtly question the male-dominated literary scene in which female representation is largely marginal and stereotypical. Actually, the position of inferiority that black women have long occupied in black literature has been reversed by women who are no longer just 'outsiders-within', but who became and act as 'insiders-within'. In these women's writings as well, the female characters are portrayed not in stereotypical and inferior positions, readily and

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[1] Quoted in: Nfah-Abbyeni, Juliana Makuchi. *Gender in African women's writing: Identity, Sexuality and Difference*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997, p.1.

[2] Llena A Ampadu, *Black Women Writers as Dynamics Agents of Change: Empowering Women from Africa to America*. The Forum on Public Policy, 2006, p. 2.

[3] Davis, Carole Boyce. *Black women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*. London & New York, Routledge, 1994, p.4.

[4] Hooks, Bell. *From Margin to Center: Feminist Theory*. London, Pluto Press, 2000, p. 16.

willingly accepting their lives as they are. Instead, they come alive as speaking subjects and agents of change.

These black women writers engage with the silence imposed upon them trough their writing which has become an agent of change since women are now writing about themselves, bringing not only their point of view but also their lived experiences in order to reclaim their marginal position. Their realities, concerns and analyses are being brought to world attention today by their political activism and by their artistic and written expression. They took the conflict and disillusionment themes but extended them into new areas of social life especially gender roles bringing a female point of view to the issue of cultural conflicts and economic change.

Aidoo and Walker participate in this debate with their prose works and their essays. Having been to the white man's school, receiving western education and being exposed to new ideas, these women are at the forefront of the new changes occurring in women's conditions. And as such, little by little, they started acting on their own initiative and their voices could be heard. Today, they can express their opinions, feelings and desires through literary works. Black women's writing is a significant weapon and the only powerful tool of resistance to stand firm against their oppressors as they could actually state their opinions and experiences concerning the injustices they faced.

Black women from America and Africa can be related because of a common history of male domination, be it black or white, and of outright victimisation in the case of Africans who were enslaved and taken to America. Another commonality is that both African-American and African women writers share similar aesthetic attitudes which are distinct from those of white feminists because of race and on account of the fact that black women have experienced in the past and in the present subtle control exercised over them by a foreign western culture. In addition, the study of African female writers has in some ways been linked and influenced by the reaction and the progress made by African-American feminists. In this connection Aidoo states in an interview:

> My understanding of womanism is like feminism. But because of us being African and black, because of our position in history, womanists believe that this special component makes it a little difficult for us to say we are feminists. Womanism adds the added understanding of our position in history to the discourse. You know that we can be feminists. But, you know, on the other hand, we bring more to the discourse, which makes us Womanists (….) for me that's also a problematic, because it is essentializing our situation, which brings its own limitations. I think it is a very complex issue.[5]

It is worth noting that in spite of the cultural features that separate them, African-American and African women share similar aesthetic choices. Both challenge the exclusion and contempt of a characteristially male-dominated literary scene and reject the Western feminist movement to embrace together the new concept of "Womanism" they have common interests and goals which are to give voice to women who had long been silenced and marginalized. In her study of black women writers, Barbara Christian remarks that some African women writers share the same characteristics with Afro-American ones. She states:

> There may be major points of comparison between contemporary African and African-American writers, my intuition being their natural roots in Africa as well as their experiences of sexism, enslavement, and colonialism have so affected their lives that they might tend to use similar themes and forms[6]

Whether they are Africans or African-Americans, they are engaged in combat against racial, social and gender oppression. According to the Zimbabwean writer Tsitsi Dangarembga, black American female writers offer more relevancy for African women than does white western feminism. Generally, African women's predicaments and concerns are shared by African-American women's own. Jayne Cortez, a poet and president of Organization of Women Writers of Africa states that: "Black women

[5] Azodo, Ada Uzoamaka. "*Interview with Ama Ata Aidoo: Facing the Millennium*". Hauppauge, N.Y, March, 31, 1996, p.7.
[6] Quoted in: Christian, Barbara. *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspective on Black Women Writers*. New York, Teachers College Press, 1997, p.212.

writers from around the globe have been struggling with racism, exploitation, gender oppression, and other human rights violations"[7],

She adds:

> The psychological consequences of globalization have been a major part of the subject matter of the contemporary African writer. In relation to Africa and African culture, the international slave trade and colonialism forced significant contact with globalization in its early manifestation. What Black women writers want is to participate in global decisions concerning survival and the future of humanity; they need access to the progress of globalization.[8]

Concerning their commitments, a sense of community exists between African and African-American women. The fact of colonialism has undeniably changed the fate of women in Africa, causing them to be doubly oppressed. In the United States, the history of slavery has contributed, in the same way colonialism did in Africa, to the degradation of the position of women. This leads to the term of comparison of African-American double race-and-gender repression with the African term of double gender-and-colonization repression.

It is important to stress that even the line of communication between the African and African-American women was broken by a history of slavery. African-American women have had to revive the culture of their foremothers who used the oral tradition of story- telling to import cultural values which have been passed down from generation to generation. As women, they have attempted to (re)discover, reflect, and (re)articulate the African heritage which has been distorted through imposed dominant cultural values and attempts integration into a white- ruled society. Toni Morisson further notes that if we do not keep in touch with the ancestor, we become lost and "when you kill the ancestor you kill yourself". In truth, African women are the source of inspiration for the African-American women who seek successfully to write stories which transmit history and tradition, starting with African roots.

[7] Llena, A Ampadu. Op. Cit. p. 2
[8] Ibid

Obviously, when contemporary African-American women started to write their literary works, they looked back to Africa as the source of traditions and customs that helps them to build communities more in line with African cultural values, from Zora Neale Hurston's "If I never see you no' mo' on earth. Ah'll meet you in Africa" to Alice Walker's Afro-utopian community in the rural South; from Toni Morrison's Solomon who deserts his family to join the "flying Africans" to Paul Marshall's Igbos who take one look at the New World and decide to walk on home[9].

By using their specific stories, histories, and locations to (re)define their identity and womanhood, African and African-American women writers like Aidoo and Walker have helped to redress the one-sided, passive, and stereotyped image of the black woman that has been depicted by both the colonizers (white men and women) and their male counterparts by bringing to the forefront their own experiences and points of view.

Through their respective works, Alice Walker and Ama Ata Aidoo encourage their heroines to resist against the rigidity of their societies as well as the silence imposed on their voices. They portray black women characters who symbolically question representations of sexuality and racism in an attempt to make visible the process of liberation from the constraints of their societies.

It can be noted that even though there is a strong African cultural bond between African women writers and the African-American counterparts, there are, naturally dissimilarities regarding the way in which the former approach their own society and the latter perceive their adaptation of African culture into their own mode of life.

Unlike African-American women, the African ones are caught in a dilemma between their liberation and that of the whole nation. Therefore, they have to choose between the feminist cause and the nationalist one in the ambitious project of nation-building against cultural imperialism. In fact, African women have to fight for their rights within the parameters of the national struggle for the political independence of

[9] Wilentz, Gay. *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora*. USA. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992, p.xii.

their people as a whole: while African women reclaim space for themselves in African societies, they address problems that face the continent as a whole.

Additionally, African women see their culture in both a positive and negative way. In fact, even though the female characters resist and oppose the traditions which reinforce and restrict their freedom, in certain respects they generally comply with the same patriarchal norms and customs. Besides, despite the emphasis on the cultural continuity between Africa and America, African-American women do not wish to romanticize the traditions of the homeland. In fact, African-American women reject the African traditions that are used to validate the control over the female sexuality. A good example is illustrated by Alice Walker's novels *The Color Purple* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. In these novels, despite the fact that she criticizes American society for being racist, she is equally critical of her African ancestors, exposing merely the restrictive codes and the "cruelty" of African socio-religious practices.

The aim of this research is to find out and study how Aidoo and Walker portray the agency of African and African-American women in their power relations with communities governed by male principles and traditions. These are also in contention with the factors of slavery and –later – colonialism that contributed to the control of African women. It is worth considering how far gender and racial discrimination are affecting women's values and how these women react to claim their own identities.

This dissertation is made up of five chapters. The first one presents a theoritical basis by dealing with some concepts of Feminism, Womanism, Africana Womanism and Post-colonialism, underlying the debate about the literature produced by black women to justify further the state of alienation, resistance and revolt of the female characters caused by social constraints. The second segment of the thesis focuses on the dilemma posed in Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy*, dealing with (African) feminist identity and concerns as inherently related to Nationalism and Pan-Africanism. The second part of the chapter will analyze the significance of the gender issue in the novel. In this way, I will demonstrate how the problems that confront African women are inextricably bound up with those of the continent. Chapter three deals with the personal and the political in Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story*, focusing mainly on the

problem of negotiating the gender identity in a changing society arising from the complex interplay between the traditional cultural parctices and the western values brought by colonialism. Chapter four deals with Walker's *The Color Purple*, it traces the evolution of Celie's growth from the context of oppression to asserting her identity. Female bonding, the relationship between black women and their resistance against victimazation is also discussed, as an important and practical means to achieve liberation. Chapter five will undertake an analysis of the narrative style applied in the texts by the two authors. It introduces language as an element of self-empowerment that defines the personal voice of the black women's identity. Thus in this work I shall attempt to demonstrate how both Aidoo and Walker are fairly close in their preoccupations in the way their respective female characters negotiate their roles in their societies. Advocacy for change is high on both writers' agendas, as their novels will reveal.

Chapter 1

Background and Theoretical Landmarks

a- Feminism/Womanism/Africana Womanism

b- Postcolonial Theory and Women's Writings

a) Feminism/ Womanism and Africana Womanism

For several centuries, in most societies, historically and traditionally, women and men have never been granted equal rights. Women's conditions have been marked by harsh and hardly manageable constraints. They have been mostly deprived of most of their individual rights and liberties. Home has been prison for the majority of them, and the centre of all their activities. Oppression is the word that comes to mind: the dominance of men over women in society has been justified and reinforced by the idea and clichés that women are emotional, subordinate, intellectually inapt and physically weak and therefore they can be only inferior to men. Based on such premises, some tasks and functions in society have always been reserved for and dominated by men. As the feminist scholar Sheila Ruth succinctly puts it:

> They all say that women as human beings are substandard: less intelligent; less moral; less competent; less able physically; psychologically, and spiritually; small of body, mind, and character.[1]

This reductive position pushes women to appeal to the principles of human rights to defend theirs. They began reconsidering their beliefs about patriarchy. They realized that the inferior and backward position that they have long occupied was not at all naturally but culturally and socially programmed. Indeed, many theories and ideas were concerned with women's freedom and liberation. As a result, women's movement rose to claim their rights and ask for a suitable and respectful position in society.

Feminism developed through the nineteenth century. It actually started when women thought they could oppose the oppression and marginalization exerted on them and took steps to redress this situation by creating feminist movements. Feminism is a form of militancy centered on the equality of men and women at the social, political and economic level. It is the belief that women are full human beings fit to participate and lead in the full range of human activities. Feminism is a concept that has been

[1] Wiredu, Kwasi, ed. *A Companion to the African Philosophy*. USA: Blackwell publishing Ltd, 2004, pp.562-563.

used to address the treatment and defend the rights of women in many cultures. It originated as a term in the west, in Europe and the United States, and many have tried to apply the principles and concerns of white, middle class, western women to those from other cultures and classes[2]. Indeed, the claims of the Western feminists can be extended and identified as the fundamental causes of black women's suffering. Nevertheless, Western feminism does not recognize the complexities and specificities of African societies. As a number of women think, it does not address the needs of all women. It has always been associated with whiteness and viewed by both black and whites as the cultural property of white women. This is actually what Walker and Aidoo, among other writers and essayists insist upon. The novels discussed here highlight the difference between the white and black women that is made manifest in the stark and brutal reality of their situation. Indeed, by focusing attention on the experiences of black women, Walker and Aidoo's novels support the struggle of these women to create an awareness of the strength and knowledge of subalterns who are empowered to speak, inviting the reader to view the protagonists from a perspective of understanding.

It is worth mentioning that many feminists claim that Western feminism perpetuates the white dominance through its universalizing tendencies which ignore the reality, experience and mostly the difference of black women. In her book: *In Feminism Without Borders*: *Decolonizing Theory*, *Practicing Solidarity*, the feminist theorist Chandra Talpade Mohanty who deals with the issues of Western feminism and its role in the mainstream of biased and victimized representations of women in other cultures sheds light on the relationship between white masculinity, colonialism, traditional forms of patriarchy, and the continuing dominance of the middle-class values. According to Mohanty, Western feminism has an ethnocentric perspective that privileges white, middle-class women and fails to recognize and to consider the lives experience and colonial legacy of many other women. She asserts that Western

[2]Jones, Baily Rachel. *Postcolonial Representations of Women: Critical Issues for Education*: USA. Springer, 2011, p 34.

feminism has the tendency to look at women's oppression from the perspective of western, white and middle-class women as the category of analyses.

Another figure who accuses Western feminism of being racist because it excludes black women from a full participation in the movement is Bell Hooks. She criticizes Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) which paved the way to the contemporary feminist movement that ignored completely the presence of black/ lower class women. According to her, racism exists in the writings of white feminists that make female bonding difficult in the face of ethnic and racial differences. Mohanty confirms Bell Hook's view by claiming that sisterhood cannot be assumed on the basis of gender because beyond sisterhood there are still racism, colonialism, and imperialism[3].

One crucial criticism leveled by black women is that Western feminism does not see beyond Western borders, and this ignores and does not adequately recognize the complexities, specificities, experiences and the differences of other women. Furthermore, it places all women's history under white women's history and experience. Thus, many definitions have been coined to best suit the needs of racial groups, black women in particular.

Black feminism thus emerged as a response to feminist theories and white bourgeois women's movement that omitted serious examination of racism, and the general concerns of black women. It acknowledges further the link between the struggles for freedom from racism and sexism in black women's lives.

For this reason, black women modify the term feminism to better describe their experiences since they witness a different and more intense kind of oppression. Similarly, they do not accept the fact that their status can be compared with that of their Western counterparts. In Africa, the pioneer female writers have flatly denied having anything to do with the ideology of feminism. They consider the term "feminist" as applicable to the struggles of white, middle class women, and inappropriate for depicting the broader liberation issues confronting African women.

[3] Katrack, Ketu H. *Politics of the Female Body: Postcolonial Women Writers of the Third World*. New Brunswick, New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2006, p 41.

Tsitsi Dangarembga rejects feminism as a label of her identity, she has stated in an interview: "the white western feminism does not meet my experiences at a certain point, the issue of me as a black woman. The black American female writers touch more of me than the white ones"[4]. In addition, black women oppose this movement because it tries to impose its feminist beliefs and ideas on them. Those beliefs do not adequately serve the experiences of black women but those of a particular privileged group. Buchi Emecheta is another black African woman writer to reject western feminism. She alludes to the fact that some African women writers see it as "a form of imperialism with a woman's face". This imperialism aims at dominating African women by imposing the feminist visions and perspectives on them. Like Aidoo, she prefers to dissociate herself from the tag "feminist" in many interviews:

> I write about the little happening of everyday life. Being a woman, and African born, I see things through an African woman's eyes. I chronicle the little happening in the lives of African women I know. I did not know that by doing so I was going to be called a feminist. But if I am now a feminist then I am an African feminist with a small "f"[5]

She adds:

> I will not be called a feminist here, because it is European. It is as simple as that. I just resent that ….. I don't like being defined by them……it is just that it comes from outside and I don't like people dictating to me. I do believe in the African type of feminism. They called it Womanism[6]

Additionally, the South African writer Miriam Tlali prefers to be recognized simply as the voice of African women speaking on their behalf and striving to make their voice audible. She states:

> In South Africa we live under a pyramid of power, so I regard myself as the voice of the African women who is oppressed politically, socially, and culturally. There is not enough emphasis given to the plight of the South African woman. I insist on this in my collection of short stories *Soweto Stories*...African women have no voice, no platform and nobody cares…therefore I feel that I must address them in my writing[7]

[4] Quoted in: Arnfred, Signe. *Rethinking Sexualities in Africa*. Sweden: Almqvist and Wiksell Tryckeri, 2004, p254.
[5] Arnfred, Signe. Op. Cit. p. 259
[6] Ibid
[7] Arnfred, Signe. Op. Cit. p. 260

The above mentioned writers claim that the Western feminist movement has nothing to do with the African experience: this feminism is carried by Westernism that is not relevant to the cause of Third World women. When the "feminist flag" is raised, it can be brought down since feminism is regarded as "Western" and irrelevant for Third World contexts[8]. Consequently, it has not been adopted or accepted by all women without being questioned. African-American women as well as the African ones have qualms about the movement. The need was highly significant for them to define feminism for their own purposes, and to identify issues that demonstrate how Western feminism is irrelevant to their societies. Walker and Aidoo's novels also draw attention to this, in that they focus on the depth of suffering black women experience, as a result of their interconnected forms of sexist and racial oppressions. Focusing mainly on black women implies that, in addition to their gender, the women's race and culture can also be overlapping issues that may significantly affect their experiences, and are thus taken into consideration when exploring the women's experiences.

In the United States, African-American women have continually questioned the definition of feminism as a universal solution to the problems women face. Black women who had adopted the women's movement sought to "speak out" in order to protest against what they considered to be the politics of exclusion by both the civil rights movement of the 1960's and of the predominantly white and middle-class feminist movement. In fact, African-American women have been made invisible, marginalized and rejected by both the African-American men who always claimed to speak about the whole black race and by the Anglo-American feminists who sought gender equality. According to Calvin Hernton : "Though black and white men stand on opposing sides of the racial mountain in America, they tread a common ground when it comes to the mountain of sex"[9]. In this sense, he distinguishes a difference between the oppression suffered by African-Americans as a collective group in contrast to the oppression suffered by African-American women in the United States. He claims that

[8] Katrack, Ketu H. Op. Cit. 43

[9] Braxton, Joanne M and Mclaughlin, Andrée Nicola, eds. *Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afra-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1990, p. 195.

identity has been denied to black women because of racism and oppression from white men and women and they have as well been the victims of sexism in their own communities, Andrée Nicolas McLaughlin echoes this idea and affirms that the "patriarchal oppression ensures that women experience any other oppression twice over –as a member of the dominated group and as a woman"[10].

She adds that, traditionally, African-American men were the fathers and purveyors of the black world literature in the United States. Thus, the complexity and vitality of the black female experience have been fundamentally marginalized and ignored.

As a result of this massive rejection, African-American women decided to challenge this situation and reject the negative image of black womanhood, pointing out that race, gender, and class oppression were the fundamental causes of black women's poverty. Maria Stewart urges and encourages black women to forge a self-definition of self-reliance and independence which are essential for black women's survival: "It is useless for us any longer to sit with our hands folded, reproaching the whites; for that will never elevate us". She exhorted: "possess the spirit of independence … possess the spirit of men, bold and enterprising, fearless and undaunted"[11].

African-American women intellectuals have been "talking quite a bit" since the 1970's and have decided that the masculine bias of their male counterparts and the racist one in the feminist theory should be corrected. Indeed the year 1970 was a high-water mark in the publication history of African-American women's critical and creative work. Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*, Alice Walker's novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Maya Angelou's memoir *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* and Toni Cade's *Anthology*. Each of these texts highlights the difficult life of black women facing both sexism and racism that stand as obstacles for their freedom and wholeness. Besides, most of the major issues raised in these literary works and

[10] Braxton, Joanne M and Mclaughlin, Andrée Nicola. Op. Cit. p.152
[11] Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 2000, p 1.

collected essays are the need for sexual self-determination and economic empowerment, the struggle against the psychic pain of racism and sexism, the possibility of coalition across the lines of race, gender, sexual orientation and class, and black women's passionate and persistent strategies of self-formation, self-recovery and self-expression. Yet, African-American women were not so much interested in the definition of their feminity; rather they were concerned and obsessed with defining their citizenship and American identity and patriotism.

Across the ocean, the African woman has had to endure the same kinds of exclusion from the male-oriented African literary scene and live the same fate as that of her African-American sister. Many literary works in Africa deal with these issues. Facing both sexism and racism, she struggles to change her situation from an oppressed to a liberated one. Shouldering the feminist movement of the 1960's and following the winds of independence that swept across Africa, African women took the conflict and brought to the forefront their experience of the double bind of living in a racist and sexist society which has placed them on the margin of society. Much of African women's writing contains therefore a discourse which gives voice to women in a society that has suffered from colonialism, on the one hand, and from the grip of all pervasive and domineering indigenous patriarchal structures, on the other. Further, they bring representations of women that are more dynamic than the images of subordination often presented by their male counterparts. By representing their past, either in fictional, historical or autobiographical narratives, theses writers create the opportunity to define themselves from their own points of view.

As a matter of fact, African-American and African women overcame a different set of barriers comparing them to their male counterparts. Hence their yearning has been aggravated by the restrictions that govern blacks as well as those women, in other words, they suffered from the double stigma of "non white" and "not male".

As western feminism fails to deal with issues that affect black women, theories of black feminism and Womanism are forged. These two theoretical concepts are developed to call attention to the multiple oppressions experienced by women of color reflecting their everyday experiences in their own terms. The black female experience

is characterized by oppression of race, class and gender. These oppressions are interwoven into social structures and work together to define the history of the lives of black women.

The modern black feminism grew out of a sense of discontent with both the civil rights movement of the 1960's which focused predominantly on the oppression of black men and the feminist movement of the 1970's which was pre-occupied with the issues of gender and deal primarily with the problems faced by white, middle-class women. Black feminism constitutes both an ideology and a global political movement. It is created to resist the issues that white feminists ignored, like cultural oppression, as pointed out by Gloria I. Joseph and Jill Lewis in their book entitled *Common Differences: Conflicts in Black and White Feminist Perspectives*:(1981), "The racism, classism, and sexism associated with each women's experienced of being black and female in the U.S are critical measurement of their oppression" [12].

The theoretical foundations of my study borrow from the black feminist movement. The concept of "Womanism" is central in this respect. It is a term coined by the African-American writer Alice Walker in her book *In Search of Our Mother's Garden*: *Womanist Prose* (1983). In this collection of essays, Walker defines a womanist as "a black feminist or feminist of color, an outrageous and audacious woman who is interested in learning and questioning all things. A womanist is a responsible woman who loves other women both sexually, and non- sexually, a woman who appreciates and prefers woman's culture, strength and emotional flexibility"[13]. Naturally, Walker has been labeled a feminist writer. However, she prefers the term "womanist" rather than "feminist"; she believes that the term "womanist" captures the spirit of the African-American woman. She claims that a "womanist to feminist as purple to lavender"[14].In fact, the introduction of the term Womanism by Alice Walker is used to describe the experiences and perspectives of women of color. Womanists argue that the liberation of black women means freedom

[12]Quoted in: Feifer, Megan and Maher, Jennifer. *The History of Black Feminism and Womanism: Their Emergence from the Modern Women's Movement*, 2005, P.12.
[13] Walker, Alice. *In Search of our Mother's Gardens*. London: The Women's Press, 1984, xii.
[14]Walker, Alice. *In Search of our Mother's Gardens*. Op. Cit. p xii

for all people since Womanism aims at ending race, gender and class oppression. In addition, the term Womanism has a profound influence on feminism because it supplies it with new demands and different perspectives.

Alice Walker emphazises black women's quest for individual identity, she attaches a great importance to struggling for the rights of the black women in the western hegemonic discourse. Indeed, Walker's womanism changes the status of black female discourse which is subject to the white feminist discourse and black male discourse. By womanism, Walker has constructed an ideology that challenges and rejects what she considers to be the dominant racist and sexist cultures.

Furthermore, womanism differs from feminism because it has adopted an Afro-centric mode in dealing with problems facing black women in the Diaspora as well those residing in Africa. In addition, it recognizes the triple oppression of black women in racial, classist and sexist oppression. Womanism thus, makes it clear that the experiences, suffering and the most important needs of black women are different from those of the middle-class white women. Actually, Walker's approach to life leads her to present a realistic picture of black women's dilemmas, far from the situation of the white woman.

It is important to note that even if Womanism, as a global ideology claims to represent all the black women, some African women criticize it as being more relevant to African-American women. In fact, some African women have felt uncomfortable with the concept of Womanism even if they do not reject its principles. In reality, it becomes problematic for African women to adopt the term Womanism that does not adequately speak their experiences but those of a particular group of women. According to them , Womanism includes lesbianism which is considered to be an important and a viable option for women to end male oppression. Hence, some African-American female writers advocate lesbianism in their works as a tool for their protagonists' empowerment. It is the case of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* in which she projects lesbianism as a weapon of female bonding. However, lesbianism has not gained much ground in Africa because it is completely strange to their worldview and a nonexistent issue. Nfah-Abbenyi writes

> As was mentioned earlier, African women do talk among themselves about their bodies and their sexuality. They have been able to create strong woman-to-woman bonds that empower them with a valuable network of practices from which men are excluded. But the vast majority of these African women have not pushed or are not able to push these bonds to the limits of celebrating lesbian sexual pleasure..[…]..Homosexuality in this case becomes taboo, something whose existence is sometimes "known" but heavily repressed and rarely spoken or spoken about[15]

Besides, the African female writers regard the family structure and the heterosexual marriage as very crucial to the African female experience. Thus, Clenora Hudson-Weems (1993) introduces another term, Africana Womanism which makes even more of a distinction between both Western and black feminisms. As far as Hudson Weems is concerned, a slight difference exists between "feminism" and Walker's Womanism. The emphasis is only on color, while it provokes feelings of alienation and rejection from men and evoking lesbian possibilities. The interest and the survival of the black family and the whole race do not appear to be important to Walker's Womanism.

According to Hudson-Weems, the colonisation of Africa has differentiated African women's situation from that of the African-Americans thus the Africana womanist prioritizes the problem of race from that of gender. She embraces the concept of a "collective struggle" with the black man to aid in bringing to light the independence and authenticity of the African race. The black woman has always been equal to men from the amount of suffering and oppression both have experienced. Hudson-Weems states:

> Women who are calling themselves Black feminists need another word that describes what their concerns are. Black feminism is not a word that describes the plight of black women. The white race has a woman problem because the women were oppressed. Black people have a man and woman problem because black men are as oppressed as their women. [16]

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[15] Nfah-Abbyeni, Juliana Makuchi. *Gender in African women's writing: Identity, Sexuality and Difference.* pp 28-29.

[16] Weems, Cleonora Hudson. *Africana Womanism: An Overview. Out of the Revolution: The Development of Africana Studies*. Delores P. Aldridge and Carlene Young, Editors. Lexington Books, 2000, p 205.

Additionally, African women do not perceive their male counterparts as enemies but rather the outside forces that subjugate black men, women and children. They prioritize their struggle for human dignity and their rights as women dictated by the general political struggle for the whole race. Unlike Walker, Aidoo's fiction claims harmony between the two sexes, the problems that unite them, along with a common agenda of struggling against the colonizer. *Our Sister Killjoy* suggests that there is a possibility for a balanced healthy relationships between males and females. In other words, Aidoo finds Womanism problematic in that it does not realise the union of black men and women. By the same intent, Aidoo claims men as part of women's struggle. For her, women's subjectivity is intrinsically linked to that of men.

Overall, "human discrimination transcends sex discrimination … the costs of human suffering are high when compared to a component, sex obstacle"[17]. So, for African women, men are important in the building of any successful society but are appealing for joint forces, men and women for a balanced society. In other words, African women seek equal participation in the society with their male counterparts and not total extermination of the male gender in societal, economical and political sector. In the African context, gender roles are complementary rather than oppositional.

b) Postcolonial Theory and Women's Writings:

It is important to situate gender issues within the spectrum of postcolonial studies. Post-colonial theory contains an intellectual discourse that holds together a set of theories which are reactions to the cultural legacy of colonialism. As a literary theory, it deals with the literature produced in countries that once were colonies of other countries, especially of the European colonial power: Britain, France and Spain; in some contexts, it includes countries still in a colonial situation. It deals also with literature written in colonial countries and by their citizens that have colonized people as its subject matter. Colonized people, especially of the British Empire attended

[17]Weems, Clenora Hudson. Op. Cit. p.209

British universities; their access to education, still available in the colonies, created a new criticism. In his book *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said argues that the theme of empire opens up horizons within which many themes can be established and studied such as social, cultural and gender issues.

Edward Said studies the interaction of the nineteenth and early twentieth century Imperialism and the culture that presented and enforced it. He also focuses on the literature of defence and resistance made by writers of the countries formerly subjected to colonialism. According to Said, imperialism is not only practised by power, domination and imposing rules on the colonizer, but it is also practised by culture. The latter is considered as an important way to reveal imperialism.

Edward Said views imperialism as a continuous phenomenon that still exists in different forms and new contents. Even though the colonized nations are freed from the power of domination, they are still in a state of "otherness" and considered as "inferior" races. Imperialism still operates with a discourse and an attitude that keeps the so-called Third World under the implicit control of empire. In fact, Edward Said's purpose is to show the relationship between culture and imperialism. To flesh out the working of imperialism, he argues that the political and the economic operations of imperialism are supported and maintained by the power of culture. In fact, imperialism is beyond the geographical sphere of empire. Edward Said's argument is that the culture of defense and resistance is the only way through which the dominated nations can respond to imperialism. Thus, the culture of resistance according to him is made through "writing-back" to the empire without the need of power and arms in order to destroy their "stereotyped" images throughout the world.

A number of studies show that women are marginalized and dehumanized. Like the colonized subjects, women have been relegated to the position of the "Other", colonized by various forms of patriarchal/colonial domination. In fact, women often appear as beings who are doubly oppressed, i.e. by the colonizer (hence their situation of colonial subjects) and by their own patriarchal societies. They then experience acts of oppression and repression. Ania Loomba notes that in the societal changes brought on by colonialism, Christianity and colonial law would lead to the further represssion

of women in colonized societies, and it "intensifies patriarchal oppression, often because native men, increasingly disenfranchised and excluded from the public sphere, became more tyrannical at home"[18].

They are the victims and the prisoners of the language of their oppressors. Being members of these colonized nations, women are condemned under the colonizer's authority. That is why feminist writers felt justified in responding to this oppression by using their own language, rather that of the colonizer in order to revolt against male centrality[19]. At present, studies, essays and works show women struggling for freedom and recognition in their societies by breaking the silence and the stereotyped language which men used to describe them. The women's combat against the oppressive norms of their societies aims at changing their situation from that of the "Other" which dehumanizes them to a more respectful one[20]. Thus, the concerns of Walker and Aidoo equip us with insights into the situations of black women, the vital part education can play in enabling them to attain self-expression and find a voice of their owns. Both Walker and Aidoo demonstrate the fact that black women are 'crying' in various ways from different places. *The Color Purple*, is a text that offers us the greatest vision of hope, as we see Celie embarking successfully on her journey towards maturity and personal empowerment. In *Our Sister Killjoy*, Sissie also manages to triumph over her circumstances by choosing to leave Europe. In *Changes*, Esi overcomes many obstacles in her way and acquires inner strength and a strong sense of independent selfhood.

Like women, the colonizers are put in a fixed stereotyped position, deprived of the right to represent themselves. The colonized and their societies are always represented by colonialists as a negative civilized other. So, in order to restore their denigrated images in the colonial discourse, the native writers began to write their own stories or histories from a native perspective. As a result, through their reactions

[18] Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism/ Postcolonialism.* London and New York. Routeledge. 1998, p. 148.
[19] Ashcroft, Bill, Griffiths, Gareth, & Tiffin, Helen. *The Empire Writes Back, Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literature 2nd* ed. London and New-york: Taylor and Francis, 1989, p. 218.
[20] Ashcroft, Bill, Griffiths, Gareth, & Tiffin, Helen. *The Empire Writes Back, Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literature.* Op. Cit. p.172

against the imperialist stereotypes, the colonized people, in claiming independence and sovereignty, also reinforce gender division, declaring masculine power.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the history and concerns of the feminist theory parallels development in post-colonial theory. The feminist discourse shares many similarities with postcolonial theory as two major representatives of "the minority discourses", they are considered to be associative and even complementary. Both discourses concern themselves with the struggle against oppression and marginalization in terms of race and gender.

Dealing with the issue from the black woman perspective, we notice that both postcolonial and feminist theories fell in the trap of reproducing the same injustices inherited from the colonial system. In fact, black women find themselves excluded from both Western, white middle class feminist literary criticism and black, male Post-colonial literary criticism. As Juliana Nfah Abbyeni writes, women are often considered to be the "other" of Western women, the other of African men, the "other" of Africans and non-Africans, thus finding themselves caught in a "chain of otherness". Consequently, the black women's road to emancipation has been complicated due to their country's colonial background that results in their double colonization, i.e. women in formerly colonized societies were doubly colonized by both imperial and patriarchal ideologies[21].

In her challenging Essay, "*Can the Subaltern Speak*?" (1985) Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a postcolonial feminist and theorist, was among the first scholars to draw attention to the link between the feminist and the postcolonial. Spivak confronts the construction of the postcolonial subject as male as a continuation of imperial patriarchal domination[22]. She as well questions the universal claims of Western feminism to speak for all women. Together with the postcolonial feminist thinkers Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, Nawal El Saadawi and Kumari Jayawardena, Spivak has generated an important rethinking of feminist

[21] Ashcroft, Bill, Griffiths, Gareth, & Tiffin, Helen. *The Empire Writes Back, Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literature.* Op. Cit. p.17
[22] Jones, Baily Rachel. Op. Cit. p. 32

thought. By doing so, she has challenged the assumption that all women deserve the same place as men in society, and emphasized the importance of respecting differences in race, class, religion, citizenship and culture between women[23]. One of the major issues she addresses in her essay is that the voice of the black woman has been marginalized and made silent by the destructive power of a combined colonial-patriarchal force. In reality, connecting the postcolonial critique of universal white experience to the feminist critique of universal male experience can produce very interesting examinations of the intersections and negociations of race, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality in identity formation[24].

By centering the subaltern woman as subject of her work, Spivak stresses the particularities, complex and multiple levels of black women's oppression. She believes that this oppression can not be identified by both the western feminist and post-colonial discourses. She therefore combined the two to better describe and distinguish black women's experiences and the nature of their oppressions.

Walker and Aidoo come together to speak specifically to the subaltern women and the multifaceted nature of their struggles against the political, social, historical and cultural oppressions that erase their voice. In so doing, they address these issues so that they portary the ways in which they give voice to the black subaltern identities. They depict their protagonists with an extreme resistance against the patriarchal and colonial systems of dominance.

As two representative theories of minority discourse, both post-colonial theory and womanism aim at challenging the West's authority. In fact, both of them challenge the white hegemony which privileges the white human race and Western culture and devalues the natives because of their race. Thus, they share some similarities. First of all, both post-colonial theory and womanism deal with the issue of identity and the sense of belonging, i.e. the post-colonial theorists and womanists try to define and locate the marginalized and the othered minority group on the periphery of the

[23] Morton, Stephen. *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.* London and New York. Routledge. 2003, pp. 71-72
[24] Jones, Baily Rachel. Op. Cit. p.33

mainstream culture. Besides, both attempt and insist on erasing race difference by challenging the West's centricity and transit from the "other" to the "self".

It is important to stress that while Post-colonial theory protests against Western centrism, Womanism struggles against both white dominant culture and male domination (black and white). Therefore, Womanism goes beyond Post-colonial theory and constitutes a supplement to it.

More importantly, both womanism and post-colonial theory have adopted an Afrocentric mode in dealing with the problems facing the black race and sets concrete measures in dealing with such issues. Based on the preservation of the African culture, both locate the African people (men and women) at the center of their social and historical experiences, as opposed to being on the periphery of European knowledge. i.e, not as victims but as people with agency and action. In addition, they are concerned with the reconstruction of the experience of the black people who have been exploited and excluded from the human history.

Afrocentricity in literature is a viewpoint that encourages writers to write about the history and culture of Africa. Therefore, an act to confront the external power of colonialism and liberate the African art and culture from Eurocentrism. The idea of Afrocentricity has been named by Molefi Kete Asante (1987) in order to convey the profound need for African people to be re-located historically, economically, socially, politically, and philosophically[25]. He explained Afrocentricity as follows:

> To say that we are decentred means essentially that we have lost our own cultural footing and become other than our cultural and political origins, dis-located and dis-oriented. We are essentially insane, that is, living an absurdity from which we will never be able to free our minds until we return to the source. Afrocentricity as a theory of change intends to re-locate the african person as subject . . . . As a pan-African idea, Afrocentricity becomes the key to the proper education of children and the essence of an African cultural revival and, indeed, survival[26]

[25] Mkabela, Queeneth. *Using the Afrocentric Method in Researching Indigenous African Culture*. The Qualitative Report. Vol. 10, No 1. University of Zululand, South Africa, 2005, p 179.
[26] Mkabela, Queeneth. Op. Cit. p 179.

Molefi Kete Asante was greatly influenced by the African centred ideas of Du Bois, Woodson, and particularly Karenga. To liberate the black race from European domination, Asante is offering a challenge to systematically displace European ways of thinking, speaking and feeling and replace them with ways that are specific to the African cultural experience. In Africa and the diaspora, writers have been dealing with questions of African identity from the perspective of African people as centred. Their preoccupation is to protect the African culture from the corruption effects of the western culture.

This study, therefore, views Walker and Aidoo as post-colonial Afrocentric writers who take advantage of their African traditions and values to self-consciously present it to the world. Actually, both try to free the culture of their people from the Eurocentric paradigm by bringing African indigenous traidtions into focus. In *The Color Purple*, Walker broadens the narrative to explore the diverse circumstances and addresses the strong African heritage, the alienated one, so that it be acknowledged and declared valid thus giving the African-Americans a sense of identity and pride. In the same way, and thanks to her Akan heritage, Aidoo presents women as strong attached to their culture, and at the same time determined to challenge the tenets of that culture.

Chapter 2

Women's Liberation vs National Liberation

Our Sister Killjoy

a- Women's Status in Literature and the Place of Ama Ata Aidoo

b- The female protagonist's duty of nationalism

c- Gender issue

a) Women's Status in Literature and the Place of Ama Ata Aidoo:

African literature has been dominated by male writers, such as Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Ayi Kwei Armah. Their literary works concentrate on political, social and historical themes rather than gender ones. During the colonial period, African male writers produced literary works through which they expressed a political message that is the affirmation of their own existence and their own culture. They have always tried to describe and analyze the cultural, political and social conditions of their societies.

In fact, the literature written during the period of colonialism was that of protest and self affirmation. It was a committed one, because it portrayed the colonized as human beings opposed to the view of the colonizer who perceived them as inferior and in need of being "civilized". The African writer's endeavor was to react against the othering and marginalization of the colonized African through various sociological, political and literary pieces of writing. Indeed, the main objective of the African writer who takes an active part in the struggle against colonialism is to make Africans value their genuine personality and empower them with the resolve that they could win back their dignity.

In some ways, the African male writer fell in the trap of reproducing the same injustices towards African women as the colonial system did in its hegemonic logic. This can be seen in a number of West African novels where the patriarchal model is an object of indirect criticism.

It must be pointed out that one of the neglected issues in African literature has been the role of women in society. African men writers were allegedly guilty of having misrepresented the African woman in their fiction, having restricted her image to that of mystified mother, child bearer as well as erotic lover. As Juliana Nfah Abbyeni writes, they are portrayed as passive subjects, always prepared to do the bidding of their husbands and family, as having no status of their own and therefore completely

dependent on their husbands[1]. African women have been depicted as being subjects to various cultural obligations imposed upon them through male domination. They are governed by fixed rules, obligations and duties to be followed strictly. Thus, the general trend is to reduce woman's status to an inferior position in society, and to make the stereotype prevail over the portrait of female protagonists as carriers of values and visions. They have been contained in a realm of inarticulate speech, given no opportunity to express themselves freely and considered as secondary figures in the environment of males.

The African literary tradition has perpetuated the image of the African woman as an object and an ornament for the African male writer. Actually, in order to react against the imperialist representation, the colonized male writers, in claiming independence, sovereignty and declaring their "masculine" power, reinforced gender division. Chinua Achebe, who is regarded by many scholars as "the father of African literature in English", severely dehumanizes and marginalizes the African woman in his popular novel *Things Fall Apart (1958)*. In his novel, women do not play a significant part in terms of decision making and agency, on the contrary, in his traditional African society, not only are they kept unvoiced and victims of physical violence, but they were also completely excluded from the male domain of community power. They live in constant fear of their husband's anger and as such they must obey all their wishes and desires.

But such a stereotyped vision which characterized most of the male works motivated early African women writers, and this led, for some of them, to the need to correct the stereotypical images and therefore to write about themselves from their point of view.

It cannot be wholly denied that in pre-colonial Africa, women were not totally marginalized and dependent on men. Instead, they were engaged in other affairs that gave them a certain level of independence, made them capable of exerting power, directly or indirectly, and to have an influence on their male dominated society. In the

[1] Nfah-Abbyeni, Juliana Makuchi. *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality and Difference*. Op. Cit. p.4.

period that preceded colonialism, women enjoyed a certain position in their societies such as the Igbo and Yoruba of Nigeria. In some aspects, women had economic and social structures which gave them more social space and influence. Gender difference and its accompanying notion that women are of "no account" and are always inferior to men is the product of colonialism. This latter, indeed, seems to have impinged upon the balanced interrelationship between the woman and her community.

It is worth noting that the active participation in the sociopolitical life that African women enjoyed before colonialism did not mean that there was perfect equality between the two sexes or an absolute and cynical triumph of women over men. However, the traditional sexist structures within pre-colonial societies were severely reinforced by colonial ideologies of domesticity and Victorian belief that women's role or place should be at home and not in the sphere of business and politics. The status and respect that women as mothers enjoyed in pre-colonial cultures shifted with the constraints of colonial gender and economic relations. Colonialism brought new female ideals through the notion of "good wives and mothers" within the home[2]. Indeed, when the British came to Africa, a lot of changes were introduced to its people and cultures that affected some of the rights available to women in pre-colonial Africa. In short, the status and the harmonious dualism of the two sexes in pre-colonial Africa have been shaken by colonialism. The latter has created a hierarchical relation between African men and women as opposed to the previous complementary and harmonious relations which existed before its arrival. Thus, the modern African woman finds herself in a confused situation where the patriarchal system combines with colonialism as two main sources of domination, and also excluded from the major domains of activity in her society.

Thus, African women's emancipation and their attempt to rediscover their identities have been eclipsed not only by the "*Otherness*" of Africa but also by the edicts of patriarchy. They are silenced and repressed by patriarchal power as women, devalued and dehumanized by colonialism as Africans. Indeed, the native men also

[2] Katrack, Ketu H. Op. Cit. p.106

treated their own women as subservient, second class citizens and sometimes even as slaves.

It is not until the mid 1960's that women writers emerged, since African women had slightly greater access then to education, a fact which helped the raising of the African women's socio-political consciousness. Those women's main concern was to react against the debasing image in which they were depicted and to engage in a correction and rehabilitation of their image by writing. Through their creative writing African women writers like the Senegalese Mariama Ba, the Ghanaian Ama Ata Aidoo, the South African Bessie Head, the Nigerians Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa, the Zimbabween Tsitsi Dangarembga, and the Egyptian Nawal el Saadawi, as well as the Algerians Assia Djebar and Ahlem Mestghanemi and many others count among the famous African women writers that have devoted their lives to the recognition of the African woman and her emancipation. They bring into focus several issues connected to women's situation before, during and after colonialism through a woman's eye. Consequently, they have helped to redress the gap between their male counterparts on the African literary scene.

Women writers have emerged in order to restore African women to their proper place in the study of African history, culture and society. In this process, they use literature as a tool for self-definition and self-liberation and through which they offer a unique view of the complexities of postcolonial life. What Aidoo writes in her fiction underlines the complexities of her protagonists which have to manage African traditions that do not always facilitate their life, and modern western styles, which are not always serviceable to them. Aidoo's fiction aims at revising the stereotypical western representation and critique persisting in traditional patriarchal structures, and creating alternative representations of womanhood and alternative visions for female emancipation. Her predominant concern is to promote a new position of women with the help of both tradition and modernity to change women's consciousness in contemporary African society.

African women's active participation and mobilization in the anti-colonial struggles reveal the complex theoretical and practical dissonances between national

liberation and female liberation. Further, it indicates the complexities around the assumption that African women are less emancipated than their western counterparts. In distinguishing feminisms in different parts of the postcolonial world, Carole Boyce Davis provides a useful discussion of "African feminism as a hybrid of sorts, which seeks to combine African concerns with feminist concerns", a sort of "balancing" act where women's own issues along with a "common struggle with African men" against imperialism is important[3].

Kirsten Holst Peterson expands on this point by arguing that an obvious and important difference exists between western feminism and African feminism. According to her, while the former engages with the relative importance of feminist versus class emancipation, the latter is caught between feminist emancipation and the fight against neo-colonialism and, particularly in its cultural aspect. She further adds: "which is the most important, which comes first, the fight for female equality or the fight against western cultural imperialism?"[4]

Therefore, it is precisely from this point that the African women's situation begins to be seen as different from that of their African-American counterparts. In Africa, men and women are united against a common enemy. Nationalism creates a kind of a unified history of resistance for the two sexes.

In the meantime, some African feminists, defenders of women's emancipation, often argue that nationalism diverts women from their struggle for liberation. They believe that the discourse of traditional nationalism reinforces so far the subjugation of women. According to them, culture imprisons women leading to their subordination because of the patriarchal nature of society. And they further state that patriarchy leads to gender inequality to the extent that women do not have control over their sexualities. All the African customs encourage women's marginalization because, so far, the society remains predominantly patriarchal, and patriarchy itself shapes and

[3] Katrack, Ketu H. Op. Cit. p. 47

[4] Ashcroft, Bill, Griffiths, Gareth, & Tiffin, Helen. *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*. London and New York: Routledg. 1995, p. 252.

perpetuates gender inequality and strips women of any form of control of their bodies due to the fact that "traditions are more important than women"[5].

Male nationalists stress that cultural traditions are indispensible for the achievement of the political independence, i.e. Nationalism and culture are strongly linked in the anti-colonial struggle. Hence, to create an "authentic" culture, the African writer tends to glorify his indigenous traditions and heritage against the imposed ones of the colonizer in order to correct or dismantle the negative stereotypes. And by doing so, he denies women's citizenships and agency. Therefore, he defines his female characters only in relation to African traditions against which the African female writers are struggling.

The nationalists emphasize the need for the cultural restoration. Frantz Fanon clearly states: "culture …. represents one aspect of the nation" and he further adds "to fight for national culture means in the first phase to fight for the liberation of the nation, the material keystone which makes the building of the culture possible"[6].

However, oppression against women is exerted by these African traditions. This is because they encourage the institution of polygamy, child marriage, female genital mutilation, male-child preference, forced marriages, bride-price and the lack of access to education that relegate women to a socially inferior position in society. Thus African men feel free to oppress and devalue their wives, sisters and daughters because their traditions permit it. Therefore, the subjugation of African women has its source in these traditional practices, and women's subordination is culturally imposed.

However, in criticizing the colonialist, the nationalist often focuses on defending these cultures, values and practices that feminists stand against because they keep women in their stereotypical role as voiceless and submissive beings, while ensuring male privilege.

Sometimes this creates a conflict for the individual feminists, some of whom were actively opposed to the nationalist project that defends the African customs.

[5] Katrack, Ketu H. Op. Cit.p.156.
[6] Pujoras, Esther. *An African (Auto) Biography: Ama Ata Aidoo's Literary Quest.* Universitat Autonome de Barcelona, 2010, p.223.

Therefore, African women feel trapped in a dilemma between their liberation and their national duty, i.e. either to engage with the nationalist movement, or to exclusively focus on women's issues, putting aside any involvement with African political independence. The latter is deemed by them to represent an obstacle in their quest for emancipation.

Consequently, African women's situation is made further complex by the nationalist project. In fact, the nationalists consider women's liberation as a kind of betrayal to the national and cultural liberation. Nationalism weakened the road to liberation opened for African women when the feminist movement for liberation beats his drums to make his voice heard. Brenda Cooper contends:

> This shared and the resulting national struggle, first for independence and then against the ne-colonial foreigner, have added complications and ambiguities to the African woman's opposition to her exploitation at the hands of African men. There is in other words pressure on women to stand 'shoulder to shoulder' with their men against the foreign oppressor and not to bring in 'divisive' issues of gender to cut across and 'weaken' this national struggle.[7]

It should be pointed out that despite the problematic around the relationships between feminism and nationalism in Africa, Aidoo maintains that African and female liberations are inseparable, insisting on the idea that men and women's roles are complementary rather than oppositional. Thus, she does not perceive African men as women's enemy, but rather the enemy is considered to be the colonial forces that subjugate and dehumanize the whole nation.

According to Aidoo, feminism in an African context is a reaction to specific historical legacies such colonialism and pre-colonial traditions, therefore she depicts her protagonists as individuals striving to achieve emancipation from these legacies thus they gain power instead of remaining silent.

[7] Cooper, Brenda. *To Lay These Secrets Open: Evaluating African Writing*. Claremont, South Africa: David Philip Publishers, 1992, p.77.

The literary work of Ama Ata Aidoo is synonymous with the work of her male African counterparts in that they present a critique of the encroachment of colonial values on the African colonized subject; however, her writing expounds the issues facing the colonial subject by expressing the disparities in the treatment of women and their ever-increasing subjugation by the merging of the contrasting cultures.

Aidoo's works can be placed in the context of post-colonial literature and read from a feminist perspective. They seem to call for the perpetuation and maintenance of the African traditional values as well as taking charge of the changing realities in Africa. Her fiction engages with themes which are significantly important to the health and identity of the new Ghanaian nation. It examines, among several issues, the continued impact of neocolonial culture on the Ghanaian women in particular and Africans in general, in addition, exposes telling correlations between culturally and sexually based oppression on women. But they do so with a vigorous humor, compassion and subtlety unusual in Ghana's writing.

Moreover, her entire work addresses powerfully the psychological effect of the colonial and post-colonial experience on her characters, especially the female ones and it elucidates the rapid dislocation of traditional cultural tenets by those of the western colonization, a pattern which afflicts the men and women of Africa. In 1991, Aidoo made reference to such conditions, as she asserted: "The term postcolonial makes me uncomfortable. Post what? because it has not got yet"[8]. She further adds:

> You come to literature or things like that, and it's then that you really understand a term like neo-colonialism … it is beautiful to have independence, but it is what happened to our mind that is to me the most frightening thing about the colonial experience[9]

The poet Chimalum Nwankwo adds more:

> Aidoo's feminist concerns are not treated in isolation from Africa's political instability, the new master complex of the so-called elite, the atavistic problems of the rural African at the cross-roads of history, the fury and

[8] Ashcroft, Bill, Griffiths, Gareth, and Tiffin, Helen. *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*. Op. Cit. p.106.
[9] Schlager, Neil & Lauer Josh, eds. *Contemporary Novelists*. USA, ST. James Press, 2001, p. 08.

> impotence of the radical African, the lure of the western world, and so forth[10].

Aidoo's female characters are trapped in situations that are beyond their control to change. However, these characters' opposition to traditional roles and values make them vibrant within these prescribed roles. The Ghanaian critic Vincent Odamtten warns against the use of the terms related to the western liberal humanist tradition such as "individuality" and "independence" in order to depict the roles of these women. According to him, these terms do not do justice to the diverse requests of African women, for their need is rather for an attachment to the community which is greater than western women's, and while they request equal relationships with their men, they do not seek to live without them. Although this view is itself prejudiced by Odamtten's personal view on cultural and gender identity, it does suitably state that Aidoo's protagonists seek fulfillment with their existing relationships, hoping to find happiness in marriage instead of trying to live without men's love.

In their introductory chapter "A breath of Fresh Air" in *Emerging Perspectives on Ama Ata Aidoo*, Ada Uzoamaka Azodo and Gay Wilentz assert that Aidoo's fiction is "the site of the dilemmas of modern African nations between the personal and the political, the individual and the community"[11], and they add

> […] The heroines embody their author's life tensions, ambitions, desires, and griefs. The more public the work appears, the more indeed it calls us back to the personal basis of the fiction: the effects of the exile, alienation and isolation on personal lives; the role of family and society in forging human understanding; African oral tradition as expression of self, especially women's lives in time of changes, conflicts, choices, crises, and the instinctual including sexuality. If we have not so far seen the entire journey of a woman writer expressed in her creative works, we prophesize here that we will not be kept long waiting[12]

[10] Nwankwo, Chimalum. "The Feminist Impulse and Social Realism in Ama Ata Aidoo's No Sweetness Here and Our Sister Killjoy". Davis, Carole Boyce & Anna Adams Graves, eds. *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*. Trenton (N.J) : Africa World Press, 1986, p .152

[11] Azodo, Ada Uzoamaka & Gay Wilentz. *Emerging Perspectives on Ama Ata Aidoo*. Trnton(N.J): Africa World Press, 1999, p. xix

[12] Ibid

Moreover, Aidoo deals with the dilemma of social change in a complex cultural environment that mixed indigenous traditions with practices imposed by colonialism. She further explores the difficulties of integrating western education with African values which have been intensely shaken by colonialism and neo-colonialism, a situation that reflects her own experience as an educated African woman in a male centered society. Besides, she insists precisely on the struggle for women's liberation and the necessity of requiring a western education that leads to the development of the African nations

> Aidoo does not merely lament Africa's fate, past, present, and even future, by bringing her sceptical intelligence to an examination of her place within an unbroken continuum of a history of colonialism and neo-colonialism; as one of black Africa's foremost feminists she considers the oppression of modern African women in all spheres of human activity[13]

Through her creation of different types of modern educated African women, Aidoo has challenged the predominance of the male-dominated literary body and has pointed to the need for a new critical perspective liberated from both Eurocentric and phallocentric views. With a measure of success, she has contributed to the dispelling of this tendency that has muted women's voice and placed men at the centre of literary analysis.

Defining the role of women in the new African society, Ghanaian reality, and exploring the 'double-bind' these women found themselves in is therefore the central concerns in Aidoo's works. This has made her into both a nationalist and a feminist writer who aims at taking "a nationalist shot at colonialism and proffering a feminist cry against the (gender) oppression of African women"[14], for she argues that "one cannot claim to be an African nationalist without being a feminist, whether one is a man or a woman"[15].

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[13] Douglas, Killam & Ruth Rowe, eds. *The Companion to African Literature*. Oxford, Bloomington, Indianapolis: James Currey, Indiana University Press, 2000, p. 21.
[14] Nfah- Abbeyni, Juliana Makuchi. "F*labberwhelemed or Turning History on its Head? The Postcolonial Woman –as- subject in Aidoo's Changes: A Love Story"*. Azodo, Ada & Gay Wilentz, eds. *Emerging Perspectives on Ama Ata Aidoo.* Trenton (N.J): Africa World Press, 1999,p. 283
[15] Nfah- Abbeyni, Juliana. "F*labberwhelemed or Turning History on its Head? The Postcolonial Woman –as- subject in Aidoo's Changes: A Love Story"*. Op. Cit. p.2

Actually, Aidoo's works have always been original and challenging through their connection of several factors such as gender, economics, race and history, and the ways these affect the lives of African women. The fact that her literary body deals with issues that fundamentally affect women's lives has produced a common consensus around her being an African feminist. Indeed, Aidoo does not contradict this label for she contends:

> When people ask me rather bluntly every now and then whether I am a feminist, I not only answer yes, but I go on to insist that every woman and every man should be a feminist – especially if they believe that Africans should take charge of African land, African wealth, African lives, and the burden of African development. It is not possible to advocate independence for the African continent without also believing that African women must have the best that the environment can offer. For some of us, this is the crucial element in our feminism[16]

Being an engaged woman writer is also the consequence of the understanding and awareness of the role art and literature play in today's world. Aidoo has been the leading voice for women's emancipation in national and international arenas. She insists on the interests and liberation of both African women and nation that are closely related as "the survival of the nation is predicated on the survival, liberation and progress of its women, and that the private and the public, the personal and the political must be fully integrated for human progress to be achieved"[17].

Like her African male compatriots, Aidoo is an African woman writer who is vigorously committed to the political issues of her country and the development of her nation at large. Her crucial preoccupation is the need for Africans to unite with other blacks all over the world in order to consider and remember a forgotten archive of African values. She insists on the closer bond that should be forged between the Africans and the Diaspora especially the African-Americans ones; for, as Buchi Emecheta expressively points out in her novel *In the Ditch*, "as long as you are black, any other black person is your people"(Emecheta, Buchi p53). The intention of this unification is in support of an African future that is alive with the force of recovered

[16] Collins, Patricia Hill. Op. Cit. p.43
[17] Azodo, Ada Uzoamaka & Gay Wilentz. Op. Cit. p. xxviii

vision, a future liberated from the disturbance and distress of a cyclonic past and the myopia of a stampeded present.

Being influenced by the first Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah's strong belief in the unity of black world, and inspired by his desire to build a United States of Africa, Aidoo insists on a closer bonding between Africans on the mainland and those of the Diaspora as a crucial step in the nation building process for in her resides the power to tell the blacks that their role in nation-building is going to be fundamental. In fact, this Pan-African solidarity, the dream of unity of the African continent as well as the linking of the African race and geography are central issues in Aidoo's works.

b) The Female Protagonist's Duty of Nationalism

Our Sister Killjoy, which is a text combining prose and poetry, portrays the experiences and thoughts of Sissie, the "black eyed squint" whose vision of the world is shaped by her steady awareness of the problems of Africa and specifically, neocolonialism, greediness as well as the insincerity of the African elites. Sissie in her travels and connections with other communities "forever carries Africa's problems on her shoulders" (OSK, p 118). And her travel to Europe catalyses her perceptions and sharpens her critical attitude concerning the problems of her society.

In fact, much of the novel is a bitter critique and condemnation of the educated elite of Ghana, in particular the 'been-tos', and the prestige and admiration that they associate with the west. It also targets those Africans who, in the face of drastic material conditions for the majority of people, offer an empty rhetoric of national development which does not act in response to the needs of the country but rather serves only to preserve the current system of inequality and corruption that promotes western interests in their continent.

The novel offers a totally original type of African encounter with the West. In actual fact, throughout the novel, Aidoo satirizes the African's idolization and

admiration of Europe and immediately contrasts it by deploring the reality of racism, degradation and poverty as the common experience of the majority who embark on the journey to these 'promised lands'. Besides, she criticizes the African migrants who are willfully blind to the inadequacy of abandoning their own countries, and fail to fulfill the needs and duties they owe to the people whom they left behind. As Nana Wilson-Tagoe writes:

> In *Our Sister Killjoy* a cruel past and a bizarre present haunt the modern era that authorizes Sissie' s visit to Europe. The bizarreness of the present is a result of the cataclysmic faults of the ages and the huge boulders thrown across the continent's pathway. It marks a new epoch of the dispersal of African people, a time when the whole continent stands in danger of becoming lost. What, Aidoo seems to ask, is the African's place within this global configuration? How can African cultures and identities be represented from within this wider location?[18]

In *Our Sister Killjoy*, Ama Ata Aidoo presents a western-educated Ghanaian woman, named Sissie, who is critical of the development implications for African communities when their most promising students, the elite, go to Europe for tertiary study. Sissie's "black-eyed squint", after the subtitle of the novel, makes the reader vigorously aware that within the pursuit of western education, the Africans face the risk of becoming alienated from their families, homes and cultures. Through her narration, Sissie mourns and complains about the great evils and social troubles that afflict the African continent by exposing the social, moral and economic problems, the question of exile and return, economic exploitation, colonialism, political corruption, western education and the brain-drain. In addition to the conflicted relationship between women and men, the neocolonial relations between developed and developing countries as well as the post-independence failure and neo-colonial regimes which have hindered development in Africa, leading the protagonist, to satirically conclude that life in Ghana is

> Just like the good old days

[18] Cole, Catherine M, Manuh, Takyiwaa and Miescher, Stephan F, eds. *Africa after Gender?*. USA: Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007, p 236.

Before independence (OSK, p.56)

First published in 1977, *Our Sister Killjoy* addresses the issues of nationalism to further a project of African unity. It denies and opposes European neo-colonialism and as such it could be recognized as an anti-colonial nationalist text. Set in a neocolonial context, Aidoo*'s* prose poem indicts an African post-independence country with a loss of moral grounding that threatens the foundation of the culture. Through the heroine, Aidoo warns of the dangers caused by the African's idealization of western capitalist societies.

In the meantime, the heroine of the novel, Sissie, is a young and politicized Ghanaian woman, who is given a scholarship by an international volunteer organization to travel from Africa into "a bad dream". During her time in Europe, she notices that the majority of the brilliant and highly educated African students with greatest potential for leading their countries have left their communities to further enrich Europe instead of Africa. Thus, European and other developed countries gain benefits at the expense of Africa's poorest people.

In preparing for her departure for Germany, Sissie is invited to an extravagant cocktail party in the German ambassador's house where she is unfortunate enough to meet Sammy, a young Ghanaian who "laughed all the time: even where there is nothing to laugh at" (OSK, p 6). Like Sissie, Sammy was lucky to be chosen to go to Europe and he expresses tremendous gratitude for the occasion he was given and keenly encourages her to feel just as grateful:

> Sammy had obviously been to their country before and seemed to have stayed for a long time. He was very anxious to get her to realize one big fact. That she was unbelievably lucky to have been chosen for the trip. And that, somehow, going to Europe was altogether more like a dress rehearsal for a journey to paradise (OSK, p.9)

Sammy is a type of African that Sissie will come to encounter often on her journey. He is the representative of the African been-tos who are eager to obey and to adopt European civilization, traditions, tastes, clothes and education. Actually, Sammy's keenness to adhere to the European values reflects his internalization of

colonial attitudes that Europe is civilized, enlightened and altogether superior to Africa. Indeed, the uncomfortable meeting of our sister with him, as Vincent Odamtten suggests, is just the beginning of her education and maturation.

It shows us clearly, right from the beginning, how Aidoo stands against the African's development based on the imitation of the colonizer's ideas, standards and ideals. She strictly opposes the new African generation's tendency to assimilate European culture and languages thus perpetuating the western hegemony. Sammy does not only sing so much about the wonders of Europe and imitate their lifestyle, but he also "speaks their language", a basic element of neo-colonialism and imperialism.

> His voice, as he spoke of that far-off land, was wet with longing.
>
> Perhaps he had been invited to the dinner just to sing of the wonders of Europe?
>
> He spoke their language well and was familiar with them in a way that made her feel uneasy. (OSK, p 9)

Across Europe, Sissie acts as the permanent "killjoy", observing and ultimately challenging the African "Sammys" she meets for their rejection to return home to use their degrees and professional education in Africa.

Through the novel, the protagonist severely criticizes the collective efforts of the African educated elites with western interests to loot the rich resources of the African continent. And the most scathing criticism is directed at the African elites that maintain close relationships with the old colonial forces by establishing new alliances and markets for new independent countries. But, however, they failed to fulfill their people's hope and political independence. Indeed, the protagonist captures the mockery and the ridicule of this situation, describing independence as "the dance of the masquerades called independence, for Africa" (OSK, p 95). Sissie considers that

> Champagne sipping
> Ministers and commissioners
> Sing away

Mineral and timber
Concessions, in exchange for
Yellow wheat which
The people can't eat (OSK, p 57)

Sissie is rather doubtful about the motives behind government programs such as student loans and grants to study abroad for African people. She comes to understand that educating Africans in colonial institutions is part of a menacing western project where the Africans are seduced by the West. This European invitation and the masses of food that accompany it are just another way to attract her countrymen and women to their culture, where 'consumer goods' are not only "a million times more, but also a thousand times better" (OSK, p 12).

Sissie notices that her national compatriots become like

A dog among the masters, the
Most masterly of the
Dogs. (OSK, p 42)

Another way to weaken the Africans is by introducing them to the European customs, habits, tastes, and values, molding their minds to better support the European and other developed countries exploitation of African resources. Consequently, perpetuating the relationship of dependency between Africa and Europe which is based on the latter' interests. Because according to Sissie, even though the scholarships are classed as aid for the African's intellectuals, the money, in part, returns to Europe through airline earnings. At worst, scholarships are a way of securing the African elite's support of neo-colonialism.

Aidoo pours scorn on neo-colonialism as it attempts to enfeeble further the previous colonies through subtler means, such as education "aid" and awards to their intellectual elites:

Post-graduate awards.
Graduate awards.
It doesn't matter.
What you call it.
But did I hear you say
Awards?
Awards?

Awards?
What

(…). Spy system of all time:
For a few pennies now and a
Doctoral degree later,
Tell us about
Your people
Your history
Your mind
Your mind
Your mind
Tell us
Boy how
We can make you weak
Weaker than you‘ve already
Been. (OSK, pp 86-87)

In reality, this system which provides citizens from Third world countries with opportunities to undertake tertiary training abroad debunks Europe's good intention towards Africa even after independence. Yet, the longer-term impact of this type of educational experience on the lives of individuals who take up this form of aid is not only the risk of gradually becoming alienated from their own culture and families but also ends with African's glorification of Europe which is only a myth that serves to encourage more emigrants from Africa to leave their home countries in search of wealth and prosperity and to instead experience racism and degradation. Their "journey to paradise" is met with the harsh, brutal reality of daily life as struggling students in England. Sissie reflects that while scholarship recipients work extremely hard, they finish up

Giving away
Not only themselves, but
All of us-
The price is high,
My brother,

Otherwise the story is as old as empire. Oppressed multitudes from the provinces rush to the empirical seat because that is where they know all salvation comes from. But as other imperial subjects in other times and

> other places have discovered, for the Slave, there is nothing at the centre but worse slavery. (OSK, p 87-88)

As Sissie encounters a superficial developing culture, she starts to question the relationship between the old familiar traditions and the western ideals, and her native country Ghana and the rest of the world. Sissie' first contact with the west shows her incomprehension of difference, she cannot comprehend Europe's lifestyle because it is really beyond understanding. In London, she finds that "the more people she talked to, the less she understood", and in Germany, she cannot even appreciate the way people eat: "but to actually chill food in order to eat it was beyond her understanding. In the end, she decided it had something to do with white skins, corn-silk hair and very cold weather" (OSK, p 68).

For the African students the cost of studying in Europe involves the endurance of an existence away from home, as well as the risk of forgetting their origins and abandoning their traditions in favor of western ideals. Sissie reveals her contempt for many Ghanaians she observes losing their sense of African identity and community as they migrate. At one point, she furiously asks her lover "But oh deliciously naïve me. What did I rather do but daily and loudly criticize you and your friends for wanting to stay forever in alien places" (OSK, p117). The protagonist believes that the students who do not return home lose their African identity, opting instead to live in a world that is not theirs. But even those who return are likely to make people believe they enjoy strange customs, thus disappointing their community by praising the colonizer's values at the expense of the local ones. Further, Sissie is very annoyed about the been-tos who deny the depressing conditions in which they live, by merely pretending to be satisfied, by imitating western postures and attitudes. In England and Germany, Sissie comes to encounter those who

> Eventually went back home as 'been-tos', the ghost of the humans that they used to be, spoke of the wonders of being overseas, pretending their tongues craved for tasteless foods which they have vomited to eat where were prepared best. (OSK, pp 89-90)

They tell lies about their voyages to Europe; they never talk about the misery they endure there, but rather proclaim illusory happiness

They lied
They lied
They lied
The been-tos lied. (OSK, p 90)

In fact, Aidoo blames both the post-colonial government that accepts such a situation and the African intellectuals who failed to fulfill their people's hopes that political independence would bring a more just distribution of wealth

Indeed
Our dear
Academic doctors
Deserve all
The worship
They get from our poor administrators at home
And more.

They work hard for the
Doctorates-
They work too hard,
Giving away
Not only themselves, but
All of us-

The price is high,
My brother, (OSK, p 87)

In fact, the polemical tone used by Aidoo clearly exposes the combined efforts of both the intellectuals and their corrupt leaders to plunder the rich resources of the African continent. Aidoo makes the neo-colonial government responsible for the perpetuating of the colonizer's hegemony from which Africa suffers. According to Aidoo, the new African bourgeoisie and neo-colonial rulers act just like the European bourgeoisie with their policy of segregation, racism, discrimination and exploitation. This aspect of Aidoo echoes the warnings of Frantz fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* that such African leaders are fulfilling the role of the western bourgeoisie's business agent. Fanon views that: "decolonization would not lead to liberation for the

African people if this process merely involved the replacement of ruling colonial white bourgeoisie by a new postcolonial black bourgeoisie with basically the same value"[19]. Indeed, they are certainly not concerned about the link between the absence of the elites and the development of the nation.

Simultaneously, the loneliness and the harshness of the western world push Sissie to wonder why Ghanaians abroad, once having completed their studies, choose to stay in Europe, continuing to treasure their lives in such distant lands rather than return to Africa to serve the needs of their families and communities. And she concludes: "though I confess too that I am convinced these cold countries are no places for anyone to be by themselves. Man, chicken, or goat. There is a kind of loneliness overseas which is truly bad" (OSK, p 119). Sissie is disheartened that her community is not what she once thought it was but is instead gradually declining into a state of confusion.

In *Our Sister Killjoy*, Sissie notices that the African's strong connection to the West, results inevitably in the individual loss of self. Gay Wilentz notes that Sissie's journey to England "compels her to issue a direct attack on her countrymen who have considered it politically expedient to remain in exile"[20]. She criticizes the same countrymen who often develop habits that contradict what she considers authentically Ghanaian. She is distressed by their lack of loyalty and she regrets that they have abandoned everything that shaped their Africaness to imitate the whites: "If our black-eyed squint mentally reprimands the colonizers because of their history of domination, she looks equally askance at the African self-exiles who have bought the colonial line"[21] . Sissie expresses her disappointment poetically, claiming

> Beautiful black bodies
> Changed into elephant-grey corpses,
> Littered all over the western world,
> Thrown across railway tracks for

[19] Booker, M. Keith. *The African Novel in English: an Introduction.* Heinemann, James Currey, 1998, p. 120.
[20] Wilentz, Gay. "*The Politics of Exile: Reflections from a Black Eyed Squint in Our Sister Killjoy*". Azodo, Ada Uzomaka & Gay Wilentz, eds. *Emerging Perspectives on Ama Ata Aidoo*. Trenton (N.J): Africa World Press, 1999, p. 86.
[21] Ibid.p.85.

Midnight expresses mangle
Just a little bit more-
Offered to cold flowing water
Buried in thickets and snow
Their penises cut. (OSK, p62)

In fact, the principle raised here in Negritudinist terms is that of human dignity and the recognition of personal duties towards the nation. Aidoo portrays Sissie speaking to students from developing countries studying abroad, urging them to return home to use their education for the benefit of the African communities rather than seeking fame and fortune overseas. Actually, Aidoo's crucial preoccupation is the need for Africans to unite with other blacks all over the world in order to consider and remember a forgotten archive of African values.

Sissie' attachment to her country is common safe with her concern about her African "brothers", which is why she pleads with them to return home, where their family will care for them, while their exile ruptures the family structure further. She insists that the best attitude for them is to return home where there is solidarity, love and generosity rather than living in misery, rejection and loneliness in strange surrounding:

> So please come home. My brother. Come to our people. They are the only ones who need to know how much we are worth. The rewards are hardly anything. For every successful surgery, they will hail you as a miracle worker. Their faith will not be in the knives you wield but in your hands. (OSK, p 130)

Sissie ends on an uplifting note, assuring her lover that "no amount of pseudo-scientific junk is going to make us a weaker race than we are". But she is a strong and self-confident female character who refuses to let Ghanaians fail their fellow countrymen, and as such, she insists that her people in particular and the African race in general can do better; she cannot excuse their shortcomings, for this would weaken her own identity as an African independent woman with a superior sense of nationalism. Aidoo uses Sissie as a spokeswoman and as a messenger for Ghana, one

who can be counted on to demand change and reform of social practices and to uphold values as established by Ghanaians, not the outside world.

In fact, Sissie's clarity of vision and her ability to resist influences demonstrates that western education, while being a factor in perpetuating neocolonialism and having role in luring Africans to Europe thus isolating them from their own culture, also serves as a tool for critical analysis. Young Africans are thus empowered with the articulation of messages that serve to combat alienation and neocolonialist hegemony in all fields. Aidoo's protagonist has grown into a conscious woman, no longer the child she once was, but in her maturation, she has only experienced the disappointment of theoretical claims of support versus the lived experience of isolation and solitude.

In sum, the overall message of the novel is that going to Europe is not the "journey to paradise" as most African been-tos might suggest. It is rather living in miserable conditions in the midst of human beings who can feel comfortable, as Aidoo concludes, only in relationships where they are clearly dominant in terms of class, race or gender. In this way, Aidoo is urging the African intellectuals including doctors and other professionals to return home to better serve their countries and communities, instead of continuing to enrich other more developed countries. Keith Booker argues that in *Our Sister Killjoy*, Aidoo suggests that these African elites who seem to have no intention of returning to Africa are not only depriving their own people of the benefits of their services, but they are also playing into the hands of a Western neocolonial educational system that is designed not only to create a "brain drain" by luring Africa's best and brightest to the west, but also to help the West maintain its economic and cultural domination of post-colonial Africa[22].

Actually, the greatest contribution that Aidoo makes through *Our Sister Killjoy* is the introduction of the problem of the ongoing neocolonial domination of Africa by the west by portraying the connection between the lives of the African individuals, the alienating effects of Western education and the complex political structures of neocolonialism.

[22] Booker, M. Keith. Op. Cit. P. 124.

c) The Issue of Gender:

Sexuality and gender issues in African societies have often been subsumed under a variety of discourses, local and global, that do not effectively acknowledge the specificities and complexities of the reality of African women. Actually, in the postcolonial world, the European domination disrupted the balance between the two sexes and led to a more complex relationship between the two. This is a matter of fact that rendered the position of women more complex. Juliana Nfah-Abbyeni comments:

> Without necessarily glorifying gender relations in theses societies, it must be noted that most of the flexible gender relations (…) were rigidified during colonial rule and have become part of the post-colonial heritage in African urban communities. These more rigid, masculinist gender roles failed to assimilate the earlier gender –integrated power structures in which women played major roles.[23]

As a result, African women writers are put in a more disadvantaged position in comparison to their western counterparts. Their literary works deal with the issue of gender in the light of colonialism, highlighting the multiple and complex layers of relationship between gender and colonialism. The issue of the interface between women and men's spaces and the dynamics of gender relationships is central to the ways in which gender is conceptualized in African societies and this is also important for the ways in which African culture is considered to be essential for gender discourses in Africa.

The issue of gender in *Our Sister Killjoy* has been open to a wide range of interpretations. Brenda Cooper argues that in Our Sister Killjoy Aidoo neglects the issue of gender because of the overwhelmingly racial view of the world presented by the author via Sissie. She further compares Aidoo to her male Ghanaian compatriots who have "developed a strategy of 'race retrieval' which, far from liberating people,

[23] Nfah-Abbenyi, Juliana Makuchi. *Gender in African Women Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference*. Op. Cit. p. 23

paralyses them within a radical and ethnic paradigm and perpetuates the enslavement of women"[24].

Actually one way to approach the reading of *Our Sister Killjoy* has been on the grounds of its being a re-writing of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The latter remains a representation of colonial fiction in which the black African woman is a receptor of "two paradigms of alienation and otherness- blackness and her constructed silence or voicelessness- in a discourse"[25]as Abena Busia argues, "in which sexuality and access to language together form part of the discourse of access to power"[26]

Indeed, the black African woman is not only absent from the locus of power in the colonizer's fiction, but rather deprived of access to language, "the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of 'truth', 'order', and reality become established"[27].

As a matter of fact, in *Our Sister Killjoy*, Aidoo depicts an African individual in search of a new subjectivity in a post-colonial world. And to make matters more peculiar, this individual is a woman. So, Aidoo seeks to renew the image of the black African woman and to restore her dignity by making Sissie a central character of the novel. Her heroine is not only given voice but also a conscience. She keeps questioning her people, ponders over the future of Africa, and assesses the impact of European culture on her compatriots.

Once in Europe, "our sister" encounters people from various socio-economic backgrounds, and the most significant one is the German housewife of a factory worker named Marija Sommer. The friendship of Sissie with the latter gradually deepens until a crucial scene in which Marija makes a sexual advance which Sissie then rejects. In fact, with its sensitive treatment of this lesbian sexuality, *Our Sister Killjoy* breaks new ground in the African narrative literature. Thus many critics have

[24] Cooper, Brenda. Op. Cit .pp 98-99
[25] Samuel,Y.A. *In my Mother's House: A Study of Selected Works by Ama Ata Aidoo and Buchi Emecheta.* Alberta: University of Calgary, March, 2000, p 160
[26] Ibid. p.160
[27] Ashcroft, Bill, Griffiths, Gareth, and Tiffin, Helen. *The Empire Writes Back, Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literature.* Op. Cit. p. 7

given serious thought about the presence of this issue and acknowledge Marija as being one of the most outrageous, determined and uncompromising homosexuals in African fiction. Lyn Innes and Caroline Rooney describe Marija's gesture towards Sissie as an "over-friendly gesture…"[28]. According to them, Marija's response to Sissie's refusal indicates that she has become obsessed with lesbianism. Marija "dies a little" when she realizes that her advances are being rebuffed: "Marija's voice came from far away, thin, tremulous and full of old tears"

> Marija was crying silently. There was a tear streaming out of one of her eyes. The tear was coming out of her left eye only. The right eye was completely dry. (OSK, p 65)

Marija is devastated not because the rejection is humiliating to her, but because her primary goal as a sexual predator is to prey on the other woman sexually and since the satisfaction of that desire is threatened, she becomes disillusioned. In character with sexual predators, she is egocentric and puts up only a pretend show of friendliness. The refusal is thus more hurtful than a thing to be shameful about, especially considering that the individual involved is black, who ordinarily she probably considers beneath her in status[29].

In fact Marija's emotional and sexual advance to Sissie arises from her loneliness because of "the individualistic milieu of Europe,(…).Sissie's (…) revulsion at Marija's advance comes from a horror of lesbianism instilled in her and her culture by the teachings of Christian missionaries[30]. It is a kind of escape from the constraints and the frustrating lifestyle of her daily life. Marija's loneliness "may have been the major motivation for colonial expansion as Europeans, seeking to fill the void at the heart of their lives, attempted to compensate it by conquering most of the rest of the world"[31].There is a connection between European loneliness and their continuous desire for expansion and domination, which Aidoo demonstrates through the relationship between Marija and Sissie. Assuming a superior position as a member of a

[28] *Sexuality Problems and Desire in Ama Ata Aidoo's Our Sister Killjoy or Reflections of a Black Eyed Squint and Changes: a Love Story,* p. 99
[29] Ibid
[30] Booker, M. Keith. Op. Cit. p. 122
[31] Ibid. pp.122-123

developed country, Marija tries to conquer Sissie sexually just to fill her loneliness by tempting her to lesbian intercourse.

> Sissie's greatest discovery is that LONELINESS is the lot of her friend, the representative German woman, Marija. (…). It is this loneliness that makes proffer a lesbian sexual relationship to Sissie but which she rejects. (…). What Aidoo does is to evoke the stereotypical image of the black woman as represented in colonial fiction in order to subvert it. The relationship between Sissie and Marija, while serving as instrument of cultural self-definition, brings to the fore the sterility of European civilization and European man's facile assumptions about morality.[32]

Following the Lacanian perception of homosexuality in the character or psyche of Marija is the idea that

> Homosexuality is an example of sublime perversion in civilization. It is the externalization of the perversion that characterizes modern civilization as internalized by the female victims of distorted and convoluted cultures. [33]

Lyn Innes and Caroline Rooney classify Marija as simply one of these victims and they describe her as "marked by her gendered inferiority within her own culture"[34]. Chimalum Nwankwo equally suggests that Marija accepts "a subservient role in her society"[35].

Lacan relates homosexuality to perversion and considers female homosexuality to be more 'hysterial' when comparing it to male homosexuality. This, according to him, is a consequence of the cultural trend in most societies where differences between the sexes are suppressed. The implication thereof is that female homosexuals with their 'phallus fetishism' find their practice a refuge. They assert their feminity through homosexual practice as a protest against the male-centered societies which involve segregation and degradation of women, so that their lower status in society constitutes the crisis that determines their psychological behavior to culminate in lesbianism.

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[32] Asante, Yaw Samuel. "*Good night Africa. Good morning Europe'*. Europe's (Re) Discovery by a Black African Woman: Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy*". Africa Quarterly. Vol.34,N°3,1994, p. 68

[33] *Sexuality Problems and Desire in Ama Ata Aidoo's Our Sister Killjoy or Reflections of a Black Eyed Squint and Changes: a Love Story*. p. 108

[34] Ibid

[35] Ibid. p.109

From the discussion above, we come to understand that Marija's sexual tendencies are the consequences of her marginalization in society. Her lower status pushes her to be involved in an ambiguous relationship with Sissie to affirm her feminity and claim for a respectful position in a society where man is the holder of power.

Actually, the issue that takes centre stage in the novel is the struggle of women for liberation in patriarchal societies across continents, and this is observable in Marija's status in her society where Sissie meets her. Aidoo's aim is to show the compelling similarities of women's resistance and struggle across racial lines in male-centered societies. Maija represents the embodiment of women's struggle in Europe, whereas Sissie embodies women from Africa. Through her encounter with Marija, Sissie comes to full realization of how women are marginalized the world over. However, Sissie's rejection of Marija's lesbian offer can be explained as a gap between the western woman and the African one. Aidoo historicizes Sissie's response by pointing out that colonization actually imposed a specifically Christian homophobia. She also situates the nationalist cliché that Africans are sexually purer than Europeans within the colonial discourse that characterized Africa as being a state of nature and, therefore, uncivilized and ripe for the civilizing mission[36].

But Sissie, taking a Manichaean standpoint, comes to consider that African women have more honor, dignity and respect than the white ones, whom she calls "dolls" and Marija is the best example. Sissie becomes aware of this distinction not by recognizing her own 'blackness', but by noticing the "oddity" of 'whiteness'.

Sissie clearly sympathizes with Marija's dilemma and as their relationship progresses so far and takes on the form of a love affair, she realizes her position of power and the way in which she can abuse this power. In this regard, Sissie becomes no longer the oppressed or subjugated woman, but rather the oppressor as she realizes in a moment of crisis that "there is pleasure in hurting" (OSK, p 77).Actually, even if

[36] Gerstner, David A. *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Queer Culture*. USA and Canada: Routledge, 2006, p14

Sissie rejects Marija's sexual advance, she wishes, deep inside herself, to take on the role of a black man in a sexist heterosexual relationship with a white woman in Europe

> Especially if she, Sissie had been a man. She had imagined and savoured the tears, their anguish at knowing that their love was doomed. But they would make promises to each other which of course would not stand a chance of getting fulfilled. She could see Marija's tears….That was a game. A game in which one day, she became so absorbed, she forgot who she was, and the fact she was a woman. (OSK, p61)

Aidoo further adds: "Sissie looked at the other woman and wished again that at least, she was a boy. A man." (Ibid)

Sissie whishes she were a man in order to create a heterosexual dynamics, then feels empowered like a man and abuses Marija emotionally. She also comes to understand the "power it affords one to inflict pain on others", which makes her feel "like a bastard. Not a bitch. A bastard". (OSK, p67) She becomes like "one of the black boys in one of these involvements with white girls in Europe." (OSK, p75)

Here, Aidoo refers to other stories of been-tos and their interracial relationships with European women that raise in Sissie a feeling of horror and aversion. In fact, the aversion that she feels at the thought of these relations demonstrates her strong attachment to a cultural nationalist ideology. Sissie also comes to realize how victimizers can feel pleasure in hurting other people, but she comments also on the sorrow and the tragedy that the hurt person can feel. She is aware of the ways in which personal relationships are influenced by larger systems of power and exploitation.

In rejecting the young German woman's love, Sissie observes her own satisfaction in causing hurt to another. Aidoo wants to relate her enjoyment of power to her political ideas about white supremacy, to realize that she could be as abusive of power and violent as a white person.

In this respect, Catherine Frank contends that the relationship between the two women demonstrates the primacy of the gender issue over race and nationality. In fact, according to her, in London, Sissie finds herself more isolated than she was in

Germany because she was more estranged from her Ghanaian brothers. And Nana Wilson-Tagoe adds further that it is Marija who helps and encourages Sissie's self-consciousness and definition as an African, as a woman, and as a sexual being. According to her, Marija provides Sissie with an environment that she is able to embrace with her own sensibilities as a woman and disclose to anxieties about her body, about motherhood, and about the loneliness of women within a gendered nationalist project. Actually, if Sissie responds to Europe through the memories of Africa, it is thanks to her encounter with Marija that her African memories are made performative and given a contemporary relevance.[37]

Further, Aidoo represents the two women sharing the same experience. Sissie the African intellectual, and, Marija Sommer, the young lonely German housewife, each one is the representative of her race, each is the bearer of history and culture that keep the two women far apart. One of the early conversations that they engage in is the matter of Sissie's confirmation name, which is the equivalent of Marija, Mary. Marija and Sissie have in common the name of virgin Mary. The name Mary is the English form of the equivalent Marija in Germany, Maria in Swedish, Marie in French and Sissie, attributed to the protagonist because she was baptized in a Christian family. Actually, this European aspect to Sissie's name did not go unnoticed by Marija who quickly reacts claiming: " 'Mary, Mary … and you an African?' 'Yes'. 'But that is a German name!' " (OSK, p 24) .Here in effect, the similarities in the names of the two women can be interpreted as a metaphor for the similarities in their predicament. The author gives the same name to both women although they are culturally different, probably suggest that women's struggle for status is far from being exclusively situated in the Third World.

However, Sissie rejects her baptismal Christian name; she completely refuses to be called Mary. Once again, even though the two women have similarities in name, their names have different connotations. To Marija, Mary is just a name, whereas to Sissie, the name is the result of colonial attachment. It has a different historical experience and connotation. For the colonial masters it was imperative that

[37] Cole, Catherine M, Manuh, Takyiwaa & Miescher, Stephan F. Op. Cit. p. 237

For a child to grow up
To be
Heaven-worthy individual,
He had
To have
Above all, a
Christian name (OSK, p 25)

For that reason Sissie rejects the name Mary because it reminds her of colonial power and colonialism in Africa. She rejects the name as she rejects Christianity and everything that can be identified with the West.

Aidoo goes on to reveal that all over the world baby boys are preferred over baby girls. Sissie comes to discover this even in Germany through the manner in which Marija adores her boy-child. Marija expresses so much enthusiasm about her younger Adolf being a boy because of her awareness of the place of females in her society, which to her is far from desirable

She was very happy he was a boy
Any good woman
In her senses
With her choices
Would say the
Same
In Asia
Europe
Anywhere (OSK, p 51)

Moreover, women share the same devotion of the institution of motherhood; it transgresses all lines of race and nationalities. In all societies, women are programmed

to consider that womanhood is equated with motherhood. Thus any woman has to embrace motherhood to reach happiness. In addition to the devotion to their children, women all over the world should be totally devoted to their husbands, being entirely at their services for duties such as: cooking, caring, feeding children…etc…and any transgression can be considered as a betrayal of men. In other words, women are not good mothers and wives unless they fulfill their duties.

In spite of the fact that Sissie has a common ground with Marija as far as women's subjugation and struggles are concerned, she believes that African women are more oppressed compared to the western ones. African women are the "more wretched" of the earth. Sissie gives the example of the drugs tested on Third world women for the benefit of western ones, thus demonstrating the legacy of colonialism which led to different meanings of the female body according to the contexts, Africa and Europe. She realizes that despite all the similarities between women's oppression and struggle across the continents, the historical and personal experiences of women differ. Ultimately, Sissie cannot follow European feminism and its mode of liberation. In her love letter she writes to her "Precious Something", Kunle with whom she has broken off ties because he has decided to remain in England. She says:

> May be I regret that I could not shut up and meekly look up to you even when I knew I disagreed with you. But you see, no one had taught me such meekness. And I wish they had.
>
> Sometimes when they are hotly debating the virtues of the African female, I ask myself: 'but who am I? Where did I come from?' (…) It seems as if much of the softness and meekness you and all the brothers expect of me and all the sisters is that which is really Western. Some kind of hashed up Victorian notions, hm? Allah me and my big mouth!! (OSK, p.117)

In reality Aidoo contrasts the experiences of African women to the "dolls the colonizers brought along with them who fainted at the sight of their own bleeding fingers and carried smelling salts around all the time" (OSK, p117). She believes that different historical experiences required different methods for achieving liberation. This is obvious in the love letter that moves towards the conclusion of the novel in which she speaks about nationalism, political issues, 'Brain-drain' particularly health

issues, whereas she is expected to be a woman. By refusing to stay in Europe, Sissie rejects Eurocentrism and its model of femininity, and as Katherine Frank argues: "returning to a culture she feels in its purest, uncontaminated form affords dignity and self-worth to women"[38]. She believes that in order for her and other African women to achieve liberation, they would have to return to Africa to be part of the struggle with their African brothers against the colonizer.

> Sissie cannot, therefore, follow European feminism's path toward liberation. Her struggles must address the formation of feminity not only within an indigenous patriarchy, but also within the response of that patriarchy to the colonial encounter. (…). In this case, Pan-Africanist nationalism means respect for the black-eyed squint of a young woman and acceptance of her leadership. (…). Aidoo advocates a nationalism that cannot do without dissent, one that recognizes internal contradictions and even thrives on the resulting complexity. So adamant is Aidoo that African nationalism does not privilege race over gender that she ends the novel with Sissie choosing to leave her lover.[39]

Ultimately Aidoo reveals that despite all the similarities between women's struggle across continents, the cultural and historical experiences differ. The differences in women's struggle warrant different modes of liberation. "These women have much in common and should be able to band together, but the legacy of colonialism creates a racial and cultural split that is very difficult to overcome"[40].

Aidoo does not present a novel that deals only with elements of women's movement, but rather demonstrates how African women are faring within not only sexual subjugation but also racial oppression. 'Black feminism', in relation to the novel is, as Kadiatu Kanneh suggests, both a re-evaluation of African femininity in respect of African communities and men, and a re-examination of racial and cultural

[38] Frank, Catherine. "Women without Men: The Feminist Novel in Africa". Jones, Eldred Durosimi, Eustace Palmer & Marjorie Jones, eds. *Women in African Literature Today*: Oxford: James Currey Ltd, 1987. P. 31

[39] Samantrai, Ramu. "Caught at the Confluence of History: Ama Ata Aidoo's Necessary Nationalism". *Research in African Literature*. Vol.26. N 2, Summer 1995, pp.13-14

[40] Booker, M. Keith. Op. Cit. p.120

differences between women[41]. Sissie represents the empowerment of a female figure in African literature. She embarks on a journey not only through continents but also through the European ideals that seduce the younger generation of Africans. Further, Sissie's sojourns in Germany and London raise more questions and confirm her feminist awareness, and her encounter with the western culture reinforces her fidelity and attachment to her own. Overall, Sissie's geographical voyage reflects her self-determination and ability as a woman to take on responsibilities such as discovery of race and gender, and the most important component of this discovery is that she did this not only as a woman but as an African woman.

[41] Kanneh, Kadiatu. *African Identities: Race, Nation and Culture in Ethnography, Pan-Africanism and Black Literatures*. London, Routldge, 1998, p.154

Chapter 3

The Personal is Political

Changes: A Love Story

a- The Female Protagonist: Liberation or Alienation?

b- Gender and Nation

a) The Female Protagonist: Liberation or Alienation?

> To the reader, a confession, and the critic, an apology
>
> Several years ago when I was a little older than I am now, I said in a published interview that I could never write about lovers in Africa. Because surely in our environment there are more important things to write about? Working on this story then was an exercise in words-eating! Because it is a slice from the life and loves of a somewhat privileged young woman and other fictional characters- in Accra. It is no meant to be a contribution to any debate, however current.

This apology and confession that preceded the reading of the novel *Changes: A Love Story* is in reality very significant since it raises a number of issues associated with women's writing and the supposed "natural" tendency to write about the so-called women's themes that are always connected with love and the personal sphere of women's lives. In fact, Aidoo's intention is to call the critic and the reader's attention to the fact that everything is linked, for as she said, "love *is* political, and everything is intertwined"[1], i.e. even a love story written by a woman can be considered as the foundation for a debate that transcends the private sphere into a public one about additional central issues that need to be dwelt on, "for it is here, at the most intimate of personal relations love between man and woman – that Aidoo critiques the ironies in the changes in the neo/ postcolonial world of African nation – state since independence"[2]. So if Aidoo holds the view that love is political and that "everything is intertwined", then she uses the story to deal with not only personal relationships but also social, political and economic situations in post-independence Africa. Actually, all the issues that Esi and the other characters face in the novel reflect the everyday problems in a neo-colonial country. Ada Uzoamaka Azodo and Gay Wilentz interpret this introduction to the novel as a

> Downright sarcastic, so-called apology in which Aidoo seems to be laughing in the face of those critics who believe that women should eschew

[1] Odamtten, Vincent. *The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo: Polylectics and Reading against Neocolonialism*. Florida: University Press of Florida, 1994, p.163

[2] Wilentz, Gay. "African Women's Domain: Demarcating Political Space in Nwapa, Southerland and Aidoo". Azodo, Ada Uzoamaka & Gay Wilentz, eds. *Emerging Perspectives on Ama Ata Aidoo.* Trenton (N.J): Africa World Press, 1999, p 275

> politics but only indulge in writing love stories, or those who are so ignorant they imagine that love and social issues have nothing to do with each other, nay that the personal is not also political[3]

What is interesting in this particular opening of the novel is that the debate does not only deal with the loves and disillusions that envelop the relationships between a man and a woman, but is rather carried out in a particular space of Africa. It is something much deeper and absorbing that denounces and acknowledges African women's positioning in familiar and communal environments and accordingly to understand the various forms of subjugation they have to go through.

Vincent Odamtten refers to *Changes* as a novel that "seeks to develop our understanding of the real problems that arise in personal relationships always-and-already subject to the political and ideological pressures of a particular historical moment"[4]. By considering that the personal is political and the political is personal, the personal foundation of the novel leads us to a political viewpoint of the events. In reality, the personal becomes political, as it is the result of the influence of the latter over the former. Women's roles surrounded by familiar milieu and society, their conflicts and crises as well as the influence of tradition and modernity on their lives need to be analyzed through an approach that takes into account the boundaries and circumstances that condition women's movements at home, at work, and in the field of interpersonal relationships. In an interview with Adeola James, Aidoo had this to say

> I am beginning to say that love or the workings of love is also political. Even when it is a so-called a-political treatment of love, if there is a-political of anything, it is very important that one explores the nature of human relationships, including sexual relationships. So in a way, maybe, I am not really eating all of those words. I have just written a play which explores polygamy and people in love[5]

[3] Azodo, Ada Uzoamaka & Gay Wilentz. Op. Cit. p xvii
[4] Odamtten, Vincent. Op. Cit. p 161
[5] Nfah- Abbeyni, Juliana Makuchi. *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference*. Op. Cit. p 52

Meanwhile, Aidoo's female characters are depicted as intelligent, educated and working women who are often radical figures in terms of political, social and economic issues and who commonly revolt in opposition to the institutional structures. They are offering alternative modes of living that are considered necessary because of the changing characteristics of the African landscape.

Unlike the other African women who do not get any type of education, the three most important female characters of the novel, Esi, Opokuya and Fusena, who feel the challenges of being ambitious in a patriarchal society are, even though radically different among themselves, placed in an advantageous and favorable situation on account of their western education. Yet, all through the novel, their roles as wives, mothers and daughters will place them in firm situations that obviously restrain their movements. Sally Mc Williams writes: "whereas Opokuya and Esi remain active questioners and actors in the changing landscape of sexual and personal relationships, Fusena remains a question mark – the silenced reminder that oppression remains in different corners of female society"[6]. Indeed these women are completely conscious about their situation but their positions are different depending on educational background and parental influence.

Women have constantly been placed at the bottom of the institutionalized power hierarchies and their access to quality education seems to be the only way out for them to escape the inevitable destiny of the doomed and see themselves and their homes from a different and newer perspective. And so these female characters especially Esi, do not see themselves as submissive victims but rather as agents of change. By presenting urbanized, well educated and economically empowered African women, Aidoo attempts to demonstrate that even if education has brought a part of emancipation to women, it sometimes turns into a heavy weight to carry for it traps women within the boundaries of modernity and tradition, past and present.

[6] Mc Williams, Sally. "Strange As It May Seem: African Feminism in Two Novels by Ama Ata Aidoo". Azodo, Ada & Gay, Wilentz, eds. *Emerging Perspectives on Ama Ata Aidoo*. Trenton (N.J): African World Press, 1999, p .335.

Changes: A Love Story (1991) addresses diverse issues in contemporary African women's lives – love, career, betrayal, family, social and economic life, and parenting. It is a story about a free and liberated professional woman, Esi Sekyi, who gets divorced from her husband, Oko, and struggles to begin with a second, Ali Kondey, only to lose him also. Esi embodies the new professional woman. She is educated and economically independent and accordingly "Esi could be seen as the stereotypical Westernized professional West African woman"[7]. Actually, this representation that subverts the recurrently known depiction of African women as passive recipients, non-career and completely reliant on men both physically and psychologically, aims at the demystification and restitution of previous concepts since Aidoo considers that:

> The image of the African woman in the mind of the world has been set: she is breeding too many children she cannot take care of, and for whom she should not expect other people to peak up the tab. She is hungry, and so her children. In fact, it has become a cliché of Western photojournalism that the African woman is old beyond her years; she is half naked; her drooped and withered breasts are well exposed; there are flies buzzing around the faces of her children; and she has a permanent begging bowl in her hand[8]

Formerly, women were seen as weaker beings, not competent at doing anything on their own and relying on their husbands for survival. And the African woman in particular, was at the bottom of her dehumanization, she was just considered as no more than a "housewife" or a "sex object" given out for marriage at a tender age, taking care of household chores, fulfilling the needs of her husband without questions as well as giving birth to his children. Actually, this position of backwardness and the traditionalist female role in African fiction as an obedient woman did not remain unchallenged. Aidoo gives new images of women sharply different from the previous ones. She moves away from the previous stereotyped representation of women as victims, good mothers and dutiful wives towards stronger images of women not only taking active roles in their societies, but also taking responsibilities for their own destinies. Indeed, Aidoo feels the necessity to illuminate and present these new

[7] Mc Williams, Sally. Op. Cit. p.347
[8] Collins, Patricia Hill. Op. Cit. p .241

perspectives that, to a certain degree, are not properly identified by the common reader and that present new types of liberty but new types of oppression as well.

In her novel, the author tackles modern women's problems to give a completely different image of that of a docile, accommodating wife and to prove another point that women have several useful roles in the society and should not be limited to just the roles defined for women such as childbirth and motherhood. In fact, Aidoo dramatizes and subverts the male power mechanisms which oppress and disempower women. As Alice Walker states, in the praise appearing on the novel's back cover: "Aidoo has reaffirmed my faith in the power of the written word to reach, to teach, to empower and encourage".

To fully appreciate the behavior of the characters, one should internalize the circumstances that encircle their lives and that condition their actions, choices and decisions. In the opening section of the novel and in an unexpected way, the reader is confronted with a rape scene that occurs between the central character Esi Sekyi and her husband Oko. Surely the reader wouldn't believe or imagine such a beginning for a love story and this may be explained as another attempt for Aidoo to call the reader's attention to the fact that this story may not follow some of the rules a novel or a love story usually does. In fact, many critics of Aidoo's work have responded in different ways to this scene .Vincent Odamtten comments by arguing that: "the rape is important, but it should not be confused with the narrative's central concerns; it is a symptom of much more fundamental personal, social, and political dislocations"[9]. Besides, in an interview on the topic, Aidoo herself is reported saying: "I had to be realistic. In terms of our African backgrounds, marital rape isn't one of the hottest topics… sex in marriage is the man's prerogatives and a woman is considered lucky if her husband should take such an aggressive interest in her"[10]. In a rather particularized discussion of Oko's sexual assault on Esi, Nfah-Abbenyi sees the issue Aidoo tackles

[9] Odamtten, Vincent. Op. Cit.p.165
[10] Samuel,Y.A. Op. Cit. p.138

as her subversion of "an age-old tradition that silences women's feelings about their own bodies".[11]

In this regard, it is important to mention that Oko's physical attraction to Esi and his cold treatment of her reflect his configuration of her body as an object to be possessed and discarded at will. Vincent Odamtten suggests that Oko feels too arrogant to even make an apology to Esi after the Assault

> Oko was already feeling like telling Esi that he was sorry. But he was also convinced that he mustn't. He got out of bed, taking the entire sleeping cloth with him. Esi's anger rose to an exploding pitch. Not just because Oko taking the cloth left her completely naked, or because she was feeling uncomfortably wet between her thighs. What really finished her was her eyes catching sight of the cloth trailing behind Oko who looked like some arrogant king, as he opened the door to get into the bathroom before her. (Changes, p.10)

Here Aidoo insists strongly on one of the processes of patriarchal domination which is the use of African women as sexual objects. In point of fact, women in most societies are relegated to the position of the 'other', and according to Bill Ashcroft, women are "marginalized and in a metaphorical sense, 'colonized'…"[12]. Ashcroft goes on to argue that, like the colonized nations and races, women have experienced the politics of oppression and repression. In the novel, the rape scene has a deep and reflective interpretation thus it should be read literally and metaphorically. First, it is the forcible control and defilement of a female body by a man, Oko. Then, rape in the context of the continent's distressed history with the west can be interpreted as a metaphor for both the slave trade and the ultimate colonization of Africa. European nations in the name of colonization literally and metaphorically raped Africa[13]. Esi's body represents symbolically the uncivilized place and the "Dark Continent" that has to be penetrated, conquered, and Oko, as the powerful colonizer, who tries to dominate

[11] Nfah-Abbenyi, Juliana Makuchi. *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference.* Op. Cit. p. 54
[12] Ashcroft, Bill, Griffiths, Gareth & Tiffin, Helen. H. *The Empire Writes Back, Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literature*. Op. Cit. p. 174
[13] Valentine Y, Mudimbe. *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge*. London: Indiana University Press, 1988.

her violently. The feminists argue that the "Othering" and silencing of women by men is comparable to the representation of the colonized Other that helps uphold white dominance. Definitely the rape scene represents the colonial and postcolonial masculine dominance over women and the mother Africa.

Therefore, Esi's resistance can be explained by her refusal of these internalized oppressions that allow women to appear as their husband's property and her rebellious rejection of the patriarchal order that keeps women in the position of the 'other'. Helen Nabasuta Mugambi suggests that Esi is not the victim of the rape but instead of her husband. Hence, Aidoo deals subtly with the theme of rape in her novel. She links the exploitation of women to the rape of the land. On the one hand, she comments on the sexual oppression of women, she sends a message across that women have the right to use and control their own bodies. On the other, she focuses on the sustained rape of the continent by its post-colonial leaders.

The taking of Esi's body by her husband brings into question a concept that is not known in the Ghanaian language: "marital rape".

> Clean? It all came to her then. That what she had gone through with Oko had been marital rape. 'Marital rape?!' She began to laugh rather uncomfortably, and managed to stop herself only when it occurred to her that anyone coming up upon her that minute would think she had lost her mind, which would not have been too far from the truth. (*Changes*, p.11)

After the incident, Esi's direct thoughts shift to the difficulty to find an expression or a term for the verbalization of the crime that formally doesn't exist in this precise context. Nfah-Abbyeni quotes Bola Makanjuola who thinks that "Aidoo tentatively raises the issue of marital rape… But never really dwells on the subject. It is as if both Esi and the author realize that in African society there could not possibly be an 'indigenous word or phrase for it'"[14].In effect, this lack of ability to define the incident as rape and marital rape could possibly be interpreted as proof that the term

[14] Nfah-Abbyeni, Juliana Makuchi. "Flabberwhelmed or Turning History on its Head? The Postcolonial Woman –as- Subject in Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story*". Op. Cit. p. 291

"marital rape" is a western concept which has not an African definition. For Aidoo the term and practice of marital rape is deemed as foreign within the cultural understandings among Ghanaians who think that "Sex is something a husband claims from his wife as his right any time and at his convenience" (*Changes*, p.12). According to her, the idea and practice of marital rape does not exist in Ghana particularly and in Africa generally. Hence, nobody would take an accusation seriously by a married woman that her husband raped her.

In the aftermath of the incident, Esi reflects and imagines an African sociologist presenting a paper on "The prevalence of marital rape in the urban African Environment" (*Changes*, p11). But she pictures the responses

> Yes, we told you, didn't we? What is burying us now are all these imported feminist ideas…
>
> And dear lady colleague, how would you describe "marital rape" in Akan?
>
> 'Igbo?... Yoruba?'
>
> 'Wolof?... or Temne?'
>
> ' Kikuyu?... or Ki-Swahili?'
>
> 'Chi-Shonia?'
>
> 'Zulu?... or Xhosa?'
>
> Or …
>
> She was caught in her own trap. Hadn't she some long time ago said in an argument that
>
> > You cannot go around claiming that an idea or an item was imported into a given society unless you could also conclude that to the best of your knowledge, there is not, and never was any word or phrase in that society's indigenous language which describe that idea or item. (*Changes*, pp11-12)

Through these reflections, we come to understand that Esi, afterwards, becomes aware that she could never explain to anyone that she wanted a divorce from her husband because of marital rape. She is enraged and nonetheless, she is conscious that according to the African traditions and society this concept does not even exist as is exemplified by the fact that there is no indigenous word for it. As she says: "But

marital rape? No. the society could not possibly have an indigenous word or phrase for it" (*Changes*, p, 12). She realizes that this is not a crime but Oko's right and that which he is allowed to have. She realizes as well that it is difficult to speak about rape inside marriage because of the African cultural background imposed by patriarchy.

It is obvious through this scene that despite Esi's independence and successful career, she remains controlled by her husband, constrained by marriage and her sexual duties towards her husband to whom her body belongs. In short, in African societies, women are bound to their husbands and are the property of their husbands. On the contrary, Esi, acting in accordance with Aidoo's opinion, has an entirely different view of herself and about her relationship with her husband Oko. She is completely the opposite of what "a good wife" should be, she wants independence, a career, and control over her body. Aidoo approvingly perceives women like Esi as challenging, trying to resist in a perpetual social instability. She argues that her main protagonist, Esi

> (…) tries to juggle(…). I think that the African woman who is like Esi, a woman with high education, who has a career, is going to have a hard time of it. But I suspect that she's not going to have a harder time than any woman in that kind of position anywhere. The added detail is that our society is at a stage where it is a little less tolerant of this dilemma than may be in the west. But, mind you, the greater sections of our world are in the position of Esi. (…) [W]hat is interesting to me is her willingness to even struggle (…) [as] life is dynamic[15].

Furthermore, in reality, through making reference to "imported feminist ideas", Aidoo is in fact distancing the African women from their western counterparts and at the same time criticizing those who believe that African women writers are imitating and importing western feminist ideas to defend themselves. Similarly, confirming the idea that African women do not need white Western women to speak for themselves, Sally Mc Williams quotes Aidoo: "we African women are perfectly capable of making up our minds and speaking for ourselves"[16].

[15] Ada Azodo. "Interview with Ama Ata Aidoo : Facing the Millennium". Hauppauge, N.Y, March 31, 1996, p.9.
[16] Mc William, Sally. Op. Cit. p. 333

Before the rape scene the reader is already aware that Oko had the intention to rape Esi for a certain number of reasons. And it is evident right from the beginning that the two are not happy with their marriage. Oko, a teacher and soon-to-be principal of school believes that Esi "definitely puts her career well above any duties she owed as a wife. She was a great cook, who complained endlessly anytime she had to enter the kitchen" (*Changes*, p.8). Thus, he feels humiliated over having to fight against Esi's career to get her care and consideration, "but to have to fight with your woman's career for her attention is not only new in the history of the world, but completely humiliating" (*Changes*, p. 70). Oko refuses to understand the demands of Esi's career. He sees her professional advancement and liberation as a hindrance to their marriage.

Living in modern Ghana and having received a Western education, Esi does not really conform to the traditional roles of mother and wife but instead adheres more to the western values. In the same way, she is fairly sexually liberated and is in command of her own reproductive life as can be seen through her decision to not have a second child and in that case prefers to use contraception without consulting her husband. In reality, Esi refuses to give birth to another child because she is aware that children will demand too much of her time and consequently this will affect negatively her professional life. Esi leaves her home early and returns at the end of the day, sometimes bringing even some work home with her. She attends numerous conferences all over the globe:

> Then there are all these conferences. Geneva, Addis, Dakar one half of the year; Rome, Lusaka, Lagos the other half.
>
> Is this too an African woman? She not only is, but there are plenty of them around these days… these days…these days. (*Changes*, p. 8)

Moreover, in addition to the successful career of Esi, she is financially independent, she earns more money than her husband and provides the house in which they live through the government job. For Esi, her husband Oko represents an obstacle for her professional life as he makes excessive demands on her body and time that she herself believes should be invested in her work. She refuses to conform to the societal tendency that sees women as appendages to men; she rejects completely the idea of

having more children as demanded by her husband. In fact, the protagonist represents the modern African and ambitious career woman who rebels against the patriarchal and sexist obstacles that obstruct both her personal and professional liberty; she refuses to conform to the role prescribed by traditions for women but rather wants a society in which both men and women will be accorded equal privileges and opportunities.

Meanwhile, one of the fundamental themes of the novel is that of education. Indeed, when we look at the African feminist novels, it is striking to note that all of them have educated heroines, such as Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*(1980), Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough*(1991), Buchi Emecheta's the *Bride Price*(1976), Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*(1988), and others. African feminist thought demonstrates black women's emerging power as agents of knowledge by portraying African women as self-defined, self-reliant individuals –indeed intellectuals– confronting gender oppression. They write about the importance that education plays in empowering oppressed women, especially in the social and political changes brought by the colonizers, and the great impact that it has on the individual consciousness[17].The representation of women in these literary texts highlights the positive side of women in society. Education therefore is believed by many writers to be the major agent of women's liberation and emancipation with the western form of education, as more women are now empowered to express themselves and assert their right to be heard.

As a matter of fact and according to Sally McWilliams, Esi's sexual and financial freedom makes Oko feel as if he is "less man because he does not control either the sexual politics of his married life or his wife's career"[18]. Oko is humiliated by Esi's neglect and professional activities. He feels also ashamed by his friend's remarks, "my friends are laughing at me (…). They think I am not behaving like a man" (*Changes*, p. 8). He realizes that he has to assert his manhood both to himself and to his wife for he feels embarrassed by the fact that he is unable to command and

[17] Christian, Barbara. Op. Cit. 143
[18] Mc William, Sally. Op. Cit. p. 348

control his family as society would expect him to do. Oko certainly belongs to the category of people who believe that women's activities should be in the domestic and traditional spheres of society, such as childbearing and care-giving and thus he complains about her autonomy. Due to his upbringing and conformity to traditions, he finds his position and value within the structure of marriage declining and even disappearing. He is no longer at ease in this situation that places him together with an educated and self-determinant woman who is completely able to support herself and who is not interested in allowing men to interfere with her ambitions and expectations, for "Esi clearly is one of those women who seem to know what they want out of this life and what she seems to want doesn't necessarily coincide with what her husband wants for her or what society thinks a woman should have" (*Changes*, p. 4). His feeling is that he has lost the power of control that men wielded in the traditional family structure as breadwinners. Bell Hooks argues that

> The structure of marriage in patriarchal society is based on a system of exchange, one in which men are traditionally taught to provide economically for women and children in exchange for sexual, housekeeping, and nurturing services. The argument that black men have been emasculated because they were not always able to assume the patriarchal role of provider is based on the assumption that black men feel that they should provide for their families and therefore feel unmanned or guilty if they cannot do so[19]

All these circumstances cause frustration and distress to Oko, and make him more worried about his image in society. He takes out his anger on her and this starts with the demand for something that was for him legitimate, i.e. his right to Esi's sexuality. He indeed has to assert his manhood and indicate his total control over her bodily functions in his exploitative and violent relationship with her.

In this confrontation, Esi prefers to take the risk of being marginalized rather than surrendering to this type of gender oppression. By doing so, Esi subverts an age-old tradition that keeps women feeling silent about their own bodies. She seeks to create a space within which African women can challenge the subjugation and the use

[19]Hooks, Bell. *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. London: Pluto Press, 1982. Op. Cit. p. 76

of their bodies supported by those traditions that see it as men's rights. In other words, it is the rejection of the brutal means that aim at controlling women's sexual freedom.

However, Esi's divorce causes another trap for her, being single is as much a problem as being married to Oko. As a single woman Esi possesses a measure of freedom in making certain choices in her life but she places herself as well within that group of women who are blamed and for whom the society has no respect and value. It is true that when married, she did not have free time as she wanted, but being a single woman she runs the risk to endure loneliness and misfortune. Thus, she chooses to marry Ali with whom she falls in love.

On the other hand, Esi who challenges the traditional responsibilities of woman and resists patriarchy through asking for a divorce using rape as her weapon, ironically seems to co-operate with patriarchy when she enters a polygamous marriage by accepting to be the second wife of an upwardly mobile young professional, Ali Kondey.

It is interesting to note that Esi's choice to enter a polygamous marriage is considered as her search for a new model of existence and a new location for a young professional female self-determination by choosing an alternative way of living. In fact, marrying Ali, a married man with children, has a double function for Esi. She is no longer single in a society that defames, abuses women and is more precisely unsympathetic vis-à-vis unmarried and single ones. In addition, unlike Oko, Ali is not too demanding because he has already a "home", a life with Fusena and their children. Mc Williams argues that "Esi is trying to create to herself a space in which her sexual desires, her need for companionship, her counter need for freedom and her career ambitions can all coexist"[20]. Esi frees herself from the constraints of a marriage that dictates cultural expectations, she sees her marriage with Ali as an arrangement that would bring her freedom and love without responsibility

> Through this affair, we see in Esi a ground breaking character in African fiction, the mature woman who freely enjoys her sensuality, with none of the social pressures to bear children. (…) Now, she can delight in her

[20] Mc William, Sally. Op. Cit. p. 354

> youthful body and carefree passionate lovemaking (…) [which] provides a refreshing breeze in an otherwise choking atmosphere of frustrations and inhibitions[21]

Yet, what is surprising is that no one could imagine an educated, modern and financially independent woman getting herself involved in such a type of relationship since polygamy is a traditional sexist institution that goes against social and familiar expectations for an educated modern woman.

By placing her protagonist within this institution, Aidoo's novel illustrates a shift and a new insight into the traditional one by offering a construction of polygamy that is completely different from the picture most African writers used to depict. From Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* to Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*, polygamy is usually presented as an unconcealed site of male supremacy and female victimhood.

In fact, polygamy is almost a universal institution in Africa. It refers to the practice of having more than one wife, but the man is not allowed to neglect his duties towards them. He must be the protector and the provider of all these wives and children. However, this polygamous arrangement regards men as lords and owners of women, and this titillates their ego to be the favorite and the cherished "possession" for which women indulge in a pitiless competition. All power and influence devolve from them, and the women who occupy the subaltern positions hardly need to be reminded of this. Women are considered like commodities to be purchased from the market, and when one of them is worn out, she will be replaced by another one. Actually, in Africa, individuals adhere to polygamous relationships for many socio-economic reasons. Many men marry other women because of their wives' inability to "produce" children. Besides, in some traditional societies, men have the right to marry more than one wife because of the social prestige of having more than one wife.

[21] Olaussen, Maria. "About lovers in Accra. Urban intimacy in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story"*. *Research in African literature*. Vol. 33, N 2, Summer 2002, p .139

Polygamy is an issue that is raised by African women writers and questioned for it is seen as a source of women's subjugation and oppression even if it is considered by some of them, like Buchi Emecheta, as something that can be beneficial to women especially the educated ones: "polygamy can be liberating to the woman, rather that inhibiting her, especially if she is educated"[22].

In the novel, Aidoo undertakes a subversive reading of polygamy as a site of empowerment and liberation for the oppressed protagonist. Polygamy, rather than being an instrument of oppression, becomes the means of liberation for the heroine.

Esi's involvement in the polygamous marriage has been opposed by her mother and grandmother. Both think of her as a "fool" for considering divorce from a good husband like Oko to be the second wife of another. In a rather disagreeable discussion between the grandmother and the granddaughter, Nana keeps asking Esi what her husband Oko has done to her that she would be dissatisfied and leave him. According to her, women should obey and respect their husbands whatever their decisions are, and they should be happy with their husbands' demands of their time. Nana says: "But Esi tell me, doesn't a woman's time belong to a man? (…) the best husband you can ever have is he who demands all of you and of your time" (*Changes*, p.109). Besides, the two mothers brought into question her education and what would be considered women's achievements since polygamy no longer exists as a model of existence for women, especially the educated ones. They believe as well that education in Africa is an advantage for women, the source of their strength and self-fulfillment. So, Esi with a high powered job deserves something much better than being the second wife of Ali. Her mother had hoped that her educated daughter "should have everything better than she has had" (*Changes*, p.95). Here, Aidoo raises the issue of the generation clash; i.e. the generational difference in women in Ghana, she juxtaposes the perceptions and world view of the older generation to the modern one. She demonstrates further the non-acceptance of such types of marriage in today's world. If it had been in the past, they would have commonly agreed on the marriage, but nowadays education opens up for women and consequently offers alternative lives much better. Esi says to Opokuya

[22] Samuel,Y.A. Op. Cit. p. 11

"to be honest, she doesn't like the divorce… and she hates the idea of me becoming anyone's second wife", then she adds "But quite clearly we were all wrong. My mother thinks that with all the education I've had, I should have everything better than she has had" (*Changes*, p.95).

Esi's situation can be contrasted to the female character Aissatou in Mariama Ba's epistolary novel *So Long a Letter*, in which Ramatoulaye, the central character, writes the letter that she never gets posted. Aissatou belongs to the Dakar professional middle class, she finds herself in a situation where her husband Mawdo takes another wife called Nabou according to the custom of Islam practised in Senegal. Aissatou decides to walk out of a polygamous marriage. She chooses to divorce and travel to the United States with her children to begin a new life far from the enslaving traditions of her society.

In many ways, Aissatou is portrayed like Esi and the resemblance between the two protagonists is that both of them are educated women who resist against the societal restrictions. However, their education serves them in different ways. While Esi enters a polygamous marriage in spite of her education and financial independence, Aissatou refuses to be the victim of her society which encourages polygamy. Certainly thanks to her education Aissatou enables herself to move from the oppressive and humiliating situation to reach self-reliance and fulfillment.

According to patriarchy, Esi is exactly the opposite of what the second wife should be. Really, Esi does not fit to the traditional conventions of polygamy; she completely ignores all the laws that go with it. She doesn't even accept to adhere to the traditions that govern the position of a second wife. She neither lives in a compound with Ali's first wife Fusena nor seeks to meet her. To this situation, Nfah-Abbenyi contends:

> How could Esi get married to a man without even knowing what his first wife looks like, that she has three children, and is called Fusena? I would say that she makes an individualistic choice in a context where individuality is thought of strictly in relation to the collective. By creating a void between herself and Ali's wife (as Fusena is often referred to) she discursively

> constructs Fusena as Other, as nonexistent, as an absence, as if Fusena were dead, buried and forgotten[23]

In this perspective, Esi brings to the fore a new notion of polygamy, a modernized version "as a possible challenge to the alienation and oppression in a monogamous marriage"[24]. The two women would not become rivals competing for Ali's attention and favors, and this consequently decreases his dominant position and sovereignty. Esi usurps the traditional right of the second wife in the polygamous marriage; she comes to it hoping that it would be without the traditional household duties since those would be the obligations of Fusena. However, it is evident in the novel that Ali and Esi are not happy with their marriage. Unlike in her first marriage when Oko had time for her, Ali "was not on her back every one of every twenty-four hours of every day. In fact, he was hardly ever near her at all" (*Changes*, p.138), and as time passes, a feeling of dissatisfaction comes stealing up on her. She feels frustrated in her new situation and becomes distressed by Ali's long and regular absences. She ends up having a nervous breakdown because she feels lonely and abandoned by Ali who is with her only for sexual relationships or for material compensation, "they soon separate and become just good friends who find it convenient once in a while to fall into bed and make love" (*Changes*, p. 164). Esi's polygamous marriage does not bring her happiness as she expected but rather isolation and disillusionment.

Like Oko, Ali sees Esi as a commodity to be used and dispensed with. And this idea is reinforced by the gift of the new car that Ali offered to Esi to justify his long absence. Ironically, as Odamtten eloquently argues "this substantial gift, the very materiality of the car, becomes the catalyst that opens Esi's mind to her marriage as 'a complete dead end' "[25]. What Aidoo wants to point out in the novel is that female characters and cars are constantly related.

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[23] Nfah-Abbenyi, Juliana Makuchi. *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference*. Op. Cit. p 57

[24] Sexuality Problems and Desire in Ama Ata Aidoo's Our Sister Killjoy or Reflections of a Black Eyed Squint and Changes: a Love Story, p.250

[25] Odamtten, Vincent. Op. Cit. p. 170

In the end, Esi becomes aware that polygamy is not a solution to her search for an alternative way of living but rather leads her to a great state of confusion. As Akachi Ezeigbo rightly observes

> Esi soon realizes that, while polygamy gives her a certain independence – including the choice to evade 'marital rape' – and time for career as a data analyst, it also brings feeling of loneliness, neglect, jealousy and depression.[26]

As Esi's story develops we encounter other women and are invited to share their struggles. Esi's best friend Opokuya is another type of modern African women. She is constantly different from Esi who, in Oko's word "is a good woman" (*Changes*, p. 9). Opokuya is married to Kubi Dakwa whom she meets when she was a student nurse and they are married when she graduated. She has been a midwife for over fifteen years and worked in Kumasi Central Hospital when Esi and Oko were first married. Unlike Esi, who is unable to determine the borderline between her family and work, Opokuya devotes her entire time to her role as a wife, a mother of four children and as a nurse in the hospital. Actually, Opokuya tries to balance her domestic duties and her professional life. She is a woman who has been adapted to the standard form of marriage, sacrifices her own needs to her family as well as being the source of Esi's support and compassion. Opokuya has a stable marriage which is, however, troubled by constant fights with her husband over the control of the car. She is certainly not capable of convincing him on the importance of taking the car for her daily activities. Over the years of their marriage, Opokuya tries in different ways to explain to her husband that the car is a material need for her self-fulfillment as a working woman and as a mother.

> The problem was out. Knowing it was one of the few areas of friction in their otherwise good marriage, Opokuya hated bringing it up. But she had to: every morning (…). How was she to work full-time, and medical work at that, and look after a family as big as theirs without transportation of her own? (*Changes*, p. 17)

[26] *Sexuality Problems and Desire in Ama Ata Aidoo's Our Sister Killjoy or Reflections of a Black Eyed Squint and Changes: a Love Story*, p. 115

In fact, Opokuya's daily battle over the car reflects the African women's struggle against the material constraints imposed on their lives and the symbol of the independence that they long for. Opokuya therefore adheres to the patriarchal norms of her society, but equally she opposes those same customs that oppress them, such as her husband's control over the car. Once Ali offers the new car to Esi as a gift, Opokuya realizes that she envies Esi's freedom. For Opokuya, the new car evokes a sense of resentment and jealousy of the liberty Esi enjoys. This act symbolizes Opokuya's failure to fulfill her material needs which could allow for her independence. In the end, Opokuya resolves her morning disputes with her husband by buying Esi's old car thus demonstrating her ability to be independent and managing better the demands of her job and family.

In contrast to Esi and Opokuya, Ali's first wife Fusena, abides by the traditional dictates of her husband being able to take a second wife even at the expense of her happiness. In reality, even though there are similarities between the three women regarding their education, the choices they make are totally different. Before her marriage with Ali, Fusena was a motivated and intelligent woman who wanted to complete her degree and continue her teaching career. However, once married, her ambitions were restricted and silenced by the male dominance, traditional values of the community and by the acceptance of the social value of women's place in society. Fusena in many respects still conforms to the model of the traditional wife which other women in the novel challenge. She has given up her career for the sake of her marriage and children. She has given Ali sons and adhered to his desires while he continues his own career, acquiring one degree after another. When the latter tells her about his second marriage with Esi, she immediately asks him if the woman he is considering to be his second wife has a university degree. She feels saddened by Ali's decision about the second wife after sacrificing her college dreams.

Unlike Esi, Fusena accepts her role of a dependent housewife and being subjugated to Ali's decision while she has to obey him and serve him loyally according to the rules laid down for her by the patriarchal tradition in force in her society. Fusena thus represses her anger and accepts to play the part of the subservient

and obedient wife. While she is equally conscious of the loss of her independence, she still regards her polygamous marriage as important as well, she says

> Leaving Ali was not only impossible but would also not be an answer to anything. Because having married her friend and got a husband, there was no chance of her getting back her friend if she left or divorced Ali the husband. She would only have an estranged husband. Nor did it help matters much that in the middle of all her frustrations, she kept telling herself that given the position of women in society, she would rather be married than not and rather to Ali than anyone else.

(*Changes*, pp 66-67)

Moreover, Fusena settles into the routine of wifely and childbearing duties, agrees being involved in the polygamous marriage despite her education. She is portrayed as a betrayed woman who has given up her ambitions and strong will to be relegated to home. In this case, Fusena can be regarded as one of the several instances of submissive and obedient women oppressed by the traditional practices that need to be accepted in silence and voicelessness. Actually, Fusena can be compared to Ramatoulaye in Mariam Ba's novel *So Long a Letter*, who seems to have been silenced by her cultural and religious belief, allowing them to dictate her actions in deciding to remain married to Modou. Ramatoulaye, the protagonist of the novel, is a school teacher and a mother of twelve children. She is depicted as a victim of polygamy which destroys her life. In a highly patriarchal society, she is confronted with the reality of having a co-wife because her husband Modou betrays their twenty five years of marriage and takes a second wife without her knowledge. Modou marries Binetou, a school mate and a friend of his eldest daughter. He spends his time as well as his money on her, abandoning his own family. Like Fusena, Ramatoulaye does not take the break with him as her children advise her to do. She remains attached to her husband because she believes that there is no happiness far from him.

The different situations faced by the female characters that can be seen as personal problems have deep social resonances. What Aidoo really advocates is that love is not only limited to the personal or physical relationship between men and women, where the latter are always there to satisfy the sexual desires and urges of men, but rather something that transcends the individualistic experience. It is shown to

depend on a more familiar, communal, cultural context, ruled by traditions and values that are thus beyond any individualistic control.

By portraying the central character as a modern African career woman and simultaneously trying to place her in two different marriages, Aidoo dramatizes the contemporary, educated and economically free African woman's dilemma. At the end, Esi whose individual emancipation permits her to ignore the societal norms, becomes another woman within the context of a changing postcolonial society in which she struggles to impose her own choices, but only to meet disaster at the end.

Further, through her female characters, Esi, Opokuya and Fusena, Aidoo has questioned the advantages and disadvantages, the doors that the western education opens up for these women and the countless obstacles and problems it creates for them. She demonstrates that this education which is based on western values, affords women opportunities to work outside the home and consequently contribute to their economic and moral independence. But at the same time this causes a confusion of identity similar to the one that is felt in Esi's country. Education creates autonomous women who often resist the traditional lifestyle just to adopt the modern one in communities where it is expected to follow the traditional female behavior.

> English education provides particularly contradictory empowerments for women – both benefiting them and rendering them outsiders from their bodies, families, and communities. In other worlds, English education along with providing new skills and knowledge also disempowers women. Female protagonists experience cultural alienation from their own communities.[27]

In sum, *Changes: A Love Story* hints indirectly at the misunderstanding of the role of women in the postcolonial African society. It exposes the difficulties that these women face when they come to make their individual choices about their personal and professional lives.

[27] Katrack, Ketu H. Op. Cit. p. 98

b) Gender and Nation:

Changes: A Love Story is a novel that deals with the issue of negotiating gender identities in a postcolonial society that has failed to combine between traditions and modernity. Aidoo demonstrates through her characters' struggles the intersection and the co-dependence of both gender and national identities in her novel. Actually, it is true that the latter is dealt with in a less important and much less obvious way than that of gender. However, gender relations are strongly related to national identity.

In formerly colonized countries, the colonized people because primarily influenced by a desire for independence from colonial rule, and celebratory because of the concrete effort among writers and intellectuals to ignite a sense of pride in all things Africans, see the concept of nation and national identity as an imperative in nation building; they argue that national identity plays a central role in bringing together the masses in the anti-colonial movements, i.e. nation is at the heart of the anti-colonial discourse. Besides, in order to reach the common goal of independence, the nationalists had to succeed in uniting all the groups of people into one national unit. Therefore, they include the role of women as biological reproducers of the nation; they are required to be the symbolic bearers of the collectivity and as participants in the cultural construction of nations in the national struggle. Definitely, women play the roles of both cultural transmitters and cultural signifiers of the national collectivity. Nira Yuval-Davies emphasizes the role of women as biological and cultural national reproducers, as cultural embodiments of collectivities and their boundaries; as careers of collective honor and as participants in national and ethnic struggles.

However, the nationalist attempt to ensure the preservation of tradition and the African way as an appropriate way is leading to personal, a social and cultural confrontation with the new emerging identities that the new generations are constructing and affirming in response to the social demands. Furthermore, it is the insistence on the maintenance of their ancestors' original beliefs that makes the female characters question not only their identities but also all the factors that form mainly their personal choices and freedom. Therefore, they find themselves caught in the

continuous dichotomy between the personal needs and the institutional and social obligations and responsibilities.

Inspired by the realities and difficulties faced by former colonies in Africa as they negotiate questions of national identity, Aidoo acknowledges the importance of traditions as well as the reality and the permanency of modernization while, at the same time, raising important questions about the non-critical acceptance of each.

The female characters of the novel need both to affirm and construct their identities as the result of the pressure by their communities. They attempt to challenge the traditionally established roles that aim at controlling their positioning. Jane Bryce argues that Aidoo in her novel dramatizes for the reader the problematics of behavior and identity in a context of social change where the old certainities are no longer reliable guides[28].

In African societies, being as female, cultural and biological reproducers, women are expected to marry and give birth to children for whom they then stay at home to raise. Motherhood is so important in African societies that a woman's procreation is one of the major considerations prior to marriage, in other words, motherhood is seen as the fulfillment of complete womanhood. Nfah-Abbeyni argues: "the purpose of these wives is to bear children and to maintain continuity in the family without which they have no place"[29]. This view is approved by Esi's grandmother Nana's attitude towards marriage that the primary and the principal duty of women is to reproduce. This is obvious in her answer to Esi's question about what some of the reasons for marrying are. She says "Esi we know that we all marry to have children…"(*Changes*, p. 42). Then she adds: "We also marry to increase the number of people with whom we can share the joys and the pains of this life" (*Changes*, p.42). Just like Nana, Oko shows a lack of patience towards Esi's choice to bear one child and in a society where boys are preferred and valued over girls. He thinks that Esi neglects her duties as a wife and as a traditional woman when she uses "those dreadful

[28] *Sexuality Problems and Desire in Ama Ata Aidoo's Our Sister Killjoy or Reflections of a Black Eyed Squint and Changes: a Love Story*, p. 117

[29] Nfah-Abbenyi, Juliana Makuchi. *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference* . Op. Cit. p.37

birth control things: pills, loops or whatever", she also fails to fulfill her task as an educator when she is away from home so much while it is expected from her to stay with her family in order to help her daughter to grow up well. Similarly, Esi's personal choice of not bearing more than one child is completely rejected by her mother and least of all by her family in-law. She finds herself attacked and verbally abused by Oko's mothers and sisters who call her a "semi-barren witch". Actually, by controlling her procreative capabilities, Esi challenges her view of the nation by rejecting the institution of motherhood and liberating herself from the constraints of an oppressive traditional role as a biological reproducer.

Compared to Esi, Opokuya struggles to combine her conventional ideas about marriage, family responsibilities with being an independent working woman. In contrast to her, Opokuya has managed to keep her marriage. She works long hours as a nurse while also raising her family, she really manages to fulfill all the roles demanded of her by her life. It is worth mentioning that Opokuya conforms to the traditional norms of her society to some extent but also, in her own way, tries to resist them. After having four children, Opokuya decides that that is enough and has a tubal ligation. According to Nfah-Abbenyi this operation is something very few African women would willingly submit themselves to whether they are educated or not. The reason is that African women often view their womanhood as almost interchangeable with motherhood, and sterilization would thus mean a loss of femaleness[30]. In reality, Opokuya's choice to get sterilized is a deliberate rejection to carry out the biological or sex role of producing children.

Just as Esi and Opokuya, Fusena is an educated, intelligent and modern woman. But she chooses a different path in her treatment of marriage and the expectations of it compared to the other two women. Fusena is painfully aware of the suppression of women in marriage and in African society in general, but she accepts the conventional way of living and does not take action to fight it. She remains married to Ali, and becomes the perfect housewife despite her education. She accepts the inferior position in relation to her husband as well as her family responsibilities; she gives birth to Ali's

[30] Nfah-Abbenyi, Juliana Makuchi. "Flabberwhelmed or Turning History on its Head? The Postcolonial Woman as Subject in Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story*." Op. Cit. p. 285

children and stay at home to take care of them. Ali opposes the idea that Fusena could go back to teaching or carry on a career, but in exchange he gives her a kiosk to manage after staying at home for five years bringing up children and minding the household. Actually, Ali's denial of Fusena's work or desire for educational progress reflects his conformity to the traditions and beliefs that the role of women is to take care of her family and children, and instead prefers buying her a kiosk as a business because "it is a more lucrative job [she] could do and still have time to look after the children" (*Changes*, p.67). Fusena then represents the ideal wife and mother who fulfills her duties in accordance with traditions.

In the meantime, the characters of the novel can be identified with reference to Fanon's "Westernised Bourgeoisie"; they represent the Ghanaian elites, "the more deserving members of society. Like the users of hotel lobbies. Like Mrs. Esi Sekyi and her friend, Mrs. Opokuya Dakwa" (*Changes*, p.43). Vincent Odamtten comments on Aidoo's characters in this novel as follows:

> Aidoo's examination of the personal problems, the political, social, and cultural knots that have tied up the minds and energies of the emergent neocolonial elites, should not be taken as an abandonment of the "ranks of the wretched". Rather, we should see this fictional analysis as a humble admission on Aidoo's part that, although she may speak and write about them, and about the contradictions of our collective experiences, she cannot and must not speak for them. The answers to life's problems are not always easy, as Esi's grandmother knows too well. In addition, Aidoo has stated, in relation to her experience as Ghana's minister for education that such voice-overs are "a kind of arrogance[31]

Clearly, Aidoo is concerned with the reality and the complex web of frustration of the emergent "neocolonial elites". She exposes the complexity of the problems and the dilemma of the middle-class women by placing them at the centre of her work. For Esi, though her education has an important role in her life, conversely, it turns her situation into a crisis by making her an alien in her country. Actually, instead of being the intellectual to invent or keep alive the African traditions, Esi finds no bond to her roots strong enough to do this. That this bond is destabilized becomes glaringly clear to her through the conflict with her mother and grandmother about her self-fulfillment

[31] Odamtten, Vincent. Op. Cit. p. 160

and self-consciousness as a woman. The conversation between the two mothers demonstrates the closeness that the mother-daughter relationship reveals and that Esi loses the following quote makes Esi's feeling clear " she could never be as close to her mother as her mother was to her grandmother. Never, never, never. And she knew why" (*Changes*, p. 114). And she continues with asking herself: "why had they sent her to school? What had they hoped to gain from it? What had they hoped she would gain from it? Who had produced the educational system that had produced her sort?" (*Changes*, p.114). From this perspective, Aidoo demonstrates the disintegration of the rural community values and the breakdown of the traditional structures like the family. Esi's education makes her lose touch with her first language and her mothers, neither of whom can understand her attitudes towards marriage and work. This creates a gap between herself and her origins that demonstrates further the loss of African daughters from the point of view of traditions. In this case, she fails in her task as a nation builder since as a modern professional woman Esi is not at ease with, or willing to subject, to this role. As Esi realizes that "all this was too high a price to pay to achieve the dangerous confusion she was now in and the country now was in" (*Changes*, p.114), Nfah-Abbenyi comments on Esi's situation by saying:

> Esi alienates herself not only from her only child and her mothers, but also from her society as a whole. She becomes an Other within the context of an ever-changing post-colonial world in which she struggles to lay down her own rules[32]

She adds:

> Having lived most of her life in another culture and in strange lands, Esi loses contact with her own roots, and with her mother's world. She loses contact with other philosophies that give different kinds of meanings to her life and experiences[33]

Ali Kondey is another character who represents a member of the Ghanaian neocolonial elites. He is Esi's second husband and the managing director of Linga HideAway. He has been educated abroad and follows his father's path as a business

[32] Nfah-Abbenyi, Juliana Makuchi. *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference.* Op. Cit. p. 37
[33] Ibid. p. 60

man by running a travel agency. His father Musa Musa called Ali Baba after the birth of his son, spent all his life acquiring wealth and traveling throughout the continent. And as a matter of fact, he had "a wife in each of his light favorite stops on his trade routes" (*Changes*, p 23). His grandfather's Musa Kondey's house was located "on the exact spot where Burkina Faso, Ghana, and Togo met" (*Changes*, p.23); thus Ali's father travelled in all these places leading Ali to assume many nationalities. And there Aidoo asks: "Ali's country. Which one was that? (*Changes*, p. 22); "Ali was the son of the world" (*Changes*, p. 22).

Ali in fact is the embodiment of a cosmopolitan man; he spends his life travelling from one part to another. And being strongly affected by his polygamous father, he moves from one woman to another just as he moves from one country to the next, like his father, he "liked the company of interesting women" (*Changes*, p.57). Further, Ali lived most of his life in another culture and in strange lands, he has travelled the whole sub-continent of West Africa as a child, and as an adult he continues to do so through his own business. Therefore, Ali has no restrictions or national boundary to stick to. He has the freedom to choose which country to belong to and what nationality to assume.

> We learn much in this brief span of print. First, we understand some facts of Ali's upbringing – that he is the product of a polygamous marriage; that he has not just one, but several mothers; that he has, from infancy, a certain stubborn nature, that he is destined to be not just of the village, but of the world[34]

Being an unusual collector of nationalities, Ali is to some extent an enigma in regard to nationality and national identity. He does not show any sign of national identity towards any one of the nations thus he fails to contribute to the formation of the Ghanaian identity or to the nation building process.

[34] Gardner, Susan. "Culture Clashes- *Changes: A love Story* by Ama Ata Aidoo". Women's Review of Books. Vol. 12, N 2, Nov. 1994, pp 4-5

Through the character of Ali, Aidoo advocates the idea of the unification of the continent and questions the notion of nation, ethnic affiliation, identity tied to place, home, country and exile, so that her novel conjures up the old pan-Africanist ideal.

> Ali approaches these nations as pieces of land and cultures that he can easily grant himself. In so doing, he plays the role of the colonizer who effortlessly lands in indigenous nations and claims them as his own. Ali's colonization does not end in Africa but extends to European countries. A wealthy and elite African neocolonial, he frequently travels around the world. (…). Keeping to his role as colonizer, Ali easily claims the bodies of black women. The novel begins with Ali having one wife and, in the end, he manages to acquire another wife and a concubine, three women in all. (…). Ali's relationship with these women [Fusena, Esi and the secretary] requires that he be the dominant party and they, the subordinate. It mirrors the relationship of the colonizer and the colonized[35]

Ali has grown up in two different worlds, his father's Muslim world and the western one in which he was educated. Like his second wife Esi, Ali lives his life spilt between two poles, he tries to balance between the traditional and the modern modes of life. He cares so much about his Muslim heritage, but at the same time has been deeply influenced by Western values, and this is obvious when he proposes to Esi, he forces her to wear the engagement ring, "Are you saying that this is some kind of an engagement ring?" (*Changes*, p.89); through this act, Ali shows his ability to accept and adhere to the western values.

To conclude, this discussion has brought to light Ama Ata Aidoo's view of the different personal and cultural transformations that lie at the heart of a formerly colonized nation such as Ghana. Actually the changes that have occurred throughout the novel have brought with them a state of confusion about the characters' role in the nation building process, and by that theoretically prove that the national identity can be marked by other influences such as education and ethnicity. Furthermore, I maintain that the novel claims that gender conflicts and women's dilemmas arise from the desired need to preserve traditions and the Old beliefs in a contemporary society and the active role the female characters are keen to play in such a society.

[35] Miriam C. Gyiamah. "The Quest for Power and Manhood: Three (Neo)Colonial Male Characters of Ama Ata Aidoo". Charles Smith, eds. *Journal of African Literature and Culture.* JALC 3. 2006, p 64-65-67

Chapter 4

From Oppression to Wholeness in

The Color Purple

a- African-American Women Writers and the Place of Alice Walker

b- Female bonding and its role in Celie's Emancipation

1- Sisterhood between Celie and Nettie
2- Sisterhood between Celie and Sofia
3- Sisterhood between Celie and Shug Avery

c- How far is the Liberation Achieved?

1- Physical and Sexual Freedom
2- Spiritual Freedom
3- Economic Freedom

a) African-American Women Writers and the Place of Alice Walker

Alice Walker belongs to a community of black people brought to America by slave traders. Her people's experience is unique in the history of humanity. Even if the American constitution provided for equality among all American citizens, the blacks were relegated to a lower status, discriminated against, rejected and actually denied the rights of citizenship. This part of the American Negro in America is a prevalent feature of her fictional representations.

Walker was certainly influenced by the important events in the Black American history such as the Harlem renaissance (1920-1930) and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's that transformed social disillusionment to racial pride and gained recognition as well as respect of the Americans and around the globe.

However, it should be pointed out that the great problem within these movements is that, in their approaches, they tend not only to ignore, but, actually, reject explicitly the role of the black woman. In fact even if being important events in the black American history, their movement of liberation remained sexist.

Being aware of these facts, Alice Walker opted for an alternative way to build up black women's identity, notably through her creative writings. Speaking from the margins, like her African sisters, Alice Walker deals with issues that serve as a common agenda that characterize black women's concerns such as the negative traditional role of women, a double marginalization due to their gender and race as well as the struggle for self-definition in the cultural context.

Like her African counterpart Aidoo, Walker has located the black female's experience in the double enslavement of racism and sexism. Her fiction provides a special kind of experience that cannot be conveyed by the literature of the whites and of black men. She was prolific in writing about the experience of black women during slavery, the patriarchal order that still governed in the black community, and, most

important, showing to what extent the black woman is still expected to be silent and passive behind the black man.

Similar to Aidoo, Walker is looking back on a history of women that had been belittled by white and black male domination. Her sense of duty was to find a means of expression and representation to revisit the past and find an identity and the importantly re-examine black women's positions vis-à-vis men and by doing so she endeavours to bring to extinction the sexist perspective of male supremacy.

Alice Walker's act of writing is the example she sets for her readers to escape the strong stereotypes and controlling images imposed upon black women and resist the silence imposed on their voices. She speaks for the oppressed women and against the misogynistic ideals purported by a patriarchal community and bravely questions the taboos her society specifies.

Barbara Christian states that black women in African-American literature have been usually assigned stereotyped roles[1].This may be shown in the African-American literature particularly southern white literature, including slavery and reconstruction period in which "the prominent black figure is the mammy as opposed to ideal white women"[2]. Christian adds further, "The mammy's identity is derived from her nurturing service", thus she is stereotyped and restricted to housekeeper and a slave position[3].

Alice Walker is the most celebrated and elevated African-American woman writer of her time. Born in 1944, Walker grew up in Georgia at a period when segregation was the law of the South. Therefore, opportunities for economic and social advancement were legally denied to Southern blacks. Besides, Walker is well aware about the Southern restrictions. Thus, she stands as an apologist, defending women through writing. Alice Walker states in a recent interview:

> Writing to me is not about audience exactly. It's about living. It's about expanding myself as much as I can and seeing myself in as many roles and

[1] Christian, Barbara. *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*. Op. Cit. p. 2
[2] Ibid
[3] Ibid

> situations as possible. Let me put it this way. If I could live as a tree, as a river, as the moon, as the sun, as a star, as the earth, as a rock, I would. Writing permits me to be more than I am. Writing permits me to experience life as any number of strange creations.[4]

Alice Walker became the symbol of African-American women, a spokesperson for the black community in its longing for liberation and struggle against oppression. Actually, it is partly thanks to such authors and theorists as Alice Walker that the African-American woman-writer Zora Neale Hurston's works have been promoted. By saying "The black woman is the mule of the world", she not only creates literary images of women, but also gives voice and representation to this same woman who has been silenced and confined both in life and literature.

Through her novels, Alice Walker is able to translate the inner, personal and communal life of black people into words and images by putting their history in the foreground. Her fiction is a means of clarifying the roles that were obscured by focusing chiefly on the struggle, survival and liberation of black people through history in general and black women in particular. Her primary task is to depict how black women are physically abused, psychologically distressed, distorted as well as mapping the journey they take for freedom by facing racial, political and economical oppression from the white community in addition to the sexual discrimination they suffer from the black one. Amy Sickels claims that Alice Walker, in her fiction, has even travelled beyond the geographical borders of the United States to Africa in order to depict the suffering of her African sisters. *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), which features several characters from *The Color Purple*, is the best example in which Alice Walker vividly portrays the physical sufferings of the African character Tashi. The latter decides to undergo the female genital mutilation as an act of resistance against colonialism and missionary teaching. Throughout the novel, Walker criticizes this tradition wherever it is practiced, and insists that African women, in addition to their marginalization, are compelled to conform to the institutionalized violence of having their genitals mutilated.

[4] Christian, Barbara. *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers.* Op. Cit. p. 185

Alice walker is an important figure in black women's literature. Her works have aroused the attention of many readers and have been studied by many black feminist critics, among them Barbara Christian. In her essay entitled "Alice Walker: the black woman artist as Wayward", Barbara Christian gives details about Walker's protagonists. She points out the fact that Walker's writing focuses on the oppression of black women and their struggle for self-determination and self-definition. In fact, Walker is very specific in her task, even though she is preoccupied with the whole people; her commitment is to explore the oppression of black women, i.e. "Walker's work is black women-centred"[5] . In an interview with John O'Brien, Walker contends:

> You ask about "preoccupations". I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival *whole* of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumph of black women.....For me, black women are the most fascinating creatures in the world[6]

Initially, the female descendants of Walker are making very substantial contributions to black American literature by bringing special knowledge of their lives, sufferings and experiences that are different from the descriptions/portrayals of women by men, as the vision of black writers in the sixties and fifties differed from that of whites writing on black subjects[7]. Walker's protagonists often discover that because they are black, they are perceived by the white community as the "Other", and because they are women they are perceived by men as the "Other". This means that they not only bear the burden of gender oppression but also that of racism. Thus, in resistance to this, the female characters struggle against the constraints of their society that put them in bondage. They go even beyond the conventions and traditions to liberate themselves. Walker insists as well on questioning the relationship between struggle and change for black women to claim their own lives, "her insistence on probing the relationship between struggle and change"[8] . This struggle derives from a

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[5] Evans, Mari. *Black Women Writers: Arguments and Interviews*. London and Sydney. Pluto Press, 1985, p.457
[6] Ibid. p. 331
[7] Ibid. p. xxiv
[8] Ibid. p. 331

deep self-knowledge and love. They struggle endlessly to liberate themselves and to make their own choices. These protagonists try to be effective parts in the building of their communities. "In *Purple"*, Bettye J. Parker-Smith contends, "Walker lifts black women off their knees, uses love as a defence mechanism, and raises black women to a level of royalty"[9].

Barbara Christian studies another current theme in Walker's novels which is the importance of the female bonding and sisterhood. Walker foregrounds in her fiction the female bonding as a means to allow women to overcome prejudice and survive. In addition, the theme of journey is another important motif in Walker's writing, this journey is the metaphor of the African-American avidity for a new life, consisting of unlimited personal development. According to Walker, there is no fixed place on earth for men or women. Brenda R. Smith writes that Walker's *The Color Purple* consists of "a young black woman's journey from silence to voice and "authentic female selfhood"[10]. At the end of the journey, the female protagonist Celie moves from a status of object in a sexist and racist relationship to an individual in search of self-expression and self-fulfilment.

The preservation of the black culture and the importance of ancestral lineage is another important theme explored by Walker in her fiction. In reality, just like Aidoo, Walker's celebration of her roots is inseparable from reclamation of self, a protest against the marginalization of black women in her society.

Alice Walker has written six novels, on which her reputation rests, but she has also produced five volumes of poetry, two collections of short stories, three volumes of essays and four children's books[11].Actually, Walker has been recognized as a spokeswoman for the voiceless black women and in her fiction, she effectively depicts their struggle for sexual, political and racial equality.

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[9] Evans, Mari. Op. Cit. p.480

[10] Smith, Brenda R. "We Need a Hero: African-American Female Bildungsromane and Celie's Journey to Heroic Female Selfhood in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*". LaGrone, Kheven. *Alice Walker's The Color Purple.* New York, 2009, p 3

[11] Gray, Richard. *A History of American Literature.* Malden: Blackwell, 2004, p 695

It is worth mentioning that Alice Walker's career as a writer has met with great success since the publication of her award-wining and best-selling novel *The Color Purple* (1983), which has been praised as one of the greatest literary works of its time. It is indeed the celebration of the lives of Walker's ancestors and blackness that Walker herself is proud of. The novel is a deep visionary meaning of her concept of Womanism as defined in her critical writing "womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender".

Actually Walker sets herself to write a novel which documents her concept of Womanism. As an epistolary novel, *The Color Purple* is a further development in her womanist pursuit. Using the letter-writing technique, she brings her major character Celie to express the impact of oppression on her life as well as her growing internal strength and reconstruction of the shattered fragments of her life. In reality, throughout the novel, Walker wants to draw the reader's attention to the different difficulties that her female characters face as a result of the sexual and racial discrimination as well as the great pain they undergo at different levels, i.e. they are tormented in body, mind and spirit.

In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker creates an alternative space where identity and a sense of belonging can be attained and autonomy realized. She formulates a space that had been denied to black women by society and brings down the previously established barriers, thus she gives a new meaning to the lives of black women. Additionally, Walker introduces more independent women by creating female characters free from the confines of the fixity of ideas and values, i.e. escaping the strong stereotypes and controlling images. This also means encouraging them to develop their personal identities and this can be achieved only through breaking the barriers and chains that were forced upon them.

According to Barbara Christian, Walker's main concern is the depiction of the suffering and experiences of black women in their relationships with black men: fathers, brothers, husbands, lovers and the sisterhood they must share as a strategy to fight back this oppression and prejudice in order to liberate themselves. Similarly Calvin Hernton regards *The Color Purple* as a twentieth-century slave narrative, in

which Walker replaces the white/black exploitation with a gendered one in which black women are enslaved by black men[12].

Actually, in dealing with the corruption and brutality of black men, *The Color Purple* has met with criticism in some African-American quarters, mainly for what many saw as an overly negative portrayal of black men that played into racist stereotypes. Gloria Thomas Pillow states that the novel was greeted with a firestorm of protest at the moment of its publication in 1984. In the same way, Calvin Hernton notes without irony that "more than with any other black-authored work so far, *The Color Purple* seemed to have driven some of its critics literally *crazy*". Indeed, many critics have strongly accused Walker of the harsh negative portrayal of black men and black families by portraying them as abusive and violent.

Actually, Turgay Bayindir explains Walker's negative depiction of black men as an inspiration from Zora Neale Hurston's works. He affirms that Walker's connection with her Harlem Renaissance ancestor Hurston is obvious in her description of black men in her novel. He adds that just like Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Walker's novel presents black women's suffering in the hands of black men. Even though Hurston belongs to the Harlem Renaissance generation of the 1930's, and Walker to the postmodern movement, the same thematic concern with male oppression in black communities is the red thread of both novels. Maria Lauret states in her book *Alice Walker*, that "Hurston's example enables Walker to articulate her critique of race and gender relations in the feminist post-civil rights era and theorize it in the concept of womanism"[13].

As said, *The Color Purple* is an epistolary novel which chronicles the life of Celie, a poor southern black woman who eventually triumphs over oppression through affirming female agency. Walker devotes that much time to her heroine. Indeed, most of the letters are written by Celie. The purpose of this is to present the events from the inside using Celie's eyes in order to give the story more force and power and transmitting thus the author's desired atmosphere and chosen themes. The novel

[12] Lauret, Maria. *Modern Novelists: Alice Walker*. London, Macmillan Press, 2000, p. 100.
[13] Ibid

highlights deeply the experiences of black women in a postcolonial society where black men, in addition to their white counterparts, continue to oppress black women. In short, it reflects the dominant issues of race, gender, class and their impacts on the lives of black women in the United States before the civil rights movement of the 1960's.

Walker's novel is a response to the history of women's silencing and oppression. It gives a clear-cut image of the black community, mainly the life of black women. These latter were at the 'bottom' of America's social caste, being enslaved to the typical hell of exploitation, violence and repression. They are born to live in pain and sacrifice, as victims of a social system that does not value women except as sexual objects and labourers. The novel follows the evolution of a black female character in a patriarchal society ruled by the white first, and the black men second. It starts with an opening letter where we discover that the protagonist, Celie, was raped by her father. Such incestuous scene is horrifying but it is a factual everyday occurrence. Walker herself speaks about this act and says "this is the country in which a woman is raped every three minutes...where one out of three women will be raped during their lifetimes and a quarter of those are children under 12"[14]. Actually, this is the answer Walker gives to those who criticized the opening of her novel with rape and negative portrayal of black men. In the essays in "*Rendering the Womanist Hero*", Gloria Steinem wrote that one of the pleasures of the novel

> Is watching people redeem themselves and grow, or wither and turn inward, according to the ways they do or don't work out the moral themes in their lives. In the hands of this author, morality is not an external dictate. It doesn't matter if you love the wrong people, or have children with more than one of them, or whether you have money, go to the church, or obey the laws. What matters is cruelty, violence, keeping the truth from others who need it, suppressing someone's will or talent, taking more than you need from people or nature, and failing to choose for yourself. It's the internal morality of dignity, autonomy, and balance
>
> What also matters is the knowledge that everybody, no matter how poor or passive, on the outside has these possibilities inside[15]

[14] Cliffs notes on *The Color Purple*. Wiley Publishing. Inc. 2000.
[15] LaGrone, Kheven. *Alice Walker's The Color Purple*. New York, 2009, p .xx

Set in the deep American South of Georgia between the two world wars, time and place of segregation, hostility as well as prejudices, the novel deserves the label "historical novel", a description given by Walker herself in the article "Writing *The Color Purple"*[16]. *The Color Purple* presents Celie as a poor, uneducated and 'ugly' African-American woman who is transformed from a fourteen year-old raped victim and incest survivor into a successful business woman in her forties, property owner and 'mother' of an extended family clan who gather around her to live in peace and harmony, celebrating each other for ever after[17].

In fact, Celie represents, according to Brenda R. Smith, the fulfilment of African-American women's need for a "female hero", an African-American "everywoman" whose condition reflects the typical African-American woman of that time – the victim of physical, sexual and verbal abuse – and who has gone through different difficulties before she could establish herself as an empowered woman by challenging the patriarchal social structures within the black community that maintain the harmful treatment of women and reclaims her place as an autonomous, courageous and creative self.

After having been rejected by almost every one during her adolescence and separated from her beloved sister Nettie, Celie has turned to God instead by writing him letters. Through these letters, Celie tells the story of her verbal, physical and sexual abuse by most male characters who appear in the novel, including her stepfather, her husband and her step-son. Besides, each letter gives an event or an episode in the story. It starts with Celie's painful experience of rape. Then, follow the events of her lifetime, i.e. her fight for autonomy and self-determination, and ends with her ascent into self-discovery.

[16] Bayindir, Turgay. "A House of Her Own: Alice Walker's Readjustment of Virginia Woolf's a Room of One's Own in *The Color Purple"*. LaGrone, Kheven. *Alice Walker's The Color Purple.* New York, 2009, p, 112

[17] Lauret, Maria. Op. Cit. p. 92

b) Female Bonding and its Role in Celie's Emancipation

In *The Color Purple,* Alice Walker conveys the importance and the necessity of unification and solidarity. She represents the idea of sisterhood that provides support and validation as the only possible way to flee repression and subjection by helping the distressed women to reintegrate into an alternative social entity through positive and supportive relations with other women. Therefore, it enables them to overcome prejudice and to survive. Actually the idea of women's friendship is related to Walker's Womanism by which she means the women who love other women both sexually and non-sexually, love other women's cultures regardless of race, class and gender; and live through women's perspective. Brenda R. Smith comments on Walker's use of women's bonds

> Like Celie's letters, sororal or sisterhood bonds, which are integral to Walker's womanist ideology and to the successful *Bildung* of the female protagonist, also pose a direct challenge to patriarchal proscriptions of the female self. Women friends often serve as guides and rescuers for the protagonist. They model the attributes and provide the emotional support that the protagonist needs to preserve and succeeds in her quest[18]

Walker presents female bonding as a form of empowerment that helps women build new identities and survive their misfortunes through mutual support and sincere commitment. And to achieve this unification, these women should create their own communities that encourage them to burden themselves through narrating their traumas, work hand in hand and help each other to stand by themselves thus healing the pain resulting from their suffering.

The Color Purple portrays Celie, Nettie, Sofia and Shug's strongest commitment to a successful female bonding that enables them to build new identities, comfort and support for each other. It demonstrates further how women's solidarity helps them to develop financial independence to liberate themselves from the burdens of oppression and face the challenges related to race, class, and gender oppression.

[18] Smith, Brenda R. Op. Cit. p. 8

Walker's characterization of these women suggests a model of women's solidarity to break through imposed stereotypes and boundaries as well as providing eventual resistance against oppression through love, friendship, and community building. Indeed, this women's sisterhood offers Celie confident and positive female role models upon which she can base her developing subjectivity.

1- Sisterhood between Celie and Nettie

The most valuable character in the course of Celie's life is her long absent sister Nettie. The latter is the only one Celie feels close to in her childhood and the only one who really cares for her in return. Nettie is Celie's greatest source of inspiration, pride, confidence and moral support. She is always the hope of Celie's life. She regards her as the perfect model of a girl. Celie describes her sister to Shug and says

> Smart as anything. Read the newspapers when she was little more than talking. Did figures like they was nothing. Talked real well too. And sweet. There never was a sweeter girl. Eyes just brimming over with it(TCP, p101)

Unlike Celie, Nettie possesses the advantages of both beauty and education. She is an educated and intelligent woman, quite autonomous and independent of all men. Nettie is deeply influenced by her teacher, Miss Addie Beasley: an unmarried, self reliant and ambitious woman with independent ideas and a rebellious consciousness, Celie writes: "Nettie dotes on Miss Beasley. Think nobody like her in the world" (TCP, p11). Nettie soon learns about the struggle between education and her life. This means that despite her young age, she is able to face a harsh situation. Actually, Nettie recognizes the importance of education in the liberation of women, thus she is always interested in sharing her newfound knowledge with her sister. After Alphonso takes Celie out of school, Nettie tries hard to teach her sister everything that she has learned in school: writing, reading, spelling and everything she thinks Celie needs to know. For instance, she writes words on some cards and sticks them to the corresponding places thus keeping Celie from being an illiterate woman. When Nettie

runs away from Alphonso and stays with her sister, Celie writes: “no matter what happened, Nettie steady try to teach me what go on in the world. And she a good teacher, too”. (TCP, p17)

Meanwhile, like Celie, Nettie also lives under the threat of being raped by her step-father. However, Nettie is not as subservient as her sister. She opposes Alphonso’s sexual advances and manages to escape from his violence and abuse to join Celie’s home.

When Nettie leaves Alphonso’s home to live with Celie, she finds her sister facing a heavy life by enduring abuse at the hand of both her husband and his children: she cooks, cleans the house, cares for his hateful children and submits to her husband’s sexual demands. Her sister Nettie aptly describes the situation Celie has to deal with: “it’s like seeing you buried” (TCP, p 20). Therefore, Nettie insists that Celie should fight back for respect from Mr ---- and his spoiled children and not let them dominate her and save her as an obedient woman

> Don’t let them run over you, Nettie say. You got to let them
>
> Know who got the upper hand.
>
> They got it, I say.
>
> But she keep on, you got to fight. You got to fight.
>
> But I don’t know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive
>
> (TCP, p18)

But, Celie is soon cast out when she refuses Albert’s sexual advances. As a result, she leaves her sister’s home; and before she leaves for Africa to teach in a mission, she promises her to write to her and tells her that only death can set them apart. The two sisters have agreed to write to each other.

Nettie’s teaching and support to Celie does stop with her departure but soon resumes and continues over the years. It is through Nettie’s letters that Celie is able to continue her education, so as to attain growth and maturity. The importance of

Nettie's letters in Celie's life is that they serve her as a guide, providing her with different items of information about other people's cultures that are new to the world in which she lives. Nettie continues teaching Celie reading and geography; she tells her in her letters about life in Africa and by doing so she takes pride in reinforcing positive aspects of African culture. For instance, in one of her letters, Nettie mentions the name of a great black American sociologist, philosopher, and Civil Rights leader W.E.B Du Bois. She mentions as well the Pan-African movement in New York, the history of its great civilizations; its natural attractiveness and shared brotherhood, "We are black like the Africans themselves. And what we and the Africans will be working for a common goal: the uplift of black people everywhere" (TCP, p 22). In short, Nettie teaches Celie, states Richard Gray, to be proud of who she is and to be proud of her inheritance[19]

> Did you know there were great cities in Africa, greater than Milledgeville or even Atlanta, thousands of years ago? Than the Egyptians who built the pyramids and enslaved the Israelites were colored? That Egypt is in Africa? That the Ethiopia we read about it in the Bible meant all of Africa
>
> (TCP, p113)

In spite of being younger, Nettie's letters continue her role as a teacher; she passes on what she learns to her sister. These letters provide Celie with tools essential for her to understand her environment. They empower and enable her to develop a more authentic sense of self. Basically, Nettie acts as an advisor, a source of information for Celie and a historical teacher who helps her to reconnect with her African heritage thus awakes her ethical pride and helps her gain a sense of self-worth. Patricia Andujo suggests that "[for Celie] the cultural connection is more empowering than her spiritual connection to God"[20]. Gay Wilentz adds further: "it is Nettie's recreation of their African heritage which helps Celie to grow into her own person"[21].

[19] Gray, Richard. Op. Cit. p. 696
[20] Andujo, Patricia. "Rendering the African-American Woman's God through *The Color Purple*. LaGrone, Kheven. *Alice Walker's The Color Purple*. New York, 2009, p. 69.
[21] Wilentz, Gay. *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora*. Op. Cit. p.76

The importance of Nettie in the novel can be explained by the fact that she keeps Olivia and Adam alive in their mother's heart. The truth about her children gives her strength to continue to fulfil her dreams about independence. She gets stronger and eager to defend herself and those she loves.

Reading Nettie's letters and hearing from her, Celie senses a little comfort in the painful and desolate situation in which she is trapped. Moreover, Nettie allows her an insight into the power of female relationship that provides her with a hope of survival during the harshest living moment of her existence. It is therefore possible to conclude that Nettie is the angle in Celie's side that helps her pave her first steps closer towards liberation. In other words, Nettie helps Celie to release her tension and enables herself expression and confession, as well as allows her to develop the voice to narrate her life story.

Celie in her turn is the single most important person in Nettie's life. Celie is of great help and support for Nettie, she sacrifices her needs and life for her sister's welfare. Clearly, caring for Nettie is the closest thing to raising a child that Celie ever experiences[22]. Celie often acts as Nettie's protector. When she is threatened by her stepfather: "I see him looking at my little sister" (TCP, p4), Celie puts herself directly in the line of fire: "I always get in his light", she accepts defeat for herself but not for her beloved sister" (TCP, pp 4-6). Simultaneously, Celie fights for Nettie's education, she urges her to keep studying and With Celie as her listener, Nettie gains more courage to survive in Africa through her letter writing.

Actually, by sending Nettie to Africa, Alice walker is able to expose the similarities and differences between black Americans and native Africans, revealing to some extent the destructive effects of European imperialism, and the intense racism and sexism that marked the African life. Brenda R. Smith points to the importance of Nettie's letters and says

> Nettie's letters describe and draw parallels between the culture and customs of the Olinka tribe and those of African-Americans in the American south;

[22] Pillow, Gloria Thomas. *Motherlove in Shades of Black: The Maternal Psyche in the Novels of African American Women*. USA, McFarland & Company Inc, 2003, p.119

> they establish parallels between colonialism and Jim Crow, African and African-American[23]

Similarly William E. Cain identifies parallel experiences of racism and sexism represented in the two sister's letters. According to him, Celie's letters expound the oppressive conditions the black woman experiences at the hands of both white and black men in Southern America. On the other hand, Nettie more widely travelled, illustrates the marginalized status of women in Europe, colonial Africa and in particular the African tribe "Olinka".

Nettie's letters broaden the novel's scope and place the racial and sexist oppression into a more global arena. Through these letters Walker is able to describe the different kinds of oppression in both America and Africa. According to Linda Selzer, in *The Color Purple* Walker invites readers to "resituate her narration [about the individuals Celie and Nettie] within a larger discourse of race and class", which includes sexism and racism in both America and Africa[24].

Nettie's letters provide that many events in the American South evoke parallel events in Africa. The African women's predicament is that of being oppressed by patriarchy and this echoes and complements African-American women's experience in America. As Barbara Christian indicates, "sexism flourishes in Africa"[25]. In reality, the longer Nettie lives with the Olinka people, the more similarities she witnesses between the situation of Olinka women and that of her sister. She notices that there is a lot of oppression of women by men in Africa that parallels the firm situation of Celie in Georgia. There is a resemblance as well between her and Celie's relationship with Alphonso and the Olinka women's relationship to their husbands. Nettie, disenchanted, writes Celie the following

> There is a way that the men speak to women that reminds me too much of Pa. They listen just long enough to issue instructions. They don't even look

[23] Smith, Brenda R. Op. Cit. pp. 11-12
[24]Cain, William E. *Literary Criticism and Cultural Theory: Outstanding Dissertations*. New York and London, Routeledge, 2001. p. 95
[25] Christian, Barbara. *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers.* Op. Cit. p. 182

> at women when women are speaking. They look at the ground and bend their heads toward the ground. The women also do not "look in a man's face" as they say. To "look in a man's face" is a brazen thing to do. They look instead at his feet or his knees. And what can I say to this? It our own behaviour around Pa (TCP, p.168)

By stating this, Walker's aim is to build coalitions between African and African-American women, she demonstrates how both of them are afflicted with the direct oppression of sexism that serves as a contributing factor to reduce their status of "gender other". Through Nettie's letters, Walker brings light to the breakdown of the male/female relationships and the power of male domination in Africa and in so doing she demonstrates further that the situation in Africa is no better than in America. Consequently oppression and control by the patriarchal society can be perceived as an international norm in the novel. Butler-Evans states in his study, "*Race, Gender, and Desire"* that the purpose of the letters is to emphasize the history of "universal oppression of black women everywhere"[26]. Gay Wilentz adds:

> This conflict in Walker's appraisal of African culture is even more pronounced in relationship to her desire to build cultural ties between African and African-American women, based on oppression[27]

Meanwhile, Nettie contrasts the desire of African people to keep their girls uneducated with the desire of American whites to keep Blacks ignorant. She learns that the Olinka village girls are not allowed to be educated; they are restrained from receiving it because "[a] girl is nothing to herself, only to her husband can she become something" and that the Olinka men do not want an educated wife, for "who wants a wife who knows everything her husband knows?" (TCP, pp 161-176). As Nettie begins teaching classes in the missionary school, she notices that Olivia, Celie's biological daughter, is the only girl to attend class. Most boys in the school refuse to talk to her except her brother Adam, simply because she "is where they are doing 'boys' things" (TCP, p141). In reality, the boys' refusal to talk to Olivia proves their

[26] Wilentz, Gay. *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora*. Op. Cit. p. 74
[27] Ibid

approval of the traditional African values that women's place is at home instead of school.

Moreover, besides preventing girls from attending school, Walker demonstrates another African system for controlling women's freedom. In the Olinka tribe, girls have to undergo the rite of female circumcision which is required as part of their initiation into adulthood. Maria Lauret points out that in the Olinka culture, mothers oblige their daughters to comply with traditions, to be 'bathed' will make them more valuable to their families, their future husbands and their people[28]. In reality such practice is a tradition that has been handed down for generations; it is an African way of forbidding women from having right over their bodies and sexuality. It is as M. Giulia Fabi defines it: "a silence that represents another, more indirect form of patriarchal domination and culturally enforced female complicity"[29]

The character who goes through this ritual is Tashi, Olivia's class mate and whom Celie's son Adam marries. It is true that Walker does not treat this practice overtly in *The Color Purple*, but she devotes a whole story to this African character in her fifth novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) which is a recent exposition of the variant cultural practices of 'female circumcision', or 'female genital mutilation', among particular African peoples[30].

While emphasising the importance of female initiation in women's lives as a sacred passage through which African women can reach womanhood, Tashi, as an African woman is also led to believe that she has to undergo the operation. Besides, unlike the other girls of her tribe, Tashi is not bathed at the proper time –girlhood, but chooses to undergo it at her adolescence.

Basically, her decision to go through the initiation is for the sake of her traditions as well as a symbol of unity and loyalty to her village. Mainly, within the intervention of the African-American missionaries in Africa, the Olinka people see the

[28] Lauret, Maria. Op. Cit. p. 166
[29] Fabi, Giulia M. "Sexual Violence and Black Atlantic: on Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*". Diedrich, Maria, Henry Louis Gates, JR, & Carl Pedersen, eds. *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, p 229
[30] Kanneh, Kadiatu. Op. Cit. p.110

preservation of their culture threatened by the outsiders and this is a very convincing reason to force their daughters to obey their traditions through undergoing the procedure. As a result, Tashi's commitment to the initiation was in the name of tradition and in defiance of tribal identity as opposed to the British colonialism and missionaries' teaching. In reality, she does not want to be an outsider to the Olinka heritage and only by doing the initiation she becomes "Completely woman. Completely African". Completely Olinka"[31]. Kanneh highlights the reasons for Tashi's motivation to the initiation, he states: "[Tashi] allows herself to be excised and infibulated as part of her expression of cultural independence from British colonialism"[32].

However, the receiving of the Olinka mark does not only prevent Tashi from the tribal unity she was seeking for, but also ruins the rest of her life. She becomes almost physically and emotionally destroyed. When she goes to the United States with her husband Adam, Tashi realizes the high price she has to pay for her decision; she loses all pleasure from sexual encounters and gives birth to a brain damaged son. Then due to this, she starts struggling with her pain caused by her tradition. As a result, she decides to return to Africa with the only purpose to murder the woman who initially circumcised her, M'Lissa as a symbolic act of resistance and rejection of what the author considers to be a form of female genital mutilation.

Initially Walker questions and rejects this ritual as a physical abuse that fosters women's subjugation. She suggests that if this procedure is performed in the name of tradition and national identity, it would further subordinate and damage the lives of women by depriving them of the control of their bodies and sexuality. Kanneh contends

> What results in an attempt to represent the practices of female circumcision as, not only specific cultural practices, but as a metaphor for women's subordination and oppression on a global scale[33]

[31] Kanneh, Kadiatu. Op. Cit. p.110
[32] Ibid
[33] Ibid. p. 111

In her novel, Walker presents African women as "Mothers handing down the future to their daughters"[34], this is how the Nigerian novelist Buchi Emecheta defines "generational/ cultural continuity" in *Our Own Freedom*. It is the passing on of cultural values and education from grandmothers to grandchildren. In African societies, this cultural transmission is traditionally regarded as a woman's domain. In examining the concept of "mothering process", Gay Wilentz views that the term mother includes not merely the biological mother but co-mothers, grandmothers, aunts, old sisters, community women[35].

Walker portrays these African mothers as being instrumental in perpetuating their daughter's submissiveness by teaching them to live within the confines of patriarchal society to ensure their survival. For Walker, this knowledge which is passed on through generations represents specifically the abuses, repression and exploitation of African women.

Walker indeed questions the tradition of Emecheta's mother, and posits the daughter's right to refuse those traditions and the social restrictions inflicted upon her. Walker strongly rejects the idea of female complicity with patriarchy in perpetuating their daughter's predicament. She blames directly the mother's role in pushing their daughters into the repressive silence.

It is important to mention that the submissiveness of the African women to their traditions and their scarification is an obvious reminder of the separation between African and African-American customs. While, the Africans see Tashi's initiation as a symbol of unity and affirmation of her female Olinka identity, the African-Americans, on the other hand, regard it as a female folly and a primitive misogyny.

[34] Wilentz, Gay. *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora*. Op. Cit. p. xxxiii
[35] Ibid. p. xxiv

2- Sisterhood between Celie and Sofia

Another influential character in the course of Celie's life is her daughter-in-law Sofia Butler. Sofia serves as an example of the independent woman, determined to follow her free will and not let anyone control her or put her down. She stands by what she wants to achieve and fights for her right to do so. Carla Kaplan views that no character in *The Color Purple* is more known for her rebellious, contestatory voice and for "fighting back" than Sofia.

However, Sofia is a very obvious contrast to Celie. She is a physically powerful and emotionally headstrong woman. She even walks like a soldier "look like the army change direction, and she heading off to catch up" (TCP, p 30). According to Gay Wilentz, Sofia has many characteristics associated with an African concept of womanhood: she is physically strong, proud and extremely independent; and she is not embarrassed or the least bit ashamed to be pregnant and not married[36]. Additionally, she has a large, closely knit family, full of siblings and children, with brothers and sisters who are as strong and proud. She and her sisters are called "Amazons"; they all have children and share the responsibilities of taking care of them[37].

While Celie is subservient to male authority, for she accepts the norm that requires a woman to be obedient to her husband, Sofia, however, rebelliously places herself outside the context of family violence and chooses to fight back. She stands up to the abusers in her life, whether they are men or women, whites or blacks including her husband. As a wife of Harpo, she quarrels everyday with him and refuses to be tied only to house chores and work in the fields like a man. She also expects Harpo to help her with the domestic chores.

Harpo defiantly marries Sofia despite his father's disagreement. And even though he loves her deeply and both live together happily, things begin to sour as he

[36] Wilentz, Gay. *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora*. Op. Cit. p. 69
[37] Ibid. pp. 69-70

attempts to make Sofia submit to his authority as husband. Harpo in effect still wants to emulate his father's relationship with Celie and adopts the system of dominance for his marriage. Albert advises his son to beat her as he does with Celie: "wives is like children. You have to let 'em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do better than a good sound beating"(TCP, p 35).

When Harpo asks Celie for advice that could help him tame his wife and control her better because she was making a fool of him by acting like a man, Celie – who understands abuse as the only relationship between men and women[38] – simply suggests that he should beat her like any other man would do. She encourages him to treat her in the way Mr ---- treats her. Harpo asks "what he ought to do to her to make her mind....I think bout how every time I jump when Mr ----call me, she look surprise. And like she pity me. Beat her, I say" (TCP, p38). In fact, Celie's suggestion proves that she has successfully internalized the principle of male domination that states that women and men are not equal and that wives should be beaten in order to remember "their place" in the house.

After heeding the advice of both his father and Celie, Harpo beats Sofia. And to his surprise, she directly fights back and challenges her husband's attempt to force her into passivity and submission. Celie describes the situation and says: "Harpo and Sofia ...fighting like two mens. Every piece of furniture they gor is turned over. Every plate look like it broke...they fight" (TCP, p 37)

When Sofia confronts Celie about her advice, Celie admits that she encourages Harpo to beat her because she is jealous of her, as she states

> I say it because I'm a fool, I say. I say it cause I'm jealous of you. I say it cause you do what I can't.
>
> What's that, she say.
>
> Fight, I say.
>
> She stand there a long time, like what I said took the wind out of her jaws. She mad before, sad now. (TCP, p.43)

[38] Wilentz, Gay. *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora*. Op. Cit. p 70

Thus Celie admires Sofia's rebellious spirit and her strong determination to reject the unfair treatment of wives in the patriarchal marriage system. Sofia reveals to Celie that as a girl, she has fought with all male members of her family during all her life –her brothers, her uncles and now her husband. She says:

> All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men. But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own house
>
> (TCP, p 42)

Sofia's situation reveals a common ground between her and Celie. Both of them confront the same situation, they suffer at the hand of their family male members. Gay Wilentz states: "However, Sofia does not take the same strategy as Celie. As for Sofia, she is able to change her situation, she decides to fight for all the unfair treatment in her life just for keeping independence or not being dominated by patriarchy as Celie[39]. For example, when she is beaten by her husband, she directly opposes him and decides to leave him, taking her five children with her. This reaction of Sofia parallels that of Nettie when she leaves Alphonso who tried to abuse her.

After Sofia learns that Celie does not fight back but rather keeps silent and tells God about her suffering, Sofia gives her a suggestion: "to bust Mr ---- head open, think about heaven later" (TCP, p 39). As a result, the sincere exchange of viewpoints that ensues between the two women ends on a note of bonding through understanding, forgiveness, and healing –symbolized by their new collaboration[40]. From that point on, Sofia and Celie become friends who support each other in the course of the abuse they each suffer from eventually. Their solidarity is symbolized in the quilt that they make "Sisters Choice"[41]. Indeed, Sofia is the first person with whom Celie shares for the first time, a connection with someone other than Nettie. Sofia's strong will and firm attitude to protect herself from being dominated inspires Celie to get rid of the unfair treatment she confronts. She is in effect the first woman to teach Celie to fight

[39] Wilentz, Gay. *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora*. Op. Cit. p 69.
[40] Pillow, Gloria Thomas. Op. Cit. p. 125
[41] Wilentz, Gay. *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora* .Op. Cit. p. 70

back against the gender system that makes women subversive, powerless and beaten down. In short, Celie's encounter with Sofia makes her realize that "women can, and should, be strong. Abuse must not be tolerated"[42].

3- Sisterhood between Celie and Shug Avery

Shug Avery is another female character who knows the value of female solidarity. She plays an important role in the novel especially in the life of Celie. Shug is the one who teaches Celie how to assert her personality and empowers her to stand up for herself as a human being. She facilitates her journey to a heroic selfhood by making her know what is inside her and her unique beauty and capacity for love.

Meanwhile, Shug is the one with whom Celie has been in love since youth. She is her model and the one who long ago captured her heart and has haunted her thoughts: "when I dream, I dream of Shug Avery" (TCP, p 7). In Celie's mind, the blues singer is "the most beautiful woman [she] ever saw" (TCP, p 6). She thinks that Shug was "more pretty than [her] mama" (Ibid), and, "bout thousand times more prettier than [her]" (Ibid). Actually, as Saadi A. Simawe states, Celie has unconsciously been waiting for Shug to help her repair her ruined selfhood and awaken her sexuality, her love, and, ultimately, her spiritual wholeness[43].

It is important to point out that the female solidarity that ties Celie to Shug is completely different from the one with her sister Nettie and daughter-in-law Sofia. Yet, they are distinctly different personalities. What Celie learns from her interaction with the two women has intensified her relationship with her lover Shug. Gay Wilentz suggests that it is through this woman-identified bonding that we see Celie's real growth[44]. Shug leads Celie by example, she represents a self-confident

[42] Pillow, Gloria Thomas. Op. Cit. p.126
[43] Simawe, Saadi A. *Black Orpheus: Music in African American Fiction from the Harlem Renaissance to Toni Morrison*. New York and London, 2000, p 256
[44] Wilentz, Gay. *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora*. Op. Cit. p. 71

independent woman Celie would like to become and she admires her for being her own self and for the ability to "positively fill the space she occupies"[45].

Shug Avery is the most liberated female character in the novel. She is Celie's best friend and the one who influences her most. Her presence in the novel changes completely the course of Celie's life and enables her to evolve into a woman no longer dependent on men or accepting the conditions that have enslaved her.

Shug is portrayed as a very successful and desirable blues singer, living an independent life and performing in bars and juke points all over the United States. She is always like "The Queen Honeybee" because she is a liberated and always confident and self-determinate woman (TCP, p25). However, Shug's liberation and confidence come from the fact that she can support herself financially thus has freed herself from male domination.

Actually, by creating Shug as a musician and artist, Walker aims to demonstrate the importance of Blues in women's liberation. She defines womanists as feminists of color, women who love women, women who are concerned with the salvation of the entire race (not just women), and women who love to sing and dance[46]. By having an income, Shug overcomes all impediments and breaks free from the conventions dictated by both black and white communities.

According to Maria Lauret, Shug Avery is already a liberated woman and it is her art that enabled her to be so. As le Roi Jones writes:

> [t]he entertainment field [was] a glamorous one for Negro women, providing an independence and importance not available in other areas open to them – the church, domestic work, or prostitution[47].

Maria Lauret adds further that for Shug, blues singing was a ticket out of the oppressed condition of black women's domestic or sexual or industrial wage labour in the inter-war period. To this economic account of the blues as work, Hortense Spillers

[45] Richard, Gray. Op. Cit. p. 697
[46] George, Courtney. "My Man Treats me Like a Slave: The Triumph of Womanist Blues over Blues Violence in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple"*. LaGrone, Kheven. *Alice Walker's The Color Purple.* New York, 2009, p. 119
[47] Lauret, Maria. Op. Cit. p. 111

adds the dimension of blues singing as also a performance of sexual self-confidence, because the singer

> celebrates, chides, embraces, inquires into, controls her womanhood through the eloquence of form that she both makes use of and brings into being. Black women have learned as much (probably more) that is positive about their sexuality through the practising activity of the singer as they have from the polemicist. Bessie Smith, for instance[48]

More than anyone else, Celie has found in Shug the maternal affection and care as well as moral support that she has been deprived of since childhood. Shug's major lessons to Celie lie in the area of emotional expression: affection, trust, sharing, friendship, respect, and intimacy[49].

By listening to Celie's problems and stories, Shug discovers Celie's miserable life experience and tries to lessen her isolation and helps her to heal emotionally. Despite the fact that Shug is Mr----'s lover, the two women become intimate friends. Shug tries to speak on Celie's behalf and protest about her mistreatment by Mr---- and his children. When Shug discovers that Albert beats Celie and mistreats her, she loses her desire and love for him; instead, she helps Celie to escape from his violence. Shug, like a mother, guides Celie's gradual evolution. She succeeds to intervene on her behalf and helps her to negotiate a place for herself in Albert's house. Celie writes in one of her letters: "My life stop when I left home, I hink. But then I think again. It stop with Mr---- may be, but start up again with Shug" (TC, p 85).

More significantly, Celie's pain and distress inspire Shug to compose a song for her. She argues that Celie deserves respect hence she performed it publicly in Harpo's juke; she announces the title of the new song "Miss Celie's song". Prior to this, Celie has never been recognized and so honoured "first time somebody made something and name it after me" (TCP, p 74). Indeed Shug with her song in love and praise of the beauty of Celie works to reinforce Celie's badly damaged ego and corrects her self-image by making her believe she is beautiful.

[48] Lauret, Maria. Op. Cit. p. 111
[49] Pillow, Gloria Thomas. Op. Cit. p. 128

In reality, the most significant gift that Shug offers to Celie is Nettie's letters. With her help, Celie finds out that Albert has been hiding her sister's letters in an attempt to keep the two sisters separated. After this discovery, not only does she know that her children and sister are still alive in Africa, but she helps her to keep hope in life.

Shug fosters Celie's independence and stresses her personal agency. Celie is no longer the passive woman who tolerated Mr ----'s violence simply because she is his wife, Celie finally declares that she leaves him to join Shug and her husband Grady in Memphis "you a lowdown dog is what's wrong. I say. It's time to leave you and enter into creation" (TCP, p180).

Turgay Bayindir points out that Shug and Albert are juxtaposed as polar opposites in terms of their influence on Celie's life. While her husband's presence is a stifling influence on Celie's creativity, Shug's presence only nurtures it and allows it to reach its full potential[50]. From the very beginning of their cohabitation, Celie's friendship with Shug departs entirely from her former relationship with her husband. While the latter degrades Celie to the position of a slave, treats her "like children", Shug is quick to remind her: "you not my maid. I did not bring you to Memphis to be that. I brought you here to love you and help you get on your feet" (TCP, p 211).

The process of helping each other is a very good example of how women's solidarity decentralizes men, freeing them from oppressive structures. Under Shug's influence, Celie discovers the benefits of being a strong woman, able to consider herself as an individual beyond the roles she has been forcibly cast into throughout life.

In addition, in *The Color Purple*, the relationship between Celie and Shug seems to be unconventional, almost in reality and in daily life. Walker establishes a relationship between a wife and a mistress based on mutual acceptance and support. Some critics suggest that Walker intentionally creates relationships based on the West African tradition of polygamy, a tradition in which the wives are expected to live

[50]Bayindir, Turgay. Op. Cit. p. 196

together and help each other. We suggest that this unconventional relationship is created by the author to establish a female community through solidarity and collaboration to oppose male domination.

4) How far is the liberation achieved?

- **Physical and sexual freedom**

From the beginning of the novel, Celie has been the victim of sexual and physical abuse. During her childhood, she is repeatedly beaten and brutally raped by her step-father, Alphonso, and in her adolescence, unwillingly becomes the enslaved wife of a violent husband who treats her as a personal sex-object. Accordingly, since her young age, Celie has been forced into heterosexuality and deprived of the control over neither her body nor her sexuality. She is deprived of the chance to experience love, emotion and sex in the right way. Celie describes sex with Mr ----, she says: "he get up on you, heist your nightgown round your waist, plunge in .... Never ast me how I feel, nothing. just do his business, get off, go to sleep" (TCP, p77).

As a matter of fact, early in her life, Celie is taught to consider her body as a location of shame and control as well as abandonment. The only concept that she has of her own body is that she is "ugly". As Gay Wilentz points out "Celie, who has seen herself only through the eyes of men, has no respect for her body since it appears to her as "ugly", an object for abuse"[51].

However, under Shug's influence, Celie is introduced into a relationship based on respect and support that over time develops into a physical intimacy that Celie has never been able to experience with men. Shug Avery, with her bisexual life style helps Celie to explore her feminine sexuality thereby aiding her in the recognition and embracing of her desire. Celie experiences for the first time in her life sex without

[51] Wilentz, Gay. *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora*. Op. Cit. p. 71

being abused or exploited. For Celie the sexual act with Shug is completely different from the one with men before.

Throughout the process of their love relationship, Shug introduces Celie to the beauty of her own body and teaches her how to find pleasure in it and how to give pleasure in return. Surprised to learn that Celie has never enjoyed sex with her husband, Shug informs her "why Miss Celie. . . you still virgin" (TCP, p81). For Shug, virginity is not defined in terms of biology, but in terms of pleasure, and since Celie has never enjoyed sex, has never had an orgasm, she is still a virgin[52]. Shug gives Celie a mirror and tells her: "Here, take this mirror and go and look at yourself down there, I bet you never seen it, have you?" (TCP, p7O). They explore together Celie's sexual organs and Shug explains their functions. This lesson increases Celie's awareness of her own body and constitutes a necessary step in her healing process.

Further, Gay Wilentz suggests that Shug also helps Celie to deal with her past abuse and to feel love with the context of sisterhood

> She say, I love you, Miss Celie. And then she haul off and kiss me on the mouth.....
>
> Then I feel something real soft and wet on my breast, feel like one of my lost little babies mouth.
>
> Way after a while, I act like a little lost baby too (TCP, p109)

After years of repressing bodily sensations as consequence of the physical and sexual exploitation, Celie's perception of sex changes, she discovers that her body and her sexuality can be also sources of pleasure rather than humiliation, pain or being of an assertion of power over another. Over time, this discovery helps Celie find her voice, develop her identity thus transforming her from an object to a subject, from a possessed to a possessor. In the end, Celie is ready to love herself and accept her body. In his article, *"A Fairy-Tale Life:The Making of Celie in Alice Walker's The Color Purple"*, Daniel W. Ross asserts that: "respect and appreciation for the body are

[52] Smith, Brenda R. Op. Cit. p. 10

necessary for self-esteem and, ultimately, for life. In Celie's case, the repossession of her body is even necessary for the development of meaningful speech"[53].

Actually, the significance of the relationship between Celie and Shug is best defined within the limits of Alice Walker's definition of womanism: "a woman who loves other women, sexually and/ or nonsexually". The sexual love relationship between the two women is another technique the author uses for Celie's self-realization and disrupts the male/female gender roles that Celie has been forcibly cast into throughout life. Adrienne Rich argues that

> 'Lesbianism' can be viewed as a counter-discourse against the 'institution' of 'compulsory heterosexuality' that traditionally has been used to by men to exercise control over women. The control is made possible by assuring male right of physical, economic and emotional access to the women[54]

Obviously, solidarity among black women challenges and overturns the patriarchal system based on power men exercised over women. Walker skilfully develops the idea of homosexuality as an alternative to male domination in its ability to break through imposed stereotypes. Uplabdhi Sangwan has given deserved attention to Celie's relationship with Shug and suggests that by including the notions of sisterhood and lesbian relations, Walker wants to show that homosexuality is as legitimate as heterosexuality. According to him, homosexuality leads to a reformulation of power relations between men and women and engenders social and individual transformation[55].

Similarly, Gay Wilentz comments on the relationship between Celie and Shug, and says:

> Their love represents an openness to all the different aspects of women's capacity to nurture. Sexuality and sexual relations between women is not seen as antithetical to familial relations; rather, they embrace the entire

[53] Smith, Brenda R. Op. Cit. p. 71
[54] Sangwan, Uplabdhi. "Significance of Sisterhood and Lesbianism in Fiction of Women of Color". LaGrone, Kheven. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. New York, 2009, p. 176
[54] Ibid
[55] Sangwan, Uplabdhi. Op. Cit. p. 176

> extended family. The men in their lives are not thrust out of community: Shug is clearly open to heterosexual relationships, and Celie, through her love for Shug, even begins to tolerate Albert...[...]... most pertinently, lesbian love in his context is not seen in contradistinction to the desire for children and the necessity of children for the life of the community; it is, in fact, life-giving[56]

Besides, Wilentz quotes Elliott Butler-Evans, she adds: "lesbianism becomes an essential aspect of 'womanist' theory and praxis"[57]. It is clear that Alice Walker challenges the masculinist oppression that prevents women's liberation by presenting women's communities sexually independent of men but not separate of them. The novel demonstrates Celie's first heterosexual encounter as a physical abuse and dominative sex, in contrast to the one with Shug that heals her from this abuse.

In this case, their bonding is a kind of rejection to be the subordinating products of men. It is not an alienation from the whole community but rather enhances it all, male and female.

In sum, Celie's sexual act with Shug is another means Celie takes to liberate herself. Their relationship makes Celie feel important, self-assured and able to grow up into an independent self-thinking individual. Therefore, it can emphasise her status concretely as a subject, as a person who realizes her potentialities to complete her journey towards wholeness.

- **Spiritual Freedom**

From the beginning of the novel, even though Celie finds comfort in God who is his listener and helping hand, she does not have a clear understanding who God is. She is in reality obsessed by the white male personified notion of god. She has associated his image to a white man who has power and goodness. Celie has been conditioned in her belief by the illustrations in the white interpretation of the bible; for her God is "like some white man work at the bank ...big and old and tall and gray

[56] Wilentz, Gay. *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora*. Op. Cit. p. 72
[57] Ibid

bearded and white. He wear robes and go barefoot" (TCP, 176). Thus in order to reach heaven, the only place where she believes she can be free and happy, Celie completely believes that she has to submit to God by enduring all kinds of pain without any protest.

Later on, a radical change in God's image happens in Celie's mind. Her changing perception started first with Nettie's letters which reveal to her that Jesus was more like her than a white man "with hair like lamb's wool", "not white" at all. Moreover, Celie's relationship with Shug is very significant because she ultimately leads her to a new level of spiritual awareness. In fact, Shug's conception of religion is more personalized and empowering. She tries to explain to Celie the spiritual and abstract interpretation of God. She awakens her to a completely different as well as deepest understanding of the divine. Besides, Shug dismantles the old image of God as a white man and source of oppression and replaces it by one which is expressed everywhere in the beauty of the world that "God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. [...] God ain't a he or a she, but a It. [...] I believe is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be" (TCP, 202). She adds, "God is inside everybody" (TCP, p176) and has no fixed place.

Celie replaces her patriarchal God by another concept and transfers her faith towards nature by believing that God exists in nature and that it is everything and that everything is connected. This is what we feel in her last letter, which begins with: "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear people. Dear everything. Dear God" (TCP, p 259)

By realizing that God is not a white man, Celie changes her perception of the world. (She begins to resist Mr ----, leaving him and travelling to Memphis with Shug). Her words to him as she explains why she joins Shug and her husband reveal the importance of her changing perception of the divine: "you a lowdown dog is what's wrong, I say. It is time to leave you and enter into the creation" (TCP, p170).

Actually the shift in Celie's conception of God from an image of an old, white man to everything contained in the natural world, the "stars...trees...sky...people" (TCP, p 242) is a central and integral part of her process towards wholeness.

- **Economic freedom**

Apart from sexual and spiritual awareness, financial freedom also plays a crucial role in Celie's journey towards wholeness. Maria Lauret points out that: "In *The Color Purple*, Celie's progress is therefore marked as much materially as it is spiritually and sexually"[58].

As a black woman deprived of education, Celie has been gifted with the ability of making pants. Like other kinds of needle work, making pants has long been seen as a marginal and insignificant woman's labour. Nonetheless, Celie is able to make of it a source of self-autonomy and financial independence. Therefore, her sewing pants project indicates the turn-around point within Celie's life.

Actually, Shug is the one who helps Celie to succeed in her pants sewing business. She helps her first to escape by taking her to Memphis. Once there, she opens her own clothing company "Folkspants Unlimited Company". This latter provides her with the means to discover her final steps towards independence. Barbara Christian notes that in *The Color Purple*, "Walker challenges [white] society's definition [of women as dependent on men] by presenting women's communities that are sexually and economically independent of men, though not separate of them"[59].

Furthermore, Celie's talent of sewing transfers her anger of being oppressed by men as well as her desire for revenge into the power of creativity. It begins as a substitute for violence. Celie thinks: "a needle and not a razor in my hand" (TCP,

[58] Lauret, Maria. Op. Cit. p 118
[59] Christian, Barbara. *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers.* Op. Cit. p. 199

p147). Actually while her husband oppressed and abused her in the early years of her life, now he ironically helps Celie in her business. Besides, the most important thing is that Celie starts to wear pants, and in those days, men were the only ones who were supposed to be clothed in pants. In this case, working together and wearing pants like men was the first sign that Celie was rejecting and breaking out of the role the men in her life has assigned to her, so as to achieve equality with them.

Celie's artistic potential of sewing constructs her self-value, and releases her tension in a positive way that makes her move further to self-realization and wholeness. In the end, she liberates herself from patriarchy by her creativity, and re-creates a new self with autonomy. She now comes to believe that she is able to speak up for herself and decide for her life.

It seems that after being weighed down for years, the oppressed soul is finally liberated and happy. In "*The Enchanted World of The Color Purple*", the scholar Magaret Walsh compares Celie to Cinderella. She claims that both exemplify the rags-to-riches pattern of fairy tales. Certainly, Celie, through her journey has a lot to do with Cinderella and other fairy tales heroines: "Celie [...] is an ideal fairy tale heroine, pitilessly victimized, simple, passive, defenceless, good and in need of a fairy godmother"[60]. Raphael Lambert suggests further that unlike Cinderella, Walker' protagonist does not wait for a Prince Charming to find her and make her rich and happy but rather learns to discover her inborn qualities and optimize them[61].

Eventually, Celie triumphs over oppression through the support of three women, her sister Nettie, her daughter in law Sofia and her lover Shug Avery. In reality, with their assistance and encouragement, Celie starts to change and refuses to submit to patriarchy. They have empowered and reshaped her from the subservient woman into a successful and autonomous one who is not dependent on men anymore. Celie and Nettie's relationship helps Celie in reconnecting with her ancestors, and helps Nettie in surviving many years of isolation in Africa. Besides, in the character of

[60] Raphael, Lambert. "Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*: Womanist Folk Tale and Capitalist Fairy Tale". LaGrone, Kheven. *Alice Walker's The Color Purple.* New York, 2009, p. 52
[61] Ibid

Sofia, Celie finds strength and the will to fight. Above all, Celie's bond with Shug helps her re-define herself, her world, and her God.

Gay Wilentz comments on the end of the novel by stating that Walker, in her depiction of Celie, is able to transform the story of her own great-grandmother, a slave raped by the plantation owner, by giving it a happy ending. Walker comments on this utopian vision in a *Newsweek* interview: "I liberated her from her own history . . . . I wanted her to be happy"[62].

Actually, through Celie's transformation, Walker attempts to establish a new black community where dignity, respect and support are accorded to all its members, men and women. According to her, a community that enables more satisfying lives for black women is inclusive of transformed men and free of gender-defined roles. The critic Candice Jenkins notes in her essay "*Queering black patriarchy: the Salvific Wish and Masculine Possibility in Alice Walker's The Color Purple*", that Walker reshapes the black family "in unconventional ways that divest its black male members of a good deal of power..."[63].

From the length of the novel, one can notice that the black woman through her skill and endurance, manages to transform the uncaring and abusive black man into a potentially conscious husband. In other words, they don't just dispute their society's status quo, they change it. Indeed, as Barbara Christian explains, the novel "demonstrates how sisterhood among women benefits the entire black community". Family, in the novel, is no longer based on abuse and oppression but on mutual love and respect. *The Color Purple* moves towards what the critic Molly Hite describes as a "celebration of family reunion and of the black race"[64].

[62] Wilentz, Gay. *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora*. Op. Cit. p. 76
[63] Sangwan, Uplabdhi. Op. Cit. p. 183
[64] Ibid

Chapter 5

Epistolary Narrative

a- The Epistolary “Love Letter” and the Seeming Love Story in *Our Sister Killjoy*

b- *The Color Purple* and Epistolary Narrative: Writing as an Act of Liberation

Epistolary Narrative

Studying Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Maria Berg Jorgensen reminds us that the epistolary genre came to prominence during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a consequence of changes in philosophy, worldview and not the least in the economic situation of the reading public[1]. It originated in British and European American literature as a narrative structure invented by men to shape and explore the inner selves of women.

Rarely used in literary works of the twentieth century, the epistolary novel reached its peak of popularity in England and France in the eighteenth century with works such as Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) which is officially recognized as the first epistolary novel in the English tradition; the longest epistolary one *Clarissa Harlowe* (1748) and *Charles Grandison* (1754); Tobias Smollett's *Humphry Clinker* (1771) and Fanny Burney's *Evelina* (1778). In addition, the famous epistolary works in the French literary scene are those of Jean Jacques Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Heloise* (1761) and Choderlos de Laclos's *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782).

In fact, one of the most appealing thematic concerns of the male-authored epistolary texts at that time was what Katherine Ann Jensen calls the "epistolary woman":

> In seventeenth and eighteenth-century France, one of the ideals of femininity, which women were encouraged/ compelled to realize, was what I term Epistolary woman. Seduced, betrayed, and suffering, this woman writes letter after letter of anguished and masochistic lament to the man who has left her behind"[2]

By defining it as such, Katherine A. Jensen refers to the "epistolary woman" as a "male creation" intended to perpetuate the negative image of women. By writing an epistolary novel, the male author fills the pages with a woman's amorous despair and suffering as well as lamentations to her lover who has neglected her, as seen in texts

[1]Jorgensen, Maria Berg. *Women, Letters and the Empire: The Role of the Epistolary Narrative in Alice Walker's The Color Purple.* University of Tromso, 2011, p.31

[2] Jensen, Catherine Ann. *Writing Love: Letters, Women, and the Novel in France,* (1605-1776). Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995, p.1

such as Guilleragues's *Lettres portugaises*. So, in Katherine A. Jensen's view, the ideal image of the writing woman is one who has been seduced and abandoned by her lover, and who is writing her unfulfilled emotions. She adds further, female suffering became a virtue and pain something positive: it might persuade the lover to come back[3].

By appropriating a form invented and traditionally controlled by men, women authors took the advantage and created works to endorse change within the negative stereotypes of women being promoted by male authors of the time. Besides, these female authors tend to assert their status as authors and dismantle the negative image of themselves to advance it in more positive terms by creating characters who stand for them. As C. A. Jensen points out

> [Other women writers] began to write novels out of feminine love letters. In so doing, these women writers dismantled a repressive ideology of femininity from within. They took advantage of the novel's narrative structure in order to rewrite the female plot of seduction, betrayal, and reiterative masochism, the raison d'etre of the love letter[4]

The use of this epistolary form can be considered very effective in the novel as the way used by women to give voice to their ideas and desires that had been denied by men. Besides, in their texts, the women authors create new ways of imagining women, their capabilities, and their motivations. In other words, they create texts that function outside the constraints that men attempt to impose on them. In theses novels, women are no longer lamenting because of their abandonment, instead they are able to liberate themselves and find happiness in their solitude and friendship.

It seems that the use of the epistolary form mirrors the act of reclaiming one's marginalized identity. Letter narrative is often read as the direct and unfiltered expression of the thoughts of characters, as a way to enter their minds without the interfering presence of the narrator.

[3] Jensen, Catherine Ann. Op. Cit. p. 27
[4] Ibid. p. xvii

Through this technique, the author is able to enhance the reader's sympathy and compassion for the protagonist, as this reader "participates" in the gradual growth and personal maturity of the protagonist. The importance of this technique is to reveal that women can be independent and take control of their own fate, and it emphasizes further on the female character's autonomy and self-esteem.

This feature of imparting a female perspective to the text is a challenge to the traditionally male dominated structure. Indeed, it has uplifted self-consciousness as well as the autonomy of the female character over her affections and decisions of life.

While the epistolary genre may have declined by the modern era, this does not mean that epistolary fiction is not being produced. As a matter of fact this genre has profoundly marked the works of both Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy.* Evidently, the epistolary form of the novel inherited from the eighteenth century English novelists is the obvious common point between the two writers, and the influence of the western genre of the epistolary novel on their works is notable.

The approach taken by both Walker and Aidoo in their works foregrounds a confidence and intimacy between the reader and their female characters Sissie, Celie and Nettie. Further, it strengthens their personality and stimulates them to develop a strong and self-confident character by allowing them to be as honest as they can and enabling them to express their own thoughts and feelings.

Both Walker and Aidoo have recognized the importance of voice in their heroine's self-liberation, consequently they represent black women who articulate their own voices in black literature. Written in a form of letters, the novels allow the silenced protagonists to record the lived experiences and document the constraints placed upon them by a male-dominated patriarchal society.

The Epistolary "Love Letter" and the Seeming "Love Story"

The closing stage of Sissie's journey to the West is recalled in "A Love Letter", written aboard the plane that will carry her back home, that is to say, Africa. Actually,

this concluding section of the novel which, as the title indicates, is indeed a letter, transports the text to the Western genre which is the epistolary. The letter is also the first time we are made privy to the voice of Sissie in the first person narration. It is a literary narrative strategy that makes Sissie's task of expressing her personal thoughts a lot easier and allows the reader an even greater intimacy with her.

Sissie's letter includes personal thoughts on transatlantic identity, neo-colonialism and memories of conversation she has had with many diasporic "brothers" during her journey. In the letter to her lover which is never sent, Sissie confesses her increasing disillusionment and laments Africans' loss of identity, their abandonment of their African roots in favor of western ideals. Besides, she sees exile as a further slavery because she comes to realize that with a strong immersion in the west, that is not home, the individual inevitably experiences a loss of self. She articulates that these Africans, who have come to Europe to be educated, have only learned "how to die": according to the "comatose intellectuals" created in Europe "we must hurry to lose our identity quickly in order to join the great family of man…" (OSK, p 121)

Meanwhile, one of Sissie's conversations with her "intended" deals explicitly with the question of language as invariably linked to the identity issue. For Aidoo, as expressed by her protagonist, it is vital to keep an authentic African identity. For Sissie, the common use of the English language as their medium of communication demonstrates further their sense of loss. This problem of language is raised in the opening sentence of the letter:

> My precious something,
>
> First of all, there is this language. This language….Eh, My Love, what positive is there to be when I cannot give voice to my soul and still have her heard? Since so far, I have only been able to use a language which enslaved me, and therefore, the messengers of my mind always come shackled?
>
> (OSK, p112)

In the letter, the English language stands at the core of lovers' dispute. Sissie reveals how the language of the 'colonizer' does not do positive services to her sex and race. She perceives the English language as problematic because it is the language

of enslavement which comes with the empire, and because she must always be constrained to use it, “the messengers of my mind always come shackled” (OSK, p 112). In addition, this language enslaves her thoughts, renders her voiceless, and deprives her of a “soul” (OSK, p112).

And in their case, an African man and an African woman, the expression of love and their ability to communicate effectively is complicated and disrupted by a foreign language. This language of the ‘colonizer’ and of power is imposed, as well as transplanted to their minds and which they are forced to adapt to their feelings , their thoughts, their beings, it is a language that resonates with a colonial past that enslaves them both[5]. This is what Sissie is trying to explain to her lover:

> So you see, My Precious Something, all that I was saying about language is that I wish you and I could share our hopes, our fears, and our fantasies, without feeling inhibited because we suspect that someone is listening. As it is, we cannot write to one another, or speak across the talking cables or converse as we travel on a bus or train or anywhere, but we are sure they are listening, listening, listening. (OSK, p 115)

C.L.Innes argues that the novel ends with a letter that is not sent, because Sissie is made to realize that her desire for reconciliation with her boyfriend Kunle cannot be achieved; and anyway, their reconciliation is no longer the issue, the main issue being more ideological. Although distressed by her lover’s choice to remain in Britain, she for her part decides to go back to Africa alone. The text ends on a realistic note of hopeful nationalism rather than despair:

> She was back in Africa. And that felt like fresh honey on the tongue: a mixture of complete sweetness and smoky roughage. Below was home with its unavoidable warmth and even after these thousands of years, its uncertainties. (OSK, p 113)

This inability for the two lovers to reconcile is in fact Aidoo’s call for a mutual understanding between African men and women that has been disrupted by colonialism; it does invite them to attend to their responsibility to work together and assume the role they are to play in the making of their nation.

[5] Noguer, Esther Pujolras. Op. Cit. p.334

In a very deep sense, Sissie's letter is written not just as a confession of love addressed to her former boyfriend, but must be construed as a love letter to her "crazy old continent". Cheryl Sterling argues that "Sissie's writing a letter to her lover becomes an even more sardonic gesture, since her true love is Africa"[6]. Aidoo here transcends romantic love, and imagines a broader one, a love letter to one's country, to one's nation, to one's race:

> Aidoo has also dabbled into unorthodoxy to the extent that a love letter is no longer what it purports to be. A love letter does not necessarily have to be romantic only in the sense of singing about love between two human beings. A love letter can be romantic in the sense that it is a patriotic letter, from a concerned citizen about the motherland or fatherland. It could be a love letter about the Mother nature and about the cosmos and the environment.[7]

Significantly, from Aidoo's perspective, Sissie's passionate emphasis on her return signifies Aidoo's call for a unified resistance and maintenance of the African identity. Sissie's return is her connection to her home; the preservation of her sense of self by assuming totally her African, woman, nationalist identity. In an interview, when asked about the significance of Sissie's love letter written to her boyfriend, Aidoo comments that:

> Sissie uses her…ex-boyfriend…as the conduit through which she is speaking with a communal voice, a kind of collective voice and her address really was to everybody because in the long run what hurt her most was not what happened between her boyfriend and herself – "I" and "I" –but between "them" and "them", between "we", between "us" as an African people. It is a love letter to everybody and also to herself. I didn't say "let her write a letter to herself", but in effect that is what it is, a letter to herself in an effort to clarify her own views, to state her case, and examine it to see if she agrees with the conceptions of her own mind, her thoughts. So I think that is why she tears the letter up after writing it. It becomes irrelevant once she has clarified herself and realized "We'll be ok". So it's larger than

[6] Sterling, Cheryl. "*Can You Really See Through a Squint? Theoretical Underpinning in Ama Ata Aidoo's Our Sister Killjoy"*. The Journal of Commonwealth Literature. Vol. 45, USA, 2010, p 148

[7] Azodo, Ada Uzoamaka. "The Multifaceted Aidoo: Ideologue, Scholar, writer, and Woman". Azodo, Ada Uzoamaka & Gay Wilentz, eds. *Emerging Perspectives on Ama Ata Aidoo.* Trenton (N.J): Africa World Press, 1999. p.419.

> herself. It is message to her, to him, to both of them, to the whole of the African world[8].

Aidoo not only empowers the female character but she also places female subjectivity and agency into the masculinist discourse of Pan-Africanism, she completes an aesthetic, ideological quest because now the African woman asserts her intent, her desire for wholeness and her projected role in the struggle the continent faces[9].Cheryl Sterling contends that

> Aidoo's concept of femaleness is irrevocably tied to her concept of Africanness. For her, women are the sites for achieving the reformation of the continent, as expressed in Sissie's insistence that her voice as an African woman must be heard.[10]

Therefore, it is worth noting that the stream of consciousness narration makes obvious Sissie's maturation and sense of agency; she is no longer the naïve young student who crossed the borders into Europe with romantic expectation, but as a woman with a heightened consciousness and new wisdom about her being and identity. Her journey to the West, her "knowledge gained" (OSK, p 69) and chosen identity bears considerable weight in the creation and exploration of her national identity as an African woman ready to take responsibility for her own country and nation.

Alice Walker's The Color Purple and the Epistolary Novel:

Writing as an Act of Revolt and Liberation:

Alice walker's *The Color Purple* is written mostly in a distinctive and unusual narrative structure through the epistolary, or letter writing, form. It is structured as a series of personal and intimate letters written in two voices addressed by Celie, a silenced woman in search of her voice, firstly by God and later to her sister Nettie,

[8] Anuradha Dingwanev, Needham. "An Interview with Ama Ata Aidoo". The Massachusetts Review .Vol. 36 Iss 1 Amhest: Spring 1995, p. 126
[9] Sterling, Cheryl. Op. Cit. p. 148
[10] Ibid

interspersed with Nettie's letters, a black missionary in Africa, writing letters from Olinka in Africa to Celie. The majority of the novel is written in Celie's voice and they measure her growth, not just as a person but into being a person[11].

Since the novel traces the transformation that occurs in Celie's life, the epistolary form seems to be an adequate medium. Actually, the first person voice creates an intimacy and authenticity introducing the reader to share openly Celie's most intimate thoughts and feelings but at the same time can experience and witness the process of change which the protagonist goes through during each stage of her life. Maria Berg Jorgensen comments on the epistolary form and states that the novel

> Portrays the growth of the protagonist from a voiceless and cowed child who is not acknowledged as a person into an independent woman who controls her life the way she controls the narrative of the novel.[12]

All through the story, Celie is presented as the embodiment of the abused woman. She is exploited, silenced and treated badly by all black men in her life and the society she lives in. First, she is raped at a young age by the man she believes to be biologically her father and twice impregnated by him. Then he quickly takes away the babies from her. Then, she is forced into a loveless and abusive marriage with Mr ----, that introduces her again to a new line of slavery and subjugation. In her essay " 'A View from Elsewhere' ": Subversive Sexuality and the Rewriting of the Heroine's Story in *The Color Purple*", Linda Abbandonato points out, that Celie is

> Trapped in a gridlock of racist, sexist, and heterosexist oppressions, Celie struggles toward linguistic self-definition. She is an "invisible woman", a character traditionally silenced and effaced in fiction.[13]

Therefore, being deprived of her sexuality, her children, self-respect and denied any personal ambitions and dreams she may have, writing was the only way to break

[11] Gray, Richard. Op. Cit. p. 697
[12] Jorgensen, Maria Berg. Op. Cit. p 6
[13] Abbandonato, Linda. "*A View from Elsewhere: Subversive Sexuality and the Rewriting of the Heroine's Story in The Color Purple*". PMLA. VOL. 106, No 5. Modern Language Association, 1991, p.1106.

away from the silence imposed upon her. Actually, "Celie is so cut off from everyone and her experience is so horrifying, even to herself, that she can only write it in letters to God"[14]. In the letters, Celie records the struggle she has been through and the biggest transformation she has undergone as she finally gains her voice and asserts her autonomy. The African-American literary scholar, Barbara Christian has argued that Walker's use of letter writing plays an important role in Celie's emancipation.

> The form of *The Color Purple* (1982), Walker's most recent novel, is a further development in the womanist process she is evolving. The entire novel is written in a series of letters. Along with diaries, letters were the dominant mode of expression allowed women in the west. Feminist historians find letters to be a principal source of information, of facts about the everyday lives of women and their own perceptions about their lives, that is of both "objective" and "subjective" information. In using the epistolary style, Walker is able to have her major character Celie express the impact of oppression on her spirit as well as her growing internal strength and final victory.[15]

Linda Abbandonato adds further:

> Celie's struggle to create a self through language, to break free from the network of class, racial, sexual, and gender ideologies to which she is subjected, represents the woman's story in an innovative way.[16]

Apart from liberation through sisterhood, the other action taken by Celie in *The Color Purple* as a means to liberate herself is letter writing. She starts writing letters to God at the age of fourteen just after being raped by her step-father, and keeps on writing for four decades. At first, the words written by Celie seem to come, as Richard Gray suggests, from nowhere. These words, he adds further, are series of shapes to fill a lack; they seem existentially sourceless, because Celie has never been allowed properly to exist –never been given the opportunity to be and know herself[17].

[14] Christian, Barbara. "Alice Walker: The Black Woman Artist as Wayward". Evans, Mary. *Black Women Writers: Arguments and Interviews*, ed. London & Sydney: Pluto Press, 1985, p. 470
[15] Christian, Barbara. "Alice Walker: The Black Woman Artist as Wayward". Op. Cit. p. 469
[16] Abbandonato, Linda. Op. Cit. p. 1107
[17] Gray, Richard. Op. Cit. p. 697

In the act of writing, a brutalized pregnant girl in her isolated world reveals her pain and sadness as well as her struggles to understand her situation by putting it into words. Elizabeth Fifer states:

> All her acts of thought, of psychology and philosophy, all her triumphs are made available and possible by the writing itself. Celie participates in the creation of meaning or herself through language. Without language, silence would have ensured madness or, as in her mother's case, an early death.[18]

The Color Purple opens with a paternal injunction of silence[19]: "you better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (TCP, p1). In this scene, Alphonso imposes a bond of silence on Celie, he threatens her and forbids her from articulating her experiences of sexual abuse to anyone except God. Consequently, and right away, Celie takes his advice by just bearing the pain and remaining obedient because her mother was already dying and she did not want to speed up the process. Therefore, she can only share her secret with God by writing him letters. By doing so, it becomes clear that Celie's letters written to God are arranged in a context of male hegemony. Significantly, exposed to verbal oppression, Celie is isolated and prevented from any social contact with friends and relatives, even with her beloved sister Nettie. Due to the fact that Celie's voice is marginalized, it seems to be a way for Mr----- to take control and maintain the patriarchal system. Cheung King-Kok interestingly quotes Carolyn Heilbrun who describes minority women as "outsiders twice over", excluded both from the mainstream and from ethnic centers of power. According to him, these women are, moreover, thrice muted, on account of sexism, racism, and a "tonguelessness" that results from prohibitions or language barriers[20]. Alphonso used every means in order to silence Celie, short of cutting out her tongue: intimidation, deprivation, and false accusation[21].

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[18] Fifer, Elizabeth. "Alice Walker: The Dialect and Letters of *The Color Purple*". Rainwater, Catherine, & William J, Scheick. Ed. *Contemporary American Women Writers: Narrative Strategies*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1985. pp. 155-156

[19] Abbandonato, Linda. Op. Cit. p. 1106

[20] Cheung, King-Kok. "*Don't Tell: Imposed Silences in The Color Purple and The Woman Warrior*". Modern Language Association. PMLA, VOL. 103, No 2. 1988, p.163

[21] Ibid.p.165

It is worthy to note that the initial shocking horror of the incestuous rape of Celie by the man whom she believes is biologically her father reflects the physical and sexual violence black women endure at the hand of black men in the United States. Indeed, Celie's history of sexual oppression parallels that of her ancestors at the hand of the whites during slavery and race relations in America. In short, the fact that Celie is raped repeatedly by her stepfather demonstrates the merciless enslavement of black women within black communities which denounces further that these women have no control over their own bodies or lives. As Missy Dehn Kubitschek notes

> Slavery forced Afro-American culture to see that the woman raped by the master or used as a beeder did survive, *did* carry on with daily life; analogously, Afro-American males dealt with the issue on a daily basis because of the ever-present threat of lynching.[22]

What is remarkable here is that in the world of the novel, the black woman is situated in the institution of marriage that reproduces the same conditions as those of slavery, i.e. white/ black exploitation in which the black man is enslaved and oppressed. It is about being a woman and black, Celie faces a "double oppression" or "double colonization" performed by her husband against her. She suffers from the white man's norm and authority at the hand of her husband. That means that the oppression is patriarchal and colonial by definition. Celie is subordinated both as a woman and as a colonial object. As Walker writes in her essay, "In Search Of Our Mother's Garden", a black woman is the mule of the world, because she has been handed the burdens that everyone else –everyone else –refused to carry"[23]. In reality, Walker wants to illustrate how the racial and cultural forces influence the relationships between the black men and women in the black community. Her novel focuses much attention on the racist oppression between blacks themselves, especially in a family. She demonstrates how black men brutalize their wives. Celie is described by her husband with a language that carries images of slavery as being of no value and subordinated to him. He reminds her of the fact that she is black, poor and unattractive

[22] Field, Robin E. "Alice Walker's Revisionary Politics of Rape". LaGrone, Kheven. *Alice Walker's The Color Purple*. New York, 2009, p. 163
[23] Walker, Alice. Op. Cit. p. 237

and thus makes his explicit reason for diminishing her, he puts it: "who you think you is? You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all" (TCP, pp 175-176). Clearly, Mr-----views himself as superior to Celie and through his depiction and treatment of his wife he tends to characterize her as the opposite of himself. Angela Y. Davis published her study *Women, Race and Class* in 1981, a year before the publication of the novel, and it is possible to trace Celie's life in it. Davis discusses how slavery negatively affected the family structure and disrupted the gender roles among African-Americans and Albert/ Celie's relationship closely mirrors the situation.

Meanwhile, the opening scene of rape made by Walker parallels the one made by Aidoo in her novel *Changes: A Love Story.* Like Celie, Esi is physically conquered and deprived of her right over her sexuality. Both writers emphasize the ways in which black men treat their women, and how male/ female relationships are built upon patriarchal exploitation of women's bodies. The black man dominates his wife because he believes that it is a normal thing to do so. Linda Abbandonato states that: "sexuality and reproductive organs are controlled by men. . . and [women] submission is enforced through violence"[24].

In reality, Walker and Aidoo's decision to draw attention to this fact is the point that the body, like one's sexuality, is one's property. The rape is a big euphemism in women's thirst for liberation. Furthermore, the problem of women's sexuality or physical violence is proven to be a global problem facing all black women, in Africa and the Diaspora.

Because of the violence committed to her, Celie believes that her only possibility of survival is following her stepfather's instructions by keeping herself passive and invisible. Additionally, without someone to listen to her problems, Celie uses writing as a verbal outlet instead in order to confess her misery. Her letters to the imagined figure of God are the only means of self-expression and the only opportunity to express how she really feels about each situation. Gay Wilentz argues that

[24] Abbandonato, Linda. Op. Cit. p. 1111

> Celie speaks out to God as if the spirit is in the room with her, explaining her pregnancy from the rape by her supposed father, and then asking God to help her understand her circumstances. Since to tell anyone else would "kill her mammy", Celie's only choice is to *talk* to God.[25]

In reality, Celie's letters to God can be considered as her initial step towards liberation. In this case, Elizabeth Fifer argues that Celie participates in the creation of meaning for herself through language. Without language, silence would have ensured madness or, as in her mother's case, an early death[26]. In God, then Celie finds an alternate listener for lack of a female confident. Thus she starts her narrative by addressing him, the only possible listener

> Dear God,
>
> I am fourteen years old. ~~I am~~ I have always been a good girl.
>
> May be you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me.
>
> (TCP, p1)

With this letter, Celie starts her series of private letters addressed to God, and thus breaks the silence imposed on her by documenting the physical and mental violence she endures at the hand of her stepfather. Besides, before she begins narrating her terrible experiences of suffering, raping and domination, she asks God to understand that she always tried to be a "good girl" (TCP, p1) and asks for explanation because she completely ignores what is happening to her. King-Kok Cheung contends about Celie's letters: "her need for self- expression is obvious: she hangs onto sanity by writing; she defends herself with words; she discovers her potential –sound herself out –through articulation[27]. He adds further that

> Celie feels the spell of verbal power at an early age, but it takes time for her to learn to fight and create with words. In the process, she uses words to describe wordlessness; writing is not the chosen but the desperate alternative to speech[28]

[25] Wilentz, Gay. *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora*. Op. Cit. p.64
[26] Fifer, Elizabeth. Op. Cit. p. 156
[27] Cheung, King-Kok. Op. Cit.p.162
[28] Ibid. p.165

Celie's marriage to Mr ----- perpetuates her plight further. Mr----- is just as abusive and controlling as Alphonso. In reality, the cycle of exploitation and silencing is re-created by Celie's tyrannical husband when he intercepts Nettie's letters and keeps the two sisters far from each other. By doing so, Mr----- silences Celie at home and Nettie as well in Africa. He prevents the two sisters from corresponding because Nettie refuses and ignores him. Nettie writes to Celie: "He said because of what I'd done I'd never hear from you again, and you would never hear from me" (TCP, p 119). Cheung King-Kok argues that by hiding Nettie's letters from Celie, Albert metes out the same punishment to Nettie that Alphonso does to Celie: the denial of communication[29]. Nettie becomes silent and distant, unable to communicate with her sister. However, in spite of Celie's belief that her sister Nettie is dead, she continues to maintain a connection with her through the letters she wrote to God. In one of her letters, Celie writes

> I say, write.
>
> She [Nettie] say, Nothing but death can keep me from it.
>
> She never write. (TCP, p19)

But Shug's discovery of the letters hidden by the abusive husband marks the radical change in Celie's narrative. As Elizabeth Fifer puts it, "When Nettie's letters enter, Celie and Nettie's worlds mingle and combine, each influencing the other"[30]. The story begins to alternate with two voices from two different worlds. Nettie's letters fortify Celie's sense of self by informing her of her personal history and of the fate of her children. The letters bring the truth that finally breaks Celie from the guilt of incest when she learns that "Pa is not pa! (TCP, p182)

It is worth noting that when Celie discovers Nettie's hidden letters, she begins to "fight back" with her own self-narrations[31]. She decides to write to Nettie instead of

[29] Cheung, King-Kok. Op. Cit. p.163
[30] Fifer, Elizabeth. Op. Cit. p.163
[31] Kaplan, Carla. *The Erotics of Talk: Women's Writing and Feminist Paradigms.* New York, Oxford University Press, Inc, 1996, p.127

God that seemingly never listens to her. Thus she loses trust in him and writes directly to her sister instead

> Dear Nettie,
>
> I don't write to God no more. I write to you. (TCP, p 282)

Significantly, the fact that Celie starts writing letters to an audience which can listen to her is also a significant part of her healing process. Cheung King-Kok states that: "An older and wiser Celie, who has freed herself from domestic violence and the shame of incest, again expresses her unspeakable sorrow in writing"[32]. Besides, Molly Hite writes:

> The drama of Celie's epistolary self-creation revolves around the discovery of a female audience that finally fulfills the ideal of co-respondence. . . .The process of finding her speaking voice is a process of finding her audience.[33]

For Celie, according to Carla Kaplan, finding a listener and finding her voice are inextricably related, just as believing one has an ideal and sympathetic listener may give one the courage to fight back against others[34]. Finding Nettie, as her listener, Celie comes to realize how a good listener helps her to survive and grow. Elizabeth Fifer comments on Celie's letters addressed to her sister by arguing that: "unlike those addressed to God, Celie's letters to her sister become more emotively personal when she gains a human auditor[35].

Just like Celie, Nettie also uses letters as a means of self-expression. Her loneliness and isolation from Olinka is lessened through her correspondence with Celie. With Celie as her listener, Nettie gains more courage to survive in Africa through her letter writing. Actually, Nettie writes from Africa, where she suffers from having "hardly nobody to talk to, just in friendship" (TCP, p170). Just like her sister before she meets Shug, Nettie is "dying to tell" her story but has no one to whom to

[32] Cheung, King-Kok. Op. Cit. p.165
[33] Kaplan, Carla. Op. Cit. p.130
[34] Ibid
[35] Fifer, Elizabeth. Op. Cit. p.159

confess. In this case, Carla Kaplan argues that Celie's rebellious voice has the power to "liberate speaker and auditor alike"[36]. Nettie tells Celie: "When I don't write to you I feel as bad as when I don't pray, locked up in myself and chocking on my own heart. I am so *lonely"*(TCP, p122).

As the story progresses, we notice the gradual change in Celie's sense of selfhood that is manifested in the way she writes her letters. Unlike the way she wrote them to God, Celie no longer expresses desperate feelings in her letters to Nettie. She rather starts to include some of her own opinions about patterns of behavior and make observations about the people around her. Actually, her letters progress from a simple recording to a sophisticated re-creation of dialogues, and events, charged with suspense, humor, and irony. At the end, Celie begins to view Albert with contempt and ridicule. While Shug is singing, Celie observes that "for such a little man, he all puff up. Look like all he can do to stay in his chair" (TCP, p74). Significantly, Celie's image of Albert as an authoritative and strong man gradually falls away to be replaced by the signs of his weaknesses. Indeed, this injection of her thoughts and emotions into the letters marks the way she achieves maturity and autonomy. Linda Abbandonato states that: "by participating in her linguistic processes, we collaborate in her struggle to construct a self"[37].

Further, Celie has never signed her letters before, but she does so in a letter to Nettie from Memphis. And by doing so, i.e. signing in a authoritative way, she declares her new identity definitely and articulates a more positive vision of her self

> I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time. And you alive and be home soon. With our children.
>
> What I care? Iast. I'm happy. (TCP, p 222)
>
> Amen,
>
> Your sister, Celie Folkpants, Unlimited. Sugar Avery Drive
>
> Memphis, Tennessee (TCP, pp 221-222)

[36] Kaplan, Carla. Op. Cit. p.135
[37] Abbandonato, Linda. Op. Cit. p.1108

The transformation of the letters represents and parallels, to some extent, Celie's personal growth as an individual, who no longer sees herself as passive and worthless. Without these letters , Elizabeth Fifer argues, Celie's physical, psychological, social, and economic status would have made her both invisible and silent[38]: "You skinny, you shape funny … you black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman…you nothing at all" (TCP, pp175-176)

Furthermore, what is equally interesting in the novel is Walker's use of the black vernacular, the novel is written mostly in a distinctive rural black dialect that is so close to the speech of the narrator that her letters read like spoken language[39]. Actually, Celie does not only speak her dialect, but writes too in what comes later as a refusal to use the Standard English that she was taught to write. Linda Abbandonato suggests that *The Color Purple* offers that "view from 'elsewhere' " through its displacement of Standard English. According to her, aware that "the master's tools can never dismantle the master's house", Alice Walker has fully confronted the challenge of constructing an alternative language. By using Vernacular English, Celie refuses to enter the linguistic structures of white patriarchy, commenting that "only a fool would want you to talk in a way that feel peculiar to your mind" (TCP, p 194). In this sense, Maria Lauret foregrounds the use of Black English and notes that Walker emancipates not only Celie, but more importantly the African American vernacular by making Celie's voice *as (written down) speech* the privileged discourse[40]. Additionally, Maria Beg Jorgensen contents that

> Celie's non-standard use of the English language is important in itself, but also works as a more overt mirror to her non-standard approach to the medium in which she writes. Celie is empowered in part by her taking control of the English language and moulding it after her preference, in stark contrast to Nettie who submits to the standardized language and the system that is part of the exploitation of the Africans.[41]

[38] Kaplan, Carla. Op. Cit. p.159
[39] Jorgensen, Maria Berg. Op .Cit. p 7
[40] Lauret, Maria. Op. Cit. p. 96
[41] Jorgensen, Maria Berg. Op .Cit. p 69

Walker's choice may of course, have been influenced by Zora Neale Hurston's narrative style in *Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937)*, a work that Walker describes with the words: "there is no book more important to me than this one". According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Hurston's novel was the first African-American novel to make use of free indirect discourse and extensive use of black vernacular[42]. Basically, Walker's concern in the preservation of black culture can be affirmed in her effective use of non-standard English. She chooses to claim the Black vernacular as a vital part of African-American culture and expression. She is mostly seeking power, pride and beauty in the black dialect as her literary medium and the root of the African-American soul by avoiding elaborate and ornamental language forms.

An important fact is that writing liberates Celie from her isolated world and enables her to acquire a sense of creativity. Through her letters, she creates a beautiful symbolic and rich world which is completely different from the patriarchal one in which she actually lives. Language gives Celie the power to affirm her own existence against her husband's alleged "nothing", to announce herself to the world: "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly . . . a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here" (TCP, p76). At the end, Celie has become, as Carla Kaplan, points out

> A role model for contemporary feminists, an example of women's oppression and liberation, a symbolic "Everywoman" in both her reduction to object and her struggles to become a speaking subject.[43]

The letters channel Celie's energy, and through them she struggles to communicate her feelings. She gradually gains the ability to synthesize her thoughts and feelings into a voice that is fully her own. Accordingly, the content of each letter appears as evidence of Celie's growth; it provides us with new opportunities not only to discover new elements of liberation but further to experience how Celie can raise her voice and change. In Memphis, Celie succeeds to stand up for herself and gain self-awareness, she becomes different from what she has been. In one passage, when she comes to visit Sofia and Harpo, she says: "I feel different. Look different …I pass

[42] Jorgensen, Maria Berg. Op .Cit . p 27
[43] Kaplan, Carla. Op. Cit. p.135

Mr---- house and him sitting on the porch and he didn't even know who I was" (TCP, p 215).

At the end of the novel, Celie has challenged the patriarchal oppression and therefore broken away from its limitations. The private, intimate nature of letter writing allows her to speak for herself, structure her identity, and her sense of self. She is no longer voiceless but rather with an opinion to stand up for herself.

All in all, in adopting the epistolary form, Walker and Aidoo ironically revise the conventions of the genre; instead of portraying female protagonists lamenting their lover's abandonment, the letter format allows for the portrayal of agency and autonomous self-expression through a new voice, and the ability to use this voice to lay the foundations for their independence.

Through the letters of their respective female protagonists, the two authors present female characters' maturity as a gradual process. They present their protagonists' progressive movement from naivety and passiveness to confident assertions of their self-acceptance and identity.

Through the letter writing form, the reader can indeed trace the protagonist's growth and maturity by putting into words their conscious and subconscious thoughts. In the end, both Sissie and Nettie come to a new understanding of their identities. Both succeed in asserting themselves outside the letters, openly and publicly claiming their emotions and eventually their inner, private self.

Both Aidoo and Walker show the empowerment of a speaking female agency, and maintain that women are powerful enough to claim their voice and their lives. It is only when they have reclaimed their voice and their feminine identity that their female agency is realized, and then that they become fully independent women.

Conclusion

Conclusion:

Transcending geographical boundaries, spanning continents and cultures[1], and through the use of a cross-cultural framework, this thesis has focused on the representation of black women, their predicament and describing the extent to which they are able to empower themselves in patriarchal societies in three literary works from postcolonial Africa and the Diaspora.

It postulates that even though Alice Walker and Ama Ata Aidoo come from different socio-political backgrounds, their common experience of being women in postcolonial patriarchal societies allows them to narrate and problematize their place in society and thus oppose oppressive patterns of behavior. Both of them encourage a serious and intensive commitment of black women in Africa and the Diaspora in order to heal wounds linked to the oppression related to race, class and gender, these intersecting in complex ways to represent the othered identities of women.

In many similar ways, Walker and Aidoo found it their duty to give voice to the silenced and marginalized woman. Their works are the paradigms of black women intellectuals' efforts to seek a path to the final liberation from the restrictive norms of conduct imposed by the male dominated society.

Both Walker and Aidoo are considered to be post-colonial writers in constant search of different forms of resistance in their writings. What ties the works of these two contemporary women writers is their feminine language which provides them with an opportunity to challenge and subvert the masculine bias of literary canons, and seek the rehabilitation of women's literature.

In reality these black women have always complained about their marginalization in literature and society. Walker, like Aidoo claims their subjectivities by stressing their differences from the negative stereotypes imposed upon them and insisting instead on the specificities of race, class, nationality, sexuality that intersect with gender. Through their literary works, they have been able to tell their stories from

[1] Wilentz, Gay. *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora*. Op. Cit.

the perspectives of women with the intention to correct the stereotypical image of women portrayed in male literature. Gay Wilentz writes

> What we see from the voices of these black women writers is that their concerns may not be entirely different from those of their male counterparts in wanting to communicate a message, liberate and bolster their own people, and improve their society; but in the manner of production and the focus of the material, these women writers have a distinguishable aim. They address the formerly unvoiced members of the community –the wife, the barren woman, the young child, the mother, the grandmother. They look at their existence as a continuum, an invisible thread drawn through the women's stories to women readers and men who listen.[2]

In the course of this study, it was revealed that in the African literary scene, the female characters in African society challenge problems that can only be traced to colonialism, apartheid, neo-colonialism and patriarchy. Florence Stratton, argues that: "under colonialism, then, African women were subject to interlocking forms of oppression to the racism of colonialism and to indigenous and foreign structures of male domination"[3].

In the same way, in the African-American literary scene, female writers often portray their protagonists as they are resisting racism, slavery, discrimination and patriarchy as the factors responsible for their problems in the African-American society.

Consequently, focusing on how these factors affect the protagonists' relationships with other members of their societies, Walker and Aidoo insist that in addition to their gender, the black women's concerns about race and culture can also be important issues to address.

However, while I refer to Walker and Aidoo, I do not suggest that they form a homogenous pair. Actually, a pattern exists in the difference between the two writers in terms of their tensions and reactions to their protagonists' particular confrontations

[2] Wilentz, Gay. *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora*. Op. Cit. p. xxxiii
[3] Stratton, Florence. *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*. London, N.Y: Routledge, 1994, p. 57

with patriarchy and African traditions. This indicates that the two writers approach some topics differently, which justifies this study to identify the source of this difference.

In the African-American society depicted by Walker in *The Color Purple*, women seem to enjoy a certain kind of unity and closeness that is absent amongst women in African society. In her work, Walker presents female bonding as a form of empowerment that helps women build their new identities and survive their misfortunes. As has been shown, Celie, Nettie, Sofia and Shug represent the true nature of female solidarity in the sense that they strive to cultivate and nurture a sisterhood that undoubtedly allows them to overcome prejudice and survive.

Walker demonstrates how female suffering and oppression can be endured by the network of female bonding. Further, this solidarity serves as a challenge to male hegemony by saving women from sexism and domestic violence. In short, women do not need to be obedient to the patriarchy because they can live an autonomous life as long as they own female bonding and financial independence.

In fact, this is not to argue that there is no female solidarity in Africa, but women in African society tend to contribute to the oppression of other women in a male dominated society, i.e. instead of uniting to face patriarchy, these women contribute to make the lives of other women difficult. In some matriarchal societies as reflected in Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story,* women such as Esi's mother and grandmother represent a generation of conservative women whose lives are so entrenched in the traditional position of women that they would not welcome change. Therefore, instead of joining hands in bonding, they fight for the sake of patriarchy. The two women are heavily molded by the old moralities that represent the old order that believe in the strict African traditions. In reality the two mothers do not help Esi to get out of the chains of the institution of marriage, which she finds suffocating, but rather expect her to conform to what is decided for her. Moreover, such women emphasize that traditional beliefs should be preserved and that a woman should know her place in the society, thus further perpetuating the oppression of women. So, the gripping situation that Esi experiences is more difficult to cope with because African

society lacks the strong presence and help of the community of women, as empowered in *The Color Purple*.

Actually, Aidoo deliberately chooses to portray Esi's negative experience which resulted from the absence of solidarity between women in order to emphasize the power of African traditions and the patriarchal order that control the society and from which African women cannot break. It seems that after all the obstacles the protagonist has come across, and despite all her achievements and her education, she is not a happy woman. It is worth noting that the sad end of the protagonist suggests that Aidoo does not entirely reject the African traditions and thus she acquiesces to the old beliefs. The author's choice for such an end captures the inability of the African people to remove themselves from their cultures regardless of the modernity of thoughts brought by the western colonizer.

The point being made here marks another difference between the two writers regarding their perception of African traditions. Walker on her part foregrounds the theme of traditions from a different perspective. In her novel, Walker's portrayal of a West African country can be unfairly biased at times, exposing merely the restrictive codes and cruelty of the society at the expense of the more humane aspects of the culture[4]. In her fifth novel *Possessing the secret of joy*, Walker carries further her criticism of the African traditions as being instruments of women's oppression and source of their predicament. In addition, she shows her disapproval of mothers who meddle in the affairs of their daughters with negative results. In this case Gay Wilentz points out:

> The African women see their culture and traditions in both a positive and negative light –as a life giving force as well a restriction of women's rights. For the African-American writer, Africa, as a symbol of an alternative practice to mainstream American life, evolved into Afro-America after the last slaves were forcibly brought into the United States. Although there is a strong sense of cultural continuity between Africa and the Americas, this diaspora perspective does not always preclude understanding or acceptance of the ancestor' homeland.[5]

[4] Wilentz, Gay. *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora*. Op. Cit. p. xviii
[5] Ibid. pp. xvii-xviii

The clash between African traditions and modernity in post-colonial Ghana is a central issue developed by Aidoo in her fiction. Basically, by piecing together notions of traditional mystical powers and western modernity, Aidoo brings into sharp focus the predicaments in which the African woman finds herself as she struggles to survive in a world which is significantly different and distant from the one of the African-American sister.

Yet in the case of the African woman, caught between two worlds, conservatism in tradition stands in her way toward liberation. Aidoo's intention in *Changes* is not to condemn her female character's behavior but rather to address the plight of an African woman in a world where she has no freedom to determine her destiny or make her own choices. In contrast, in *The Color Purple,* women have freedom in organizing their own lives independently from their communities.

Furthermore, as reflected in the novels studied, dissimilarity exists between the two writers regarding their portrayals and reactions to the black man. In the African-American literary scene as in *The Color Purple*, the African-American woman simply tolerates the men in the narratives. This means that men are not essential and their existence or absence has no impact on the message intended. Judging from the image of the black society presented in the novel, the black man is viewed as an embodiment of violence, source of fear and pain. Walker advocates female bonding as a challenge to the patriarchal system based on men's power, thus she frees her female characters from men's burden. What is more, the type of love relationship between Celie and Shug presents women's community as being sexually independent of men –Celie's lesbian relationship allows her a degree of freedom from the control of men. By doing so, Walker claims women's independence and freedom from men, thus disrupts the model of the traditional patriarchal family and reveals her optimistic approach towards the future family, where the black woman could take a leading role. In reality, Walker wants to construct a new world order where femininity equals masculinity rather than subordinates it.

On the other hand, in the African societies depicted in Aidoo's novels, black men lie at the heart of the story. Their portrayal is mainly centered on the fact that their existence is as indispensable as that of women. In effect, Aidoo's female characters do not enjoy total independence from their male counterparts as important decisions are made on their behalf. *In Changes*, Aidoo's presentation of Esi's disillusionment that results in her alienation is to show that women should unite with their husbands for a brighter future of the institutions of marriage, family and society as a whole. Besides, in *Our Sister Killjoy*, even though rejecting and disrupting Marija's lesbian tendencies, Aidoo hardly attempts to develop a successful story of heterosexual relationship. Unlike Walker, Aidoo advocates a harmony and healing between African men and women. She strictly opposes gender separatism as advocated by radical feminists. She believes that women's happiness lies in being married hence she calls for the union between the two sexes. For her, men complement the lives of women, so they should not be separated from them as the radical feminists maintain.

From the foregoing it stands to reason that even though the two writers have their individual differences in terms of content and worldview, they have several points in common when it comes to their treatment of women's resistance, i.e. the common search for self-determination and independence from a restrictive patriarchal society. What connects the two authors is their deployment of a different vision of life from the one in which they live. As voices for black women, Walker and Aidoo portray female protagonists emerging as agents of knowledge standing as self-defined, self-reliant individuals confronting gender and racial oppressions. In particular both writers stress the importance of knowledge in empowering oppressed people, especially women, who emerge from the enforced domesticity and female servitude to the stage of self-fulfillment.

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