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Representation of Women in Ama Ata Aidoo's Selected Literary Works: A Feminist Study

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Abstract

The term 'feminism' basically stands for the rights and equality of women. There is no definite definition of feminism. The feminist thinkers struggled a lot for making the simple and innocent women of the society aware about this and they always are trying to solve several issues related to women. It is again not a recent concept. Feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft, Margaret Fuller, Virginia Woolf and many more thinkers forwarded a lot of different perspectives related to feminism. Ama Ata Aidoo, the former Education Minister of Ghana and an excellent academician has fought for the rights of the women of her native land. During her reign several provisions for Girls' Education were implemented in Ghana. She has a great contribution towards the literary field. In the present paper three of her popular literary pieces are taken into account to study the issues related to women of Africa especially of Ghana. These three literary works are: *Anowa* (1970), *Our Sister Killjoy or Reflections from a Black-Eyed Squint* (1977) and *Changes: A Love Story* (1991). These three literary pieces deal with women issue from different perspectives. She is also featuring her protagonists accordingly, Anowa, Sissie and Esi are different from each other. Her protagonists seem to be very bold, independent which reveal the strength of women.

Keywords: Ama Ata Aidoo, Feminism, Woman, Anowa, Sissie, Esi, Ghana

Introduction

Literature is said to be the mirror of society. It is like a document of social life, attitudes and perceptions of a particular society during a particular period of time. The emerging role of women in a family as well as a society can also be observed

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in literature, which the term 'evolution of women' better indicates. Literature acts as a medium to witness the evolution of women through years.

If we see the history regarding evolution of women in literature then we must acknowledge feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, Virginia Woolf, Margaret Fuller, etc. for their bold statements regarding the status of women in the global society. Likewise, surviving in a patriarchal society, African women had to wait for decades to gain a respectful position or to secure an identity in the society. Ama Ata Aidoo, an academician and former Education Minister of Ghana is one of those African thinkers who have been raising their voices in favour of educating as well as making the woman independent in Africa.

Aims and Objectives

The present paper is based on the following aims and objectives:

1. To know about the status of women in African society through the selected literary works.
2. To explore the transformation of African women from their earlier position.

Analysis

Various theorists have forwarded various opinions regarding the concept of feminism. Basically all of them talk about the need of equal position for women in the society along with male. In Africa also the influence of feminism among the females is found. The feminist thinkers have struggled a lot to help the women to get rid of several oppressive obstacles. They also try their best to educate the women so that they can stand for themselves in every aspect like- academic, economic, political and social. At the initial stage of consciousness regarding feminism, many women organizations developed in Ghana and when a meeting was held among women of 110 districts they realized the similarities and dissimilarities among them. After mutual understanding among them they came to a solution and prepared a political statement demanding rights and equality to the government of Ghana in 2004 and this is known as the Women's Manifesto for Ghana. According to the Manifesto, African women are:

> Concerned about the negative impacts of economic globalization on Ghana and other African countries; unhappy about the continuing economic decline, rising levels of poverty, aid dependency and foreign domination of economic decision-making after two decades of structural adjustment programmes in Africa; horrified by the scourge of conflicts, wars, disease and famine across Africa and the West African sub-region in particular, and growing threat of militarization and intolerance over the world; appalled by the conditions of extreme poverty and hardship, deprivation and exclusion of rural and urban poor, the majority of whom are women . . .; concerned about the failure of the Ghanaian State to honour its obligations under the 1992 constitution, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of

> Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and its commitment under Declaration and Platform for Action and its Outcome Document (Beijing + 5) and other international instruments to promote gender equality, with the result that decades of efforts at achieving gender equality and equality have yielded very little… (*The Women's Manifesto for Ghana* 8-9).

The above quoted lines show how the women of Ghana have struggled not only for their rights but also for the overall development of the country. Though they have faced a lot of problems in the patriarchal society, later on they came up with the solution which is beneficial for every citizen. They have not restrained themselves within the economic and political field rather they have also contributed in the field of literature and education for better development of the whole country. Naomi Nkealah describes the concept, African feminism "strives to create a new, liberal, productive and self-reliant African woman within the heterogeneous cultures of Africa. Feminisms in Africa, ultimately, aim at modifying culture as it affects women in different societies." (133-141).

Ama Ata Aidoo is also one of the feminists of Africa. She has attempted to make people understand the need of equality in society through her unique narratives. She always tries to keep balance with the tradition and modernity. Her selected literary pieces accordingly, *Anowa* (1970), *Our Sister Killjoy or Reflections from a Black-Eyed Squint* (1977) and *Changes: A Love Story* (1991) represent different personalities of women especially of Africa. In these three works the protagonists represent the advancement of African women in three major aspects i.e. family, education and economic aspect.

In the play *Anowa* (1970), Aidoo presents the protagonist Anowa as a very brave girl who hardly listens to what her elders say. Since her childhood, she ignores one after another social as well as family rules and for this she becomes a common topic for discussion in society. Aidoo presents this character as an independent girl who loves to do activities of her choice, for example, playing with boys, roaming here and there in the village without doing any household activities and many more. A character of the play named OLD MAN describes Anowa's character in the following ways:

> OLD MAN.
>
> A child of several incarnations,
> She listens to her own tales,
> Laughs at her own jokes and
> Follows her own advice (Aidoo, Anowa 102).

The above extract refers to the nature of Anowa. She is such type of girl who always remains busy with herself. In African society, girls are basically expected to concentrate on household activities and the girls usually marry with the particular person whom her elders have selected for her. But Anowa is completely opposite

to all this. She marries a person of her own choice and maintains her married life with love and respect till her last breath. In fact, she also helps her husband in his business and approaches him continuously to marry another woman as she believes that because of her physical problem she is unable to bear any child though it does not happen because of her inability to bear.

This play basically talks about the major domestic issue in the society, i.e. marriage and family. Shashi Deshpande has also discussed about marriage in her popular novel, *The Binding Vine*: "Tell me, is getting married so important to a woman? ... One always hopes one's children will get more out of life than one has… Security. You're safe from other men…it usually gives them that guarantee of safety. It takes much greater courage to dispense with a man's protection" (87-88). Here Deshpande questions the society about the typical concept of marriage and its restrictive and oppressive nature towards the female. In relation to this issue, Pramod K. Nayar has commented on Ama Ata Aidoo's play *Anowa* as follows:

> More complicated issues are addressed in Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo's play *Anowa* (1970). Here a disobedient daughter, Anowa, refuses all the suitors brought by her mother and marries a stranger, who, it turns out, is the devil. The independence of the young woman-a code for 'new' Ghana, perhaps?- is complicated by the need to adhere to the received wisdom of elders in the play. She finally commits suicide, a problematic ending because Aidoo seems to shy away from confronting the issues around women's 'rebellion' in patriarchal postcolonial societies (Nayar 133).

Nayar here talks about the play *Anowa* from both positive and negative perspectives of the need of flexibility in case of restrictions existing in the society. According to him, though Aidoo has thrown light on the concept of new Ghana by featuring her protagonist as strong but at the same time towards the end of the play we find the protagonist, Anowa facing a lot of problems in her married life which ultimately is the outcome of her own decision.

Aidoo presents this character as a bold, independent female which represents the strong repressed mind that every woman basically carries within her and often hesitates to show it to others. This fact also shows the development of the status of women in family life where they can give their opinions in family matters. Through this character Aidoo also tries to make the global reader understand that women are also mature enough to take decision about their future. In this play it is also reflected that girls are basically bound to marry with the person of their parents' or elders' choice in Ghana. The bride's opinion is not given any importance. Aidoo, thus presents her protagonist complete opposite to such typical thought of the society which may make people think beyond their typical thought. In other words this play basically reflects to that dark side of the reality where women hesitate to give their opinions.

pursuing higher education. Breaking the typical notion of staying within the four walls of the house, Sissie represents the modern grown up African woman who steps out from her country all alone and experiences a lot of things about people in foreign land. On her journey she also comes across her fellow people who have also stepped out from their native land for a better life. She feels pity after seeing the hard situations that her fellow countrymen are going through in the foreign land. She has mentioned several instances describing the pathetic condition of her fellow countrymen. The following sentences are an extract from the text:

> The women especially were pitiful. She saw women who at home would have been dignified matrons as well as young, attractive girls looking ridiculous in a motley of fabrics and colours. Unused to the cold and thoroughly inefficient at dealing with it, they smothered their bodies in raiments of diverse lengths, hues and quality- in a desperate effort to keep warm (Aidoo, *Our Sister Killjoy* 88).

From the above quoted lines it is revealed that people struggle a lot in the foreign land. Women sacrifice their comfort and needs in order to give their family a better life. From her journey, Sissie also comes across a bitter truth that people often neglect their native land after heading to a foreign land. Sissie stands opposite to such trend and she proudly returns to her native after completing her work. With this she attempts to pass a message that we all have a responsibility towards our motherland which we should never forget.

Through the protagonist Sissie, Aidoo attempts to set an example of a responsible citizen and this novel is said to be her semi-autobiographical one. Sissie is never found hesitated in the foreign land in showing her African identity rather she seems to be a proud educated woman. Aidoo wants to teach her own people to love their native land and how a woman can also prosper in the field of knowledge by maintaining all the decorum of her origin. In fact the novel ends with Sissie's return to her native land with more responsibility towards it. During her journey Sissie experiences several sweet and bitter experiences and she is represented like a bird through whose eyes the European land is described and a hint is given about the condition of the settled African people in the European land.

Similarly, in the novel *Changes: A Love story* (1991) we find the protagonist, Esi as an independent thinker who works in the Department of Urban Statistics. The society around Esi wants the woman to take care of the needs of her husband and child. The society also prefers the married couple to have more than a child. Oko, her husband becomes very much influenced by the expectation of the society and hence he begins to show his masculinity over Esi. The following instance will better serve the purpose:

> …Oko flung the bed cloth away from him, sat up, pulled her down, and moved on her. Esi started to protest. But he went on doing what he had determined to do allmorning. He squeezed her breast repeatedly, thrust his

> tongue into her mouth, forced her unwilling legs apart, entered her, plunging in and out of her, thrashing to the left, to the right, pounding and just pounding away. Then it was all over (Aidoo, *Changes*, 9).

The above lines are enough to understand the day to day sufferings of woman in the society where she hardly can express her desire. Again the parents do not want their daughters to become the second wife of a person. But Esi has challenged the typical society by divorcing her husband Oko and becoming the second wife of a person named, Ali. Because of her dedication towards her job, Esi is unable to pay attention to the household matters. This character also undergoes several difficult situations throughout the novel. But Esi stands brave and always is found ready to face every situation. Towards the end of the novel, Esi stays all alone as her second marriage also does not go smoothly but at that time also she is found a strong lady doing her activities by herself.

Like other two characters Anowa and Sissie, Esi is also a very strong character which reveals the mental strength of woman. Esi is in fact an economically independent lady who does not want to be a burden in anyone's life. These three protagonists of Ama Ata Aidoo have come out as struggling characters who have struggled a lot in their journey of life. Aidoo has represented her protagonists quite opposite to what the Carribbean poet Lorna Good is on has expressed in her poem entitled "I am Becoming My Mother". Some of the lines are mentioned below:

> Yellow/ brown woman
> Fingers smelling always of onions
> My mother raises rare blooms
> And waters them with tea (qtd. Nayar 136).

The above quoted lines explain the basic identity that is entrusted with woman. It also explains the suitable activity of cooking with woman. The term 'yellow' and 'brown' refer to the two generations of woman i.e. grandmother and mother. This also reveals the adaptation or transformation of duties and responsibilities from a generation of woman to another generation of woman. But in the novel, Aidoo has transformed the typical notion of housewife to a professional woman through the character of Esi.

Conclusion

Ama Ata Aidoo is quite different in her explanation from her contemporaries. Her protagonists serve her repressed desire. Aidoo wants the woman of her nation to be bold, independent enough to survive in the society with respect and put forward their own opinions in the matters. Through these three strong characters, Aidoo wants to set before her native women an example regarding how they can overcome their depressions, tensions, difficulties. Sissie's heading towards abroad for further education and again returning towards her own native land by not forgetting her duty and responsibility towards her mother land; Anowa's decision to marry the boy

of her own choice and continuing her married life despite facing several ups and down in the life; and Esi's driving the car, arguing with the taxi-drivers verbally, working efficiently in the Department of Urban Statistics, after getting divorced with her husband marrying another married person and facing all the discomforts bravely; all these matters though seem to be very small but rather the most important points that we often negotiate with. All these three literary works basically concentrate on the concept of new Ghana where woman will enjoy equal facility along with man by keeping balance with their tradition.

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