

Tribute to Ama Ata Aidoo

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Ama Ata Aidoo was one of the greatest writers of her generation. She was the renowned author of the plays *Anowa* and *Dilemma of a Ghost* and the novels *Our Sister Killjoy* and *Changes: A Love Story*. Her vision as an African writer and her advocacy for the empowerment of women portray her as a leading feminist voice within postcolonial writing. This tribute celebrates her as a writer, gender activist, and feminist theorist.

When Professor Cajetan Iheka asked me to contribute to the dossier that he was putting together for the renowned late Ghanaian novelist, dramatist, poet, and short story writer Ama Ata Aidoo, I immediately agreed. I made this decision because I believe that she deserves to be celebrated on account of her remarkable achievements as a writer, feminist theorist and activist, literary critic, gender expert, and pan-Africanist. She was one of the most prominent African feminists and was committed to the struggle for women's emancipation and empowerment. If I may borrow a term from Igbo culture, I can confidently call her *Olu Umunwanyị*, meaning Voice of Women. She imbued her female characters with agency and a strong voice within the patriarchal culture that was structured to subjugate or marginalize them. Women like the eponymous Anowa in Aidoo's second play *Anowa* and Esi in her second novel *Changes: A Love Story* could hold their own anywhere and everywhere. Thus, Ama Ata Aidoo was a leading feminist voice within post-colonial writing.

It was a big shock when two of my friends in the US informed me that the great Ama Ata Aidoo had passed away on May 31 of this year. I could not believe it, but soon the news spread and was all over the electronic, print, and social media, especially on literary platforms and on WhatsApp and Facebook. Thus, the news was authenticated in the media, and the literary world was thrown into mourning. It dawned on me and everyone else that we had lost a woman of courage and remarkable achievement. My last contact with her, though virtual, was uplifting and inspiring. It was in Accra, Ghana, in April 2022, when I was a participant at the Ako Caine Prize Workshop for African Writing, where writers from a number of West African countries were

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brought together by the Ako Caine Prize for African Writing to produce a short story anthology as the end result of some two weeks of an intensive creative writing workshop held at Elmina Resort in Cape Coast, Ghana. One of the events organized by Writers Project Ghana in which we participated was “An Intergenerational Celebration of the Legacy of Ama Ata Aidoo,” which took place at the Omanyaba Hall, Accra City Hall, on Thursday, April 28, 2023. It was a great celebration of the famous lady, and because she was indisposed, she attended the event virtually. It must have been a wonderful experience for her, listening to speakers who discussed her work and her life and contributions to literature, culture, and education in Ghana as well as globally. The event was hosted by Dagny Asase, and I was a speaker, along with other Ghanaian writers Bisi Adjapon, Ama Asantewa Diaka, and Akua Serwah Amankwah. Others who participated were Chike Frankie Edozien and Nana Akosua Hanson. I spoke about my interactions with Ama Ata Aidoo and my experience teaching her works *Anowa* and *Changes: A Love Story* at the English Department of the University of Lagos from 1991 to 2014. During these years, many students used her work for their projects, dissertations, and theses at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Before the event ended that evening, Ama Ata Aidoo responded, and her words inspired the attentive audience as they watched her on the screen.

Let me go back to the earlier interactions I had with Ama Ata Aidoo. Apart from the event in Accra in April 2022, I had met her on three previous occasions, first in Durban (South Africa) at the Time of the Writer Festival in 2002. She and Nawal El Saadawi were among the great writers from different parts of the world who were invited to the festival, and one can imagine how honored I felt to be included. In fact, Ama Ata Aidoo and I appeared on the same panel. What a privilege! The next time I met her was in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, in 2010; both of us (among other writers) were guests of the Rainbow Book Club and Rivers State Government during the Garden City International Book Festival, which was organized by the gifted and amiable Koko Kalango. Ama Ata Aidoo stole the show, drawing the attention of writers and students and inspiring them with her mesmerizing speech and expressive gestures. Her gentle but authoritative voice and charming ways were like music to the attendees. I also met her at the African Literature Association (ALA) Conference at the University of Bayreuth, Germany, 2016. Her presence at the conference on the invitation of ALA was joyfully welcomed by members of the association. She was feted by everyone present, and the hall was filled up on the day she gave her keynote address. It was a great pleasure for me to approach her and chat with her for a few minutes. For me and many other African writers, especially women writers, Ama Ata Aidoo was and will ever be an inspiration, a role model, and a pathfinder. Her legacy will last forever.

This notable Ghanaian writer, feminist, activist and academic, who taught in Africa and outside Africa for many years and then returned to Ghana finally in 2012 to contribute to the intellectual and literary development of her society, left an indelible footprint in world literature written in

English. Interestingly, some of her works were translated into some other notable languages. She, alongside writers such as Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Ba, and others were responsible for “breaking the silence” and including African women as writers and strong characters in the African literary tradition.

With profound respect and admiration, I pay homage to Ama Ata Aidoo for her achievements in the development and growth of African literature, especially in the area of feminist literary criticism and feminist cultural productions. Her work has contributed immensely to making African feminism a viable ideology and feminist literary criticism an area of serious scholarship. It is my hope that she will be honored by organizations founded on African Studies, such as African Literature Association (ALA), African Studies Association (ASA), and Association of African Women Scholars (AAWS).

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