



The narrative of the disobedient daughter: A feminist review of AMA Ata Aidoo's *anowa*

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Abstract

Ama Ata Aidoo's play *Anowa* is based on a traditional folktale of the legend of the disobedient daughter in the oral literature of Ghana. It is set in the 1870's in the Gold Coast, a place which is stuck between the traditional culture and the chaos of the post colonial cultural modernity. Aidoo portrays *Anowa* as the modern disobedient daughter of the tale and locates her experiences in the heritage of the imperialism, slavery, economic exploitation, and male dominance. Two other important voices in the play are Badua, *Anowa's* mother, who, is held responsible for *Anowa's* disobedient behaviour and an Old Woman, who becomes the mouthpiece of the society. The paper will study by a feminist approach how the society views *Anowa* as a disobedient daughter. It will highlight *Anowa* as a modern independent woman and how her inability to bear any children and her views regarding slavery, ends up destroying her marriage and her life. The focus will be on the identity crises that *Anowa* faces as she is unable to comprehend her status as disobedient.

Keywords: disobedience, barrenness, polygamy, economic independence and slavery

Introduction

The term feminism is understood as "a movement to end women's oppression" (Hooks 26). The term woman is understood in terms of gender that is associated to be socially and culturally constructed. It coincides with Simone de Beauvoir claim that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, and that social discrimination produces in women moral and intellectual effects so profound that they appear to be caused by nature" (18). As a result, various behavioural traits and expectations are linked with the terms men and women. Gender is thus, shaped by society and according to Gayle Rubin is, "socially imposed division of the sexes" (179). He stresses that gender is thus a "part of social life which is the locus of the oppression of women" (159).

Kate Millet defines gender norms as "the sum total of the parents', the peers', and the culture's notions of what is appropriate to each gender by way of temperament, character, interests, status, worth, gesture, and expression" (31). According to her these gender norms therefore, lead to women subordination as women, "learn to be passive, ignorant, docile, emotional helpmeets for men (26). Therefore, men in the patriarchal society are seen as the head of the family. Whereas, women are delegate to two spheres of motherhood and household. They are seen as either mothers or barren, good or evil and obedient.

Anowa(1970) is the second play by the Ghanian writer Ama Ata Aidoo. In the play, she uses the strategies of structure, characters, themes and language of oral literature of the Akan tribe. She sets the play at the backdrop of post colonial Ghana, where the effects of imperialism, capitalism and slavery can be seen on the people. On the other hand, it is an important time in the history of post colonial Ghana as it encounters the western traders. As according to Ashcroft, hat, Post colonialism begins from the very first moment of colonial

contact, it is the discourse of oppositionality which colonialism brings into being. (Ashcroft 117).

An important strategy implied by Aidoo is the legend of the disobedient daughter, but she twists the theme. The tale tells about an independent woman, who refuses to marry suitors that are brought by her family. Instead, she finds a man herself (outcast) and announces to her family, her will of marrying the man. In various versions, the groom turns out to be devil in disguise on their wedding nights and kills the young bride. In another version, the couple leave the village/tribe and losses all contact with her parents to the extent that she doesn't even return for their funeral. The daughter is disobedient first, as she finds a groom on her own, second, as expected out of her that she will live in her mother's house or nearby, she abandons the house and starts an independent life.

The play is divided into three phases: In Yebi, on the highway and the big house at Oguua. Phase one starts with the old man and old woman making the reading familiar with the post-colonial society of Yebi, they drop hints about the struggle of ideas that is taking place. Finally, they introduce *Anowa*, as a strange, not common and independent girl, who has not been married even after six years from puberty. She has rejected all suitors that her parents and family proposed. The scene shifts to the house of Badua and Osam, *Anowa's* parents. Badua is worried that the reputation of her daughter is sinking as the whole village is talking about *Anowa's* disobedience. Right at that moment, *Anowa* comes home and announces to her parents that she has found a man; Kofi Ako and she will marry him. Her mother is not happy about it as she aware of the reputation of Kofi Ako and she thinks that he is a loser. The couple gets married and to avoid being the ridicule of the village, they leave Yebi. *Anowa* declares to her parents that she will never come back to Yebi, even if all she is left with is rags.

Phase two, tells about the life of Anowa and Kofi Ako, who are nomadic traders, trading in skins. It is here, Aidoo reveals that even after two years of marriage Anowa is childless. Anowa asks Kofi Ako to take medicine but he refuses and instead blames it on her that, she is not able to conceive because of her restless blood. She also asks Kofi Ako to remarry, which he refuses and this becomes the conflict of the play. Kofi Ako then suggests that he wants to own slaves, which is at once opposed by Anowa.

In phase three, Aidoo tells that Kofi Ako has become the richest man and owns a lot of slaves, including both women and children. However, the couple has still not been able to conceive a child. While, Kofi Ako lives a lifestyle similar to a British king, Anowa, on the other hand is still wearing the same clothes, she was in the previous phase, her feet supporting the same pair of slippers. Kofi Ako is not happy by the lifestyle of her wife and he decides to send her back to Yebi. Anowa begs her husband to not do the same and again suggests she remarry. It is here, finally that Anowa understands that the cause of their childlessness is not her but Kofi Ako's greed and virility. The community finds about Kofi Ako's virility and he shoots himself.

Aidoo offers two ends of the play. The first ending is that Kofi Ako shoots himself and Anowa goes insane. In the second ending, we find the members of the yes community including Anowa's parents preparing for the funeral of the couple, while Kofi Ako has shot himself, Anowa drowns herself. The Mouth-That-Eat-Salt-and Pepper lament over the death of Kofi and Anowa, trying to understand the circumstance that led to the catastrophic death of the couple.

Another important element of the society that Aidoo brings to attention is the prevalent matrilineal system of inheritance, where kinship and descent happens across matrilineal lineage. According to this system, a child is the property of the mother's family. The responsibility of the only daughter not the son is on the mother, for sons are the proud properties of the fathers. In the play, as Badua is worried about Anowa's marriage, her husband very casually sheds away the responsibility. He says:

"OSAM: You know that I am a man and getting daughters married is not one of my duties. Getting them born, aha! But not finding them husbands" (104).

However, here also Aidoo brings out the patriarchal idea behind this arrangement. The society is matriarchal only in name, but the real power lies in the hands of uncles of the child, that is the brothers of the mother. However, women (mothers) hold the responsibility and burden of carrying forward the lineage and if they are unable to bear any children, they are blamed for the extinction of the family. Anowa announces to her parents that she is going to marry Kofi Ako. Badua is against the marriage.

"BADUA My marriage! Why should it be my daughter who would want to marry that good-for-nothing cassava-man?

ANOWA He is mine and I like him.

BADUA If you like him, do like him. The men of his house do not make good husbands; ask older women who are married to Nsona men.

OSAM You know what you are saying is not true. Indeed from the beginning of time Nsona men make the best of husbands. (BADUA glares at him.)" (106).

Badua asks her husband Osam to say something in the matter, as it concerns her own daughter. To which, he reminds her of his inability to mingle in the matriarchal system of the society.

"B A DU A And you Kobina Sam, will you not say anything? OSAM Abena Badua, leave me out of this. You know that if I so much as whisper anything to do with Anowa, you and your brothers and uncles will tell me to go and straighten out the lives of my nieces. This is your family drum; beat it, my wife.

OSAM Anyway, I said long ago that I was removing my mouth from my daughter Anowa's marriage. Did I not say that? She would not allow herself to be married to any man who came to ask for her hand from us and of whom we approved. Did you not know then that when she chose a man, it might be one of whom we would disapprove?

BADUA But why should she want to do a thing like that?

OSAM My wife, do remember I am a man, son of a woman who also had five sisters. It is a long time since I gave up trying to understand the human female. Besides, if you think well of it, I am not the one to decide finally whom Anowa is to marry. Her uncle, your brother is there, is he not? You'd better consult him. Because I know your family: they will say I deliberately married Anowa to a fool to spite them" (106)

The condition of Badua is in jeopardy, she wants to give Anowa all the freedom and independence she couldn't get. An example of this is the very fact that she protests against her husband, the society and even her own brothers, when they suggest that Anowa should become a priestess. She does to the fact that whenever anyone even talks about such a thing, she puts her fingers in her ears and vanishes from her mind all such thoughts. She does so because, she wants that,

"I want my child
To be a human woman
Marry a man,
Tend a farm

And be happy to see her Peppers and her onions grow. A woman like her Should bear children Many children, So she can afford to have One or two die. Should she not take Her place at meetings Among the men and women of the clan? And sit on my chair when I am gone? And a captainship in the army,

Should not be beyond her when the time is ripe!"(104)

However, Badua is also concerned about her daughter and about what the people of the clan talk about her. She is worried that her daughter is not married even after six years of the day she started menstruating.

"BADUA any mother would be concerned if her daughter refused to get married six years after her puberty. If I do not worry about this, what shall I worry about? (OSAM enters from upper left smoking his pipe.) Besides, a woman is not a stone but a human being; she grows.

BADUA (moving quickly up to OSAM) SO it is nothing at a-a-l-l (stretching the utterance of the last word) to you that your child is not married and goes round wild, making everyone talk about her?

OSAM which is your headache, that she is not yet married, or that she is wild?" (104).

The patriarchal society, including her husband blames her for

that. They blame her for filling her daughter's head with independent ideas, which lead to her being disobedient.

“OLD WOMAN others think that her mother Badua has spoilt her shamefully. But let us ask: why should Anowa carry herself so stiffly? Where is she taking her 'I won't, I won't' to? Badua should tell her daughter” (102).

“BADUA I am in disgrace so suck your teeth at me. (Silence.) Other women certainly have happier tales to tell about motherhood. (Silence.) I think I am just an unlucky woman” (104).

Another important techniques used by Aidoo to highlight the plight of Anowa is brought forth by two characters he-Mouth-That-Eat-Salt-And-Pepper. Who also function as the narrators and elucidate Anowa's experience. Their names symbolize two important ingredients that are required to balance the taste in a dish. Similarly, their role in the play is to portray the balance in the society. Also, they are the two opposite voices prevalent in the society and they interpret Anowa's situation from two different perspectives. The play opens with both the old man and the old woman introducing the community of Akan by the experience of Anowa, to be in unrest as a result of the chaos between the two conflicting ideas of modernity and tradition. They highlight Anowa's marginal position and comment on the post colonial crises enveloping their society.

The old woman introduces Anowa by calling her unfortunate and hinting her disobedience by placing her as different from the rest of them.

“OLD WOMAN: But what shall we say of our child, The unfortunate Anowa? Let us just say that Anowa is not a girl to meet every day.

OLD WOMAN That Anowa is something else! Like all the beautiful maidens in the tales, she has refused to marry any of the sturdy men who have asked for her hand in marriage. No one knows what is wrong with her!

Old Man

A child of several incarnations, She listens to her own tales, Laughs at her own jokes and Follows her own advice.

OLD WOMAN Some of us think she has just allowed her unusual beauty to cloud her vision of the world” (102)

Later in the play, the chorus of the old man and old woman again come and tell about the condition of Anowa. Here, they elaborate on the fact that Anowa is too independent and unlike the other girls, she does not listen to her husband. As a result, she is labelled as a witch by the patriarchal society.

“OLD WOMAN
She is a witch,
She is a devil

OLD WOMAN who else but that child of Abena Badua?
OLD MAN and what has she done now ping, raising her stick in the air, coughing etc.) She thinks the world has not seen the likes of her before. (Now with feigned concern) I wonder what a woman eats to produce a child like Anowa. I am sure that such children are not begotten by normal natural processes.

OLD MAN (with amused contempt) But what?

OLD WOMAN They issue from cancerous growths, tumours that grow from evil dreams. Yes, and from hard and bony material that the tender organs of ordinary human women are

too weak to digest.

OLD MAN Are you not sure that you are seeing too much in too little?

OLD WOMAN what are you saying? Am I wrong? What woman is she who thinks she knows better than her husband in all things?

OLD MAN A good husband would himself want advice from his wife, as the head of a family, a chief, a king, any nobleman has need of an adviser.

OLD WOMAN But Anowa is too much. She is now against the very man who she selected from so many. She would rather he was poor than prospering. They say she raves hourly against our revered ancestors and sanctions their deeds in high tones. She thinks our forefathers should have waited for her to be born so she could have upbraided them for their misdeeds and shown them what actions of men are virtuous.

OLD MAN I do not know if I can believe all this you say of the pitiful child. But certainly, it is not too much to think that the heavens might show something to children of a latter day which was hidden from them of old?” (116-117).

Aidoo by these conversations brings out the idea that the elders of the Akan clan are angry and surprised by Anowa's disobedience and independence. The chorus in the entire play compare Anowa's actions to that expected out of a normal girl. Infact, the society is another element that contributes to the identity crises that Anowa faces.

Identity crises happen when an individual faces inner conflict as regarding his/ her role in the society. These crises are deepened by the confusion that is created when the societal expectations about one an individual's role is contradictory to an individual inner personality. Such an individual fails to recognise the societal expectations, values and ambitions and any breakaway from these established values is often suppressed.

Anowa finds herself at crossroads with the society that wants to oppress her inner strength and limit her to the roles created by the patriarchal society. She constantly struggles for independence and happiness but finds herself under the weighing burden of gender norms, social customs and cultural traditions. However, she creates an identity outside the boundaries of the prevalent gender norms and is instantly segregated and isolated by the her parents and the society on the whole.

At the start of their relationship, Kofi Ako is a man who is an outcast of the society, he has not achieved any success and is too lazy to even keep his inheritance safe. At that, time he continuously praises his wife, reminding her of her strength, that lies in her being extra ordinary and different from others. He says, “my wife seems to be extraordinary in more things than one.” (108). He even tells her that he is nothing without her help and wonders what he would be without her.

However, the fact remains that she is unable to conceive, which troubles her mind. At one point, Kofi Ako admits that he is tired of this nomadic life but, Anowa says that she is a strong woman, to which he says, “Anowa. You ought to have been born a man” (109).

He goes on and says,

“Sometimes, I do not understand. Wherever we go, people take you for my sister at first. They say they have never heard of a woman who helped her husband so. 'Your wife is good',

they say, 'for your sisters are the only women you can force to toil like this for you'. They say that however good for licking the back of your hand is, it would never be like your palms.

Perhaps if they knew what I am beginning to know, they would not say so much. And proverbs do not always describe the truth of reality. (His face acquires new determination.) Anowa truly has a few strong ideas. But I know she will settle down. (Addressing the sleeping woman) Anowa, I shall be the new husband and you the new wife." (110-111).

However, Anowa is worried about their childlessness and she asks Kofi Ako to marry again, which he refused and then she asks him to take medicines, which again he refuses. They both go to a doctor, and he tells her that, "there is nothing wrong with your womb. But your soul is too restless. You always seem to be looking for things; and that prevents your blood from settling" (111).

Kofi Ako then declares that he wants to keep slaves to help him in his work. This idea horrifies Anowa, who instead asks him to remarry.

"ANOWA - My husband, I am listening to you. KOFI AKO You remember, you were telling me to marry another woman to help us?"

ANOWA - MY hus-band! Am I hear-ing you right? Have we risen so high? (Corking her ears) Kofi Ako, do not let me hear these words again.

KOFI AKO (mimicking her) 'Do not let me hear these words again'. Anowa, do you think I am your son?

ANOWA I do not care. We shall not buy men.

KOFI AKO Anowa, look here. You are not always going to have it your way. Who are you to tell me what I must do or not do?

KOFI AKO What do you want to say? I am not buying these men to come and carry me. They are coming to help us in our work.

ANOWA We do not need them.

KOFI AKO If you don't, I do. Besides you are only talking like a woman.

ANOWA A And please, how does a woman talk? I had as much a mouth in the idea of beginning this trade as you had. And as much head! you have decided to say nothing, eh? Anowa, who told you that buying men is wrong? You know what? I like you and the way you are different. But Anowa, sometimes, you are too different. (ANOWA walks away from him.) I know I could not have started without you, but after all, we all know you are a woman and I am the man.... Kofi, no man made a slave of his friend and came to much himself. It is wrong. It is evil.

KOFI AKO (showing alarm) Hei, where did you get these ideas from? Who told you all this?

ANOWA A Are there never things which one can think out for oneself?

KOFI AKO Yes, so now you are saying I am a fool?

ANOWA (collapsing) O the gods of my fathers! KOFI AKO What shall the gods of your fathers do for you? I know you think you are the wise one of the two of us.

KOFI AKO Am I lying?

ANOWA When and where and what did I do to give you this idea?

KOFI AKO This is the way you have always behaved" (111-112).

He tells her to stay home instead. She says that she is worried that she does not see her self anywhere in the future.

"KOFI AKO This is because you have no children. Women who have children can always see themselves in the future...

KOFI AKO You are a strange woman, Anowa. Too strange. You never even show much interest in what the oracles say. But you are not at fault; they all say the same thing. Anowa, what makes you so restless? What occupies you?

ANOWA A Nothing. Nothing at all.

KOFI AKO (walking away from her) Anowa, is it true that you should have been a priestess?

ANOWA A 0 yes? But how would I know. And where did you hear that from? (Looks genuinely lost.)

KOFI AKO Don't think about that one then. It doesn't matter. Still, there is too much restlessness in you which is frightening. I think maybe you are too lonely with only us men around. (Pause.) I have decided to procure one or two women, not many. Just one or two, so that you will have companionship of your kind.

ANOWA A (almost hysterical) No, no, no! I don't want them. I don't need them.

KOFI AKO About slaves and all such unpleasant affairs? ANOWA a They are part of our lives now.

ANOWA (Still cool, she stares at him.) It seems this is how they created me.

KOFI AKO (letting go of her) Hmm. How sad... And yet if I gave you two good blows on your cheeks which flashed lightning across your face, all this foolishness would go out of your head. (To himself) And what is wrong with me? Any man married to her would have by now beaten her to a pulp, a dough.... dozens more. But please, bring your mind home. Have joy in our overflowing wealth. Enhance this beauty nature gave you with the best craftsmanship in cloth and stone. Be happy with that which countless women would give their lives to enjoy for a day. Be happy in being my wife and maybe we shall have our own children. Be my glorious Wife, Anowa, and the contented mother of my children" (115-116).

In the last phase of the play, Aidoo portrays that Kofi Ako is angered by her wife's independent thoughts and he asks her to leave. He is also angered by the fact that she does not listen to him, as her husband and also the head of the house.

"KOFI AKO All I want to say Anowa, is that I do not like seeing you walking around the house like this.

ANOWA a You don't like seeing me walk around the house like what?

KOFI AKO Please, stop asking me annoying questions.

ANOWA A Don't shout. After all, it is you who are anxious that the slaves should not hear us. What I don't understand, Kofi, is why you want to have so many things your own way.

KOFI AKO (very angrily) And I don't think there is a single woman in the land who speaks to her husband the way you do to me. (Sighs and relaxes.) Why are you like this, Anowa? Why? CANOW A laughs,) can't you be like other normal women? Other normal people? CANOW A continues laughing, then stops abruptly.)

ANOWA I still don't know what you mean b:, normal. Is it abnormal to want to continue working?

KOFI AKO Yes, if there is no need to. ANOWA A But my husband, is there a time when there is no need for a human being to work? After all, our elders said that one never stops

wearing hats on a head which still stands on its shoulders” (122).

She thinks that Kofi Ako is sending her back because she has not been able to give him a son. However, the truth is that Kofi Ako is unable to tolerate her independent views about slavery and modernity.

“ANOW A Am I your wife? What is there to prove it?

KOFI AKO I don't understand you.

ANOWA Don't you? I am asking you what I do or what there is about me that shows I am your wife, I do not think putting on fine clothes is enough.

KOFI AKO Are you referring to the fact that we have not had children?

ANOWA An adopted child is always an adopted child and a slave child, a slave... Perhaps I am the barren one. But you deserve a son; so Kofi, I shall get you a wife. One of these plump mulatto women of Oguua...

KOFI AKO Anowa, Stop that!

ANOW A Besides, such women are more civilised than I, who only come from Yebi. They, like you, have learned the ways of the white people. And a woman like that may be attractive enough to be allowed into your bed...” (123).

He simply asks her to leave him alone and not come back. However, Anowa asks for an explanation, as why he is sending her away. When he does not reply, she calls in all the slaves and asks them, if they have ever heard go a woman who has been sent away by her husband without any reason.

Aidoo therefore, wants to tell that, Anowa is a courageous enough, not only to leave her parents house but also to question her husband and the society on the whole.

She finally asks the slave boy to go get the governor as, she wants to have a discussion regarding this matter.

“KOF! AKO (raising himself up) Anowa, what are you doing all this for?

ANOWA the times are past when our individual actions had to be explained to each other.

(BOY looks away with embarrassment.)

KOFI AKO Perhaps you are going out of your senses.

ANOWA That should not mean anything to you.

ANOW A My good husband, in the old days how well I knew you. That is why I want to consult him too.

KOFI AKO I should have known that you were always that clever.

ANOW A And certain things have shown that cleverness is not a bad thing.

KOFI AKO Everyone said you were a witch. I should have believed them.

ANOW A (derisively) Why, have I choked you with the bone of an infant?

KOFI AKO Stop all this show and just leave me alone, I say.

ANOW A Then I shall ask advice of whom I please.

KOFI AKO Anowa, if you do not leave me quietly, but go consulting anybody about this affair, I shall brand you a witch.

ANOW A (shocked) No!

KOFI AKO (brought suddenly to life by her exclamation) and if I do, you know there is more than one person in the world who would believe me.

ANOW A (screams) No, no, no!

KOFI AKO And there will be those who would be prepared to

furnish proof.

ANOWA Kofi, I am not hearing you right.

KOFI AKO What?

ANOWA You cannot send me away like this. Not to Yebi, or anywhere. Not before you have told me why. I swore to Mother I was not returning. Not ever. (Not shedding a tear but her eyes shining dangerously) No, ram not in rags. But... but I do not have children from this marriage. Ah! Yes, Kofi, (she moves to him and whispers hoarsely and audibly) we do not have children, Kofi, we have not got children! And for years now,

I have not seen your bed. And Kofi, (getting hysterical) now that I think back on it, you have never been interested in any other woman.

KOFI AKO What are you saying, Anowa?

ANOW A Kofi, are you dead? (Pause.) Kofi, is your manhood gone? I mean, you are like a woman. (Pause.) Kofi, there is not hope any more, is there? (Pause.) Kofi.. tell me, is that why I must leave you? That you have exhausted your masculinity acquiring slaves and wealth? (Silence.) Why didn't you want me to know? You could have told me. Because we were friends. Like brother and sister. You just did not want me to know? And the priest said it was my fault. That I ate your manhood up? Why did he say I did it? Out of envy? Did he not tell you that perhaps you had consumed it up yourself acquiring wealth and slaves?

ANOWA Now I know. So that is it. My husband is a woman now. (She giggles.) He is a corpse. He is dead wood. But less than dead wood because at least that sometimes grows mushrooms... Why didn't you want me to know? (Long pause while they look at each other strangely. Then he gets up to leave.) Where are you going? Kofi, don't leave. Let us start from the beginning. (Long pause.) No, I shall leave you in peace. (Pause.) I am leaving, Kofi. I am leaving. I shall leave you in peace” (125-126).

As Anowa suffers identity crises the entire time, even her husband contributes to that crises. On one hand he calls her his strength and on the other hand, he simply discards her as a witch. The fact remains that, he is a man with no courage, timid to own up to his inability to bear children. He is greedy for wealth and wants to acquire wealth even at the cost of others freedom. However, even as the whole truth is out, people of the community still blame Anowa for the tragedy. They brand her as a independent woman, whose disobedience brought about the ultimate fall of the couple. As the old woman finally comments, “But I say that all should be laid at Anowa's doorstep. What man prospers, married to a woman like Anowa? Eh, would even Amanfi the giant have retained his strength faced with that witch? They say she always worked as though she could eat a thousand cows. Let the gods forgive me for speaking ill of the dead, but Anowa ate Kofi Ako up!” (126).

Aidoo thus portrays the ambivalent position of women in the post colonial Ghana. The community of Yebi is both sites of traditional patriarchal regulated gender norms and one that is adopting fast to the post colonial modernity. As a result, both the categories of culture and gender are in a fix and chaos is evident. The chaos is finally revealed by the tragedy of Anowa, who fell prey to the traditional patriarchal culture of her community and Kofi Ako, who, became a target of the

new capitalist modernity.

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