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Digest

"For Whom Things Did Not Change"
Women as Workers in Ama Ata Aidoo's No Sweetness Here

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Although African literature is slowly finding its way into university curriculums, especially in departments of English and French, it is a literature dominated by male writers. Consequently, when the topic of the image of African women becomes a subject, one has to lament the relative paucity of African women writers who can provide a picture of African women from a woman's perspective. Among the few African women writers, however, one in particular stands out for her panorama of African women in their roles as workers in both traditional and contemporary Africa, especially post-colonial Ghana. Ama Ata Aidoo, not only presents a gallery of African women at work, but her major thesis in her excellent collection of short stories No Sweetness Here is that despite the addition of the new roles as teacher, secretary, nurse to the traditional ones of mother, wife, market-woman, there has been little change for African women. "Life is not sweet." Ms. Aidoo illustrates this position in two major ways. Her central metaphor to emphasize the continuity is the prostitute. Although the prostitute of yesterday is not the same as Mansa in "In the Cutting of a Drink" who has left the village and reconciled her new role of work by stating that "Any kind of work is work," or as Mercy in "Two Sisters" who in order to share in the materialism of the urban society is willing to give herself to the big government men, it is obvious that women were "slaves of [the] Lords" in the pre-colonial and colonial period as Zirigu points out in "For Whom Things Did Not Change." Secondly, Ms. Aidoo demonstrates the continuum by portraying her women in pairs. She may use the educated woman as narrator - foil to describe the plight of the less-educated woman or in other stories she may present the two-some in Mother/daughter or daughter-in-law situations as in "Certain Winds from the South" and "Something to Talk About On the Way to The Funeral" or as two urban women, one in the conventional roles of wife and mother and the other as a secretary-prostitute, but both in unsatisfactory predicaments.

In spite of the sadness which prevades the lives of her women characters, Ama Ata Aidoo celebrates womanhood and motherhood; for her women are resilient, resourceful, strong, caring, and enduring.

Though presenting an image of only a small segment of African women, Ghanaian-Fanti, Ms. Aidoo's figures appear representative of most African women, whether on the continent or in other parts of the diaspora.

Women & Work in Africa Conference

"For Whom Things Did Not Change":
Women as Workers in Ama Ata Aidoo's No Sweetness Here

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Although African literature is slowly finding its way into university curriculums, especially in departments of English and French, it is a literature dominated by male writers. Therefore, when the topic of the image of African women becomes a subject, one has to lament the relative paucity of African women writers who can provide a picture of African women from the perspective of the woman. Among the few African women writers, however, one in particular stands out for her panorama of African women in their roles as workers in both traditional and contemporary Africa, especially post-colonial Ghana. Ama Ata Aidoo, not only presents a gallery of African women at work; but her major thesis in her excellent collection of short stories No Sweetness Here is that despite the addition of the new roles as teacher, secretary, nurse, to the traditional ones of mother, wife, market-woman, there has been little change for African women. "Life is not sweet." Ms. Aidoo illustrates this situation in two major ways. Her central metaphor for emphasizing the continuity is the prostitute. Secondly, to demonstrate the continuum, she portrays the women in pairs. She may use the educated woman as narrator - foil to describe the plight of the less-educated woman or in other stories, she presents the two-some in Mother/daughter or daughter-in-law situations or as two urban women, one in the conventional role of wife and mother and the other as a secretary-prostitute, but both in unsatisfactory predicaments.

But in spite of the unhappiness and misery which pervade the lives

of her women characters, Aidoo celebrates womanhood and motherhood. Her women are resilient, resourceful, strong, caring, and enduring.

In No Sweetness Here, African women are portrayed as teachers or university lecturers as in the opening story, "Everything Counts," in "Two Sisters," and in the titled story, "No Sweetness Here." Reference is also made to young women as college students in "Something to Talk About on the Way to the Funeral"; and in "Everything Counts," the lecturer states that "one-third of the class was girls." Other non-traditional roles that women occupy in these stories are as nurse in "The Message," typist in "Two Sisters" and an allusion is made to air-stewardesses in one of the stories.

In their more traditional roles, women are hard-working, industrious, and astute market women who sell bread and peddle cloth. As Ama in the story, "No Sweetness Here," the women till their farms to produce food for the family and to earn money from the excess produce. A reference is made to the role of mid-wife. During the colonial period, it is stated that women began to be employed as housemaids for the whites. The most preferred role for all the women in the collection of short stories, however, is that of mother. Since the dominant tone of the work is that there is no sweetness here, women who have only one child or may be having difficulty becoming pregnant are always the most anxious of Ms. Aidoo's characters. Motherhood often substitutes for unhappy roles as wives as was the case in the title story "No Sweetness Here" and in "A Gift From Somewhere". In these stories, women are often described as suffering women willing to take the punishment of their children or bear their child's pain or taboo because they love their children so much. A common theme in many of the stories is the hard-working mother who sacrifices and works hard so that her children may get an education and in Ama Ata Aidoo's stories, the luckiest women are

the ones who have many children and whose children are successful.

Although Ms. Aidoo looks upon motherhood as an ideal state, she recognizes pregnancy can be limiting for the woman. Connie, in "Two Sisters" is viewed with disgust by James, her husband, who uses her pregnancy as a time to be disloyal to his marriage. In "A Gift From Somewhere," the main character, although trying desperately to save her baby but already fearing that it is dead thinks, "Now all I must do is try to prepare myself for another pregnancy, for it seems this is the reason why I was created. . . to be pregnant for nine of twelve months of every year . . . Or is there a way out of it all? And where does this road lie?"¹ It may be that this character fears the pregnancies because they represent unhappy periods before she loses the baby. But, the narrator does refer to her pregnancies as a "pattern set for my life" (p. 100). The tone is not a happy one and suggests a kind of restrictive existence.

While it appears that there are a few good husband-wife relationships as in the story "For Whom Things Did Not Change," where Setu is praised as a "good wife" by her husband, the most prevailing depiction of the woman as wife is that of "the unlucky woman." Twice this phrase is used in the story "No Sweetness Here." In many of the stories, the women are given the total responsibility of raising and providing for the children, either because the husband has to leave the family for some reason or in many circumstances, the male does not assume the role of father as with Ata in "Something To Talk About on the Way to the Funeral." Emphasizing the pattern which exists in the lives of her Fanti women, the author shows that even the life of the contemporary

¹Ama Ata Aidoo. No Sweetness Here (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1972) p. 100. All parenthetical page numbers refer to this edition.

woman has not improved. For example, the lecturer in "Everything Counts," is a wife, but when she needs her husband to comfort her, he is still traveling in other countries. The speaker notes: "Her brothers, lovers and husbands. But nearly all of them were still abroad" (p. 8). While it is suggested that a revolution is under way and that women and men have new roles as university students and lecturers, the same problems continue. Things really have not changed.

A central metaphor used to illustrate "the repetition of old patterns" is the use of the prostitute. In "For Whom Things Did Not Change" Setu questions how the big men of today can take the young girls as their mistresses. She asks "How can men behave in this way who are our Lords." Zirigu, her husband, answers: "Mm. Was it different in the old days. . . Did not the lords take the little girls they liked among the women?" (p. 12).

In disgust, Setu, because of her Muslim beliefs wants to believe it is Allah's wish. She reasons, "Allah has made it so. All women are slaves of our lords." But, then she thinks, "These new Masters are not Believers. It is not Allah's will" (p. 12).

Zirigu tries to explain to her. He argues, "When a man is your lord, he is your lord. And he behaves like your lord. How else should he behave? And how are we to say that new lords must not do what old ones did? When the white men were here, did they not do the same? Sleep with very little girls, oh such little girls?" (p. 12).

Although Ms. Aidoo, as she has Setu state in her long speech, believes that if a revolution is going on and there has been a change where the oppressed male-leader has been given his land and home back, he should not continue the same destruction as the oppressor, she simultaneously views the problems, especially, the plight of the woman, as

"unconquerable." Thus, when Mercy in her desire to have many of the material benefits of the society turns to prostitution with a fifty year old "big man" who thinks he is somebody, our author writes that here is a "twenty-three year old child who chooses a silly way to conquer unconquerable problems" (p. 118).

Mansa, "In the Cutting of a Drink" has even internalized her role as prostitute as being acceptable. Thus, when her brother finds her in the city dance hall, she can utter to him, "Any kind of work is work" (pg. 44).

Throughout the short stories, the women are trying to escape their oppressive lot. Most often, they are shown fleeing from the village and going to the city, where frequently they become classified as "bad women." While men are most often blamed for forcing the women into prostitution because the females do not have many other choices if they are to receive any of the material goods of the society, often Ms Aidoo depicts families as contributing to the victimizing of the urban young women. Aidoo describes many of these families as so concerned with getting better homes, new refrigerators, cars, and appearing successful that often times they will support "the big men" who are using their daughters as prostitutes because they know the big men will provide the families with these goods. Even one of the admirable characters in the work, Connie, who frowns upon her sister, Mercy's movement into prostitution compromises and accepts a motor for her sewing machine from the big man of Mercy.

It is a dilemma. Ms. Aidoo with her excellent metaphor, the Gulf of Guinea points out the contradictions and the repetitions. She writes, "He has seen things happen along these beaches. Different things. Contradictory things. Or just repetitions of old patterns." (p. 118).

A second method that is used to illustrate the continuum of the unpleasant status of the African woman is through the use of contrasts or parallels. As we have noted earlier, Aidoo presents happy marriages and unhappy ones, describes loving grandmothers as in "The Message" but hateful grandmothers as in "No Sweetness Here." In the last mentioned story, she presents the educated women - "chicha" as the narrator to relate the unhappy tale of Kwesi's mother. While it is obvious that Ama, the main character's life is not sweet, one recognizes that the life of the teacher is moderately unhappy. She is described as being somewhat alienated from the others in the village because she has been "trained" away from the customs of the land, but above all she is unmarried and she has no children. Vicariously, she lives the roles of wife and mother through Ama and dreams of stealing Kwesi and giving him the opportunities she would normally wish to provide for her own son. Apparently, she believes she will not share in the joys of motherhood in the usual way. A similar contrast is developed between Connie and Mercy in "Two Sisters." Both are now in the city; Connie is the better educated, teacher-trained, loyal wife, and mother. Nevertheless, her life is unhappy, for she knows that James, her husband is unfaithful to her. Mercy, on the other hand is characterized as having been a not-too brilliant student who has only been successful at preparing to be a typist, not a "proper secretary." Mercy believes she can love more than one man at a time and she is willing to give herself to the big men if they will provide her with the life she wishes to live. While Connie, like the family of Mansa in the, "Cutting of a Drink" laments the action of their sisters, both of these contemporary women prostitutes believe their existence has improved. As Ms. Aidoo suggests, "another one of those contradictions."

The two works in this small excellent volume which illustrate so vividly the plight of the African Woman are "Certain Winds From the South" and "Something To Talk About on the Way to the Funeral." In both of these stories, we have two generations of women. There is the mother or mother-in-law of the older generation and the daughter and daughter-in-law of the modern period. In both situations, the lives of the two groups of women are repeats. "In Certain Winds From the South" the mother had been left with her baby daughter while the father went off to war to fight other people's battles. Thus, the mother had to rear her daughter without the father. The daughter grows up and on the night her baby is born, his father leaves to go South to find better work. Although the mother would like to believe the husband of her daughter will return, she is not optimistic. Life has taught her that it is difficult. There is one ray of hope, however, for the breaking of the pattern: the new baby is a boy.

In "Something to Talk About on the Way to the Funeral," the two women are described as independent, hard-working. While they have many problems with the fathers of their children, the message is clearly made, "A good woman does not rot" (p. 145). The story also points out that the older generation of women, though not educated in the western schools, often, received special training. Araba, the now deceased main character of the story, as a girl had been sent to the city to learn the trade of making good breads. Although she did get in "trouble," when she returned home, her family took her in and was supportive. Her son, grew up and through his big-man lawyer-father was able to go to school. He too impregnates Mansa, who is a young woman whose family had sent her to be educated. Unfortunately, the family of Mansa is not as supportive and loving as the family of Araba when she comes home pregnant. Nevertheless, Aunt Araba, the mother-in-law takes Mansa in, treats her as a

daughter and prepares her to be a good wife for Ato, her son. But life with its irony cannot be that good to Mansa or as the writer suggests, to women. Ato is unable to marry Mansa because he has made pregnant, the daughter of a more powerful big man.

Mansa is left alone again. Mansa too goes to the city, but instead of becoming "the bad woman," she becomes a successful business woman and is able to send money and other things home. Clearly, we have a reversal. A woman can be successful in the city without becoming a prostitute. In addition, it gives support to the moral that a good woman, despite the obstacles of life can find happiness. Furthermore, it demonstrates Ms. Aidoo's commitment to the point of ambivalency in presenting the multi-faceted aspects of the lives of African Women.

Therefore, it is easy for us to move to the last part of our discussion. While it is obvious that Ama Ata Aidoo would wish the lot of her women to be less oppressive and determined by males, she also is certain that her women have character, dignity, independence and the ability to endure, and even more, appear triumphant in their survival. It is true that the women such as Auntie Araba in "Something to Talk About on the Way to the Funeral" and Mami Ama in "No Sweetness Here" often seem to collapse under the heavy burdens of their lives; but on the other hand, the author portrays the influence of these two women on the lives of the other characters. The gossips in the funeral story have been so impressed with the life of Araba that they tell her story for her and in addition, Mansa, her daughter-in-law has been the beneficiary of the strength of character that Auntie Araba possessed. The teacher in "No Sweetness Here," although sympathizing with Mami Ama, recognizes that the mother of Kwesi is a strong woman. In the story

which underscores so much the repetitiveness of an unhappy life, "Certain Winds From the South," the mother leaves going to market in a celebrating mood.

I am going to the market now. Get up early to wash Fuseni. I hope to get something for those miserable colas. There is enough rice to make two, is there not? Good. Today, even if it takes all the money, I hope to get us some smoked fish, the biggest I can find, to make us a real good sauce . . ." --p. 67

Although Ms. Aidoo concentrates on the Ghanaian-Fanti woman, her women could represent Black women throughout Africa and the diaspora. In her final story, "Other Versions" she links the African mother and woman to the African-American woman. The African student who has watched his unselfish, caring, hard-working mother is able to see the same characteristics in the Black American women he meets as a servant in the white American home he visits and on the subway. He recognizes the beauty and strength of existence of these women, though their lives as workers may be menial and often non-rewarding. After his offer of money to the Black American woman on the bus and her subsequent refusal with "I sure know you need them more than I do," he is able to acknowledge to himself, "Of course, she was mother. And so there was no need to see. But now I could openly look at her beautiful face" (p. 166).

Yes, life for the African woman as Ms. Aidoo suggests has been exceedingly difficult, filled with hard work, tremendous responsibility, and often victimization; but it has made her independent, resourceful, courageous, and resilient.