

Interview with Ama Ata Aidoo: Facing the Millennium

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by

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Azodo: How did you begin to write?

Aidoo: Well, it was more an awareness that I wanted to write from when I was about fifteen. My literature teacher asked me what I wanted to do as a career. And I said I wanted to write poetry. So, that's how far it goes.

Azodo: What are the difficulties you have faced as a writer?

Aidoo: Well, I think basically, for me, these are difficulties I became aware of later, not when I started. Just the whole business of having space, space and time to write, without having to do other things, you know. What I mean is the whole business of not having structures, supporting structures, precisely because of the neo-colonial nature of our society. Unlike an American or a Scandinavian, you don't have access to things like funds, things like fellowships or grants. So, you always have to work. You always have to do other work, in order to survive. I mean, I've had to teach and that takes away writing time. So, that has been for me one single most pressing problem, all my life.

Azodo: What is your advice to budding women writers?

Aidoo: Well, to go on writing, in spite of the problems.

Azodo: How do female writers compare with their male counterparts, in your estimation?

Aidoo: In terms of what?

Azodo: In terms of production, in terms of depth of understanding of issues?

Aidoo: Well, I think it is an unfair question, because different writers have different depths of understanding. I don't think we can characterize the issue of depth of understanding on a gender basis. Because I am a woman, and it is very tempting to me to say that we have more understanding than men. Everybody knows that. But, I don't think that will be fair, you know. As far as the production is concerned, women are constrained by all the forces that take part of our attention. I mean, as mothers, as wives, and so on and so forth. We have to farm away part of our time. And of course that reduces the volume of our work. I mean at least the quantity of it, enormously. So, men are luckier than us in that respect.

Azodo: Okay. Your writing is remarkable for crisscrossing genres, as you well know.

Aidoo: Hmm.

Azodo: Novel to poetry, poetry to short story to drama. Which side of you seems to be dominant over the others?

Aidoo: Well, that's for the critic to say, really, because as I am a poet--well, I hope I can say I am a poet--the novel takes a lot more time. I haven't written as many novels as I would want because a novel takes so much time. And then I haven't done as many plays as I probably would want to, because, for the past twenty years or so, I have not led a stable existence. And without a certain kind of stability, you can't do drama on the move. You need a stage. You need maybe a company that could produce your plays on stage, and so on and so forth. So, again, my output as a dramatist has been terrifyingly....

Azodo: Well, I have read *Anowa* and *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, and I think they are excellent books.

Aidoo: Thank you. But, I am not talking about the quality. But I mean the quantity. *The Dilemma* was published in 1965, and *Anowa* was published in 1970. And since then, apart from a radio play, I haven't done drama. That's what I mean. That's what I'm saying. Well, I am not even in a position to judge the quality of a few of my works. But just, I'm saying, in terms of the sheer volume, I haven't done as much as I would want, because of the way my life has seemed to have worked out.

Azodo: In the future, which direction do you see yourself leaning?

Aidoo: Well, you know, me, I am a writer. When I say I am a writer, what I'm saying is, depending upon the material and how it strikes me, or how the material presents itself, and then I write a poem. For instance, I have just written a new short story, two weeks ago. I would like to happily announce it, because it was nice. Because I had been teaching full-time for the past three years, I hadn't really written much. So, it was very nice that I should sit down and write a story. So, in the mean time, I am working on a novel. Again, I can't see myself doing plays for the reason I have outlined. But I do hope that I'll be writing more and more. That sort of thing.

Azodo: In reading your works, I see that the grandmothers have a significant role. With changes in society, and young women moving away from home, with modern life and travels, and the young people moving around, what or who do you see replacing the grandmother?

Aidoo: You mean the grandmother in her role as grandmother?

Azodo: As the custodian of tradition, and...

Aidoo: Well, then, there is no replacement. I mean, I think that we are looking at a society which, by and large, has been in a process of collapse and disintegration, as a result of colonial intervention for some time. That is, if we are looking at it in terms of very original traditional structures. But, you see, I think that societies, even our own, are dynamic in their own way. And it is quite possible that not all the changes are going to be negative. I suspect grandparents would

be there. They may not fulfill the same roles in our lives as they've done. But the choice is ours entirely to make, whether we let the present process, which more or less sidelines grandmothers, continue or whether we do something to stop this disintegration. And I think that to a certain extent, we can intervene. We don't have to simply let everything collapse. But, what we need is a certain measure of energy. And what is really bothersome is whether we have this energy, whether we have energy at all. But, the kind of energy that we need to intervene in the disintegration of the role of the grandmother as we know it is the same kind of energy we need to reorganize other areas of our life. Like making the education system more meaningful, and so on and so forth. Like tackling the issue of African languages and what we want to do about that. You see what I am saying. I see that energy as central to all our future, because the issue of the decay or the disintegration of the role or the function of the grandmother in our life is not separate from all the other developmental issues facing us as a people.

Azodo: Nawal el Saadawi, only a few days ago, was saying that a committed artist must be an activist. I wonder what your opinion is on that issue.

Aidoo: I think she is right, you know. The only thing is that the committed artist has to be an activist. The thing is that if you are committed, you would be an activist, whether through your mode of writing or other areas. I know that Nawal was categorical in thinking that what we artists do is not enough. We need to be out there. And I cannot agree with her more, because I tried, you know, to even enter what I then perceived as revolutionary politics. So, I agree with her. If everything were equal, we wouldn't be asking the writer and the artist to also be going out there actively participating in the struggle. But, we know that everything is not equal where we come from.

Azodo: In reading *Changes*, sometimes I wonder what the changes are....

Aidoo: Well, you are the critic, that's okay. I also titled my book *Changes*. I was trying to see how one young woman or one woman perceived herself in a non-stable environment. Do you see? I mean, in our environment, as we keep coming back to the issue, as a result of colonial

intervention, what you would see under any circumstances as normal societal development was interfered with. So now, we have all these forces going on around us. And, in the mean time, we are not living in a vacuum. We are also living in a world which is impacted on by other forces outside itself. I called the book *Changes*, because I see primarily a character like Esi the protagonist as being a part of those who are trying to define, or even redefine woman as a lover, as a wife, as a mother, as a daughter, even as a granddaughter. Do you see? So, that's why I called the book *Changes*. In the meantime, it was fascinating to note that, for instance, my Dutch publishers titled the Dutch version of the book *Choices*. So, they saw her as somebody who had to deal with the issue of choices.

Azodo: Very good. Tuzyline, whom you know, in the "Afterword" to *Changes*, did mention that your major characters usually do not portray what she called "a drama of victimization." Do you see yourself as advancement on your predecessors, Nwapa or Buchi Emecheta?

Aidoo: Well, that's again an unfair question, because I don't want to position myself as advancement. That is for the critic to decide. Well, I would want to think that I do not see my women as victims, although even that statement cannot be wholly true. For instance, in terms of a woman like Anowa, who refused to be a victim, but finally, eventually, had to submit and commit suicide. Committing suicide is pretty nihilistic, you know. I mean, you have to be confronted with despair, which is so total you cannot see any other way out. I mean, when a person, if a person, gets into that kind of hole, that's being victim. She succumbs. The thing is that not all, but some, of my women escape being victims. I would like to think that I do try to prevent victimization. If people see that as advancement on Nwapa and Emecheta, for instance, fine. But, I wouldn't go characterizing my work in that kind of way.

Azodo: Yes. Let me get back to *Changes*. I really like that novel. Do you see a certain kind of oxymoron...? Do you see yourself shifting on issues that you had categorically dealt with in, say, *Our Sister Killjoy*?

Aidoo: Like?

Azodo: There is no question about how you feel about things. And my students really say, "Oh, my God, she's so angry!" But in *Changes*, you seem to...let me use the word...waffle a little bit on issues.

Aidoo: Like what?

Azodo: Like polygamy.

Aidoo: No. But I don't waffle on it. You just can't stay angry all the time. In *Killjoy*, I was dealing with very hard public issues, political issues, like colonization, what happened to us as a people. *Changes* is much easier. I deal with love, personal relationships. You can't take up an angry posture over issues to do with love and marriage. I mean, you have to be calm about it. Do you see what I'm saying?

Azodo: Turning now to feminism as such, African feminism, Cherie Register has spoken of American feminism as suffering from a "biological putdown" on women. Do you see any such attitude of male writers on women in African literature?

Aidoo: Well, I definitely think it is a characteristic, rather than an attitude. Because I don't think they do it deliberately. It is just their perception of society. And they can't go beyond what they see as a *status quo*. So, you get these women who are not very assertive and so on and so forth. But, I wouldn't use the term "attitude," because when you say that it means they do it deliberately. But an attitude needn't be deliberate. Yet, it is there. But, we have to also understand it in terms of how they perceive contemporary society. I think it is there.

Azodo: Years ago in Stockholm, you reluctantly accepted the label of a feminist. And I know that many African women writers prefer Womanism to the term feminism. How do you yourself define Womanism? What does that mean to you?

Aidoo: Well, my understanding of Womanism is like feminism. But, because of us being African and black, because of our particular position in history, Womanists believe that special component makes it a little difficult for us to say we are feminists. Womanism adds the added understanding of our position in history to the discourse. You know that we can be feminists. But, you know, on the other hand, we bring more to the discourse, which makes us Womanists. But, like you heard me say yesterday, for me that's also problematic, because it is essentializing our situation, which brings its own limitations. I think it is a very complex issue.

Azodo: Okay. What do you feel about Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*?

Aidoo: You know perfectly well that we don't have too much time. What I mean is that this is a big issue that needs time. And, I think it needs its own interview. My position is that, unlike other people, I disagree with the position that Alice has no right to talk about these things. I think, as the author of *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, which has a main character who is African American, I think that if I can write a play with an African American as a main character, then Alice can talk about that. What I mean is that the relationship between Africans and African Americans is too ... We are relatives, in conflict but also familiar. What I mean is, we are cousins, so we cannot say that we can't talk about issues to deal with one another. What I find problematic in Alice's handling of the issue is the way Africa got demonized in the process. Older African women got demonized, you know. I think that's very unfortunate. And as a person who has a bad leg, I think I have a problem with *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, because the older woman who does these things has a limp. And, for me, that's saying something there that I don't find too heavy. Do you see?

Azodo: Yes. Do you think we should have canons among literatures by African women?

Aidoo: Well, a canon develops. Like every literature, like every art, there's bound to be a canon. But, who determines the nature of that canon is really who determines it. And what eventually emerges as the canon is what we have to be clear about and try to deal with. But, there is bound to be a canon.

Azodo: How would you define a literature that is good from a feminist perspective, in regard to African literature?

Aidoo: Well, again, I wish it is something that I can deal with in a more substantive way. Literature that deals with women's issues, I mean, with women and our position in history, but goes beyond just being about women. First of all, we have to decide what a feminist would consider literature and good literature. But, I think that a literature that affirms women, representing us as articulate, three dimensional beings, not flats, not caricatures, a literature that doesn't portray us as being dumb or inactive. You know what I am saying?

Azodo: Yes.

Aidoo: A literature that affirms women, that for me is good feminist literature.

Azodo: Would you characterize the African feminist novel as radical, Marxist, liberal or militant?

Aidoo: Well, if it is a feminist novel, then it is bound to be radical. It is probably bound to be militant. It should be socialistic. I don't know about Marxist. If it is socialistic, it is probably Marxist as well.

Azodo: Don't you see any kind of class consciousness among African women?

Aidoo: What do you mean? First of all, we have to clarify that. The fact that a novel is written by a woman doesn't make it feminist. That is what I was saying yesterday. A book written by a woman is just a book written by a woman. It doesn't make it feminist, because feminism is a specific category, is an ideological overview. It is an ideology. Feminism is an ideology. So a woman writer is just a woman writer. A book written by a woman is just a book written by a woman. When we say that literature is feminist, then we are speaking specifically of a literature produced from a feminist viewpoint. And that means that literature, if it is feminist, has done

more; it affirms women. If you write a book about women, which portrays women as being silly, giggly, ineffectual characters, that's not feminist.

Azodo: I understand where you are coming from. How does the African woman today negotiate her space between the claims of tradition or traditionalism and modernization? I am thinking specifically of Esi's dilemma. At the end, despite her praxis, she ends up as a second wife, who is not much regarded, from what we see, not even by her new husband. So, how does the career woman juggle relationships with men?

Aidoo: Well, she tries to juggle. But, the thing is that it is not a situation that's going to be easily resolved. I think that the African woman who is like Esi, a woman with high education, who has a career, is going to have a hard time of it. But, I suspect that she's not going to have a harder time than any woman in that kind of position anywhere. The added detail is that our society is at a stage where it is a little less tolerant of this dilemma than may be the West. But, mind you, the greater sections of our world are in the position of Esi. Do you see what I'm saying? But for me, what is interesting to me is her willingness to even struggle. Do you see? Yes, for me, life itself is dynamic. And when people say, "But Esi does not end up anywhere," I say, "but she has done part of the journey." And for me, the willingness to even put her emotions out there, her mind, her desires, is in itself a good thing, a positive thing.

Azodo: This question is almost redundant. But what is your idea of romantic love?

Aidoo: Oh, I suppose romantic love is precisely that, romantic love. As long as we know it represents an almost unattainable ideal, it is okay.

Azodo: Yes.

Aidoo: And it is only when women delude themselves into thinking that romantic love is life that we get into trouble.

Azodo: Hmm.

Aidoo: I mean it exists in every society, different versions of it.

Azodo: Hmm...

Aidoo: In the West, in Africa, if you listen to our songs, it is there. You see what I'm saying?

Azodo: Hmm.

Aidoo: Yeah. And we need it to take us out of the humdrum also.

Azodo: Okay. You have spoken very strongly against brain-drain from Africa. Do you see a way we can transform the *status quo* positively?

Aidoo: If we get good, confident leadership, a leadership that has confidence in itself and in us as African people, so that we would undertake the development of our environment meaningfully, not only will we be needing our brains, but we will create structures that would make the people with expertise want to stay. Do you see?

Azodo: Hmm.

Aidoo: That's the only way we can. We can't do it by complaining about it.

Azodo: Okay. There are already thousands out...

Aidoo: Exactly.

Azodo: How can they help Africa from here?

Aidoo: Ah, well, that's another story.

Azodo: What can we do to transform the negative into the positive? I mean, being already here, what can we do?

Aidoo: Well, Nawal gave you one of the best possible answers, namely, that people become organized and collectively strong, so that at least those issues that can be handled from this end will be handled. For instance, one of the ways I thought we could operate from the West, meaningfully, is for us to pool our resources so that we become some kind of a pressure group, which is also what Nawal was saying.

Azodo: Hmm

Aidoo: So that people do not take us for granted. So that people do not go abusing us and getting away with it. So that people, like Dennis has been doing, can't say they are coming to re-colonize Africa without us protesting. Do you see?

Azodo: Hmm

Aidoo: Because so much of the negative impulses and stimuli coming from the West may not be entirely taken care of. But, they can be handled, a little, from here.

Azodo: Okay. That explains your position that the survival of the nation is implicated in feminism?

Aidoo: Of course.

Azodo: Okay. Do you see any way we could really combat the evils of imperialism in the world today?

Aidoo: Well, there must be. For every problem there is a solution. And so, if we look hard, we will find answers. We would be able to combat imperialism.

Azodo: Oh, thank you very much.

Aidoo: You are welcome.

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