



## **Southeastern Regional Seminar in African Studies (SERSAS)**

**Fall Meeting  
12 and 13 October 2001  
East Carolina University  
Greenville, North Carolina, USA**

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### **Demarcating Political Space: African Women's Domain in the Writings of Flora Nwapa and Ama Ata Aidoo**

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There is a tradition in West African literature, beginning with the earliest (male) writers such as Achebe and Laye, to try to recreate (no matter how different the approach) an African historical past before the colonizers, and by doing this, to somehow strip away the biases and prejudices of the presentation of African cultures through the eyes of the colonizers, who according V.I. Mudimbe, "invented" it. And some of the first women writing in English in West Africa Flora Nwapa and Ama Ata Aidoo were also involved in a reclamation project, but one that both critiqued the colonizers and their own male contemporaries: what exactly was precolonial women's political domain and to what extent had colonial constructions of womanhood transformed the role of women in a postcolonial world? Early works by these writers examined the role of women within African historical space--exploring the role of women in their recently postcolonial world and in certain cases revisioning the past as to make their present viable, stripping away the colonial representations of womanhood. They also investigated the double-bind they found themselves in as women in the postcolonial era, and looked to the past for answers in demarcating African women's domain for the present.

From the early works in the 1960's till the writings of the 80s and 90s, the challenge of development and women's role in the political space of the (re)new(ed) West African nations remains a question. This essay is intended to examine this original project for demarcating African women's political domain, and then interrogate the changes in the writing of two of these authors, Nwapa and Aidoo, in more recent novels *One is Enough* and *Changes*. To do this, I examine the role of the younger woman in relation to her mothers, including grandmothers and older women, within the context of an African family and community. This relationship tells us a great deal not only about the position of women in a West African community, but also the contradictions in

reconceptualizing women's role contemporarily. What is significant about this project is that these women writers do not leave us with a simple glorification of an African past, nor is their interest in the position of the precolonial woman "nostalgic"--the aims of these writers is to somehow find a usable past in which to inform the present, a present, as we see with the most recent works, which has become increasingly more complicated in demarcating women's political domain.

It may be useful at this juncture to define my use of the term "political" within an African context, and present some background on the public role of women in a precolonial setting. I use the term "political" in the broadest sense of the word, from the range of women's roles--from citizens within a West African community who affect the society's values and traditions to a contemporary notion of women's space in the public sphere. From the more conventional role of women within the public arena of an Africa community and the religious life of her people to the undocumented village women storytellers who educate and initiate future generations into the culture, the women played a major role in the formulation of the community, since they have not merely maintained the culture but often reformed it. As Filomina Chioma Steady contends in *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*: "The woman . . . represents the ultimate value in [African] life, namely the continuation of the group" (32). And her service in continuing the group is intellectual, spiritual, and political as well as physical. In these matrifocal societies, women's place in the community is assessed in terms of "cultural elaboration and valuation as well as the structural centrality of mother roles" (Tanner 154). A West African adage goes, "If you educate a man, you educate an individual. If you educate a woman, you educate a nation." This concept, tied to the elaborate structure of a family compound in West Africa, attests to the predominance of women's position as a political being in both family and community life.

Historically and today, a woman's function in the compound extends to the entire village communal life, but there have been changes which have limited women's role as citizen in her own right. The balanced interrelationship between the woman and her community was disrupted during colonialism and that disruption has added to women's present-day second class citizenship. Niara Sudarkasa, in "Female Employment and Family Organization in West Africa," examines a precolonial system which, although male-dominated, incorporated women's power: "In traditional West Africa the compound was usually the unit of political organization. . . . Thus wives, mothers, sisters, or daughters could exert direct political influence over males, or they themselves could play important roles by virtue of their position of authority, power or influence in their natal or affinal compounds" (53). However, not to reify this precolonial position, the relationship within the community was dialectical and remains so, framed by male privilege in precolonial Africa as well as the further restrictions imposed by colonialism and neo-colonialism.

Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966); Sutherland's *Foriwa* (1967), and Aidoo's *Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965) all focus on women's position in their West African communities. In each of these works, there is a primary relationship between an older "mother" figure (who is not necessarily a biological mother), and her "daughter" that leads toward a resolution of conflict, and at times, a reinterpretation and acceptance of the traditional culture. In *Efuru*, Efuru's biological mother is dead, and some of her problems, especially in regard to her two worthless husbands, has been connected to that fact. However, Nwapa present an almost precolonial African community, in which the mothering role is taken over by others in the community because as the Igbos' say: "'The rearing of a child is not a job for one person nor is a child a child for only one person" ( Okonjo 1). For Efuru, the most important mother is Ajanupu, her first husband's aunt and confidante. It is she who explains the way of the community to Efuru in a beneficial way, unlike some others in Nwapa's fictionalized Oguta. She continues her role of mothering, even after Efuru has remarried, and she helps Efuru to work through her often problematic relationship with the community. It is Ajanupu who stands up against second husband Gilbert's accusation the Efuru has been adulterous, and Efuru by the end, has learned from this woman, as she takes on a role in the public sphere, as Uhamiri's worshipper, and is reintegrated into the community politic.

Although Nwapa present this relationship as only one aspect of women's citizenship in the West African communal world in which she was raised, Efua Sutherland, in *Foriwa*, poses the mother-daughter relationship in a more overtly politicized way. In this case, the relationship is between actual mother to daughter, but it clearly their political connection which is addressed in this short, activist play. *Foriwa* addresses the issue of disintegrating rural communities and the breakdown of traditional structures in developing African states, an

issue which is still as relevant today. Sutherland's play functions as an educational tool to unite traditional customs and modern technology through the collective process of the African community. Through the joined forces of the Queen Mother and her daughter Foriwa, along with the people of the decaying town of Kyerefaso, Sutherland has designed an African-based development plan to revitalize rural communities and reconnect the traditional past with future generations. Relevant to this discussion, it is the resolution between the Queen Mother, who is desperate about the condition of her community, and the new life the daughter brings in, that revives the town. The climax of the play is the revitalization of an important traditional festival, a ceremony of "new life." The Queen Mother, with the help of her daughter Foriwa, decides to conduct a mock ceremony to point out how far the town has strayed from the original intent of the ceremony and the traditions. The reforming of the ceremony to awaken Kyerefaso to the real meaning of the festival reflects Sutherland's aim to arouse the audience so that they, too, will work to revitalize their own communities. Although Foriwa, the educated daughter, brings new ideas and is instrumental in the inclusion of the stranger Labaran (a Hausa from Northern Ghana, symbolizing the involvement of all Ghanaians in developing the country), the Queen Mother functions as a political and social leader for her daughter *and* the community, directing the generations of young women to follow. In this way, Sutherland documents African women's unique contribution at an important juncture in postcolonial nation building. The resolution at the end of *Foriwa* offers a positive statement which joins mother and daughter, young and old, tradition and technology in the future of contemporary African communities.

Although the mother-daughter relationship in *The Dilemma of a Ghost* is both transatlantic and mother-daughter-in-law, Aidoo's play also offers a positive portrait of women's role in the political life of her community. Significantly, it also portrays how one imparts traditions to those daughters lost in the slave trade. All of Aidoo's work demarcates the political nature of women's position within a Ghanaian community, and *Dilemma* is no exception. Even though she is quick to criticize male dominance in both traditional and contemporary society, Aidoo is equally clear about the political role women played in Akan society. In a recent interview "We Were Feminists in Africa First," Aidoo comments that precolonial Akan society was "one of the most matriarchal societies in West Africa," and states further: "Women were everything: they were supposed to hold the power. . . . Yet when a priestess had her period she couldn't approach her own shrine" (17). As she demonstrates in *Anowa*, women's position in precolonial Akan society was a contested space, yet Aidoo also (re)places Eurocentric feminist bias in historical context.

In an interview with Aidoo, Nigerian critic Theo Vincent questioned the validity of an African woman as politically astute as Sissie in *Our Sister Killjoy*. Aidoo responded, "What makes you think our men are more politically aware than our women?" (3). Although not as overt as *Our Sister Killjoy*, the women in the play, like Esi Kom and the grandmother Nana, illustrate the powerful place of women in matrilineal Akan culture. The relationship between Esi Kom and Nana exemplify a generational continuity that demarcate women's political position in the Yawson clan. However, the most interesting dynamic is between the Black American Eulalie and Esi Kom, since this conflict-resolution makes a major statement concerning women's polemical role in healing the rift of the diaspora. Although Esi is initially antagonistic to Eulalie at first, it is she who reintegrates Eulalie into the community. Esi Kom, by the end of the play, accepts Eulalie and it is implied that Eulalie will gain a place among the women of the community (signified by the sympathies of the 1st woman narrator). In the final confrontation between Esi Kom and her son Ato, the play clearly marks out a stand for African womanhood, the return of the lost daughters of the diaspora, and the importance of African family organization and communal values. The reconciliation of Esi Kom and Eulalie reflects not only a coming home for those in the diaspora, but clearly identifies in Esi's words and behavior a political act, reversing what Aidoo calls Africa's "amnesia" concerning its role in the Slave Trade.

Although I have not gone into the more problematic relationships set up in the 70s by Buchi Emecheta or Aidoo in *Anowa*--nor are these examples themselves uncomplicated--I use these first works to interrogate later novels by Nwapa and Aidoo, in which there is a larger challenge to questions of generational continuity and women's political domain in a so-called "liberated" environment. Obioma Nnaemeka, in a recent article on Nwapa, comments: "Feminists critics of African literature focus primarily on where rebellious women liberate themselves *from*, but it is equally, if not more, important to examine the politics of location that determine where they liberate themselves *into*" (92). In *One is Enough* and *Changes*, Nwapa and Aidoo present a different picture of African woman's political domain, which resists the reconciliation between generations we see in the earlier

works. In the end of this paper, I touch on some of the contradictions uncovered in these two novels of liberated African women of the '80s and 90's.

*One is Enough* (1981), written in Nwapa's middle period after she left Heinemann to start Tana Press, reflects many of the same concerns of both *Efuru* and *Idu*, but in an urban contemporary setting. The novel takes place after independence and the Biafran war, and it identifies many of the problems of postcolonial Nigeria. The main character, Amaka, like her predecessors, is a strong, competent woman, good at business, but is childless and in a marriage that restricts her. After being basically thrown out of her home in Onitsha by her mother-in-law, Amaka decides to give up on marriage and move to Lagos. Her life in Lagos details her rise to power as she turns her skills in the "attack trade" during the war to gain business "contracts" in the capitalism-gone-wild world of postcolonial Nigeria, and in the process, finally becomes pregnant by seducing a priest. However, she decides that one husband is enough, and like *Efuru*, ends up alone and independent--although, in this case, less conflicted than her predecessor.

Amaka is a modern African woman, taking both from the traditional role of the market women and a modern-day lifestyle of capital supply-and-demand business. However, as I note elsewhere, there is an inherent problem attached to her individual rise to power and independence: What does Amaka's personal success mean to the growth and health of her nation? To what extent can there be female liberation when it is gained at the cost of the community? Nwapa, in *One is Enough*, clearly demonstrates that in a postcolonial setting, the politics of African women's cultural production is turned on its head, and the concept of generational continuity and women's political domain is transformed.

As in other Nwapa novels, the elder women often function as "custodians of the 'custom'" (Arhin 94). And in this novel, Amaka and Ayo's mother maintains this role in the family. The clash of traditional values versus the contemporary lack of values (except in terms of individual achievement) is exhibited throughout the novel by the conflict between Amaka and her mother. Early in the novel, Amaka's thinking reflects her confusion as well as the changes in attitudes with increasing Westernization and Christianity. She calls her mother "illiterate," but also perceives her as "formidable" (26). Amaka does not want the life of her mother, but finds her own path unclear. Amaka's mother, who grew up in a very different cultural setting, is frustrated in trying to determine what values to pass on to the next generation. By the end of the novel, Amaka in some ways replicates a more traditional role since she is a citizen in her own right and has extricated herself from a western-style conjugal relationship. Nevertheless, the basic problem in the novel remains: Can we really see Amaka as a fully realized person if her self-determination as a woman is at the expense of the greater good of the society? There is a sense that the mother has a strength of purpose and vision that is not evident in either of the daughters. And despite the novel's apparent happy ending, we are left with an uneasy feeling about women's political domain and what kinds of values will be passed on to the next generation. As in all of her works, Nwapa presents solely how women negotiate their positions in society; it is up to us as readers to make our own judgments.

Aidoo, a much more polemical writer, is also more overt about the contradictions of the modern, "liberated" African woman and what has been lost in women's contemporary political space. Esi, the protagonist, is the epitome of the modern African woman--she has a high powered job, a husband and child, and is an independent woman. But she is not satisfied--to the astonishment of mother and grandmother, who condescend marriage and family in very different terms. Despite their objections, Esi leaves her husband Oko, and ends up becoming a second wife to her lover, Ali Kondey, hence the "love story" subtitle of the novel. However, under the guise of a rather euro-romantic narrative is an exploration of Nnaemeka's implied question stated earlier: what are the women liberating themselves *into*? In the interview with Aidoo, already mentioned, she constantly critiques the notion that the "emergence into the modern world" actually helped women's position in Ghana (17), and this view is fictionalized in the novel.

Throughout the novel, the voice of the grandmother remains the voice of reason, and she questions the actions of everyone in this romantic farce of the second time around. Both her mother and grandmother try to convince Esi that there is no benefit in being a second wife, but Esi, caught in the contested space of contemporary relations, is unable to hear what they are saying and even incapable of dealing with her own misgivings. Her grandmother, in trying to explain things to her, notes in a voice that reflects Aidoo's interview, how it "used to be possible to talk and know that you and everyone else knew what you were talking about" (109). But in a world where language

has been transformed by the remnants of a colonizing presence, there appears to be no way to continue any kind of helpful generational continuity. As Esi hears her mother and grandmother speaking to each other about her, Esi's lament connects to a larger political protest:

"She could never be as close to her mother as her mother was to her grandmother. . . Why had they sent her to school . . . with no hope of ever meaningfully re-entering her mother's world. . . all this was too high a price to pay to achieve the dangerous confusion she was now in and *the country was now in*" (114; emphasis added)

Esi's inability to continue traditions handed down from mother to daughter is shown painfully here as well as in her relationship with her own daughter, whom she ignores. The ending of the novel leaves the questions of what values and traditions to pass on unresolved for Esi and her nation, but earlier on, she makes a prophetic comment: "Hopefully a whole people would soon have answers for them. In the meantime, she would listen to her grandmother" (115). However, ironically, Esi does not listen to her, and winds up in precisely the bad situation her grandmother warned her about. Aidoo clearly links listening to the grandmothers to a fate of a nation--but she does not give us clear cut answers on how to proceed.

The contradictions of these two works--one of a successful modern woman who is in the process of helping destroy rather than rebuild her nation and the other of a superwoman who is miserable because despite ostensible changes, nothing much has really changed--leaves us with more questions than answers concerning women's contemporary political domain. Nwapa's last novel, *The Lake Goddess*, presents a kind of return, but *Changes*, Aidoo's most recent novel, complicates the voice that in earlier novels demarcated women's role as part of a community with traditions. Although the desire to reconnect to the past to understand the future is clearly not a nostalgic aim, the actuality of how to continue generational continuity in a contemporary setting appears to exist in a domain without demarcations.

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First Online Edition: 8 October 2001  
Last Revised: 11 October 2001