

Ama Ata Aidoo: A Fond Remembrance and Farewell

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“Look here my sister, it should not be said but they say they opened her up.”
“They opened her up?”
“Yes, opened her up.”
“And the baby removed?”
“Yes, the baby removed.”
“Yes, the baby removed.”
“I say ...” “They do not say, my sister.”
“Have you heard it?”
“What?”

(Ama Ata Aidoo, “The Message” in *No Sweetness Here and Other Stories* [Feminist Press, 1970/1995]).

Ama Ata Aidoo’s powerful voice is silenced by her recent passing (May 31, 2023). The literary world will miss her unique contributions as a creative writer, cultural worker, and thinker. Her historic and feminist vision, committed to realizing a just and equitable society for both women and men in post-independence Ghana was local as well as global. Aidoo recognized the shared struggles for full autonomy and liberation for black people across the African continent and the black diaspora. She wrote passionately about the destiny of black people, marred by the devastations of the slave trade and the lingering wounds of colonialism’s economic and psychological violence that denigrated African languages, religions, and cultures.

Aidoo was as adept at representing the postcolonial challenges faced by ordinary people in her finely crafted short stories and engaging poems as she was in depicting gender inequities in her dramas. Her skillful storytelling is evident in her novel *Changes: A Love Story* (The Feminist Press, 1991) and her multi-genre text *Our Sister Killjoy: or Reflections from a Black-Eyed Squint* (Longman, 1994 [1977]), which scathingly portrays the continuing unequal power dynamics between the global North and South.

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Aidoo's essays, such as "To Be a Woman," and her insightful analyses of language, gender, and culture in interviews merit a posthumous collection for her probing views on orality, feminism, and linguistic blind spots. For instance, In "To Be a Woman," Aidoo narrates a sobering incident when an excited male student burst into her office after her lecture and paid her the compliment that her "English was absolutely masculine." In my essay, "Teaching Aidoo: Theorizing via Creative Writing," I explore "what I call Aidoo's unique kind of 'literary theorizing' that provides provocative critical reading practices for teachers and scholars of Aidoo's work as well as that of other writers from the so-called 'third world' who are dedicated to social justice in their decolonizing societies ... I attempt to extend what is accepted usually as 'theory' in Western academia and include the writer's own analyses in essays, interviews and other occasional publications" (in Anne V. Adams, ed., *Essays in Honour of Ama Ata Aidoo at 70* [Ayeibia Clarke Publishing, 2012], 138).

Champion of Orality

The dynamism of orality is [what Africa] can give to the world (Aidoo, in Adeola James, ed., *In Their Own Voices: African Women Writers Talk* [Heinemann 1990], 23).

Aidoo demonstrated her commitment to orality in all her written texts that integrate the dramatic and narrative, and where the sound of the spoken voice is palpable. As she remarked in a 1967 interview: "The art of the speaking voice can be brought back so easily ... We don't have to write for readers, we can write for listeners" (quoted in Dennis Duerden and Cosmo Pieterse, eds., *African Writers Talking: A Collection of Interviews* [Heinemann 1972], 23–24). Aidoo creatively transmutes several features of orality—conversation, audience participation, and communal voices as chorus, dialogue, repetition—into written "heard" texts, as in the opening of her short story "The Message" (quoted above as epigraph), with its medley of voices, dialoguing, questioning, and repeating the disturbing news that has arrived via this "tengram [telegram] thing."

Aidoo's dynamic form of oral textuality is interwoven with proverbs and local idioms, such as "the mouth must not tell everything" (*The Dilemma of a Ghost and Anowa* [Longman African Writers 1985], 7), or the choral character of First Woman, who wonders if the African American character Eulalie, the female protagonist in *Dilemma of a Ghost*, who uses machines for everything (and is misjudged as barren whereas she and her husband are practicing birth control, something unfamiliar to the village community), is "pregnant with a machine child?" (*Dilemma*, 39). In *Anowa*, the protagonist's mother Badua wonders if Anowa and her husband have "sold their birth-seeds to acquire their wealth" (*Dilemma*, 92). Badua also expresses a troubling traditional/ patriarchal saying that "a good woman does not have a brain or a mouth" (*Dilemma*, 93).

In Aidoo's dramas, choral characters—First Woman and Second Woman in *Dilemma of a Ghost*—comment on childbearing, female fertility, and the

necessity of biological motherhood to even be considered a full-fledged woman. Through a children's song, namely, "Shall I go to Cape Coast /Or to Elmina? /I don't know. I can't tell" Aidoo deftly includes the slave trade by naming these historic slave "castles" (a misnomer for dungeons). In *Anowa*, the communal chorus is embodied in Old Man and Old Woman. The latter, who upholds internalized patriarchy, is bitterly critical of the precocious and bold Anowa, who breaks traditional norms by selecting her own husband, then with her own foresight and moral conviction opposing him fiercely for wanting to own slaves, and who comes to a tragic end. Aidoo has noted that she heard the story of Anowa "in the form of a song" from her mother. Aidoo traces her playwriting to "a people who told stories ... My mother 'talks' stories and sings songs ... definitely, a direct antecedent" (James, 23).

Aidoo is a venerable griot of African oral tradition, one who remembers and recounts her community's history elegantly. Her representations of ordinary people who struggle to survive with dignity are memorable in *No Sweetness Here and Other Stories*, such as the disillusioned Zirigu in "For Whom Things Did Not Change" who asks, "What does 'Independence' mean?" (*No Sweetness Here*, 29), or the fate of Mansa "with a mouth that looked like clotted blood" who leaves her village to work as a barmaid/ dancer/prostitute in the city, and who states forthrightly that "any kind of work is work" in the short story "In the Cutting of a Drink" (*No Sweetness Here*, 37).

Diasporic-Feminist Vision

Aidoo was a pan-Africanist, inspired by her upbringing in the 1960s, an exhilarating time under independent Ghana's inaugural president Kwame Nkrumah, and visits by intellectuals such as the African American W.E.B. Dubois and the Trinidadian George Padmore. Aidoo remains remarkable among Black African writers who excavated and laid bare the painful history of Ghanaians (such as the male protagonist Kofi Ako in *Anowa*) who traded their own people to European slavers. Aidoo takes a searing look at "the relationship between us [Africans] and the African diaspora [which] is charged ... it is one of the issues that the entire continent needs to go through; [to undertake] some debriefing. Our inability almost to go forward is part of the mess we are in" (Yaba Badoe, *The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo* [Fadoa Films 2014, www.amaatafilm.com]). For Aidoo, it is fundamental that black people on both sides of the Atlantic face this history with honesty. In such mandates, Aidoo embraces "the continent through tough love" remarks Ngugi wa Thiong'o astutely, "being able to see its beauty because she is also able to see clearly her warts" (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, "Ama Ata Aidoo: A Personal Celebration," in Adams, 426–38). Ghanaians themselves trading their own people as slaves was certainly one such uncomfortable "wart" that Aidoo depicts courageously in *Anowa*, even as she shows up the racism among her own people in *Dilemma* when they reject the African American Eulalie as "an offspring of slaves."

Aidoo created strong female characters who embody their author's forthright feminist stance, in her words:

When people ask me rather bluntly every now and then whether I am a feminist, I not only answer yes, but I go on to insist that every woman and every man should be a feminist—especially if they believe that Africans should take charge of our land, its wealth, our lives, and the burden of our own development. Because it is not possible to advocate independence for our continent without also believing that African women must have the best that the environment can offer. For some of us, this is the crucial element of our feminism. (Ama Ata Aidoo, “The African Woman Today,” *Dissent* 39 [1992], 319–25)

In conclusion, Aidoo's original literary contributions that excavate history, gender, slavery, and diaspora through a feminist lens will continue to enlighten readers and listeners who tune into her wavelength and learn from the many human beings who populate her creative world—from the child Anowa who asks her Nana, “what is a slave?” only to be told that “all good men and women try to forget; they have forgotten” (*Dilemma*, 106) that harrowing past, to the Old Man's wise words after both Kofi and Anowa are dead: “Who knows if Anowa would have been a better person if we had not been what we are? ... If there is life after death, Anowa's spirit will certainly have something to say about that” (*Dilemma*, 124). Aidoo's female characters like Anowa are not victims; although Anowa dies at the end, her spirit will have “something to say” to future women. For Sissie in *Our Sister Killjoy*, home “felt like fresh honey on the tongue: a mixture of complete sweetness and smoky roughage. Below was home with its unavoidable warmth and even after these thousands of years, its uncertainties” (*Our Sister Killjoy*, 133).

Aidoo's rich creative texts speak to us across time and space. Her writing has made remarkable contributions to world literature in English. Her voice is profoundly significant in our time of political divisions and strife, for students and scholars who can learn from her incisive questions and complex representation of the many dilemmas facing contemporary postcolonial societies.

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