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**An Interview with Ama Ata Aidoo:  
“I Learnt my First Feminist Lessons in Africa”**

María Frías

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## **An Interview with Ama Ata Aidoo: “I Learnt my First Feminist Lessons in Africa” (note 1)**

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### **Abstract**

This is an interview with Ghanaian writer AMA ATA AIDOO. It took place in Accra (Ghana), on January 1998. After living abroad for more than fourteen years, Aidoo decided to go back to Ghana. When this interview took place, she was still trying to settle down. Since then, she has kept herself intellectually active, and has been invited to lecture to numerous international universities and prestigious institutions all over the world. With the passing of time, she has become still more vocal and critical, and she continues to be widely admired in Africa and abroad. (note 2) Aidoo is considered an outspoken African writer who tackles feminist issues in her fiction. Brought up in, and respectful with the Akan tradition she comes from, Aidoo openly states that she learnt her first lessons in feminism from African women, and in Africa.

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In this interview, we focus on feminist theories—and the controversies around African, African-American, and Western Feminisms—and look at some of her most relevant works, to see to what extent her female protagonists deal with the somewhat schizophrenic reality of colonialism, and post-colonialism, at the same time they face African traditional culture and modernity.

## 1. Introduction

**G**hanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo (1940) is an outspoken woman who, in the tradition of some of her predecessors such as Flora Nwapa (Nigeria) or Efiya Sutherland (Ghana) both resists and subverts traditional literary boundaries. Pejoratively labelled as belonging to the “old guard” of African women writers by Femi-Ojo ([note 3](#)), Aidoo is nevertheless respected by well-established writers such as Buchi Emecheta ([note 4](#)) -who thinks of herself as Aidoo’s new sister-or by the still-relatively unknown Ghanaian writer Ama Darko-who pays respects to Aidoo as her literary mother. Aidoo’s long, varied and prolific literary career-she has published poems, plays, short stories, essays, and novels-has received considerable critical attention and, after teaching for several years at different institutions in Africa and the USA, she has gained the respect and recognition of canonical African American writer Alice Walker, who enthusiastically asserts from the front cover of Aidoo’s Ghanaian edition

of her novel *Changes*: “Aidoo has reaffirmed my faith in the power of the written word to reach, to teach, to empower and to encourage”. (note 5)

As with other African women writers, to use Busia’s words (1989-90: 90), Aidoo challenges, deconstructs, and subverts the traditional “voicelessness of the black women trope”. (note 6) Born into the Akan society—a Ghanaian group which according to Aidoo openly favors women to the extent that the mother of four sons still considers herself “infertile” because she could not have any daughters, and where women are supposed to have the authority but not the power to rule—Aidoo’s (for some) progressive portrayal of African women is simply a reflection of what she saw: “I got this incredible birds-eye view of what happens in that society and I definitely knew that being a woman is enormously important in Akan society” (Wilson-Tagoe, 2002: 48). Accordingly, Aidoo foregrounds the complex lives of women who behave in contradictory ways—haunted by African tradition, but caught in the dislocation of post-colonial Africa. In *Changes* (1991), for example, the protagonist Esi is a college-educated, career-oriented, married woman who abandons her monogamous marriage to voluntarily embrace a polygamous relationship where she has to cope with the uncomfortable role of sec-



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ond wife. Changes start with Esi driving her own car, literally fighting taxi-drivers' verbal aggressions, performing her secretarial functions-despite her manager-position in statistics-and complaining about what she considers men's dictatorial ways. Esi's schizophrenia serves as the metaphor for the contemporary African woman's need to project a sense of assertiveness, self-sufficiency, and financial independence. However, Aidoo's Esi is just one of the many female voices that need to be urgently heard after being silenced for so long. The irony here lies in the fact that Aidoo also gives voice to Muslim women like Fusena, also in *Changes*, who, although college-educated abroad and clearly intelligent, conforms to the subservient social and religious role assigned to her by her culture. In the same thread of thought, take Anowa, the protagonist of Aidoo's play *Anowa* (1970), who rejects the prescription of an arranged marriage, chooses her own lover, and leaves her home town. Barren, but actively participating in her husband's financial success-both making use of her "mouth" and her "head"-Anowa exiles herself from the domestic space of the home, and from the conscriptions of motherhood, but pays a very high price for her stubborn resistance and her transgressive attitude. *Anowa* is a work that has been recently rediscovered by feminists critics and Africanists as a disturbing and challenging text. Consequently, among others,

Davies (1994:59) studies Anowa's physical and psychological journey, while at the same time demanding critical attention for Aidoo and her play Anowa which have long been ignored due to what she calls "the politics of exclusion". (note 7)

Thematically, as with other African women writers, Aidoo's recurrent topics are, in Stratton's words (1994: 175), "marriage, motherhood, emotional and economic dependence, women's education, their political and economic marginalization, their resistance to oppression". With a not-always-conscious Western feminist agenda in mind-Aidoo insists that she did not learn her notions of feminism outside Africa, and that her vocal women simply come from her Akan side-Aidoo resists labels and compartmentalization, and has problems with the strict marking of boundaries between African and African American Feminism. Though venerated in Europe and the USA as the foremost African feminist-a fact that she somewhat resents-and long immersed in gender issues-both at a personal, political, and literary level-Aidoo still questions artificial critical constructions. Her women, though, following the principles of the Akan society she comes from, are strong, hard-working, independent, articulate, and smart, thus, deconstructing the stereotypical image of the submissive, passive, and battered African woman. Aidoo herself takes pains to explain the reasons

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for portraying these provocative female protagonists: People say to me: “Your women characters seem to be stronger than we are used to when thinking about African women”. As far as I am concerned these are the African women among whom I was brought up. In terms of women standing on their own feet, within or outside marriage, mostly from inside marriage, living life on their own terms. (Wilson-Tagoe, 200: 248). Raised in, respectful towards, and proud of her African oral tradition and the ancient story-telling, Aidoo’s forte is in her dialogues. Aidoo invests her female characters with the powerful tool of speech. Her African women make use of words as weapons to the extent that they can easily and intelligently fustigate men’s egos and beat them dialectically /metaphorically, at the same time gaining the respect of the other sisters in the community. Furthermore, in Allan’s words (1994: 188-89), Aidoo’s instinctive and innovative use of similes and proverbs is an effective rhetorical tool which shows women’s verbal dexterity at the same time as it highlights collective wisdom: Africanisms, new words coined from the alchemic blending of English and the African cultural scene, enrich Aidoo’s linguistic repertoire. Such terms as “flabberwhelmed”, “negatively eventful”, and “away matches” violate standard English in order to express a socio-linguistic identity that is uniquely African.

Aidoo has travelled widely, is not blind to the trauma and pain of the African diaspora, and has personally experienced the always conflictive encounter between African and Western cultures. Maybe this is the reason why some of her female protagonists also undergo a physical and emotional journey that is painful and traumatic, though always instructive and regenerative. Aidoo deals with the impact of colonialism, post-colonialism, and neo-colonialism on the bodies and psyches of her African women characters but, contrary to the “nervous condition” of Dangarembga’s female protagonist, Aidoo’s women are much more in control of their bodies and minds and they can always come back home-though psychologically injured, physically exhausted, emotionally disillusioned, and culturally alienated-start a new life, or choose a liberating but tragic ending. Though confronted with and struggling against social norms and cultural disintegration as well as with the traumatic dichotomy of African tradition versus Western modernity, Aidoo’s women-albeit shaken-retain their sanity and are able to articulate their anger. Madness-a recurrent theme in post-colonial African fiction Femi-Ojo (1979), Adepitan (1993/94)-does not hit /affect Aidoo’s heroines. Only in the case of Anowa did Aidoo contemplate the possibility of her protagonist ending up insane, but she thought it too cruel, and handed Anowa the privilege of choosing her

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own death. Aidoo's women are peripatetic beings who cross boundaries-geographical, social, cultural, and emotional-who dare to step over patriarchal borderlines, who violate traditional discourses on the cult of marriage and motherhood, at the same time as they dramatize their vulnerability and their subjugation to African tradition. As Allan (1994: 178) argues, by portraying African women's tensions, frustrations, and contradictions, Aidoo's works reflect on the dual theme of "social stasis"-tradition-versus "change"-modernity. Aidoo herself has personally experienced the liminal state of living in the Western world, and has chosen to return to Ghana having spent fourteen years abroad. Her homecoming has been no crystal stair, though. After a serious car accident, she cannot drive, she is on crutches, and is accompanied by a young Ghanaian driver. She is desperately looking for a permanent home in Accra, and has not found the necessary peace of mind to write.

I first met Ama Ata Aidoo in November 1997, on the occasion of the welcoming party hosted by the British Council in Accra to honor the visit of writer Fred D'Aguiar. This interview took place on a suffocating, extremely hot and sticky day on January 1998, at the British Council delegation in Accra. The whole magnificent building was undergoing repairs and, added to

the heat and the humidity, the noises of construction were-at times-unbearable. Aidoo could not remain sitting for a long period of time due to the injuries sustained in the car accident, but, despite the many inconveniences, she talked for hours on the tape-she provides long, elaborate answers, emphatically underlines words, supplies personal anecdotes, and jumps to other subject themes to better illustrate her point. We later decided to move to the restaurant in the garden where we continued our conversation.

Ama Ata Aidoo is a medium-sized, strongly built, round-faced woman who wears Ghanaian dresses, and rich, colorful, and beautiful headwraps tied to her dignified head. Her celebration of the African story-telling tradition, her critical view of the Western world, her rebellion against “the colonization of the African minds”, and her preoccupation with the future of her country and her Ghanaian people-women in particular-makes a conversation with Ama Ata Aidoo a learning experience. Her voice always sounds fresh, critical, outrageous and full of life.

My first academic encounter with Aidoo’s work took place at a conference early in 1997. Maya García-Vinuesa, a colleague of mine at the University of Alcalá de Henares-who had done some research at the University of Legon in Accra-was pre-

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senting a paper on Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Changes*. I was seized by what seemed to me to be the prevalent theme -polygamy and educated African women- and by these women’s voices. Although I was busy teaching classes and attending conferences, and there was a lot to read on Afro-American women writers, I went to the library and picked up one of the two volumes there. I read *Changes* between tutorials, at lunch breaks, at night. These African female voices spoke out loud about polygamy, divorce, forced marriages, women’s education, motherhood, marital violence, desire, and sexuality. Esi, Opokuya, and Fusena -the three female protagonists- resist and subvert typical clichés about African women’s passive and submissive attitudes. I later found out that Ama Ata Aidoo’s discourse on African women’s issues seriously challenges previous categories. One only has to read her plays *Anowa*, and *The Dilemma of the Ghost*, her book of poems *An Angry Letter in January*, her collection of short stories *No Sweetness Here*, or her novel *Changes*. She speaks for and about African women. Ama Ata Aidoo spoke to me, as one woman to another.

MARÍA FRÍAS: I would like to start with the women in your family. From what you say, they pushed you and supported your intellectual and your creative life. In “To Be a Woman”

(1985: 259), you quote from your uneducated aunt: “My child, get as far as you can into this education. Go until you yourself are tired. As for marriage, it is something a woman picks up along the way”. **(note 8)** Could you comment on these women? In the African tradition, have you passed on to your daughter Kinna what your aunt told you long time ago?

AMA ATA AIDOO: I would like to straighten out first that they did not push me; they encouraged me. I think that I was very lucky. Even my father was excellent, my aunt too. However, I understand my grandmother was slightly doubtful; she was a little uncertain about it all. My mother has always been really very understanding not only of me and education, but especially of me and writing, and my life as a writer. She is one person in this world who is very sensitive to that. And as for whether I have passed it on to my daughter, the thing is that I didn't have to pass consciously anything to my daughter. According to her, she learnt from being around me. Living with me, meeting my friends, sharing her life with me, she seems to have acquired her own notions about women and the need to be independent. In my view, it is not just me and my friends, and the atmosphere she shared with me. It's also the world she has been moving in. Like with other young people, other young African women of her generation. **(note 9)**



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MF : Because of the power of your short story “No Sweetness Here”, you were invited to the African Writers Workshop at the University of Ibadan in 1962 (you were only 22 years old). Langston Hughes was there. Chinua Achebe was there. Wole Soyinka was there. How did you feel -African woman and writer- among those celebrities?

AAA : I’ll be very honest with you. At that time, being a woman was not even part of my equation. I mean, I was naturally there, and there were other women who were there too. I remember clearly that a very young ‘Molara Ogundipe Leslie was there, and she was also a student. **(note 10)** The woman bit had not struck me at the time, but I was conscious that it was a privilege. It was wonderful! However, I didn’t get the magic of it all, the full impact of it all, until much much later when I realized about it, though I knew then who they were. I had become progressively enchanted with the retrospective thinking: Langston Hughes! And of course, Wole Soyinka! It is something I have had in my life-some incredible encounters-and this is one of them. I sometimes wonder did I meet W.E.B. Dubois? To be quite honest with you, María, I have been extremely lucky with the people I have encountered, and the places I have been. For me, nothing of this is taken for granted.

MF: Are African male critics or colleagues still greeting you with the paternalistic “How is our Little Sister doing with Africa and women on her back?”, as earlier in your career?

AAA: To be quite honest, only one person has ever greeted me like that. It was Professor Eldred Durosimi Jones-and influential African literary critic. I resented it, but he was an old man. In African terms, he is an older brother. On this continent, he could say that to me. Traditionally, I am not allowed into interrogating him, but I took the liberty of questioning his paternalistic and condescending greeting in my poem “Routine Drugs I”. It is not aggressive, though. He knows about the poem, and he knows I was not abusing him. Other male critics would not even dream or dare to greet me like that. He was permitted to call me that. He could do it. Only then. Only him.

MF: You have taught at different universities in Africa and in the United States. When teaching African Literature which women writers and works would you include in your syllabi?

AAA: I will tell you the women I’ve always been teaching. I’ve definitely been teaching Mariama Bâ (*So Long a Letter*), Bessie Head (*A Question of Power*), Buchi Emecheta (*Joys of Motherhood*)-which is a must-and, although she is not by nationality an African, I’ve always taught Marise Condé

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(Segú). (note 11) In drama, I wouldn't even move one inch without teaching Efua Sutherland, especially *The Marriage of Anansewa*. I always teach Nawal El Saadawi (note 12) and there are a whole lot of other women. My reading list is longer than this, but these are the writers I will always include, and that I will recommend you to teach-though I see you are already familiar with them. And, of course, at different Departments, both in Africa and the States, they have insisted that I teach my works. I have taught my work too, and it has been a very interesting arena.

MF: And how have your Western and African students responded to your work?

AAA: What is interesting is that I've learnt a lot about my work from the comments they made, and the questions they raised. Students found things I didn't know I was saying. They always bring insights into your work. Sometimes other people feel you should feel angry, but I don't see why I should feel angry. If you sit down and you write something, and you assume that other people should stop whatever they are doing and read you, either for pleasure or because it is work (as it is in your case), then the least you can do is to give them some room for their opinion. They don't have to like your work. They don't have to agree with you either. The only thing that makes me

really angry is when people have not read you properly and then they talk you rubbish. That I just can stand. I am sorry.

MF: Together with other African women writers (Flora Nwapa, Efua Sutherland, Bessie Head, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Darko) you basically deal with women's issues. Since you have been writing for decades now, have you seen a growing female audience in Africa? Or in Ghana in particular?

AAA: I hope so. The thing is, Maria, I hadn't lived in Ghana for nearly fourteen years. It is a very long time in a person's life time. This is the reason why when I came back one of the decisions I deliberately took was that I was not going to comment on issues that I knew about and cared about fifteen years ago, until I had time to update my own information. What is actually going on in the system from primary to the university? I don't know. As in other African universities, I have the feeling that African American Literature is much more part of the syllabus, as well as the works written by African women writers, at Legon University. Unfortunately, people do not get the books, even when they are published locally, for some odd reason. And that is something that has to be seriously addressed. But, like I said, because I was a Minister of Education (**note 13**) -a controversial one- I have decided I am not going to talk until I

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know a little bit more about what has been happening over the last fifteen, sixteen years.

MF: Do you see more African Women writers coming out?

AAA: But, María, you know the books are not available. It is a vicious circle! One of the things I cannot even believe is that I've gone to the trouble of getting a Ghanaian edition of *Changes* published. (note 14) Because I wanted to reach the Ghanaian market, but it is not available! So...

MF: It must be very frustrating.

AAA: Yes, it is very frustrating. People complain that Africans do not read, but the thing is that the material is not available. Ask the *Daily Graphic*! Ask *The Ghanaian Times*! People are buying them. Ordinary Ghanaian workers who don't have money are buying the local newspapers. But they do not make the books available to them, and, frankly, for me this is one of the most frustrating issues in this country, or this region, or the whole of Africa. Somebody is making sure that there are no books available. I blame the publishers.

MF: Ama Darko also complains about the struggle to be published in Ghana, or to have your books distributed here. Have you read Ama Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*? Could

you comment on this first novel by a Ghanaian women writer? (note 15)

AAA: I think it is a marvelous book. Unfortunately, I haven't had the chance to teach it. When I first started it, it was a very absorbing reading for me. I know when I am enjoying a book. One of the ways in which I know I am enjoying a book, is that half way through I don't want to finish this book. I didn't want to finish Darko's book. I think it is very well written. I think that her insights are very sharp, and I genuinely think she is wonderful. Was it her first novel?

MF: Yes, that's right.

AAA: I haven't had the chance to read her other work, but that first one I think it was superb. On the one hand she introduces you into the horrors of her protagonist's life, Mara; on the other hand you come away feeling well, fantastic ... Plus the Ghanaian bits, the whole life in Ghana, Mara's struggles in Ghana, her spirit. I like the book very much. I thought it was wonderful.

MF: Would you agree with Pr. Opoku-Agyeman (1997) from Cape Coast University that both the older women writers together with the recent, living and active literary voices -like yourself- receive very little critical attention in Ghana?

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AAA [*Furious*]: I don't even think we receive any! Not at all! I mean, who is talking about our work? You are writing about African women writers, María, but you are not Ghanaian. I have been here for two years and nobody Ghanaian has asked me about my work as a writer-except you. I have been asked to comment on gender issues, it's true, but nobody has interrogated me about my work. So I personally think Opoku-Agyeman is right, African women writers do not receive any critical attention here.

MF: You feel bad about it, don't you?

AAA: Yes, but not so much at a personal level. I feel bad in relation to what it tells me about what is happening in academics in Ghana, and about the atmosphere that does not nurture creative work. If we had to wait for the critics to pay attention to our work in Ghana before we wrote, we would never write because either there are no critics or if there are then they do not talk about our work.

MF: In view of the intellectual panorama, would you like to teach African women writers at Legon University, and spread the word?

AAA: Well, I am not teaching because I haven't asked them for a job to teach, and they haven't asked me to go and teach.

For the two years I have been here it hasn't even been easy getting a place to rent, so I have been moving around the city in this whole atmosphere. I have to settle down first.

MF: You are the author of an often-quoted article "To Be an African Woman Writer" (1988). What is it to be an African Woman writer nowadays? I am asking this because you have been witness to the literary atmosphere in colonial, post-colonial, and independent Ghana. (note 16) Is it different now to be an African woman writer?

AAA I actually wrote "To Be an African Woman Writer" in 1975. I had been asked for this piece, as well as many other women around the world, to help the UN put together a position paper for women, for the Conference at Copenhagen. I don't think it is much different now. I think there is more awareness, but by and large the position of the woman is about the same. There are more African women writers, but this is a very interesting country, María. I did that paper, but I also know now that the Ghanaian society is one of the most liberal societies in this world when it comes to the position of the woman in society. It has always been like that. But it does not change. What I was actually trying to do in the article was to point out that instead of what people think -they say, what do you Ghanaian women worry about, if you are all over the place?- which is true.



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You go out into the world, and you hear about bride burning, and stuff like that, and that does not happen where you come from. But I think it is very important that you look into your own society and find out what can be improved. Now, if looked at from that stand point, what can be improved is still what can be improved. Nothing has changed. The improvement hasn't come, but Ghanaian women are very vocal. It fascinates me, coming back after fourteen years, how many women are into the legal field, in organizations, in international companies. It is very nice. And the statements women make... Oh, my dear! So in a way, I find that living in Ghana is kind of restful for me, not because we don't have burning issues, but because you have the feeling that other people are doing something about it too. I don't think that anything has fundamentally changed. People still have the same attitudes about women and about men-including women's attitudes about women-but you still have the feeling that is changing, and other people are talking and dealing with it. Yes, that is what I feel. I would definitely say that the position of the African woman writer is bad. One, because the position of the writer is bad in general: men writers are not receiving any more support, either. What you know as far as a woman writer, though, is that if there are two books of the same quality, even a woman reader still would make a bee line, unconsciously, for the man's book.

MF: Do you think so?

AAA: Oh, yes, of course!

MF: I would have gone for the woman's...

AAA: Oh, yes, but that is you! It comes with consciousness raising. It comes with race awareness, but I certainly think there is still a vestige of that. Because it is something that has been taught to us. We have been conditioned to look out for men. By the time you automatically select anything feminine then it is something you have taught yourself to do.

MF: It is self-taught...

AAA: It is self-taught. It is a growing awareness. But it is certainly not an impulse that has been inbred into you. And the African society speaks a lot about that educational contradiction.

MF: In the same article you refuse to be told that you have learned your feminism abroad-out of Africa. How did you learn then to give voice to the silenced African woman?

AAA: First of all, María, you have lived in Ghana, and you know these women are not silent at all. Maybe it is because you do not speak the local languages, but I can assure you that these are the most vocal, the most articulate African women I know.

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And they are not silent at all. It is true they are not marching, but if we talk about silence in terms of people who do not talk, it is not here. These women are talking all the time-you already know the story about my aunt. I am not so sure these women are silent at all, and in that article I was only writing about women that I knew-my mother who teaches me political lessons, or the two illiterate women who sell peanuts and coconuts at the hospital and I caught having a serious theological argument on Muslim and Christian religion. I was writing about women who protest at least at a personal level, about injustice, about misrepresentation. But, believe me, María, if the women in my stories are articulate, it is because that is the only type of women I grew up among. And I learnt those first feminist lessons in Africa from African women.

MF: In an article entitled “The House Divided: Feminism in African Literature”, Charles Nmolin-a professor at the University of Port Harcourt-states that the African feminist literary scene is not whole (there are, what he calls feminist, womanists, accommodationists, reactionaries, gynandrists, etc.,). Would you agree on that fragmentation?

AAA: I haven’t even thought about it. I also suspect that when people do not want to deal with an issue, they look for lack of coherence in the issue itself. This is what in American English

is called “nit-picking”-the fundamental issue is, are we going to develop our own feminist consciousness? It does not matter if some of us are womanists. Are we feminist? My point is that with all ideological thoughts there are bound to be disagreements, different shapes. If he thinks that that is what he sees, fine, but I do not think it is the most important, essential commentary anybody can make on the state of the feminist debate in Africa.

MF: How would you approach it then?

AAA: Like I said, there are womanists, and feminists, but the most important thing is: what are we all trying to get at? If we are all trying to get at the development of society’s awareness about the position of women in this world-and what to do about it, how to get women to develop-that’s the important issue. If this is what we are about then, frankly, it is not relevant at all whether we are feminists, or womanists, or fundamentalists. Who cares? That’s where I come from. I am not going to stop talking to somebody because she is a womanist. I will argue with the person about the view points. I will discuss them, like I have done with Alice [Walker], I will discuss the validity of the term. But that does not mean that I will negate the validity of that term. I will want to point out the difficulties it raises for

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us, African women, in terms of clarity. But I will never say, the womanists are so different I cannot talk to them.

MF: In the same article, Nmolin mentions you as one of the many African women who systematically write about women’s issues but “deny involvement in the feminist movement in their public utterances”. He quotes from one of your articles. **(note 17)**

AAA: But that is so ridiculous! Here is Nmolin saying that I deny in public my feminism when they are marketing me in Europe as the foremost African feminist. What I also resent, because I am not the foremost African feminist. What does a term like that mean? We are talking about outrageous women, and I have told you stories about women who did not even go to school. My aunt, for instance, isn’t she a foremost African feminist? [*I nod in agreement*]. I would think so too. And Nmolin says I do not want to say I am a feminist at all! That’s ridiculous! If he is using that article to back a statement, then he has completely misread me.

MF: Efua Sutherland also mentions that African women writers like you, who write about women’s issues, regret being called feminist.

AAA: That's equally ridiculous! I've always said I am a feminist! People are making a fundamental mistake. We are women. A woman writer writes about women naturally. I cannot understand why people think that if you write about women you should be a feminist. Now that I have been called the foremost African feminist, it is a bit awkward for me when African critics who do not want to take that I am a feminist write such things about me because, really, that is wishful thinking. They don't want to say I'm a feminist, and I suspect that is because people have not clarified the whole issue of lesbianism, and where it impinges on feminism. And I genuinely think that when they say I am not a feminist, they are saying: Oh, she cannot be because feminists are lesbians. It is there, unspoken. Because how more loudly should I declare my feminism? But I always make it clear that feminism is an ideological viewpoint. Lesbianism is a sexual orientation, and the two should not be mixed at all. But people do not want to deal with the dichotomy, the difference. In Africa people just cringe, but feminism has nothing to do with lesbianism.

MF: So you think that it is African critics who put feminism and lesbianism in the same bag?

AAA: They don't openly put together feminism and lesbianism. Nobody writes about lesbianism in Africa. What I am say-

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ing is that when they say: “Oh, Ama Ata Aidoo writes about women’s issues, but she is not a feminist”, they themselves are willing not to be feminist because people are not really clear as to what feminism means and what it does not mean, do you see?

MF: As some feminists critics point out (hooks, Hill-Collins, Butler, etc.) do you see a different agenda for Afro-American feminists and African feminists?

AAA: Frankly, this is something I have not dealt with at all. I know that what we have been engaged in is the dichotomy between black women and feminism, and white women and feminism. But I haven’t really dealt with the difference. I have commented on Alice Walker and the issue of womanism, you know, but I have not dealt with the feminism of African American women as a coherent whole as opposed to the feminism of African women.

MF: But you would not put them in different bags.

AAA: I don’t even know how, María. My feeling is that those differences are so frail. When you take the women of any two countries, the women of two different environment, like Spain, like England, we are going to find certain local details, but I am not so sure I want to make it the subject of an academic

study yet because there are -and here I go again- so many other issues crying to be dealt with in Africa.

MF: In “Black Feminism: The African Diaspora”, Maggie Humm (1994) significantly divides her article into Afro-American Feminist Criticism, and African Feminist Criticism, and she argues that “African writing tends to represent collective and community concerns in opposition to a white Western faith in individualistic psychology”. Anowa, Sissie, and Esi, to name some of your female characters, seem to me individualistic. Could you comment on that rather broad statement?

AAA You know, María, I don't even know if they are so individualistic. Every human being is an individual. The thing is that there are areas of ourselves, of our psyches, that deal with our personal conscience, but I also think that there are areas of ourselves that deal with the collective. But I surely refuse Humm's division. I find it unfortunate that we are so bent on dividing African societies into collectivistic, and Western societies into individualistic. I find that division a bit uncomfortable because, in the long run, we are born alone, and we die alone, and that's all there is to that, and someday along the line people struggle on their own. On the other hand, I think there are more palpable areas of ourselves, of our societies, where we react collectively-as you have probably noticed af-



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ter spending months in Ghana-as there are areas in the Western World where the individual is very much on the forefront of the people’s consent. But I also suspect that even in the West such obsessions with individualism is a relatively new development. It came with Capitalism; it is not that Western societies have always been like that, no. It is new, and I suspect that as we Africans move into the market forces we are going to be also very individual, but I refuse to deal on such a level. I am not thinking of such things when I am writing. It didn’t occur to me to make Sissie individualistic. After all, people who resist, who oppose resistance to society, begin as individuals. Once they become a movement, of course they move as a collective. There is no way I could present Anowa as a member of some kind of collective. And, as for Sissie, I saw her as an African student who explores Europe on her own. But, of course, all these women-especially Sissie-speak with a collective voice. Sissie is much of the time whining about the political situation, what is going to happen to us ... She moves collectively. Even Esi, in her own way, when she says: “What were my people thinking about when they sent me, a little girl, to this boarding school?” What she is interrogating is the fascination this African society has for boarding schools, to the extent that characters are capable of going out of themselves, moving away from their personal courses. And the same you

can say of Western novels. It is a division I do not agree with, and certainly not in relation to my work.

MF: I would like to start with your works. Anowa drowns herself, the victim of forced marriage and barrenness. Does Anowa's suicide work as the metaphor for an African tradition that buries women in life because they cannot have children or become rebellious?

AAA: You see, María, I haven't thought about it that way. When I was writing this play the only thing I could think of was that Anowa was resisting society. Mind you, at that time, I was not an articulate feminist. I was about 25. All I could see was: What was the most probable if you get a woman flying in the face of society? What is most likely to happen? It was not something I was dealing with on a critical or ideological level. I could see Anowa. I could see how articulate she was, but in a way I was also young, and I was interrogating me. I was never scared of society's capacity to punish you.

MF: But African women in general, and Anowa, in particular pays a very high price for that resisting attitude. Would you agree on that?

AAA: Exactly, that is the price you pay. Today everybody has attacked me, and I am very humble about it because I say: At

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that time this is what I could see. Of course, today, if I were writing *Anowa* I would not let her die. If *Anowa* was not meant to die, I would have written and constructed the play right from the beginning with the agency of her salvation or redemption blew into the play, into the fabric of the story. You just don't get to the end and rescue her. That is not good. I heard that somebody put *Anowa* on in Nigeria, and they were so unwilling to have this fantastic woman dead, that they made her pregnant, because the Head of State was coming to see it. Nigerians could not have the Head of State confronting this terrifying ending. So they make *Anowa* pregnant and everybody lived happily ever after.

MF: But you were not in favor of a fairy-tale-ending for *Anowa*?

AAA: Exactly. But because of the way the play was constructed, and because of *Anowa*'s integrity, he could not return home. Today I would not let *Anowa* die. I would make sure that she lived, and that she lived in terms of the dynamics of all her life, not just to save her at the end. The play has two endings. In the first one *Anowa* went crazy; in the second one she killed herself, and it is obviously more radical. I changed the ending because, again, I thought that it was not fair to let *Anowa* live as a madwoman. That was not fair.

MF: You didn't think Anowa deserved that ending.

AAA: Exactly! She didn't deserve that! The other possible alternative was to let herself make the decision. She wasn't going to live, and she wasn't going back to her parents' village. As far as I am concerned, the real metaphor, and you don't have to agree with me, is what happens when an individual struggles in isolation, because she had nobody. Anowa was a lonely woman, and she was struggling with all her intelligence, and all her energy against a whole society. It was very difficult for her to live. The only way you could make her live -and if I had lived that long, and had the time, I might have attempted to live like that- it is to let her move closer to the slaves, even closer, so that they struggle together, for instance, against internal slavery, because she can become a leader. That way she will survive.

MF: You said you heard this story from your mother, but the ending was your own. How was your mother's ending?

AAA: To tell you the truth, María, I just recently checked with my mother on the story. I wrote *Anowa* so long ago ... It was just last Christmas when I was wounded after the car accident, and we were talking. I asked my mother to tell me the story again-the story that inspired the play-and the real ending was even more horrific than Anowa's end in fiction!

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MF: Which was the real ending?

AAA: The woman died, but she died out of shame and disgrace. Humiliation, public humiliation. The real history is even worse. I wanted to refresh my memory, and look what I found!

MF: In your play *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, Eulalie, the African American woman who marries African Ato in the United States and travels to meet his family in Africa, is portrayed in the negative: she rejects food (snails); rites (washing her stomach); tribalism (family meetings), etc. Are you sending the message that the embrace between African American women and African women is not possible?

AAA: At that time I was not consciously sending any messages. I wrote this play when I was twenty years old. I returned from the Conference in Lagos you mentioned, to live on Campus and to write this play. In retrospect, all I can say is that if I were a critic dealing with this play I would say that both parties are sending and getting messages. It was not only Eulalie, as an African American girl, who was rejecting African society. Africans had already rejected her, her smoking, her drinking. What I am trying to say is that if you want to bring two forces together without any preparation there is meant to be a clash. You bring an African American girl without telling her honestly

what you see about your own African society, and then you don't tell your people what to expect from an African American person. You just throw them together. What could they do but hate one another's guts? I mean, you could do the experiment, and the same could happen with two Ghanaians coming from two different ethnic groups.

MF: In your short story "Our Sister Killjoy" you deal in passing with lesbianism when you write: "Marija's [German married woman] cold fingers on her [Sissie's] breast" (65). Could you elaborate on a rather taboo theme in African society? Aren't you perpetuating the stereotype of black women perceived as the desire object of white -whether men or women-?

AAA: All I have to say is that I have not dealt with lesbianism at all on a conscious level though I know it is in the story. I know that in certain girls' schools there is something there, but in the Ghanaian society everybody comes out of the boarding schools and he or she is a properly heterosexual being. Girls have had that experience, but they are not later affected by it. In these boarding schools they are there from the ages of twelve to twenty-a time when girls and boys are very much alive to themselves as sexual beings. It is in these boarding schools, where there are no boys around, that girls use other girls to explore their sexuality. In the African society, they do

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not bring lesbianism back with them. It is something you experience and leave in boarding schools. Everybody comes out and is a very respectful heterosexual being: we marry, we have children, we carry on with our lives. Nobody talks about it. When I was a child, growing up in my father's house, I never came across two grown up women in any position that made me think they were making love to one another. Never. Consequently, I also grew up with the notion that we don't have lesbianism in African society. Of course, you know that is not true any more because you hear about this and that. But how new is it? How old is lesbianism in our society? I don't know. Now, María, when I was writing *Our Sister Killjoy*, I was not thinking about lesbianism. In retrospect, I was sub-consciously dealing with a situation parallel to the one we find in African boarding schools. Imagine the scene. There are two women caught in a room together. The atmosphere is very intimate. Marija, the German, moves impulsively, and kisses Sissie. For the life of me! I cannot say either Marija or Sissie is a lesbian! Maybe I am some kind of a repressed lesbian, and I haven't dealt with it! I don't know! What I know is that I am not a lesbian, but the issue came, and I decided that I wasn't going to cut it out because that was going to be self censorship, and I wasn't going to do that to my own writing. On the other

hand, Maria, I haven't dealt with lesbianism sufficiently-as an idea, as an orientation to exploit-so I just left it there.

MF: And the fact that one woman, Sissie, is black, and the other, Marija, is white. Wasn't that done on purpose?

AAA: No. That answers your question of black being an object of desire. Now, Maria, I am saying this on the tape: if black people are objects of white desire, you white folks have a very funny way to show it ... [*long pause*].

MF: Because?

AAA: Because? Look at all the racism in the world! If we are the objects of your desire, why do you treat us like ... [*another long pause*].

MF: Shit?

AAA: You said it. [\(note 18\)](#)

MF: In *Our Sister Killjoy*, the protagonist, Sissie does not portray a glamorous picture of a "been to". [\(note 19\)](#) Are you telling African women to stay in Africa? Have you personally felt in exile when abroad?

AAA I have always felt uncomfortable living abroad: racism, the cold, the weather, the food, the people ... I had also felt some kind of patriotic sense of guilt. Something like: Oh, my



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dear! Look at all the problems we have at home. What am I doing here? That's personal. But I don't think, again, I was consciously sending any messages. I wanted to see what Sis-sie was making of Europe. To an extent this story was overtly more political. You are right, I was maybe sending messages, but I was not sending them on purpose. You are writing, and the things come. For me, even in Killjoy where my engagement, my commitment to the sociopolitical debate in Africa is so obvious, I didn't say: let me send this message. It just comes. It is amazing how it comes. The issue of emigration really bothers me, and then it came.

MF: Referring to *Changes*, (note 20) Esi Sutherland claims that you “studiously avoid telling success stories in gender relations”. It is the word studiously that struck me. Would you agree with her? (note 21)

AAA: No, I would disagree completely with Esi. I don't studiously avoid success stories in gender relations. It is just that I don't happen to write about it. It is not something I avoid at all. In fact, I think, for *Changes* if there is anything that was conscious is the fact that I wanted to make Ali a very attractive figure...

MF: Which he is!

AAA: Well, of course, Ali is an attractive figure, but the gender relationship is not a success story. I agree with her on that, but it wasn't anything I was studious about it. Again, it is like portraying strong or articulate women. It is a question of what you know. I mean, María, how many success stories can you find in real life?

MF: Very few!

AAA: Exactly! Very few. So you struggle to present a success story and it doesn't work. When Esi says I studiously avoid to tell a success story, I would say: How many books, novels, short stories, that she knows which are not fairy tales, tell successful gender stories? She is making me responsible for the failure of gender artistic imagination when it comes to write gender success stories. Ask Shakespeare, for Christ sake! Ask Soyinka! Ask García Márquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude*! Are those success stories? There aren't any. I am not the only one. I am going to fight her. Studiously! That is not fair. Look at Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, look at Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, look at Mariaba Ba's *So Long a Letter*! And we are only in Africa -we haven't even gone outside. What is she talking about?

MF: In *Changes* you look at polygamy -which is embedded in African culture- from the point of view of two educated African

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women. In choosing articulate, educated, and professional women, were you trying to present polygamy in a controversial way?

AAA: I wasn't trying to say nothing to anybody. It was what I observe around. *Changes* tries to make the point that it is not polygamy what is being interrogated, but matrimony because Esi was definitely willing to try and work for her second marriage. Now, what messed her up was not so much that she was the second wife of a Muslim polygamous husband, but the fact that after the marriage-after all the rituals of the second marriage had been concluded-Ali wasn't working for the relation; he was treating her like any wife, whether she was the only wife or the second wife.

MF: Both Esi and Fusena are not only educated but they work outside the domestic sphere. Both women have unfulfilled emotional relations. Even Opokuya, a more down-to-earth character, complains to Esi: “Well, see, how ragged I have become in the process of having ‘a full life’”. You are obviously given voice to this new generation of African married women with children who are also professionals. Are you saying that women's independence -full life- might interfere with their emotional life?

AAA: Don't you think it will? Don't you think, Maria, that your profession interferes with your emotional life? It is not just for African women. I mean, this is the end of the twentieth century, and Virginia Wolf tried to deal with it at the beginning of this century. I genuinely think that, going back all the way to Egypt, women had always seen that having a full life somehow interferes into your emotional sphere. Because society does not give you an inch, women have to struggle for it. It hasn't been resolved in the West at all either. In a way, I find that there is a certain uneasiness about the feminine debate in the Western World because women are giving up without struggle. I find it frightening sometimes.

MF: When you say they are giving up, you mean?

AAA: What I say is that people like Paglia ([note 22](#)), who are in the forefront of the feminine debate, are talking like ... Gosh!. Young women, I think, take for granted just the few gains that have been made, and they think it is enough. And I genuinely think we haven't even began. Some women come from Scotland to London to protest against all that feminist talk. They make a pilgrimage on the BBC and the media... They are so scared, they want to walk quickly back, and there isn't enough force coming from convinced feminists against this backlash. A bit scary.

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MF: Ama Ata Aidoo, I want to thank you for this interview. I know you must be tired, and we have to finish now, but we can relax and talk more over lunch.

AAA: Thanks to you, María, for reading my work and writing about it. You are not letting me die as a writer [Laughs]. **(note 23)** And, yes, let's now have some Ghanaian chicken and rice outside in the cool.

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1. Sponsored by the university of Alcalá (Madrid), I traveled to Accra (Ghana) where I stayed from September 1997 to February 1998, as a Visiting Scholar at the University of Ghana in Legon, Accra, as part of an exchange program existing between the two universities. I thank the British Council delegation in Accra for helping me to arrange this interview which took place at their premises.
2. A recent interview with Aidoo has been published in *Wasafiri*. See Wilson-Tagoe (2002).
3. In his openly hostile and critical article, Femi-Ojo (1982) rejects feminism as an “occidental phenomenon” that has nothing to offer to African women. In his dual division of African women writers, Femi-Ojo places Aidoo in the less ideologically aggressive group or “old guard”, together with Flora Nwapa or Efua Sutherland.
4. As with African American writers such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall, or Gloria Naylor who venerate Zora Neale Hurston as their literary mother, African women writers also read each other’s works and celebrate their literary ancestors.
5. Aidoo is the author of plays *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965), and *Anowa* (1970); short stories *No Sweetness Here* (1979), and *The Girl Who Can and Other Stories* (1999); novels *Our Sister Killjoy* or *Reflections from a Black-Eyed Squint* (1977), and *Changes* (1991); collections of poems *Someone Talking to Sometime* (1985), and *An Angry Letter in January and Other Poems*; children’s books *The Eagle and Chickens and Other Stories* (1986), and *Birds and Other Poems* (1987).

6. Focusing on canonical texts such as *Heart of Darkness* or *The Tempest*, Busia argues that African women have historically remained silent in colonial literature. Although we find oppressed women in Aidoo's fiction, most of her female characters transgress that passive role by voicing and resenting injustice. See Abena Busia, "Silencing Sycorax: On African Colonial Discourse and the Unvoiced Female" (1989-1990).

7. Though Carole Boyce Davies is right to complain about the marginality and effacement of African women writers, and to point to the need for critical attention, that same year Aidoo was favored with an in-depth and groundbreaking study of her literary career. See Vicent Odamtten's *The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo. Polylectics and Reading Against Neocolonialism* (1994). A more recent publication is Ada Uzoamaka Azodo and Gay Wilentz's *Emerging Perspectives on Ama Ata Aidoo* (1999).

8. This is an emblematic article, written by Ama Ata Aidoo, which has been included in different publications. See Ama Ata Aidoo, "To Be a Woman" (1985).

9. Aidoo's daughter, Kinna (1969), has chosen to stay in the United States. She graduated from Smith College where she majored in Chemistry.

10. 'Molara Ogundipe-Leslie is a prolific and respected Nigerian poet, former Professor at the University of Ibadan, and lecturer at major universities in Africa, Europe, and the United States. She has been instrumental in founding several women's organizations in Africa such as WIN (Women in Nigeria), and AAWORD (Association of African Women in Research and Development). Among her works, see, for

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example, *Sew the Old Days and Other Poems* (1985), and *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations* (1994).

**11.** Maryse Condé and Ama Ata Aidoo’s admiration for each other’s works is reciprocal. While Aidoo systematically teaches, and enthusiastically recommends Condé’s books, in turn, Condé writes about Aidoo’s influential presence in African women’s literature. See Condé (1972).

**12.** An outspoken and critical voice against the Muslim religion, Egyptian writer Nawal al Saadawi (1931) has recently been awarded the Premi International Catalunya in Spain.

**13.** Aidoo was the Minister of Education under the government of President Jerry Rawlings in 1982. She gave up her post a year later when she realized she could not put into practice her projected plan for free education accessible to all Ghanaian citizens.

**14.** The Ghanaian edition of Aidoo’s *Changes* (1994), includes an Afterword by Tuzyline Jita Allan-author of *Feminist and Womanist Aesthetics* (1993)-and its front cover is decorated with bright kente colors and the geometric patterns of the adrinkas (each design is illustrative of a Ghanaian proverb). On the back cover, Nikki Giovanni and Manthia Diawara praise the novel.

**15.** Amma Darko’s first novel *Beyond the Horizon* was published in Germany in 1991, after Heinemann rejected it. In view of her success, Heinemann included it in their African Series, together with Darko’s second novel *The Housemaid* (1999). Neither Darko’s novels nor Aidoo’s could be found at the University of Legon’s bookshop or at

the best bookshop in town. Only Buchi Emecheta's novel *The Joys of Motherhood*, or Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* were available.

**16.** Ghana was the first African country to obtain her independence on March 6, 1957. Ghana's first president was Dr. Kwame Nkrumah.

**17.** Nmolin refers to Aidoo's article "Unwelcome Pals and Decorative Slaves: The Woman as Writer in Modern Africa" (1982).

**18.** According to Korang (1992: 57), Sissie "the exemplary Africanist, irreverently rediscovers Europe as the heartland, not of humanism, but of racialism and imperialism".

**19.** A "been to" is a term used to refer to any African/Ghanaian person who has been abroad, and has come back to Ghana. From "I have been to England".

**20.** First written as a play for Radio Zimbabwe where Aidoo was living in 1988, *Changes* was the winner of the 1992 Commonwealth Prize for Literature in Africa.

**21.** Esi Sutherland is a Professor and Scholar at the Department of African Studies in the University of Ghana at Legon. I took a course with her ("Written African Literature"), and she brought this article to class. Esi Sutherland is the daughter of Efua Sutherland-the pioneer Ghanaian drama writer, and one of Aidoo's literary mothers.

**22.** A provocative and outspoken archaeologist and Popular Culture critic, Camille Paglia became famous in the nineties with her irreverent and provoking *Sexual Personae* (1990), and *Sex, Art, and American Culture* (1992).

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**23.** In her essay “To Be a Woman” (1984: 259), Aidoo furiously claims: “When a critic refuses to talk about your work, that is violence; he is willing you to die as a creative person”.