

Ama Ata Aidoo's Woman-Centred Pan-Africanism: A reading of selected works

Delia Kumavie

Introduction

In the course of her writing career, Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo has explored the challenges, hopes and dreams of African women as intricately connected to Africa's recent history, from the time of the continent's encounter with Europe, the ensuing trade in humans, followed by colonialism and post-colonialism. From the earliest works to her most recent collection of short stories, *Diplomatic Pounds and Other Stories*, Aidoo's oeuvre is a testament to her frank and direct exploration of African women's experiences in an increasingly globalising world.

This paper examines the pan-African perspective that informs Ama Ata Aidoo's body of work. It situates the author's work within the seemingly male-dominated pan-African discourse of the 1960s and beyond, by exploring her construction of a woman-centred pan-Africanism through the creation of strong female archetypes as well as her use of narratives that are both trans-national and trans-temporal. Further, it argues that Aidoo's literary work constructs a pan-Africanism that privileges African women's experiences.

From her earliest writings, Aidoo's ability to take on issues that were deemed "taboo" set her apart. She pioneered the excavation into Ghana's past, present and future by examining the experiences of women like Anowa, Esi, Sissie and Cecille. Aidoo has attributed her fascination with Ghana's unspoken past to her own early encounter with a troubling reminder of slavery: the Cape Coast Castle. In a conversation with Micere Githae Mugo, Aidoo, describing the emotions of her encounter with the slave castles of Cape Coast, says: "I think I was kind of traumatised and I couldn't get the story out of my mind" (Mugo 2010: 34).

It is plausible that this event in the life of the young Aidoo was to inform her engagement with the larger destiny and experience of Africans both on the continent and its diasporas.

Born in 1940, to a royal family, at Abeamzi Kyiakor, a small town near Cape Coast, Aidoo attended the prestigious Wesley Girls' School and later the University of Ghana. Aidoo attributes her feminist consciousness to growing up among women whom she describes as strong because of their ability to "negotiate their own existence" (Mugo 2010: 31). She further acknowledges the influence of her mother's ability to interrogate Ghanaian society and question existing power relations and systems of authority (Mugo 2010: 33). Such strong female archetypes emerge across the span of Aidoo's work, in characters like Esi in *Changes*, Sissie in *Our Sister Killjoy* and Anowa in the play with the same title.

Further, Aidoo's feminism emanates from her insistence that her feminist consciousness is intrinsic to her pan-African ideals. Indeed, she posits that coming of age during Kwame Nkrumah's era, when pan-African ideals were powerfully articulated, exerted a significant influence on her view of the world. As a Junior Research Fellow at the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana, between September 1964 and June 1966, Aidoo was part of the flourishing debates of pan-Africanism. According to Vincent Odamtten, at the University of Ghana the young Aidoo was exposed to the "radical use of traditional oral forms and strategies" then being advocated by Efuia Sutherland and others (Odamtten 1994:10). Hence, exposure to the plethora of critical debates on pan-Africanism, as well as socialist thought, among the Ghanaian educated elite in the 1950s and 1960s, enabled Aidoo to: "avoid a romanticisation of Africa's past as some exotic golden age similar to that evoked by the negritude movement led by writers as Camara Laye and Leopold Senghor" (Odamtten 1994:10). In addition, these debates became important for Aidoo's literary re-visioning of the situation of the African woman in a manner that "pull[ed] back the covers that concealed societal instability, flux, inequitable relationships, structural duality, and social indeterminacy" which constitute the "superficial layer" of contemporary nation-states in Africa (Mikell 1997:31).

In his analysis of Aidoo's pan-Africanism, the Ghanaian literary scholar and poet Kofi Anyidoho argues that in poems such as "Images of Africa at Century's End," Aidoo draws on the pan-African intellectual foundation to advocate a "self-determining Pan-African agenda for the 20th century and beyond" (Anyidoho 2012: 81). This critical awareness of Africa's intellectual history perhaps explains in part Aidoo's need to confront Africa's past head-on in her plays, *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965) and *Anowa* (1969), and in her

collections of short stories *No Sweetness Here* (1970), *The Girl Who Can and Other Stories* (1997), and *Diplomatic Pounds and Other Stories* (2012). Aidoo's conception of pan-Africanism is similar to that offered by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who locates pan-Africanism within the African diaspora and its political movements such as Garveyism. According to Ngugi pan-Africanism forms part of "re-membling visions and practices" that are responsible for the "most visible results" of black struggles for civil and political rights and political independence (Ngugi, 2009: 35). An example of this is the Pan-African Congress in Manchester in 1945, which is directly accredited for the return of Kwame Nkrumah and Jomo Kenyatta to Ghana and Kenya respectively. Pan-Africanism remained a central part of an era characterised by political struggles for independence and self-determination for all people of African descent. Almost six decades after the independence struggles, the concept of pan-Africanism alludes to the connection between Africa and its Diasporas across national, transnational, intellectual and virtual spaces. These are the kinds of connections that Ama Ata Aidoo's extensive body of work unearths and continues to explore.

Addressing the Women of Africa and the African Diaspora (WAAD) conference, Aidoo asserts her feminism:

When people ask me rather bluntly every now and then whether I am a feminist, I not only answer yes, but I go on to insist 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. It is not possible to advocate the independence for the African continent without also believing that African women must have the best that the environment can offer. For some of us, this is the crucial element in our feminism (1998: 47).

Aidoo expresses a vision of feminism for Africa that is both pan-African and nationalist. It is a vision that can only be realised, Aidoo suggests, by addressing the many struggles and obstacles that continue to affect the lives of African women. Throughout her literary works she continues to engage with African women's lives through characters that exemplify the struggles and triumphs of Africa and its women.

Nana Wilson-Tagoe (2007) points out the ways in which Ama Ata Aidoo situates the African woman's struggle within "larger issues of social, cultural, and economic relations", which in turn provides a "paradigm for

exploring national culture and agency". Wilson-Tagoe's analysis of Aidoo's work confirms that Aidoo's feminist agenda is located within a pan-African frame. Citing Anowa's dream in Act Three of the play, where she dreams that she is the woman whose progeny is being taken by the sea, Wilson-Tagoe points out that the fact that Anowa remains childless in the play, suggest that Aidoo deviates from the "teleological history of the nation" where the African woman is figured as the bearer of the nation's children (229). Aidoo, according to Wilson-Tagoe, creates a "differentiated female history that disrupts the homogeneity of national culture" (229). In other words, Aidoo creates a narrative that centres women's role and experiences. Similarly, Carole Boyce Davies (1994), in her exploration of Aidoo's *Anowa*, examines the ways in which ideas of home or the lack thereof reveal pertinent concepts about the marginality, constructions of the feminine, the subjectivity of the African woman, and questions of witchcraft and madness. Both Wilson-Tagoe and Davies analyse the ways in which Aidoo's work actively engages with African women's experiences within national and global systems, developing a discourse that spans national and regional boundaries.

Woman-Centred Pan-Africanism

In her 1969 play, *Anowa*, Aidoo takes us back in time to a period before Europe's colonisation of the continent. The play is set in the nineteenth century, after the abolition of the slave trade and the signing of the Bond of 1844, between the British Crown in Cape Coast Castle and the chiefs of the near-by communities.¹ The play tells the story of a young woman who, after refusing to marry several suitors, decides to marry a man of her own choosing. The couple, after encountering opposition from Anowa's family, decide to leave their hometown of Yebi and start trading in animal skins, a life which increases Kofi Ako's wealth. It is when Kofi Ako embarks on the use of enslaved labour that Anowa's distress takes over, leading to its tragic climax. Anowa's resistance to Kofi Ako's insistence on trading in humans, and her rejection of the wealth Kofi Ako accumulates through this trade leads ultimately to their tragic end. Through the character of Anowa, Aidoo explores an emerging pan-African identity, forged out of the traumatic events of slavery. In other words, *Anowa* is a play that negotiates both the temporal and spatial boundaries. It re-imagines and recuperates the past, giving salience to women's conflicted and contradictory experiences of major historical upheavals.

Carole Boyce Davies describes this form of engagement with mobility and migration in Aidoo's play as "creative theorising" (1994: 44). She explains that this form of theorising is a strategy that is central to Black women's writing. Extending Davies' notion, I argue that Aidoo's portrayal of women's mobility is central to her woman-centred pan-African perspective, through which she writes women into a historical record that has erased their presence. Thus, the agency of "creative theorising" (44) is a significant component of Aidoo's projection of feminism in Africa. Aidoo's feminism emerges from a pan-African historical legacy of African women that can be traced back to Cleopatra and Yaa Asantewaa (1998: 39-40). These women, according to Aidoo, anticipate feminist discourse; similarly, Anowa's presence in the nineteenth century offers a woman-centred perspective on that history. In other words, Aidoo's re-creation of the past in *Anowa* theorises the physical and metaphorical recuperation of the past to establish a dialogue among the past, present, and future. For instance, in the context of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, Anowa's dream (Act Three) crosses both temporal and spatial boundaries:

I dreamt that I was a big, big woman. And from my insides were huge holes out of which poured men, women and children. And the sea was boiling and steaming. And as it boiled, it threw out many, many giant lobsters, each of whom as it fell turned into a man or woman, but keeping its lobster head and claws. And they rushed to where I sat and seized the men and women as they poured out of me, and they tore them apart, and dashed them on the ground and stamped upon them (71).

In this passage, Anowa associates herself with the traumatic experience of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which occurred in an earlier time in history. She maps slavery and the slave trade onto her physical being as though she had a personal experience of it. Anowa's dream positions her at the heart of the slave trade as the woman out of whom the men, women, and children are born, and whose progeny are seized and destroyed. The sea both represents Anowa's loss and separation from the past and connects her to the roots of pan-Africanism. Indeed, Anowa's return to this imagery in her own moment of personal crisis foregrounds the depth of the diasporic connection that Aidoo pursues in her subsequent work.

In her reading of *Anowa*, Angeleta Gouridine posits that through the character of Anowa, the victims of slavery are reclaimed and the "ghost from the past" is re-awakened (Gouridine 37-38). Gouridine's argument invokes a

kind of temporal transgression in which those who have been forgotten are given a renewed presence and a means of expression. Anowa's dream and her insistence, as a child, on hearing about the "huge houses rising to touch the skies" that were built by the "pale men" (69-71), I would argue, point to an historical memory, one which is uncannily present and refuses to be forgotten.

In a later work, "She-Who-Would-Be-King (with an apology to Rudyard Kipling)" (2002), Aidoo takes us to the future, precisely 25th May 2026, where a woman has been elected President of a United Confederation of Africa. A confederation, as a system of government, simultaneously acknowledges the need to exceed the nation-state, but also to maintain the forms of autonomy that the nation-state offers. It is significant that this potentially powerful political entity is headed by a female president. Aidoo offers a feminist pan-Africanism that precedes that of writers like Abdourahman A. Waberi, who, in his 2009 satire *In the United States of Africa*, turns the world upside down by creating a world in which a United States of Africa is the leading world power, but still male-dominated. Aidoo's pan-African narrative is more radical in her vision of a woman president.

In temporal terms, Aidoo's pan-Africanism is situated both in the historical experience of Africa and its diaspora, but also in the imagination of Africa's future. Aidoo's trans-temporality is a narrative strategy that allows her to interrogate dominant hegemonic and androcentric constructions of Africa's past and future, to provide an alternative pan-African vision that foregrounds women-centred issues.

In her most recent collection of short stories, *Diplomatic Pounds* (2012), Aidoo presents yet another female-centred pan-African experience. Here we encounter different African women who participate in the global system in various ways. We meet world-travellers such as Cecille, Lucinda Mena Esi Eshun and her friends, political refugees like Sibi, and educated African women who migrate to pursue educational goals, such as Esaaba and Affiye. These women depict the multifaceted experience of African women. As "flexible citizens" or "global citizens" they represent a transgressive pan-African discourse in which African women's mobility challenges binaries of agency and disempowerment that characterise African women's experiences. It is useful to look at these women's mobility through Ong's definition of transnationality, which draws attention to the *trans-*, which, in the words of Ong, denotes "moving through space or across lines, as well as changing the nature of

something” (2006: 4). Ong’s definition complicates the seeming “naturalness” of nationhood and nationality, and posits a new and radically subversive space where the transgressive discourses of mobility and migration can challenge entrenched performances of national life. By acknowledging the existence of such discursive and conceptual spaces of possibility, Aidoo’s work also offers a viable and “liberatory” lens through which to read women’s mobility and migratory flows as part of the pan-African experience of African women.

African women’s mobility and migration take on different forms in the stories in *Diplomatic Pounds*. The story that lends its name to the title of the collection, “Diplomatic Pounds” narrates one such experience of migration, through Ghana’s diplomatic service. Through Cecille and her family, Aidoo shows how women struggle to navigate this assumedly most privileged form of migration. Having grown up in such a mobile and elite family, Cecille as an adult develops the eccentric habit of collecting bathroom scales as a compulsive attempt to manage and discipline a body that does not conform to hegemonic standards for femininity. The bathroom scales, her mother informs the psychiatrist, are in every room, even under the chairs in the living room. The failure of the scales to control Cecille’s weight suggests a body in rebellion, resistant to the normative prescriptions that do not accommodate the actuality of African women’s bodies, or the changes that are undergone with multiple migrations. Cecille’s obsessive need to record these pounds suggests a need to discipline her migratory body as it spirals out of control.

Cecille, like the earlier Anowa, is transitioning from girlhood to into the new spatial and temporal ‘scape’ of adulthood. Cecille’s transition into adulthood is signified by her changing response to her mother. Whereas Cecille the child acknowledged her mother’s scolding about her eating habits, the adult Cecille challenges her mother by asking “what’s the point in being in the diplomatic service if one isn’t going to explore the food of other people?” (2013: 34). It is paradoxical that it is Cecille who is obsessed with the measurements, while her mother tries to exercise control over her eating.

Like Anowa’s whose deteriorating mental state is diagnosed by the chorus appropriately named “The-mouth-that-eats-salt-and-pepper,” Cecille’s mother is worried about how Cecille’s condition will be diagnosed by the migrant African community in London. For fear that Cecille will be considered mad, her mother names Cecille’s condition as a “little nervous breakdown” and in this way protects her daughter from community judgement by presenting a

milder interpretation of her daughter's behavior accounted for by new forms of displacement.

In "Recipe for a Stone Meal" Aidoo confronts this African women's negotiation of war and its effects. When war breaks out, Sibi is forced to leave her life behind and attempt to run to safety with her children. She arrives at a refugee camp, where she attempts to cook the food she receives from the aid workers to feed her children. Sibi soon realises that the beans remain hard no matter how long she boils them, and her children begin fainting from hunger. Stories such as Sibi's confirm Ada Uzoamaka Adzodo and Gay Wilentz assertion that "Aidoo's work is the site of the dilemmas of modern African nations between the personal and the public, the individual and the community" (1999: xix). Indeed Aidoo's work creates a site for confronting theories and experiences of African women across various national and transnational spaces and time. At the same time, Aidoo's works are sites of conversations and co-existence of multiple narratives and experiences that dominant theories and discourses tend to omit. Stories like Sibi's in *Diplomatic Pounds* are provocative narrative spheres through which the dilemmas of African women are confronted.

Aidoo strategically refuses to associate Sibi's experiences with a specific war or with a specific geopolitical national space. This lack of specificity suggests that the experience Aidoo narrates is not a singular unique narrative. It is one that has its counterparts in many parts of Africa, and the world. It is an experience that Aidoo chooses to narrate in sparse detail to mirror the fragmentary nature of traumatic memory. When Sibi and her children take to the "highway", it is after witnessing the brutal murder of relatives and the violent spread of war. The "highway" does not provide a space of solace and possibility for Sibi. On the contrary: it leads to the United Nations-run refugee camp where despair flourishes and death looms. It is a space that has been replicated across the continent. It is part of the experiences of the continent, albeit one that is often left out in the discussion of pan-Africanism.

Memory remains an important component of pan-Africanism in *Diplomatic Pounds*. Indeed pan-Africanism as a movement draws on the memory of a homeland and of a people displaced throughout history. The acts of remembering and re-remembering are important practices in Aidoo's pan-Africanism. Thus, when we first encounter Sibi, she is attempting to re-member fragments of her deracinated past. She says:

Her mother hails from a matrilineal clan, her father from a patrilineal, at just over thirty-five years in the prime of life, 'reasonably good-looking,' 'strong' – her description of herself for herself – a qualified primary school teacher, married to another qualified school teacher and now public schools all over the country are back at work... So what exactly is she doing here? (2012: 61).

Sibi attempts to evoke memories of her past to authenticate and establish a connection to her life before the war. The events and details that Sibi remembers point to the ways in which she chooses to account for her pre-war life. It also points to Sibi's attempt to re-establish her identity through dis-membering and re-membering the events of her past. Yet it is from this past life, too abruptly abandoned, that Sibi derives her sense of place within the world. Sibi's self-definition emerges out of her ability to connect to her lived experiences of the past. Unlike Anowa, who crosses temporal boundaries to account for her community's "forgotten" memory of the slave trade. Sibi's transgression of time through memory is to affirm her sense of self, and her identity roots her to a specific social locality.

Mobility and migration are essential components of Aidoo's form of woman-centred pan-Africanism. Saskia Sassen suggests that migration and globalisation are movements that are "embedded in larger social, economic, and political processes," such as colonialism or the existence of a diasporic community (55). Europe's complex political and historical involvement in Africa makes it an important destination for African migrants. In "Rain", "Outfoxed", and "No Nuts", we meet African women who migrate to Europe to pursue their educational ambitions. This pattern illustrates the historical, economic and political relationship between Europe and peoples of African descent. It also illustrates that the colonial relationship between Europe and Africa continues to influence personal and political decisions till date. Similarly, the family is a significant factor in African women's negotiation of mobility and migratory experiences as depicted by Aidoo. In "Rain" we find that Affiye's mobility is made possible because of her uncle's "successful" migration. This form of mobility and migration is replicated by many of African descent. These intellectuals of African origin transgress multiple boundaries to present their research to various groups of people outside Africa. In the course of their presentation, these intellectuals confront groups of African migrants who are critical of such intellectual undertakings. The irony here is not that

the migrants are critical of intellectual engagements about the continent, but that these conversations about Africa are happening in Europe (or the United States) and not Africa. The narrator points this out when she muses,

If anyone had thought there was anything odd about such an event taking place somewhere in Europe instead of somewhere in Africa, they didn't say so any time before, during or after the retreat. In any case, if they had, they would have exposed their own ignorance. For over centuries, all sorts of meetings, conferences and other caucuses crucial to Africa and her people had been organised outside that continent and most especially in Europe (2012: 85).

The narrator rightly criticises the tradition in which intellectual and political engagement that concern the African continent are undertaken in Europe. Indeed since the Berlin Conference of 1884, some of the most crucial of Africa's economic and political policies have been enacted in Euro-American localities, often without the contribution of Africans living and working on the continent. These intellectual engagements about the continent that take place in Europe are paralleled with Affiye's negotiation of her migration and mobility, ending with her return to Ghana to assist and support her family. At the same time, due to the dispersal of Africans across the world, it remains important that these discussions are taking place in various localities.

Aidoo's conception of pan-Africanism as female-centred leads her to question the homogenous understandings of the term.

This variability is reiterated across her literary work through women like Eulalie Yawson in *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, to Anowa's dream which connects her body to Ghana's history of slavery; to Sissie's commentary on her journey to Europe and her friendship with Marija; and more recently in the plethora of female characters in *Diplomatic Pounds* who transgress boundaries of space and time and social constrictions. Some have described Aidoo as "the mouth of those women who have no mouth to speak for themselves" and as "the spokesperson for Africa" (Azodo, 1999: 401). Though such broadly applicable acclamations tend to overlook the specificity of Aidoo's work, I believe that the many lessons that Aidoo's work imparts make her a voice for a feminist pan-Africanism.

Endnotes

1. The Bond of 1844 and its legal significance in Ghana's history has been contested by J.B. Danquah in "The Historical Significance of the Bond of 1844". Danquah argues that the considering the Bond of 1844 as a kind of "magna carta" is false because the wording of the document does not grant the British Crown political control over the communities described in the bond as "adjacent" to Cape Coast Castle.

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