

MOTHERHOOD – AMA ATA AIDOO'S CHANGING COLOUR

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Abstract

*In this article, the writer explores the changing views of Ama Ata Aidoo on motherhood. Using three of her works, the writer discusses Aidoo's attitude to motherhood in her early writings in *The Dilemma of a Ghost* and *Anowa* and compares this attitude to the writer's later works in *Changes*. The article concludes that judging from the main female characters, it becomes manifest that there is a dichotomy in the fulfilment of the motherhood paradigm if the two periods of Aidoo's writings are contrasted.*

Introduction

The concept of motherhood is one of the many issues that feminists of every persuasion show interest in. It is this issue that I intend to critically examine to determine the position of Aidoo through the women characters who inhabit her works.

Motherhood as a concept is not only a re-curring theme in literature but also it is central to the lives of many women. Motherhood shapes the relationship of women with other people especially their husbands and family members. Onwueme (1997) in *Tell it to Women* mocks the mothers who decide to murder since they have rejected mothering. Aidoo, an avowed feminist discusses motherhood in her writings. The society she depicts accepts and adores motherhood, although her own position does shift with time. It is not far from right to say that if women are the cement of the family, then motherhood concretizes or fulfils it.

Aidoo's works

Aidoo is a reputed and an acclaimed writer. She is novelist, dramatist and poet. Her works include *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, *Anowa*, *The Girl who can and other stories* and *Changes*. Others are *Our Sister Killjoy* and *No Sweetness here*.

For the purpose of this discussion, I intend to discuss three of the works. These are *Anowa*, *The Dilemma of a Ghost* both plays, and *Changes*, a novel. The choice of the three books has to do with the period in which they were written. In doing so, I should also like to state that since the discussion is a comparative study, it is important to divide the works into two. Hence, *Anowa* and *The Dilemma of a Ghost* would be termed early works while *Changes* would be regarded as later works. *The Dilemma of a Ghost* just like *Anowa* has a principal woman character in the person of Eulalie. The play discusses the consequences that await a been-to who brings home a foreign wife and how it pans out. The central conflict, however, is the inability of the heroine to conceive and give birth, an important requirement of the society that Aidoo depicts. In *Anowa*, the principal female character whose name is used as the title of the book, fails in spite all efforts to bear a child for her husband Kofi Ako. This leaves her troubled and eventually leads to her death. *Changes* describes the lives of working mothers in a changing Ghanaian society. The ability or inability of these women to combine their wifely role with their work is the subject of this work.

Analysis of Aidoo's works

In the early works of Aidoo, one cannot help but sympathize with Eulalie (*The Dilemma of a Ghost*) and *Anowa's* (*Anowa*) plight as women who either refuse or are unable to give birth. This seems to be the overriding perception of the societies that are depicted in *The Dilemma of a Ghost* and *Anowa*. This is because motherhood in the African feminist

context has a much more fulfilling meaning than in Western feminist circles. In many societies, a woman is valued according to her reproductive efficiency. Her status in family and community depends on her ability to bear children of the desired number and of the desired sex. De Beauvoir's conception of motherhood is one that sees the woman as "a victim of the species". For her, this enslavement of woman is expressed succinctly in her capacity to procreate. What de Beauvoir thinks is that for women to emancipate themselves from this circumscribed status, they must be in a position to control their bodies since every biological part of them is a "crisis" or a "trial". In analysing de Beauvoir's view of motherhood, Toril Moi concludes that "for Beauvoir, women are the slaves of the species". Although Aidoo supports de Beauvoir's idea that women should oppose the idea that portrays them as being equated to the second sex, there is a point of departure in as much as the use of the female body is concerned. The remarks above about Eulalie and Anowa attest to this viewpoint of Aidoo. Aidoo is supportive of de Beauvoir's view of women disentangling themselves from being called the second sex but her thoughts about motherhood contradict that held by de Beauvoir. Signe Arnfred in a paper titled, 'Simon de Beauvoir in Africa: Woman= The Second Sex? Issues of African Feminist Thought' supports Aidoo in this debate. For her, that the use of the female body is a handicap is unacceptable and smacks of insincerity from de Beauvoir since the latter herself confesses that "it is difficult to determine to what extent woman's physical condition handicaps her" (*Issues in Feminism*, p. 706).

How does motherhood oppress women like Esi, Opokuyaa, and Fusena (*Changes*). Indeed, Aidoo does not give any indication of these mothers complaining about their role as mothers. All the above women are happy to be called mothers but in different ways. Aidoo's women in the later works are not the rural ones we discussed in the early works, because for the former women, there are many alternatives to being married and having children. Esi, for example, wants to be called a mother but not one who is a prolific child bearer while Fusena in particular sees her role as one specifically married to Ali to produce several children. What for example brought about the conflict between Oko and Esi in *Changes* is not about the care of Ogyaanowa nor did it emanate from her being called a mother; but it was about some independence and freedom to choose when to have sex with another human being who only happens to be called by a different name - a husband. Esi thinks that her society's inability to allow her to exercise her right in her marriage with Oko should be interpreted as enslavement. It must, however, be remembered that in most African societies, a wife is virtually the property of the husband. In other words, the husband decides to have uninhibited access to the woman's body any day and anytime. Esi thinks otherwise. She wants to be a mother but at the same time wants to re-negotiate with her society to determine when to have sex, when to have children etc.

What about the conflict between Fusena and Ali? (*Changes*) The conflict is not about Fusena's inability to care for their children but that Ali desires to take another wife and a graduate of course, is what leads her to lodge a complaint. Opokuya in spite of her heavy schedule as a nurse that leaves her virtually exhausted at the close of each day still finds time to take care of her family. Aidoo then presents women who cherish motherhood in her later works but at the same time love to be independent both in thought and action.

Aidoo's women in her later writings are not like the women in the early works as women in the later writings crave for some independence as far as their reproductive organs are concerned. In Esi Sekyi (*Changes*) for example, the desire is not only for her to be given the independence and freedom but also to be part of the arrangement about the number of children she wants as a mother. Until she decided that Ogyaanowa alone was enough for her at present, her independence and freedom are unquestioned as they seem to exist. In Opokuya's case, her four children are not stumbling blocks to her wish to be a professional nurse. After all, she is able to leave them alone while she went to work only to return home to

surmount the challenge of her wifely and motherly duties. Hence, *Changes* as a novel for example, calls for new articulations of wifehood, child bearing and motherhood.

Aidoo's society's view of motherhood in the later writings is enshrined in Oyeronke Oyewumi's words: "Mother is the preferred and cherished self-identity of many African women" (2000:1096). Oyewumi contends that the position of mother is in itself a position of authority in Africa culture. Most women aspire to be mothers because under patriarchy, they are made to enjoy an imaginary status. Clark in *Through African Eyes* quoted in Pandey also observes that "the rearing of a family brings with it a rise in social status. The social position of a married man and woman who have children is of greater importance and dignity than that of a bachelor or spinster" (p. 141). In her book *The Emancipation of Women: An African Perspective*, Dolphyne (1991) has these to say about motherhood:

Motherhood is a colossal role of a woman; her childbearing function and ability to provide nourishment for children through her own body must be far more fulfilling than her contribution, for example, to farming (p.17).

Aidoo practicalizes the popular saying among most Africans that mother is supreme. In this regard, she does not pay lip service to mothers but rather gives meaning to motherhood. This view is alien to most Western cultures whose thinking is like Eno Egu's Lagos society (*The Joys of Motherhood*), which no more shows interest in having many children but rather become totally and predominantly wealth seekers.

Amadiume also adds her voice to the debate on motherhood and thinks that African women's power is based on "the logic of motherhood". For her, motherhood is empowering and not disempowering as it tends to be in the West. Pandey also supports the above assertion:

The presence of the Africanized term motherless in West African English is a testament to the power of motherhood in this part of the world. Motherhood is presented as the opportunity to create, nurture and sustain progeny. As a result, it is consistently presented as a fulfilling experience to married females, their families, and their husbands, in particular (p.4).

The dichotomy

The difference between Aidoo's early works as seen in *The Dilemma of a Ghost* and *Anowa*, and her later ones as seen in *Changes* as far as motherhood is concerned, becomes all the more manifest if one considers the principal female characters who inhabit her works. Eulalie and Anowa, two important women characters in the early writings (*The Dilemma of a Ghost and Anowa*) may be considered unfulfilled mothers (women) because of their inability to procreate. We need to understand and appreciate Eulalie's background. Because of her Western genesis, she does not show to be very worried about her plight as a motherless woman since for her procreation is not her immediate concern.

This being the case, it is not also surprising that Ato, the been-to, having been influenced by western ideas, succumbs to the culture of disparaging motherhood and agrees with Eulalie to postpone procreation. Despite Ato's education, he should not have forgotten that not only is his mother expecting to have a grandchild from him but that Nana, her grandmother also is expectant of a great grandchild. While it is true that Ato's education naturally will make him have interest in practising family planning, a concept common with educated people, he should not have forgotten that (at least) his society will expect him to start procreation once he was married. The joy of such a thing (Ato having a child) happening to both mother and grandmother cannot be exchanged for anything in Akan culture which is the setting for these works. Also worthy of mention is the concern shown by all the other characters, women and men alike about Eulalie and Ato's intentions.

On the other hand, Anowa, who is born, bred and immersed in Africa culture, knows the importance attached to childbirth and by extension motherhood. This is why between Eulalie and Anowa, it is the latter who shows signs of worry for her inability to give birth. No wonder then that not even the several slaves (somehow adopted children), could assuage her worry and desire to be called a mother. Despite assurances from her husband, Anowa does not budge. Anowa knows that her motherless state diminishes her status in the society and by extension affects the influence she wields as a wife especially when we consider that she comes from Fanti lineage which is typically matrilineal. Anowa knows and understands the predicament of motherless women and for which reason such mothers will go at any length to have children. Motherhood, Aidoo appreciates and approves, is an important path to social status and personal achievement.

Aidoo sympathizes with Eulalie for her non-conformity to the African feminist's view of motherhood just as she regrets Anowa's inability to produce her own children after flouting traditionally accepted way of being betrothed to a man. Aidoo's society surely does not approve of these women in this respect. Eulalie and Anowa could have impacted positively in some areas but as regards motherhood, they fall below par. Aidoo does not create them to fulfil such a big issue in African feminist literature. Perhaps realising this omission in her early writings, in her later writings in *Changes*, Aidoo makes all the principal women characters achieve the "motherhood paradigm" (Amadiume).

Motherhood, which in the belief of patriarchy gives women power tends to subvert them anyway. Indeed, in *The Girl Who Can and Other Stories*, there is the subtle mention of Mami insisting on marrying Adjoa's father just like Anowa did. But as part of her later writings and focus, Aidoo depicts a society whose objective is no more about the resistance that women put up to marry men of their choice. Rather it is the product of the relationship that matters. Hence, Mami's mother is rather concerned about the type of child that is born whose legs are so spindly that she is afraid it may not be able to support a baby in the event of child birth. Little wonder then that the older women in *Changes* in spite of their objection to Esi's divorce arrangement with Oko, they do not complain for ever. After all, as Esi's grandmother resorts, Esi has shown her womanliness by giving birth- a major fulfilment in Aidoo's feminist consideration. This foregrounds Aidoo's belief in motherhood. Aidoo does not attack heterosexuality nor does she do so to motherhood.

It is important to state that the idea of motherhood as conceived in African feminism is one of the basic differences between Africa and Western feminism. The very thought of women's power being based on the logic of motherhood has proved offensive to many Western feminists. Tettey in her book *Motherhood-An Experience in Ghanaian Context* agrees when she says that, "Motherhood is often regarded as a more natural role but there are differences in the meaning of it from one society to the other" (p. 1). In the European system...motherhood represents a means of enslavement (Amadiume, 1997:114).

For critics critical of motherhood, motherhood whether in the past or now, plays a pivotal role in facilitating the patriarchal economic and political dominance. This means that Western feminists have succeeded in decentralizing the importance of motherhood to the detriment of the human race. While for majority of African communities motherhood is an essential component of every marriage, Western societies see marriage as distinct from motherhood. In other words, for most African societies, motherhood is an automatic preference in any marriage while Westerners normally will like to disassociate marriage from motherhood; the two issues are separate from one another. A couple may marry without procreating while another may do so with the intent of giving birth. It is a matter of choice.

The non-fulfilment of Aidoo's principal characters as seen in Eulalie and Anowa is de-constructed in the later works of Aidoo as personified and fulfilled in Esi Sekyi, Fusena and Opokuya. In the African context, motherhood brings fulfilment to many women. This

reconstruction represents a change in colour of Aidoo's feminist orientation. In a sense, however, biological motherhood reinforces women's oppression. Typically, in most African societies childbirth and motherhood status follow as a matter of natural consequence after marriage. Western societies think otherwise. For African feminists, the glorification of the mother figure as a woman's sole source of personal empowerment is unchallengeable and indisputable.

Conclusion

Aidoo is a pro-life advocate or believer as many of her colleagues like Mariama Ba are. The belief of the African feminist is that God is in co-operation with wo(man) for the survival of the human race. It is not, therefore, surprising that the likes of Aidoo and Mariama Ba prefer to be called womanists instead of feminists since in their estimation, feminism in the other part of the world especially lesbian feminists are opposed to motherhood. Anowa and Eulalie, principal characters in Aidoo's early works, are contrasted sharply with Esi Sekyi, Fusena and Opokuya in the later writings in their fulfilment of motherhood dreams. That Aidoo's views on motherhood shift with passing time are doubtless.

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Plan of Work

1. Introduction – motherhood in general

2. Theoretical framework
3. Main characters for early works – Eulalie, Anowa/ Later works – Opokuyaa, Esi, Fusena
4. Secondary characters – early works – old women/ later works – old women
5. Characteristics-early works-uneducated, worried, traditional/later works-modern, unperturbed, educated, influences
6. Attitude
7. Conclusion