



The Contribution of Female Graduates to National Development: A Reading of Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes* and Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen*

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Abstract - It is argued that women's education is biased in the sense that their natural role is to get married and bear children. That explains why in almost every country in the world, women's education has always lagged behind that of men. But it has been proved that education more precisely university education is a powerful weapon to fight against all forms of oppression. The impulse that drives my writing of this paper is the necessity to show how female graduates can valuably contribute in nation building in the light of two West African novels.

Key words: female, graduates, national, development, education.

Résumé - Il est souvent démontré que l'éducation des femmes n'est pas très importante du au fait que le rôle naturel des femmes est celui de se marier et de porter des enfants. Cela explique pourquoi dans presque chaque pays dans le monde, l'éducation des femmes a du retard par rapport à celle des hommes. Cependant il a été prouvé que l'éducation en général et plus précisément l'éducation universitaire est un instrument puissant pour combattre toute forme d'oppression. La nécessité de prouver que les femmes diplômées peuvent valablement contribuer à la construction d'une nation est ce qui m'a amené à écrire le présent article à la lumière de deux romans ouest africain.

Mots clés : féminin, diplômées, national, développement, éducation.

1. Introduction

Women's education is instrumental to social and societal development. "If you educate a man, you educate an individual. If you educate a woman, you educate a nation." Tuzyline Jita Allan (1991, p.189) reports in an afterword to Aidoo's *Changes* the above statement. Ama Ata Aidoo acknowledges that it was from her father that she first heard the above wisdom. In his famous *Anatomy of Female Power: A Masculinist Dissection of Matriarchy*, Ibekwe Chinweizu (2005, p.15) expresses a similar view: "woman, who rules the nursery, shapes boys and girls for life; and the ways in which she shapes boys make them what they become as men." In one way or the other, a woman is always assigned the role of an educator. She needs education and a higher education will make her a more articulate thinker. To achieve this goal, she needs to be educated herself, and this includes getting a college education. Aidoo, in an interview with James Adeola (1990, p.11), asserts that "education is the key, the key to *everything*." Binwell Sinyangwe (2000, p.37) has his female character Nasula stress that standpoint to her daughter Sula:

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"You must go to school. You don't know what suffering I have gone through because apart from being poor and a woman, my parents did not send me to school. I don't want you to suffer the way I have suffered."

That statement and many similar ones by various people underscore the importance of female education. Unfortunately, girls' formal education is not given much importance in most contemporary African societies. In this paper the emphasis is laid on the need for girls' higher education, i.e. university education, as a prerequisite for their contribution to development.

A female graduate is a woman who has successfully completed a university education and has received a certificate showing this credential. If female education lagged behind some decades ago, there is every evidence nowadays that women in higher social positions are educated. As a result their contributions to their countries' development are more concrete. Through their novels, some African female writers show the importance of female graduates to the development of society. "School - the Ibos never played with that! They were realizing fast that one's savior from poverty and disease was education. Every Ibo family saw to it that their children attended school. Boys were usually given preference, though."¹ Informed with reader-response criticism and based on the Ghanaian novelist Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes* and the Nigerian novelist Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen*, this paper highlights the valuable contributions of female graduates to nation building and underscores the importance of female intellectuals in the development of a nation.

Reader-response theory stresses the role of the reader in actively constructing meaning rather than passively consuming texts under consideration. (Afagla2018: 2) This essay seeks on the one hand to underscore women's ability to get educated despite their origins, cultures and religions, and focuses on two characters - Adah and Fusena - respectively in *Second Class Citizen* and *Changes* as analytical references, on the other hand it shows how female graduates can valuably contribute in nation building.

2. Women's School Education in a Patriarchal Setting

William K. Frankena (1973, p.19) assigns a key role to education:

The process by which the individual acquires the many physical and social capacities demanded of him by the group into which he is born and within which he must function, education is a collective technique which a society

¹ Buchi Emecheta, *Second Class Citizen* (London: Allison and Busby 1974), 9. Subsequent quotes are from this edition, parenthetically included, and preceded by SCC.



employs to instruct its youth in the values and accomplishments of the civilization within which it exists.

Furthermore, Frankena (1973, p.31) concedes that education involves initiation in traditions of thought and action, while aiming at creating individuals who can and will make new advances within those traditions, i.e., do new work (or at least make independent judgments) in art, science, etc. Likewise, Louis Arnaud Reid (1986, p.109) regards education as “the preparation of children to be functionaries in whatever sort of adult society lies in wait for them.”

From the foregoing definitions, education is a means for social mobility in modern societies. It is a process of training and learning – especially in schools or colleges – in view of collecting knowledge and developing skills. Definitely, formal education is a key factor in the preparedness of the youth for a better survival and social integration (Anawi 2010, p.205).

Everybody needs formal and/or modern education because building a nation implies the collaboration between men and women. However, marriage and motherhood have heavily defined womanhood in traditional African societies. Motherhood has served as an identity benchmark for women in Africa because it is “closely linked to the understanding of African women’s lives and identities within their sociocultural contexts.” (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997, p.35) This state of affairs explains why for long, women’s school education has been neglected, as society relegates the latter to domestic chores and child bearing roles.

Customs, traditions and beliefs have kept women under subjugation over the years. These burdens have made them feel generally inferior to men and incapable of operating at the same level as men in society. (Dolphyne, 1991, p.1) In Emecheta’s *The Slave girl* (1977, p.113), Amanna, a slave girl in Ma Palagada’s house, asserts: “Every woman, whether slave or free, must marry. All her life a woman always belongs to some male.” Also, Nnu Ego, in Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979, p.186), complains in a prayer to God: “God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody’s appendage?” In Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* (1988, p.15), Jeremiah, Tambu’s father, holds that “cooking, not intellectual pursuits, defines womanhood and feminine living. He views education as what ruins women, distracting them from their gendered role.” On the basis of this statement by the character, one may infer that from masculine perspective, women do not need education. Again, Nfah-Abbenyi (1997, p.35) contends that motherhood has traditionally been the predominant framework of identity for women in African literature, be it from the perspective of male writers, or paradoxically, from that of female writers. So,



Sheila Ruth (1998, p.9) ironically agrees that "too much learning will drain away the energy we [women] needed to produce children."

Against the background of traditional male/patriarchal views, most female writers and critics have "emerged from 'silence'" (Kolawole, 1997, p.6), turning the picture upside down in many of their novels. They create female characters aspiring to modern education. Examples include, among others: Adah and Nko respectively in Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* (1974) and *Double Yoke* (1982); Li in Zeynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* (1984); Tambudzai, Nyasha and Maiguru in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988); Esi, Fusena and Opokuya in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes* (1991); Chimere in Ifeoma Okoye's *Chimere* (1992); Enitan in Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* (2005) and Bolanle in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010).

In Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966, p.165), a woman is no longer a failure because of her barrenness. *Efuru* the main character, states that: "it was a curse not to have children. Her people did not just take it as one of the numerous accidents of nature. It was regarded as a failure." As for Yemi Mojola (1988, p.127), "women constitute an indispensable force in the social and economic life of our society," if only they could be given the opportunity to show off their ability in their respective communities. Sadly enough patriarchal societies do not encourage women's education. These societies bind women to house chores, which Aidoo challenges through Esi one of her female characters (Aidoo, 9), "Esi definitely put her career well above all duties she owed as a wife. She was a great cook, who complained endlessly any time she had to enter the kitchen."

The African literary canon was mainly a male-dominated until some decades ago partially due to the lack of female graduates because "African women writers are often left in the shadows of their male counterparts." (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997, p.xi). Ajoke Mimiko Bestman (2014, p.2) further emphasizes the phenomenon: "Jusqu'aux années 1970, la production littéraire en Afrique Subsaharienne était en général l'affaire des hommes. Nul doute que cette pénurie de l'écriture féminine ait été le résultat du retard de la scolarisation de la jeune fille sur le continent à l'époque coloniale."

Standing against the prevailing situation, many female African writers paint a realistic picture of African women's conditions and fate within their cultures. Thus, most of them "who spend their lifetime in dealing with women's issues" (Kolawole, 1997, p.10) took their cue from this situation to denounce women illiteracy in most of their novels and show the importance of female graduates in a given society. Aidoo and Emecheta portray the challenging life of two female



graduates in their different settings. This leads to the analysis of their respective novels: *Changes* (1991) and *Second Class Citizen* (1974).

3. Women's Ability

AN ENCOUNTER that took place in the kitchen of a university guest house.
Half a century earlier, in 1977.

He-of-25 years old:

"So what did you say you will be when you grow up?"

She-of-10-years-old:

"The President."

"The what?"

"The President"

"The President?"

"Yes."

"Of what?"

"This country."

"W-H-A-T?- -"

"Why not?"

"You are mad."

"No"

"Well you can't be"

"Yes, I can."

"You are mad."

"I am not."

"Anyway, you can never be the President of this country."

"Why not?"

"Listen, I don't think the men of this country will even let a woman be their President."

"No? We shall see." (Aidoo, 1997, pp.1-2)

The above excerpt is a dialogue between a man and a ten-year-old girl. Unbelievably a girl could dream so big in such a way that her ambition is compared to madness, corroborating that women are able to do valuable things.

Aidoo and Emecheta are themselves university graduates. They understand the importance of education and have highly contributed to their society's development. A prolific writer, Aidoo has written novels, essays and plays to contribute to the liberation of women from oppression, poverty and forced marriage. Allan (1991, p.191) puts "commitment to social change has engendered in Aidoo a tremendous versatility. Adding to an array of literary credentials -poet, dramatist, novelist, and essayist - are her roles as university professor, politician and mother." She read sociology at London University. She was a teacher, librarian and community worker and has written novels and essays. As for Emecheta, she was an essayist and critic, a research fellow at the University of Calabar, Nigeria. Equally, she was a member of Britain's Advisory Council to the Home Secretary on Race and Equality.



Researches showed how some women had highly contributed to national development. Famous historical examples include Queen Nzinga of Angola, Dona Beatrice of Kongo, Ranavalona I of Madagascar, Yaa Asantewa of Asante, Nehanda of Zimbabwe, to mention but a few. Far in past, when a leader of a family went away fighting he had to leave his lands and possessions in charge of his trustworthy and nearest female kin (Sweetman, 1984: x). In this twenty-first century, African societies and states are facing numerous leadership challenges such as political crises, wars, epidemics, etc... In four African countries, women are either prime ministers or presidents: President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia was elected in 2006; President Joyce Banda of Malawi was elected in 2012; and President Catherine Samba-Panza of Central African Republic came to power in January 2014 to solve the political crisis in the country. Aminata Touré became the female Prime Minister of Senegal in September 2013. David Sweetman (1984: xi) complained that if so many women had valuably contributed [could valuably contribute] to national development, how are men everywhere the dominant members of our species?

If Nwapa's novels show that women constitute an indispensable force in the social and economic life of our society (Mojola, 1988, p.127), Aidoo and Emecheta's novels, in a larger extent, portray the importance of female graduates to a society. Moreover, Nwapa's "creation of a new woman, economically independent and with a female culture" (Ogunyemi, 1988, p.61) is not sufficient in a society where change is germinating every time. Her younger sisters Emecheta and Aidoo see the necessity to introduce educated and graduate women in their fictional universe to prove that women's existence is not conditioned by motherhood alone but goes beyond that fixed boundary.

Both novelists demonstrate women's ability in educational matters. *Second Class Citizen* is about the struggle of Adah, the main character, her survival and her dreams: "it had all begun like a dream. You know the sort of dream which seems to have originated from nowhere, yet one was always aware of its existence." (SCC: 7) A young girl, Adah starts dreaming to go to the United Kingdom when she is about eight. She then decides to go to school and sneaks away from her mother one day and runs all the way to school. She is not allowed to go to school because she is a girl and the family does not want to spend money on her education.

It was decided that the money in the family, a hundred pounds or two, would be spent on Boy's education. So Boy was cut out for a bright future, with a grammar school education and all that. Adah's schooling would have been stopped, but somebody pointed out that the longer she stayed at school, the bigger the dowry her future husband would pay for her. (SCC: 18)



This desire to persevere and survive in her society leads Adah on her journey through life. After the death of her parents, she avoids marriage over and over until she realizes that marriage might be her only way to pursue her dreams: “in Lagos, at that time, teenagers were not allowed to live by themselves and if the teenager happened to be a girl as well, living alone would be asking for trouble. In short, Adah had to marry.” (SCC: 25) But as Emecheta puts it, “She was going to continue her education, she was going to go to Ibadan University to read Classics and she was going to teach at the end of it all. (SCC: 25) Through her marriage she acquires a good job and takes care of her husband and children. Holding fast to her dream, she saves money and her husband writes telling her that he is going to be in England for at least four or five more years, she resolves to make her move. She convinces her reluctant in-laws concerning the necessity of being in England with her husband. “Mind you, in England I’ll work and still send you money. All you have to do is to ask, and then you’ll get whatever you want.” (SCC: 35) Adah finally arrives in the United Kingdom where she has to struggle as a black woman, a wife and a mother with a lazy and abusive husband.

In *Changes*, Ali and Fusena are classmates at the post-secondary teacher training college at Atebubu. They are just good friends and a little more like brother and sister. “For their three years on campus, they often spent a lot of their free time sharing discoveries, comparing notes and even swotting together.”² Both went to teach at primary schools in Tamale after their graduation. From their friendship, Ali finally asked the hand of Fusena and the marriage was contracted before Ali’s departure for England.

“One evening found them together at Ali’s, while he was getting ready to go to Bamako in the morning to tell his family the good news of the scholarship. Suddenly he straightened up and turned to face Fusena fully.

‘Fusena?’

‘Hmm... hmm?’

‘Would you be shocked if I asked you to marry me?’

‘Yes... but I would also say yes.’” (*Changes*: 59)

After a proper Muslim marriage, both families insisted that Ali makes sure Fusena was pregnant before he left the country. And “four months after he arrived

² Ama Ata Aidoo, *Changes* (Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 1991), 56. Subsequent quotes are from this edition, parenthetically included, and preceded by *Changes*.



in England Fusena wrote to confirm that, indeed, she was expecting their first child." (*Changes*: 63) After three years of separation, Fusena and the child had to join Ali in England three years later. Her arrival in England quickens Ali's progress to her detriment. Ali progresses while she stays home taking care of the family. (*Changes*: 65-66) The worst is Ali wanting now to take the university graduate Esi as a second wife. Clearly, Fusena's dream of resuming a career has been jeopardized for the sake of a husband's ambition.

Compared to Fusena in *Changes*, Emecheta's Adah overcomes almost every obstacle to achieve her goal. If men are not at ease in marrying less educated women, we should all expect them to encourage their sisters, daughters, female cousins and wives to acquire university degrees.

Both characters have common dreams and hope to become graduates. Whether in Adah's or Fusena's community, girls' education is not of great or much importance. Emecheta portrays Adah as "insignificant":

She (Adah) was not even quite sure that she was exactly eight, because, you see, she was a girl. She was a girl. She was a girl who arrived when everyone was expecting and predicting a boy. So, since she was such a disappointment to her parents, to her immediate family, to her tribe, nobody thought of recording her birth. She was so insignificant. (SCC, 7)

Likewise, Amma Darko's novel *The Housemaid* (1998, p.3) bears underlining: "in Ghana, if you come into the world a she, acquire the habit of praying. And master it." In Igbo and Akan traditional societies, girls are of less importance. Fusena is from a Muslim background where "the girl is marked out from childhood as intended for particular men, with or without her knowledge and consent" (Taiwo, 1967, p.30). Fusena has even once come close to getting married (*Changes*: 57).

In the unfolding of the stories both ladies show their ability to promote new ways of looking at the world through the success they have on educational field. Both characters have been given almost the same environments, Adah started school in Nigeria and pursued it in London and Fusena also started school in Ghana and joined her husband in London; but she was unable to further her education. Both face difficulties as women, mothers and wives. Adah faced racism, joblessness but refused to surrender. Fusena was not given the opportunity to go to school abroad, something she regrets. When her husband pursues his studies Fusena has to stay at home:

Soon after finishing his degree examinations, and even before Fusena arrived, Ali had got a full-time job. And now he began to study part-time for a Master's



in Economics and Business Administration. Fusena on the other hand sat home in their one-bedroom apartment or did her housework and looked through catalogues. (*Changes*: 64)

This is the male oriented society to which Aidoo and Emecheta introduce us in their works. Adah and Fusena are university graduates. How do they use their degrees to contribute to national development?

4. Female Graduates’ Contribution to National Development

Most female writers promote awareness raising in their works. For them, education and literacy are important tools for women’s empowerment. All over the world, girls/women are facing tremendous challenges due to some factors that cause lower retention rates for females: juvenile pregnancy, parents’ inability to adequately educate their children because of socio-economic crises, poverty, forced marriages, sexual harassment, child labor and many other plights. These situations lead to female under-representation in high educational sphere. As immediate consequences, many of them land as homemakers, hairdressers, beauticians, secretaries, cooks and related professions, prompting Mariama Awumbila (2001, p.47) to concede that “this affected women’s earnings, prestige and power in society.” Awumbila (2001, p.46) further comments:

Numerous studies have shown that formal education is a pre-requisite for greater social autonomy for women and for improving the socio-economic status of their families. Inequality in female access to schooling has continued despite commitments by various governments to the goal of universal primary education.

Once a woman is highly educated, her children will probably be highly educated. Adah in *Second Class Citizen* faces racism in London but her knowledge of the positive aspects of modern education, triggers her resolve to push her children through an English education, being prepared to bear the coldest welcome, from her dream land. (SCC: 39) Contrary to Mami Kokor in Darko’s *The Housemaid* (1998, p.11), Mami Kokor fails to send little Bibio to school because she is herself uneducated. The little Bibio complained: “Too bad. You should have sent me to school to learn some manners then. But since you rather let me stay home to play mother to you and your friend’s sons -boys I’m only three years older than- where else can I learn my manners but in the streets?”

A sophisticated woman will likely see to it that her children are sent to school. As a result this will reduce the rate of juvenile delinquency, unwanted pregnancy and early marriage in the nation. Ofori (2013, p.186) believes that: “For women to get on their feet, the relevance of the education of the female regardless of



patriarchy and tradition cannot be underestimated." Educated women in the novels occupy respectable positions and they all realize their responsibility towards making society a fair place for the disadvantaged women. For example female lecturers have a key role to play in their students' lives. Female students look up to women lectures as their source of inspiration and are convinced that their female teachers are the ample evidence that it is feasible.

Educated women make relevant contributions. As lecturers, midwives, statisticians, researchers, event planners, investigators and civil rights activists, they are involved in literacy drives and campaigns against forced marriages, marital abuses and obsolete widowhood practices.

Women in the novels under study seek to rub shoulders with their male counterparts in contributing to national progress and development and, more importantly, to gain individual self-actualization. They hence promote their own visibility. As an ambitious woman, Adah "refused working in a factory, after all she had several 'O' and 'A' levels and she had part of the British Library Association Professional Certificate" (SCC: 44). In Aidoo's *Changes* Fusena dreams to become a teacher but unfortunately fails to achieve her goal. Her husband bought her a massive kiosk at a strategic site in Accra. I presume she should be a good manager and cannot go bankrupt as a result of mismanagement. A female graduate will not always think of marriage as the only source of salvation; she will further see to it that the prospective husband and father is a responsible man.

Critically, the female graduates will consider and reconsider their environment; furthermore, nothing will be taken for granted. The woman is given more chance by trying to keep her own life under control. She is given the opportunity to make decisions for her own life.

Dolphyne (1991, p.89) concurs that having more female graduates implies a higher female participation in decision-making posts in the country. For instance, a female graduate as a cabinet minister responsible for women's issues can bring such issues to the government's attention. Professional women's groups also organise, from time to time, seminars and workshops to address important women issues: laws affecting women, small business management, careers available for working women's problems and so on.

5. Conclusion

This study has shown the importance of female graduates' contribution to national development. Aidoo's and Emecheta's commitments to see women



contribute to the development of their communities are quite challenging. Education is a form of praxis that enables women to first take charge of their destiny and then bring their contribution to national development. Female education is not purposeless.

If the role assigned to a woman is to educate the younger generation, it is consequently a must for her in the first place to be personally educated. In *Changes*, Aidoo makes her three female characters –Esi, a statistician; Opokuya, a midwife; and Fusena, a trained teacher and a business woman– to highly contribute to national development. Emecheta’s Adah encounters many difficulties in her native Nigeria and Great Britain, but she overcomes them all through her skillful use of modern education. It is not enough having “archetypes of powerful African women [...] created in fiction” as Kolawole (1997, p.68) points out. We also need active women prepared to contribute to nation building. Kolawole (1997, p.69) finally concedes that: “African women writers and theorists are on the process of demythification, unveiling the hidden gender codes that have enhanced male domination of power structures. This is an attempt to reorder ethical and moral consciousness. For too long, unverified reality has impinged on proximate reality for the African woman.”

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