

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

EXPLORING THE THEME OF MOTHERHOOD: AN ANALYSIS ON “THE MOTHERHOOD AND THE NUMBERS GAME” BY AMA ATA AIDOO.

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.7219.220>



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ABSTRACT

In African societies, similar to the various cultures worldwide characterized motherhood as the stage of completion of a family life. Among the mothers, the one who bears a male child gets applauds. Depictions of motherhood in African literature get enhanced by the influx of African feminist writers. The protuberances of African motherhood are often inspired by a new idea of femininity called as Motherism, an alternative to the western feminist theories which represents women fundamentally as mothers. Born in Ghana novelist, playwright, poet and academic Ama Ata Aidoo is a preceding figure among the African feminist writers. “Motherhood and a Numbers Game” is a poem by Ama Ata Aidoo which portrays poet’s motherly experiences that she has observed and has experienced. Being a mother in the improved African environs she realizes that she is unintentionally connected to the predicament of the mothers of former generations. She uses numbers to show the irrelevancy of the time in the life of mothers while living for others. The poem mocks at the attitude of the society towards women and it reminds the rights of women by asserting motherhood as a personal choice and she emphasizes the humanitarian view that the act of pregnancy should not be compulsory and it should be free from all categories of biases.

Key words: Aidoo, African, Choice, Motherhood, Number.

Mbiti observes that "Marriage is not fully recognized or consummated until the wife has given birth" (1970: 143). There is much truth in this statement and it can be taken into contemplation for almost all the societies regardless of their social, political, economical and geographical disparities. In African societies, similar to the various cultures worldwide characterized motherhood as the stage of completion of a family life. Among the mothers, the one who bears a male child gets applauds. Concerning this Chinua Achebe says: "women's very essence or sense of fulfilment as a human being is measured by the number of children (especially males) she bears" (1981: 7). In an orthodox African society, a woman who suffers childlessness or

barenness either temporarily or permanently has to face traditional and cultural dilemmas throughout her life. This trepidation grounds physical and psychological impasses among women as suffered by Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood* by Buchi Emecheta.

Depictions of motherhood in African literature get enhanced by the influx of African feminist writers such as Tsitsi Dangarembga, Miriam Ba, Bessie Head, Buchi Emecheta, Lauretta Ngcobo, Maya Angelou, Lindsey Collen, Ama Ata Aidoo, Alice Walker and Amma Darko ; who have focus their consideration on the sufferings of women living both on their home terrain and abroad including the fluctuations in maternal experience.

Regarding the plight of African women, Mr. Agboadannon writes:

From girlhood to womanhood, the African woman has had to contend with many issues that restrain her ‘being’ as she journeys through life’s winding cycles dictated by culture and cult. The woman’s role has hitherto been canopied to the kitchen and to other chores that are akin to her femininity, while the men do the political talking and decision-making that unfortunately also affect the voiceless woman. Oseni Taiwo Afisi, in “Power and Womanhood in Africa: An Introductory Evaluation”, quotes Bulkachuwa (1996, 15) saying that: “In many areas women are still regarded as chattels to be inherited, they are given no formal education...given out in marriage at an early age. They are forever under the control of either their husbands or male relatives...they cannot inherit or own property, nor can they participate fully in public life and the decision-making process within their immediate community (7).

In Africa, feminism has been received with diverse judgments because of the cultural disparities leading to the suggestion of substitute terms like Womanism, Black Feminism and African Feminism. The protuberances of African motherhood are often inspired by a new idea of femininity that is entirely different from the Western theories of feminism. Suggested as an African movement known as Motherism, it has recently developed in several British colonies of Africa including Nigeria, Sudan, Ghana and Zimbabwe as an alternative to the western feminist theories. This cluster consists of artists, writers and theorists. They have begun to envision a new female typology and to bring in an atypical woman’s literary image. Motherism represents women fundamentally as mothers; this precise notion influences many literary topics, related to the characterization of female protagonists in the African fiction, drama and poetry.

Born in the central region of Ghana; then known by its colonial name, the Gold Coast in a small village called Abeamzi Kyakor in 1942 ; novelist, playwright, poet, academic and the former Minister of Education in Ghana Ama Ata Aidoo is undoubtedly a preceding figure among the African feminist writers. She began her literary career with the production of a play, *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, in 1964. As a writer, Aidoo challenges and questions the pre-defined roles of African women in modern society. Her poems, novels, and plays institute a feminine consciousness and strongly propose women’s liberation. In 2000 she established the Mbaasem Foundation to promote and support the work of African women writers.

She questions vicious gender and racial conflicts which are prevalent in the African society. As an ingredient of her protest she develops female characters who are dynamic, creative, successful, clever, and most strikingly, defiant. Along with this her works replicates the socio-heritage of slavery and the consequences of oppressive political regimes. An addition to this Aidoo’s works represents her own life and her struggles to find her identity as a woman within the patriarchal boundaries of African society. Aidoo’s vision of feminism addresses the struggles and obstacles that persist to affect the lives of African women. Throughout her literary works she upholds African women’s lives through characters that exemplify the struggles and triumphs of Africa and its women. Addressing the Women of Africa and the African Diaspora (WAAD) conference, Aidoo asserts her feminism:

When people ask me rather bluntly every now and then whether I am a feminist, I not only answer yes, but I go on to insist that every woman and every man should be a feminist — especially if they believe that Africans should take charge of African land, African wealth, African lives, and the burden of African development. It is not possible to advocate the independence for the African continent without also believing that African women must have the best that the environment can offer. For some

of us, this is the crucial element in our feminism (1998: 47).

Ama Ata Aidoo understands the predicament of African mothers clearly as she herself points out "African mothers have had a long history of suffering, which they have endured since them and their children were kidnapped into slavery, raped, forced to labour on plantations, and drafted into imperial armies" (Aidoo, 1997: 123). She is able to understand the crucial sources of their predicament and proposed basic education as an alternative. She promoted women's education while she was working as the Minister of Education in Ghana.

Christina Ama Ata Aidoo has represented the poignant countenance of African countries including Ghana where women are out of mount from the western female replica. Behrent in his *Independence and Disillusionment in Postcolonial Ghana* observes: "Aidoo depicts primarily female characters that live in poorer urban and rural sectors of Ghana (10). Aidoo's *Certain Winds from the South* is focused on the female condition in rural areas of Ghana:

We hear such women usually go to their homes to die. 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 (13–15).

"Motherhood and a Numbers Game" is a poem by Ama Ata Aidoo. As its title suggests, it portrays poet's motherly experiences that she has observed and has experienced. Being a mother in the improved African environs she realizes that she is unintentionally connected to the predicament of the mothers of former generations. She uses numbers to show the irrelevancy of the time in the life of mothers while living for others.

The entire poem can be divided into two parts. First part of the poem depicts the narrator as an intense observer and as a critical thinker of the events happening around her while the second part portrays the experiences of the narrator as a

mother. Poem commences with the illustration of a lady named Egyeifi speaking to the other screaming woman nearby. She says:

Now
that I am suffering so much
I know I am truly a mother

From the words like "screaming, suffering, mother" of above lines one can comprehend that the setting of this part of the poem is a delivery room where two women are almost on their path to deliver their new born ones. Egyeifi, a representation of African mothers of all the instances involuntarily accepts suffering as the fundamental foundation of motherhood. While saying "I know I am truly a mother" she expresses her readiness to follow the hidden laws of suffering she has learned from previous generations.

2 painfully hoarse voices
still managing to bellow like
cows in an abattoir

This stanza presents numbers for the very first time, as far as the entire poem is concerned. To exemplify the magnitude of the numbers which the title suggests poet deliberately uses the numerical letters. As a pubescent, protagonist feels and witnesses it as a mere number's game while she hearse two painfully hoarse voices that of Egeify and of another woman. Their sounds seem husky and are still managing to bellow like cows in an abattoir. Born in a typical Ghanian village, cows were a common view for Ama Ata Aidoo. The deliberate application of the image of a cow in a rope symbolizes the predicament of women in chains, which the narrator has been witnessing from her childhood itself.

4 veins swollen to
sizes larger than the
2 necks they stood on.

Raconteur sees two necks with four larger veins. In other sense these lines say that the mentioned women are early married and they are not mature enough, either physically or mentally to endure the severe pain of child birth.

meda w'ase

meda w'ase

meda w'ase...

osiande,

ama meehu de,

saana moso

maawo!

This stanza has written in the mother tongue of the poet. And it is narrated by one of the women, most probably the unnamed second woman. Use of mother tongue exemplifies the emotional outburst, may be because of the pain or of excitement of seeing the new born one. "meda w'ase" can be translated as "Thank you"(Trans. by Google) while the other lines are tough to transform. Saying "thank you" repeatedly shows the intensity of her pain and the depth of endurance that she has been suffering for a long period of time. In other aspect this phrase can be a representation of her proud while seeing the new born one; perhaps a male child.

I always marvelled at the
non-logic
of it all,

As an observer, narrator was always amused at the non- logic of this endurance. She calls it as a mere numbers game or nothing beneficial. She finds a pre- defined definition of motherhood which connects sufferings to motherhood is illogical. While saying 'non- logic' she gives space to a 'logical' method of 'optional pregnancy'. Many of the women in Africa have no such chances and have to endure crucial marital rapes; the sexual harassments by their own husbands. It is also non- logical when a male child becomes an inevitable element of social status.

And even managed
the educated lady's dainty grin
the day
they told me that in all the
20 years I was away,
my mother never slept a wink!

The woman who spoke
-my mother's friend-

stared straight into my eyes
bespectacled already

In this stanza, by evaluating a personal experience of the narrator, she learns that even the educated ladies have no specific opinions. One day they told the narrator that her mother never slept a wink when she was away for twenty years. She found it as illogical and could able to manage the "dainty grin" she possessed. Dainty grin is a neatly wrapped smirk. It was her mother's friend, bespectacled; seemed to be a mentor in the very first look. Narrator in ironical tone remembers the way an already bespectacled lady stared straight into her eyes. Here number 20 is exemplified to indicate the time and distance and that stanza ends with an exclamation mark used to indicate the amusement of the protagonist.

As it seems,
all eyes must be
20/20 visioned or not, when
folks turn 40 at the very least.

Poet satirises the attitude of the middle aged populace who find curiosity in the matters of others. 20/20 vision is a term used to express normal visual acuity. Normal vision diminishes when the old age begins. But some of them could able to maintain their "20/20 vision" even in old age to "stare straight" into other's eyes. Versifier at this juncture says that middle aged individuals are more conscious about others matters; literally they were curious about her when she was away for twenty years. To exemplify this, twenty- twenty is written in numerical values.

So
at 2 in the morning
I lie here in the dark
more sharp-eyed than
the cat my totem:

The core of the poem lies in these lines where the second part begins. When the poem begins narrator was a mere observer and was thinking about the non-logicality of the things happening. Now it is the turn of narrator herself. She portrays her own image as lying in the dark with sharp eyes opened at two in the morning. To

exemplify the time number poet uses numerical. She compares her attention to that of a cat, which portrayed in her totem.

Anxious
angry
sleepless-

blissfully anxious
happily angry and
nervously fulfilled
that

I
too
am
a mother.

Protagonist feels that her mood varies through different stages. She is anxious, angry and sleepless. Narrator realises that she is anxious but blissfully anxious. Angry but happily angry sleepless but nervously fulfilled. She too is a mother. While saying "I too" she confirms her pinnacle which is unknowingly connected to that of her fore-mothers.

Compares to the other women like Egyeifi, protagonist is capable enough to connect her motherhood with bliss, joy and fulfilment through a 'logical' act of optional pregnancy at a voluntary point of her life. Irrespective of the sex of the child she affirms the motherhood, admits it and finally achieves it.

In *Motherhood- A Joy? The Status of Mothers of African Descent in the Literature and Lore of Africa and the African Diaspora* by Dr. Lena Ampadu opines that "The joys of motherhood for many of these women are the richness of experiences that they have undergone as they have struggled to forge lives for themselves and their children, in spite of the many pitfalls and obstacles that they have managed to overcome" (175). This view could help the reader to realize how the providence of the mothers of diverse age group in Africa including Egyeifi and her unnamed companion, narrator's mother and finally the narrator are connected to that of their fore- mothers.

In conclusion, as some have described, Ama Ata Aidoo is the "mouth of those women who have no mouth to speak for them and is the spokesperson for Africa" (Azodo, 1999: 401). The merit of Ama Ata Aidoo is that she actively positions herself in African literature and is one of the new feminist voices for the voiceless mothers of Africa. "The Motherhood and the Numbers Game" mocks at the attitude of the society towards women and it reminds the rights of women by asserting motherhood as a choice. Motherhood is undoubtedly a delight when it would be acceptable to the states of mind and to the physical conditions of the woman. Through the poem Ama Ata Aidoo asserts the humanitarian view that the act of pregnancy should not be compulsory and it should be free from all categories of biases. A woman's life should not be a mere Numbers Game played by others. Protagonist of the poem is a mere replica of the poet and she confirms the joys of motherhood through her own choices along with the logics it assures.

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