

# Urban Ambivalence and Female Autonomy: Exploring Choice in the African City in Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story* and Adichie's *Americanah*.

Theresah Patrine Ennin

**Author:** Theresah Patrine Ennin, Department of English, University of Cape Coast, Ghana.  
Email: tennin@ucc.edu.gh.

**Published date:** Dec 04, 2024



This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

**How to cite the article:** Theresah Patrine Ennin, "Urban Ambivalence and Female Autonomy: Exploring Choice in the African City in Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story* and Adichie's *Americanah*," *Ahyu: A Journal of Language and Literature* 7 (2024): 62-73.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56666/ahyu.v7i.155>

## Abstract

The politics of self-empowerment and agency by women in an African city can be examined in Ama Ata Aidoo's novel *Changes: A Love Story* (1991) and Chimamanda Adichie's novel, *Americanah* (2013). These novels describe women in the city negotiating relationships in a changing terrain that propels and restrains their agency. It is important to foreground the extent to which gender shapes experiences and representations of the city and foregrounds the efforts of Aidoo and Adichie to create imaginative space for women. The struggle faced by the female protagonist to find autonomy in the urban environment often results in the quest for self-discovery and self-identity, causing the city to become representative of rebirth and regeneration.

**Keywords:** *The African city, female empowerment, spatial dynamics, Changes: A Love Story, Americanah, agency*

## Introduction

The city space in African literature has been represented as a dual entity that performs oxymoronic functions. In *Cry the Beloved Country* (1948), *Jaguar Nana* (1961), *No Sweetness Here* (1969), and *Tropical Fish* (2005) among others, the city space appears as a place of degradation. This place corrupts all the good morals the character has been born with and taught in the rural setting. This phenomenon of the city as a place of estrangement from all that is familiar does not pertain to African literature alone. Conrad in *The Secret Agent*, Doyle in *The Sign of Four*, Elliot in *The Wasteland*, and

Stevenson in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, see the city as a place of excitement and estrangement. From these readings and others, the city connotes a place that produces ambivalence, anxiety, and doubt in the protagonists. At the same time, it is a place of stimulation, opportunity, and adventure. This ambivalence is captured in the love-hate relationship between the protagonist and the city and amply exemplified in James Joyce's latter portrayal of Dublin as a city full of life, colour, and joy as against his earlier representation of Dublin as the centre of paralysis. This same phenomenon is portrayed in Tsitsi Dangaremba's *Nervous Conditions* where the city provides Tambu the opportunity and mobility to achieve the postcolonial definition

of a successful subject while alienating her from her roots and traditions.

The city is a very different place for women, according to Virginia Woolf who argues that women are constrained by the proprieties and dangers that limit their ability to emulate Baudelaire's detached, anonymous flâneur. In Woolf's essay, she expresses the joy a woman takes in her walk across London under the ruse of going to buy a pencil. That same sense of exuberant pleasure is also seen in Clarissa Dalloway who decides to go and buy flowers herself to indulge in an unfettered stroll across Westminster. This sense of jubilation is felt, too, by her daughter Elizabeth, who boarded the omnibus as it sails down Whitehall. (115). The women share an exhilaration arising from the freedom of walking through the streets freely. That freedom was newly won for women, as the city became a landscape of opportunities. However, in her dream-like depiction of consciousness, Woolf also represents the alienation and anxiety experienced in the modern urban space. Woolf weaves together the sense of estrangement and the sense of wonder and shows her characters enjoying the possibilities that anonymity in the city affords.<sup>1</sup>

Western culture bears a deeply grounded tradition that sees the city as a place both hostile and threatening. This way of looking at the city is necessary. Stories of the pollution from industrialization, poverty, crime, and loneliness, can all be juxtaposed with the peace and solitude to be gained from rural life as well as the support of a communal system of living. The city as a presence in literature brings major changes in narrative patterns. Abandoning the inclusive

tourism of the picaresque, the 19th-century novel often employs a spiral-like pattern; first a pull toward the city, then a disheartened retreat to some point of origin.

As the city becomes a major locale in literature, there are major changes regarding permissible subjects, settings, and characters. The city enables the birth of new genres. It also permits a more complex system of social relationships than any other locale; the intimate relationships, the casuals, the hookups, and the acquaintances are all embraced as part of the rhythm of the city space.

Employing a deconstructive lens, this paper interrogates the dual presentation of the African city space in Adichie's *Americanah* and Aidoo's *Changes*, examining the female characters' embodiment of independence, sexual relations, and resilience that flourish in the urban space. I discuss how this same urban space concurrently prevents the female character from breaking out of patriarchal norms that should have had no place in such a cosmopolitan setting. The city in both novels appears as a patriarchal citadel as well as a cosmopolitan space that offers opportunities for personal and professional growth. I analyse the female characters' embodiment of independence, sexual relations, resilience as well as aspirations to be more than their mothers because of their special locations within the urban space.

In African literature, the city has been variously discussed and treated. Lola Akande concludes that whereas contemporary Nigerian fiction writers portray the city as fraught with difficulty and danger, their younger counterparts celebrate the city for its globalization potential. Morolake Dairo argues that Lagos as portrayed in the short story collection, "Lagos Noir" is reflective of the real city of Lagos, resplendent in its various, often contradictory parts. He,

<sup>1</sup> Katherine Mullin 2016. <https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/cities-in-modernist-literature>

therefore, deemed it important for the city to be properly branded and made attractive to all. Rita Nnodim contends that urban spaces are ingrained in the bodies and identities of the people inhabiting them, whilst it is also the very people inhabiting urban spaces, who – through their activities and itineraries – give shape and meaning to urban spaces. More commonly in the literature, we come across studies on the city like those of O'Connor and Simone which are policy-oriented research on the development challenges, urban economy, and the spatial structures of African cities, without necessarily examining the metaphor of the city space as found in many literary texts.

Yet in all these and many other works on the city in Africa, the study of the ambivalent nature of the city in the life of the female character as depicted in Aidoo's *Changes A Love Story* and Adichie's *Americanah* has not been tackled. There are references to the female characters in the novels navigating obstacles in the city, but no focused discussion of how the city could be simultaneously enervating and yet, reviving.

### Authors and the works

The Ghanaian writer, Ama Ata Aidoo has established and maintained a reputation as one of the most accomplished writers in modern Africa. Although Aidoo's literary works project women as major characters navigating life in settings that deny them agency, her overall concerns go beyond the individual to interrogate the problems of an African continent fighting to survive. Aidoo's background, including her experiences in the political and educational spheres of the African continent and beyond, has broadened and deepened her perspectives on the debates surrounding African literature. One important issue that we find repeatedly in her works is the issue of gender. Specifically, Aidoo's writings focus on the betterment of women's positions. She justifies her

preoccupation with the female character by saying that:

Unless a particular writer commits his or her energies actively, to exposing the sexist tragedy of women's history; protesting the ongoing degradation of women; celebrating their physical and intellectual capabilities, and above all, unfolding a revolutionary vision of the role of women tomorrow, as dreamers, thinkers and doers; they cannot be described as feminist writers.<sup>2</sup>

She is also an accomplished poet and has written several children's books. Her novel, *Changes*, won the 1992 Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book (Africa). *Changes: A Love Story*, published in 1991, follows the marital ups and downs of three couples: Esi and Oko, Opokuya and Kubi, and Fusena and Ali in the capital city of Accra in the early 1990s in Ghana. The focus is mostly on Esi Sekyi and her quest for the ideal man who would love her and give her the space and support she needs to develop her career and herself as an individual. She lives in the city of Accra and works as a government statistician in a space largely dominated by men, where even with her master's degree she still needs to work extra hard to maintain her position as a career woman. She divorces her husband, Oko, after a marital rape because he demands too much of her time and wants her to be the type of wife his family and friends think a Ghanaian wife should be. Gaining her freedom, Esi engages in an affair and eventually marries Ali Kondey, who already has a wife, Fusena. Ali provides Esi with the space she never had with her first husband

<sup>2</sup> Gay Wilentz. *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and The Diaspora*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.

but, in the end, Esi realises that torn between his work and other marital demands, Ali hardly has any time for her.

The novel presents a subtle critique of traditional masculinity and contests the likeability and passivity of African femininity. In the "Afterword" to the novel, Tuzyline Jita Allan (185) argues that Aidoo's works lack the drama of victimization believed to preoccupy African women writers.' Rather, Aidoo infuses her characters with agency and a sense of their individuality and identity. Ginette Curry observes that the cosmopolitan setting of Accra allows Esi to make or embrace changes in her life. The setting further contributes to her mobility as she can travel all over the world from Accra on business trips. On the topic of marriage in this urban setting, Curry asserts that marriage prevents urban, educated women such as Esi, Opokuya, and Fusena from reaching their full potential (189). Toivanen also discusses the importance of mobility for the African woman, and in her paper, she explores how Aidoo's characters employ different forms of mobility in their processes of self-fashioning as modern African subjects. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is one of the writers who engage with the city space in her work. She is a Nigerian writer who is widely acknowledged internationally for her works in postcolonial feminist literature. Her novel, *Purple Hibiscus* garnered the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 2005 for Best First Book (Africa) and that year's Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book (overall). It was also short-listed for the 2004 Orange Prize for Fiction. Adichie's nonfiction includes *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014) and *Notes on Grief* (2021), which was written after the death of her father. *Americanah* (2013), her latest novel, centres on the romantic and existential struggles of a young Nigerian woman studying and blogging about race in the United States. Themes in her works include strong women navigating

life on their terms and grappling with patriarchal influences in their culture. Her strong feminist stance is also very evident in her texts.

Adichie's *Americanah* follows the lives of Ifemelu and Obinze who, as teenagers in a Lagos secondary school, fall in love. Nigeria at the time is under military dictatorship, and people are seeking to leave the country. Ifemelu moves to the United States to study, where she struggles for the first time with racism and the many varieties of racial distinctions: for the first time, Ifemelu discovers what it means to be a 'Black Person'. Obinze had hoped to join her in the U.S. but was denied a visa after 9/11. He goes to London, eventually becoming an undocumented immigrant after his visa expires. Years later, Obinze returns to Nigeria and becomes a wealthy man as a property developer in the newly democratic country. Ifemelu gained success in the United States, where she becomes known for her blog about race in America, entitled "Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black". When Ifemelu returns to Nigeria, she and Obinze reconnect and find that their feelings for each other have never diminished. The novel has mostly been critiqued for its exposition on Afropolitanism, migrant identity, black subjectivities, and feminism (Guarracino 1-27; Akingbe and Adeniyi 37-55; Nwanyanwu 386-399; McCoy 279-294; Phiri: 121-142; Iromuanya 163-183; Lyle 102-123).

When we carefully read Aidoo's *Changes* and Adichie's *Americanah*, we notice that the portrayal of the central characters points towards the social construct debate. Aidoo registers a voice on how the fictional Akan society constructs the female gender (Ennin 45), while also portraying the agency with which the female gender can move up the ladder of their personal and professional

growth through the busy life of the African city. Adichie on the other hand, brings to light the life of the Nigerian female in the city of Lagos. The authors consciously create heroines in the novels who portray women's self-definition as expansion in development and how their exposure to formal education has borne in them an assertiveness that helps them make self-empowering decisions in their respective restricting patriarchal African cities. The assertive African woman recognizes all forms of oppression and refuses to be controlled by any of these forms. She strategically opposes all forms of subjugation, and this calculated effort at freeing herself from domination climaxes in total assertiveness.

The female characters depicted in the novels demonstrate that the African-educated woman still faces the problem of a divided self. Esi in Aidoo's *Changes* is torn between succumbing to her husband and his family's demands of her to live up to their expectations of a traditional African woman, and her desire to be the educated assertive woman in the city of Accra. Unlike Esi who vehemently refuses to live up to her in-law's expectations, Opokuya tries her best to be a good African wife to her husband and a good mother to her children. She juggles the demands of her stressful job as a nurse midwife with the equally stressful job of mother to four growing children, in addition to a husband who enjoys her financial contributions to the home but does none of the household chores to make her life easier. Adichie, on the other hand, brings to light through the character of Ifemelu, the dilemma faced by not only an educated African woman but also an African woman who has once lived outside of the continent.

### **Forging an Authentic Self in the City Space**

In Lagos, where Ifemelu lives with her family before she leaves for America, religion

controls her family life. From a conservative catholic, her mother was 'converted' by a colleague to a charismatic movement. This conversion saw her transform from an easy-going woman to one whose God was 'exacting' (Adichie 51) and demanding. The family is poor, but the church keeps her mother from actively working to better her family conditions because she believes that God alone can grant them the wealth they need if she continues to worship him. This same mentality prevents her mother from seeing Ifemelu's father's difficulties with getting a job because he doesn't understand the new Nigeria in which they live, where an older man is supposed to call his female boss, 'mummy'. Instead, she sees her husband's inability to get a job as a demonic attack. Ifemelu, however, thinks otherwise. She is also aware that the largesse the Pastor of their church is enjoying is from the congregation. "[she] did not think that God had given Pastor Gideon the big house and all those cars, he had, of course, bought them with money from the three collections at each service" (Adichie 53). The church's preoccupation with wealth as a sign of God's favour causes Ifemelu's mother to also ignore any objections she might have about her sister-in-law's affair with The General.

Aunty Uju's relationship with The General exemplifies the ways patriarchal influences control women in their relationships with men even in the city of Lagos. After her graduation as a medical doctor from the university, Aunty Uju and her colleagues find it difficult to get a job. A chance meeting with one of the generals of the country secures her financial future. The General manages for Uju to get a job as a medical consultant in a hospital that had no vacancies. She works, but because her position does not officially exist, she does not earn a salary and must depend on The General for money as if she were a child asking for an allowance. She must in turn use some of this "allowance" for



expensive beauty treatments, like lightening creams, to please The General, meaning that even the money he gives her must be reinvested into keeping his interest.

Not satisfied with keeping a financial leash on Uju, The General controls her autonomy by infantilizing her. Auntie Uju must shave her pubic region because The General is 'disturbed' by adult pubic hair. The symbolism inherent here is that pubic hairlessness is a pre-pubescent trait, and The General requiring Auntie Uju to be hairless can be read as a requirement for Uju to maintain the illusion of a child. Keeping her as a child reinforces his position as the adult and controller of her life. It adds unto his power over her and makes nonsense of her age and autonomy. The General controls her finances, gives her a little money to get by, pays all her bills, and therefore, would inquire what she needs money for any time she asks for money. Regardless of her education and training as a medical doctor, in the city of Lagos, without a job, she is reduced to a child who must be taken care of. This re-echoes what The General told her the first time they met, he said, "I like you. I will take care of you" (Adichie 56) and reiterates patriarchal notions of the man as responsible for the upkeep of the woman. In a traditional setting in the rural area, this patriarchal idea of man as Lord of the household would not be surprising, but in the city space where Uju has been trained as a medical officer and been educated to know that a woman should not be the appendage of a man, this becomes problematic. How does the city liberate Uju then?

The importance of independence for the woman is reiterated by Obinze's mother when she catches Ifemelu and Obinze together. She tells Ifemelu, "If anything happens between you and Obinze, you are both responsible. But Nature is unfair to women. An act is done by two people. But if there are any

consequences, one person carries it alone" (Adichie 87). While her warning against dependence on men refers to sex, this warning can metaphorically apply to protection in general. She wants Ifemelu to know that she should not cede control of her life to a man.

Upon Ifemelu's return to Lagos, she finds a city that has not changed much in her absence. Women are still using men as meal tickets. Her friend, Ranyinudo's affair echoes Auntie Uju's relationship with The General, reflecting how women without opportunities for advancement in their career in Lagos rely on wealthy men for survival. This reiterates that the urban space provides prospects for freedom and development unavailable to females without male protection and sponsorship. Ranyinudo has a respectable job, yet cannot afford her rent, signifying a discrepancy between the cost of living and wages in Lagos. Ranyinudo's and Priye's declaration that marriage is about finding a man to "maintain them" implies that marriage in Lagos for women is contracted with the woman seeing herself as dependent on the man for her upkeep. Feminist calls for independence and self-reliance are highly contestable in this urban space that fails to provide women the opportunity to be self-reliant. The similarities between Auntie Uju's situation with The General and Ranyinudo's also foreshadow the precarity of Ranyinudo's life. Consequently, Ifemelu is afraid of the power imbalance in financially unbalanced relationships, which may explain her refusal to ask Obinze for help in finding a flat when she arrives in Lagos, as well as rejecting his money in establishing her blog. Her complete unwillingness to create any sort of dependence on Obinze demonstrates that Ifemelu does not believe a transactional relationship can ever be liberating for the woman in the city.

The city of Lagos highlights a life that values superficiality over substance. Television stations have become the government's mouthpiece of propaganda and the media space does not offer any meaningful engagement. Ifemelu's frank suggestions to Auntie Onenu, the owner of the Lifestyle magazine she works for, to make the magazine better are interpreted as insubordination because Auntie Onenu is not interested in making any meaningful contribution to society, but rather, she wants to show up her competitor, "Glass Magazine"; likewise, Priye's job as a wedding planner seems to be less about celebrating couples' love and more about making couples appear prestigious, reducing their wedding to a display of affluence and influence. Whereas Ifemelu's time away in the US has helped her become true to herself, Lagos has remained committed to its preference for pretence. By quitting her job at Zoe to start a new blog, Ifemelu makes another move toward authenticity. In America, she fights for authenticity by maintaining her true accent, refusing to relax her hair, and keeping her blog focused on her observations surrounding race. It, therefore, appears surreal to her that in Lagos, she must fight to remain true to herself. This she does by rejecting Doris's insistence that magazines like Zoe simply represent how Nigeria works and deciding to forge her vision of journalism in Lagos that meets her own needs and desires.

This position of reclaiming authenticity is not appealing to all women, however. Kosi's response to Obinze's cheating underlines the difference between her and Ifemelu and the ways she embodies the superficiality of Lagos. Kosi values appearances and consistency over uncomfortable honesty, just like Auntie Onenu's preference for Doris's obsequiousness over Ifemelu's constructive criticism. Kosi, like Auntie Onenu, prefers to maintain a façade of family cohesion, rather than speak honestly with Obinze about his

feelings and desires. Associating Kosi with pretence and Ifemelu with truth reveals that Obinze's choice between Kosi and Ifemelu is also a choice about authenticity and superficiality. He can either pick comfort with Kosi (who reflects Lagos and has no depth), or his honest feelings for Ifemelu.

Unlike Esi in *Changes*, even though she wants Obinze in her life, Ifemelu refuses to be the other woman, as an indication of her rejection of the values of Lagos. Likewise, Obinze's decision to leave Kosi for Ifemelu marks the triumph of an authentic life over one of superficial ease. Ifemelu, as a representative of honesty and truth, invites Obinze into her flat because she can now fully trust in Obinze's desire to build an honest life with her.

### **Claiming the Autonomy of the City Space**

In Aidoo's *Changes*, three couples grapple with their conceptions of themselves and their marriages in a cosmopolitan setting fraught with traditional undertones. Esi overturns Oko's perception of the ideal African woman because as an educated woman, she puts her career first, above her husband and children. Opokuya's husband, Kubi, refuses to acknowledge that life in the urban centre is different than in the peri-urban or rural and, thus controls their car, uncaring of Opokuya's need for it to run errands around the city. In the city of Accra, Ali Kondey lives as a man of the world, but he attempts to enact a traditional marriage model that fails.

Oko is a school headteacher with a Bachelor's degree married to Esi who has a master's degree and in whose house they live. The scene that introduces Oko shows him lying on the bed contemplating his wife's naked body as she gets ready for work in the morning. This posturing, which connotes vulnerability and weakness, together with the abovementioned elements of power differentials between them, contributes to an

image of disempowerment. Other areas of their relationship that trouble Oko include the fact that Esi earns more money than he does, is a senior officer at her workplace, and appears taller than him. Despite all these, Esi is seen as subordinate to Oko in their relationship by his family. Oko's mother and sisters continually use every opportunity to let her know that she is a failed woman. To make the situation worse, Esi finds cooking a drudgery; she has one daughter and refuses to have more children, she leaves home very early for work and comes back very late, often bringing work home, and then she travels all over the world for work-related conferences. Oko wonders, "Is Esi too an African woman?" (Aidoo 8).

All these contribute to Oko's feelings of inadequacy. He tries to overcome these feelings by controlling Esi's career, forcing her to place it second to their marriage. But it does not work as Esi is fulfilled by her demanding career, and not her husband or child. In an attempt therefore, to end months of frustrations and coldness between them, Oko jumps on Esi one morning when she is dressing for work. Aidoo describes the incident in such a way that there can be no other word for what happened but rape:

Oko flung the bed cloth away from him, sat up, pulled [Esi] down, and moved on her. Esi started to protest. But he went on doing what he had 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 (Aidoo 9).

Afterward, he feels his actions are justified. Even though he senses the need to apologise, he is convinced that he must not, and he gets up from the bed, taking the bed cloth, which

was, "trailing behind [him] ... like some arrogant king, as he opened the door to get to the bathroom before her" (Aidoo 10). This description of the moments after the rape shows that Oko believes he has righted the balance of power in his relationship with Esi; he now feels in control and on top as the man of the house. However, this assertion of supremacy backfires because Esi rejects the new balance of power through rape, a symbolic act of subjugation, by asking for a divorce. The urban environment Esi lives in provides her with the opportunity to assert her individuality and rights within her marriage. It also allows her to use the "rape" as grounds for divorce. However, it does not protect her from the traditional demands of her as a wife and mother.

Unlike Esi, Opokuya has learned the art of juggling work and family life. "With a fully grown man, a young growing woman, and three growing boisterous boys to feed" (Aidoo 33), she must find time in her busy schedule to fit in work, shopping, and cooking. Although she manages to do all these well, she feels the pressure as the narrator indicates during New Year's Eve:

Opokuya was feeling sorry for herself and tired. Tired from being too conscientious. Tired of being too mindful of other people's needs and ignoring her own. Tired from having to be in too many places at the same time (Aidoo 120).

This 'superwoman' act is her understanding of the expectations of a good wife. Although she works outside the home, she takes all these burdens upon herself and does not ask much from Kubi, except that he be reasonable about the use of the car. As she tells Esi, a woman cannot have it all, and therefore, Esi should be realistic and forget her desire for things to be different.



On the surface, it appears all is well with this outspoken nurse midwife in Accra, but a close reading of the text reveals her frustrations with her situation and the constraints she must live with. Together with her husband, they pool their resources and buy a car. Kubi believes that he should take the car to work, park it, and bring it home at the end of the day. Opokuya feels that as a very busy woman, she should have access to the car to run her errands during the day instead of it being parked at Kubi's workplace. Whenever she brings up her need for access to the car, Kubi rebuffs her, saying that it is on a government maintenance plan and, as such, fit only to be used for government duties. He rejects Opokuya's suggestion that they take it off government maintenance and pay for the maintenance themselves. In his refusal to come to any form of compromise on the use of the car, with excuses that do not sound plausible, Kubi shows his need for control in the relationship. With a wife as independently minded and enlightened as Opokuya, Kubi feels a lessening of his power and position as husband and head of the family. He shows how uncomfortable he is with the fact that his wife is not economically dependent on him whenever he accuses Opokuya of behaving as if she were the only one earning money in the house. After years of this constant battle over the use of the car, Opokuya buys Esi's old car, and thus completely removing any vestiges of power Kubi has over her by his refusal to let her use the car.

It is interesting that when Opokuya complains about her husband's unreasonable attitude about the car to any of her female colleagues, they would laugh at her behind her back. They felt "she didn't know anything. She should listen to stories of women who paid for cars which their husband then took over completely. In some cases, whisking their girlfriends around town in them" (Aidoo 17). In their reaction to her complaints, her colleagues display a mindset

that is at variance with their setting. Even in this space that grants them the opportunities of choice and independence, marriage is still seen as the be - and end - all of a woman's life, and she must be grateful to have a husband, even one that does not take her feelings and wishes into consideration.

Curiously, in this urban space where their wives have demanding careers, Kubi and Oko have traditional expectations of their wives. Kubi expects that a working woman should get home early enough to take care of her household. When he picks Opokuya up around 9 pm at the Twentieth Century Hotel, he wonders why Esi, a married woman, is out late at that time. Ironically, he does not question why he, a married man is also not home early to take care of his household. The sense of male privilege is prominent in this space, but it denies women the freedom to participate fully in the development that this urban space provides.

This urban space also provides its inhabitants with the illusion of modernity. Da Silva and Ivone observe that "By attempting to be modern, men and women in urban Accra perform ambiguous and incoherent roles which promote and reinforce the very structures they allegedly abhor" (Da Silva and Ivone 133). Esi's decision to leave her husband and become the second wife of Ali, without recognising the effect of this decision on Ali's first wife, Fusena, shows her up as a selfish, individualistic cruel person. Ultimately, this marriage does not grant her the freedom she seeks, and she ends up becoming a property of Ali to be used at his whims. She realises her mistake in not listening to her mother and grandmother's advice as her marriage to Ali is a parody of the institution of polygamy. Likewise, Fusena's fear of being in a polygamous marriage materialises in the city when Ali marries Esi without going through the due process of getting a second wife by Islamic

practice. The only person who benefits from the second marriage is Ali who now has unlimited access to Esi as well as Fusena, and can at the same time, engage in extramarital activities with his secretary. In the city of Accra, values are distorted to benefit patriarchy.

### **The Paradox of the City**

Both Aidoo's *Changes* and Adichie's *Americanah*, explore the concept of the city as a multi-cultural space that encourages female agency. In *Changes*, the city of Accra serves as a multicultural facet where urbanization and modernization intersect with traditional values. Esi represents a modern, educated woman who places her aspirations and needs above societal expectations. The city allows Esi to assert her agency by pursuing a career and maintaining her independence, even though she struggles with the traditional gender roles that her family and culture impose on her. For Esi, the city is about escaping what was seen as a predetermined life: grow up, marry, give birth, and spend the rest of your life pleasing your husband, his family, and his ancestors. Accra then appears to be the escape tunnel through which Esi escapes the traditional routine life of a woman defined by patriarchy. Here the city not only helps her escape but also enables her to forge her path, a life she designed for herself. However, this freedom is not absolute as she still must contend with the traditional demands of her as a woman, thus, while the city affords her the possibility of being, it continues to limit her choices.

In *Americanah*, the city serves as a conducive environment that facilitates the growth of Ifemelu. The urban environment allows Ifemelu to explore her identity, challenge societal norms, and pursue her academic and professional ambitions. In America, the city space allows her to grow her blog and have a following. This helps with her self-esteem and how she navigates life as a black woman.

In the same way, she can cohabit with Blaine without the censorious eye of the rural community. When she arrives in Nigeria and decides to live in Lagos, the city also affords her the freedom of being:

At first, Lagos assaulted her; the sun-dazed haste ... Here, she felt, anything could happen, a ripe mango could burst out of solid stone. And she had the dizzying sensation of falling, falling into the new person she had become (Adichie 475).

This sensation of falling into a new person ushers her into new experiences in Lagos. In the end, the narrator claims that Ifemelu, "was at peace: to be home, to be writing her blog, to have discovered Lagos again. She had, finally, spun herself fully into being" (Adichie 586). At the same time, the city space calls her to a traditional conjugal life where her unmarried state is a cause for concern and pity. Her friends worry about her, and she worries about her happiness. It is a testament to her emotional strength that she can reject Obinze's halfway loving and chooses to be single, rather than an unhappy side woman.

Both narratives portray African women living by making difficult choices in rapidly evolving African cities. The African city represents a melting pot of cultures, ideas, and traditions, resulting in a state of uncertainty among its inhabitants. The development brings the charm of modernity and progress, contrasted with the pull of traditional values and familial expectations. This inconsistency is particularly evident in the experiences of women who find themselves torn between the desire for independence and the pressure to adhere to societal norms. The choices they make because of these expectations affect both their families and the communities. Esi's divorce affects her daughter and husband, and her subsequent remarriage to Ali adversely affects Fusena and her children, although Esi

assumes that it is a personal matter between her and Ali.

Esi's conversations with her mother and grandmother, as well as her discussions with Opokuya, highlight the prevalence of patriarchy within the urban landscape of Africa, where even in a supposedly progressive environment, the expectations and limitations imposed on women remain deeply rooted. Opokuya says, "No matter what anybody says, we can't have it all. Not if you are a woman" (Aidoo 48). Similarly, in Adichie's *Americanah*, Ifemelu's experiences in both Nigeria and the United States offer varied views on how the city can restrict the space within which the female gender can operate. In Lagos, Ifemelu struggles to let her friends know that she is happy finding herself and enjoying being alone, rather than waiting for a married man to make up his mind whether he wants to be with her or his wife.

### Conclusion

Aidoo and Adichie demonstrate that even within urban environments that appear to be more progressive, deeply rooted patriarchal norms continue to influence women's lives and choices serving as a restrictive space that hinders female agency, pushing women to conform to traditional roles and expectations as illustrated by Esi's grandmother's words that it is the destiny of a man to rule over the universe, and the destiny of a woman to support him quietly and with dignity. At the same time, the transformative power of the city space on female agency is brought to bear in the narratives. The urban environment becomes a space where women can break free from traditional female roles, explore their identities, and assert their independence. In Ifemelu, Adichie illustrates how the woman can take control of the benefits of city living to carve a niche for herself. She does not need to be selfish and cruel; she needs to speak her truth and stand by it. The ambivalence of the city space then

forces women to choose what they would want the city space to do for them; either to be a liberating space or a constricting one.

**Declaration of Interest Statement:** The Author reports that there are no competing interests to declare.

### Works Cited

- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Americanah*. New York: Anchor Books, 2014.
- Aidoo, Ama Ata. *Changes: A Love Story*. Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 1999.
- Aidoo, Ama Ata. *No Sweetness Here*. New York: The Feminist Press, 1970.
- Akande, L. "Representations of the City in the Early and Recent Nigerian Novel: People of the City and Alpha Song". *Unilag Journal of Humanities*, 3.2, (2019):1-16.
- Akingbe, Niyi and Emmanuel Adeniyi. "'Reconfiguring Others': Negotiating Identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*." *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 9.4 (2017): 37-55
- Allan, Tuzyline Jita. "Afterword." *Changes: A Love Story*, by Ama Ata Aidoo, New York: The Feminist Press, 1993. 171-196.
- Conrad, Joseph. *The Secret Agent*. UK: Methuen & Co., 1907.
- Curry, Ginette. "Women from Ghana: Their Urban Challenges in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes*." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* 32.1(2011): 179-198.
- Dangarembga, Tsitsi. *Nervous Conditions*. London: The Women's Press, 1988.
- Da Silva, Santana, and Meyre Ivone. "Metaphors of Modernity: Palimpsestic Identities, Polygamous Marriages, and Global Capitalism in Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story*." *Alicante Journal of English Studies Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses* 36 (2021): 131-147.
- Dairo, M. "The City in Literature: The Image of Lagos City in Lagos Noir". *City*, 59 (2021): 1-9.

- Doyle, Arthur Conan. *The Sign of Four*. UK: Spencer Blackett, 1890.
- Ekwensi, Cyprian. *Jaguar Nana*. UK: Heinemann, 1961.
- Elliot, T. S. "The Wasteland". New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922.
- Ennin, Theresah P. "The Making of Akan Men: Confronting Hegemonic Masculinities in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Healers* and Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa*." *Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men* 2.2 (2014): 41-62.
- Guarracino, S. "Writing "so raw and true": Blogging in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*." *Between* 4.8 (2014): 1-27
- Iromuanya, Julie. "Are We All Feminists? The Global Black Hair Industry and Marketplace in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*." *Meridians* 16.1 (2018): 163-183.
- Lyle, Caroline. "Afropolitanism for Black Women: Sexual Identity and Coming to Voice in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*." *Aspeers* 11 (2018): 102-123
- McCoy, Shane A. "The "outsider within": Counter-narratives of the "new" African diaspora in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*." *Journal of the African Literature Association* 11:3 (2013): 279-294
- Nwanyanwu, Augustine Uka. "Transculturalism, Otherness, Exile, and Identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*." *Matatu* 49.2 (2017): 386-399.
- Nnodim, R. "City, identity, and dystopia: Writing Lagos in contemporary Nigerian novels." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 44.4 (2008): 321-332.
- O'Connor, A. *The African City*. New York: Holmes & Meier, 2013.
- Phiri, Aretha. "Expanding black subjectivities in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*." *Cultural Studies* 31.1 (2017): 121-142.
- Stevenson, Louis Robert. *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. London: Longmans, Green, and Co. 1886.
- Simone, A. M. *For the city yet to come: Changing African life in four cities*. Duke U P, 2004.
- Toivanen, Anna-Leena. "Anxious Mobilities in Accra and Beyond." *Matatu* 49.2 (2017): 307-328.
- Wilentz, Gay. *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and The Diaspora*. Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1992.
- Woolf, Virginia. *Street Haunting and Other Essays*. New York: Random House, 1930, 2022.

#### Author's profile:

**Theresah Patrine Ennin PhD** is an Associate Professor of English (African Literature and Gender) at the Department of English, Faculty of Arts, College of Humanities and Legal Studies at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana. She holds a PhD in African Languages and Literature from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her teaching and research areas are: African literature, Literary theory, Masculinities, Gender and Writing, Queer theory, Gender Identity and Sexuality Studies, and Literary and artistic constructions of gender and sex. Dr Ennin has published in Journals such as the *West Africa Review*; *Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men*, and *Research in African Literatures*. Her recent publications include a monograph, *Men Across Time: Contesting Masculinities in Ghanaian Fiction and Film*. South Africa: NISC, 2022; "Unmasking Patriarchies: Paradigms of Violation and the Future Praxis in Nawal El Saadwi's *God Dies by the Nile*," *Research in African Literatures* 53.4 (2023): 15-31 and "Societal Hegemony and the Evolution of Masculinity in Francis Selormey's *The Narrow Path* and Asare Konadu's *A Woman in Her Prime*," *Matatu* 53.1-2 (2023): 73-92. **Email:** <tennin@ucc.edu.gh>.