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Ama Ata Aidoo, African Women's Writings and Criticism

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Abstract

An examination of the existing scholarship on African women writers shows that the question of negotiating the Western definition of Feminism and the Afro-American Womanism is one of the crucial discussions in African women's literature and criticism. However, this negotiation is hardly dealt with as an issue that can potentially lead to the re-evaluation of African women's roles and status in contemporary Africa and the literary world scene, so as to break away from the nostalgia for pre-colonial women's images and roles and to cast a critical eye on Western imported lifestyles. As social change occurs, women's position in Africa is undergoing an ever changing redefinition especially when it is considered within the larger scope of nationalism. This article attempts to discuss the different concepts which are crucial to the Feminist/Womanist criticism and African women's writings with a particular focus on Ama Ata Aidoo's own view on what women writers' commitment as well as women roles and positions, at large, should be.

1. Introduction

In the late 1970s, the Feminist Movement emerged in Africa. The feminist or womanist writers – as some preferred to be called to distinguish themselves from the white, middle-class women of metropolitan feminism – have challenged the nationalist project which claims to speak on behalf of homogeneous people who share a common bound of kinship, ethnicity, culture, language or history, thus erasing all the differences of class, caste, gender, locality in the name of the greater good, the transcendental signifier which is the Nation. Womanist African writers have defied this reductive view which has romanticised African culture and ignored the oppression of women sanctified by many traditional cultural rituals and practices. They have also spoken out against the literary patriarchies that had established what they felt was a strangulating dominance over African literature and reacted to the hegemony of African men who refuse to acknowledge women's ability to contribute meaningfully to society's development. Much more than the literature of post-independence disillusionment, women's literature has been more resolute in its intention to strike at the very heart of the founding premise of an ideal of modern African literature, i.e. the truth of representation.

The prevalence of inadequate female portrayals in male African writings have led to the emergence, in the late 1960s, of many African women writings to respond to and to redress the negative, stereotyped images attributed to African female characters and hence to African women. These images as well as women's position in society and their supposed inferiority to

men have long been shared by women all over the world. Molara Ogundipe-Leslie lists some of the stereotypes attributed to women in American literature and actually found in African male literature. "Female attributes include formlessness, passivity, instability, confinement, piety, materiality, spirituality, irrationality, compliancy, and two incorrigible figures: the shrew and the witch." (Ogundipe-Leslie. 1987, 5) She adds some images particular to males' portrayals of American women like "the Rose, the Lily (...) the 'Earth Mother' and the 'Great American Bitch'." (Ogundipe-Leslie. 1987, 6). These images are again shared by African women who are often connected to the land, the continent, motherhood, and nurturing. Ogundipe-Leslie lists some of the stereotyped images typically attributed to African women in African Literature.

[T]he 'sweet mother', the all-accepting creature of fecundity and self-sacrifice. This figure is often conflated with Mother Africa, with eternal and abstract Beauty and with inspiration, artistic or otherwise. (...) . Much African poetry concerns itself with the erotism of the African woman ... [with] the love of women, not love in its larger sense but sexual, physical love. (Ogundipe-Leslie. 1987, 6)

African male writers have thus restricted the roles of African women to those of mystified mothers and child bearers as well as erotic lovers. They do not depart markedly from the beliefs held by men about women in general and from their tendency to degrade and diminish women in the different roles they can play in society outside of their households. Again, this shows that "the position of women in Africa has been no less ridiculous than anywhere else. The few details that differ are interesting only in terms of local colour and particular family needs." (Aidoo. 1999, 12) In addition to their colour and particular family needs, African women writers have had to face many problematic issues when dealing with their positions and roles in a Postcolonial context.

African literature developed out of the influence of both colonialism and patriarchy. (Stratton. 1994, 171). Women were, in fact, saying that if the colonialists had misrepresented Africa and Africans, male African writers were also guilty of having misrepresented women. These accusations went beyond the realm of traditional patriarchal customs and cultures to the conventions of representation, the language and the vocabulary deployed in the portrayal of women in African literary texts. Prominent among the metaphors that aroused the anger of these women writers is the trope of "Mother Africa" and the reducing of women to the role of mothering and providing nurture and support, thus denying them their own individuality and independence.

The genesis of the Mother Africa trope, a trope that pervades the African male literary tradition from Senghor to Soyinka, can also be seen as colonial literature. Such figures illustrate the way in which colonial and African (male) literary discourse sometimes interlink. (...). For even though the figures fulfill a different function in African than they do in colonial writing (serving as means in the latter for legitimating colonialism and the former for legitimating 'post-colonial' male domination), the form of the dialogical is essentially affirmative. What is revealed by such instances of what is basically non-parodic reiteration is the patriarchal nature of both European imperialism and African nationalism, a coincidence of

interests and complicity between two groups of men who share a will to power.
(Stratton. 1994, 171-172.)

In truth, the image of “Mother Africa” has been a major trope of nationalist writing which has become part of the popular imagination; and in literature, according to African male writers, women have emerged either as dependable wives and mothers -the Madonna figure- or, when they are single and independent, as despicable whores. Romanticized at times and demonized at others, women have had to negotiate their position in African societies in search of new ethical bearings in the post-colonial situation. Just as the earlier African writers had set out to restore the truth about their cultures and modes of life before they were distorted by colonialism, these new writers have undertaken to report on the lives of women, silenced or disfigured by patriarchy. Among these writers whose objective was to break this silence are writers like the Nigerian Buchi Emecheta, the Senegalese Mariama Bâ, the Egyptian Nawal El Saddawi, the Algerian Assia Djebar, and the Ghanaian Ama Ata Aidoo. Their works such as the ironically entitled *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), infinitely patient *So Long A Letter* (1980), the brutally stark *Women at Point Zero* (1975), the audacious autobiographical *L’Amour, la fantasia* (1985), and the polemical *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977), respectively, have since become some of the classic female texts of African literature. They represent a trend in the representation of women in African literature that has continued to grow.

As a result of these contentions, one of the most controversial issues in the contemporary discussion of African literature is whether or not Western critical approaches are suitable and adaptable to African literary texts and writings, especially when it comes to African women’s writings. For instance, can we assess *Our Sister Killjoy* or *Changes* with the same critical tools as we would assess *Jane Eyre* or *Pride and Prejudice*? Some African critics have called for the decolonization of African literature; these critics contend that African literature emerges from a context which has its own cultural and historical specificities. Therefore, they assert that African literature requires its own Black Aesthetics in order to posit the appropriate tools for its understanding. Additionally, there is a complex network of class, gender and national liberation in which ‘Third World women’ are inserted. In fact, the fiction of the African woman should be understood in the light of race, gender, class, identity and the African postcolonial context.

Besides, the controversies arising in the contemporary discussion of African women’s writings lie in the ambiguous relationship between African and Western Feminism due to the historical factors of colonialism and imperialism, which have set apart the two struggles. Actually, the distinction between Western Feminism and the African one, or Womanist literary criticism is that Western Feminism is fixed into a model appropriate to the Western context and ignores the postcolonial realities of African women. According to some African and African-American critics and women writers, the term “Feminist” bears a racist, narrow implication associated with main stream Feminism(s). Thus, these critics and writers reject this notion preferring African Feminism, Black Feminism, Motherism, Femalism or Stiwanism, an acronym for “Social Transformation Including Women in Africa”, a term coined by Ogunjipe-Leslie. However, the most widespread term referring to the African-American, African, and women of colour is Womanism. In fact, the term “Womanism” is a

term that has been first coined by the African-American novelist Alice Walker, in her collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* which shed light on how Walker's background affected her creative writing and critical thinking.

Indeed, in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1984), Alice Walker celebrates the African-American women of the past and explains how these women have impacted her writing. She writes about the African identity found in these women, her "mothers". She expresses how they found independence thanks to their creative spirit and how in her turn she found freedom and independence thanks to the creative spirit inherited from them. She celebrates these women's lives, famous or unknown, as she sees them as inspirations to become a writer. She praises and glorifies the lives of these "mothers" because she has built her identity by learning from them. Besides, Walker refers to her mothers' gardens as an ultimate expression of art. By carefully tending the garden each day, Walker's mother showed her attachment to the land. Similarly, Walker values the connection to nature because it is a symbol of her mother's creative spirit. Walker has been inspired by her mother's successful attempt to be a creator and to create beauty. It is through analysing her mother's simple and nature-oriented life that Walker has been able to find a similar place inside her. Her mother took great pride in the creation of her gardens, and Walker takes in her mother's strength and dedication. Walker finds her mother inside of herself and finds a common identity with her African ancestors.

Obviously, Walker has been labelled a feminist writer; however, she prefers the term "Womanist" rather than "Feminist", for she believes that the term "Womanist" captures the spirit of the African-American woman. Her primary dedication is always to the African-American woman. She states that a "Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender." (Walker, 1984, xii) She defines a Womanist as a black feminist or feminist of colour, an outrageous and audacious woman who is interested in learning and questioning all things. A Womanist is a responsible woman who loves other women both sexually and non-sexually, a woman who appreciates and prefers women's culture, strength and emotional flexibility. The theory of Womanism is committed to the survival and wholeness of all people both men and women. Rather than supporting separatism, Womanism promotes Universalism.

Meanwhile, within the Modern Feminist Movement, white women have been accused of focusing on oppression in terms of gender and sexuality while ignoring issues of race and class. Alongside all women's experiences in terms of their own, this homogenizing excludes issues concerning the interlocking oppressors of race, class and gender. Walker speaks of "the twin afflictions" in this world: racism and sexism. In this respect Odamtten (1994) states the following:

Specifically, African women's works are either seen to champion a perspective that characterizes the evils of patriarchy as (1) not only primary but also and specifically European male (that is, colonialist) impositions, or (2) no less primary oppressions arising from indigenous precolonial values and social relations. Such dichotomizing, though understandable (given the historical burden of patriarchal marginalization), leads, at worst, to the formal approval of an exclusivist feminist 'protected village' type criticism. Fortunately, this tendency

has not gained much of a hold on the new criticism of African women – authored literature. (Odamtten. 1994, 4)

Thus, and in resistance to this marginalization, theories of Black Feminism and Womanism were forged. These theoretical concepts were developed to call attention to the multiple oppressions experienced by women of colour, reflecting and defining their everyday experiences in their own terms. Accordingly, theories of Womanism created a space for black women and women of colour who found themselves incapable of identifying with both Feminism and Black Feminism which was still as elitist and exclusive to some women of colour. Thus, Womanism is seen as an affirmative and all-embracing ideology that celebrates the lives and achievements of black women and women of colour.

Further, African women share many problems with African- American women. In the United States, the history of slavery has played out the position of women. In Africa, the fact of colonialism has played out, in the same way as slavery in the United States, to the degradation of the position of women. In this respect, Aidoo contends:

[m]y understanding of Womanism is like Feminism. But because of us being African and black, because of our position in history, Womanists believe that this special component makes it a little difficult for us to say we are feminists. Womanism adds the added understanding of our position in history to the discourse. You know that we can be feminists. But, you know, on the other hand, we bring more to the discourse, which makes us Womanists (...) for me that's also a problematic, because it is essentializing our situation, which brings its own limitations. I think it is a very complex issue. (Azodo. 1996, 7)

Aidoo clearly identifies with Womanism rather than Feminism; however, she claims that it is as well challenging because Womanism has also its limitations. She argues that the questioning of gender inequalities has to do with gradation in levels of consciousness; thus, there are different needs within the same cultural group even in Africa. In relation to the division between Western feminism and African feminism or womanism or African American feminism, Aidoo states:

There are Womanists, and Feminists and the most important thing is: what are we all trying to get at? If we are all trying to get at the development of society's awareness about the position of women to develop, that is the most important issue. If this is what we are about then, frankly, it is not relevant at all whether we are feminists, or womanists, or fundamentalists (Frias. 2003, 28).

Aidoo further states that Feminism is an ideological view point; she contends that Feminism is (...) a specific category, [it] is an ideological overview. It is an ideology. Feminism is an ideology (...). When we say that literature is feminist, then we are speaking specifically of a literature produced from a feminist view point. And that means that literature, if it is feminist, has done more; it affirms women. (Azodo. 1996,8-9)

Obviously, Womanism and Feminism are set apart in terms of “issues, preoccupations and priorities between Western and African women” (Cooper 1992, 77). Therefore, issues treated by Western Feminists should be viewed and adapted to the African cultural, social, historical, economic and political specificities, as Bryce (1999) intimates in the following confession:

“Feminist writer” is a definition which begs all sorts of questions – of national identity, of the relationship between Africa and its external predators, of history and its eruptions into the contemporary, of which ways of seeing and speaking are appropriate in the rendering of subjectivity and perspective peculiar to Africa. (Bryce. 1999, 2)

Thus, in addition to women's roles and positions in African societies, concerns like National identity, history as well as the global world are all treated and dealt with by African women writers. An important concern in relation to this is the fact that Postcolonial literary criticism is directed to colonialist/anti-colonialist texts. In fact, African women find themselves dismissed from both Western, white, middle-class Feminist literary criticism, and the African, black, male- oriented Postcolonial literary criticism. Thus, the latter ignore the internal centre-peripheries of Postcolonial African societies, disregarding an important number of texts which deal with other issues, namely class, gender and sexuality. Bryce advocates a move beyond the everlasting opposition to the centre; Postcolonial literary criticism should move beyond the centre-periphery dichotomy to more serious concern with its own peripheries.

Within those internal center and peripheries of post- colonial societies, post-colonial women's writing would require a different order of theorizing, since post-colonial women are like a fragment, an oppositional system, within an overall colonized framework. Women therefore function here as burdened by a twice disabling discourse. (...) [W]omen are not just ‘a’ fragment, but multiple fragments in multiple ways.(NfahAbbenyi. 1997, 19)

In fact, as NfahAbbenyi (1997) asserts, women are often considered as being the other of Western women, the other of African men, the other of Africans and non-Africans, thus finding themselves trapped in a “chain of otherness”. (NfahAbbenyi. 1997, p.31)They try to re-address the misrepresentation of both the colonialist discourse and the African male discourse. They try to locate themselves within a broader movement, the Womanist Movement, and try to posit their theorizing within the Womanist and Postcolonial literary criticism. As Stratton argues,

“African women's writing is a multi-voiced discourse.”(Stratton. 1994, 173)In this respect, Hartsock states that African Women's Writings enable [women] to connect everyday life with an analysis of the social institutions which shape that life. (...). In this way, feminism [or womanism] provides us with a way to understand our anger and direct our anger and energy toward change. (...). We can transform ourselves [by] (...) struggling to transform the social relations that

define us: self-changing and changed social institutions are simply two aspects of the same process. (Hartsock. 1998, 36-37)

Therefore, one can say that Womanism “is a mode of analysis, a method of approaching life and politics, rather than a set of political conclusions about the oppression of women.” (Hartsock. 1998, 35).

Another important concern in the debate of African Women Writers is the gender issue. Feminist theory has introduced gender as a major aspect of analyzing literary texts especially those written by women. This concept has influenced, defined and oriented much of the Feminist discourse. Simone De Beauvoir’s *Le deuxième Sexe*(1949) is considered as the first Feminist work to give an insight into the gender question and how women became the “others” of men. In fact, the book opens with “on ne naît pas femme: on le devient”- “one is not born a woman but becomes a woman” (Simone De Beauvoir. 1949, p. 1). Throughout her essay, Simone De Beauvoir differentiates sex from gender: sex is the biological categorization of maleness and femaleness whereas gender is the group of attributes assigned by society to each of the sexes. In addition, she elaborated in a detailed way the different steps, from childhood to adulthood, through which gender identity is formed as well as the different cultural and social factors which perpetuate gender oppression.

The concept of Gender gained ground in African literature in the late 1980s and there, this concept has many implications: sociological, cultural, political, anthropological, and historical. “[G]ender seeks to explain and change historical systems of sexual difference, whereby “men” and “women” are socially constituted and positioned in relations of hierarchy and antagonism.” (NfahAbbyeni. 1997, 16). Actually, many definitions have been associated to the concept of Gender, depending on the context of its use. It has been related to women’s sexuality, bodies, mothering, and women’s sexual pleasure. However, the notions of motherhood and sexuality do not apply to the same degree in the African context as they are applied in the Anglo-Saxon context. The theories of Gender as developed by Western critics cannot be totally applied to African literature because African societies have their own gender relations. In fact, the disrupted gender relations which are specific to the Postcolonial context create conflicting identities in women’s lives and writings. Often, they must take many, different and contradictory identities to suit both traditional and modern patterns of relations and behaviours. In a constant changing social order, women create new spaces and social locations for themselves within the dominant and often oppressive culture. In this respect, Stratton states that,

Gender is a submerged category in colonial discourse, a status that it has maintained until recently in African men’s literature. While African men writers challenge the racial codes of colonial discourse and attempt to subvert them, they adopt certain aspects of the gender coding of their supposed adversaries in their representation of African women. (Stratton. 1994, 171)

This falls with Gayatri Spivak’s approach to the text and her interest in a “feministly” oriented reading. She asserts: “in what way, in what contexts, under what kinds of race and class situations, gender is used as what sort of signifier to cover over what kinds of things.” (

Harasym 1990, 52). Additionally, Spivak's definition of "a woman" rests on the word "man" which is a reactionary position. Spivak argues: "no rigorous definition of anything is ultimately possible, so that if one wants to, one could go on deconstructing the opposition between man and woman, and finally show that it is a binary opposition that displaces itself." (Spivak. 1988, 77). However, being a deconstructivist, Spivak cannot advocate such dichotomy, but feels the necessity of attributing definitions because they are necessary to improve and to conceptualize positions. Therefore, she "construct[s] [her] definition as a woman not in terms of a woman's putative essence but in terms of words currently in use. Man is such a word in common use. Not a word but the word." (Spivak. 1988, 77)

Moreover, gender oppression is perpetuated and consolidated by the process of socialization. Anthropologists use the term enculturation to refer to this process by which the individual acquires the culture of the society he/she is born into.

The general process of acquiring culture is referred to as socialization. During socialization, we learn the language of the culture we are born into as well as the roles we are to play in life. For instance, girls learn how to be daughters, sisters, friends, wives and mothers. In addition, they learn about the occupational roles that their society has instore for them. We also learn and usually adopt our culture's norms through the socialization process. Norms are the conceptions of appropriate and expected behaviour that are held by most members of the society. (O'Neil. 2006, 1)

Indeed, socialization is important in the process of personality formation. It is a learning process that begins shortly after birth. Looking around the world, we see that different cultures use different techniques to socialize their children. Actually, there are two broad types of teaching methods: formal and informal. Formal education is what primarily happens in a classroom. It is usually structured, controlled, and directed primarily by adult teachers who are professional "knowers." In contrast, informal education can occur anywhere. It involves imitation of what others do and say as well as experimentation and repetitive practice of basic skills. This is what happens when children role-play adult interactions in their games.

Most of the crucial early socialization throughout the world is done informally under the supervision of women and girls. Initially, mothers and their female relatives are primarily responsible for socialization. Later, when children enter the lower school grades, they are usually under the control of women teachers. Women socialize their children in much the same way that their parents, namely mothers, have socialized them. Therefore, women are those who perpetuate and consolidate gender oppression because they are those who socialize their girls within a patriarchal system.

However, in Aidoo's novels, there is a different picture presented. Aidoo actually subverts this discourse by freeing her female characters from this socializing process, as a result of both her traditional Akan descendency and modern residues over her female characters. In the meantime, Aidoo's depictions of gender relations and the position of women in particular, serve as a broader etiological discourse of accounting for the state of things. Thus, the depictions of gender relations in her novels are not the exclusive destinations of her texts but part of her discourse.

Any study of a corpus of African literature would, therefore, refer to the writer's treatment of the colonial oppression. A more discerning attitude would show, however, that women are usually the most oppressed. This gender oppression, as women writers insist, is perpetuated in the postcolonial era. Thus, national reconstruction is considered as an undertaking reserved for men. Second, national and cultural liberation require a return to the precolonial ideals which may represent women negatively. Third, Womanism and Feminism are set apart by historical events, namely, colonialism and imperialism, which have left a gap between Africa and Western women in terms of issues, preoccupations and priorities. Last but not least, there is a disagreement among African women themselves as to what roles should be assigned to them, and therefore what kind of education they should receive, and whether they can remain in harmony with their African/National identity. Hence, African women writers are under two major pressures: tradition and feminism. Tradition is dominated by patriarchy and the foundation of national and cultural liberation which sets against any ideal emanating from the West.

African male literary tradition has been to reveal the strategies of containment to which men writers have resorted in their attempt to legitimate patriarchal ideology. These include the embodiment of Africa in the figure of a woman, one of the most enabling tropes of 'post-colonial' male domination as well as of colonialism; the portrayal of women as passive and voiceless, images that serve to rationalize and therefore to perpetuate inequality between the sexes; and the romanticization and idealization of motherhood, a means of masking women's subordination in society. They also encompass the assignment of different roles in the anti-colonial struggle to men and women – the allocation to the former of the task of mending the breach in the historical continuum and to the latter of embodying

African cultural values; the assumption of the primacy of the male subject; the objectification of women; their identification with tradition and with biological roles; the representation of female sexuality as dangerous and destructive; and the resolution of narrative tension with the theme of redemption through repatriation to the village. (Stratton.1994. 172)

Moreover, in "The African Woman Today", Aidoo criticizes the present day picture that Western media have presented about African women since the 1990s drought onward: semi-naked, hungry, not able to take care of their children, buzz turning around their faces and those of their many children. She contends that it is a pejorative, derogatory picture presented by the West on purpose to print these images in the minds of the world about Africa and African people at large and for longer periods. She reminds us that African women have not always been like that. African women have fought colonizers and indigenous patriarchies, great women sacrificed their lives for independence and are still fighting to gain recognition in the post- colonial context. She further contends that:

The major historical factors that have influenced the position of the African woman today: indigenous African societal patterns; the conquest of the continent by Europe; and the apparent lack of vision, or courage, in the leadership of the postcolonial period. "Leadership" in the context does not refer to the political leadership exclusively, but to the entire spectrum of the intellectual, professional,

and commercial elites in positions to make vital decisions on behalf of the entire community.(Aidoo. 1998, 42)

Feminism implies a rejection of patriarchy which is at the heart of African cultural and national reconstruction, i.e. feminism sets against tradition, patriarchy, national and cultural liberation. In this connection, Ogundipe-Leslie lists the commitments of African women writers. According to her, "the female writer should be committed in three ways: as a writer, as a woman and as a Third World person; and her biological womanhood is implicated in all the three." (Ogundipe- Leslie. 1987, 10)Aidoo reacts to this statement by saying:

[M]y own addition, or rather a slight suggestion, in terms of formula, is in connection with what we should be committed to as Third World people. I wish that at some point it would have been possible for Molara to mention 'African'. I don't deny that we belong to a larger non- northern world and the dynamics that operate in a situation like that, but find commitment as an African nationalist, be a little more pressing. It seems there are things relating to our world, as African people, which are of a more throbbing nature in an immediate sense. (James. (Ed.). 1990, 15)

In the midst of this, Aidoo is certainly among the most committed to women's issues and the most politically active African woman writer. She has tried to redress, re-evaluate and reconsider the capacities, capabilities and potentials of the African woman within the post-colonial situation and its socio-political framework. She states: "I have been happy being me: an African, a woman, and a writer."(Aidoo. 1992, 25)

Therefore, in order to fully comprehend Aidoo's writings, it is important to grasp the constant tension between Aidoo the scholar, the ideologue and the revolutionary. Aidoo's commitments are clearly to her continent, to her womanhood and to her profession in which, as a woman, she has encountered many problems within her African male dominated environment. She reveals how much she has been discriminated against in the field of academia because she is a woman. She also reveals how much she has been frustrated and disregarded by her male intellectual brothers because of her commitments, activism, ideas, and her audacity to deal with women's issues and taboo topics.

Crucial to her are the issues of marriage, polygamy and education, which she considers as vital issues to address. According to her, women writers produce their works at the expense of their personal lives. A woman writer has to cope with her family obligations, as a wife, as a mother. She has to manage her activities between her career as a writer, which is a time consuming job, and that of taking care of a family, a task which is highly demanding in terms of time and devotion. For her, African women writers and African women at large "suffer a little more, simply because [they] are women, and [their] positions are nearly hopeless because [they] are African women." (Aidoo. 1988, 164) Besides, she contends that African women writers share nearly all the problems of men; however, African women writers suffer from neglect and lack of interest from the critics, Africans and non-Africans, as if women writers did not deserve serious critical attention.

Moreover, she argues that the fact that women writers are being silenced has to do with their position in society generally. Because women are marginalized in society, critics, mainly men, literally lock them out of meaningful spheres of activities, such as academic or creative writing. "A woman who tries to operate in the so-called men's world excites panic dismay in other women, and except her own father, arouses anger in all men. And of course, the more exclusive the field, the greater the hatred." (Aidoo. 1999,15)

And because critics make of a writer a male writer, they deliberately dismiss women from the field of criticism perpetuating thus a male hegemony in the literary field. Men writers and critics lock women in their traditional roles; a woman for them is nothing more valuable than being a wife and a mother. For African women writers, scholars and male writers have not done enough to help these members of the community free themselves from the female writing "ghetto". Aidoo argues that the reality of African women's writing starts to differ from that of the male African writers when it comes to the issue of criticism. Critics are very little interested in women's writing because they are women.

Until the present moment, in fact, African literary studies have been an almost exclusively masculine domain, largely because the scholars and critics who have mapped it out are nearly all men, who have tended to ignore the admittedly small but still significant number of African women writers and women related issues in African literature. (Frank. 1984, 35)

Aidoo gives the example of a German lecturer who lectured for two hours about African literature and found it "so natural" not to mention any of the many African women writers. She enumerates a number of non-African and African critics like Gerald Moore, Chinweizu, Emmanuel Ngara, who never mentioned any African woman writer in their works, like Efua Sutherland, Bessie Head, Flora Nwapa, Micere Mugo, Mariama Bâ and many others.

Furthermore, she adds that male critics and publishers are reluctant to study and publish women writers. Aidoo's project to deal with crucial taboo issues have led to the freezing of her first novel *Our Sister Killjoy* when it was first published. She states:

[i]f *Killjoy* has received recognition someplace else, it is gratifying. But there is no solve for the hurt that my own house put a freeze on it. (...). When a critic refuses to talk about your work, that is violence. He is willing you to die as a creative person. (Aidoo. 1999. 17)

Besides, many critics consider women as feminist writers just because they write about women. To this Aidoo responds by arguing that she is almost shocked that highly respectable academics hold this idea.

I shall not protest if you call me a feminist. But I am not a feminist because I write about women. (...) no writer, female or male, is a feminist just by writing about women. Unless a particular writer commits his or her energies, actively, to exposing the sexist tragedy of women's history; protesting the on-going degradation of women; celebrating their physical and intellectual capabilities; and

above all, unfolding a revolutionary vision of the role of women tomorrow, as dreamers, thinkers and doers. (Aidoo. 1999, 21)

Aidoo contends that both graduate and undergraduate African women “share all, or nearly all the problems of male Africans” and that women “are also part of an articulate minority that handles the language of power. Therefore [they] are expected and expect [themselves] to articulate (...) opinions (...) and act powerful.” (Aidoo. 1999,22)

Feminism for Aidoo is about gender, but also about the radical point of view and her localization in the world as a Third World person. She does not write about women simply because she is a woman writer, but rather because she is insistent that African women should demand their rights as human beings. (Azodo. 1999, 422)

Further, in addition to all the issues dealt with above, Aidoo points out the language and the aesthetic issues, arguing that African writers struggle to give expression to themselves, to their culture, to their identity, in an alien language, the colonizer's language. This dismisses the readership including the very people they are writing about. Aidoo further contends that it is important to create an aesthetic vacuum based on griots and traditional poetry, even if the majority of African writers have absorbed Western aesthetics that govern writing production “the aesthetics of good European literature and other dynamics of Western civilization (...) to suit the colonial or neo- colonial environment.” (Aidoo. 1988, 157-158)

Meantime, just like her male African compatriots, including Ayi Kwei Armah, Chinua Achebe and Ngugi WaThiong'o, Ama Ata Aidoo is an African intellectual who is actively committed to the political issues of her country, Ghana, and the development of Africa at large. Aidoo is very committed as a woman writer not only to her womanhood and her profession but also to the politics of her country and continent. For instance, she has been a committed political activist in the Ghanaian revolution of 1981, when she had the office of Minister of Education in the government of Jerry Rawlings.

In her writings and essays, she definitely sets herself against the human, cultural, economic and political exploitation of Africa by the forces of imperialism and neo-colonialism. Her revolutionary ideology is “vehement against isolationism; it is passionate about knowledge based on reason, and it is adamant about pan- Africanism.”(Azodo. 1999, 416) The latter is central to Aidoo's ideology and essential in her writings.

Kwame Nkrumah was the statesman who led his country, Ghana, to decolonisation, so that Ghana was the first African country to reach independence in 1957. Aged 17 at independence, Aidoo was one of those who benefited from the educational programmes initiated by Nkrumah. The latter was a pan-Africanist who dreamt of a United States of Africa. Aidoo argues that during Nkrumah's days, the connection with African-Americans and Caribbeans was a thrilling experience. She recalls that in her father's house, there had always been visitors from overseas. She contends that one should never forget that many Africans had been enslaved and sold, and the act of not forgetting is probably the key for the future of Africans, African- Americans and Caribbeans.

Moreover, pan-Africanism centres on the idea of unification of the African people and countries with the same language but not the colonizer's language. Like many male and female African writers, Aidoo sees the pressing necessity to find a solution to the language issue to unite African people. She argues that it would be an excellent idea (...) one can envisage that when a language is chosen according to the question of its validity or its qualification as an African lingua franca (...). If we can be forced to speak English because some people colonized us, (...), I don't see why as people we cannot give ourselves a nice little present of a continental language. (James. 1990, 10)

Furthermore, Aidoo links the language issue to the writing question. She argues that an African writer writing in his/her first language will reduce the possibilities for reading his/her works. In fact, if African writers write in their first languages, their African languages, they find themselves confined as voices, locked up in a vacuum, not even invited to communicate with others. In the meanwhile, if they write in English, French or Portuguese, they are able to communicate with non-African people and those Africans who share the same colonial language throughout the continent. She contends that the relationship between the writer and his immediate environment is most likely non-existent or rather problematic. Aidoo definitely links the necessity of language unity in Africa with one of the developmental issues facing the continent as well as a means of disfranchisement from cultural imperialism and certainly a way to "decolonize the minds" of Africans.

Additionally, Aidoo is much concerned with the issue of education; she attributes the developmental problems facing Africa mainly to the issue of education. According to her, if the field of education is to be reconsidered and given primary importance, Africa would solve half of its problems. She contends that "education is the key, the key to everything."(James. 1990, 11)

Education is (...) on the list of issues that gained Aidoo's attention. In different African countries, the items of the curriculum do not seem to be geared towards fostering African values, though children do not seem to learn from the wisdom of their grandparents anymore. (...). Since curriculum is the means by which society transmits its values and power, it follows that the educational systems of African schools need a major and urgent overhaul if the people are mindful of maintaining mores and values. (Azodo. 1999, 413)

Besides, Aidoo argues that the issue of education is a major problem facing African women. She states that millions of African girls are prevented from realizing their full potential as human beings and as professional future generations because their basic needs like "food, shelter and maximum education" (Aidoo. 1988, 156) are not met. In fact, Aidoo links the issue of education to both economic and social problems from which Africans suffer. However, women are the most exposed to this problem, because of the discrimination they are subjected to. The working towards Africa's development should begin with the recognition of Africa's human potential in women. In this connection, Aidoo argues that "this had nothing to do with anything that African women themselves did or failed to do. It had to do with the politics of

sex and the politics of the wealthy of this earth, who grabbed it and who held it. (Aidoo. 1988, 157)

With the same insistence, Aidoo points to the urgent necessity to stop the hemorrhage of brain drain. She acknowledges that it is the unfortunate situation from which the continent suffers.

If Aidoo appears to belabour the point about rural exodus in Africa and the exodus of African youth to the West to study in foreign universities, it is all from first-hand knowledge about the cultural damage to these young minds and their loss to their countries, just as other youth were lost to Africa in the Atlantic slavery period. Aidoo is also saddened by the situation at home, where universities are closed for more months of the year than they are open (...). Aidoo is aware of the damage that can be done to young minds subjected to new ideologies. (...) Aidoo laments that African youths who have been educated abroad on foreign scholarships become acculturated to their host countries. They either refuse to go home thereafter or, if they are able to extricate themselves, they have become virtual strangers to their own country and people. (Azodo. 1999, 414)

The implication of this statement is that, according to Aidoo, the continent should be more attentive to the Diaspora and the brain- drain because these self-exiled people should be the ones to develop Africa's modern technologies, its capital formation rather than importation and exportation, i.e. generating capitals. She also blames African leaders for failing to keep intellectuals in their countries. Worse, neo-colonial governments in Africa help to consolidate the hemorrhage of brain-drain on purpose. She contends that many African intellectuals are in self-exile abroad due to their nations' governments. She argues that:

[i]f we get good leadership, confident leadership that has confidence in itself and in us as African people, so that would undertake the development of our environment meaningfully, not only will we be needing our brains, but we will create structures that would make the people with expertise want to stay. (Azodo. 1996, 10)

In a similar vein, Aidoo violently and harshly criticizes imperialism and its institutions like capitalism and international economy which operate in a core-periphery system. She also reacts against all its forms, be it cultural imperialism, social or economic imperialism, as well as its means and most importantly "humanitarian helps", political and military interventions in Africa. Worse, neo- colonial governments in Africa help the imperial machinery in consolidating Africa as a "raw material base, and at the same time a dumping ground for industrial waste" as well as consolidating "the geography of development and modernization, i.e. core-periphery" (Azodo. 1999, 401)relations.

Additionally, she contends that mismanagement and corruption in Ghana, and in Africa at large, have led to a poor output in the agriculture and industry sectors, the growing pollution, deforestation, environment degradation, overpopulation and above all, poverty, hunger and ignorance. Aidoo rejects the notion that all the problems of Africa are due to the West. She also blames African leaders for sustaining such a situation and perpetuating the Western hegemony. She contends that "Africans certainly are in need of an enlightened leadership in

every one of the fifty four nation-states,” (Azodo. 1999, 413) and education is a step toward this improvement. Therefore, Aidoo bemoans the unfortunate situation of the continent as well as the loss of leadership in African nations.

Her specific immersion in the general ideology of Gold Coast/Ghana, her unique background, and her education seem to have made her particularly sensitive to the possibility that her literary work might yield this kind of ideological message. The textual ideology, the message that arises from the interaction of form and content, style and idea, may in fact contradict the supposedly conscious authorial ideology - of the writer’s expressed or implicit agenda or intention – thus producing works that are bifocal even as they collapse textual and authorial ideologies. (Odamtten. 1994, 11)

Thus, one can say that Aidoo pinpoints all these issues as being crucial developmental issues which need more than energy to be solved; they need effective good will. Undeniably, Aidoo is more than a writer; she is at once a militant and an artist whose activism as a woman gave mouth to those women who have no mouth. Azodo acknowledges that “Aidoo [is] known as a forceful and passionate writer (...) [and] critics find her just too aggressive and brash for a woman writer.” (Ada Azodo. 1999,399)

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