

# Ama Ata Aidoo: Celebrating her legacy in the twenty-first century

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## Abstract

*Renowned as Ghana's foremost woman writer, Ama Ata Aidoo has built a distinguished career that spans decades of post-independence African history. A pioneer among African women writers, Aidoo is celebrated for her feminist contributions to postcolonial literature. Her body of work offers a nuanced exploration of African women's experiences, revealing the layered challenges they face in colonial and postcolonial contexts. This essay explores her fictional works highlighting how her fictional characters confront local traditions, societal expectations, and issues of race, class, and gender inequality, particularly within transnational and Western frameworks.*

**Keywords:** Ama Ata Aidoo, fictional works, postcolonial perspectives, feminist expression

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\* Contributions to the 'Honouring our Elders section' are single blind reviewed.

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## Introduction

Ama Ata Aidoo is Ghana's foremost woman writer whose distinguished career spans several decades post-independence in Africa. Her literary contribution places her amongst the first generation of African women writers as a leading feminist voice within postcolonial writing. Through a feminist lens, her literary corpus provides much insight into the complexities of African women's lives in the colonial and postcolonial landscape of competing and challenging experiences in society. Her fictional works portray women characters who navigate local norms and expectations for women, customs and traditions, and the challenges of race, class, and gender inequalities within transnational spaces in western settings. For over twenty years, my research, scholarship and teaching has explored the literature of African women writers, including Aidoo's work, to highlight their experiences in society and to celebrate their remarkable contributions to women's and gender studies through literary expression.

Aidoo is a pioneering figure of immense significance through the creation of Africa's first dramatic work in English by an African woman, *The dilemma of a ghost* in 1965 followed by her second play *Anowa* in 1970.<sup>1</sup> As a commanding literary figure, Aidoo repositioned women's writing within a male-dominated canon in African literature during the mid-1960s. Her novels *Our sister killjoy: or reflections of a black-eyed squint* (1977) and *Changes: A love story* (1991) disrupted stereotypical portrayals of African women that were common in male-authored African texts written during the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> In both novels, Aidoo crafted female protagonists who were strong, intelligent, and outspoken as a form of 'writing back' to reclaim women's voices from the margins to centre stage in the African literary world. Important themes in Aidoo's works include postcolonial perspectives, feminist expression, the inter-

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<sup>1</sup> Ama Ata Aidoo, *Dilemma of a ghost*, Longman, 1965; Ama Ata Aidoo, *Anowa*, Longman, 1970.

<sup>2</sup> Ama Ata Aidoo, *Our sister killjoy: Or reflections of a black-eyed squint*, Longman, 1977; Ama Ata Aidoo, *Changes: A love story*, Women's Press, 1991.

play of tradition and modernity, and the relationship between Ghana and the African diaspora among other compelling issues of postcolonial discourse.

Her creative artistry has woven a tapestry of literature across genres of poetry, drama, novels, short fiction, essays, and literary criticism. Her short fiction includes *No sweetness here* (1970), *The eagle and the chickens and other stories* (1986), *The girl who can and other Stories* (1997), and *Diplomatic pounds* (2012).<sup>3</sup> Her poetry collections include *Someone talking to sometime* (1985), *Birds and other poems* (1987), *An angry letter in January* (1992), and *After the ceremonies: New and selected poems* (2017).<sup>4</sup> Like many African writers in the past and the present, Aidoo's literary style draws heavily upon African oral traditions and a combination of prose and poetry that is best illustrated in her iconic novel, *Our sister killjoy*.

Ama Ata Aidoo was born on March 23, 1940, in southern Ghana to a royal family among the Fante ethnic community. Encouraged by her father to pursue Western education, she began writing at age fifteen. After completing secondary school at Wesley Girl's School in Cape Coast, she attended the University of Ghana at Legon, where she majored in English literature. While at University she participated in the Ghana Drama Studio and published her first play, *Dilemma of a ghost* in 1965. Her teaching career began in 1970 and lasted for over a decade at the University of Cape Coast but the unfavourable political climate in the country failed to nurture her creative talent. In 1982 she was appointed Minister of Education by the then head of state, Jerry J Rawlings. She resigned from her position in less than two years and migrated to Zimbabwe where she resumed writing and teaching. She subsequently taught in the United States at the University of Richmond and at Brown University until her retirement in 2012.

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<sup>3</sup> Ama Ata Aidoo, *No sweetness here*, Longman, 1970; Ama Ata Aidoo, *The girl who can and other stories*, Sub-Saharan Publishers, 1997; Ama Ata Aidoo, *The eagle and the chickens and other stories*, Tana Press, 1986; Ama Ata Aidoo, *Diplomatic pounds*, Ayebia Clarke, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Ama Ata Aidoo, *Someone talking to sometime*, College Press, 1985; Ama Ata Aidoo, *Birds and other poems*, College Press, 1987; Ama Ata Aidoo, *An angry letter in January*, Dangaroo Press, 1992; Ama Ata Aidoo, *After the ceremonies: New and selected poems*, University of Nebraska, 2017.

Her works have received critical acclaim and robust scholarly engagement by writers and literary critics. Among these are *Emerging perspectives on Ama Ata Aidoo* (1999), *The art of Ama Ata Aidoo: Documentary film* (2014), *Essays in honour of Ama Ata Aidoo at 70: A reader in African cultural studies* (2012) and *The art of Ama Ata Aidoo: Polylectics and reading against neocolonialism* (1994).<sup>5</sup>

I am fortunate to have experienced a rewarding friendship with Ama Ata Aidoo that began at the African Literature Association annual conference in 2012. I will always cherish the memory of her warmth and hospitality as well as her insightful perspectives on contemporary women's issues in Ghana and the African diaspora. One of the memories that I cherish deeply is the sense of acceptance that she created in me whenever I visited her home. She never made me feel like an outsider to Ghana or Africa. There were no awkward discussions about my life as an African diaspora person and no suggestion that I was a 'lost' person because I could not speak an African language. Ama Ata respected me for my passion, research, and scholarship on African literature. She welcomed me as well as my daughters into her home as a mark of friendship and warmth for which the nation is famous for throughout the African continent and beyond. Each time I visited her we exchanged gifts, shared wonderful Ghanaian food and much laughter. In the early years of my career as a literary scholar, her fiction inspired my scholarly engagement with women's identity, and experiences in the works of African women writers as well as my approach to feminist inspired African texts through critical analysis of her novel *Changes: A love story*, the short story collection *No sweetness here* and the play *Anowa*.<sup>6</sup>

In her iconic fictional works, Ama Ata Aidoo presents paradoxical outcomes for women characters as they respond to patriarchy, urbanisation, and conflicting demands of modernity in the colonial and post-

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<sup>5</sup> Ada Uzomaka Azodo and Gay Wilentz, *Emerging perspectives on Ama Ata Aidoo*, Africa World Press, 1999; *The art of Ama Ata Aidoo: A film* by Yaba Badoe, 2014; Anne V Adams, *Essays in honor of Ama Ata Aidoo at 70: A reader in African cultural studies*, Ayebia, 2012; Vincent Odamtten, *The art of Ama Ata Aidoo: Polylectics and reading against neo-colonialism*, University Press of Florida, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Aidoo, *Changes: A love story*; Aidoo, *No sweetness here*; Aidoo, *Anowa*.

colonial landscape of Ghana. The novel *Changes* skilfully examines the complexities of Ghanaian women's difficult choices and responsibility for one's destiny in life. In the novel, Aidoo investigates the extent to which a woman who follows her own path ends up better off than the woman who bends to the status quo through obedience to conventional norms in society. The stories in *No sweetness here* portray Ghanaian women faced with choices that challenge conventional norms and expectations as well as realities of the modern world of social flux and changing identities. Among Aidoo's short-fiction collections, *No sweetness here* has been the most discussed among scholars and critics.

In her role as an outspoken voice for women, Aidoo articulates the impact of social, economic, and political forces on the lives of African women. Aidoo asserts that, 'on the whole, African traditional societies seem to have been at odds with themselves as to what exactly to do with women'.<sup>7</sup> This dilemma lies at the crux of Aidoo's feminist perspectives expressed in her writing and underscore the pressing need for social transformation and women's equality.

In her 1998 essay titled 'The African woman today', Ama Ata Aidoo states emphatically that she is a feminist and asserts the conviction that 'every woman and every man should be a feminist-especially if they believe that Africans should take charge of African land, African wealth, African lives, and the burden of African development'.<sup>8</sup>

### **An overview of *Dilemma of a ghost***

Ama Ata Aidoo has left behind a powerful legacy, and the significance of her literary oeuvre is evident through the issues and topics that shape her works. Her plays are especially relevant and timely in the global age marked by increased mobilities, transformation and flux. To illustrate, *Dilemma of a ghost* explores the relationship between Ghana

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<sup>7</sup> Ama Ata Aidoo, 'Essay: The African woman today', *The Black Agenda Review*, 2021 (first published by *Dissent Magazine* in 1992).

<sup>8</sup> Aidoo, 'Essay: The African woman today'.

and the diaspora, women's identity, home and return for both Africans, and African descended people, the value of western education, and tradition and modernity. These represent salient themes that are equally, if not more important than they were in 1965 when the play was published.

In *Dilemma of a ghost*, Eulalie is the African American woman who returns to Ghana as the wife of a Ghanaian man and her journey represents the diasporic search for belonging that is fraught with paradoxical realities, romanticised perceptions, and lack of Ghanaian cultural knowledge.

The play interrogates the nature of the dichotomy that exists between Africans and diasporans whose ancestors were displaced through enslavement. Interestingly, Ghana has made strong efforts to reconnect and welcome diaspora people. For example, 2019 was named the 'Year of Return' which drew thousands of visitors to pay homage and connect to African origins that were erased during slavery.<sup>9</sup> In the documentary *The art of Ama Ata Aidoo*, Aidoo notes emphatically that 'the relationship between Ghana and the diaspora is charged'.<sup>10</sup> These tensions are skilfully portrayed in the play through family conflict fuelled by misunderstanding by all parties as a result of the disruptions of slavery and poor communication. Into this mix, Aidoo questions the role of women in society that reflect her deep commitment to feminism as a theme that pervades her works.

Another important idea in *Dilemma of a ghost* that plays out in the twenty-first century are the tensions experienced by many African immigrants who must navigate uncertain relationships to the 'home' they left behind in search of education and opportunities abroad in Western spaces. Sometimes family relationships suffer as 'returnees' have acquired Western education and attendant values that may conflict with norms and expectations of local culture. The conflictual nature of this

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<sup>9</sup> Ghana Tourism Authority, 'About Year of Return, Ghana 2019,' Ghana Tourism Authority, 2019; Year of return, Ghana 2019: 400-year anniversary', 12(6) *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies* (2018) 247-248.

<sup>10</sup> *The art of Ama Ata Aidoo: A film by Yaba Badoe*, 2014.

dilemma may be understood through the 'been to' phenomenon in the world of migrant Africans. In the play, Ato Yawson returns to his people with values and behaviours that are unacceptable in his community and a major source of family discord in the play. Ato is the 'ghost' at the centre of the play who is torn between the past and the present, tradition and modernity, rural Ghanaian life and Western culture.

The play is framed by Ato's dilemma over whether he should go to Cape Coast or Elmina which represent the modern city and the old slave port along the coast of Ghana. By the end of the Play, he remains undecided while the early rift between his wife and his family is abated. The final scenes of the play suggest reconciliation and acceptance of Eulalie into his family. Critical responses to *Dilemma of a ghost* examine the attitudes and behaviours of Ato, but Eulalie is equally ghost-like because of her disconnection to Ghanaian cultural moorings.

This idea is a sub-text of the work as it suggests that as a displaced African, she is like a ghost of her former (lost African) self. Her ignorance is not her fault but rather an accident of history. Ato's family displays ignorance as well and thinks of her as a slave, seemingly unaware of the formation of the African diaspora through the dispersal of captured Africans. As an overarching theme, the clash of cultures is almost a character in the play as it takes on a life of its own in the unfolding events.

Feminist energies infuse Eulalie's character as she struggles against conformity and acceptance of Ghanaian cultural norms and expectations. Her romanticised ideals fall away as she becomes a stranger in a strange land. Eulalie's identity as a woman is challenged as she grapples with her own 'dilemma' of what it means to be a Ghanaian wife. The play is still one of Aidoo's most well-known and popular dramatic works whose ideas reoccur in her novels, poetry and short stories that define her as one of Africa's greatest playwrights and literary figures.

## **An overview of *Anowa***

The setting of *Anowa* is nineteenth century colonial Ghana where feminist themes emerge through the actions of the female protagonist. Anowa rebels against parental authority and traditional roles for women by marrying a man her family has rejected, resulting in tragic outcomes. Aidoo is noted for her use of Ghanaian oral traditions and *Anowa* is based on an old Ghanaian legend that serves as a cautionary tale for women in society. Along with feminist expression in the work, Aidoo writes about the sensitive and controversial topic of slavery that sparks a mixture of silence and conflict on both sides of the Atlantic.

Aidoo's outspoken nature, critique of society and the willingness to examine difficult and conflictual issues is a defining characteristic of her legacy. The play is unique in the exploration of ethical issues that underpin Ghana's complicity in slavery as the largest instance of forced migration in history. The tragic ending of the play portends disaster for individuals and for society; when greed and moral corruption fuel the forces of oppression among African people.

## **An overview of *Diplomatic pounds***

*Diplomatic pounds* was published in 2012 as Ama Ata Aidoo's third collection of short fiction that comprises 12 stories about female characters who traverse the boundaries of Ghanaian women's identity within diaspora spaces of the twenty first century. The stories in *Diplomatic pounds* mirror the complex changes within a globalised landscape and Ama Ata Aidoo revisits themes of 'home and return' to Africa through a gendered lens. Aidoo's collections of short stories has re-centred the African short story from the periphery of African literary production to counter the prominence of the novel in the past. Contemporary stories in the collection are linked through the examination of de-centred and culturally dislocated behaviours that re-define what it means to be an African woman at home and abroad.



The stories resonate paradoxical bonds and entanglements, discontinuity, and hybrid identities of the female protagonists who are torn between London and Ghana. The narrative structure of each story chronicles the appropriation of behaviours and ideas that simultaneously alienate Ghanaian women from African cultural norms and familial connections to *home* while offering new spaces to contest their subjectivities in Africa and the diaspora. The stories in the collection uncover problematic behaviours and questionable outcomes of women's disconnection to *self* and to Africa. The diasporic subjectivity of the female protagonists illustrates a mosaic of contested identities expressed through themes of cultural confusion, and the absence of coherent meaning in the lives of migrant Ghanaian and African women.

In most of the stories in *Diplomatic pounds*, a gendered lens mirrors these elements through hybridity as a focal point of interlocking themes of disquieting re-connections to home, generational conflict, and inter-racial relationships. Postcolonial literary theory frames *Diplomatic pounds* and the author's perspectives resonate the critical gaze of Sissie, the protagonist in *Our sister killjoy* who notes the un-African behaviours of her fellow Ghanaians in Europe. The women in the stories share characteristics of ambiguity, problematic views of cultural identity and socially disruptive family relationships. Moreover, Ghanaians and other African nationals living abroad who disconnect from their homeland is a compelling motif that intersects in the stories in *Diplomatic pounds* as a metanarrative of diaspora angst in the twenty first century. Relocating to western nations represents a space for opportunity and self-actualisation. However, transcultural identities are fluid and frequently irreconcilable with African cultural norms and expectations.

Inter-textual elements of the stories profile women that detach themselves from Ghana as homeland, never to return as in *In new lessons* and *Funnyless*. In *Diplomatic pounds* and *Mixed messages* women appropriate narcissistic obsessions of the western world and succumb to twenty first century 'nervous conditions' through severe emotional distress. The most significant and cautionary theme in the collection is that women feel 'lost' and alienated when they return home to Ghana.

*Diplomatic pounds* suggests a caveat for African women's response to transnational identity that engages new affiliations and entanglements that confound their Ghanaian identities.

### **An overview of *Our sister killjoy: Or reflections of a black-eyed squint***

*Our sister killjoy: Or reflections of a black-eyed squint* was published in 1977 and is widely acknowledged as a postcolonial classic that contributes to Aidoo's distinguished legacy. She is one of the first generation of African writers to craft stories about diasporic experiences of Africans as transnational subjects. Similar to other reoccurring themes that appear in her works, diasporic landscapes are a compelling site of engagement that resonate in the outpouring of literary works of leading authors in the global age. Thus, Aidoo is a forerunner of African immigrant fictional works, feminist writing, and postcolonial perspectives. Aidoo's creative talent has woven a tapestry of prose and poetry to convey the protagonist's journey to Europe where she casts her gaze on neo-colonial Ghana, patriarchy and relationships to Ghana.

Sissie is a young Ghanaian female at the centre of the work whose 'squint' is a finely textured critique of her fellow Ghanaians at home and abroad as well as the European colonial intruders into Africa and the attendant cultural imperialism. Sissie is a student who visits both Germany and London and she comes of age to racial otherness, alienation and culture shock. She is comfortable in her own skin despite the exotification of her appearance by German people in public spaces. When Sissie visits London she casts a bold and caustic gaze upon her fellow Ghanaians whom she perceives as pitiable, wretched, and shabby. She cannot understand why they remain in Europe after completing their studies. From the vantage point of Europe, especially in the United Kingdom as Ghana's former colonial power, Sissie's vision is clear-sighted, penetrating and brutally honest. Among Aidoo's female characters, Sissie is undeniably empowered by her authentic sense of African womanhood,

self-acceptance and her ability to unpack the vestiges of the colonial encounter in post-independence Ghana.

## Conclusion

As a consummate storyteller, the corpus of Aidoo's writings capture the dynamism of Ghanaian and African women's lives through strong women characters that exhibit intelligence, strength, and agency in the search for happiness and success in their lives. Ama Ata Aidoo's legacy may be seen in the outpouring of African literature in the twenty-first century by women authors who now dominate the African literary landscape. A new generation of leading women writers from Africa owe their inspiration to Ama Ata Aidoo and other pioneers like Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta and Mariama Ba who broke barriers for women as literary godmothers of feminist expression and innovative ways of telling the African story, beginning in the twentieth century.

I am honoured to have known her and her literary works are among the iconic literature that I share with students. Her penetrating insight into Africa's and women's issues is the hallmark of her talent and creative artistry. Ghana and the world have lost a commanding presence on the literary stage and her works will remain as cherished classics in African and world literature.