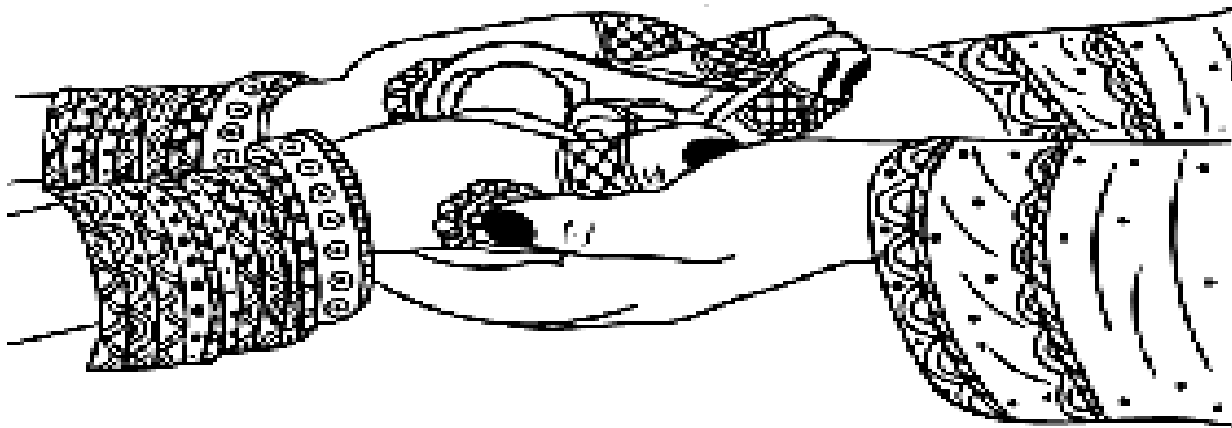


Defying Class and Gender Expectations as Postcolonial Feminism between Ama Ata Aidoo and Arundhati Roy

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With the rise of feminism over the last century and its ongoing evolution, stories of women fighting against oppressive systems have grown in number and popularity. Many of these repressive systems, such as sexism and casteism, include aspects of misogyny and patriarchy founded in colonialism. Feminists from formerly colonized countries such as, Africa, South-east Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean Islands, have discussed how these oppressive aspects interact with native ideals in contradictory ways, stating “...it is nonsensical to continue to be represented by aliens; we should represent ourselves in our own terms instead, hence postcolonial feminism” (Mishra 130). Postcolonialism refers to the time after the end of colonial rule and looks at the cultural, political, and economic legacy and long-term effects of control, exploitation, and violation of colonized people and states. Two postcolonial novels that explore women navigating life in a patriarchal society that represent themselves in their own terms are *Changes: A Love Story* by Ama Ata Aidoo and *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy. Aidoo’s novel, set in modern-day Ghana, follows the life of Esi Sekyi, a woman whose independence and ambition differed from traditional gender roles and expectations, leading to an unhappy marriage and a complicated second marriage. Roy’s novel is set in India, shifting back and forth between 1969 and 1993 and tells the story of Ammu, a woman who defied class and gender expectations through her love life. Esi and Ammu both had to deal with failed marriages, abuse, trying to care for their children and their family’s disapproval of their new romantic relationships. Pursuing these romantic relationships is an act of rebellion in itself. In patriarchal societies, such as India, it is frowned upon for previously married women to want and find love again. Even in Western society today, which is considered progressive throughout the world, women still face stigma and discrimination for pursuing romantic relationships after a previous marriage, the death of a spouse, or separation/divorce. However, in Esi and Ammu’s situations, there are added layers of social and political discrimination in addition to having been previously married. Esi faces added discrimination for being in a polygamist relationship, and Ammu faces added discrimination for being in a relationship with a lower caste man.

Esi is career oriented and independent, which angers Oko, her husband. She explains this to her best friend, Opokuya saying, "...my job can be very demanding sometimes...Oko resented every minute he was free and I couldn't be with him" (44). She wants to aim for higher positions but settles for one she is overqualified for because her success threatens her husband's masculinity. He then rapes her, and Esi can bear no more and finally seeks a divorce. Whether knowingly or not, the assault on Esi is Oko's attempt to assert his dominance and reestablish the traditional gender power imbalance. Aidoo describes the double standards of gender in the workplace and in general, stating, "[h]aving to deal with a man who is over-qualified for a job is bad enough. To have to cope with an over-qualified woman in any situation is a complete misfortune" (41). Esi fights against the social traditions of a woman's role and expectations in the public and private spheres by prioritizing her career and leaving her husband.

Ammu goes through something similar in her life, as she was also in an unhappy marriage. She got married to escape her father's tyranny and the role of a daughter as a submissive victim, which is her attempt of freeing herself from the forms of patriarchy and gender roles in her life. Her husband turns out to be an alcoholic that often skips work. He is unreliable and constantly lies to Ammu. They have twins, a boy and a girl named Estha and Rahel. Ammu's husband would also beat her when he was drunk, and "[w]hen his bouts of violence began to include the children...Ammu left her husband and returned, unwelcomed, to her parents' house in Ayemenem" (Roy 42). Indian society's general perception of married daughters returning to their maiden homes is expressed through the thoughts of Baby Kochamma, Ammu's aunt. Baby Kochamma's disdain for the situation, stating, "[s]he subscribed to the commonly held view that a married daughter had no position in her parents' home. As for a divorced daughter—according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all" (45). Women in South Asian cultures are expected to bear abuse and remain in unhappy marriages to preserve their family's reputation and the sanctity of marriage. By choosing to leave her husband and care for the twins herself, Ammu defies the social expectations of women- as a wife, daughter, and mother.

Esi faces further scrutiny by her mother, grandmother, and Opokuya for agreeing to be Ali's second wife. They are surprised that an educated woman would participate in the 'old tradition' of polygamy. They are also shocked that Esi is willing to commit bigamy, as the law in Ghana prohibits polyamorous marriages. It is important to note that "[d]espite its decline in the past century, polygamy remains more common in Africa than elsewhere in the world, with about a quarter of married women in polygamous unions" (qtd. in Becker 31). Polygamy is a part of many African and Islamic cultures, and its decline is due to colonialism and the subsequent arrival of Christian missionaries. The missionaries strongly opposed polyamorous unions and practices, as "...polygamy was widely considered as incompatible with Christian norms" (31). Ali explains this to Esi, saying, "[p]olygamy, bigamy. To the people who created the concepts, these are all crimes...Why have we got so used to describing

our cultural dynamics with the condemnatory tone of our masters' voices?" (Aidoo 90). Christian missionaries were also responsible for the expansion of Western-style education, and their oppositional stance on polygamy affected the access people had to education. Parents were hesitant to let their children attend missionary schools for fear of them learning and adopting monogamous ways of thinking. At the same time, children were refused admission to schools unless the marriages of polygamous parents were dissolved (Becker 32). Due to the insistence on monogamy, "...levels of educational attainment are generally lower in traditionally polygamous societies" (33). Therefore, colonialism and Christian missionaries led to the association between education and monogamy. However, Esi, Ali, and his first wife, Fusena, are all college-educated. Fusena talks to the women in Ali's family about him wanting to take a second wife and "[w]hat shocked the older women though, was how little had changed for their daughters - school and all!" (Aidoo 107). This sentiment is later reiterated by Esi's mother and grandmother when she tells them about marrying Ali and being his second wife. Esi overhears her mother saying, "Esi had such high school education and she is such a big lady," and her grandmother tells her mother, "...it is not our fault that you and I did not go to school" (113). The notion that being educated means being monogamous and being less educated means being polygamous is evident in how the elders react to this situation. As an educated woman who becomes a second wife, Esi defies both colonial and Ghanaian expectations of women in love and marriage.

While Ammu did not deal with the issue of multiple spouses, she had to combat classism. Ammu is a twenty-seven-year-old single mother who has not been in any romantic or sexual relationship since the dissolution of her marriage. Although she has known Velutha since her youth, they did not enter a sexual relationship until now. While it is frowned upon for Ammu to be divorced and seek new love, the caste system, a class system of occupation and lifestyle that is based on birth, is the major societal obstacle she faces. Despite being outlawed at the time of Independence from Britain, casteism perseveres and is rigidly adhered to, especially by elders. It is interesting to note that:

"...despite the spread of education, industrialization, urbanization and modernization which have increased opportunities for young people of both sexes from different castes to socially interact and fall in love, the number of intermarriages or rather the number of young people who dare cross the caste lines to marry is still very small" (Saroja 186-7).

Ammu is a Syrian Christian, an ethnicity believed to be of the Brahmin caste. Brahmin is an upper caste, and its people are considered Touchable. Velutha is a Paravan, a lower caste of fisherman and its people are considered Untouchable. Velutha's father feels he owes a debt to Ammu's family and must remain loyal to them by exposing their relationship to Ammu's mother. When describing this, Roy repeats a phrase from earlier in the book: "[t]hey had made the unthinkable thinkable and the impossible really happen" (242). It was unimaginable for inter-caste relationships to occur, emphasizing a continued influence and deep integration of casteism even

during postcolonial times. Ammu confirms her decision to be with Velutha when she goes to the police station and tries to explain that she was not violated but chose to give herself to him. Ammu rebels against colonial gender expectations by pursuing a relationship as a divorced single mother. She also defies class expectations by entering a relationship with a man of a different caste and is considered especially damning due to their caste disparity.

Esi and Ammu are two women who were abused by their husbands and left them. They both faced similar stigmas for abandoning traditional ways of being a woman in a family. Leaving their husbands is a postcolonial act of feminism since they defied the rigid marriage structures formed to support the patriarchy and disseminated through colonialism. Furthermore, Esi becoming a second wife and Ammu having a relationship with a man of a lower caste further solidify their active rejection of societal roles, expectations, and traditions. By rebelling against monogamy and casteism, Esi and Ammu engage in postcolonial feminism to fight for equality and inclusivity in their lives simply by falling in love.



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