

Ama Ata Aidoo: Ghana's Literary Icon

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Ama Ata Aidoo is Ghana's foremost woman writer; her distinguished career spans several decades of the post-independence era in Africa, and her literary contribution places her among the first generation of African women writers as a leading feminist voice within postcolonial writing. Her literary corpus conveys much insight into the complexities of African women's lives in the challenging and competing social experiences of the colonial and postcolonial landscape. Her fictional works portray women characters who navigate local norms and expectations for women, customs and traditions, and the challenges of race, class, and gender inequalities within transnational spaces in western settings.

Africa, the diaspora, and the world mourn the passing of Ama Ata Aidoo as a celebrated feminist and author of a distinguished array of pathbreaking literary works. As one of the godmothers of postcolonial African fiction, her dramatic works, novels, short fiction, poetry, essays, and literary criticism are landmarks of women's entrance onto the literary stage alongside iconic male writers during the mid-twentieth century. Through her creative artistry, Ama Ata Aidoo became a voice for African women to interrogate the complexities of the postcolonial landscape from a female perspective. Her literary style draws upon African oral traditions and a combination of prose and poetry. Her literary corpus conveys clear-sighted vision, critique, and thematic focus on compelling issues of women's identity, tradition and modernity, cultural norms and expectations, the relationship between Ghana and the diaspora, and the incongruent trajectories of post-independence Ghana. Ama Ata Aidoo joined the ancestors on May 31, 2023, and her loss will be keenly felt for generations throughout Africa and the world. Her literary works will live on as classics that represent women's unsilenced voices of resistance to oppressive experiences and the expression of their selfhood and identity.

At the African Literature Association Conference in 2012, I was honored to meet Ama Ata Aidoo, and this event marked the beginning of a rewarding friendship that developed through visits to her home each time I traveled to Ghana. I experienced warm hospitality, laughter, and rich exchange of ideas

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about Ghana and the diaspora, women and gender, and literature, among other compelling topics. In her presence, I never felt like an outsider to Ghana or to Africa because of her welcoming spirit, generosity, and kindness. I will always cherish the memory of our friendship as well as her insightful perspectives on contemporary women's issues that shape the lives of Ghanaian and African women. In the early years of my career as a literary scholar, her fiction inspired my scholarly engagement with the portrayal of African women characters by female authors as well as my approach to feminist-inspired African texts through critical analysis of her novel *Changes: A Love Story*, the short story collection *No Sweetness Here*, and the play *Anowa*. Through my analysis of these and other texts, I explored the ways in which African women writers use their creative artistry to reconfigure the complexities of women's identities and their role in society.

Ama Ata Aidoo was born on March 23, 1940, in southern Ghana to a royal family among the Fante ethnic community. Encouraged by her father to pursue a western education, she was fortunate to win a scholarship to Wesley Girls' High School, where she developed her interest in writing. She won a short story competition sponsored by the Daily Graphic with a story called "To Us a Child is Born." After completing secondary school, she attended the University of Ghana at Legon, where she majored in English literature. While at the university, she participated in the Ghana Drama Studio and published her first play, *Dilemma of a Ghost*, in 1965. Her teaching career began in 1970 and lasted for over a decade at the University of Cape Coast, but the unfavorable political climate in the country failed to nurture her creative talent. In 1982 she was appointed Minister of Education by J. J. Rawlings, who was at that time head of state. She resigned from her position in less than two years and migrated to Zimbabwe, where she resumed writing and teaching. In 1991 she founded the New York-based Organization of Women Writers of Africa with the poet Jayne Cortez, and in 1994 she helped to create the Women's World Organization for Rights Development and Literature to support women's access to publishing. In 2000, Ama Ata Aidoo established the Mbassem Foundation to support African women writers. She subsequently taught in the United States at the University of Richmond and at Brown University until her retirement in 2012. Her works have received critical acclaim and robust scholarly engagement by scholars, writers, and literary critics in such works as *The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo: Polylectics and Reading Against Neocolonialism* (1994), *Emerging Perspectives on Ama Ata Aidoo* (1999), *Essays in Honor of Ama Ata Aidoo at 70: a Reader in African Cultural Studies* (2012), and the documentary film *The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo* (2014).

In 1965 Ama Ata Aidoo broke barriers for African women writers with the publication of her iconic play *Dilemma of a Ghost*. As a groundbreaking dramatic work, the play examines interlocking themes of the tensions between Ghana and her diaspora, tradition and modernity, the past and the present, and the cultural collisions that explode familial harmony. The publication of her second play, *Anowa*, in 1970 confirmed her talent as gifted

storyteller with compelling messages for Ghanaians and for the African world. Aidoo's powerful play conveys her commitment to unveil uncomfortable truths by examining the trauma of slavery through a gendered lens. The setting of *Anowa* is nineteenth-century colonial Ghana, where feminist themes emerge through the actions of the female protagonist. Anowa rebels against parental authority and traditional roles for women by marrying a man her family has rejected, resulting in tragic outcomes.

As a pioneering literary figure, Aidoo reconfigured the image of African women within a male-dominated canon in African literature during the mid-1960s. Her novels *Our Sister Killjoy: or Reflections of a Black-Eyed Squint* (1977) and *Changes: A Love Story* (1999) disrupted stereotypical portrayals of African women that were common in male-authored African texts written during the twentieth century. In both novels, Aidoo crafted female protagonists who were strong, intelligent, and outspoken as a form of "writing back" to reclaim women's voices from the margins to center stage in the African literary world. Important themes that resonate in both works include a feminist critique of gender dynamics and post-independence ruptures in Ghana.

In the iconic novel *Our Sister Killjoy: or Reflections of a Black-Eyed Squint*, Aidoo's literary imagination brought to life the finely sketched character of Sissie, the "black-eyed squint" whose perceptions express the clear-eyed vision of a former colonial subject who describes the unseemly transformations of Ghana's colonial past. The term "black-eyed squint" is a metaphorical signifier of Sissie's gaze, which captures the spatio-temporal nexus of Ghana and Africa's encounter with the west. Through a skillfully woven tapestry of poetry and prose, Sissie's observations in Europe interrogate the psychological impact of colonization on her fellow Africans and the confluence of gendered expectations at home and abroad.

In the novel *Changes: A Love Story* (1991) and the short story collection *No Sweetness Here* (1970), Ama Ata Aidoo's critical voice presents paradoxical outcomes for women characters as they respond to patriarchy, urbanization, and the conflicting demands of modernity in the colonial and postcolonial landscape of Ghana. *Changes* was awarded the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for Africa in 1992; it skillfully examines the complexities of Ghanaian women's difficult choices and the responsibility for one's destiny in life. Aidoo interrogates the extent to which a woman who follows her own path ends up better off than the woman who bends to the status quo through obedience to conventional norms for women in society. The stories in *No Sweetness Here* portray Ghanaian women faced with choices that challenge cultural roles and expectations as well as the realities of the modern world of social flux and changing identities. *Diplomatic Pounds* was published in 2012, and the stories resonate contemporary diasporan themes of transnationalism, cultural hybridity, and African women's identity in modern urban settings.

In her role as an outspoken voice for women, Aidoo articulates the impact of social, economic, and political forces on the lives of African women.

In her 1998 essay “The African Woman Today,” Aidoo affirmed that she is a feminist and insisted that “every woman and every man should be a feminist.” She asserts that, “on the whole, African traditional societies seem to have been at odds with themselves as to what exactly to do with women. For although some of them appeared to doubt gender and biology as bases for judging women, in the end they all used gender and biology to judge women’s capabilities.” This dilemma lies at the crux of Aidoo’s feminist sentiments as expressed in her writing and underscores the pressing need for social transformation to achieve women’s equality. Aidoo’s unapologetic feminism animates her women characters, who are strong, resourceful, and self-directed as they navigate tradition and modernity, gender dynamics, and the exigencies of nationhood in post-independence Africa.

Aidoo’s literary corpus is recognized as foundational in African Anglophone Writing and Feminist Literature, within a postcolonial framework that spans decades of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

As a consummate storyteller, Aidoo’s prolific writings capture the transformative energies of Ghanaian and African women’s lives through strong-willed and self-driven women characters who assert their agency and autonomy in the search for happiness and success.

Ama Ata Aidoo’s poetic voice infuses feminist critique in the sharp tones of her 1992 poem “An Angry Letter in January,” where she “writes back” to race, class, and gender barriers erected by the white male power structure. The letter is addressed to a bank manager who has rejected her request for a loan. The narrative voice asserts that “I have been happy being me: an African, a woman and a writer. Just take your racism, your sexism, your pragmatism off me.” The beauty of the poem transcends the narrator’s anger to convey the power of her African identity, self-worth, and dignity, illustrating the ways in which Aidoo’s women characters speak with one voice against patriarchal structures and socially imposed gender roles. Ama Ata Aidoo emphasizes the role of the African writer when she boldly asserts, “For us Africans, literature must serve a purpose: to expose, embarrass, and fight corruption and authoritarianism. It is understandable why the African artist is utilitarian.”

Literary scholars, writers, and critics acknowledge Aidoo’s contribution to literature, which continues to inspire contemporary African female authors to re-envision the image of women in their fictional works. Her oeuvre represents feminist synergy to achieve her vision of social transformation to empower women in society. Ama Ata Aidoo’s legacy may be seen in the outpouring of African literature in the twenty-first century by women authors who now dominate the field, and their fictional works herald dramatic changes in the trajectory of the African novel in the global age. A new generation of leading women writers from Africa owe their inspiration to Ama Ata Aidoo and other pioneers such as Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, and Mariama Ba, who broke barriers for women as literary godmothers of feminist expression and innovative ways of telling the African story. Aidoo’s writing firmly establishes her as a groundbreaking literary figure through her portrayal of dynamic African

women who redefine their identities in society. Ghana and the world have lost a commanding presence on the literary stage, and her works will live on as cherished classics in African and world literature.

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