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Article

Performing Womanhood: Gender Negotiation and Female Agency in the West African Novel in English

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Abstract: What does it mean for womanhood to be performed rather than simply lived, and how does negotiation become the quiet grammar of survival in contexts shaped by gendered constraint? These questions frame the concern of this study as it examines how West African fiction reimagines female agency through acts of strategic adaptation rather than overt rebellion. The study is an exploration of the construction of womanhood in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*, and Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story*. The study argues that gender in these texts is not a fixed biological essence but a socially regulated performance shaped by domestic, urban, and professional spaces. Drawing on African Womanism, nego-feminism, and snail-sense feminism, the study theorises agency as a relational and situational practice embedded within everyday negotiations of power. Using qualitative narrative inquiry and comparative thematic analysis, the study examines the novels as interconnected meditations on the shifting meanings of freedom for African women. Findings suggest that resistance in these novels is neither uniform nor absolute. In Shoneyin, women construct covert solidarities within polygamous domesticity to destabilise patriarchal control. In Atta, education and legal consciousness enable mobility while exposing the fragility of urban independence. In Aidoo, professional success unsettles marital expectations, revealing the emotional costs of autonomy. Across the texts, agency emerges as a negotiated practice rather than a final achievement. The artide concludes that the "New Woman" in novels written by novelists who belong to the West African Novel in English block is best understood as an ongoing performance of survival, shaped by constant recalibration between tradition, modernity, and selfhood.

Keywords: Gender Performance, African Womanism, Female Agency, Nego-Feminism, West African Fiction, Lola Shoneyin, Sefi Atta, Ama Ata Aidoo

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1. Introduction

Performing Womanhood and the Question of Agency

What does it mean for womanhood to be continually performed within societies that both depend on and constrain it, and how might West African fiction help us read this tension as something more than a simple story of oppression? These questions are not merely decorative; they sit at the centre of contemporary debates on gender, literature, and social transformation. In many West African societies, womanhood has often been framed through fixed expectations of obedience, domesticity, and relational duty, yet

contemporary fiction increasingly unsettles these assumptions by presenting women who think, choose, and negotiate within restrictive environments. One must therefore ask whether the African woman in literature is still being written as an object of cultural expectation or as a subject of strategic self-definition. The works of Lola Shoneyin, Sefi Atta, and Ama Ata Aidoo emerge within this contested space, where gender is neither stable nor singular but continuously reworked through experience, speech, and silence. Rather than offering closure, their narratives reopen the question of what agency actually looks like when it is embedded in unequal structures of power [1]. This study is therefore concerned with how these texts reframe womanhood not as essence but as action, not as identity but as negotiation.

At the centre of this inquiry lies a persistent tension: can a woman truly claim autonomy in a world where her choices are already anticipated, regulated, or interpreted through patriarchal norms, or is agency itself always already compromised by structure? Is marriage a site of shared life or a carefully disguised system of expectation and control, and how does education function within this contradiction—does it liberate women, or merely refine the forms of compliance expected of them? These questions are not abstract philosophical concerns; they are embedded in the lived realities that contemporary African women writers dramatise through fiction. In Shoneyin's polygamous household, Atta's urban Lagos, and Aidoo's professional Accra, we encounter women who do not simply resist but recalibrate their positions within systems that remain structurally unequal. The question is not only whether these women are free, but what kinds of freedom are even possible within such layered constraints [2]. Literature here becomes less a reflection of society and more a site where the contradictions of gendered life are staged, tested, and reimagined.

To understand these dynamics, it is necessary to move beyond essentialist definitions of womanhood that reduce gender to biology or fixed cultural roles. Gender, in this study, is approached as a performance—an ongoing repetition of socially regulated acts that produce the appearance of stability while concealing their constructed nature. This implies that what is often taken as "natural" femininity is in fact produced through repetition, expectation, and surveillance within everyday life [3]. Within this framework, female characters in the selected novels are not simply living out identities but actively negotiating them, sometimes conforming, sometimes subverting, and often doing both simultaneously. The significance of this approach lies in its refusal to treat agency as absolute freedom; instead, it frames agency as situational mobility within constraint. Such a perspective allows us to see that silence may be tactical, compromise may be strategic, and survival itself may constitute a form of resistance [4]. The study therefore interrogates how gender performance becomes a site of both control and creativity in West African fiction.

The objective of this article is to examine how Lola Shoneyin, Sefi Atta, and Ama Ata Aidoo construct the figure of the "New Woman" through narratives of negotiation, adaptation, and self-definition. This is not a celebration of victimhood, nor is it a simplistic narrative of liberation; rather, it is an attempt to trace the subtle ways through which women in the novels under study articulate presence within constraint. By comparing *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives, Everything Good Will Come*, and *Changes: A Love Story*, the study identifies recurring patterns of resistance that are shaped by space, institution, and relational dynamics. These novels suggest that womanhood is not a fixed category but a shifting field of possibilities, constantly reshaped by domestic expectations, urban mobility, and professional ambition. The analysis therefore moves beyond binary oppositions of oppression and freedom to explore how agency is produced through tension itself. In doing so, it situates these literary works within broader debates on African Womanism and negotiated feminism, where survival and selfhood are understood as interdependent rather than opposed [5]. Ultimately, this introduction frames the study as

an exploration of how West African women's fiction redefines what it means to act, endure, and become within uneven worlds.

Theoretical Foundations

Performativity and Womanist Ethics

How do we begin to theorise womanhood in contexts where gender is neither simply inherited nor entirely chosen, and can we meaningfully speak of female agency without first interrogating the structures that define what counts as agency in the first place? These questions place the theoretical burden of this study on a set of interlocking frameworks that refuse to treat gender as stable essence. Instead, gender is approached here as something continuously produced through repetition, regulation, and social expectation. In West African literary contexts, this means that womanhood is not merely expressed but actively constructed through everyday practices that are both visible and invisible. The implication is that identity is not a possession but a process, constantly shaped by cultural scripts that individuals are compelled to perform, sometimes knowingly and sometimes under quiet coercion [6]. Yet the question remains: if gender is performance, who writes the script, and to what extent can it be revised from within the performance itself? It is within this tension between construction and agency that the theoretical architecture of this study is grounded.

Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity provides a crucial entry point into this debate, particularly her argument that gender is not something one is, but something one repeatedly does until it appears natural. This repetition is not innocent; it is structured by regulatory norms that determine what counts as intelligible masculinity or femininity within a given society [7]. But in the West African context, this framework requires careful re-reading, because the performance of gender is also deeply entangled with kinship obligations, communal survival, and moral economies of care. Can we then still speak of "subversion" in the same way when deviation from gender norms may threaten not only the individual but also the relational fabric that sustains her? This question pushes the analysis beyond Western universalism and opens up space for African-centred feminist reinterpretations. It is precisely here that gender performativity becomes less about abstract identity and more about lived negotiation within constrained social worlds. In this sense, performance is not theatrical excess but everyday survival strategy [8].

African Womanism, as articulated by Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, offers a corrective to frameworks that position African women's struggles primarily in adversarial terms against men. Instead, it insists on relational survival, where the health of the family and community is inseparable from the pursuit of female dignity. But does this relational emphasis risk softening the realities of inequality, or does it instead reveal a more accurate picture of how gender operates in African social life? Ogunyemi's formulation suggests that womanhood is embedded within networks of obligation that cannot be easily dismantled without social rupture [9]. This means that resistance is rarely total; it is often partial, negotiated, and embedded within the very structures it seeks to reshape. Rather than imagining liberation as separation, African Womanism reframes it as recalibration of relationships. This becomes particularly important for reading West African fiction, where female characters rarely exist outside kinship systems but instead work through them, bending their limits without fully breaking them. The theoretical implication is that agency must be understood as relational competence rather than individual autonomy.

If African Womanism provides the ethical frame, nego-feminism offers a methodological vocabulary for understanding how women operate within these constraints. Obioma Nnaemeka's concept of nego-feminism is built on the idea that negotiation, compromise, and tactical engagement are central to the African woman's lived realities. What happens, then, when resistance is no longer defined by confrontation but by strategic accommodation? Does negotiation dilute feminist politics, or does it redefine what politics itself means in contexts where survival depends on relational balance?

Nnaemeka suggests that African women often engage in what might be called “everyday diplomacy,” where survival is achieved not through rupture but through calibrated adjustment [10]. This perspective is particularly useful for reading characters who appear silent or compliant but are in fact actively managing power relations from within. It forces a reconsideration of agency as something that is often invisible, embedded in timing, tone, and restraint rather than overt rebellion. In this way, nego-feminism complements performativity by showing how gendered action is not only repeated but strategically managed.

Complementing this framework is Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo’s snail-sense feminism, which introduces a temporal and strategic dimension to feminist action. The metaphor of the snail suggests that progress is not always linear or fast; rather, it is cautious, deliberate, and responsive to environmental pressure. But is slowness equivalent to weakness, or does it represent a more sustainable mode of resistance in contexts where direct confrontation may be socially or materially costly? Snail-sense feminism proposes that women often survive by reading situations carefully and choosing moments of intervention rather than constant opposition [11]. This theoretical position is particularly valuable for interpreting narrative moments of silence, delay, or apparent withdrawal in West African fiction. Instead of reading such moments as absence of agency, they are reinterpreted as calculated pauses within broader strategies of survival. When read alongside nego-feminism, snail-sense feminism deepens the idea that agency is not always visible, but it is continuously active in subtle, adaptive forms.

These theoretical positions construct a layered understanding of gender as performance, negotiation, and strategic adaptation. They challenge the assumption that agency must always appear as resistance in its most visible or confrontational form. Instead, they suggest that agency in West African contexts is often embedded in relational ethics, temporal calculation, and cultural negotiation. This raises a final theoretical question: if agency is always already constrained, how do we distinguish between compliance and strategy without imposing external judgments on lived realities? The answer proposed in this study is not to resolve the tension but to inhabit it analytically, allowing the literature to reveal its own logic of survival and self-definition. It is within this theoretical tension that the subsequent analysis of Shoneyin, Atta, and Aidoo will be grounded, as each writer offers a distinct but interconnected vision of how womanhood is performed and reworked within the uneven terrains of African modernity.

2. Materials and Methods

Narrative Inquiry and Comparative Literary Reading

How does one meaningfully study womanhood as performance in literature without reducing complex narratives to mechanical summaries, and what kind of methodological posture allows the critic to remain attentive to nuance, silence, and contradiction without forcing closure too early? These questions shape the methodological orientation of this study, which adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and library-based narrative inquiry. The guiding assumption here is that literary texts are not passive reflections of society but active sites where cultural meanings are produced, contested, and reworked. In this sense, methodology is not merely a technical requirement but an intellectual stance that determines what kinds of meanings become visible in the analysis. The study therefore privileges close reading, thematic interpretation, and comparative engagement over statistical abstraction or distant reading. Can we truly understand gendered experience without attending to the textures of language, the rhythm of dialogue, and the politics of narrative silence? This methodological position insists that meaning is not located outside the text but generated within its narrative structures and symbolic economies [12]. It is within this interpretive space that the fiction of Shoneyin, Atta, and Aidoo is read as cultural argument rather than mere storytelling.

The selection of texts for this study is both deliberate and theoretically motivated, rather than incidental or merely canonical. Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives,* Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come,* and Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story* were chosen because they represent distinct but interconnected articulations of West African womanhood across domestic, urban, and professional spaces. Yet the question arises: why these three texts, and what makes them analytically comparable beyond their shared focus on female protagonists? The answer lies in their shared preoccupation with gender negotiation under conditions of structural constraint, albeit expressed through different narrative environments and generational perspectives. These novels allow for a diachronic reading of African feminist consciousness, moving from polygamous domestic entanglement to urban legal struggle and finally to professional existential tension. They are therefore treated not as isolated narratives but as a comparative archive of gendered experience. This approach enables the study to trace continuity and divergence in how female agency is imagined across time and space [13]. The selection is thus guided by conceptual resonance rather than thematic convenience.

To ensure analytical rigour, the study employs thematic coding as a guiding interpretive tool, though not in a rigid or purely technical sense. Thematic coding here is understood as a flexible process of identifying recurring motifs, narrative tensions, and symbolic patterns across the three texts. Key themes such as silence, education, marriage, secrecy, mobility, and professional ambition are traced across the novels to reveal how gendered agency is constructed differently within each narrative environment. But does thematic repetition necessarily indicate similarity of meaning, or does it sometimes conceal deeper contradictions that resist easy categorisation? This question is important because the aim is not to flatten difference but to make it analytically productive. Thematic patterns are therefore read as sites of tension rather than closure, allowing contradictions within and between texts to remain visible. In this way, coding becomes less about classification and more about interpretive mapping of gendered experience. Lomotey [14] suggests that such comparative readings are essential for understanding the evolving nature of African feminist thought, particularly when texts are read across generational divides.

Narrative inquiry, as used in this study, also requires attentiveness to the structure of storytelling itself, including focalisation, character development, and narrative voice. The assumption is that how a story is told is as significant as what is told, particularly when dealing with gendered subjectivity. For instance, shifts in narrative perspective often signal shifts in power, authority, and emotional proximity within the text. Can we separate the politics of representation from the mechanics of narration, or are they fundamentally intertwined in shaping how womanhood is perceived? This study proceeds on the basis that narrative form is itself a gendered technology, one that either constrains or expands the possibilities of female visibility. By paying attention to these formal elements, the analysis avoids reducing the novels to thematic summaries and instead engages their internal logic of meaning-making. In Shoneyin, Atta, and Aidoo, narrative form becomes a space where gender is not only represented but actively contested and reconfigured.

Finally, this methodological approach acknowledges its own limitations, particularly its reliance on textual interpretation rather than ethnographic or empirical validation. While this may appear to restrict the scope of claims, it also allows for a deeper engagement with literary imagination as a site of social theorisation. The study does not claim to speak for lived experience in a direct empirical sense, but rather to interpret how lived experience is narratively constructed and symbolically mediated. This raises an important methodological question: can literature be treated as a legitimate site of social knowledge production, or must it always remain secondary to empirical data? Within the framework of African literary studies, the answer leans toward the former, especially when texts engage so directly with gender, power, and social structure. Abib Sene [15] argues that African fiction often functions as a parallel archive of social meaning, one that captures emotional and symbolic dimensions that conventional data cannot easily represent. It is

within this interpretive conviction that the present study situates its methodological legitimacy, treating narrative inquiry not as a supplementary tool but as a primary mode of theoretical engagement.

3. Results and Discussion

Domestic Space and Hidden Power: Shoneyin's Polygamous Negotiations

What does domestic space truly signify in a society where the home is expected to function simultaneously as sanctuary, institution, and instrument of control, and can we still read the household as private when it is saturated with surveillance, competition, and emotional economies of power? These questions are central to understanding Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, where the polygamous compound becomes more than a setting; it becomes a political architecture of gendered negotiation. At first glance, the household appears to reproduce a rigid patriarchal order anchored in male authority and female submission, yet a closer reading reveals a far more unstable and contested environment. The women within this space are not passive occupants but strategic actors embedded in a system that demands both compliance and calculation. Can a structure that appears oppressive on the surface simultaneously produce forms of female agency beneath its visible hierarchy? This tension defines the domestic world Shoneyin constructs, where survival depends less on open confrontation and more on the management of secrecy, alliances, and emotional intelligence. Ndiyah notes that such domestic arrangements often generate "generalised resistance resources," where women convert vulnerability into adaptive strategies of endurance. It is within this paradox that domesticity becomes a site of hidden power rather than simple subjugation.

Within Baba Segi's household, power is not located solely in the figure of the husband but distributed unevenly across networks of female interaction, rivalry, and complicity. The co-wives operate within a carefully balanced ecology of suspicion and solidarity, where knowledge becomes both currency and weapon. One must therefore ask whether secrecy in this context is a symptom of oppression or a deliberate strategy of self-preservation within an unstable marital economy. Shoneyin carefully constructs a domestic environment where women are forced to read each other as much as they are required to navigate their husband's authority. This produces a form of intra-female negotiation that complicates simplistic binaries of victim and oppressor. The household becomes a space where silence is not absence but calculation, where withholding information is a form of power management. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes evident that the women's ability to survive depends on their capacity to interpret subtle shifts in behaviour, emotion, and domestic routine. The implication is that power in the domestic sphere is relational rather than unilateral, constantly shifting between visibility and concealment.

This relational dynamic is further intensified by the emergence of female solidarity as both necessity and strategy within the household. While the polygamous structure is designed to isolate the wives from one another through competition for male attention, Shoneyin subverts this expectation by revealing moments of covert alliance and shared understanding. But can solidarity within oppression be considered genuine empowerment, or is it merely another adaptive response to structural constraint? The women's alliances are neither stable nor romanticised; they are tactical and situational, emerging when survival demands collective action against shared vulnerability. University of Cape Town observes that such narratives of polygamous domesticity often reveal "counter-intuitive networks of female agency" that disrupt patriarchal intentions of division. In this sense, solidarity becomes less an ideal and more a pragmatic response to structural entrapment. The household therefore functions as a paradoxical space where division produces connection, and competition produces cooperation. Shoneyin's narrative forces the reader to reconsider whether power is always hierarchical, or whether it can also be horizontally distributed among those who appear subordinate.

At the level of narrative strategy, Shoneyin's text further complicates the notion of domestic passivity by foregrounding knowledge as a form of power. The wives are not only emotionally intelligent but also deeply observant of each other's histories, desires, and vulnerabilities, which they use to navigate domestic hierarchies. This raises a critical question: if knowledge within the household is asymmetrically distributed, who truly controls the narrative of domestic life? The husband's authority is repeatedly undermined by his lack of access to the full emotional and psychological landscape of his household. In contrast, the wives operate with a more comprehensive understanding of the domestic system, allowing them to anticipate and manipulate outcomes. Ndiyah argues that this form of "embedded knowledge" constitutes a subtle but significant form of resistance within constrained domestic systems. The implication is that epistemic control within the household may be more consequential than formal authority. Through this lens, domestic space becomes an epistemological battlefield where what is known, hidden, or misrepresented determines survival.

Ultimately, Shoneyin's representation of polygamous domesticity destabilises conventional assumptions about home as a site of female disempowerment by revealing its internal contradictions. The household is neither purely oppressive nor liberatory; rather, it is a site of continuous negotiation where women constantly recalibrate their positions within shifting relational structures. This raises a final and pressing question: if agency in such a space is always conditional and tactical, can it still be meaningfully distinguished from survival itself? The answer offered by the narrative is not a definitive resolution but an invitation to rethink agency as embedded practice rather than abstract freedom. Women in Baba Segi's household do not escape patriarchy; they learn how to live within its fractures, exploiting its inconsistencies while managing its emotional costs. Ogunyemi suggests that such relational survival strategies reflect the ethical core of African Womanism, where endurance and negotiation replace confrontation as dominant modes of agency. In this way, Shoneyin's domestic world becomes a critical site for rethinking how power circulates not only through domination but through adaptation, secrecy, and carefully sustained relational intelligence.

Urban Space and Legal Consciousness: Atta's Lagos Woman

What happens when womanhood is displaced from the enclosed logic of the domestic sphere into the volatile, fast-moving terrain of the city, and can urban space truly offer liberation when it simultaneously intensifies surveillance, ambition, and social expectation? These questions frame Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*, where Lagos is not merely a backdrop but an active force shaping female subjectivity through unpredictability and contradiction. The city is presented as a space of possibility, yet it is also saturated with competing norms that continually test the limits of female autonomy. One must therefore ask whether urban modernity produces freedom or simply reconfigures older forms of constraint into more sophisticated social expectations. In Atta's narrative world, Enitan's journey becomes a study in movement—between family expectation, legal consciousness, and personal desire—each demanding a different version of herself. Lomotey suggests that this form of urban femininity reflects a broader shift in African women's writing, where agency is increasingly negotiated through institutional rather than purely domestic frameworks. Yet the question remains whether institutional engagement truly liberates women or merely relocates the site of struggle.

Within Lagos, education functions as both an entry point into mobility and a site of ideological tension, raising important questions about what kind of subject the educated woman is expected to become. Does education serve as a pathway to self-definition, or does it simply refine the tools through which women are expected to navigate pre-existing social hierarchies? Enitan's intellectual formation exposes her to new possibilities of thought, yet these possibilities are constantly filtered through familial expectations and gendered assumptions. Her legal awareness becomes particularly significant, as it

introduces her to the possibility of interpreting social relations through rights, justice, and institutional accountability. However, this legal consciousness does not exist in isolation; it is continually disrupted by emotional ties, cultural obligations, and gendered expectations of respectability. Fongang observes that postcolonial urban spaces often produce contradictory subjectivities, especially for women who must simultaneously embody tradition and modern professionalism. In this sense, education does not resolve contradiction but intensifies it, forcing women into continuous negotiation between competing identities. The urban woman, therefore, emerges not as a liberated subject but as a constantly recalibrating figure of transition.

Atta's Lagos further complicates the idea of freedom by positioning the city as a space of both anonymity and exposure, where movement does not necessarily guarantee autonomy. Can mobility in the city be equated with liberation, or does it merely shift the terms under which surveillance and judgment operate? Enitan's experience reveals that urban life demands constant self-presentation, where identity must be strategically adjusted depending on context, audience, and institutional setting. The city does not dissolve gender expectations; rather, it multiplies them across different social spaces. Within this environment, Enitan's legal consciousness becomes both empowering and burdensome, as it forces her to recognise systemic injustice while still operating within its constraints. Abib Sene argues that Atta's narrative constructs urban womanhood as a form of "discursive negotiation," where identity is continually rewritten in response to institutional pressure. This means that agency in the city is not static but procedural, requiring constant recalibration of self in relation to shifting norms. The implication is that urban space produces not resolution but intensified awareness of contradiction.

The legal dimension of Enitan's development introduces another layer of complexity, particularly in how law functions as both a tool of empowerment and a structure of limitation. Does legal knowledge genuinely transform gender relations, or does it simply equip women with new languages through which to articulate existing inequalities? Enitan's engagement with law allows her to reinterpret her social reality, yet it does not fully insulate her from the emotional and cultural pressures of her environment. The law, in this sense, becomes a double-edged instrument—offering recognition while also exposing the limits of formal equality. Jacinta notes that in many West African narratives, legal consciousness often coexists with emotional dislocation, particularly for women who attempt to reconcile institutional logic with familial expectation. Atta's novel thus refuses to romanticise legal empowerment, instead presenting it as a contested space of partial victories and persistent tensions. The urban woman's agency is therefore neither complete nor stable; it is continuously interrupted by the very systems that appear to support it.

Thus, *Everything Good Will Come* presents Lagos as a site where gender identity is continuously produced through friction rather than resolution. Enitan's movement through different social spaces reveals that agency is less about achieving final independence and more about sustaining interpretive flexibility in the face of competing demands. This raises a final question: if the city produces multiple, often conflicting versions of the self, can coherence ever be expected of the modern woman, or is fragmentation itself the condition of urban survival? The narrative suggests that coherence is less important than adaptability, as women learn to inhabit contradiction rather than resolve it. In this sense, Atta's work aligns with broader African feminist thought that views agency as relational, situational, and deeply embedded in institutional negotiation. reinforces this reading by arguing that contemporary African women's fiction increasingly foregrounds instability as a defining feature of modern female subjectivity. The urban woman, therefore, is not a completed identity but an ongoing process of adjustment within a city that both enables and constrains her possibilities.

Professional Space and the Cost of Autonomy: Aidoo's Reconfigured Marriage

What does it mean for womanhood to reach professional visibility yet remain structurally unsettled within the intimate domain of marriage, and can we truly speak of liberation when success in public life produces new forms of private disquiet? These questions are central to Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story*, where the professional woman is not simply empowered but placed within a field of competing expectations that refuse resolution. The narrative invites us to reconsider whether autonomy achieved through education and career advancement can withstand the enduring pull of cultural definitions of marriage and femininity. One must therefore ask whether modern professional success represents genuine transformation or merely a relocation of traditional constraints into more refined emotional and social forms. Esi's trajectory reveals that independence is never a settled achievement but a continuous negotiation between selfhood and relational obligation. Lomotey argues that Aidoo's fiction consistently exposes the instability of female autonomy within postcolonial modernity, where institutional progress does not necessarily translate into social acceptance. The professional woman, in this sense, becomes a figure suspended between recognition and resistance, never fully secure in either domain.

Within Aidoo's narrative world, marriage emerges not as a stable institution but as a contested space where expectations of gendered behaviour collide with individual aspirations for self-definition. Can marriage still be understood as partnership when it continually demands the erasure or modification of female subjectivity in order to sustain its symbolic coherence? Esi's professional identity does not exempt her from these pressures; rather, it intensifies the contradictions she must navigate. Her career success places her in a position of visibility, yet this visibility becomes a source of scrutiny within her marital relationship. The tension between her occupational autonomy and domestic expectations reveals that professional achievement does not automatically dismantle patriarchal logic. Jacinta observes that in many West African narratives, the professional woman often experiences heightened forms of relational strain precisely because her success disrupts normative gender hierarchies. Aidoo's text therefore complicates linear narratives of progress by showing that empowerment in one sphere can produce instability in another. The implication is that autonomy is not cumulative but unevenly distributed across different domains of life.

Esi's decision to pursue divorce represents one of the most radical gestures of self-assertion within the narrative, yet even this act is not presented as an uncomplicated triumph. What does it mean to choose oneself in a context where such a choice is culturally interpreted as disruption rather than self-realisation? The novel refuses to romanticise separation as liberation, instead exposing the emotional, social, and symbolic costs that accompany such a decision. Esi's professional identity remains intact, but her relational positioning becomes increasingly uncertain, as she occupies a space that is neither fully traditional nor fully reconfigured. Fongang notes that postcolonial African societies often struggle to accommodate women who refuse conventional marital roles, resulting in forms of social ambiguity that neither fully exclude nor fully accept them. Aidoo's narrative captures this ambiguity with precision, showing that autonomy can generate isolation as much as it produces freedom. The professional woman thus emerges as a figure who must continually negotiate the boundaries of acceptability while maintaining a fragile sense of self-coherence.

At the level of symbolic meaning, Changes interrogates the assumption that professional achievement necessarily produces social transformation for women. Does economic independence translate into relational equity, or does it simply expose deeper contradictions embedded within gendered expectations of marriage? Esi's experience suggests that the answer is neither straightforward nor stable. Her success in the public sphere does not dissolve the emotional demands placed upon her in private life; instead, it intensifies the disjunction between what she has achieved and what is socially recognised. Abib Sene argues that Aidoo's work consistently reveals the "structural lag"

between women's professional advancement and the persistence of traditional gender norms. This lag produces a condition in which women are simultaneously modern and traditional, empowered and constrained, visible and misrecognised. The narrative therefore resists closure, insisting instead on the unresolved nature of female subjectivity within transitional societies. Professional space becomes not a final destination but an ongoing site of tension.

Ultimately, Aidoo's representation of the professional woman compels us to rethink the meaning of autonomy in contexts where social recognition is uneven and conditional. If independence requires social validation to be meaningful, can it still be considered autonomy when such validation is withheld or contested? The novel suggests that autonomy must be understood not as a fixed state but as a fragile process of self-maintenance within contradictory social expectations. Esi does not achieve a final resolution; instead, she inhabits a space of ongoing negotiation where identity must be continually reasserted and reinterpreted. Lomotey reinforces this reading by arguing that contemporary African women's fiction increasingly portrays female autonomy as processual rather than definitive. In this sense, Aidoo's narrative aligns with broader theoretical concerns in African feminist thought, where agency is understood as relational, contested, and incomplete. The professional woman, therefore, is not the endpoint of progress but a critical site where the costs of modernity and the limits of tradition are made visibly entangled.

Comparative Synthesis: Typologies of Resistance and the Grammar of Negotiated Agency

How do we meaningfully compare women's experiences across such distinct narrative spaces as the domestic compound, the urban city, and the professional world without flattening their differences into a single story of "oppression and resistance," and can we still speak of a unified feminist trajectory when each text appears to construct agency through different logics of survival? These questions mark the threshold of synthesis in this study, where the aim is no longer to isolate individual narratives but to read them as part of a broader grammar of gendered negotiation. Across Shoneyin, Atta, and Aidoo, womanhood is neither singular nor linear; it is instead distributed across spaces that demand different tactical responses to constraint. What becomes clear is that agency is not a fixed possession but a shifting capacity that changes shape depending on context, pressure, and relational positioning. Lomotey suggests that contemporary African women's writing increasingly refuses unified definitions of liberation, instead privileging multiplicity and situational adaptation. Yet one must ask whether this multiplicity signals progress or whether it simply reflects the deepening complexity of gendered constraint in modern African societies. In either case, what emerges is not a single narrative of emancipation but a patterned field of negotiated survival.

When these texts are placed side by side, a typology of resistance begins to emerge, revealing three distinct but interconnected modes of female agency. In Shoneyin's domestic world, resistance is primarily horizontal, emerging through female solidarity, secrecy, and the strategic circulation of knowledge within the polygamous household. But can solidarity among co-wives be understood as liberation, or is it merely a survival mechanism produced by structural entrapment? Ndiyah argues that such solidarities should be read as adaptive resistance formations rather than idealised feminist alliances, since they are often born out of necessity rather than ideological alignment. In Atta's urban Lagos, resistance shifts into an institutional mode, where education, legal consciousness, and civic engagement become tools for negotiating identity within public structures of power. Here, agency is expressed through mobility and discursive repositioning, yet it remains constrained by the persistent demand for cultural conformity. Abib Sene observes that this form of resistance is inherently unstable, as it requires continuous movement between competing identities. In Aidoo's professional Accra, resistance becomes

existential, expressed through rupture, particularly in Esi's decision to redefine marriage through divorce, even at the cost of social belonging. Across these three configurations, resistance is not uniform but structurally differentiated according to space and social expectation.

A second axis of comparison emerges when we consider the relationship between space and constraint, particularly how each narrative constructs the environment as both enabling and limiting. The domestic space in Shoneyin's novel is enclosed yet internally dynamic, producing forms of agency that depend on invisibility and relational intelligence. The urban space in Atta's work is expansive yet destabilising, requiring constant adaptation to shifting social codes and institutional demands. The professional space in Aidoo's narrative is formally liberating yet emotionally restrictive, exposing the tension between public success and private dissatisfaction. One must therefore ask whether space itself determines the possibilities of agency, or whether agency is better understood as the ability to reinterpret space from within. Fongang argues that postcolonial African spaces are never neutral; they are always saturated with historical, cultural, and gendered meanings that shape how subjects move within them. This means that agency is less about occupying space freely and more about learning how to operate within its contradictions. In this sense, space becomes not a backdrop but an active participant in the production of gendered subjectivity.

A third dimension of comparison lies in the cost of agency, which reveals that resistance in all three texts is accompanied by forms of emotional, social, or existential loss. In Shoneyin's domestic world, the cost of agency is relational mistrust and sustained emotional vigilance within a fragile network of co-wives. In Atta's urban narrative, the cost manifests as identity fragmentation and the pressure of continuous self-reinvention within competing social expectations. In Aidoo's professional context, the cost becomes most visible in emotional isolation and the erosion of stable marital belonging. But can agency still be considered meaningful when it consistently produces forms of dislocation and loss? Jacinta suggests that African women's narratives often refuse the fantasy of cost-free empowerment, instead foregrounding the material and emotional consequences of autonomy. This refusal is crucial, as it prevents the romanticisation of resistance and insists on the realism of gendered struggle. The implication is that agency is never free; it is always negotiated at a price, whether visible or concealed. Across the three texts, therefore, resistance is inseparable from cost, and empowerment is always shadowed by sacrifice.

What unites these divergent narrative worlds is not a shared model of liberation but a shared logic of negotiation, where women continuously recalibrate their positions within systems that remain structurally uneven. Can we still think of emancipation as an endpoint, or must we instead understand it as an ongoing process of adjustment, compromise, and reinterpretation? Ogunyemi proposes that African Womanism already anticipates this condition by framing survival as relational and adaptive rather than oppositional and absolute. This means that what appears as inconsistency across the texts may in fact be a coherent theoretical pattern grounded in lived realities of constraint. Lomotey further argues that the diversity of strategies in African women's fiction should be read as evidence of conceptual maturity rather than fragmentation. In this light, Shoneyin, Atta, and Aidoo collectively map a spectrum of negotiated agency that resists closure and instead foregrounds the instability of gendered life. The synthesis therefore does not resolve difference but renders it analytically productive, showing that womanhood in West African fiction is best understood as a shifting practice of survival within uneven worlds.

4. Conclusion

Rethinking Gender, Agency, and the Future of West African Feminist Imagination

What does it finally mean to read West African women's fiction not as a closed archive of gender struggle but as an evolving intellectual space where agency is continuously tested, revised, and reimagined, and can we still speak of conclusion when the narratives themselves resist closure and insist on movement, tension, and incompletion? These questions frame the closing reflections of this study, where the focus shifts from comparative interpretation to broader theoretical implication. Across Shoneyin, Atta, and Aidoo, womanhood emerges not as a fixed identity but as a contested process shaped by shifting spatial, emotional, and institutional pressures. The study has shown that agency is not located in a single act of resistance but in the accumulation of small, strategic negotiations that redefine survival in context-specific ways. Lomotey suggests that African women's writing increasingly destabilises linear narratives of empowerment, replacing them with layered and situational understandings of gendered becoming. Yet one must still ask whether this conceptual openness reflects genuine liberation or simply the complexity of unresolved structural inequalities. What remains clear is that West African feminist fiction refuses to offer final answers, instead sustaining a productive tension between constraint and possibility.

One of the central insights of this study is that resistance in these texts cannot be reduced to visibility or confrontation alone, but must be understood through the subtler logics of negotiation, adaptation, and strategic silence. Can silence itself be a form of agency, or does it always risk being misread as absence within dominant interpretive frameworks? The novels examined consistently demonstrate that what is unsaid is often as politically significant as what is spoken, particularly in contexts where speech carries social or relational consequences. Ndiyah argues that African women's narratives frequently encode resistance in affective and relational forms that defy straightforward political categorisation. This means that agency must be rethought beyond action-based definitions and extended to include interpretive, emotional, and relational labour. In Shoneyin, this appears in the management of domestic secrecy; in Atta, in the navigation of institutional identity; and in Aidoo, in the reconfiguration of marital meaning. Across these spaces, resistance is neither singular nor spectacular but dispersed, embedded, and often invisible to external observers. The implication is that feminist analysis must expand its vocabulary to account for these quieter forms of gendered negotiation.

Another key argument advanced in this study concerns the spatial politics of womanhood, particularly how domestic, urban, and professional spaces produce different configurations of constraint and possibility. If space is not neutral but socially produced, then how do women actively reinterpret or reconfigure the spaces they inhabit? The domestic sphere in Shoneyin's novel demonstrates how enclosure can generate internal networks of female strategy, even under patriarchal surveillance. The urban space in Atta's narrative reveals how mobility creates both opportunity and fragmentation, requiring constant identity recalibration. The professional space in Aidoo's work exposes the limits of institutional recognition when it is not matched by social acceptance. Fongang emphasises that postcolonial spaces are always layered with historical and gendered meanings that shape subject formation in uneven ways. This study extends that insight by showing that women are not merely shaped by space but actively reshape their meaning through everyday practices of negotiation. Space, therefore, becomes a site of ongoing contestation rather than fixed determination.

The study also foregrounds the importance of understanding cost as an integral dimension of agency, rather than treating empowerment as an unqualified good. What does it mean for autonomy to consistently generate emotional strain, social ambiguity, or relational rupture, and can agency still be celebrated when it is accompanied by such persistent costs? Across all three texts, female autonomy is shown to involve forms of loss that are neither incidental nor avoidable but structurally embedded. Jacinta observes that African feminist narratives often resist celebratory closures precisely because they remain attentive to the material and emotional consequences of resistance. This refusal of closure

is ethically significant, as it prevents the romanticisation of struggle and instead insists on the complexity of lived experience. In Shoneyin, cost appears as fractured trust within domestic relations; in Atta, as identity instability within urban mobility; and in Aidoo, as emotional dislocation within professional independence. These costs do not negate agency but define its conditions of possibility. The implication is that feminist interpretation must remain attentive to both empowerment and its shadow.

The study therefore argues that West African feminist fiction constructs a grammar of negotiated agency that refuses singular definitions of womanhood and instead foregrounds multiplicity, tension, and situated survival. Can feminist theory adequately account for such complexity without reducing it to familiar categories of liberation and oppression? Ogunyemi offers an important starting point by framing African Womanism as a relational ethic grounded in survival, negotiation, and communal continuity rather than individual rupture. This perspective allows us to read Shoneyin, Atta, and Aidoo not as isolated feminist voices but as part of a broader intellectual tradition that rethinks power through relation rather than separation. Lomotey further reinforces this view by arguing that contemporary African women's writing increasingly operates as a site of theoretical production in its own right. In this sense, fiction becomes not merely illustrative of feminist ideas but constitutive of them. The future of West African feminist imagination, therefore, lies not in resolving contradiction but in sustaining it as a productive analytic space where gender, power, and agency remain in constant motion.

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