
The Wo-Man Empire: A Womanist Reading of Ama Ata Aidoo's Plays

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Abstract

*This paper is a womanist critique of Ama Ata Aidoo's two plays, **Dilemma of a Ghost** (1965) and **Anowa** (1970). The paper examines the roles of the major female characters in the two plays, in their relationship with the men in their worlds, and brings out their undeniable contributions to the lives of these men. The study equally shows how these contributions pale into insignificance as the women later appear the 'wo-man' (woe of man) in man's world. The paper therefore concludes that while women must contribute and take their 'right of way', it has to be in a mutually and culturally acceptable and definable order.*

Introduction

The African woman has come a long way. At least, the city woman. Different from the poor, voiceless, powerless and often marginalized womenfolk of African literature, women writers are now presenting

more positive images of women in African literature. (Kolawole, 1997:12) The myth of the woman as powerful, resourceful, emotionally-stable, dependable and even as breadwinners are fast gaining ground. Such characters include Akinwumi Isola's Efunsetan Aniwura, Amadi's Ihuoma, Osofisan's Titubi and Aidoo's Opokuya. While these images of women may not have discarded the myth of man as a breadwinner, they have become alter-egos as we can also see in Eulalie and Ato's mothers in *Dilemma of a Ghost*, who single-handedly saw their children through University Education.

Gender role sharing is determined by centuries of misconceived notion of gender inequality. This underlies the ever present notion that gender beliefs are the direct recurrent decimal underpinning women's problem here in Africa and elsewhere. This has largely led to the recurrence of gender as a major preoccupation, as many women

writers act as mouthpieces for other women. This may not be peculiar to Africa but African women writers face the additional challenge of making gender issues relevant to African culture. (Kolawole, 1997:12) it is in this light that Aidoo's play discussed in this study become important. The two plays chosen for this study are some of the earliest plays in African corpus dramatizing gender relational problems as experienced in African culture. Gender relations have been the themes of many literary works in Africa and outside the continent, with the preoccupation of exploring the many possibilities of gender relational and inter-relational benefits and problems.

Feminism and Womanism as Gender Theories

Feminism and Womanism are gender theories that have become recurrent and predominant critical tools for literary analysis in recent years in Africa. More so, both are affecting the position and status of women in African societies. Both feminism and womanism are movements for the emancipation of women from political, economic, cultural, social, physical and psychological domination. There are

diversities of these gender theories. Feminism, right from the beginning, sees men as responsible for the inferior status of women in the society. Mary Wollstonecraft published a book in the 18th century: *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. She argues that men and women must share true equality before either of them could be free. She again identified *false system of education* as one of the factors responsible for women's subjugation because through this system of education, false images of women are passed from generation to generation, therefore seeing the problem of women as being that of nurture rather than nature as the opponents for 'superanumary bone of Adam' (Virgina Adams, p.18) would contend. But rather than completely dissociate themselves from men's society, she proposed another system of education that will truly make the woman a 'helpmeet' for man. (Wollstonecraft, p.15) Wollstonecraft contributions has remained a landmark in agitation of women for due recognition from men and society of all ages. But her contribution is equally more important in other respects. She provided the framework for latter day's womanist theorist and philosophers with her advocacy of

women as ‘helpmeet’. While many scholars all over the world have defined feminism from diverse angles of reflection and refraction, womanism is the black/African woman conceptualization of feminism in African culture. (Kolawole, 1997:15) One major poser for African women writers and literary critics is the question of relevance of feminism to African culture and how women writers on the continent identified with western feminism. Ama Ata Aidoo, as represented by her two plays here, symbolizes the changing attitude of African woman to feminism. While radical feminists opined that patriarchy and the women’s reproductive roles need to be upturned for women to be set free, Aidoo sees differently, partly because some part of Africa practices matriarchy yet, women are still not properly recognized. Many radical feminists also advocate ‘a gendered reproduction’ (Virginia Adams, p.5). The psychoanalytical feminists see the sexual act as an oppression of the females because she has to stay under the man. The liberal feminist tolerates men but does not see men as necessary for the wellbeing either economically, socially and politically. While one may not completely fault the agenda for

women emancipation, there is much controversy in feminism, both as political theory and a critical tool for literary enterprise with cultural validity in Africa. The departing point of African scholars from feminist thought may have begun with African-American writers/theorists such as Alice Walker, Angela Davies, Carole Boyce Davis and Philomena Steady and African scholars such as Molarra Ogundipe-Leslie, Chikwenje Okonjo-Ogunyemi, Modupe Elizabeth Kolawole, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo and others. This started with Black Feminism which is a conceptualization that distinguishes the black woman’s while recognizing cultural universals. But other critics again see Black Feminism as a misconstruction of terms. This accounts for the conceptualization of gender through new terminology – African/Africana Womanism. Although Alice Walker and Chikwenje Okonjo-Ogunyemi were the first to use the term ‘Womanism’ (Hudson-Weems, p.16). It was Hudson-Weems that gave it specific Afrocentric direction (Kolawole,p.11)

According to Hudson-Weems (1993, p.15):

*Africana womanism is
an ideology created and*

*designed for all
women of African descent.*

*It is grounded in
African culture and therefore
it*

*necessarily focuses on
the unique experiences,*

*struggles, needs and
desires of Africana women.*

The uniqueness of African women's experiences and reality informs the need for an African woman to dissociate herself from the militant anti-men postures of the Western woman. African womanism is thus a gender theory that gathers together the peculiarities of black women's experiences for cultural meaningfulness. Thus, womanism is a more acceptable form of gender theory that underscores rather than rejects family togetherness and advocates concerted effort by men and women in the struggles against all forms of oppression. It celebrates feminine qualities but does not uphold the neutralization of sex roles or outlook (Olorunsomo, 2000, p.12). Womanism is a holistic approach to women issues, a celebration of the totality of the

woman's experience and being. It is a wholesome recognition of nature/traditional assignment to womanhood. This is the reason many African women within and outside the academia would rather see themselves taking their place beside men without feeling threatened. They rejected feminism as a perpetuation of white women's agenda (Alexander-Floyd and Simien, 2006). They appreciate the natural design of femininity as a given fact and they aim to promote and preserve the pride of being a female human being (Boisnier, 2003)

Hudson-Weems (1993) and Kolawole (1997) present twelve codes for an African woman definition – these are self-naming, family centredness, submission, supportive of males in struggle, commitment to genuine sisterhood, strength of character, wholeness and authenticity, spirituality, respectfulness, respectability, mothering and nurturing. By these codes, scholars have affirmed womanism to be a gender theory more accommodating and reflective of African woman's experience and role in society.

This paper will be looking at six of these codes in the context of the plays

chosen for study. They are self-naming, family centredness, submission, complementarily, spirituality/intuitive, mothering and nurturing.

Synopsis of the Two Plays

The Dilemma of a Ghost (1965) revolves around Eulalie, an educated African-American married to a young Ghanaian graduate, Ato. They got married while they were still abroad where Ato has gone to study. Eulalie extracted a promise from her husband to delay procreation until such a time they are economically and emotionally prepared. Ato, who knew the cultural imperatives of his society failed to impress upon his wife the misunderstanding the step could precipitate in the homeland. Ato, because of his modern beliefs, agreed with his wife but when they got back home, the woman was blamed for childlessness after years of marriage and is even working like her husband, smoking, using gadgets in the home instead of being the *cultural* woman who meekly stays at home while the man goes out to work.

Anowa (1970) takes the motif of the earlier play further by situating the marriage strictly within the culture. Anowa, chose her

own husband in spite of the parents disapproval. She left home with the husband Ako to settle in Yebi where they become prosperous. However, the prosperity did not bring the much needed happiness and contentment to Anowa, partly because she was childless and partly because her husband has become an alien to her. He has acquired slaves which Anowa detests. At the end both of them committed suicide.

Conceptual Analysis of the Plays

In *dilemma of a Ghost* (Aidoo, 1965), Aidoo explores the myth of the childless woman. This myth was prevalent in pre-modern societies and even in some parts of Africa till the present time that a woman is to blame for childlessness in marriage. Motherhood and nurturance are two interwoven major assignments traditional Africa or even nature assigns to womanhood. A woman that fails in any of the two is adjudged failure in life. The first woman in the play sees herself as unlucky because of her childlessness. Aidoo sets out to look at the possible causes from Planned Parenthood. In exploring this theme, Aidoo situates her thesis within the cultural milieu of matriarchy using a young Ghanaians

graduate from an American University and an Africa-American who got married peremptorily without any member of the family knowing about it. With this play, Aidoo attempts to deflate the unconscious attempts of the West to de-womanize African women since a woman is recognized through her role in extending the frontier of the human race. This is one of the cardinal principles of womanism – motherhood. The woman's suggestion of Planned Parenthood becomes an Achilles' heels in their marriage. Yet, she means well in advising a solid base for the unborn child. Besides, marriage in Africa is a communal experience. It is the pride of every woman, both the aged and the young; educated and the uneducated. The mother of the bride is happy because of her success in bringing up another *woman* for her race while the bride is happy for the opportunity she has to fulfill the essence of her being. The community as a whole is happy that it has another of its race falling in the line with the norms of the race. Hence, the occasion is generally celebrative: it is a celebration of the rites of womanhood. This was the reason the Odunma clan was taken aback when Ato informed them he was married already

without any prior notice to even the mother. The foreign woman, the stranger in their home, is the obvious culprit. Though, the playwright refused to give us the insight for this insidious insult on the clan, yet, all would gladly see it as an influence of the *strange woman* which is an indictment of liberal feminism. Besides, marriage is not merely a joining together of the couples, but a joining together of families. This explains why Badua was concerned about her only daughter marrying a woman from Nsona clan which has a bad reputation in the community. This view of marriage informs the characterization of Eulalie, the liberal feminist in an African environment, a misnomer. To the African woman, mothering and nurturing is the pride of womanhood. There is no place for the childless woman. Eulalie probably solved the problem by following the grandmother to the school for re-education and acculturation.

Self-definition is an important aspect of Womanism. This is actually the point of departure from Black Feminism or Africana Womanism. The two central characters of the play started with self definition by giving themselves pet-names – *Sweetie Pie*

for Eulalie and *Native Boy* for Ato. The names show the projection of the lovers. *Sweetie pie* defines the woman that exists merely for the pleasure of the man. *Poor Sweetie pie* extends the metaphor to include the woman as object of man's pity – slaving for man's comfort. Ato was *Native Boy* to Eulalie, which is a symbol of her yearning for her roots. She actually sees her coming to Ghana as coming home to roost. She even romanticizes the countryside: *...waa..! The palm trees, the azure sea, the sun and the golden beaches...*" (Aidoo, 1965:13). This yearning in Eulalie is reminiscent of Maya Angelou's *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes* where the African-Americans discovered that Africa of their dreams is non-existent. This was the earlier part of their relationship when they live like royalty. The Bubble bursts at the climax six months later when the couples were visiting the relatives. The mother, in the culture of mothering, brought snails for them. Eulalie because of her cultural rootlessness exhibited the ignorance of the western feminist. She asserted her desires and wants as opposed to that of her husband. Even the man 'pleaded' that she 'allows' the snail to be prepared for him by his mother. Eulalie

was quick to cut in *"...and give them the opportunity of accusing me of inadaptability..."*(Aidoo, 1965:28), yet, Ato was quick to his wife's defense before his mother when he was confronted later, showing oneness in the marital relationship despite personal differences. This underscores the fact that Womanism is issue oriented, not people oriented. Feminism believes man is the problem while womanism does not but is in alliance with man to redress inequalities in the society.

The climax of the action came when the couple was confronted by the extended family for childlessness. Ato, as usual, after an initial stupefied silence in the face of years of prejudiced traditional belief in the culpability of the woman in the matters of childlessness, overawed again because of the innate misunderstanding of the modern notions of arranged procreation/family planning, rose to the defense of his wife again. However, the dawn of reality, prefigured by the Ghost Scene of Act II now plays itself out. All the vestiges of deceit are removed. Eulalie, now drunk, was at her militant feminist best, attacked her husband and family and called them 'savages'. This provocation earned her

a slap that woke her up from her dream and brought her dystopia fast. She went to the school and bowed to eat the humble pie of self re-assessment. Ato, having looked for her in vain, was distraught. He made his choice – went back to his mother for help and counsel where Eulalie came to meet them. This is a part of the womanist agenda and a re-affirmation of African familial bond. After the round of purgative self-confession and re-assessment at both sides of the divide, there was reconciliation. Eulalie, like Sidi who chose Baroka, the traditionalist, instead of prepossessing Lakunle in Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*, chose the path of integration, discarded the militant toga of feminism and became the reborn womanist as her mother-in-law took her to her quarters in the old sections of the clan compound. This again shows the sisterhood of womanism, supportive of one another. But the support of Eulalie was supposed to offer her husband was not forthcoming because much of their income goes to satisfy her desires for technological gadgets. To the womenfolk at the homestead, it is strange that she works but more strange is the fact that in spite of this fact, they are not able to meet up their

needs. What Aidoo seems to argue here is not that it is not strange for the couple to work as in contemporary times because it has been part of African culture for the woman to work to support their husbands. As Oladele Taiwo (1984:84) pointed out that the man may be planting cassava, cocoyam, melon but that the woman is the harvester (and seller) of all farm products. This corroborates the contemporary position of womanhood in African society. Yet, Eulalie's work does not help her husband's standard of living that the family commented that "...Ato has...no penny to buy himself a shirt" (Aidoo, 1965:34). What Aidoo seeks to point out here is that mothering and nurturance is part of the African culture but Eulalie's independent work is only consumed on her lust to the extent that the family is the worse for it. What is intended to be a help actually became a burden. This may actually be a swipe at the European unbridled craze for technology at the expense of human degradation in their society – crime at an all time high level, drugs, juvenile delinquency and other forms of problems in the European societies. It may even be directed at the

feminists that leave other pressing problems in their society to fight the sexist war.

Eulalie, puffing away at her cigarette in the presence of the relatives shows her cultural dislocation. She failed to comprehend what familial bonding means to an African. When Ato confronted her with this by saying: “*now, you have succeeded in making trouble for me. Won't you congratulate yourself?*” (Aidoo, 1965:32). Her reply was rather that of disgust instead of disdain. It is an expression of regret not of exultation.

Anowa is a play that dramatizes the myth of a woman that defied tradition and suffered for it. The main thesis is that Anowa is not every woman ... (Aidoo, 1970:33). Rather, she is a woman with a difference. She is deliberately set against the multiple myths of womanhood and lost out. Anowa as a character is defined as a ... way farer....a traveler....who does not belong.... (Aidoo, 1970:37). While she is not hysterically anti-men or totally opposed to age-long definitions of womanhood, a woman as a mother-wife, man's friend and companion and a sister, which is the position of an African womanist, yet she sets out as a

liberated woman who demanded to have not only her say but also her way and ended up frustrated. Her conciliatory position between the outright radical feminist and the traditional woman is defined by Alice Walker as Black Feminism and Philomena Steady as African Feminism. This equates roughly with Liberal Feminism. But the big question is – Is Anowa a feminist? To answer this question needs a careful consideration of the characterization of Anowa in the play. Anowa was conceived to validate the myth of creation that is nature-oriented and widely accepted in most human societies. The woman is defined by the man, exists for the man by the famous super-annumary *bone of Adam* (Virginia Adams, p.18). The woman, does not only need the man, the man equally need her and both must cooperate to fulfill the nature (or God) assigned role of Earth's administration.

Anowa's inability to fulfill her priesthood essence – she was not allowed to dance – leads to accumulation of unused energy which predictably leads to her restlessness. The dance then being metaphor of both psychic and spiritual phenomena necessary for the stability of her own being, assumes a cosmic proportion when viewed

against the background of Anowa's characterization. This was her first indirect deviation from the traditional demands on her womanhood.

Her decision to marry a man contrary to the wish of her parents later set the stage for her suffering until the point of her recognition. This makes Anowa an archetypal anti-hero, to underscore the validity of the African woman's dependence on age old conventions, yet would want all women to conform to their canons of feminist struggle, even when these canons are not meaningful to the average African woman. This is set against the backdrop of Akan culture where there appears to be differentiated gender roles not only at the individual level but also at the family level with everybody recognizing the limitations. This position taken in cognizance of the husband-wife relationship suggests that the real leadership of the society rests with women who are in a position to exert enormous influence upon their husbands at home. A parallel exists in some European societies where the position of the Queen/Queen mother was very powerful. Queens Victoria and Elizabeth supervised arguably the most extensive and the most

powerful empire in human history. While the position of the Queen is sacrosanct and inviolable, the prime minister has to be subjected to the vagaries of democratic election where a woman could emerge as the winner, as it indeed was during the time of the Iron Lady of British politics – Margaret Thatcher.

Besides, women should constitute the majority of the enfranchised adults, if the myth of more women than men is real; they are in position to exert considerable influence on the way they are governed. The above is coupled with the conspicuous display of Queen Victoria's portrait in Kofi Ako's home as the matriarch of the most inglorious, bestial traffic in human history. Yet feminists would like to see women empowered. Maybe become apotheosized.

Anowa, though denied of her true essence, married the man of her choice against protest by her mother, more on account of the man being lazy and secondly because of his clan. They were not given chance of success. Anowa was set to prove tradition wrong on this score. Again, she lost. The two worked hard and in companionship at the beginning – which is

the militant feminist at the best, determined to prove her worth, but she was not cast in the mould of every other feminist. She believes in the complementary relationship with her husband. Anowa sees her role as companion to her man as paramount that she even invoked her spirituality in prayers for sunshine which was dramatically answered. Yet, she was not ashamed to tag along behind her husband as they walked along. She would complain of being considered a weakling yet she is afraid of the night. At this point, she has transformed to a liberal feminist. Anowa's problem however peaked when after years of marriage she had no issue. Though, they have grown in material possession but the real essence of the relationship remains unfulfilled. This became a source of continual sorrow for her. Moreover, her husband disregarded her advice against slave trade. Here, Kofi Ako in the mould of a liberal humanist and a cold blooded capitalist' rolled into one, while feigning interest in their matrimonial problems of infertility, refused to brook any disruption of his slave traffic. This is the only way he could validate his macho-image false myth of man's masculinity. To compound matters' he pretended the

problem of their childless marriage was due to the woman, thus making the woman the sacrificial lamb, the societal scapegoat for validation of his masculinity. (Aidoo, 1970:4)

This two-fold problem of Anowa is typified symbolically by her two wrappers, her defiance against the voice of tradition and her priesthood denial. Her defiance was now spiritual and physical, the essence and the material. She had died spiritually before her physical death. Since her priesthood was the contribution she had to make towards societal health and she was denied that, she was condemned to a life-long existence in disquietude. As pointed out earlier, mothering to an African woman is the joy of a fulfilled marriage. Anowa has sacrificed her parental love for matrimonial love but the hope of that love remains unfulfilled when she could not have her own child. This shows the womanist agenda of primacy of mothering instinct in the woman. Rather, she had psychological bruises for her self-assertion. Realizing this, she reverted to her child-like state, a state of innocence, the beginning point of life. The play climaxed in her suicide when the reality dawns on her that with the death of her husband, she has

to die unfulfilled, no man to nurture and no child to nurture, then the better to end it all. The disquietude provoked in the society by her rejection of arranged marriage was a reflection of an infraction of the moral order, disquietude in her. Her mother's intuitive warning about men of the Nsona clan turned out to be prophetic, another validation of a woman's pathetic emasculative process of growth which reached an anti-climax in her wanderings around the house like a ghost talking to herself, a half demented existence. She has lost her stability. At the point of recognition that led to the denouement, Anowa confessed that all her life she has been behaving like a grown up but has not gained anything by it. This makes her the errant feminist in African environment.

Conclusion

The two plays under study here present the heroines as stereotypes of what a feminist would look like in an African environment. Eulalie and Anowa are conceived as warning signals to would-be feminists of whatever shade in Africa. Their characterization is presented as cultural misbehaviors in a land where women cherished their men and support them,

cherished their roles as mothers and nurturer and cherished familiness. To the African woman, her essence is to be a 'help-meet' for man in earth administration. To do this, she may stand by the man, shoulder to shoulder, without undue and unhealthy rivalry, to support, not to supplant. Anowa who helped her man to become rich to the extent of procuring slaves that must fan an empty chair is an image of help that turned awry, not only for the man but for the society itself. Eulalie's decision to follow Ato to Africa is also an image of 'help' turned awry because she became a source of worry to the man until she was reconciled by the older women in the homestead. These show that cultural deviant of African womanhood end up being problem, not only for the man but also the society. They become woe-of-man instead.

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