THE FEMALE BODY IN AFRICAN SEXUAL POLITICS: SEXUALITY, SELF-FULFILLMENT AND SUBVERSION IN AMA ATA AIDOO'S *CHANGES: A LOVE STORY*

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ABSTRACT

While the emergence of gender studies questioned the control of woman's body in patriarchal societies, it appeared as a taboo issue in the debates on the rights of the African woman and her quest for equality. The objective of this article is twofold. First, using a sociological approach, it reminds us that a practice such as female circumcision significantly participates in the strategy of the control of the female body in Africa. Secondly, using a literary approach, it shows through the analysis of Ama Ata Aidoo's novel *Changes: A Love Story* that modern women gradually get rid of the burden of African sexual politics and regain control of their body by challenging the sexual contract which maintains them in oppressive structures such as the family and marriage. The contrast between sociological and literary approaches highlights not only the disturbing nature of women's real-life experience but also the limits of a feminist discourse which is confronted with multi-form resistance.

Key terms
Body, sexuality, sexual politics, sexual contract, infibulation, marital rape, subversion.

RESUME

Alors que l'émergence des gender studies a remis en question la confiscation du corps féminin dans les sociétés patriarcales, elle est apparue comme un sujet tabou dans les débats sur les droits de la femme africaine et son aspiration à l'égalité. L'objectif de cet article est double. Dans un premier temps, utilisant une approche sociologique, il rappelle qu'une pratique mémorielle telle que la circoncision participe de façon significative à la stratégie de contrôle du corps féminin en Afrique. En deuxième lieu, utilisant une approche littéraire, il montre à travers l'analyse du roman *Changes : A Love Story* de l'écrivain féminin ghanéen Ama Ata Aidoo, que la femme moderne africaine se défait progressivement du fardeau de la politique sexuelle issue de la société traditionnelle et se réapproprie son corps en rompant le contrat sexuel qui la maintient dans des structures opprimantes telles que la famille et le mariage. Ce parallèle entre approches sociologique et littéraire met en lumière l'exigence d'une prise en compte du vécu de la femme africaine mais aussi les limites d'un discours féministe confronté à des résistances multiformes.

Mots-clés
Corps, sexualité, politique sexuelle, contrat sexuel, circoncision, viol marital, subversion.

Introduction

The Martinique-born Afro-Caribbean writer Frantz Fanon is well known for his struggle against western colonization in Africa. However, very little attention has been paid to his concern for African women. In the last paragraph of his seminal book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), he put the body at the heart of human consciousness when he wrote: "At the conclusion of this study, I want the world to recognize, with me, the open door of every consciousness. My final prayer: O my body, make of me always a man who questions."[1] Beyond the universality of these words, it is legitimate to take them as being more relevant to the female body than to the male body. Indeed, if we want to understand African women's sociopolitical condition, a good starting point might be to study how her body is perceived and treated in most African societies. In this view, the aim of this paper is twofold. First, it would be relevant to restate a sociological approach to African sexual politics that would enable us to understand the importance of the female body and how the desire to control female sexual desire has justified a cultural traditional practice such as female circumcision. What do female theorists think about the mutilation of the one Simone De Beauvoir has simply called "the second sex" and who is now shockingly referred to as "the mutilated half" [2] by Nawal El Saadawi? The theoretical background that will be used is based on authoritative books written by Africanist theorists (such as Frantz Fanon, Nawal El Saadawi, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie etc) and major Western feminists (such as Kate Millett, Carole Pateman or Luce Irigaray).

Secondly, as the mutilation of woman's body goes along with her oppression and her subjugated status in African societies, the most obvious way of understanding the relation African women have with their body nowadays would be to give voice to African women themselves. In this perspective, shifting from social realities, we will study how Ama Ata Aidoo (representative in this case of African women writers) represents the female body and sexuality in *Changes: A Love Story* (1991). Does woman's body symbolize the freedom of African women in this novel or is it seen by Aidoo or her narrator as bearing the stigmata of a conservative tradition? To what extent does the representation of woman's body show female

[1] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, translated by Charles Lam Markmann, London: Pluto Press, 2008, p.181.

[2] Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (London: Virago, 1977, first published in 1949), an important document for modern feminists, deals with the ways in which women have historically been marginalised, both culturally and socially. As for "The Mutilated Half", it is the title of the first part of Nawal El Saadawi's *The Hidden Face of Eve*: *Women in the Arab World* (London: Zed Press, 1980) in which she condemns female circumcision.

sexuality as a factor of freedom and empowerment in African societies? Combining the description and analysis of sociological realities with literary representations, this study is an attempt to grasp the extent to which woman's body, mainly female sexuality, is at the core of African sexual politics.

I. African Sexual Politics and the Control of Woman's Body

As a starting point, it might be useful to try to define 'sexual politics' and 'body', two of the key terms used in the title of this article as they are specific to the academic field of feminism and gender studies and have occupied key positions in a wide range of debates. The term 'sexual politics' is borrowed from the American feminist Kate Millett who coined it in a study devoted to the sexualised construction of women in novels by some of the key twentieth-century male writers such as D.H.Lawrence, Norman Mailer and Henry Miller. In *Sexual Politics* (1971), a book which became a classic in feminist writings, she wrote:

> Sexual politics obtains consent through the 'socialisation' of both sexes to basic patriarchal polities with regard to temperament, role and status. As to status, a pervasive assent to the prejudice of male superiority guarantees superior status in the male, inferior in the female. The first item, temperament, involves the formation of human personality along stereotyped lines of sex category ('masculine' and 'feminine'), based on the needs and values of the dominant group and dictated by what its members cherish in themselves and find convenient in subordinates: aggression, intelligence, force, and efficacy in the male: passivity, ignorance, docility, 'virtue' and ineffectuality in the female. This is complemented by a second factor, sex role, which decrees a consonant and highly elaborate code of conduct, gesture and attitude for each sex.[3]

Millet defines here sexual politics as a contract which encourages men and women to act in conformity with certain types of behavior. In most societies, this politics is simply seen as the result of gender hierarchy which defines the male as superior to the female. One of the key means of subordination of the female to the male is undoubtedly the control of women's body that takes various forms in different societies. As this study will show, even though the methods used in Africa are different from those used in Western societies, they are undoubtedly part of a societal strategy to maintain patriarchal and phallocratic systems which deprive women, denying them the free use of their bodies.

As for the word 'body', we can say that it is easy only in appearance as its definition evolves over time. Indeed, in *50 Key Concepts in Gender Studies*, Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan recognize this difficulty when they write:

> Feminists have long recognised that bodies matter in social relations, but over time, there have been shifts in conceptions of what the body is, especially in relation to nature and to culture. The range of

[3] Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*, London: Virago, 1977, p. 26.

> conceptions of the body present within gender studies can be grouped into three broadly defined categories: the body as nature, the body as socially constructed, and embodiment[4].

Though the concept of 'the body as nature' echoes the Cartesian dualism of the human mind and body, we find it less problematic to work through the perspective insofar as it conceptualizes the body as a natural, biological entity that determines inequalities or differences between women and men. However, this choice does not mean that the perception of the body as a socially-constructed entity will be totally neglected as this is the basis of recent research on gender studies.[5] Anyway, when theorizing the problems of the African woman, we must not lose sight of the specificity of her situation. Indeed, twentieth century African sociological and literary works on gender relations have conveyed the image of an African woman who is doubly oppressed: oppressed by the colonizer (a burden that she shares with her male counterpart) and oppressed by African men. In the one case as in the other, the African woman undergoes the weight of the patriarchy in which her suffering is crystallized on her body. For instance, when Fanon depicts the pangs of French colonization in Algeria in *A Dying Colonialism* (1959), he feels sorry for the fate of Algerian women when he states: "Revolutionary war, as the Algerian people is waging it, is a total war in which the woman does not merely knit for or mourn the soldier. The Algerian woman is at the heart of the combat. Arrested, tortured, raped, shot down, she testifies to the violence of the occupier and to his inhumanity"[6].

While the violence endured by the Algerian people is psychological and physical, that of the women can be seen as more humiliating insofar as they undergo an unacceptable sexual violence from the colonizer. However, if in postcolonial African studies, the colonizer often appears as a scapegoat in most of the sociopolitical problems, one must recognize that he had not established the bodily suffering of the African woman, he only amplified it. African cultural heritage, especially the patriarchal system, sometimes appears as a burden for her to the extent that her desires seem to be neglected for the benefit of those of the man. This disparity on which gender relations are based did not escape African feminists. For instance, in her book entitled *Gender in African Women's Writings*, Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi states that women's pleasure and the denial of pleasure for women has been "one of the

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[4] Jane Pilcher and Imelda, *50 Key Concepts in Gender Studies*, London: SAGE Publications, 2004, p. 6.

[5] For instance, we can note that Judith Butler's research on the cultural and social construction of sex is worthy of interest. She strongly sustains that "the body is not a 'being' but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality", *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London: Routledge, 2nd edition, 1999, p. 177.

[6] Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon Chevalier, New York: Grove, 1967, p. 66.

thorny issues addressed by feminists."[7] This assertion implies that women's sexuality is part of the feminists' struggle for women's freedom, a struggle that is all the more justified as female sexuality seems to be controlled by men in Africa insofar as the patriarchal system does not take into account women's sexual pleasure.

In this view, one can consider sexuality and the female body as one of the sites of women's oppression in most African societies. From a feminist standpoint, one can assert that in African patriarchal systems, most activities or deeds of women revolve around male's satisfactions. Indeed, in the realm of intimacy, women are taught some practices in order to satisfy their husbands. This research for males' pleasure justifies the practice of female genital mutilation (also referred to as female circumcision or infibulation), a cultural institution that consists in cutting the clitoris. Research shows that it has a great consequence on women's sexuality insofar as it reduces or deprives them of sexual pleasure[8]. Indeed, the clitoris is the catalyst of women's sexual pleasure. In "Orgasm, Anatomy of the Female", William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson point out the importance of the clitoris in women's sexuality when they write:

> If a female who is capable of having regular orgasms is properly stimulated within a short period after her first climax, she will, in most instances, be capable of having a second, third, fourth and even a fifth and sixth orgasm before she is fully satiated. As constructed with the male's usual inability to have more than one orgasm in a short period, many females, especially when clitorally stimulated, can have regularly have five or sixth full orgasms within a matter of minute.[9]

This relevant remark reveals that contrary to men, women can have many orgasms within minutes mainly when the clitoris is correctly stimulated. It enables us to understand that the clitoris determines female sexual pleasure and that its removal can but destroy women's pleasure and deprive them of orgasm. In most African societies, female genital mutilations are practiced by old women whose role is to perpetuate the tradition. In societies where marriage is still seen as an institution contributing to women's self-realization, one can understand why these experienced women teach their daughters how to be more feminine and submissive to their husbands. However, by adopting this practice, these women are driven to deprive their daughters of sexual pleasure in order to satisfy their male partners' libido. By

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[7] Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi, *Gender in African Women's Writings: Identity, Sexuality and Difference*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997, p.25.

[8] As for the consequence of infibulation on women's health, Frances Althaus writes in "Female Circumcision: Rite of Passage Or Violation of Rights?": "Often performed without anesthetic under sceptic conditions by lay practitioners with little or no knowledge on human anatomy or medicine, female circumcision can cause death or permanent health problems as well as severe pain. Despite these grave risks, its practitioners look as an integral part of their cultural and ethnic identity, and some perceive it as a religious obligation", *International Family Planning Perspectives*, Volume 23, Number 3, September 1997, p.130.

[9] William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson , "Orgasm, Anatomy of the Female," in *Encyclopedia of Sexual Behavior*, vol. 2, edited by A. Ellis and Abarbanel, New York: Hawthorn Books, 1961, p. 792.

conforming to such cultural expectations, African women are objectified as objects of pleasure and instruments of human reproduction.

According to some African feminists, this situation is profitable to men insofar as they fear women's free use of their body. Indeed, in her article "African Women Culture and Another Development", the Nigerian female theorist Molara Ogundipe-Leslie asserts that some men "argue that genital mutilation was not wicked or sadistic in intent since it was societal or parental effort to do the best they thought fit for their daughter."[10] This point of view clearly implies that female sex mutilation helps men in their desire to control women's sexuality. In the same vein, Nfah-Abbenyi states:

> Men use this practice as a cultural and political weapon to keep women in position of subjugation in a society where hierarchical organization of sexes is important to men; so that they can always define the female sex as inferior to the male sex, thereby legitimizing the prevalent male control over the female sex especially over the sexuality.[11]

This point of view highlights the use of infibulation in African sexual politics in which it can be perceived as a means for men to perpetuate their domination upon women through the controlling of their body and their pleasure. Ethnic, cultural and religious reasons have been used to justify the perpetuation of this practice. However, in her book *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, the Egyptian feminist and activist Nawal El Saadawi relevantly showed the nonsense of such justifications when she depicts infibulation as a social practice performed just to enable young girls to remain chaste before marriage. She wrote:

> The importance given to virginity and an intact hymen in these societies is the reason why female circumcision still remains a very widespread practice despite a growing tendency, especially in urban Egypt, to do away with it as something outdated and harmful. Behind circumcision lies the belief that, by removing parts of girls' external genitals organs, sexual desire is minimized. This permits a female who has reached the dangerous age of puberty and adolescence to protect her virginity, and therefore her honor, with greater ease. Chastity was imposed on male attendants in the female harem by castration which turned them into inoffensive eunuchs. Similarly female circumcision is meant to preserve the chastity of young girls by reducing their desire for sexual intercourse.[12]

If we stick to El Saadawi's assertion, the objective of this atrocity imposed on women would be to keep their bodies pure until marriage. Conversely, no practice of this kind is compulsory for men and no one wonders if they had or not sexual intercourse before marriage. In the face of this disparity which derives from a secular will to hierarchize male and female genders, African women reacted to counter the patriarchal ideology which tends to dispossess them of any right of possession of their own bodies. The emergence of African

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[10] Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, "African Women, Culture and Another Development" in Stanlie M. James and Abena P. Busia (Eds), *Theorising Black Feminisms: The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women*, London and New York: Routledge, 1993,113.

[11] Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi, *Gender in African Women's Writings: Identity, Sexuality and Difference*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997, p. 27.

[12] Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, London: Zed Press, 1980, p. 33.

women writers in the 80s contributed in a significant way to this awareness as they used their writing as "a weapon"[13] as the Senegalese female novelist Mariama Bâ put it in an interview with Barbara Harrell-Bond.

II. Protesting Against Sexual Violence: Aidoo and the Concept of Marital Rape

As shown in the first part of our essay, the female body is at the heart of African sexual politics. However, contrary to men, women's sexuality does not fully participate in their fulfillment. In their representation of woman's relation with her body, African writers have attempted to describe this sociological reality while presenting new possibilities that contrast with traditional determinism which defines woman's body only in relation to human reproduction. In 2003, 'Ecriture et sexualité' (Sexuality and Writing), a special edition of the journal *Notre Librairie* relevantly showed that male and female African readers are eager to read novels that abandon age-old sexual modesty (that characterized the novels of first and second generations of African writers) and which bring them a new sentimental education[14]. However, as most of the articles of this edition were devoted to the representation of sexuality in francophone male writing, they are not totally representative of African cultural change. In this respect, Anglophone African novels and mainly narratives of desire by female writers deserve our attention.

Like female Nigerian writers of the second generation Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa, the Ghanaian Ama Ata Aidoo can be perceived as one of the major female writers of West Africa. More importantly, she can be referred to as one of the writers whose narrative gives a central place to woman's body and sexuality. In her second novel *Changes: A Love Story* (1991)[15], she depicts marriage as a social constraint in which gender-based violence is prevalent. Furthermore, through her central character Esi Seky, she presents Ghanaian modern woman as the victim of sexual violence, more precisely of rape. In "Feminist Perspectives on Rape", Rebecca Whisnant notes that "although the proper definition of 'rape' is itself a matter of some dispute, rape is generally understood to involve sexual penetration of a person by force and/or without that person's consent."[16]

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[13] Barbara Harrell-Bond, "Interview: Mariama Bâ, Winner of the First Noma Award for Publishing in Africa." *The African Book Publishing Record* 6.3/4, p. 214.

[14] Jean-Louis Joubert, 'L'envers de la mort…', *Notre Libraire : Revue des littératures du Sud*, N° 151, juillet-septembre 2003, p. 3

[15] Ama Ata Aidoo, *Changes: A Love Story*, London: Women's Press, 1991.

[16] Rebecca Whisnant, "Feminist Perspectives on Rape", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.),
Online: http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/feminism-rape/, [accessed 19 Nov. 2015]

As is known, rape is committed overwhelmingly by men and boys, usually against women and girls, and sometimes against other men and boys. However, very little attention has been given to such sexual violence that can be perpetrated by a man on his wife. Ama Ata Aidoo certainly innovates in the depiction of African gender relations when she introduces the concept of 'marital rape' in her novel. Indeed, Esi the heroine of her novel has been raped by her husband and that changes her life. The narrator describes the scene as follows:

> Oko flung the bedclothes away from him; sat up pulled her down, and moved on her, Esi started to protest. But he went on doing what he had been determined to do all morning. He squeezed her breast repeatedly thrust his tongue into her mouth, forced her unwilling legs apart, entered her plunging in and out of her thrashing to the left, to the right, pounding and just pounding away. Then it was all over. Breathing like a marathon runner at the end of a particularly grueling race, he got off and fell heavily back on his side of bed. (*Changes*, 13)

Taking advantage of his physical strength, Oko obliges Esi to have a sexual intercourse. Through this description, one can realize the oppression that Esi has undergone from her husband. As the chief of the family, Oko probably wants to show that his will must be respected at whatever time and for whatever reason. If that is not so surprising in an African cultural context, the way he abuses Esi patently shows that he uses his wife as a sexual object and that he has no respect for her and even less for her body. Esi's body is thus seen as the extension of the things her husband possesses.

It might be a tautology to state here that rape characterizes men's domination of women as this can be noticed in most patriarchal societies. Indeed, according to Kate Millet, patriarchal force "relies on a form of violence particularly sexual in character and realized most completely in the act of rape [and] the patriarchal societies typically link feeling of cruelty with sexuality, the latter often equated both with evil and with power."[17] As a matter of fact, Aidoo tends to present the sexual aggression of her protagonist as if it is widely accepted in the Ghanaian society. By the same token, she sees men as possessing the monopole of sexual, physical and psychological violence that transform their female sexual partners into easy preys who must submit to their husbands' desire and will.

Aidoo even dramatizes Ghanaian (and by extension African) women's situation when she presents marital rape as something of which the existence is denied by African languages. Indeed, after her rape, the protagonist imagines herself presenting a paper on "The Prevalence of Marital Rape in Urban African Environment." Taking the cultural context into account, she pictures that many voices will arouse in the audience to disapprove of this issue as the major difficulty would be to find a word in any African language that is synonymous with marital rape:

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[17] Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*, London: Virago, 1977, p. 44.

‘Yes we told you, didn’t we? What is buying us now are all these imported feminists ideas…’
‘And dear lady colleagues, how would you describe “marital rape” in Akan?’
‘Igbo?Yoruba? ‘
‘Kikuyu? Ki-Swahili’
‘Chi-Shona?’
‘Zulu? or Xhosa?’
Or…. (*Changes*, p.16)

As there is no appropriate translation to the concept of marital rape, Esi realizes that in African culture and probably in many other societies, sex is certainly something that a husband has the right to claim from his wife at any time. However, her husband has certainly overused this right. This explains the reason why after that episode, she becomes aware that this marriage can no longer continue. Contrary to many female characters who suffer in silence in such a situation in male writing, Esi appears as a character shaped to break social determinism that considers African woman only as a “mutilated half” as Nawal El Saadawi would put it. Therefore her husband’s assault on her body drives her to divorce from him.

III. Challenging the Sexual Contract: Sexuality, Self-fulfillment and Subversion

Aidoo’s narrative would have been too static if Esi was only presented as the victim of African patriarchal system, an image prevalent in African male writer’s novels. Instead, her central character is presented as a complex figure who succeeds in going out of her status as a victim of patriarchy to reveal herself as the metaphor of woman’s freedom in African modern society. Indeed, after her divorce, she will engage in a passionate love story with a married man with whom she will make free use of her body. The depiction of this relationship enables the reader to realize the impact of social changes on Aidoo’s writing insofar as the cultural context presented in *Changes* seems to have evolved in comparison with that of her play *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965) which echoes a status quo in intercultural relations between Africa and her diaspora.

Indeed, Esi happens to be different from the traditional woman who usually carries the burden of African cultural heritage. As she has been taken away from her family to get formal education, she has grown up far from her mother. As such, Esi has not received African traditional education and as a consequence she is not even able to speak her mother tongue. The narrator explains:

> For surely, taking a ten-year-old child away from her mother, and away from her first language – which is surely one of life’s most powerful working tools – for what would turn out to be forever, then transferring her into a boarding school for two years, to a higher boarding school for seven years, then to an even higher boarding school for three or four years, from where she was only equipped to go and roam in strange and foreign lands with no hope of ever meaningfully reentering her mother’s world ... all this was too high a price to pay to achieve the dangerous confusion she was in now and the country was in.” (*Changes*, p.89)

We can see here that Esi is a westernized woman who sees things differently from women of the generations of her mother and grandmother. This is why she decides to break with Oko when this latter raped her. Esi is expected to stay in that situation but she refuses to bear the burden of this patriarchal system when she decides to begin a sexual relationship with an already married man. She claims her right to participate willingly in a sexual relationship and the right to fulfill her own desire. As Oko did not take her pleasure into account, she decided to be with a man who could give her the sexual pleasure that she looked for, transgressing thus African sexual politics which, in this context, is not different from the Western one. Indeed, as stated by French feminist theorist Luce Irigaray in *The Sex Which is Not One*, white women's pleasure is not often taken into account by their male counterparts:

> How can this object of transaction claim a right to pleasure without removing her/itself from established commerce? With respect to other merchandise in the marketplace, how could this commodity maintain a relationship other than one of aggressive jealousy? How could material substance enjoy her/itself without provoking the consumer's anxiety over the disappearance of his nurturing ground? How could that exchange-which can no way be defined in terms "proper" to woman's desire appear as anything but a pure mirage, mere foolishness, all too readily obscured by a more sensible discourse and by a system of apparently more tangible values?[18]

Luce Irigaray explains that a woman is considered as a piece of property and an object and has no right to claim for any sexual pleasure. Esi's refusal to behave as a typical African woman does frustrate Oko who feels that his masculinity and authority is derided. By raping her, Oko seems to have expressed his manhood and his authority. In contrast, Esi's divorce, her refusal to consider her body as her husband's property and the sexual freedom she claims patently illustrate her desire to challenge the sexual contract of her society.

In their attempt to explain this term, Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan state that it is a concept coined by British feminist and political theorist Carole Pateman.[19] Indeed, in political theory, drawing on the writings of French theorists Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the development of government and the state is understood as if they originated in a social contract. In a groundbreaking critique of political contract theory, Carole Pateman developed the concept of the sexual contract to draw attention to the gendered nature of the social contract. In *The Sexual Contract*, she states:

> The original pact is a sexual as well as a social contract; it is sexual in the sense of patriarchal – that is, the contract establishes men's political right over women – and also sexual in the sense of establishing orderly access by men to women's bodies.[20]

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[18] Luce Irigaray, *The Sex Which is Not One*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977, p. 32.
[19] Jane Pilcher and Imelda, *50 Key Concepts in Gender Studies*, London: SAGE Publications, 2004, p. 151.
[20] Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, Cambridge: Polity, 1988, p. 2.

It is this "contract" which is violated by Esi when she decides to deny access to her body to any man who does not take her aspirations into account. In such a perspective and contrary to her previous situation, she finds the freedom that she looks for with Ali with whom she expresses her sexuality without any pressure and without any oppression. Of course, one can wonder how Esi, who has undergone a marital rape from a tyrannical husband, can undertake a love affair with a married man, as both actions tend to be against gender equality principles. This decision is all the more surprising as it is against the Ghanaian moral standard of male-female relations. Although it is obvious that Esi was traumatized by her rape, Aidoo might have added this aspect to her protagonist's relationship with Ali to complicate her quest for freedom in the Ghanaian society described by her narrator. As a matter of fact, their relationship is more a sexual attraction and they do not lose the opportunity to enjoy each other's bodies. Their sexual life is so minutely detailed by the narrator (for instance from pages 89 to 92) that one might reasonably think that Aidoo suggests to her reader that passionate lovemaking should be fully part of Africans' self-fulfillment.

Lovemaking is recurrent and all the more speaking that it is usually (but not exclusively) described from the point of view of Esi and not from that of Ali. The following passage shows well that the female body can be the object of attention in today's society:

> Each time he touched any part of her that he found erotic, a massive shudder shook him. It happened with her nose, her mouth, her breast. By the time he got to her pubic hair, he could not hold himself any longer. He moved to part Esi's legs parted for him, willingly. And then he was inside her, feeling his way into a carve that was warm, of uneven surfaces, wet and dangerously inviting…She wanted to scream and scream. (*Changes*, p. 101-102)

Taking the cultural context into account, one might assume that Aidoo attempts to make a kind of revolution through her detailed and recurrent description of the lovemaking of her characters, particularly Esi. In this regard, Nada Elia is right when she points out that with "the creation of Esi, Aidoo is breaking the silence on erotica on the African novel."[21] Besides, we can notice that contrary to the African traditional woman who tends to hide her body because of her modesty, Esi is depicted as a woman who shows the private parts of her body and encourages admiration of her nakedness.

Far from being a pornographic exhibition, most of the scenes which put woman's body at the center of attention aim to show the quest for freedom of the African woman in modern society. In this respect, Ama Ata Aidoo's writing can be seen as an attempt to subvert Ghanaian social realities and above all gender relations. As we know, subversion is the act of

[21] Nada Elia, "To be an African working woman: Level of Feminist Consciousness", *Research in African Literatures*, Volume 30, Number 2, Summer 1999, p. 139.

trying to destroy or damage an established system. If an imagined reality cannot subvert the sociological one, it can have an impact on readers' mentality. Indeed, Esi's reappropriation of her body and sexuality is clearly an attempt to emphasize the importance of love in a society where existential constraints and cultural heritage tend to dictate almost all of people's behavior, thus excluding people's aspirations to personal freedom and self-fulfillment. One realizes that these are the values which are emphasized by Aidoo's protagonist.

The conversations between Esi and her grandmother show a conflict between generations in which the grandmother explains Ghanaian secular ways which are based on compromise instead of self-freedom. She clearly condemns Esi's stubborn search for love in her relations with men. Her point of view suggests that in Ghana marriage implies community involvement and as such love is not necessarily given a central role. For this reason, she disagrees with her granddaughter's decision to be the second wife of Ali who is already married but who exerts a physical attraction on her. Using an ironic tone, the narrator exposes the point of view of the grandmother which obviously arises from the African traditional philosophy of the relations between men and women:

> 'Leave one man, marry another. Esi, you can. You have got your job. The government gives you a house. You have got your car. You have already got your daughter. You don't even have to prove you are a woman to any man, old or new. You can pick and choose. But remember, my lady, the best husband you can ever have is he who demands all of you and all of your time. Who is a good man if not the one who eats his wife completely, and pushes her down with a good gulp of alcohol? In our time, the best citizen was the man who swallowed more than one woman, and the more, the better. So our warrior and our kings married more women than the other men in their communities. To prove that they were, by that single move, the best in the land. (*Changes*, 109)

It is useful to emphasize that polygamy itself is not condemned by the grandmother as she is a traditional woman but her concern is that too much love and physical attraction do not necessary symbolize good marriage in Akan society. In this regard, Nadia Elia is right to write: "The grandmother opposes the marriage but cannot stop it. It is significant in the context of this discussion that the grandmother does not condemn polygamy itself but rather the potentially patriarchal western institution of romantic heterosexual love. Through the grandmother Aidoo argues that a traditional Akan matrilineal woman views this relationship as a doom (because of the presence of the element of love)."[22] Finally, through the juxtaposition of both feminine characters, it seems to us that Aidoo's objective is not only to highlight a conflict of generations. She also wants to underline the fact that African feminist discourse comes up against a cultural resistance that any writer has to take into account if he wants to make a realistic depiction of ordinary life.

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[22] Nada Elia, "To be an African Working Woman: Levels of Feminist Consciousness in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes*", *Research in African Literatures*, Volume 30, Number 2, Summer 1999, p. 145.

Conclusion

Comparing African and Western feminist discourses in works by authors such as Frantz Fanon, Nawal El Saadawi, Kate Millett, Carole Pateman or Luce Irigaray, one realizes the universality of women's oppressed status in patriarchal ideologies where their sexual desire has not been fully taken into account until recently. Through a socio-literary analysis of African sexual politics, this article has shown that woman's body and sexuality are presently at the heart of debates on African gender discourse. The sociological perspective enables us to realize the extent to which the cultural legacy of African tradition is still a burden for African women. In this view, research on female circumcision shows that whether seen as a rite of passage or a violation of rights, infibulation is part of the strategy to control woman's body in African patriarchal systems. Political decisions have been taken in many Sub-Saharan countries to solve this problem that shows the illusory nature of the quest for gender equality which only perpetuates male domination. However, no one seems to be more preoccupied by the debate on the control of woman's body than African women themselves, mainly female writers. Through their representation of gender relations, they try to show that it is crucial to deconstruct patriarchal ideas on woman's body and sexuality. As this might be obvious, writers of the new generation such as the Zimbabwean Tsitsi Dangarembga and the Nigerian Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie certainly offer an updated representation on women's reappropriation of their body but pioneer African feminist Ama Ata Aidoo's depiction of Ghanaian cultural dilemma in *Changes: A Love Story*, appears to us more realistic and challenging. Through the central character Esi, she dramatizes the situation of modern African women caught between tradition and modernism but who are determined to subvert cultural norms. In such a perspective, she has eloquently shown that woman's right for a free use of her body goes along with her struggle for emancipation and social empowerment. By reaching this conclusion, if we cannot claim that our research showed a certain originality, it would have at least the merit of reminding us that the debate on African sexual politics and the renegotiation of the sexual contract are not a taboo issue any more in postcolonial African literature in general and particularly for women writers.

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