

Between Aidoo's Feminism and Sofola's De-Womanisation: Issues and Perspectives in African Gender Discourse

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Abstract

Ama Ata Aidoo of Ghana and Zulu Sofola of Nigeria are matriarchs of African Literature because of their active involvement with female self-assertion in Africa. Whether in the novel or drama, Aidoo's women are assertive and individualistic; but female assertion in Sofola's works functions within cultural boundaries because she abhors the tendency in Western civilisation to "de-womanise" African women. Both positions have implications for African gender discourse because they raise issues about women's self-definition and actualisation which border on the relationship between the sexes. Did African women experience gender oppression before their encounter with Western values or is it a product of colonial education? Should African women define themselves based on the parameters of their Western counterparts? Is gender cooperation or conflict the panacea for gender equity in Africa? This paper uses Aidoo's and Sofola's plays to examine the different attitudes of African scholars and theorists to gender discourse in Africa and propose a direction for gender relations in the twenty first century.

Introduction

Of all the concerns that occupy men's minds, the relationship between the sexes is the most

basic and important, and also the most intricate, perplexing and elusive... The truth it seems, is full of paradoxes and evades precise definition (Wolfgang, vi).

Ama Ata Aidoo of Ghana is a prominent playwright who has utilised both orature and contemporary realities to propose directions for human relations in Africa. As a woman writer, her creative impulse interrogates the boundaries of power and powerlessness and their impact on the African female, both in the traditional and modern setting. Her first play, *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, published in 1965 introduced her into the African literary scene. The work shows the effect of acculturation on the educated African as Ato Yawson, a Ghanaian who studies in the United States returns home with an African American wife, Eulalie. Ato vassilates between the two cultures which the playwright symbolises through the old homestead where the illiterate members of the family live while the new house is occupied by Ato and his wife. It is with the publication of *Anowa* in 1970 that Aidoo makes an explicit statement on gender relations in Africa through the range of feminist issues which she raises in this explosive drama on the challenges of female assertion within a cultural framework.

But Zulu Sofola's legacy in Nigerian drama lies in her introduction of powerful women into the theatrical scene. In *Wedlock of the Gods*, she problematises choice, especially where the individual is set against the community, but *Memories in the Moonlight* celebrates choice as a viable approach for women's self-definition. *King Emene* examines the conflicts polygamy could pose to human existence; *The Sweet Trap* unravels the negative impact of Western civilisation of African women while *Song of a Maiden* and *The Wizard of Law* reveal the moral bankruptcy of the African elites who are disconnected

from the root of group experience. *Queen Omu-Aku of Oligho* is a historical play, which celebrates the courage, power and dignity of African womanhood but *The Showers and Lost Dreams* investigate the problems of women's reproductive rights in Nigeria, especially when negative traditional practices seem to conspire with inadequate health facilities to destroy women.

Ama Ata Aidoo and Zulu Sofola have made the female the subject of their creative enterprise because of their insightful approach to the dilemmas of women in Africa. The project of bringing these two female giants of African literature together is to examine their pioneering role in women's literary history in order to assess their contributions to gender discourse in the continent. In doing this, it is pertinent to identify points of affinity and divergency in their approaches to African women's search for social advancement. This work, therefore, probes the feminist issues evolved in Aidoo's *Anowa* and uses them as standpoints to examine African gender discourse in the decades which follow Sofola's lament on the de-womanisation of the modern African woman.

Issues in Aidoo's Feminism

Anowa, though a play set in Ghana of the 19th century is basically a drama of revolt, revolt against consensus behaviour both in the protagonist's insistence on marrying the man of her choice and the decision to elope with him. Aidoo's feminism begins with a Western position because the type of revolt which characterises *Anowa*'s rebellious spirit is fundamental to Western feminism. According to Berg, feminism is the woman's "freedom to decide her own destiny, freedom from sex determined role, freedom from society's oppression and restrictions, freedom to express her thoughts fully and to convert them freely into action..." (Hooks 24).

The protagonist's individualistic approach to self-definition dislocates her from the basis of group behaviour and transforms her into a wayfarer in the process of time. This dislocation is in itself a step in self-expatriation, which necessitates the choice of an alternative lifestyle or culture because nobody lives in a vacuum. Human life, as it is shown in Emenyi's *Social Determinism...* should reflect the realities of its world because the human person is, to a large extent, the product of his/her world (1-). Consequently, *Anowa*'s responses to life are shaped by the challenges which her choice to marry Kofi pose.

However, the protagonist's critical spirit provides the standpoint from where she relates with her world. This accounts for the moral and physical strength which the playwright infuses into her major character. In consonance with African humanism, *Anowa* helps to establish her husband on the path to greatness through their partnership in Hide and Skin business. But the attendant social advancement weakens Kofi's moral vision and negates constructive human behaviour. Consequently, economic expediency combines with cross materialism and withcrafty to emasculate Kofi, but *Anowa* retains her humanity ("The Playwright as Humanist" 33).

Aidoo's second play¹ raises major feminist issues because in spite of Kofi's moral ineptitude, he continues to provide leadership. This is a sign of "masculine connivance at feminine invisibility which panders to the machismo," to use Chioma Opara's apt description (1). But *Anowa*, like a light set on the hill, but covered in part, radiates glimpses of hope. This explains why she rebels against her parents, the society with its tradition and her husband. *Anowa*'s greatness of character and her eventual tragedy are traceable to the fact that she is "different" though difference in this context is limited by her suppressed consciousness. This also accounts for Kofi's seemingly casual but desperate questions: "How is it you can't feel like anybody

else does? What is the meaning of this strangeness" (38).

In androgynist poetics, women are expected to be conformist; as such Anowa's perception is a critique on male supremacy. But by imbuing her consciousness with a critical spirit, the playwright dramatises the conflict between maleness and femaleness. Aidoo recreates this most vividly through Anowa's incisive remark.

Someone should have taught me how to grow up to be a woman. I hear in other lands a woman is nothing. And they let her know this from the day of her birth... in order for her man to be a man, she must not think, she must not talk, O-o, why didn't someone teach me how to grow up to be a woman (52).

Silence, in most cultures, is identified as a female virtue, a position that is popularised by the Beti proverb which states that "women have no mouth" (Okereke 135).

Aidoo's protagonist rejects the asphyxiation of the female voice which is synonymous with powerlessness. In the process, she explores one of the biggest myths in Africa which has made infertility a female problem. This agrees with the common agenda of feminism which Helen Haste identifies as "relocating the definition of self out of a male perspective into a female perspective" (101). Consequently, the protagonist names the source and nature of her oppression in a set of rhetorical questions: "Kofi, are you dead? ... Kofi, is your manhood gone? ... Kofi ... tell me, is that why I must leave you? (61). Anowa's radical approach to self-assertion is flawed by her dependence on her husband for self-affirmation. This fractured vision contradicts a major tenet of feminism which in Berg's definition,

...demands the acceptance of women's right to individual conscience and judgement, it

postulates that women's essential worth stems from her common humanity and does not depend on the other relationships of her life. (24)

But Anowa depreciates physically and psychologically because she depends on her husband and other people for acceptance and actualisation.

Issues in Sofola's De-Womanisation of African Womanhood

Zulu Sofola's reaction to the African woman's quest for self advancement forms the thesis of her article entitled "Feminism and African Womanhood" where she surveys the dual-sex system of rulership in Africa before her contact with European and Arab cultures. The existing "socio-political power sharing" formula recognised womanhood as "(1) the divine equal of man in essence, (2) as a daughter, (3) as a mother, (4) as a wife" (54). This is why Sofola bemoans the fate of modern African women who in their exposure to Western education tend to adopt modes of assertion, which diminish African womanhood.

The term de-womanisation is used to describe modern African women who are "ineffective, always timidly and indecisively stepping behind the men, and periodically making weak scratches at issues of importance, while their non-literate counterparts would always match out in full force and achieve unbelievable successes" (62). African history is replete with accounts of women whose lives shaped the destiny of nations and peoples. Illiterate women in Opobo Province² of South Eastern Nigeria engaged the British colonial government in a battle of will which made the administration to repeal its law on taxation of domestic items in 1929.

Aidoo affirms Sofola's position in her essay, "The African Woman Today" where she posits that the daughters of Africa

descend "from some of the bravest, most independent and most innovative women this world has ever known" (39). It is the active role played by African power models in protecting, sustaining and preserving African culture and people that informs Sofola's creative enterprise because she believes that there should be a connection between the past and the present.

Therefore, though the second conference on Women in Africa and the African Diaspora (WAAD) which held in Nsukka in July, 1992 produced Sofola's concept of de-womanisation as a theoretical position, it nevertheless informed her creative vision decades before it was coined. This is shown in the way she engages her women characters in the battles for survival which go with what Mary Kolawole describes as "a critical unpacking" of tradition in the essay, "Zulu Sofola's Cyclic Aesthetics..." (30). But like most African women writers, Zulu Sofola rejects the label "feminist" because of its Western connotations. Yet she uses the power relation between men and women to "question the isms that have been superimposed on African people" as she confesses in an interview with Adeola James (24).

This enquiry allows Sofola to examine the wounds inflicted on women by negative aspects of tradition even though she abhors the word feminism³. Ogwoma's predicament in *Wedlock of the God's* when she is forcefully married to Adigwu and Abiona's refusal in *Memories in the Moonlight* to marry Otakpo, the eighty year old man who greets her birth with a bunch of firewood, show Sofola's involvement with women's sexist history. But while Abiona's revolt is an affirmation of self above group repression, Ogwoma's is a deconstruction of tradition and goes with a tinge of individualism even though it eliminates the possibility of her being inherited by Okezie, her late husband's brother.

Sofola locates female assertion within tradition because it is the basis for group experience. This is why she castigates the elites in *The Sweet Trap*, *Song of a Maiden* and *The Wizard of Law* for approaching life "from a cultural void" (Adewale, 80). Although she admits that tradition has not been fair to women as it is illustrated in *Old Wines are Tasty*, she also acknowledges that women cannot single handedly correct the injustice in the society as Ogwoma does in *Wedlock of the God's* (James, 143). Rather, she advocates a holistic approach which conforms to African cosmology and the gender inclusive nature of human relations, a situation which she analyses in her inaugural lecture, *The Artist and the Tragedy of a Nation*.

If psyche which is the centre of creativity is genderless as Sofola shows in *Feminism and African Womanhood*, then all human beings are equal in essence. This realisation results in her historical play, *Queen Omu-Ako of Oligbo* where she shows how the dual-sex system of government functions with an Omu, the leader of women controlling the female arm of the government. Being the grand daughter of an Omu, Sofola uses the leadership role of the Queen to debunk notions of female powerlessness and passivity propagated by European culture. However, there seems to be a gradual growth in her approach to gender relations between the early and latter plays. *Lost Dreams*, *The Showers* and *The Ivory Tower* dramatise the battle of the sexes because one is pitched against the other though within the confines of tradition.

Kolawole corroborates this position when she remarks that Sofola has developed "her gender ideology in an overt way from a modernist traditionalist mixed context" (32). We shall use *The Showers* to show her growth from a "cultural apostle" to a gender ideologue who in the process creates a modern educated female character that is not de-womanised. The play engages men and women in a "chat" over the exploitation of

women and the traumas they undergo during childbirth. Written in 1991, the Director's Note to the premiere of *The Showers* in Africa Hall, University of Illorin on September 24 states: "As no bird can fly effectively, if at all with one wing, so also it is that a nation cannot grow and develop effectively with only one wing" Thus, Nigeria is advancing towards self destruction if it perpetrates the female exploitation.

Sofola uses Mrs. Adebekun and Mrs. Oteri to reveal the neglect of women by their husbands and the complications, which the poor state of health facilities introduce into the situation. With a female view point, she retains her commitment "as a writer, as a woman and as a Third World Person" (Ogundipe-Leslie 10) as this dialogue shows

Dr Essien... I am sure if men were to lay down their lives on the line for new life to be ushered into this world the way women undergo this natural but dangerous function, all services would have been at their beck and call ...

Dr Okezie: Must everything be seen through the lenses of gender warfare?

Dr Essien: There is no war, it is only a chat (9)

This "chat" also extends to fathers who literally sale their daughters in marriage situations. Mr. Chukwura, a father of four daughters is confronted by his last daughter, Obinna, over bride price/wealth. What redeems her from the fate of her three sisters is that despite her Western education, she understands her tradition. As such, she knows that bride price should be two hundred Naira (N200.00). Therefore, she insists that the ten thousand Naira (N10, 000.00) which her father got from her fiancé should be used to purchase household items for her bridal shower.

Unlike other women in the play, Obinna's insistence on choice enables her to re-negotiate her worth by demanding for her right without gender antagonism. The complementary nature of African sexual politics is explicitly shown through the calibre of professional men and women in *Feminique Internationale* which is the pressure group that fights for women's rights in *The Showers*. Their goals are clearly marked and their focus is to protect women's rights. Even though Sofola indicates on the Production Note that the play fights the cause of humanity, its immediate concerns are about women which explains why the female members of *Feminique Internationale* are more articulate.

Perspectives in African Gender Discourse

African gender scholars have contributed to the various debates on gender issues in the continent. While accepting that gender was not used to define human worth in the traditional society because sex difference was not associated with notions of superiority or inferiority, nevertheless, African women were confronted with harmful traditional practices such as widowhood, circumcision, polygamy, arranged marriages which have persisted through illiteracy and poverty. However, the nature of colonial education destroyed the complementarity of the sexes and accorded women a subordinate position to the men.

African female writers who gave themselves the task of recreating the female story are themselves the product of colonial literacy; as such, the tendency as Zaynab Alkali intimates in her Keynote Address at Uyo Conference on Language and Literature (UCOLL 2007), is that African "women now use the doors of opportunity opened by the Western system of education to struggle for the same goals men are struggling for namely, power, status and wealth" (12). This need not be

because African women have a feminist history which is different from their Western counterparts. It is the tendency to ignore the peculiar needs of women from different socio-political backgrounds which accounts for the contradictory voices in feminism even though female oppression is a universal experience. This is why Hooks intimates that the only way to centralise "the experiences of all women, especially the women whose social conditions have been least written about, studied, or changed by political movement is to define feminism "in such a way that it draws attention to the diversity of women's social and political reality"(25). Difference which is a crucial subject in feminist discourse is undoubtedly the basis of phallogocentric criticism, as Nnolim highlights in his article "A House Divided..."

This notwithstanding, the numerous perspectives to the search for women's assertion emphasise the peculiar needs of each group. African women in the diaspora realise that race and class affect their quest for social equality. This realisation gave birth to "womanism" which is used by Alice Walker and Chikwenye Ogunyemi to explore the challenges of black female assertion (see Walker, 1983 and Ogunyemi, 1988). African feminism as Chukwuma divulges in her introductory essay in *Feminism in African Literature* is "accommodationist not exclusive and negativistic. Men remain a vital part of the women's lives" (xvi). This is because black men have had their own share of expression; as such, credible assertion should function within cultural boundaries.

The need for female identity has produced Okpara's "femalism" as a concept which repudiates radicalism but integrates the different voices in the social system through its emphasis on dialogue as the panacea for gender harmony. Like Acholonu's "motherism," it rejects radical feminism advocated by Simone de Beauvoir; but unlike motherism which

eschews patriarchy, celebrates patrilocality and idealises motherhood, femalism identifies with the realities of female existence and insists on the need to impose meaning on chaos (see Acholonu, 1994 and Opara, 2004). Nevertheless, the possibilities of many women in Africa, particularly Muslim women are severely restricted by traditional Islamic laws, which thrive on the concepts of "seclusion" and "exclusion." Yet the Moroccan feminist, Fatima Mernissi in her investigation of women's right in Islam has blamed the male elite for fabricating a false hadith that mutilates women's existence and denies them the rights that were accorded to women in Medina of the year 622 (see Mernissi 1991 and 1993).

However, the boundaries of ignorance and self awareness, power and powerlessness move when dialogue is put to proper use in the investigation and analysis of human experience. African women writers and gender scholars therefore, have a task to engage the male viewpoints in dialogue. The essence is not to replace the omnipotent male voice which assigns chaos to women with an authoritative female voice; rather it will produce a multivocal approach to reality because dialogue brings hierarchies under scrutiny by deprivileging the authoritative position. This feminist dialogic perspective to gender issues has the ability to promote harmony between the sexes especially since it agrees with the communal nature of African life. (see Dale Bauer and Susan Mc Kinstry, 1991 and Emenyi, 2005).

These perspectives have resulted in multiple voices which also point to new directions in African gender discourse. If critical attention on Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* at the 50th anniversary of its publication could shift from cultural conflict to the imperative of speech as Dan Izevabye postulates in his Distinguished Lecture on 21 February, 2008, at the University of Uyo, then every individual has a right to tell his/her stories,

especially women whose stories were first told by men as writers, critics and characters in literature.

This justifies Uko's position in her essay "Transcending the Margins – New Directions in Women's Writing" where she admonishes women writers in Africa to re-order their perception of reality away from eurocentric/colonial representation in order to recreate societal constructs of African womanhood which limit the possibilities of African women (85). But in doing this, they should be guided by a need to preserve female identity and promote human dignity by creating a society where neither power nor powerlessness is used as an index of human worth.

Conclusion

African writers and gender theorists have reacted in various ways to feminism, but there is a consensus that the experiences of African women are different from those of their Western counterparts. Even among African scholars, there are different positions. Aidoo's rebellious protagonist in *Anowa* destroys her husband and herself because of the radical choices she makes. These choices, in view of how the play ends, suggest that *Anowa* is a feminist who lacks a feminist analysis of her situation. Does she need conjugal love to live a meaningful life? Must a woman lose the courage to live because her husband has abandoned her? These questions raise issues which Sofola addresses in her theory of de-womanisation because if the women in Opobo Province for instance, had waited for their husbands, they would not have entered the annals of history. In fact, they took the challenge to confront the colonial administration because their men were helpless.

In spite of the different perspectives African women have adopted towards self-assertion, the need to sustain harmony and preserve human dignity in the society should be balanced with self-affirmation because it is only in life that a woman can

preserve human existence. African writers, therefore, have a task to produce a "new" woman whose possibilities are neither defined nor limited by gender signification, but who approaches life with courage and compels circumstances, through personal ingenuity and constructive insight to submit to her convictions. Here lies the link between Aidoo's feminism and Sofola's de-womanisation.

Notes

¹Even though Aidoo has contributed immensely to African feminism in her novels, *Anowa* is the only play in which she addresses feminist issues, but Sofola has engaged the subject of women's right in most of her plays.

²The incident generally known as the Aba Women's Riot or War of 1929 in Nigerian history does not recognise women in Opobo Province as those who fought the colonial authority and paid the supreme price in a town in the present Akwa Ibom State called Ikot Abasi. The panel of inquiry into that uprising sat in Aba yet most of the women who died were Ibibio not Igbo women. However, there were riots in Aba and Bendel but neither of these had the kind of disaster recorded in Ikot Abasi. It was in realisation of this that Marian Babangida, the wife of the former Military Head of State, built the Hall of Fame at Ewang Beach where the slain women were given a mass burial. This place has become a rallying point for women's groups as they gather annually on 16th December to commemorate the heroism of Nigeria's pioneer nationalists. Ibibio gender scholars advocate a distinction between Aba Women's Riot of 1929 and Ikot Abasi Women's War of 1929.

³Being a feminist is not important to Sofola's aesthetics but as a major female writer who has explored women's experience in the Nigerian state, she qualifies as one. Her subject is woman

and her major characters are women whose searches for human right are defined within African cultural boundaries. Therefore, Zulu Sofola is a non-conformist feminist.

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