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## Caught in Transition: Ama Ata Aidoo's Search for a New Ghanaian Woman

### Sohail Ahmad Saeed

Assistant Professor, Department of English Literature, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Punjab, Pakistan.

### Ahmad Naeem

Lecturer, Department of English Language and Literature, Gomal University, Dera Ismail Khan, KP, Pakistan.

Email: [anaeemk@hotmail.com](mailto:anaeemk@hotmail.com)

(Corresponding Author)

### Muhammad Mahmood Ahmad Shaheen

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Government Sadiq Egerton Graduate College, Bahawalpur, Punjab, Pakistan.

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**Abstract:** *This paper brings out the Womanist perspective in Aidoo's No Sweetness Here and Other Stories. The term 'Womanism' encapsulates the varied dynamics of the black woman's literary experience as it distinguishes itself from the feminism of the White Woman. The predicament of women in postcolonial Ghana is the focus of Aidoo's attention. Aidoo's vision is historical, also. In her short stories, she explores the challenges faced by women in post-independence Ghana. In the period of transition, the African woman's identity is brought into conflict with traditions and cultural modernization. Aidoo's predominant concern is to reflect on women's increasing alienation in contemporary African society with the help of tradition and modernity. In Aidoo's vision, Africa's progress is inseparable from the social, economic, political and psychological liberation of women. No Sweetness Here and Other Stories attempts to make African women aware of their agency, which is the first step towards their liberation.*

**Key Words:** Womanism, Colonization, Commodification, Motherhood, Liberation

### Introduction

Ama Ata Aidoo's first collection of short stories, titled *No Sweetness Here and Other Stories*, consists of eleven short stories. Aidoo is a contemporary Ghanaian creative artist, thinker, teacher and cultural worker who gives expression to her thoughts in the language of the former colonizers. This is her way of writing back to the empire and reclaiming the cultural identity of her people, particularly of the women. In William [Luis's \(1981\)](#) words, "The Slave, Caliban, uses Prospero's imposed language to undermine

the master's powers" (p. 250). Ghana, a sub-region in West Africa, was a British colony in 1942 when Ama Ata Aidoo was born. Her adolescence saw her beloved nation emerging as the first sub-Saharan African nation to declare independence from European colonization. Nationalism and anticolonialism led to independence and sadly to what Neil [Lazarus \(1990\)](#) terms "the mourning after" (p. 1). Given the historical onslaught of colonialism, Ghana resembles other regions of West Africa as it is caught in a long and unhappy postcolonial transition.

A colonial rule introduced a capitalist wage economy, English law, English language, and English mores where quite different cultural realities existed. The colonial interruption of the colonial masters in Africa has had a devastating outcome in terms of economic plunder. However, the lingering impact had been the psychological colonization which persisted long after the decolonization of the land.

Aidoo's vision of this history governs all her work. She raises issues of Europe's accountability for "underdeveloping Africa" (p. 4) in Walter [Rodney's \(1982\)](#) phrase. Her work makes significant contributions to African literature and culture, particularly because it illuminates the struggles and triumphs of post-independence Ghanaian society. The focus of her attention is the predicament of women in postcolonial Ghana. Women are being commodified and exploited in a residual patriarchal set-up. With her characteristic honesty and humour, Aidoo explores the conflict between tradition and modernization that rages within the African woman. True to the tradition of African storytelling, in *No Sweetness Here and Other Stories*, the characters come to life through their distinct voices and speech. If there is no sweetness, there is the salt essential to life, even if it comes from tears and the strength that comes from a history of endurance.

Gwendolyn [Mikell \(1995\)](#), in "African Feminism: Toward a New Politics of Representation", indicates that the African woman found her place in the African society through a reoccurring tradition of inclusion and integration within its collective structures. As the colonization process affected Africa, it also affected women and their place in African society. The western cultural imports, including religion, economy and politics, affected the colonized. Specifically, gender inequality was perpetuated by the following factors:

- i. The catholic induction of monogamy within the African culture
- ii. A clear pattern of oppressing women
- iii. The western education system's endorsement of men over women
- iv. The legal system and its varied reforms

Combined, these aspects perpetuated a lack of equality in African society. These colonial systems were integrated with the political, religious, and social arenas with long-lasting consequences. As a result of such structures, the new social structures had little place for the common African woman, resulting in a drastic shift in woman's position in African society. With continued reinforcement, gender inequality persisted and continued to affect society. By the 1980s, the awareness of political and economic manipulation was grasped by the African female population, resulting in a vast literary output on the issues of gender inequality. African-American feminists were among the pioneers to reveal the flawed representation of mainstream feminists who neglected the experience of non-white women. According to black feminists, the integration of racial oppression is necessary to understand gender oppression. A black woman's oppression is twofold, as a woman and as black woman.

## Research Methodology

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Mainstream feminism deals with the plights of western women. The literary critic Bell [Hooks \(1984\)](#) pointed out the exclusion of black women. According to her, western feminism has neglected the silent majority, the women who have been the most victimized part of society due to racial differences. Thus, African women had seen the need for representation of that unrepresented majority. Alice [Walker \(1983\)](#) coined the term Womanism in her essay collection titled *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*. The term represents the women who had been neglected by racial differences.

Bernard [Bell \(1987\)](#) studies black American female writers and their predominant concern with racism and oppressive dynamics of sexism and classism. Often, such works include a black female protagonist who journeys from victimization to the realization of her autonomy. The protagonist connects a host of ideas and themes, ranging from female bonding, personal relationships, communal connection, power of female emotions, and the usage of black female language. Through the medium of fiction, black writers have explored such experiences in an attempt to underscore the struggles of women in society (pp. 1-421).

### Discussion and Analysis

Aidoo's (1992) creative works and her statements in essays and interviews contribute significantly to the parameters of African feminism. She remarks:

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 our land, its wealth, our lives, and the burden of our own development because it is not possible to advocate independence for our 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 of our feminism. (p. 323)

That is Aidoo's vision of the future of her continent in which Africa's progress is inseparable from the social, economic, political and psychological liberation of women. If a woman does not recognize her enslavement to patriarchy, she cannot be freed into liberation with any meaningful outcome. Patriarchal women, the women who have internalized the norms and values of patriarchy, do not even know that they are subjugated. According to some feminists, a

woman's psychological liberation can be achieved by systematically analyzing it at the level of language. Language, the carrier of ideologies, plays an important role in internalizing as well as getting beyond patriarchal ideology. Aidoo's collection, *No Sweetness Here and Other Stories*, is an attempt to make African women realize their subjugation which is the first step towards their liberation. The eleven stories of this collection explore several dilemmas through the prisms of three phases of national history: colonialism, independence, and post-colonialism. Aidoo makes use of the dilemma tale of the Akan oral tradition and in each tale, the dilemma is directly or indirectly related to women.

In Aidoo's collection, African women are portrayed as teachers or university lecturers as in the opening story "Everything Counts", in "Two Sisters", and in the titled story, "No Sweetness Here". Reference is also made to young women as college students in "Something to Talk About on the Way to the Funeral" and in "Everything Counts", the lecturer states that one-third of the class was girls ([Aidoo, 1995, p. 4](#)). Other nontraditional roles that women occupy in these stories are as a nurse in "The Message", typist in "Two Sisters", and an allusion is made to air stewardesses in one of the stories. These roles are suggestive of Aidoo's focus on the changing roles of women in a society going through a transition. This may well be attributed to the impact of colonial education and economic norms introduced from the outside.

In their more traditional roles, women are hardworking, industrious, and astute market women who sell bread and peddle cloth. Like Ama in the story "No Sweetness Here", the women till their farms to produce food for the family and to earn money from the excess produce. A reference is made to the role of the midwife. During the colonial period, it is stated that women began to be employed as housemaids for the whites. The

most preferred role for all the women in the collection of short stories, however, is that of a mother. Since the dominant tone of the work is that there is no sweetness here, women who have only one child or have difficulty becoming pregnant are always the most anxious of Aidoo's characters. Motherhood often substitutes for unhappy roles as wives, as was the case in the title story "No Sweetness Here" and in "A Gift From Somewhere". In these stories, women are often described as suffering women willing to take the punishment of their children or bear their child's pain because they love their children so much. A common theme in many of the stories is the hardworking mother who sacrifices and works hard so that her children may get an education. In Aidoo's stories, the luckiest women are the ones who have many children and whose children are successful.

Although Aidoo looks upon motherhood as an ideal state but also recognizes that pregnancy can be limiting for the woman, Connie, in "Two Sisters", is viewed with disgust by James, her husband, who uses her pregnancy as an excuse to be disloyal. In "A Gift From Somewhere", the main character, although trying desperately to save her baby, already fearing that it is dead, thinks, "Now all I must do is try to prepare myself for another pregnancy, for it seems this is the reason why I was created . . . to be pregnant for nine of twelve months of every year. Or is there a way out of it all? And where does this road lie?" (1995, p. 81). The tone is not a happy one and suggests a kind of restrictive existence.

While it appears that there are a few good husband-wife relationships, as in the story "For Whom Things Did Not Change", where Setu is praised as a 'good wife' by her husband, the most prevailing depiction of a woman as a wife is that of 'the unlucky woman'. In many of the stories, women are given the total responsibility of raising and providing for the children, either because the husband has to leave the family for some

reason or in many circumstances, the male does not assume the role of father as with Ata in "Something to Talk About on the Way to the Funeral". Emphasizing the pattern which exists in the lives of her Fanti women, the author shows that even the life of the contemporary woman has not improved. For example, the lecturer in "Everything Counts" is a wife, but when she needs her husband to comfort her, he is still travelling in other countries. The speaker notes: "Her brothers, lovers and husbands. But nearly all of them were still abroad" (1995, p. 8). While it is suggested that a revolution is underway and that women and men have new roles as university students and lecturers, the same problems continue. Things really have not changed. A central metaphor used to illustrate 'the repetition of old patterns is the use of the prostitute. In "For Whom Things Did Not Change", Setu questions how the big men of today can take the young girls as their mistresses. She asks, "How can men behave in this way who are our Lords." Zirigu, her husband, answers: "Mm. was it different in the old days. . . Did not the lords take the little girls they liked among the women?" (1995, p. 12).

There is a particular pattern in which the collection of short stories opens and closes. The opening narrative is "Everything Counts", and the concluding narrative is "Other Versions". Both these stories, where the West is insidiously and pervasively present in terms of racism, economic exploitation and psychological colonization, provide a frame for *No Sweetness Here*. In these two stories, the viewpoint of Western-educated Africans returning home or living abroad is the focus. The first one is female, while the other is male. Through their confused eyes, the dilemmas are sharpened for the readers. In "Everything Counts", the wig becomes a symbol of 'mimicry.' Through 'wigs' and 'make-ups', black women are trying to 'mimic,' to be like white women. This is their postcolonial identity. Through

generations of subjugation, the black women integrated the colonial ideology into their own lifestyle; such ideology endorsed the superiority of the white culture and emphasized the inferiority of the indigenous people. The formerly colonized people are left with a psychological 'inheritance' of a negative self-image and alienation from their own indigenous cultures. Black women, after so-called independence, are doubly the victims of this predicament: they are despised because of the form of their hair and the colour of their skin, not by their white masters but by the black males of their own community. The only accepted criterion of beauty has become white skin and long tresses: "As for imitating white women, mm, what else can one do, seeing how some of our brothers behave? The things one has seen with one's own eyes. The stories one has heard about African politicians and diplomats abroad" (1995, p. 3). The beauty contest marks the climax of this story where Sissie, the protagonist of the story, gets a rude shock on discovering that the winner of the beauty pageant is a "mulatto" (1995, p. 7), an affirmation by Africans that being light-skinned and having silky hair, like the wig, is symbolic of African beauty: a collective consensus highlighting Africans' loss of their pre-colonial cultural identity.

In Aidoo's stories, gender and disillusionment relate to class and race issues. The story questions the progressive nature of modernization as it comes in conflict with gender issues in modern urban areas where women are particularly exploited. In the short story "For Whom Things Did Not Change", the dilemmas of the ascendancy of Western-educated 'big men'--corrupt black politicians who exploit the nation and young women---are also explored, as are women's trials as mothers, prostitutes, and wives. As the title of the story suggests, it is the story of those for whom nothing changed after independence. Zirigu encounters the tyrannical power of the black

ruling class, which exempts him from the basic modern amenities. Zirigu, the cook-steward, asks Kobina, his black Massa, the meanings of independence. For Zirigu, 'freedom' means just a change of masters: the white masters are replaced with the black masters. Zirigu realizes that now it is some of his own people – the big men – who would not treat him equally, and his status as a second-rate citizen is now more strongly laid in the post-independence society. This story also probes the dilemmas of changing gender roles as they relate to race and class. Profound differences in class and education override racial commonality between the black, Western-educated Kobina and the black Zirigu, as the older man addresses the younger as "My White Massa!" While Zirigu is adept at cooking white peoples' food---that is his job---he is horrified by Kobina's request for local food. Cooking local food is a woman's work! And the writer's comment is: "When a black man is with his wife who cooks and chores for him, he is a man. When he is with white folk for whom he cooks and chores, he is a woman. Dear Lord, what then is a black man who cooks and chores for black men?" (1995, p. 17).

Another modern dilemma highlighted in this story is the objectification and commodification of women. This phenomenon is very complex. Women are treated as sex objects, and at the same time, women commodify themselves: the damaging effects of capitalism on human psychology. Women become sex objects when 'big men' abuse and sexualize them by luring them with new, flashy cars and new, flashy salaries. Their bodies are treated as objects having use value, exchange value, and sign-exchange value. But these are women themselves who commodify their bodies---an object becomes a commodity only when it has exchange value or sign-exchange value---women give their bodies to get money. Here lies a very bitter social reality. The problem of women's limited work options in cities is

closely related to urbanization which is the major social effect of colonization. In the battle for survival, the girls and women shifting from rural origins to urban centres are not only losing traditional mores but also falling for any available opportunity of earning their livelihood. As Setu in For "Whom Things Did Not Change", expresses her outrage: "It is good I never had a daughter. Because if I had had a daughter, and I knew a big man was doing unholy things with her, then with a machet in my own hand, I would have cut that big man to pieces myself!" (1995, p. 11). And given Aidoo's typically complex perspective, she has Setu identify other participants who are equally accountable for this moral disease corroding the social fabric---avaricious families who "try to profit by their daughters" (1995, p. 13). Setu's strong condemnation is resounding: "I spit upon such big men! I spit upon such mothers! I spit upon such daughters!" (1995, p. 13). The same is the case with Mansa in "In the Cutting of a Drink". She embraces prostitution amorally: "Any kind of work is work," she remarks to the narrator, who also learns that he must accept his sister's choice (1995, p. 37). Aidoo does not romanticize sexually objectified girl-friends, nor does she regard them as victims. She recognizes the dilemma of being a woman in a changing patriarchal society.

In the short story *Two Sisters*, Mercy and Connie, the two sisters are juxtaposed as the opposite of each other. Connie is a respectable wife who is a teacher by profession. But in her case, virtue is not its own reward. She also has to face the dilemmas of changing sexual mores in urban areas. She tolerates her husband's infidelities when she is pregnant with their second child. His reaction during her first pregnancy, even though he regrets it later, is strikingly abusive: "During her first pregnancy, he kept saying after the third month or so that the sight of her tummy the last thing before he slept always gave him nightmares" (1995, p.

97). Then there is the other sister Mercy who is one of those women who use their bodies as weapons to acquire material wealth and climb the social ladder. In urban areas, 'big men' who have 'girl friends' indulge in visiting relationships that are very different from traditional polygamy that, with all its problems, require male responsibility. There is no accountability for precarious sexual contacts; they are as unstable as the new fragile nation-states and their governments. Although Aidoo's representation makes such exploitative men accountable for their acts, she does not solely blame these men. Women also demonstrate exploitive behaviour as Mercy uses Mensar-Arthur for material gain. After Mensar-Arthur's imprisonment, she moves on to Captain Ashe, who replaces Mensar-Arthur and plays his role for the future. The entire story is based around this ongoing battle of control and power. Even though Mercy is complicit in being sexually used by these 'big men,' she also relishes their power. So in this story, the two sisters represent a clash between the morally idealistic and the morally realistic in the face of a corrupt post-independence Ghanaian society. The attitude of Mercy highlights the lack of social and political stability in Ghana. In the story, Mercy is addressed as "...a twenty-three-year-old child who chooses a silly way to conquer unconquerable problems" (1995, p. 98). Mercy is a product of her environment, the postcolonial socio-economic set-up in which a girl cannot improve her status without the crutches of marriage or the otherwise monopolization of a man. However, she has also become a part of the corruption by perpetuating oppression.

How women are exploited and subjugated as mothers is a special focus of Aidoo's attention in this collection. The particular dilemmas of mothers figure into a remarkable cluster of stories: a traditional child-custody dispute in the title story "No Sweetness Here", the repeated burden of

childbearing in "A Gift from Somewhere", and the comfort of children when men leave wives to a life of loneliness in "Certain Winds from the South". The narrator of "No Sweetness Here" is a respected local teacher, and as an outsider, she can look into the village disputes objectively. The title story is placed carefully in the middle of the collection. Kwesi's mother, Maami Ama, decides to face a formal divorce despite the risk of losing custody of her only son. This decision is quite radical on her part: "Why should I make myself unhappy about a man for whom I ceased to exist a long time?" (1995, p. 62). The cruelty of the communal construct that a child ultimately belongs to his father when the marriage is broken, no matter how much the mother suffered in bringing the child up, is vocalized in the words of Maami's aunt: "Now that he is grown enough to be counted among the living, a father knows he has got a son" (1995, p. 68). Maami Ama gets no support against her husband's abuse. Though her own mother had told her that "in marriage, a woman must sometimes be a fool," she decides to fight back: "I have been a fool for far too long a time" (1995, p. 61).

A method that is used to illustrate the continuum of the unpleasant status of the African woman is through the use of contrasts or parallels. Aidoo presents happy marriages and unhappy ones and describes loving grandmothers as in "The Message" but hateful grandmothers as in "No Sweetness Here." In the last mentioned story, she presents the educated woman – 'chicha' as the narrator to relate the unhappy tale of Kwesi's mother. While it is obvious that Ama, the main character's life, is not sweet, one recognizes that the life of the teacher is moderately unhappy. She is described as being somewhat alienated from the others in the village because she has been 'trained' away from the customs of the land, but above all, she is unmarried, and she has no children. Vicariously, she lives the roles of wife and

mother through Ama and dreams of stealing Kwesi and giving him the opportunities she would normally wish to provide for her own son. Apparently, she believes she will not share in the joys of motherhood in the usual way. A similar contrast is developed between Connie and Mercy in "Two Sisters". Both are now in the city; Connie is the better educated, teacher-trained, loyal wife and mother. Nevertheless, her life is unhappy, for she knows that James, her husband is unfaithful to her. Mercy, on the other hand, is characterized as having been a not-too brilliant student who has only been successful at preparing to be a typist, not a proper secretary. Mercy believes she can love more than one man at a time and she is willing to give herself to the big men if they will provide her with the life she wishes to live. While Connie, like the family of Mansa In "the Cutting of a Drink", laments the action of her sister, both of these contemporary women prostitutes believes their existence has improved.

In "Something to Talk About on the Way to the Funeral", the two women are described as independent and hardworking. While they have many problems with the fathers of their children, the message is clearly made: "A good woman does not rot" (1995, p. 118). The story also points out that the older generation of women, though not educated in western schools, often received special training. Araba—the now deceased main character of the story—as a girl, had been sent to the city to learn the trade of making good bread. Although she did get in 'trouble' when she returned home, her family took her in and was supportive. Her son grew up and, through his big-man lawyer-father, was able to go to school. He, too, impregnates Mansa, who is a young woman whose family had sent her to be educated. Unfortunately, the family of Mansa is not as supportive and loving as the family of Araba when she comes home pregnant. Nevertheless, Aunt Araba, the mother-in-law, takes Mansa in, treats her as

a daughter and prepares her to be a good wife for Ato, her son. But life with its irony cannot be that good to Mansa or, as the writer suggests, to women. Ato is unable to marry Mansa because he has made pregnant the daughter of a more powerful big man. Mansa is left alone again. Mansa, too, goes to the city, but instead of becoming 'the bad woman', she becomes a successful businesswoman and is able to send money and other things home. Clearly, a reversal. A woman can be successful in the city without becoming a prostitute. In addition, it supports that a woman, despite the obstacles, can find happiness. Furthermore, it demonstrates Aidoo's commitment to the point of ambivalence in presenting the multifaceted aspects of the lives of African Women.

While it is obvious that Ama Ata Aidoo would wish a lot of her women to be less oppressive and determined by males, she is also certain that her women have character, dignity, independence and the ability to endure and, even more, appear triumphant in their survival. It is true that the women such as Araba in "Something to Talk About on the Way to the Funeral" and Maami Ama in "No Sweetness Here" often seem to collapse under the heavy burdens of their lives, but the author portrays the influence of these two women on the lives of the other characters. The gossip-mongers in the funeral story have been so impressed with the life of Araba that they tell her story for her, and in addition, Mansa, her daughter-in-law, is the beneficiary of the strength of character that Auntie Araba possessed. The teacher in "No Sweetness Here", although sympathizing with Maami Ama, recognizes that she is a strong woman. In the story which underscores so much the repetitiveness of an unhappy life, "Certain Winds from the South", the mother leaves for the market in a celebratory mood. Although Aidoo concentrates on the Ghanaian-Fanti women, her women could represent Black women

throughout Africa and the diaspora. In her final story, "Other Versions", she links the African mother and woman to the African-American woman. The African student who has watched his unselfish, caring, hardworking mother is able to see the same characteristics in the Black American women he meets as a servant in the white American home he visits and on the subway. He recognizes the beauty and strength of the existence of these women, though their lives as workers may be menial and often non-rewarding. After his offer of money to the Black American woman on the bus and her subsequent refusal with "I sure know you need them more than I do," he is able to acknowledge to himself, "Of course, she was a mother. And so there was no need to see. But now I could openly look at her beautiful face" (1995, p. 166).

## **Conclusion**

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Thus, the study concludes that the selection of short stories facilitates an understanding of the severe consequences of the British colonial enterprise. In the colonial time period, western education, its political system, and the western adherence to Catholic beliefs brought a painful transition to post-independence Ghana. This transition affected women as they were brought into conflict with patriarchal influences and the colonial heritage of the western culture. However, in spite of the unhappiness and misery which pervade the lives of her women characters, Aidoo celebrates womanhood and motherhood. In a selection of stories, she explores a variety of challenges that women face on a daily basis. Life for African women, as Aidoo suggests has been exceedingly difficult, filled with hard work, tremendous responsibility, and often victimization; it is a life that forces women to step outside the norms if she is to find their freedom. Despite the odds, the challenges still make a woman independent, resourceful, courageous, and resilient.

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