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Emancipation of Ghanaian Women in the Light of Efua Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa*

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Abstract:

This paper takes a critical look at some practices associated with the marriage institution that militate against the emancipation of women in the traditional Ghanaian society. It identifies 'child marriage' and 'bride wealth' as two such practices. These practices also form part of the existing culture. The study is conducted in reference to "The marriage of Anansewa", a drama written by Efua T. Sutherland, a renowned female Ghanaian writer. The paper explores the attempt by Sutherland and other writers of feminine inclinations to reject aspects of the cultural practices that have the potential to trample upon the rights of women in the society. More importantly, the study also seeks to highlight measures that project the image of women and empower them in the traditional Ghanaian society.

Keywords: *Bride wealth, child marriage, culture, emancipation, feminine, rights, traditional*

1. Introduction

Ever since the International Women's Year in 1975 highlighted the quality of men and women, various studies have shown that, to a large extent, women the world over suffer similar types of injustices within the family structure, in employment, in education and in access to professional training. Women's issues, which previously were the concerns of voluntary women's societies, have, therefore, attained national and international significance. Many conferences and seminars have been held at both regional and national levels all over the country. These conferences aim at affording the Ghanaian women the opportunity to identify, discuss and find ways of removing the obstacles that have been, and still are impeding women's emancipation and their full integration into the economic, social and political life of the country.

However, given the differences in the social, educational and especially the cultural background of women in the country, it becomes inevitable that there would be differences in their perception of what emancipation means to them. At the End-of-Decade Conference held in Nairobi, Kenya in 1985, for example, certain women's rights were considered non-issues to African women. Since most women living in rural areas with no good drinking water, with no hospitals or clinics within easy reach, no motorable roads to centres where certain essential services can be obtained, living in drought-stricken areas where there is a constant threat of famine, the issue of women's emancipation is inextricably linked to that of survival. Their concerns, therefore, relate to the provision of the basic necessities of life that will relieve them of the anxieties inherent in their existence. Their energies are, therefore, directed towards making a worthwhile contribution to the achievement of sustainable improvement in the conditions in which they live and, to the development of their society. For most African women, therefore, their emancipation and status in the society are closely linked with national development

Issues concerning the rights and the emancipation of women have always been the prior concern of female writers in Ghana. Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes*, Ama Darko's *Faceless* and Efua T. Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa* - all comment on the plight of women in the Ghanaian society and more importantly, how to empower them to stand up against their rights being trampled upon. It is important to note that in treating the issue of women's emancipation, these female writers adopt different approaches. Ama Darko's *Faceless* deals with the hardship that the girl-child goes through in the society. This ranges from instances where the girl-child is forced out of school, sexual and physical abuse to child labour. One cannot also lose sight of the issue of divorce and its related effects on the mother, the girl-child and the society as a whole. Ama Ata Aidoo, in *Changes*, also sees the need to empower women to stand up for their rights. This she does by creating a very strong female character who dominates the entire story. One can infer from the story that the question of who does what in the home is a non-issue to the author. In Efua Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa*, she takes a critical look at marriage, which forms part of the existing culture, and its related issues that hinder women's emancipation. Even though these female writers treat women issues in one way or the other, there has been the tendency for the female writers, not only in Ghana but in Africa as a whole, to dissociate themselves from the term 'feminism'. In the foreword to her famous love story '*Changes*', Ama Ata Aidoo writes:

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 not meant to be a contribution to any debate however current /Changes/

Feminism is a brand of politics which aims at changing the status of women in the society. Why then should anybody feel apologetic for contributing towards the rectification of a problematic situation which concerns his or her

well-being? Why then should the Ghanaian female writer shy away from any utterance that might suggest that she is a feminist? And why should men so strongly detest women who display any feminist leanings? This position gives the impression that there is something wrong with being a feminist. At this point, one may like to ask the following questions: Should being a feminist impair the woman's prospects of finding a husband? Does being a feminist in any way imply inadequacy in a wife or mother? Does it indicate the inability to carry out the woman's duties in the home effectively? Most female writers of feminist inclinations have lived very successful and exemplary lives. It is, therefore, amazing that some Ghanaian female writers seem apologetic to admit that they are feminists, even when their writings constitute clear indications of their feminist inclinations.

2. Some Factors That Affect Women's Emancipation in Ghana

Every human society has a body of beliefs that regulate the way people behave and relate to each other in the society. These beliefs, which also form part of the existing culture, have a particular bearing on the issue of women's emancipation. They have in no small way contributed to keeping women under subjugation, making them feel generally inferior to men and incapable of operating at the same level with men in the society. Mention could be made of the institution of marriage and its related issues of child-marriage, bride-wealth, polygamy and widowhood rites. Other factors also include female circumcision, child abuse/labour and domestic violence.

Marriage is a very important institution in the Ghanaian society. The marriage institution in no doubt confers much respect on the Ghanaian woman. For this reason, any woman, who is considered major, is expected to get married. If she fails to get married, she is often considered to be irresponsible. It is not surprising that a woman of high professional and education status but without a husband is sometimes looked down upon. She is not accorded the necessary respect she deserves simply because she is not married. However, this all-important institution comes with a lot of issues that retard the emancipation of women. In *The Marriage of Anansewa*, Efua Sutherland shares her opinion on marriage and its related issues which militate against the emancipation of Ghanaian women. Florence Abena Dolphyne, a former professor of Linguistics at the University of Ghana, has also observed certain factors that affect the status of women in Ghana and Africa at large. Some of these factors emanate from the marriage institution while others too form part of the existing culture.

2.1. Child Marriage

According to Professor Florence Abena Dolphyne, in the traditional Ghanaian society, an older man may indicate to the parents of a young girl that he will like to marry the girl when she becomes of age. Sometimes also, he indicates his intention of marrying the young girl for his son. If the young girl's parents agree to this proposal, the man usually assumes financial responsibility for the upkeep of the girl. He then gives her clothing, gifts and even pays for her education where applicable. When the man is ready to take her home for marriage, she is invariably withdrawn from school. For this reason, the poor girl cannot complete her formal education. It is ever so pathetic to learn that the reason behind her being withdrawn from school is to ensure that she does not become too sophisticated for the husband. This is cruel and selfish mentality that needs to be condemned in no uncertain terms as it retards efforts at offering the girl-child formal education. It often happens that the young girl may refuse to marry the man she had been promised when she was a child. This is so because sometimes, the arrangement is made when the girl is still young. She, therefore, becomes unaware of such arrangement until she matures and her suitor sets in. The girl on refusing the marriage proposal creates a lot of problems to the parties involved. If the parents are unable to persuade her into marrying the man, then they will have to refund all the gifts and amount of money the suitor has spent on the girl since the arrangement was made till the present time. This is often impossible, for if the parents were rich, they would not have allowed the future husband to spend that much money on her in the first place. In this case, the only option for the girl to get out of this situation is elopement. If the new found lover is unable to refund the entire amount that the rejected husband has spent on her, the girl is forced to go and live with the latter under very unpleasant circumstances. At this stage, she cannot expect any protection or support from her parents. She, therefore, has no option than to submit to the whims and caprices of her husband. This is a great deal of injustice done to the young girl. There are also instances where the girl, who can no longer continue to live in bondage, absconds into the city and ends up as a prostitute.

2.2. Bride-Wealth

Marriages in Ghana are often characterized by the exchange of gifts between the families of the bride and the groom as custom demands. The bride-wealth given by a prospective husband to his would-be bride is generally higher than what the latter gives the former. The reason behind this is that it is considered that the woman's family is going to lose her services, for example on the farm and in the house; not only that, it is also assumed that the woman is going to have children for the man's family to ensure its continuity at the expense of the woman's family. Therefore, there is the need for the man to compensate the woman's family adequately for these services that she would be performing for the man. Both the woman and her family become so indebted to the prospective husband. This is what is witnessed in *The Marriage of Anansewa* which is up for discussion. Women in such marriages have very little or no power at all. Even if they are ill-treated, which is normally the case, they cannot complain, let alone ask for a divorce. This is because their parents would not be in the position to refund the huge sums of money, material things and gifts given as bride price. They, therefore, suffer in silence. The men are of the opinion that they 'bought' their wives through the bride-wealth and can therefore treat them anyhow. They are somehow justified since they have spent so much on the young girl.

These factors have been identified by some female Ghanaian writers and carefully dealt with in their writings. A cursory look at *The Marriage of Anansewa* shows an attempt made by Efu Sutherland to help resolve some of these issues. Again, distinguished female writers world-wide like Flora Nwapa (in *Efuru*), Buchi Emecheta (in *The Joys of Motherhood*), Mariama Ba (in *So Long a Letter*) and Charlotte Brontë (in *Jane Eyre*) have established an enviable tradition to which Ghanaian female writers may wish to aspire. As if by design, other non-Ghanaian female African writers have also expressed their opinion on the issues in their respective writings.

3. Emancipation of Ghanaian Women as Treated in the Marriage of Anansewa

The Ghanaian female writers have shown in their writings that women's issues are their prior concern. For this reason, most of their works have female protagonists who feature prominently in the development of the stories. However, the attitudes of these writers towards the female protagonists vary from one author to the other. While some writers focus on the predicament of the female protagonists, others prefer creating very strong female characters who dominate the other characters including male characters. In *The Marriage of Anansewa*, Efu Sutherland presents us with the helplessness of the girl-child in her choice of husband, the issue of child-marriage and bride-wealth which, in no small way, affect the proper development of the girl-child. As the title even suggests, marriage is the major theme in *The Marriage of Anansewa*. This theme is traceable to the beginning of the story where Ananse asks his daughter to type some letters to be mailed to the four chiefs. Clearly, the story does not begin on a happy note, for we learn at the beginning that Ananse is in serious financial crisis. It is in an attempt to free himself and his entire family from poor economic conditions that Ananse arranges the marriage of her only daughter, Anansewa, to the four chiefs. The helplessness of Anansewa is brought to bear here in the following ways: In the first place, she is left with no choice than to end her training or education. Secondly, she has no choice than to be forced into early marriage. As if that is not enough, even the choice of husband is not in her hands. It is very pathetic to note that Ananse only wants to use the wealthy chiefs to solve his financial problems and carve a name for himself in the society. This assertion is evident in the following statement made by Ananse:

Take a look at my condition. I'm not young, and yet what are my prospects? To what can I look forward? ...when you return, will there be a better, leak-proof roof over our heads... car in the garage? My name on invitation lists for state function? [The Marriage of Anansewa p 4]

As the chiefs think mere gifts can always smoothen the road to marriage, they pour money and gifts on Ananse's household forgetting that there is no law binding Ananse to give his daughter to any of them. Efu Sutherland brings to the fore two related issues of marriage that go against the development and emancipation of women. These are the issues of child-marriage and bride-wealth. Anansewa is a young girl who has a lot of talent in her. Since she is clever and hardworking, she has been able to learn and acquire considerable skills in her secretarial training. She portrays this by efficiently typing her father's letters without difficulty and supervision. It, therefore, becomes pathetic that a young girl with such a bright future should be entangled in this web all because of the inordinate ambitions of his father, and end up becoming a housewife to a chief old enough to be her grandfather. She is a promising girl who has a lot to learn in the training institution; therefore, forcing her into early marriage means bringing her education and training to an abrupt end. When this happens, the family and the community at large can no longer benefit from her services. This goes a long way to retard her personal development as well as the development of the society at large. The issue of child-marriage, which existed in the past, continues to exist in present times. However, it must be made clear that in present times the issue of child marriage exists mainly in the rural areas in Ghana. This is basically due to the impact of education and civilisation especially in the urban centres. There is the need to create the awareness that the girl-child is not only meant for marriage. She can also study to become a responsible woman in future. Therefore, any idea of forcing her into marriage at a tender age must be strongly condemned and discarded.

The marriage organised by Ananse for his daughter, Anansewa, is again characterised by high bride price ranging from huge sums of money to clothing and very expensive jewellery. Ananse receives these gifts from the wealthy chiefs to satisfy his inordinate desires. For this reason, Ananse becomes so much indebted to the suitors that it would be ever so difficult for him not to comply with their dictates. Will one be far from wrong to conclude that the suitors have 'bought' Anansewa, the daughter of Ananse, with their riches? In this case, who is going to suffer the consequences? If Anansewa makes any marital complaint to his father, will he be in the position to find out or question the husband? In a bid to avert the grave consequences that loom over his head, Ananse, crafty as he is, fabricates the death story of Anansewa to outwit the numerous suitors. The message that Efu Sutherland wants to put across is that the gifts showered on Ananse's household do not necessarily bind Anansewa to marry any of the suitors. Therefore, it is high time society disabused its mind of this practice.

Again, Sutherland calls on parents not to be more interested in pushing the girl-child into early marriage or using her as a bait to attract big offers from suitors. Any such attempt amounts to presenting the girl-child as commodity for sale to the highest bidder. More importantly, Sutherland implores parents to be more interested in securing a bright future for the girl-child through education, training and proper upbringing. When this is done, she stands to be independent not only financially but in her marriage as well. This will go a long way to ensure that the parents enjoy the fruit of their labour without having the feeling that they are indebted to somebody as in the case of Ananse. It is clear that over the years, instances of high bride-price have given husbands more power in marriages at the expense of their wives. This power they abuse at the expense of their wives. As long as suitors continue to pay exorbitant bride-prices, wives will have little or no choice and will continue to be maltreated in their marriages. Marriage is a union between the man and the woman. Why then should it become a norm for one party to pay so much just to establish this union?

The emancipation of women is bound to take a long time if efforts of feminist writers are not given the necessary compliment. Every individual in the society has a role to play to ensure that the efforts of these writers do not go in vain. Chinua Achebe, for instance, has demonstrated through his writings that a woman's honour and dignity often consists of her adherence to certain idealized norms of wife and motherhood. Like many other male writers, the ideal female character created by Achebe often acts within the framework of her traditional roles as a wife and a mother. This position is strongly rejected by Ama Ata Aidoo in *Changes* and *The Dilemma of a Ghost* where she creates very strong female characters in Esi and Eulalie respectively, who dominate the other male characters in the stories. The role of government cannot be left out. Government should enact the necessary legislation that would improve the condition and status of women in the society. There should be laws modifying or even banning all identified customs and practices that undermine the status of women. Since the emancipation of women is closely linked to their economic independence, efforts should be made at promoting the economic activities of women. Both government and non-governmental organizations should help the women to generate income activities. It is high time society recognized the effort and worth of women, and it is in line with this that Mariama Ba in *So Long a Letter* reiterates:

Women should no longer be decorative accessories, objects to be moved about, companions to be flattered or claimed with promises. Women are the nation's primary fundamental root from which all else grows and blossoms. Women must be encouraged to take a keener interest in the destiny of the country. [So Long a Letter p 51, 62]

4. Conclusion

This paper has identified certain practices that undermine the status of women in the Ghanaian society. Most of these practices are linked one way or the other to the existing culture. Notable among them are marriage and its related issues of child-marriage and bride wealth. Efua Sutherland's *The marriage of Anansewa* has clearly shown the extent to which these practices can affect the development of women. The paper has also identified certain perceptions about women in general which have become norms in the society. These perceptions have made the society develop certain attitudes towards women. For instance, the marriage institution is one of the main factors that accord women respect in the Ghanaian society. Although marriage and motherhood are important factors that uplift the image of women, they should not be seen as the only criterion for measuring the status of women. Women should, therefore, not spend all their time and energy trying to fulfil this obligation. More importantly, women's effort should be geared towards engaging in personal development and income generating activities.

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