
UNIT 3 AMA ATA AIDOO, ‘THE GIRL WHO CAN’

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we will learn about Ama Ata Aidoo’s life and works. We will examine her works as distinct literary representations from Ghana. We will situate the short story, ‘The Girl Who Can’ within the larger oeuvre of women writers of Africa. After reading this Unit, you will be able to: learn about the life and works of Ama Ata Aidoo.

- comprehend ‘The Girl Who Can’ as a story written in oral tradition.
- understand the role of society and culture in placing reproductive expectations at the very core of women’s lives.
- situate the power dynamics within matrilineal families.
- understand the strength of female solidarity in uplifting women in the vastly changing cultural milieu.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

3.1.1 The Writer’s Bio-brief

Ama Ata Aidoo was born in 1940 to progressive parents, Mfantse Chief, Nana Yaw Fama and Mme Elizabeth aba AbasemaBosu, in central Ghana. Her father firmly believed in the importance of learning and established the first school in her village. She was amongst the first students to enroll in that school. Her family belonged to the matrilineal tradition and she grew up recognizing the female authority and potential. Her parents’ progressive views ensured a constant influx of travelling artists, wandering prophets, and communal gatherings in their household which influenced her worldview. Her unique family life enabled her

to develop a nuanced understanding of Ghanaian culture, colonialism, and women's position in the society. At a young age, she decided that she wanted to be a poet and published her first short story when she was nineteen years old. She studied literature at the university of Ghana and subsequently worked there as a lecturer. She was appointed as the Minister of Education in 1982 and she resolved to make free education accessible to all. When she realized that she could not achieve her aim, she resigned from active politics and moved to Zimbabwe to develop a career as a full time writer. She also taught at the African Studies Department at Brown University.

Aidoo's notable works include, *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965), *Anowa* (1970), *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977), *Someone Talking to Sometime* (1986), *An Angry Letter in January* (1992), *The Girl Who Can and Other Stories* (1997). She was awarded the 1992 Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book (Africa) for *Changes: A Love Story* (1993). She also went on to found The Mbaasem Foundation in 2000 to provide much needed support to the development and growth of African women writers and to promote their work.

3.1.2 Story of *The Girl Who Can*

The Girl Who Can and Other Stories is Aidoo's second book of short stories published in 1997. The anthology has stories with strong female protagonists. There are various issues and concerns addressed in all the stories. Most of them deal with maternity and reproductive issues, feminism, societal definitions of gender roles, misogyny, influence of postcolonialism etc. Most of the stories are written in a clear and conversational prose, drawing from the oral literary tradition of the Fanti people. The conversational writing style of Aidoo enables us to witness the lives of the characters very closely.

The Girl Who Can is a short story written in an oral style. The very first line 'They say that I was born in Hasodzi; and it is a very big village in the Central Region of our country, Ghana' sounds like an anecdote orally recounted by the young narrator. Written in first person narrative, it deals with the life of a seven years old girl, Adjoa who lives in a house with her mother whom she calls Maami and her grandmother whom she calls Nana. Adjoa is a bright young girl who finds it hard to express herself without being silenced or ridiculed. She is often perplexed at the duality of Nana's approach. She is either met with a shocked Nana who forbids her from repeating her statements sometimes, and other times she finds Nana racked with laughter over their childlike innocence and repeats them to her friends and neighbours. Young Adjoa is confused at this hypocrisy of the grown-ups. Her thoughts are stifled as she doesn't know if she should express herself or be quiet.

Moreover, Nana and Maami constantly discuss the state of Adjoa's legs to her consternation. Nana finds them too thin and long for a girl destined to become a mother. She is concerned about the fact that in future Adjoa's thin legs may not be able to support strong hips for childbearing. Here, it is important to remember that Nana believes that the blame for being born with thin legs rests with Adjoa. It is squarely her fault for not being born with thicker legs and fleshy calves. The present skinny state of her legs is constantly lamented as they are considered useless. At such instances, Nana refers to her daughter's poor choice of a husband who is not in the picture. It reduces the mother to helpless tears as she finds it unbearable to reflect upon her unfortunate marriage.

Adjoa is herself curious about the entire issue. Being a child, she doesn't understand what childbearing legs look like and wishes to see them. Since she is perfectly capable of walking long distances and running fast, she doesn't find any shortcoming in her own legs. She walks to her school daily. It is estimated to be five kilometres away from her own village but unlike others, Adjoa doesn't mind walking so far because she enjoys her time at school. As an unlettered woman herself, her mother firmly believes that a school education would greatly benefit her daughter. She wants Adjoa to rise above ignorance and acquire knowledge for self- advancement.

The major breakthrough in the story comes when Adjoa is selected as a runner for her age group, to represent the school in district sports events. The news is met with disbelief at her home and Nana marches to the school to confirm the veracity of it. To Adjoa's great surprise, she finds that Nana takes up washing and ironing her school uniform daily indicating her acceptance of Adjoa's new role as an athlete. When she wins the award for the best all- around junior athlete, Nana carries the trophy on her back with great pride. The undue concern regarding Adjoa's thin legs is finally dispelled. Her thin legs may not support childbearing hips, but they can enable her to run very fast and be a good athlete. The trifecta of the three generations of women in the house end the story on distinct notes of a newly found sense of pride and contentment. While Nana is proudly exhorting her granddaughter's achievement, the mother is overwhelmed at her child's success and absolution from the blame of birthing a girl with thin legs. Young Adjoa is perplexed at this change in the adults'behaviour but rejoices in her newly discovered agentive self.

3.2 CHARACTERS

After reading the story, we must undertake the exercise to familiarize ourselves with the main characters. All the characters have distinct perspectives towards their lives and issues and it would help us understand their motives better.

Adjoa

Adjoa is the narrator and the central character of the story. She is a seven years old girl and presents the events with her childlike innocence and natural curiosity. Her forthright opinions and guileless observations about the world around her enable us to see her small village from a child's eyes. In the small family comprised of her mother and grandmother, she struggles to understand the world inhabited by the adults. She is alternately told to keep her thoughts to herself or she is made to repeat them for the adults' amusement. When she wins a sports tournament regardless of grandmother's constant lament about her legs, it reaffirms her faith in her own self. She is able to achieve respect, recognition, and her grandmother's pride using the same legs which were considered useless.

Nana

Nana is the head of the tripartite household. As the matriarch, she represents the traditional outlook in the story. As the leader of the house, she is dominant but loving towards her daughter and Adjoa. At the same time, she taunts her daughter for marrying unwisely. She provides a frank commentary on the social position of women as mothers. Adjoa is outspoken and has the imagined disability of being born with long and thin legs. To the grandmother these qualities won't let

her be a mother. She draws a parallel between children born with disabilities and Adjoa who has legs too skinny to support childbearing hips. However, her character evolves with her granddaughter's victory as a runner. Her perception about women's role in life alters as she examines new possibilities and potential in Adjoa's future.

Maami

Mother is a quiet character who acts as a bridge between Adjoa's restive curiosity and her own mother's orthodoxy. She lives with a strong sense of repentance as she is constantly reminded that she did not choose a husband wisely. To compound her grief, Nana berates her for birthing a girl with perceived deformity of thin legs. Despite being admonished by her mother for being a failure as a mother, she resists the idea that her daughter is useless as a girl. Since she was denied a formal education, she understands the need and significance of it. Going against Nana's wishes, she enrolls Adjoa in the school so that she does not lead a life of ignorance. The story ends with her state of speechlessness. We shall discuss that in greater detail in subsequent units.

3.3 ROLE OF ADJOA AS A CHILD NARRATOR

Ama Ata Aidoo uses the seven years old Adjoa as the narrator of her story. Although she is a small child, she is extremely observant and intuitive. She watches the world around her keenly and presents a unique worldview to the reader using simple vocabulary. Her doubts and questions about her village life seldom elicit comprehensible responses from the adults. She is often given contradictory advice by Nana. She is alternately told to either be quiet or to repeat what she has already said for the purpose of adults' entertainment. They find her ideas so preposterous that she is repeatedly told to 'never, never, but NEVER to repeat that.' The abrupt dismissal comes without any accompanying reason. She is never told why she mustn't utter a few things and conversely why she must repeat others only to have adults laugh at them. Her predictable discontent at this duality leads to a vociferous internal monologue.

Although Adjoa might have stifled her voice, her inner monologue is as perennial as ever. She tells herself, 'when I think back on it now, those two, Nana and my mother, must have been discussing my legs from the day I was born. What I am sure of is that when I came out of the land of sweet, soft silence into the world of noise and comprehension, the first topic I met was my legs.' The exasperation of Adjoa is legitimate because the discussion is so relentless, it might have started at her very birth. Her exaggeration does not make her an unreliable narrator. On the contrary, it is a mark of the oral tradition. She doesn't see the world from the adults' perspective and hence leads to a clearer account of the daily rhythms of the village life.

Adjoa shows great insight in understanding that her small, all female family had divided opinion on the state of her legs. She finds her two 'favourite people', Maami and Nana arguing about her thin spindly legs. As the narrator who is the center of her mother's and grandmother's love and concern, she wishes to assure them that her legs are not of any consequence. Yet, she lacks the linguistic finesse of her grandmother to make a compelling argument.

Dear student, you must have noticed that the child narrator doesn't provide a social commentary about hunger or social issues out of context. This is a story

set in rural Ghana. Since the child is merely seven years old, she only tackles issues that directly impact her. When she leaves food in her plate, she is met with Nana's disappointment for being insensitive to the famine victims. Thus, she is able to connect with the larger reality of others in Ghana who are struggling for adequate nourishment.

At the same time, the usage of the child narrator limits the narrative since she can't describe her mother's silences. She articulates the incomprehensible silences within the context of her mother's supposed failures in marriage and birthing a girl with thin legs. She understands the implications of the hushed protests and defeated tones, but she doesn't possess the requisite socio-political vocabulary to analyze them. It is left to the reader to grasp the implications of absences in the otherwise straightforward narrative. The narration doesn't falter when dealing with the absent father figure. It is hinted, through breaks and silences in Adjoa's narration, that he was an inadequate husband although neither Nana nor Maami emphasize it. The women only household comes to life with the direct perspective of a child. As Nana Banyywa Horne says, 'By making the girl-child the narrative voice in this story, Aidoo makes the reclaiming of voice for girl-children a universal prerogative.'

3.4 ORAL STORYTELLING

"We cannot assume that all literature should be written. One doesn't have to be so patronising about oral literature...the art of the speaking voice can be brought back so easily...We don't have to write for readers, we can write for listeners."
(Aidoo)

Dear student, we have discussed the role of Adjoa as a child narrator in earlier units. The story starts like an anecdotal account of a little girl. She directly addresses the reader in a familiar tone of an acquaintance. The emphasis on words enables the reader to visualize the authoritative and wizened Nana, incredulously staring at the young Adjoa after she has made an observation, 'you say what?'. The self-deprecating modesty with which she says, 'as far as I could see' or 'that I don't know' highlight the orality of the tale told by a child narrator.

The repetition is not redundant. The stress on 'Never, ever, but NEVER' paints the picture of a conversation between the young curious Adjoa and her wiser, no-nonsense grandmother. The orality of the tale makes it universal. Usage of local proverbs in conversation, such as touching wood in a gesture of superstition, is instrumental in reinstating the orality of the story. Aidoo herself says, "...I haven't tried to speak the Queen's English. I've always tried to let the flavour of my African background come through in terms of the idioms and so on"

Adjoa is the narrator but she isn't ubiquitous. She sees and remarks upon looks, silences, and sounds of her family life but leaves her mother's and grandmother's thoughts to speculation.

The girl child navigates the world of adults and absorbs more than she expresses. Her silent remarks to herself about the elders' ambiguous behaviours are reminiscent of the universal childhood experiences. Since the story borrows from oral literary traditions, Aidoo doesn't reveal the name of the grandmother who is the hierarchical head of the three-member family. She is referred to as Nana for the entire length of the story. The mother is referred to as Maami. They are

defined by their socially determined names. Any independent identity they have is secondary to their gendered identity as mothers and daughters. Within the scope of the story, the scope of their character is fixed by the young girl who is telling the story. The reader hears the secrets that the storyteller divulges and is free to speculate about the gaps and silences. As Ghanaian scholar Abena Busia says for Aidoo, “She is a consummate storyteller. We do not so much ‘read’ her stories as listen to them, or rather, overhear them.

3.5 NARRATIVIZING MOTHER’S SILENCE

Ama Ata Aidoo presents Maami as the mother with small acts of courage and hushed silences. She inhabits the small world of the trinity as she is poised between Nana and Adjoa. The quiet mother has limited authority of her own in the domestic space. Aidoo deftly deals with Maami’s disenfranchisement with half sentences, long looks, and small acts of valour such as speaking up for her daughter. She is found guilty of choosing an irresponsible husband and birthing a girl whose legs are too thin and long. Her protests about Adjoa’s legs are stifled in the grandmother’s presence. The absent father is always referred to as a ‘man like that’. A considerate Nana, who is sharp of observation, fails to see grievous harm she subjects her daughter to. In the absence of men, the tyranny is held by the parochial tradition that is quick to assign blame to women. Even the matrilineal families can assign blame to women and hold them responsible for circumstances beyond their control. Women such as Maami find it difficult to assert their opinions in contempt of the conventional wisdom.

It is pertinent to note that Maami herself never silences her own daughter. The stringent act of censorship and disciplining is solely grandmother’s prerogative. Maami pushes for her child’s right to a formal education. In an argument about the role of education, grandmother finds futility and wastage of time. Maami firmly believes in enlightening powers of formal education. Her state as an unlettered woman leads her to live a life of ignorance and darkness. She doesn’t want her child to be deprived of learning. Maami’s silences are indicative of her own disadvantaged positioning as a single mother who doesn’t have the benefits of a mainstream schooling. Her self-affirmation comes from vicariously living through her daughter and seeing her acquire life skills that Maami couldn’t afford for her own self.

Maami’s silence serves dual purpose. It demonstrates her own marginalization within the small family headed by a rigid Nana. At the same time, her small voice gives her daughter moral strength and encourages her to ask inconvenient questions. Her opinions are truncated and denied by the constant reminder of her unfortunate past. Women who don’t fit neatly into the socially prescribed roles are deliberately silenced and pushed to the margins. Adjoa’s defiance is a disruption of Maami’s silence. She speaks for herself and her gagged mother. Education and athletic ability empower her to speak out.

3.6 AGENCY OF ADJOA’S SELF

Adjoa’s legs are the focal point through which one can understand the position of the orthodox grandmother, the voiceless mother, and the young and defiant grandchild. The central dilemma is one that is based on traditional perception of women’s role in the society as mothers. The matrilineal family of the three women

lives in domestic harmony for most aspects except Adjoa's legs and the mother's husband. The constant refrain in the house is that of a future problem about Adjoa's reproductive self. According to the grandmother, Adjoa's very existence would be a failure if she can't become a mother. In the matrilineal tradition, it is the women's imperative and responsibility to ensure continuation of the family line. While the birth of a girl child is a welcome occasion in the household, her importance rests on her ability to reproduce. Her hypothetical transformation from a child into a mother connects her with the strong matrilineal tradition of ancestors, mothers, aunts, and companions. Her future inability to do so, arouses feelings of fear and failure amongst her mother and grandmother. Her identity is reduced to her gender and her gender is defined by her ability to bear children. Here, it is important to note that Nana's worry is rooted in the anxiety of the socio-cultural expectations from women. She doesn't speak from an individualistic desire for Adjoa to have children. Her fretting situates Adjoa in the Ghanaian milieu of her time as would-be mothers.

Adjoa's positioning as a young, school going child is in stark comparison with her grandmother's and mother's. The generational distance allows her to speak, think, and act without the restrictions faced by her mother and grandmother. Armed with all the myriad advantages of a formal education, she wished to reassure her elders that her body is alright. Being raised in an all girl household, she values the nurturing affection of her mother and grandmother but she is also able to register the oppression of the elderly over the younger members. Her own life is not cushioned with comforts. We read that she must walk over five kilometers to reach her school daily. She doesn't complain about it like the rest of her schoolmates for she finds school a refreshing break in her life. With a child's simplicity, she concludes her school going experience into one sentence; 'school is nice'. She doesn't brag about winning in races in her school to her family until she is selected to run for the junior section of the district games. The extraordinary feat about Adjoa's running is not her winning but that of the dramatic shift it brings in the perception of her legs at home. The news of her selection draws remarkable responses at home, since Nana starts repositioning her legs as something useful.

Adjoa is able to claim her subjectivity and redefine herself because of generational distance and the benefit of formal education. At seven, she uses logic and deduction to understand that childbearing wouldn't likely be a problem for her since her mother and grandmother have been able to give birth. Although it isn't mentioned in the story itself, the reader can understand the biological determinism inherent in the soundness of this logic. She comes from a tradition of strong and nurturing women. She repeats to the reader that she had faith in her body all along even though she doesn't say it out loud for fear of ridicule. Her self-affirmation comes from being able to find newer and perhaps, more fulfilling potentials of her body.

3.7 WALKING AND RUNNING AS METAPHORS FOR TRADITION AND MODERNITY

Female solidarity between the authoritative grandmother and the precocious Adjoa is represented by the tropes of walking and running in the story. Nana's attempt to first verify and then support Adjoa as a junior runner for the sports tournament leads to evolution of one's understanding of her character. She re-examines

Adjoa's legs as the ones that are capable of performing other glorious functions even if they aren't thick enough to support her as a future mother. She steals glances at them as if assessing their worth in the fresh light of this discovery. Her efforts to wash Adjoa's school uniform and iron them with a charcoal iron borrowed from a neighbour point to her desire to assist Adjoa in her newly discovered aim. She irons the school uniform with such determination that it shines with stiffness. Her contribution towards enabling Adjoa's full potential points to the larger female communal support for each other.

Nana's choice in taking pride in Adjoa's appearance and bearing witness to her feats of athletics connect the two ends of the family hierarchy. The long walk from home to school and back is the confluence of grandmother's tradition and Adjoa's modernity. Grandmother chooses fresh clothes from her old brass bowl to walk to school every day while she sends Adjoa in a stiffly ironed school uniform. She walks a little behind Adjoa and other children to distance herself from them. She pointedly tells Adjoa that she doesn't care for athletics but is secretly won by the idea that her grandchild could be a successful runner. The novelty of running brings with it a sense of introspection of the traditional structures of culture.

When Adjoa wins every race she participated in, Nana carries the shiny trophy home. She carries the 'gleaming cup back. Like they do with the babies, and other precious things'. Running and winning at something that tests an individual's strength and endurance is the true subversion in the story. The patriarchal structures that define women solely in the roles of wives and mothers crumble by Adjoa's running and Nana's walking by her side. Adjoa's victory brings her closer to a self-awareness which opens new prospects for her and girls like her. Her resistance comes from action since she isn't allowed to use words that might disrupt the societal order. The conventional gender roles of mothering are replaced by a choice that is symbolized by running. Her ability to win accolades for winning opens new avenues for her future self and marks the beginning of a new order in which girl children aren't confined to a single function.

3.8 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (QUESTIONS WITH ANSWER KEYS)

- a) What do you think of the child narrator in 'The Girl Who Can'?

Ama Ata Aidoo uses the first-person narrative of the seven years old Adjoa in 'The Girl Who Can'. While it makes the narration a tad simplistic, it appears to be real and reliable since the central conflict of the story surrounds the narrator and her imagined incapability to bear children. Since the narrator is a young child, there is no ambivalence in her understanding of the world around her. Explore the self-reflexive nature of the narrative. Although the young narrator is forbidden to voice certain opinions, she doesn't stop herself from introspecting them. Explore the distinctness of a child narrator as compared to an adult one.

- b) Examine the techniques of oral literary tradition in 'The Girl Who Can'.

African literature had a strong oral heritage in the form of songs, folktales, proverbs, beating drums etc. The verbal messages which could be sung, tuned on musical instruments, and narrated from one generation to another

form the bedrock of Afante tradition. Aidoo draws upon the same tradition in her literary works. While reading the story you must have found examples of audible culture in the form or repetition, different structuring of sentences, proverbs etc.

- c) What is the role of education in Adjoa's self-emancipation?

The narrator states that other than her legs, the other topic that elicited divided opinions was Adjoa's enrollment in the formal school. It bears merit to emphasize the pivotal role that formal education plays in her life. Her long walks to school materialize into an opportunity to run for the district level sports competitions. Her victory brings a sea change in the grandmother's perception of her body and it reaffirms her confidence in her own self. In addition to that, Adjoa's formal education must have honed Adjoa's arguments to a degree. Compare Maami's lack of education to Adjoa's experience at school and the recognition it brings her.

- d) Discuss Nana's relationship with Adjoa.

Notice how the tripartite family is a part of the matrilineal tradition. With a strictly conservative grandmother at the top of the family hierarchy, and a feebly resistant mother, Adjoa finds herself loved but patronized. Nana's fierce disciplinarian is a mark of tougher times. Her love for Adjoa and her solidarity with her running is magnified by her acts of support. You must investigate Nana's change of stance towards Adjoa's education and her body in the light of her generational difference and an evolution into a liberal matriarch.

- e) What is the significance of Maami's silence in the story?

Maami's character is provided with long silences, truncated arguments cut short by a strict mother, defeated tones and a sure zeal for her child's better future. In the relevant section, you must have read about Maami's guilt at a failed marriage and Adjoa's supposed inability. Develop upon her victimhood as the site of oppression as Nana constantly admonishes her for being a failure as an individual since she failed as a wife and a mother. Regardless of her own marginalization, she works tirelessly for a better prospect for her child. Examine the implication of her silence at the end. Could her final silence be a symbol of her vindication?

3.9 SUMMING UP

To conclude our Unit on 'The Girl who Can', we must return to the Objectives outlined at the beginning of this unit. Dear reader, now you must be able to locate 'The Girl who Can' as a progressive work of literature. You must be able to investigate the reasons behind Maami's insistence upon a formal education for her daughter. The story would have made you curious to learn more about Ghanaian societies with their matrilineal structure. Moreover, Ama Ata Aidoo would have provided you a discursive space to perceive gender as a social construct which is flexible. Little Adjoa's story is a story of exploring one's potential and it must have inspired you to do the same in your own life.

3.10 SELECT READING LIST

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