

Ambivalent Narratives of Traditional African Womanhood as Normalising Discourse in Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost*

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Summary

Feminist critics of African literature have observed that the domination of African literary outputs by male writers has led to romanticised and negative portrayals of the female character in contemporary African literature. Male writers have been accused (and often rightly so) of valorising and projecting the female character as not only docile and passive, but largely dependent on menfolk for her basic sustenance and survival (Ajayi 1997; Nfah-Abbenyi 1997).

According to these critics, African literature written by men has predominantly robbed the female character of the power of agency, often idealising and romanticising her as fragile and weak. The female character is often conflated with Mother Africa as she is also presented as the ultimate symbol of human fecundity. In those rare instances when she has been credited with the power of agency, she has been portrayed as rebellious, evil and constitutive of mortal threats to stability and social equilibrium.

Be that as it may, a considerable number of contemporary African women writers have striven to circumvent these negative portrayals of the female character. They seek to offer more dynamic representations of female subjectivity in African literature. In this paper, however, I argue that Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost* presents the reader with striking narratives of traditional African womanhood, which are at once nearly equally progressive and regressive. I argue that whereas Aidoo's play challenges traditional patriarchy by subverting certain discriminatory female stereotypes and normative perceptions of women that are prevalent in traditional African societies, the play nevertheless exudes an ambivalent attitude towards female emancipation. I also argue that this ambivalent attitude unwittingly reinforces the very negative images of the female character which Aidoo sets out to subvert.

Opsomming

Feministiese kritici van Afrika-literatuur het opgemerk dat die oorheersing van Afrika-literatuurbydraes deur manlike skrywers gelei het tot geromantiseerde en negatiewe uitbeeldings van die vroulike karakter in hedendaagse Afrika-literatuur. Manlike skrywers is (dikwels met reg) daarvan beskuldig dat hulle die vroulike karakter valoriseer en nie net as onderdanig en passief uitbeeld nie, maar ook as grotendeels

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afhanklik van mans vir haar basiese lewensonderhoud en vir oorlewing (Ajayi 1997; Nfah-Abbenyi 1997).

Volgens hierdie kritici het Afrika-literatuur wat deur mans geskryf is, die vroulike karakter hoofsaaklik ontnem van die mag van bemiddeling, deurdat sy altyd as broos en swak geïdealiseer en geromantiseer word. Die vroulike karakter word dikwels vereenselwig met Moeder Afrika aangesien sy ook voorgestel word as dié simbool van menslike vrugbaarheid. In uitsonderlike gevalle waar die mag van bemiddeling wel aan haar toegeken word, word sy uitgebeeld as rebels, boos en deel van dodelike gevare vir stabiliteit en sosiale ewewig.

Hoe dit ook al sy, heelwat van vandag se vroulike skrywers uit Afrika streef om hierdie negatiewe uitbeeldings van die vroulike karakter te omseil. Hulle probeer om meer dinamiese voorstellings van vroulike subjektiwiteit in Afrika-literatuur te bewerkstellig. In hierdie opstel voer ek egter aan dat *The Dilemma of a Ghost* deur Ama Ata Aidoo opvallende narratiewe van die tradisionele rol van vroue in Afrika voorhou, en dit is terselfdertyd ewe progressief as regressief. Ek wys daarop dat hoewel Aidoo se drama tradisionele vaderreg betwis deur sekere diskriminerende vroulike stereotipes en normatiewe persepsies oor vroue wat algemeen voorkom in tradisionele Afrika-gemeenskappe omver te werp, die drama nietemin 'n teenstrydige houding teenoor vroulike emansipasie uitstraal. Ek voer ook aan dat hierdie teenstrydige houding onbewustelik juis die negatiewe beelde van die vroulike karakter wat Aidoo probeer omverwerp, versterk.

Introduction

Although there has been a considerable upsurge in literary outputs by African women during the course of the last three decades or so, the paucity of creative writings by African women still remains a palpable reality in African literature. The preponderance of male writers in prose, poetry, drama, the short story and life writing still remains a stark reality in African literature. Nowhere is this reality made more poignant than through the occasional publication of literary anthologies written, compiled and edited by all-female creative writers and critics, all this in a bid to try and shore up a hitherto decidedly marginalised and historically muted voice in African creative writing.

That the African woman writer has remained a largely unheard voice in African literature when compared to her male counterparts is a fact that is hardly in dispute. From the time of the originary literary outputs by the doyens of African writing such as Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Okot p'Bitek, Wole Soyinka, Camara Laye and Sembene Ousmane among others, the number of African women writers has been relatively low in comparison. This is of course not to say that women's voices in African drama and literature have totally remained silent. Rather, the point is that the voices of women in African writing have largely remained unheard, muted as it were, by the inordinately large number of male voices in a historically male dominated movement.

While Ama Ata Aidoo, Efua Sutherland, Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Bâ, Nadine Gordimer, Flora Nwapa, Zulu Sofola, Tess Onwueme, Yvonne Vera,

Tsitsi Dangarembga and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie among others remain Africa's most iconic women writers, more often than not writing from a feminist perspective designed to rehabilitate and emancipate female African voices and identities, African women's voices have continued to be heard through the agency of male African writers. Writing from a gendered male perspective, male African writers have more often than not spoken not only for themselves but also for their women-folk from a decidedly patriarchal standpoint, arrogating to themselves, exclusive agency to speak on behalf of their societies.

Amofolabi Ajayi has made the observation that nowhere is the negative and stereotypical valorisation of the African woman more in evidence than in Leopold Sedar Senghor and Aime Cesaire's Negritude movement, which remains even up till this day one of the most time-fixing epochs in the development of African literature. According to Ajayi, Negritude poetry set the stage for the subsequent historical valorisation of the African woman through its romanticisation and idealisation of the (pre-colonial) African woman. Negritude poetry presented the African woman as the ultimate symbol of pristine femininity. The African woman was presented as fragile, weak and vulnerable, also serving as a symbol of the Mother Earth in all its beauty and bounty. With time and the upsurge in African political nationalism, the African woman came to be conflated with the Nation and the African continent itself, serving as a transcendental symbol of provision, motherhood and fecundity (see Negritude poetry). In the words of Ajayi:

Negritude especially promotes a literary aesthetic that among other things constructs an idealised image of femme noire "the black woman". Dark, beautiful, regal and unspoiled ... she is equated with mother earth, nature at its purest without the interference of human cultures ... it is no wonder that, as Mariama Bâ so aptly observes the archetypal African woman, a mother, is conflated with the symbolic Mother Africa However, when confused with Mother Africa, the African mother ends up being a voiceless and defenceless object of whom everyone takes advantage.

(1997: 37-38)

It is from this historical perspective that Africa's male dominated creative literary outputs have often presented women as peripheral to human experience, with women appearing only to the extent that they serve as instruments of male agency.

A whole host of African feminist writers and critics have been at pains to deconstruct male propagated stereotypical images of women in African literature. All this has been part and parcel of a quest to empower the female character. Pursuing a line of argument strikingly similar to that propagated by Ajayi, Meyre Ivone da Silva (2004) has made the point that according to these feminist writers and critics, the first task [was] to demystify the long-

held stereotype of the African woman as a goddess, Supreme Mother, as well as a self-sacrificing and willing silent sufferer.

Given a situation where African women were condemned to the historical role of mute and powerless objects in a male dominated and decidedly patriarchal terrain, it becomes of much interest to pose the question: to what extent has African women's writing, especially that written from a feminist perspective, made an effort and succeeded in refuting the long-standing subordination of women?

In this paper I attempt to address this basic question by focusing on Ama Ata Aidoo, (a founding figure in feminist writing from Africa)'s *The Dilemma of a Ghost*. My principal argument is that Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost* presents the reader with a striking narrative of traditional African womanhood, which is at once progressive as it is somewhat equally regressive. I argue that whereas Aidoo's play challenges traditional patriarchy by subverting certain discriminatory female stereotypes and normative perceptions of women that were/are prevalent in traditional African societies, this play nevertheless exudes an ambivalent attitude towards female emancipation. I further make the point that this ambivalent attitude unwittingly reinforces the very negative image of the female character which as a feminist writer, Aidoo sets out to subvert.

The Traditional African Woman's Burden

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie has identified what she metaphorically refers to as the six mountains that are strapped on the back of the African woman, which the African woman must get rid of if she is to be emancipated from the tyranny of traditional patriarchy. According to Ogundipe-Leslie:

The first one is oppression from outside (colonialism and neo-colonialism), the second one is from traditional structures, the third one is her backwardness, the fourth is man, the fifth is her colour, her race, and the sixth is herself.

(1994: 28)

Over and above these "six mountains", Ogundipe-Leslie further identifies the feeling of inferiority that was implanted on the psyche of the African woman through the ideologies of gender and patriarchy. She writes:

Women are shackled by their own negative self-image, by centuries of the interiorisation of the ideologies of patriarchy and gender hierarchy. Their own reactions to objective problems therefore are often self-defeating and self-crippling.

(1994: 36)

Given these various burdens that have been imposed on the African woman, Ogundipe-Leslie suggests that one of her (i.e. the African woman's) first tasks is to fight against all these various forms of oppression that women are still subjected to in Africa. In this paper I am particularly interested to interrogate the sixth "mountain" as circumscribed by Ogundipe-Leslie, arguing that even in some of those literary outputs in which the female African writer makes an effort to rid her kinsfolk of this burden, she may in fact be unwittingly consolidating the same.

Seeking Ways Of Escape Or A Mere Return To The Source?

My interrogation of ambivalent narratives of traditional African womanhood in this paper is significantly informed by the journey motif as it is deployed in Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost*. This is particularly so when viewed against the protagonist Eulalie's diasporic desire to return to Africa in search of a long lost sense of belonging and social emancipation. The notion of migration and a search for "roots" has been identified as central to Aidoo's play (Williams 2006; Secovnie 2012). Historically, it is a motif which has often been characterised by idealisations of home especially when the journeys are "journeys-in" or home-bound that are undertaken by diasporic individuals. It is in this perspective that Piper Kendrix Williams (2006) has written that:

The idea that people's origins are somehow clear and not clouded by diverse histories, migrations, and relationships is for me a romantic (read: unrealistic) one, especially for blacks in the African diaspora... for women, homelands can represent a place of oppression just as well as a place of comfort ... The migrations ... turn quickly to exile and prove to be ineffective as mechanisms for constructing a black identity, which encompasses gender as well.

(2006: 55)

In Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, the idealisation of the journey back to Africa as a return to the homeland and a return to the source is something that is all too evident when the play opens:

Eulalie: [Relaxing] I'm optimistic, Native Boy. To belong to somewhere again ... Sure, this must be bliss.

Ato: Poor Sweetie Pie

Eulalie: But I will not be poor again, will I? I'll just be "Sweetie Pie". Waw! The palm trees, the azure sea, the sun and golden beaches....

(1985: 2)

However, Eulalie's idealised "journey-in" in search of roots soon turns out to be no more than something of a migration horror story as her host society

subjects her to inordinately unbearable normative gender discourses which render her a total misfit gender wise in her newly adopted home.

Aidoo's ambivalent narrative of traditional African womanhood is first introduced by the author's use of a two-woman chorus who seem to foreground the hopelessness and timelessness of the traditional African woman's gender oppression and subordination. Set against the two-woman chorus's resigned acceptance of the average woman's condition, Eulalie's lonely attempts at pursuing her liberated gender identity as a modern African woman are rendered futile, unachievable, largely misdirected and out of place. This is particularly so if it is argued that Aidoo's two-woman's chorus serves a thematic function that is not dissimilar to the chorus in classical Greek plays whose function it was to provide a running commentary on the futility of mortal man's puny efforts in trying to circumvent the immutable will of the gods.

The ambivalence of Aidoo's narratives of traditional African womanhood are further sustained through several minor characters, chief among whom is Ato's grandmother Nana, an 80-year-old sage and female gender stereotype who comes across to the reader as caustic, incorrigible and cast in the old traditional ways of gendered female African identities. Together with Ato's mother Esi Kom, Old Nana is at the forefront of the propagation of gendered female identities which view marriage not as an individual choice that Ato and his westernised wife Eulalie take for granted, but rather, a collective decision made on the basis of normative gender choices. These are highly conservative collective gender choices that do not allow for deviations in marriage that are based on race, or marrying someone with a background in slavery or indeed someone who is without roots. It is thus that in seeking to expose the gender constraints and regressive nature of traditional African societies such as that which is depicted in *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, Ama Ata Aidoo unwittingly presents the reader with a seemingly insurmountable predicament for the hapless Eulalie. Any attempt to break with Africa's normative gender identities seems to trigger the apocalyptic as evidenced by the reaction of Ato's clan to Eulalie's gender transgressions such as smoking cigarettes, use of modern gadgets and her apparent refusal or inability to procreate.

Because Eulalie's gender transgressions seem to be predicated on her education, westernisation and enlightenment, Aidoo's play presents the acquisition and propagation of western education as inherently corrupt and corrupting to the extent that traditional values and identities are in contrast presented as normative, upstanding and pure. The clan's views on Eulalie's gender transgressions are consistently mirrored throughout the play by the god-like two-woman chorus, which at one time satirises Eulalie's predilections for using modern gadgets whenever she comes home to the village. For all its commendable efforts at exposing gender oppression in traditional African societies, in the end Aidoo's play seems to propagate the

somewhat ambivalent view that an adoption of modern gadgetry which renders the individual African woman almost indolent is perhaps something that Africa might well do without.

Viewed against the practical obstacles that exist upon arrival, Eulalie's lofty expectation of the journey-in invites the reader to begin to question the idealisation of Africa that is often attendant to home-bound migrations back to the continent. Ama Ata Aidoo's discourse on female gender emancipation in Africa is rendered ambivalent in so far as the gender norms stacked against Eulalie are so gargantuan as to seem almost insurmountable. Eulalie's effort at asserting her liberties only helps to present her as a social misfit who has no place in Africa. Her initial conception of migration back to Africa as a return to the source and a sense of belonging is shattered by the overweening normative gender identities and stereotypes that are closely circumscribed and monitored by her host society. In the final analysis, Aidoo seems to be saying that these are traditional normative gender attitudes and identities that are essentially immutable. As a result our commonly held notions of Africa as home and a place of comfort and return is at best only a utopia. The journey motif or return to Africa as a way of escape which marks the play's opening is certainly not matched by the situational gender realities that Eulalie encounters among Ato's people. So entrenched are Africa's traditional gender stereotypes that "home" and "Africa" turn out to be another form of exile in which Eulalie's utopian values of black identity and gender freedoms are emasculated and rendered as no more than just an elixir.

From the above, it is reasonably possible to read the ambivalence of Ama Ata Aidoo's narratives of traditional African womanhood in *The Dilemma of a Ghost* using Edouard Glissant (1989)'s twin notions of "retour" and "detour". This is so because Eulalie initially imagines Africa as home, and a place of liberty and comfort. The instructive question then becomes: what sort of home does Africa really turn out to be? Is the idea of return to an imagined idyllic actually possible? Rather than being an act of emancipation, Eulalie's trip back comes across as a "retour" to vintage Africa with the continent's seemingly immutable normative gender identities. It is also a "detour" into a worse form of exile because gender emancipatory movements that have taken root elsewhere in the world have not necessarily filtered into the traditional African setting. As a result the protagonist's search for origins, acceptance, and a sense of belonging and authenticity can only result in unwittingly walking back into the clutches of traditional Africa's normative gender roles. The protagonist's initial idealisation of Africa as "black" and home turns out to be a nightmare as Africa is in fact a hopelessly gendered patriarchal space. This is something that the individual only learns at their peril. Aidoo presents Eulalie's idyllic approach and perception of Africa as simplistic and not sufficiently cognisant of the continent's enduringly gendered patriarchal culture that is

all but unbreakable. Worse still, Aidoo presents the reader with an idealistic protagonist whose approach to the African continent is mediated through marriage, whereas the institution of marriage has itself historically constituted the single most pernicious propagator of patriarchal hegemonies in traditional African societies. For Ama Ata Aidoo's Eulalie, the institution of marriage occasions the worst forms of patriarchy and gender oppression which revolve around race, social background, procreation, modernity and identity. Nearly all the confrontations and normative discourses that are imposed on Aidoo's protagonist revolve around the institution of marriage, so much so that in Aidoo's play, marriage comes across as an uncompromising gendered institution whose dictates for the subordinated female character are all but immutable.

In her constant run-ins with members of Ato's clan as she makes an effort to assert her personal freedom and independence, Eulalie is portrayed as a hopeless cultural misfit who has no place in Africa. Her spirited efforts to repudiate the host society's patriarchal traditions and institutions in the name of gendered self-definition as a woman only seems to alienate her further from both the host society and the reader. This too further sustains the ambivalence of Aidoo's discourse on traditional African womanhood. It is as if as long as the protagonist is unable to reconcile herself to the rigidity of the normative gender identities put before her, then she has absolutely no place at all wherever she happens to find herself in Africa.

Given such circumstances, it is ironic that Eulalie initially views marriage as her ticket to a sense of wholeness and liberation once she is back in Africa.

Their Own Worst Oppressors?

One of the significant drivers of what I view as the ambivalence of Ama Ata Aidoo's narratives on traditional African womanhood is the part that is played by female characters in *The Dilemma of a Ghost*. Just as much as the two-woman chorus introduces the apparent hopelessness and timelessness of the historical subordination and oppression of the female gender in Africa when the play opens, the worst forms of gender oppression and subordination in the play are also mediated via other women.

Aidoo's play presents female characters as the worst propagators of their own oppression and subordination. In a situation where the women (rather than the men) in Eulalie's life come to represent the most tenacious gatekeepers for the propagation and retention of normative gender stereotypes for the traditional African woman, Eulalie's efforts at asserting her own individual liberties, though equally resilient, can only come across as doomed to fail. This is first in evidence when Ato introduces his wife as a descendant of slaves, with no tribe or totemic roots with which the family

can identify. All the women in attendance react to this introduction with an apocalyptic wail which speaks to the unshakeable strength of racialised and gendered traditional female identities in which women must suit the ideals of the collective and not their individual ideals.

In *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, Aidoo presents the reader with a coterie of female characters whose understanding of the female gender is rigid, culturally specific and highly normative in its outlook. The women in Aidoo's play have a normative understanding of the female gender which seamlessly collapses the gender category of "woman" with that of motherhood in ways that resonate with the way that the Negritude movement first overlaid the concept of woman with Mother Africa. As Williams observes:

The women of Ato's family and the larger village understand the category of "woman" in culturally specific ways. In this paradigm, "woman" collapses primarily with "mother". Reproduction, the continuation of generations, is not easily parsed from women's essential roles in the village. It becomes clear as the play develops that Ato and Eulalie's investment in a sense of choice and independence concerning children operates outside this traditional paradigm.

(2006: 73)

The treatment of Eulalie at the hands of the coterie of women in Ato's clan is potentially so enervating as to render Ama Ata Aidoo's discourses of female emancipation altogether futile. Eulalie's entry in traditional society with her new-fangled libertarian gender attitudes of the modern African woman come to constitute an upheaval that seems to threaten the whole existence of society and its social equilibrium. In the end Aidoo portrays Eulalie's libertarian attitudes as a highly traumatising and disconcerting experience which she suffers at the hands of other womenfolk. The playwright's narrative of female emancipation is thus rendered ambivalent to the extent that the liberated protagonist is forced to bend to the patriarchal values of the larger clan. Eulalie's deviation from normative behaviour is almost comparable to a freak of nature. Myriam Chancy has observed that so overwhelming is male patriarchy and its internalisation by women that women's "Bodies become a representation of who they ought to be (wives, mothers, mammies, sapphires and the rest) rather than who they know themselves to be" (1997: 4).

It is the women in Ato's clan who are at the forefront of the propagation of motherhood and procreation as the single most important signifiers of what it means to be a woman, with Ato's mother, grandmothers, aunts and his sister serving as the most vocal propagators of the reproductive trope. For all these women, the notion of "woman" is intrinsically enmeshed with that of "motherhood", so much so that the protagonist who would wish to break out of this normative gender role cannot know peace. The ambivalence of Aidoo's discourse seems to convey the lesson that; "To be wife

engenders a number of demands, including producing children, staging a life for husbands, obedience, subservience and self-negation” Williams 2006: 76).

Meanwhile, Eulalie’s reaction to the normative standards that the other women set for her only helps to exacerbate her portrayal as unreasonable and unacceptably arrogant. A typical example is the evidently neo-Tarzanist remark that she blurts out in anger during a heated confrontation with Ato saying: “Do you dare compare these bastards, these narrow-minded savages with us?” and later, “What else would they understand but their own savage customs and standards ... have they appreciation for anything but their own pre-historic existence? More savage than dinosaurs”. This attitude is of course further exacerbated by a condescending remark she makes earlier when she expresses her astonishment at the discovery that Coca-Cola is also available in Africa. Given this kind of arrogance and condescending attitudes towards Africa’s traditions, it becomes relatively easy for the critic to conclude that perhaps Aidoo’s protagonist really has no place in Africa after all.

Conclusion

Like a number of other critiques of African women’s writing before, this paper has situated Ama Ata Aidoo’s *The Dilemma of a Ghost* within the corpus of feminist African writing, in turn within the larger framework of African literature, where there has been an overwhelming preponderance of men’s voices. African literature is a genre where women’s voices in both the colonial and the post-colonial periods have been heard through the agency of male writers, resulting in the propagation of largely patriarchal views of the female experience. The paper has also acknowledged the fact that over the years this has led to the negative valorisation of the female gender. As Ajayi (1997) eloquently observes, this is a form of valorisation whose most enduring roots are to be found in the Negritude movement’s inauguration of the African woman in images of a self-sacrificing goddess, Mother Africa and a helpless and silent sufferer.

Having delineated this background, the paper has also situated Ama Ata Aidoo’s play as belonging to an alternative movement of African writing by women in which, having despaired of their negative portrayal at the hands of patriarchal male writers, African women began to make an effort to refute this traditional subordination by their male counterparts.

Over and above this, the paper has attempted to do more. It has attempted to interrogate the extent to which some of this female writing has in fact achieved its stated goal to liberate women from the historical negative valorisation that they have suffered for a long time at the hands of male writers. The paper has argued that Ama Ata Aidoo’s *The Dilemma of a*

Ghost in fact presents what approximates to an ambivalent narrative of traditional African womanhood wherein the narrative of female emancipation is undermined by the presentation of female protagonists (or liberated women) who find themselves in incorrigibly patriarchal spaces. These are spaces in which the forces of normative traditional womanhood that are propagated by both men and women and are so overwhelming and oppressive that any deviation from such normativity is rendered a futile freak of nature.

It is thus that I read Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost* as an ambivalent narrative of female emancipation where the effort to subvert traditional African womanhood unwittingly seems to propagate the very normative discourses of African womanhood the writer sets out to subvert.

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