

Aidoo's *Certain Winds from the South*: Interceding for the Voiceless in the African Rural Community

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Abstract

This study examines Ama Ata Aidoo's short story entitled "Certain Winds from the South" and posits that it is a work in which the writer makes manifest to her readers the predicament of the deprived in the rural communities of Africa using a Ghanaian rural setting as canvas. It is the position in the essay that the ordinary working people in these communities are presented with limited options in their search for means of survival. As a result of this limitedness, the men are forced to migrate to the urban centres in search of alternatives; and this has adverse consequences for members of the family that are then left to be catered for by the womenfolk, and invariably, for the community. One of these is family disorientation and its implied implications for the nation. It is the view in the study that the women who bear the direct consequences of the family dislocation in these communities value their humanity more than material considerations. It is equally the position that they are compelled to accept their lot as there is literally no one to intercede for them. The study concludes that in presenting their plight, the storyteller gives voice to these otherwise deprived voiceless rural working people, especially the women who are ultimately the victims. The study is anchored on the womanism variant of African feminism.

Key Words: *Aidoo, certain, deprived, rural, voiceless, community.*

Introduction

This study interrogates the short story, "Certain Winds from the South," hereafter refers to as "Certain Winds," written by Ama Ata Aidoo, a first generation Ghanaian female writer. The short story, according to M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, is "a brief work of prose fiction, and most of the terms for analyzing the

component elements, the types, and the narrative techniques of the novel are applicable to the short story as well"; they go further to say that the short story is a work that can be read "at one sitting of from half an hour to two hours" (Abrams and Harpham 365). In other words, the shortness of the story is its most obvious defining quality. In many other respects, as they point out, it appropriates the qualities of the other prose forms in engaging its concerns.

Aidoo is one of the pioneer female writers in Africa having published her first play, *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, in 1965. As a writer of international repute, Aidoo, born 23rd March, 1940 and named Christiana Ama Ata Aidoo, is a prolific author who has published in the three genres of literature – drama, poetry, and prose (fiction). Her other published works include a play entitled *Anowa* (1970), *No Sweetness Here: A Collection of Short Stories* (1970), *Our Sister Killjoy or, Reflections from a Black-Eyed Squint*, a novel, (1977), *Someone Talking to Sometime*, a poetry collection, (1986), *The Eagle and the Chickens and Other Stories* (1986), *Birds and Other Poems* (1987), *Changes: a Love Story*, a novel, (1991), *An Angry Letter in January*, a collection of poems, (1992), *The Girl Who Can and other Stories* (1997), and *Diplomatic Pound and Other Stories* (2012). She has also edited a collection of short stories which is entitled *African Love Stories* (2006). Aidoo has indeed left her mark on the African literary scene considering her prolificacy and longevity as a literary, creative artist.

As it has been variously argued, the concern with issues relating to the plight of women in African literature began to take centre stage by the second half of the 1960s. This is the period that a large number of the countries in the continent had thrown off the colonial yoke and Africa had begun to emerge on the world scene with a definitive voice. It would thus appear that with this historical reality emerged a strong female voice to remind humanity that the African woman was not to be left behind in the evolving new order. And of course, the incursion of the female voice in African letters was to represent her in "[a] positive image ... that is in tune with African historical realities and does not stereotype or limit women into postures of dependence or submergence" (Davies 15).

Amongst the female writers of this period are Flora Nwapa, Mariama Ba, Ama Ata Aidoo, Bessie Head, Efua Sutherland, and a host of others. These writers devoted their attention to the plight of African women; a path that later African female writers have continued to navigate. They have made the plight of the woman and her concerns the centre of the engagement in the literature that they produce. It is for this reason that Rose Acholonu says that female writers in Africa have made "... heard the hitherto unheard voices, and [are] giving some meaningful insights into the hitherto unexplored psyches of the female in our literature" (Acholonu 7).

And as Anne Adams Graves has observed, concerning female writers in Africa, “in place of the role-categories such as girlfriends, mistresses, and prostitutes, we can recognize prophets, decision-makers, heroines, martyrs, and challengers of the status quo,” and she adds that currently in African literature, we have the independent female character “... standing on her own rather than in the shadow of the men with whom she shares the literary stage” (Graves viii). Graves's position appears to suggest that the writer with a feminist bend has been able to work at raising the female in African literature to an appreciable level that she is recognized for her individual achievement than striving under the shadow of the male.

This paper is anchored on the womanism variant of African feminism. In adopting this variant of feminism, the authors of this essay agree with Mary E. Modupe Kolawole that “[w]omanism is closer to a valid theoretical basic for expressing women's sensibility in African literature.” This is because, as she argues, “in spite of the existence of gender solipsism in African literature, some men and most women writers have created themes around women's oppression and need for self-realisation” (p.118). Kolawole's point here is that womanism is not gender arrogant as it gives room for gender negotiation on critical, and even in personal relationships.

Helen Chukwuma, in her take on feminism as a theory for interrogating literature, posits as follows:

Feminism is a political doctrine advocating for equal rights and treatment of women as of men. It manifested itself initially as Women's Liberation Movement and Women Rights Movement. Its original aim was to fight for franchise for women, later it developed to fighting for legal and social rights for women. When the term feminism is applied to literature, it stand for female assertion, an effort by women to claim proper treatment and places in society and the home not out of pity and consideration but by right. It is a fight for rights, for human dignity; importantly, it is a fight for recognition, for a place in the sun. (Chukwuma 44).

In essence, feminism is about advancing the place of women in the society; they are not to be seen as chattels, not as others, but as humans with equal dignity as their male counterparts. And on feminism in African letters, Chukwuma again says thus:

Feminism or womanism in Africa does not advocate negative stance against the male nor indeed a life without men nor does it negate the family. Rather it advocates a complementary

relationship between the sexes where female individualism and character are given ample opportunity for life and expression. (Chukwuma, Introduction ix).

What this does mean is that African feminism or, pointedly womanism, in its conception and worldview, is a departure from the mainstream radical European feminism that tends to reject the male gender completely with its attendant consequences. African feminism, therefore, advocates equalization of opportunities between the genders and seek cooperation and understanding with and from the men.

The objective in this study is an exploration of the pains and agony of rural women who are forced by circumstances beyond their control to raise their children singlehandedly without the support of the husbands who are driven by the quest for a better life for their family to go seek alternatives in the cities only to be consumed in that search. The researchers show that this happens because of the neglect and abandonment of the people in the rural communities who depend largely on subsistence means of existence that invariably become inadequate to cater for their needs as the family grows and as nature takes its toll on the land resource that they depend on for sustenance. "Certain Winds" deals with the pains and agony of separation, and thereby the endurance that comes with single-parenting when a woman suddenly realizes that the burden of raising a child is hers alone to bear as the man has disappeared without a trace; without any cheery news. The story uses the flashback technique in its plotting which is embedded, that one story fused in another – sub plot. According to Esi Sutherland-Addy, in the plot of "Certain Winds," "... the embedded plot is used by Mma Asana (sic) in the typical intimacy of a heart to heart talk between mother and daughter as an illustration of, or parallel to the current situation that her daughter is facing in order to help her bear it" (Sutherland-Addy 62).

The story teller depends on the flashback technique in order to marry the events of the past with those of the present for M'ma Asana to enable her daughter to make meaning of the reality she is about to confront, and to help her live through it. And flashback is "interpolated narratives or scenes ... which represent events that happened before the time at which the work opened" (Abram and Harpham 296). M'ma Asana who has just returned home from the fields where she goes to pick up a "wretched pile of cola-nuts" (Aidoo 8) for the market the next day welcomes her son in law, Issa, who comes to visit late in the evening. It is the outcome of the exchange with her son-in-law that triggers her memory of the past which is the focus of the story. In essence, it can be said that the plot begins 'in medias res,' "in the middle of things," and then moves backward to the beginning and then the end. The plot is, therefore, a unified one.

After the exchange of greetings between the two, Issa asks after the welfare of his wife and son. In the exchange the reader notices a certain level of anxiety on the part of the son-in-law. In the end Issa tells M'ma Asana of his decision to leave for the South so he can find work to do to earn a living. Issa's decision to go South triggers M'ma Asana's memory to another going away more than twenty years before: the going away of her own husband who never returned! After thinking over the whole incident, she decides to tell her daughter the truth about her father; in other words she had not told her the truth all these years. It is pertinent to point out here that Issa's decision to go away is final as he has not come to seek the opinion of the mother-in-law. His wife's opinion does not even remotely count. This underscores the patriarchal nature of the setting of the story.

In the first going away, M'ma Asana's husband had joined the army because he was not the type to sit by while his mates were moving on as he saw it. He came home to display his glittering uniform and promised to go secure accommodation for married soldiers. But the next time he came home it is to announce he is going to fight in the 'great war' on the side of the British against the Germans. She did not understand the reason for his involvement in other people's war and told her husband so. But he went all the same and never came back. She only got information he was killed in the war. She refused to go collect his entitlements because as she puts it: "It was him I wanted not his body turned to gold" (Aidoo 15). It is thus established that M'ma Asana's humanity transcends transient pecuniary consideration. The story is set in an agrarian rural community in the northern part of Ghana. The religion of the characters of the story is obviously Islam as shown by their names. These include M'ma Asana, Issa, Hauwa, and Fuseni. The setting in time is the colonial and post-colonial Ghanaian life, and the incidents of the story are narrated by M'ma Asana within a period of twelve hours – from the evening of one day to the morning of the next using the dramatic monologue to tell her hurt and pain. The reader is told she does not get sleep throughout the night as she reflects on her life and ponders the decision as to when to tell her daughter, Hauwa, the full story of her father's going away.

The Characters as Victims in the Story

One of the features of the short story is its economy of characters. In "Certain Winds" there are a total of four characters that we meet as enumerated above. They are from the other 'end of the street,' those at the receiving end of the actions and inactions of state power and authority. As Sutherland-Addy puts it, Aidoo tries to "evoke psychological and sociological responses to traumatic situations from the point of view of the traumatized" (Sutherland-Addy 61). It is equally true, as Loretta Stec says of Bessie Head's stories, that Aidoo "pays particular attention to the lives of 'ordinary women' using her tales to examine the position of women in society ..." (Stec 121). The structure of the story, that is "Certain Winds," is such that it is M'ma

Asana and Issa that the reader hears all through the narrative. Even though there is clear indication that Hauwa converses with her mother in the scene where the older woman tells her daughter about Issa's going away, her voice is never made audible to the reader. This can only be deduced from her mother's responses to her queries on the stories she has been told about her husband's going away, and her father's earlier.

M'ma Asana is the protagonist of the story and it is her story, the pain she bears at the separation from her husband more than twenty years before the present and the single parentage that is foisted upon her thereby that are the focus of the story. She is devoted to her daughter being the result of the pregnancy twenty years before Fuseni's. At Issa's going away, she understands the pain that her daughter will go through, hence her telling her own story to help her go through that torturous moment that is bound to come. It is through her eyes and knowledge of the kraal that we are made aware of the losses that confront the people. As a woman she deeply loved her husband. That is why for over twenty years after his going away and with the knowledge of his death, approaching footsteps still make her wish: "If only it could be my husband!" (Aidoo 15). This underscores her pain and years of longing. She is practical and loving in her own unique way.

On the other hand, we meet Issa very briefly. In that brief moment we can say he is a hardworking young man who is concerned about the welfare of his wife, Hauwa, and son, Fuseni. In order to avoid the display of emotion that would attend, hopefully, the temporary separation from his young family he chooses to leave without informing his wife. In as much as this would generate debate as to whether the decision to leave without consultation with the wife is right, we cannot dismiss the fact that he carries her and their child in his heart as he leaves. This is why Chukwuma's summation of the story is difficult to accept wholly. To her, "Aidoo's memorable "Certain Winds from the South" shows how women rise up to head families when their men leave home and go South looking for better jobs. The truth of the matter is that once in the city, these men never come back and the women and children are left on their own" (Chukwuma 110). It is true that M'ma Asana's husband never returned through no fault of his really, but it cannot be said with a definiteness that the son-in-law will also not return. These writers believe that Issa is a practical young man who realizes that remaining at home in a season of drought and uncertainty portends no good omen for his young family. We really do not meet Hauwa as even in the scene she appears in, we only know of her presence through her mother's responses to her questions. She is a young mother who is nursing her first child at the point her husband decides to leave for the South. We can infer that like her mother she cares deeply for her husband, Issa. It is for this reason that she does not understand why her mother does not wake her up at the time Issa comes to inform her of his leaving. She weeps for the coming loneliness and the burden of playing mother and father to their son while the husband is away.

It would be correct to assert that all the characters in “Certain Winds” are the victims of the society they have found themselves. They are assailed by the system run by those who wield political power who do not really care about the natural predicament that confronts the people. In the quest for survival, therefore, the ordinary people are forced to take decisions that would have negative consequences for them and the family. And those who are left to bear the brunt, so to speak, are the more vulnerable segment of the rural people, the women and children. Even though it would be correct to say that M'ma Asana's husband made a conscious and deliberate choice, the same cannot be said of the son-in-law, Issa, whose going away is necessitated by the impending agony of the likelihood of watching his loved ones starve and be able to do nothing about it.

Thematic Analysis and Critical Context

The major theme in “Certain Winds” is separation, forced separation. Other themes are poverty, abandonment and neglect of rural dwellers, female bonding and filial love and quest for survival and others. The forced separation of Issa and Hauwa as a result of the pervading poverty fuelled by a poor harvest of cola-nuts jolts M'ma Asana's memory into remembrance of her own husband's separation from her. In the first separation, we are made forcefully aware of the emotional distress and family break ups that colonialism caused Africans. M'ma Asana is forced to live her years in hopeless expectation for a husband who leaves her in the prime of her youth to get killed “[i]n other people's war.” She likens the going away of her son in law to that of the first going away, but this time it is to earn a living to try to keep his family alive. But are the reasons really different? There is a subtle hint that government's neglect and their unfulfilled promise of hope are largely responsible for the current state of things. M'ma Asana tells the reader:

Those people, the government's people, who come and go, tell us
trade is bad now, and once again there is no tinned fish and no cloth.
But this time they say is because our children are going to get them
in abundance one day. (Aidoo 15).

The people, as the reader can see here, do not really count as they have to continue to give in the hope of better days to come; but days that no one is really sure will come. We see that even the pieces of land that the people have to farm on have become overused and no longer fertile. This point is brought home to us in the very opening of the story when we are told of “wretched pile of cola-nuts” (Aidoo 8). And again we are told:

On the way back to the kraal her eyes fell on the especially patchy
circles that mark where the old pits had been. At this time, in the old

days, they would have been nearly bursting and as one scratched the remains of the outgoing season, one felt a near-sexual thrill of pleasure looking at these pits” (Aidoo 8)

This clearly shows the retrogression that the land has undergone, yet “the government's people” keep promising hope without any action. It is the deplorable state that makes it inevitable for Issa to decide to leave for the South in search of the means to feed his family. He justifies the need for his going away when he asks and explains to M'ma Asana as follows:

...what will be the use of my staying here and watching them starve? You yourself know that all the cola went bad, and even if they had not, with trade as it is, how much money do you think I would have got from them? And that is why I am going. Trade is broken and since we do not know when things will be good again, I think it will be better for me to go away. (Aidoo 11)

The alternative to going South is to sit and watch his family starve and be able to do nothing about it. In this regard, the story is a critique of the abandonment of the rural communities and their people to their fate, an attitude which invariably leads to urban migration of able bodied youths to the urban centres and the consequences that that has on the family and the society at large.

There is also the premium that is placed on the boy child in a patriarchal African society. M'ma Asana hints at this when she takes the birth of Hauwa with philosophical acceptance. Obviously, she had hoped to have a son to replace her lost husband in his family. There is a note of disappointment, however, on noticing she has a daughter! In her explanation to Hauwa, she says:

I had told myself when you were born that it did not matter you were a girl. All gifts from Allah are good and anyway he was coming back and we were going to have many more children, lots of sons. (Aidoo 15).

The disappointment is quite loud; even though she knows her husband is not coming back, she tries to keep hope alive for the male child that will not come from him. And in this going away, there is no assurance, no guarantee, that her son-in-law, Issa, will return to them to play the duties of a husband to her daughter, Hauwa, and that of a father to her grandson, Fuseni. The burden shifts to the women once more to bring up the child without the support of a husband and a father. Here is the core of the story that Aidoo tells; she assumes the voice of the ordinary and suffering people of the Ghana of the day, and even of today, to prod the conscience of “the government

people” to rise up to their responsibility of providing leadership and catering for the welfare of the people, especially those in the rural areas, to live to their full potentials.

Conclusion

To conclude, “Certain Winds” deals with the pains of the deprived in the African rural community where the vulnerable members of society live, women and the poor who do not have a voice in society, or whose voices are muted. They are left to be blown about by the wind; and the one that blows from the South obviously portends no good omen. In spite of this, however, M'ma Asana does not give up hope as she encourages her daughter and imparts some of her strength into her. In essence she, having been there before, her daughter will learn from her experience and be stronger. Thus in “Certain Winds,” Aidoo stays with the dispossessed in the rural communities and voices their pains and agony to the world. Through her intercession in the story, the world is made aware of the pain and emotional trauma that these ordinary folks are made to endure. Indeed as Sutherland-Addy observes, Aidoo's preoccupation in her story is to make her readers become aware that “... those who suffer from extreme powerlessness, unemployment and poverty must be given a hearing” (Sutherland-Addy 60). Therein lies the strength and relevance of “Certain Winds from the South.”

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