

Aidoo, Ama Ata. *Changes: A Love Story*. New York: The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 1991. 196 pp.

*Changes*, by Ama Ata Aidoo, is a compelling novel which examines the many complex issues impacting the lives of contemporary urban African women. While many of the issues explored may be familiar themes to most readers, the context in which they unfold goes far beyond the personal. Aidoo does not portray her characters as simply "African women, victims of circumstance," but as African women who assert an active political agency over their own lives despite the circumstances in which they live.

Set in present-day Ghana, the story centers around the friendship of two well-educated women, Esi, an urban analyst, and Opokuya, a registered nurse. It is the troubled marriage between Esi and her husband, Oko, and the unresolved household issues between Opokuya and her husband, Kubi, which serves as the base from which they struggle to put into perspective the conflicts between the expectations of others and those they have established for themselves. Aidoo's ability to integrate personal moments of revelation and larger political issues is one of her strong points and is exemplified throughout the book. Early in the story Esi is raped by her husband Oko. Because it happened to her, rape was no longer an abstract statistical device discussed at conferences, "suddenly she could see herself or some other man sociologist presenting a paper on: 'The prevalence of marital rape in the urban African environment' to a packed audience of academics. Overwhelmingly male of course." It is this act of violence which brings Esi to the realization that her marriage had to end.

While the relationship between Esi and Opokuya reflects a bond that serves as a source of strength that both women draw upon in times of need, it is the love affair with Ali, a Muslim Northerner that draws Esi away from her traditional base of strength that also includes her grandmother, Nana. Respecting Esi's decision to marry Ali (as his second wife), Nana is only too aware that there is little difference between marrying for love (exercising individual choice), and a marriage of convenience. Ali's first wife Fusena knows this fact only too well, as she struggles to deal with Ali's pending marriage to a non-Muslim. Esi soon comes to realize this fact shortly after she is married. As Nana warns; "Love is not safe my Lady Silk...Love is dangerous."

Echoed in the voices of the elders of both characters are expectations: expectations for their children that were not as rooted in tradition as were the circumstances Esi and Ali unknowingly created for themselves by marrying. In the end, despite these expectations, they are forced to play along in this familiar circumstance (tradition). It is through the insight of the elders that this paradox is realized. Expectations can change, but rarely do circumstances.

It is the strength of Esi's relationship with Opokuya which saves Esi from further oblivion after her marriage with Ali falls apart. In a vulnerable moment Kubi attempts to console Esi, placing both in a predicament which would certainly have destroyed each persons commitment to Opokuya, one as a friend, the other as a husband. Esi does not allow for such a violation to take place, and for the first time in months Esi summons the strength which she had relied upon so heavily in the past. It is this strength that is always derived from the friendship and insight of the women who have been so much a part of her life.

The last section of the book includes a provocative Afterward by Tuzyline Jita Allan, who critically explores *Changes*, as well as several other works by this winner of the 1992 Commonwealth Prize for Literature. One can summarize the true message Aidoo is trying to convey in *Changes* when Allan writes, "Nana's countermyth of male supremacy and Esi's difficult but successful negotiation of romance testify to the possibility inherent in female 'thinking and doing'." One can only zealously look forward to Aidoo's future works after reading such a compelling and informative novel.

Kendahl Radcliffe