

You only survive if you knew how to live in it as a woman: **Ghanaian Women in Ama Ata Aidoo's Select Works**

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Abstract: Society expects women to play the role of a dutiful daughter, sister, wife and mother. Aidoo's heroines play the multiple roles as expected by society. This paper deals with the roles given to the woman, the limitations of these roles and how she plays these roles.

Keywords: Barrenness, Motherhood, Patriarchy, Conditioning, Responsibility.

Ghanaian society, being a patriarchal one, expects a woman to play a number of roles for her family. This society believes that, "good" girls ought to be loyal wives and mothers. Aidoo portrays women of all ages, and hence we see daughters, sisters, wives, mothers and grandmothers in her works. Aidoo shows how women in different roles are "expected to be" and "looked upon" by men. Aidoo in her stories also show us how her women characters play the roles imposed on them by society.

Society decides how a woman should be and the role she needs to undertake in the society. Traditional women therefore impose rules and teach the norms of society to their children from a very early age. Young girls are expected to follow the footsteps of their mothers and be by the hearth while men undertake the responsibility of defending the home and village. Aidoo's short story "The Late Bud" shows how society looks at children who do not conform to the rules of society. The short story revolves around women and shows the treatment of women by women. Yaaba's mother refuses to address Yaaba as her child when she is on the playground and not by the hearth as is expected from a girl of her age. Yaaba plays pebbles by the Big Trunk the whole day and does not bother to run any errands for her mother. Her mother therefore tells her, "... [a] woman that lives on the playground is not a woman. If you were a boy, it would be bad enough, but for a girl, it is a curse. The house cannot hold you. *Tchia*." (108)

This conditioning or rules of how one should be begins in childhood itself, and interestingly, this conditioning of the girl children is done by women. The patriarchal society uses women as tools against women.

Yaaba's mother is hostile towards Yaaba because Yaaba's "unwomanly" behaviour is unacceptable in their society. In order to make the girl child aware of her duties, even the favourite saying in Yaaba's family goes, "The good child who willingly goes on errands eats the food of peace" (103) and those who do nothing, "... [w]ill not get the tiniest bit" (104). Yaaba's mother spits upon children like Yaaba who fail to live up to the expectation of the family and the society. According to Yaaba's mother, "...[t]o be a good girl, one had to stay by the hearth and not by the Big Trunk throwing pebbles, but with one's hands folded quietly on one's lap, waiting to be sent everywhere by all mothers..." (109)

Throughout the story, Yaaba is addressed as "Yaaba" while the good child Adwoa is addressed as "My child Adwoa". Later, when Yaaba tries to get red earth for her mother like the good Adwoa, Yaaba hears her mother call her "my child". Yaaba is loved and accepted into the family only when she tries to abide by the rules of her society.

Aidoo also portrays child characters in her plays, *Anowa* and *The Dilemma of a Ghost*. The boy and the girl in these plays are carefree and light-hearted. Still, when it comes to authority between the two, the boy holds the upper hand in both the plays, and he threatens to beat the girl if she doesn't yield to his wishes. From a very early age, boys are entitled an upper hand in every matter. Through the portrayal of light-hearted children, Aidoo goes on to discuss serious issues and reflective themes. A girl child is a liability to most families. Therefore, triviality attached to a girl child in the name of the family is seen in the character of Mansa. Mansa in the short story "In The Cutting of a Drink" has gone missing from her family for twelve years. Mansa's brother goes in search of her in the city after twelve years so that at least Mansa's ghost would know that they had not ignored her totally. Perhaps they want to avoid some ill omen which might befall on them if they totally neglect Mansa. If they really cared for her, why didn't they bother to look for her in all those twelve years? If Mansa had been a "son" or a "brother", her family might not have deserted her. Interestingly, this story revolves around Mansa but as a character she is not seen in the story. Ironically, this reflects the status of a woman in Ghana who forms the centre of the family and yet remains and is expected to remain invisible. Aidoo also uses a male narrator in the story to show man's expectations from a woman in his society.

As a liability, they think that a daughter is raised only to glorify another man's family, so she is trained to be in the kitchen and do the household chores. She is nurtured only for the sake of the bride-price which is kept aside for seeking brides for the sons. So, for most women, marriage means the loss of self. Very often, a woman's marital bed transforms itself into her death-bed. By paying the bride-price, the husband owns her because he

has “bought” her. And whatever happens after marriage, she is not supposed to come back but endure the suffering and save her family's name. In case she breaks these norms, her parents have to return the bride-price which by then, might have already been used up. She also becomes a stigma to the family in case she comes back or fails in her duty as a wife. Usually most families are more bothered about the reputation of the family and not her misery, so they force her to endure the hardship.

Gyaawa in the short story, “A Gift From Somewhere” is a victim of an unhappy marriage. She is the first wife but her husband and junior wives neglect her. Gyaawa performs the role expected of her as a wife and endures her sufferings. Aidoo through the character of Gyaawa suggests that though polygamy was accepted by society, women were not happy with it and in it. Wives fight for the husband's attention, are jealous of each other and finally end up quarrelling. There exists no harmony as expected from a family.

Like the good mother Gyaawa, Aunt Araba in the story, “Something to Talk About on the Way to the Funeral”, works overtime to provide the best for her son. She endures all the pain caused by her spoiled scholar son and continues to work for him. And, what is the reward for all her hard work? Humiliation and negligence. Women like Aunt Araba who remain voiceless and submissive for the sake of security and their children, end up as victims of marriage and motherhood. The misconception of true motherhood is evident here, as the woman who lives solely for her children, suffers the most. Motherhood is considered the greatest blessing for a woman, and barrenness is considered a curse and the worst punishment for a woman. Barren women are branded as “witches” and ostracised by society. In order to avoid the “tag”, most women long for children and motherhood. The two women in Flora Nwapa's novel *Idu* comment, “What we are praying for is children. What else do we want if we have children” (150).

As society considers women as tools of production, they are not bothered about the mortality of women. Aidoo in her poem, “Gynae One” talks about the pain of childbirth. Society believes that women are created for procreation and ignores the plight of women:

Dying for it | Dying with it | Dying from it.
| Or | Just | dying | dying | dying | dying |
[...]
All agony | no ecstasy. (43-4)

A childless woman has no identity or status. A woman is considered a woman only when she gives birth to a child. The 1st woman, who is barren in Aidoo's play *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, is a failed woman and a failed wife. She therefore expresses the intense loneliness and longing for children in

the following words:

Oh, Eternal Mother Nature,
Queen Mother of Childbirth,
How was it you went past my house
Without a pause
Without a rest?
Mighty God, when shall the cry of an infant
Come into my ear;
For the sun has journeyed far
In my sky. (23)

The two women characters in the play discuss the pain of barrenness. A barren woman has no one to come home to and no say even among her own peers. Even when they are gossiping and conversing, the 2nd woman holds more authority and respect. In all their conversations, the 2nd woman ends their talk and tells the 1st woman to hurry as she has a family to attend to. The 1st woman is forced to respect the decision of the 2nd woman, and hence she expresses her desire to be a mother and be a full-fledged woman. The 1st woman in the play also mourns for Eulalie who they think is barren. Being barren herself, the 1st woman pities Eulalie who shares her fate as a barren woman. The two women who represent the chorus in the play continue to sing about the sorrows of a barren woman. Aidoo uses the oral tradition and repeats the word “barren” in the song of the two women in order to stress the stigma attached to barrenness:

1st w: Barren!
2nd w: I must leave you then
You know Esi kom's troubles are many...
1st w: Barren!...
2nd w: I say let us go. [*she takes the lead.*]
1st w: Barren!...
If it is real barrenness,
Then, oh stranger-girl
Whom I do not know,
I weep for you. (39)

The woman, steeped in self-pity, identifies herself with Eulalie. Because she knows how she is branded and treated by the society. Eulalie, who is unaware of all the connotations attached to barrenness, continues to practice family planning. Not because she wants to but because Ato wants to enjoy life. She is considered a “failed” woman and a “witch” by her in-laws who are unaware of family planning and modern technologies. Eulalie comes from a different cultural background, and therefore fails to play the role of a wife or daughter-in-law as expected by Ato's society. She faces discontentment since her life as a wife does not

turn out the way she had expected. Esi plays the role of a mother who can do anything for her son. She goes to the extent of selling the family heirloom for Ato's education. She even rears a sheep to pay the bride price for Ato and so, feels deeply disappointed when Ato marries Eulalie without her consent. Esi wants Ato to marry a girl from their own community, and like a good mother even chooses a girl for him. She is therefore annoyed when Ato brings home a woman who has no knowledge of their customs and traditions. After this initial hostility, she tries to play the role of a good mother-in-law and gifts Ato and Eulalie snails for dinner. She faces disappointment again as a mother-in-law when Eulalie throws away her snails. In the end she unites the young couple when the cultural differences threaten their marriage. She teaches her son the importance of relationships, compromise and negotiation.

As barrenness is associated with many negative implications, Aidoo uses the metaphor of unproductiveness to describe the political situation of Ghana. Anowa in the play *Anowa*, is desolate because the slave trade has metaphorically robbed her of her fertility, and the fertility of Ghana because of selling of the indigenous resources to other parts of the world. Similarly, her husband, Kofi Ako's impotence is said to be the result of his selling off or slavery of his own people for material gains. Anowa's financial stability is useless without children. Kofi's slave girl therefore says, "If I had money than I knew what to do with, but not a single child, I should be very unhappy" (109).

The "disobedient" daughter Anowa marries for love but finds no fulfillment in her marriage. Likewise, Fusena in the novel *Changes: A Love Story*, marries Ali for love and finds no fulfilment in her marriage. Fusena plays the role of a dutiful wife and sacrifices so much for Ali and her children. Yet, Ali refuses to be committed to her and cheats on Fusena. Though she is aware of the loss of independence, Fusena preserves her marriage and accepts her role as a wife and a mother. She knows that:

Leaving Ali was not only impossible but would also not be an answer to anything. Because having married her friend and got a husband, there was no chance of getting back her friend if she left or divorced Ali the husband. She would only have an estranged husband. Nor did it help matters much that in the middle of all her frustrations, she kept telling herself that given the position of women in society, she would rather be married than not, and rather to Ali than anyone else. (65)

Fusena conforms to the role expected of her, in the process, sacrificing herself, her ambition and her independence for a sense of security. Ali and

Fusena are equally educated before marriage, but after her marriage, Fusena gives up her education for her family. Fusena endures in silence when Ali was "... [g]etting more and more educated while she stayed the same" (67). She is therefore deeply hurt when Ali falls for a woman who has more educational qualifications than herself. The first question she asks Ali about Esi was, "She has a university degree" (99). Fusena was not bothered about Esi's age or looks; all she knew is that her sacrifice to give up education went unappreciated. On the other hand, Esi knew that as a second wife, she could never enjoy the privileges like a first wife.

After the second marriage, Esi feels insecure as Ali starts to drift away slowly from her. In that sense, marriage only drifts them apart. Nana, Esi's grandmother who represents the traditional society advises Esi that marriage is not beneficial to women either in traditional or in modern society. Marriage is in no way associated with love but rather, is the means by which the wife becomes the property of her husband. Esi's grandmother advises Esi, "Ah my lady, the last man any woman should think of marrying is the man she loves" (42). Esi seems to have followed this advice dutifully. Love is never present in her relationship with her men. In Oko's case it is gratitude or rather pity and in Ali's case it is physical attraction. Esi however remains unfulfilled even after strictly following Nana's advice.

Esi is a complex character, who tries to redefine woman as a daughter, as a lover, as a wife and as a mother. Aidoo in an interview with Maria Frias says that Esi's failure in marriage is because of Ali and not Esi:

...[E]si was definitely willing to try and work for her second marriage. Now, what messed her up was not so much that she was the second wife of a Muslim polygamous husband, but the fact that after the marriage—after all the rituals of the second marriage had been conducted—Ali wasn't working for the relation; he was treating her like any wife, whether she was the only wife or the second wife. (Maria Frias, 43)

Later in the novel, Nana explains the reality of marriage to Esi in *Changes: A Love Story*:

When we were young we were told that people who were condemned to death were granted any wish on the eve of their execution. By the way, was that ever true? Anyhow, a young woman on her wedding day was something like that. She was made much of, because that whole ceremony was a funeral of the self that could have been. (110)

Esi fails to fit into the role of a wife as her society expects. When she is with Oko, she feels suffocated as Oko demands all of her and her time. And when she is with Ali, she feels neglected and her marriage is only a

contract to have sex legally. Oko represents the traditional man who wants his woman to be at home, be a wife and mother. Ali on the other hand, represents the modern, educated man. Esi has an experience with both of them but can not find fulfilment in either of them. The fact that Esi is more educated than her friends does not make her truly liberated, because both the men in her life look upon her as an object to be suppressed and to satiate their own sexual gratification.

Marriage therefore does not solve Esi's problem. Ali never belongs to her completely he is constantly on the run for new adventures. Home for Ali is never at Esi's place. Consequently, Esi's life remains unfulfilled as she is looking for independence as well as love, which neither of the men could give her. Oko fails to give her space, and Ali fails to give her love, and like most women, she becomes a victim of patriarchy.

How can a woman find fulfilment as a daughter, wife or mother when women are always treated as commodities which men can pick and use? They are expected to be moral and carry out the domestic duties while men take pride in having adulterous relationships. Esi's grandmother points out the difference between a man and a woman in matters of adultery. She tells Esi that, a man gains self esteem if he sleeps and flirts with many women but a woman degrades herself if she does so. We wonder why the question of immorality is always imposed upon women, while men wash their hands free over the part played by them, in perpetuating the social views in the so called "man's world".

Despite the fact that the woman does so much for her family and society, the term "woman" is considered derogatory because of the various implications attached to it. Some men fight when called a "woman", and one is left wondering what harm that does to them. Zirigu in "For Whom Things Did Not Change" cannot stand being called a "woman". Though he cooks and does household chores for his master Kobina, he cannot imagine himself cooking for his family. He thinks it is derogatory, and that it is a woman's job to cook and do chores for his family. He tells Kobina, "I no be woman. God forbid!" (17) Zirigu is terribly scared to be a woman. He adds, "God forbid" after his speech as though being a woman is a punishment or crime. What Zirigu does not realise is that the connotation attributed to "woman" is a construct. Man cannot be termed the "superior sex" when both man and woman have their own flaws physically and mentally. Admitted that physically men are better endowed with strength, but if one cares to look beyond then one will see that, she hasn't borne anything less than him. In fact, many a time she endures and can endure more than him. Anowa, in *Anowa* calls her husband a "woman" when she finds out that he is impotent.

Calling a man as a woman is intended to ridicule his potency. In *Anowa*, it is a hit at his failure to have children. Like women's barrenness, impotency is also a cause of insult for men. Perhaps what *Anowa* really meant is that, if a man wishes to call a woman incapable, a weak man is like the woman he constructed. So, there is no difference between them. Kofi does not want to admit his weakness, and therefore refuses to tell *Anowa* the reason for his decision to separate. Unable to bear the "insult" of being called a "woman", Kofi commits suicide. Kofi can not endure what women have been enduring for ages, so whom should we consider the weaker sex? Thus, women in *Aidoo* come to us more as role players than as individuals. Indigenous traditions as well as the impact of western colonisation have deteriorated their position in society, thus ranging her roles from a subservient mother to a sensuous mistress, all of them modified and designed to cater to man's pleasures, transforming woman into a commodity.

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