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Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Girl Who Can and Other Stories*: Creating Political Space for Women in Social and National Domains

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the creation of political space for women in social and national domains in Ama Ata Aidoo's collection of short stories, *The Girl Who Can and Other Stories*, with particular reference to "Heavy Moments;" "She–Who–Would–Be-King" and the title story, "The Girl Who Can." That is because Aidoo believes that the improvement of the condition of women's lives should not be separated from their contribution to nation–building through alternative roles other than those of marriage, hitherto, prescribed for them by the society. It might be natural that man and woman should copulate to bear children. However, most of the rest of the ordering of the society is man–made or artificial. Gender hierarchy, marriage, womanhood, female inferiority and the arrogance of male superiority are all socio-cultural constructs. That is why feminists like Ama Ata Aidoo and the rest strive to create political space for women in nation–building in fiction so that other women can emulate such successful female characters in everyday life. In the following short stories in this collection, Aidoo breaks down complacencies and reveals that most of those myths which tend to inhibit woman are all social constructs and can be reversed. Aidoo seems to input that if women could be so self-effacing, other-oriented and generous as to produce such achievers and rivals to men in their, hitherto, exclusive domains of life's endeavour, then they should all be allowed to participate as collaborators in the development of Africa in alternative economic and political roles and in the enjoyment of the fruits of their labour and the natural resources of their African continent.

INTRODUCTION

In examining women's political domain in the collection of short stories, *The Girl Who Can and Other Stories*, this study first explores the conventional public roles of women in a rural or near pre-colonial setting as they affect the community. Ama Ata Aidoo, like her male fore–runners or contemporaries in African fiction, Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye, attempts to recreate the African historical past before the advent of the colonizers. In the process, she succeeds in stripping away the colonial representations of womanhood and in

reclaiming women's pre-colonial political role within the African context so that it can serve as a model for reconstructing a political domain for the cotemporary African woman. Consequently, we are able to determine to what extent colonial constructions of African womanhood have eroded the roles of women in the post-colonial era.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs the feminist qualified by the sociological theory of literary criticism to explore the creation of political space for women in the social and national domains in the three short stories**,** "Heavy Moments;" "She–Who–Would–Be-King" and the title story, "The Girl Who Can" of Ama Ata Aidoo's collection of short stories *The Girl Who Can and Other Stories.* This is with an intention of extricating women from the near permanent domestication prescribed for them in marriage by the society and to involve them actively in the development of their African nations through out-door political and economic activities.

Definition of Terms

The term political is used in the broadest sense of the word, connoting the range of women's roles, just as Gay Wilentz puts it in her article:

> I use the term "political" in the broadest sense of the word, connoting 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 African community and the religious life of her people, to the undocumented village women storytellers who educate and initiate future generations into the culture, women have played a major role in the formulation of the community, since they have not merely maintained the culture but [have] often reformed it (Woman's Domain 266).

Summary of the Stories

In **"Heavy Moments,"** the society propagates the retrogressive myth that a woman should not wear trousers because they make urinating difficult. Going by that myth, Akuba would not have joined the military force, or else a different type of uniform would need to have been designed for her. Furthermore, she would not have realized her dream of flying a plane, if she had adhered to the tenets of such a myth. In spite of all the discouragement from the society, and amidst contempt and ridicule from the male cadets, Akuba defies such a myth and remains in the Air Force. With determination, she successfully flies a plane on her final test day. When she succeeds, those same male colleagues herald her as "a jolly good fellow."

In the story, **"She–Who–Would- Be-King,"** after She–of–ten-years-old says to He–of–twenty–five–years-old that she would like to be the President of her country when she grows up, he reprimands her saying that she is mad and adds that he does not think the men of their country would allow her because she is a woman. Instead of feeling discouraged by such a cultural inhibition, she says with determination, "No? We shall see" (55). In the end, she becomes a Professor and Dean of the Faculty of Law, while her thirty–five–year–old daughter becomes not just President of their country but the President of the whole of Africa, the Confederation of African States.

In the title story, **"The Girl Who Can,"** Adjoa's grandmother, Nana, attempts to propagate the fallacious gender myth that any girl-child who does not have big strong legs or who has thin long legs like Adjoa cannot have babies because thin legs cannot support solid hips that can support a pregnancy. This is eventually proved wrong by Adjoa. Another bone of contention in the family is whether or not Adjoa should be allowed to go to school. Owing to Nana's prejudice, Adjoa is initially allowed to go to school as a happy riddance because her legs are supposedly of no use for child-bearing. In the end, Adjoa turns out to become the best all-round junior athlete who wins the trophy. The irony is that her grandmother Nana gets so proud of her that throughout the sports week, she accompanies the pupils to school to watch Adjoa during the competition, and keeps admiring Adjoa's legs silently. It is Nana who eventually brings home the cup and shows it to Adjoa's mother before returning it to the headmaster.

Preamble

The short stories in this collection, *The Girl Who Can and Other Stories*, may not be structurally divided into parts. However, they fall naturally and symbolically into four identifiable segments, with some of them duplicated. The first segment, consisting of the stories: "Lice," "Payments," Comparisons," "Choosing" and "Newly Opened Doors," reveals the multifaceted problems of the ordinary contemporary African woman, originally caused by indigenous cultural sexism and gender hierarchy, as exhibited in "Comparisons," and later aggravated by the complications of colonialism and its aftermath, as demonstrated in "Lice" and "Payments," among others. However, these women remain undaunted and continue to attempt to transcend their social problems and contribute meaningfully towards the sustenance of their families, and the development of their communities and the society.

It is from the survival of such humble families, sustained by women in spite of indigenous cultural sexism and the complications introduced by colonialism, that new female achievers like the protagonists of "The Girl Who Can," "Heavy Moments" and "She-Who-Would-Be-King" or the first ever President of the Confederation of African States will emerge for the improvement of the entire society and the new pan-African nation. The

African woman is, therefore, represented in these short stories as the bedrock and nucleus of her family and the pivot on which the larger society and her community are hinged. Ama Ata Aidoo's commitment to the contemporary African woman's cause has compelled her to write in an attempt, as Okereke puts it, "to authenticate and humanize the female personality and experience hitherto mythified" (59).

The second group comprised of "She-Who-Would-Be–King," "Heavy Moments" and "The Girl Who Can" contains stories of triumph and unprecedented achievements, where the female protagonists or characters emerge as rivals of men in their, hitherto, exclusive fields of endeavour, like Adjoa the best junior athlete, and Akuba the first female pilot in her county's Air Force Academy. Each protagonist overcomes patriarchal gender myths, retrogressive and inhibitive cultural norms about women, as she clings to her zeal and determination to achieve her goal. For reasons best explained towards the end of the story, "She-Who-Would-Be–King," Aidoo envisions the first ever President of the Confederation of African States to be a woman – the daughter of the protagonist of that short story. Similarly, the protagonist of "Heavy Moments" emerges as the first ever female pilot in the Air Force of her African country after overcoming many challenges as a girl-child, including an attempted sexual violation in the city by her step-father, her mother's husband. The central character of the title story, "The Girl Who Can," Adjoa, uses her thin legs, prejudiced against by her grandmother, based on indigenous traditional gender myths, to run and win the trophy of the best junior athlete, and this brings fame to her and her school, and pride to her family.

The third segment is comprised of stories of female protagonists who do not only emerge as rivals of men in their fields of endeavour but also as leaders in the decolonization of the mentality of their African people. Such stories include: "Her Hair Politics," "Some Global News," and "Male - ing Names in the Sun." The fourth segment made up of the next set of three short stories, "Nowhere Cool," "Nutty" and "About the Wedding Feast" advocates bonding among all women of the world, in order that they can form a great sisterhood through the tolerance of one another's African culture as in "About the Wedding Feast," and through racial tolerance as in "Nutty" and "Nowhere Cool," in order that women can jointly resist and combat patriarchal oppression globally.

Aidoo has demonstrated the gradual development of the African woman towards autonomy or liberation and her enormous contributions to the African society, as she gets better enlightened and liberated from historical, colonial and on-going sexual discrimination. Unlike the collection, *No Sweetness Here*, where many of the stories are situated in the rural setting, most of the stories in this collection, *The Girl Who Can and Other Stories* are situated in the urban centre. Just as the African woman in the emerging urban setting in *No Sweetness Here* retains her atavistic roles of motherhood, procurement of food for the family, preservation of the family or prevention

from extinction, propagation of the people's culture, and contributes meaningfully to the family, her community and her society in general, so also does the low-income African woman in the city in the first segment of this collection, *The Girl Who Can and Other Stories,* attempt to support her family until great female achievers like the first female pilot of her African country, a star athlete, and the first ever President of the Confederation of African States, envisioned by Aidoo to be a woman, emerge from such humble African families maintained by women. Commenting on the growth of the independent woman in female fiction in Africa, Grace Okereke states:

> The image of woman bearing her burdens in conformity with tradition which is obvious in their early novels [read short stories], gives way to the image of woman adopting different strategies for survival and striving for self-assertion against the tidal wave of patriarchal definition of woman in their later works. These stages I designate the apologetic and feminist stages (60).

Therefore, the heroine of "the feminist stage" is depicted as fashioning out her own method of revolt and breaking bounds to gain her freedom and autonomy. Okereke contrasts, thus, the heroine of the "apologetic" and the "feminist" stages in the development of African fiction:

> While for the heroine of the apologetic novel [read fiction], spatial Mobility is restricted by domestic needs, the heroine of the protest feminist novel [read fiction], symbolically launches out into a long physical and psychological journey to independence (60)".

Ama Ata Aidoo in her short stories succeeds in defining woman both in the traditional ethos or in the pre-colonial environment and in the urban setting, among the proletariat as well as the bourgeoisie. When Aidoo defines the contemporary African woman in the traditional ethos, especially in a marriage situation as in "Lice" and "Comparisons," or in a family situation, as in "Payments" and "Newly Opened Doors," she does so in protest to draw society's attention to the multiple modes of injustice meted out to women in the name of tradition or culture where women have to cater for all dependants virtually alone like Rufa's mother does in "Newly Opened Doors." In the process, Aidoo succeeds in highlighting the subjugation or denigration suffered by women in any condition of oppression like colonization, neo-colonialism and in a war situation.

Since Aidoo is an educated woman from the matrilineal Akan clan of Ghana where power held by the men is channeled through female descent, she is self-confident and revolutionary in her literary works. Consequently, she creates strong, intelligent, resourceful and resilient, female central characters in this collection like Rufa's mother in the story, "Newly Opened Doors," Ekuwa Esuon in "Payments", Sissie, a mother of two and a wife to an irresponsible husband who sleeps out in "Lice," and Nora Cobbina in the story "Comparisons" which demonstrates how gender myths are up–dated

and perpetuated by husbands in the subjugation of their wives, among others. Each of the female protagonists in the first segment represents the image of woman bearing her burdens in conformity with tradition, a characteristic which is obvious in the heroine of the "apologetic" stage of the development of the independent woman in African fiction, according to Okereke (60). Aidoo's female characters are so impressive that a critic like Mildred Hill-Lubin rates her portrayal of mothers as the best among African women writers (256).

Having transcended the tragic condition like indigenous sexism and gender hierarchy, the war for independence, slavery, colonialism and having contributed positively towards the survival of the family and the society, as we have seen women do in the earlier segment, a woman or the girl–child has to emerge as a victor and an achiever among her male peers in the second. The female individual has to depend on her will and determination, and not expect the already successful men to create room for her, although she needs men's co-operation just as the two female cadets Akuba Baidoo and Sarah Larbi solicit the co-operation of the Director of the Air Force Academy to prevent any further pulling of expensive or lewd jokes on them by the male cadets in "Heavy Moments."

The male would rather discourage the girl-child just as the male cadets do to Akuba Baidoo and Sarah Larbi, the first ever female cadets in their country's Air Force academy in "Heavy Moments;" or the twenty–five–year old man does to She-of–ten–years-old when she says that she would want to be the President of her country in "She–Who–Would–Be-King." Even older women who have been negatively socialized to serve as agents of patriarchy would also join in discouraging the girl-child just as Nana, Adjoa's grandmother, does to her grand-daughter when she claims that Adjoa's legs are too thin to support solid hips that can carry a pregnancy in the title story, "The Girl Who Can."

With a positive spirit and the determination to succeed in life, Adjoa says she would have loved to ask her mother and grand–mother not to worry, just as She–of–ten–years-old says to the older man, "We will see" (55). It is for the same reason of instilling into the girl–child self-confidence and the will and determination to succeed in life in any field of life's endeavour that Aidoo creates exceptional female characters who excel in their professions like Adjoa, the best junior athlete of the region and protagonist of the story, "The Girl Who Can," Akuba, the first female pilot of her African country who is the protagonist of "Heavy Moments," and She–of–ten–years-old in the story, "She–Who–Would–Be-King" whose daughter becomes the first President of the Confederation of African States.

That is because Aidoo believes that the improvement of the condition of women's lives should not be separated from their contribution to nation–building through alternative roles other than those of marriage hitherto prescribed for women by the society. To corroborate that fact, here is the third person editorial omniscient narrator's comment when the male cadets

ask what the two female recruits who are said to be the best candidates that year are looking for:

> It had never occurred to the questioners that Akuba Baidoo and Sarah Larbi wanted from the Academy what they too had gone there for. That if being a flying soldier was something to be Enjoyed and lived by, then other people including women could want it too (65).

It might be natural for man and woman to copulate to bear children. However, most of the rest of the ordering of society is man–made or artificial. Sexism, gender hierarchy, marriage, womanhood, female inferiority and the arrogance of male superiority are all socio-cultural constructs. That is why feminists like Ama Ata Aidoo and the rest strive to create political space for women in nation–building in fiction, so that other women can emulate in everyday life such successful female characters as those in the following short stories in this segment. Aidoo breaks down complacencies and reveals that most of those myths which tend to inhibit women are all socio-cultural constructs which can and should be reversed.

Creating Political Space for Women in "Heavy Moments" "She–Who–Would–Be-King" and the title story, "The Girl Who Can,"

In "Heavy Moments," for instance, the myth that a woman should not wear trousers because they make urinating difficult is retrogressive. If Akuba had adhered to the tenets of such a myth, she would neither have joined the Air Force nor to realize her dream of flying a plane,. In spite of all the discouragement from the society, and amidst contempt and ridicule from the male cadets, Akuba defies such a myth and remains in the Air Force. With determination, she successfully flies a plane on her final test day. When she succeeds, those same male colleagues herald her as "a jolly good fellow." Aidoo projects into the future and envisions a time when gender barriers are broken and when women who prove their mettle are given the opportunity to rule or assume positions of responsibility like men.

A futuristic writer is one who anticipates the future and creates possible avenues or areas of progress and even technological development as human beings continue in their advancement and attempt to overcome nature. In the short story "She-Who-Would-Be-King," Aidoo exhibits her skill as a futuristic writer by projecting into the future to reveal how comfortable the "Old Queen" is and how pleased she is with herself and the world, probably because of the political space created for women by allowing her grand-daughter to become the President of the Confederation of African States. As a futuristic writer, Aidoo deftly dabbles into Architecture, politics and technology. She exhibits her skill as a futuristic writer by blending foreign and African architectural designs to suit the African extended family

requirements. This is what we are told by the third-person omniscient editorial narrator in "She-Who-Would-Be-King":

> It is really the square open space linking the four sides of the house, roofed with glass, and a huge skylight created in the process. So as you approach from the garage you are pleasantly surprised to find yourself entering a classical African clan courtyard, which is also a lounge in the European style (56-7).

She also projects into technological development like envisioning the enlarged television screens. She even dabbles into the field of aeronautic technology as demonstrated below in the following passage while talking, thus, about the protagonist, Akuba, of "Heavy Moments"

> She wished the plane was one of those futuristic self-fuelling machines that could go forever on ordinary air. Or at least, one of those then being planned for American Presidents which its designers claimed would be able to refuel in midair, and then fly non-stop for eight days or something monstrous like that (67).

In this short story, "Heavy Moments," Aidoo demonstrates how the rights and respect for women can be implemented in the society. Even if everybody is guilty including both men and women in the denigration of women, owing to negative socialization or indoctrination, someone can start the positive change of attitude towards women and the implementation of their rights. Through Aidoo's creative imagination, she gets the Director of the Academy to enforce the positive change of attitude towards the female Air Force cadets, even though "he himself had been one of the worst offenders" in pulling expensive or lewd jokes behind their backs. "So he had promised he would do something about it. He subsequently called his lieutenants, spoke to them and asked them to speak to their men" (65).

This positive attitude towards women would encourage and empower them to be achievers in their various areas of life's endeavours. That era of denigration of women as passive, docile and unintelligent would, then, be past and forgotten. If women succeed in their endeavours, the society would learn to accept, cheer or applaud them and welcome them into the ranks of achievers the way the on-looking crowd greets Akuba after she successfully flies the plane and brings it to a stop (71). This is what we are told by the third-person omniscient narrator:

> Then she was actually taxing on the airstrip. She brought the plane to a stop. She realized that there was quite a crowd waiting for her…Then someone broke into that mad English song: "For she is a jolly good fellow…." Everyone took the song up. And she wanted to tell them, "Silly, can't you see I am not a 'fellow' at all? Jolly or not?" How had all these men managed to change so

> much within such a short time? After all what they had put her and Yaa through (71)?

As Aidoo creates a political domain for women in the social polity, she no longer limits the description of their actions to domestic-chores like male authors of the old tradition. Women's activities now include even flying an air-plane- an activity which, hitherto, was exclusively reserved for men. The detailed description of Akuba's action is to make up for the omission of women's sensibilities, actions and introspection in early male-authored works. Here is what we are told by the editorial third-person omniscient narrator: "Enjoying the release of the tension at the bottom of her belly, she flushed the toilet, washed her hands, shut the door of the toilet and returned to the cockpit" (64). Then the omniscient narrator goes on to discuss Akuba's introspection thus:

> "One of these days, you are going to burst your bladder" (63) . . . Now where had she heard the One about the old man who in an argument as to whether women should wear trousers, had calmly declared, puffing on his pipe, that it should not really be a problem for anybody but women themselves? If they want to imitate men, fine. They will find out whether they should wear trousers when they want to urinate (64)!

All those proverbs, incidents and sayings were flashbacks on Akuba's mind linking them to a memorable night when she inadvertently peed after a heavy knock on her head by her auntie, Mampa.

Aidoo, the psychologist, is able, through her third-person omniscient narrator to discern the goings-on on Akuba's mind. She also knows that most intelligent children have ideas which they cannot express like Adjoa in the story, "The Girl Who Can." As young Akuba of "Heavy Moments" wakes up at the sound of a passing plane and starts crying because the plane's drone has died down indicating its departure, when she would have liked to be up there flying, we are told: "When her big mother Mam'Panyin asked her what the matter was, she couldn't speak. She just sat there wailing" (67).

It is remarkable that when the rural people cannot explain a situation like the reason for Akuba's wailing, they tend to refer to the individual as a witch. "In exasperation, Mampa had called her a witch of a child, wailing in the middle of the night" (67). As for the situation itself concerning Akuba's flying of an aircraft, many myths are created around it; and this forms part of the collective unconscious of the people. Aidoo seems to use this situation to enlighten the entire society that just as the formally educated and the scientific minded can now see the untruths in such old myths in the traditional society, so also should they learn to see the untruth in the false traditional myths about women.

Here is an example of such a traditional myth: "…wailing in the middle of the night. Did she know it was a taboo? A bad omen? Because all the bad

spirits will come and join in and then someone in the house or neighbourhood was bound to die for sure" (67). It is owing to such false myths about women, imbibed through socialization, that everybody in the Academy, hitherto exclusively for men, asks the same question when Akuba Baidoo and Sarah Larbi are recruited as cadets into the Air Force Academy. "Women? But, what do they want?" The third person omniscient narrator replies, thus, to their question: "It had never occurred to the questioners that Akuba Baidoo and Sarah Larbi wanted from the Academy whatever they too had gone there for. That if being a flying soldier was something to be enjoyed and lived by, then other people – including women – could want it too" (65). It is as a result of such societal prejudices that Mampa rhetorically asks Akuba, thus, when the latter declares her intention to join the Air Force: "But how do you expect me to go and tell anybody that you are actually going to drive an aeroplane through the skies and be believed" (70)?

Aidoo, thus, succeeds in her fiction to espouse a positive consciousness of the society concerning the capabilities of women, envisions the nature of women's eventual unfolding, and creates new and alternative roles, other than the socially prescribed ones, for contemporary African women to improve their lives and get involved in nation-building and the decolonization process for the positive transformation of the entire society.

Because Aidoo, like Kwame Nkrumah, would want the whole of Africa united, she depicts in her short story air-routes linking West Africa to the north of Africa and beyond after taking off from southern and central Africa. This is when in her creative imagination she tries to prove that Akuba was born flying.

> Her maternal grand-parents' village lay in the path of the planes that flew over coastal West Africa: from southern and central Africa on their way to North Africa and beyond to Europe, as well as those that flew from those northern places to the south (65-6).

If it was during the day, Akuba would run out screaming their usual chorus with her friends that the plane should buy some bread and bring it to her on its return journey. Bread is one of the staple foods which colonialism has added to our variety of foods in Africa up till the present day. Whenever a grown-up is travelling, children often request for bread as a take-home present. To ensure that she ridicules colonialism and the false impression on Africans that Europe is the nerve-centre of civilization, the third person editorial omniscient narrator states: "But she remembered that the grown-ups always said that whatever came from overseas was very special. So maybe that included b-r-e-a-d" (66)? This statement from "Heavy Moments" reminds us of and can be compared to the following account of how a neo-colonial agent, Sammy, attempts to prepare Sissie's mind for her first trip to Europe in *Our Sister Killjoy:*

> Sammy had obviously been to their country before…. He was very anxious to get her to realize …. That, somehow going to Europe was altogether more like a dress rehearsal for a journey to paradise (*9*).

Aidoo's description of Akuba's childhood memories or her "running out if it was during the day, and screaming their usual chorus with her friends that the plane should buy some bread and bring it to her on its return journey, reminds this writer of reacting in exactly the same manner and expressing the same wish while she was a child. Aidoo's short stories speak to her like nothing else that she has ever read. There is great affinity in the culture, the setting, the language and even between Aidoo's people of Ghana and those of this writer in Cross River State of Nigeria. The Efik people of Cross River State, Nigeria retain their identity as Efiks even in Ghana, whereas the largest ethnic group in Cross River State, the Bakor or Ejagham, formerly grouped among the Ekoi tribes to which this writer belongs, have retained their language and matrilineal culture but have a different name in Ghana, since even in Nigeria they have not always had a common name until as recently as 1967, after the creation of States in Nigeria.

The fact that the affinity between these two groups of people in Nigeria and Ghana could remain so close in nearly everything after some centuries of separation, probably after the end of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade when people who had been shipped from Nigeria, awaiting final transportation to the West Indies and the Americas were abandoned in the former Gold Coast just by Elmina Castle, the largest slave dungeon on the west coast of Africa, euphemistically referred to as a castle, located in Accra, Ghana, the last port of departure from Africa, calls for further investigation and building of bridges of friendship and kinship.

Because this writer speaks seven Nigerian languages fluently, she could identify them amongst the languages spoken in Ghana, and how some of the languages have been mixed to produce new ones. She can also identify them in some of the names in Aidoo's fiction. For example Maami Ama in the title story "No Sweetness Here" means Mother of love in Efik. This fits the character appropriately because she loves her only son Kwesi so much that she is prepared to receive the teacher's strokes of the cane in place of him. The same appropriateness goes for a name like Nyiamekye, which though pronounced slightly differently in Ghana as /Nyiametche/ still means a gift from God when pronounced as it is spelt, in Mbube language which is the mother tongue of this writer. For Mami Fanti, Nyiamekye is a gift from God, since he survived through the intervention of the Mallam, a diviner or soothsayer, while all the babies born before him died.

It is not surprising then that Aidoo like Kwame Nkrumah, the first indigenous Ghanaian Head of State, keeps emphasizing Pan-Africanism, since she has that evidence of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, epitomized in the Elmina Castle, stirring her in the face perpetually. If Africans realized this very close affinity among the various ethnic groups and among one another – a realization which has been deliberately delayed by the borders

created by colonialism and the demand for travel documents – and the negative impact of colonialism and slavery on them, they would learn to detribalize their mentality and stop all civil wars and any form of acrimony. This, then, would be one of the benefits of feminist studies, such as this one. There would also be a genuine advocacy for female leadership in Africa because as mothers most women would encourage peace and the survival of their "hard born" or "hard earned" children rather than encourage war and the loss of their children or loved ones.

The same positive spirit of determination to succeed and rejection of defeat and inferiority is replicated in the story, "She–Who–Would- Be-King." This title is remarkable because it reminds us of the title "*She That Must Be Obeyed*." Probably that is why Aidoo states in bracket under the title "with an apology to Rudyard Kipling." Because the two opening words "AN ENCOUNTER" are in capitals, it becomes note-worthy that what initially could be classified as a dialogue turns out to become truly an encounter with a sexual political undertone. It is also note-worthy that the characters are not given proper names. For instance, the older person, the man is simply identified as: "He-of-25 years old" while the little girl is identified as "she-of-10-years-old." The man represents all the oppressive men of his sex who want to keep women inhibited and marginalized, while the girl represents all the new generation of women who have become feminist conscious and who strive under all circumstances to overcome the, hitherto, retrogressive traditional myths, inhibitions and cultural norms which militate against women's autonomy and put them under constraint.

When asked what she intends to become in future, "She-of-10-years-old" says that she aspires to become the president of her country, probably Ghana. Metaphorically, she aims at the sun, but in the end, she gets at least to the moon. She becomes not only a lawyer but also a University professor and the Dean of the Law Faculty, and her house is regarded as the most fascinating in town, though not the richest. The girl's aspiration ironically becomes manifest in grand style, not in herself but in her daughter who becomes not just the president of her country, Ghana, but the President of the Confederation of African States. In the words of the man's workers at the site: "Contri chief be President, all Africa chief no be President, e be King. So as for this woman, e be She-King" (61-2).

The writing of the man's exclamation, "W-H-A-T-?-!-!" in capitals expresses the extent of his shock at the girl's ambition to become the President of their country. The girl's bold response with a rhetorical question: "Why Not?" expresses the intensity of her feminist consciousness and determination to succeed in the face of all odds. The only reason advanced by "He-of-25-years-old" why the girl cannot be the President of their country is because of men's inhibition, as he reiterates, thus: "Listen, I don't think the men of this country will ever let a woman be their President" (56). That chauvinistic notion is debunked and womanhood gets redefined as not just a state of being a woman and limited to remain as wife and mother, but also a

state of being a president of the whole of Africa. This is reminiscent of what Molara Ogundipe-Leslie tells us of womanhood in Africa in pre-colonial times. She informs us that womanhood in Africa does not only relate to gender because situations exist where women adopt other gender roles. She reminds us of women in the armies of Dahomey in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, women who marry wives in Igboland and lord it over the husbands of their acquired wives, and women who are called "men" when they attain certain levels of economic and social independence … women who are professionally liberated, such as owners of theatre troupes or poets, among the Enuani Western Igbo, and women who are financially independent and strong in character who are named "men" (ALT 15:8).

Another remarkable issue is that the girl's response, "No? We shall see" (55), to the man's comment, "You are mad," recurs towards the end of the story after the girl's aspiration becomes manifest in her daughter. During another encounter many years later, this time with his forty-year-old-son, the man now speaks in defence or in favour of the female President of Africa. He contradicts his son who claims that in Africa, leaders never vacate their offices if they can help it. Rather they wait to be thrown out in coups, or else they stay in office until they rot with old age. Worse still, those waiting as deputies or opponents to succeed them are usually no better. The former misogynist who used to be "He-of-25-years-old" now "He-of-74-years-old" states:

> "These are the 2020s. Not the 1970s or the 80s or even the 90s. In any case, it was I who lived through all that. Not you. So, shut up. And she is a woman" (60). When his son attempts to contradict him asking what difference it makes, the old man insists saying: Should be a lot. Those were power-hungry old men…and power-hungry young men… Okay. Well, she is a young woman, and she doesn't seem to be hungry for anything, least of all power" (60).

It is at this juncture that his son coincidentally repeats the same expression used by "She-of-10-years-old," saying: "No? We shall see" (60), at the beginning of the story in the opening episode.

Aidoo projects and writes in the future like George Orwell. Whereas George Orwell writes of happenings in the future long before the year 1984 which becomes the title of his novel, Aidoo projects into the future and prospects events that take place in 2026. The narrative technique used to establish the year of the prevalent action in the short story is remarkable. The editorial third-person omniscient narrator states: "And now, the year is 2026." This style is necessary not only to attract the future period into the present but also to distinguish this period of positive societal transformation and women's self-actualization from the time of the retrogressive happenings at the beginning of the story, like the dialogue or encounter between the girl, "She-of-10-years-old" and the man, "He-of-25-years-old."

In a similar manner another episode is introduced with the presentation of other characters by the same editorial third-person omniscient narrator who states: "The old woman is 86 years old. Her daughter, the lawyer (whose story this should have been) turned 59 six months ago" (56). The story should have been that of the fifty-nine-year-old woman if she had become the President as she aspired about 40 years earlier. The narrator continues: "Her granddaughter (whose story it turns out to be) would be 36 at year's end." (56). The lawyer-professor who predicted that she would be the country's President must have been 60-36 = 24 years old when she had the child who has now turned out to be the first female president of the Pan-African nation, referred to as the "Confederation of African States."(CAS) (58). As a result, the female President is referred to as She-King. It is note-worthy that the barrier of gender is now broken since a woman can now be referred to as King, even though qualified. She is not queen since she is the executive President of the confederation. This is unlike Queen Elizabeth of England who is only a ceremonial monarch. It is rather her grandmother who is referred to as the "Old Queen," having assumed the role and position by virtue of her granddaughter's office as President or She-King of the whole of Africa.

The "Old Queen" is now very comfortable and everybody around her in the family fusses over her believing that being so "old beyond joy and sorrow," that is "the only way she can jubilate with them over this most welcome, but still unbelievable piece of news" (56). However, life has not always been easy. "In fact, if anybody had ever told her that a day would come when she would feel this much at peace with herself and the world, she would have laughed in her face" (56).

It is note-worthy that it is a woman's story even though it is claimed that: "But then this is not supposed to be her (the Old Queen's) story" (56). It is assumed that the supposed interlocutor of the Old Queen is a woman, not a man, as is usually the case in the Old Tradition or in male-authored works. That explains the use of the pronoun "her" in the clause: "she would have laughed in *her* face" (56). Again, even though "there are, at least, four generations of the family in this "classical African clan courtyard, which is also a lounge in the European style," the story is woven around a lineage of only female members, namely: the old queen, her daughter the lawyer-professor, her grand-daughter the new President of Africa, and the fourth generation made up of the young ones who fuss over the Old Queen. Thus, this justifies Katherine Frank's claim that most African female writers, including Ama Ata Aidoo, create a world of women without men. Aidoo tends to have a ready answer in her article, "Unwelcome Pals and Decorative Slaves" where she states that a woman writer should write about women just as male writers write about men.

Similarly, in the title story, "The Girl Who Can," Adjoa's grandmother, Nana, attempts to propagate the fallacious gender myth that any girl-child who does not have big strong legs or who has thin long legs like Adjoa

cannot have babies because thin legs cannot support solid hips that can support a pregnancy. Here is Nana's yardstick for approved legs:

> As I keep saying, if any woman decides to come into this world with all of her two legs, then she should select legs that have meat on them: with good calves. Because you are sure such legs would support solid hips. And a woman must have solid hips to be able to have children (30).

The irony in the verbs *decides* and *select* is note-worthy. Nana presumes that it is each woman who decides to come into the world or who selects the kind of legs she comes with, whereas nature or God does. Even though the babies, according to tradition, are owned by men, the gender myths are perpetuated by older women who are socialized to serve as agents of patriarchy. As Nana and Kaya, Adjoa's grandmother and mother, continually argue about Adjoa's legs, the latter who overhears them one day says, "I have always wanted to tell them not to worry" (28).

Through the flash–back technique, Adjoa in the first person autobiographical voice represents a probable dialogue between her mother and grandmother close to the time of Adjoa's birth: "I thank my God that your very first child is female. But Kaya, I am not sure about her legs, Hm… hm… hm" (29). It is note-worthy that grandmother is grateful to God that Kaya's first child is female. Although the Fantis are matrilineal and have a political space for women, this story anticipates and attempts to enforce an even more positive attitude of the society towards women. Therefore, it does not show the conventional contempt at birth for a female baby. However, it is taking the older generation a lot of time to re-orientate their mentality towards women. The old prejudices against women and gender myths persist. Nana's erroneous gender myth is eventually proved wrong by Adjoa. The complaint about Adjoa's legs can be compared to that against Esi's legs and height in the novel, *Changes.* What is remarkable here is that Adjoa whose story is supposed to be autobiographical and limited by the first-person narration tends to assume omniscience by knowing what argument transpired between her mother and grandmother at the time of her own birth.

This fallacy about women's legs is not accepted by the young but gifted girl-child, Adjoa. She would want to confirm whether all adult women who have successfully been delivered of children have such recommended legs. Again, she cannot accomplish her investigation owing to patriarchal inhibitions placed on children by adults. For instance, children like her are not allowed near the river in the evening when adult women go there to take their bath. Consequently, it is difficult to see the legs of adult women except those of her mother and grandmother since older women always wear long wrappers.

This gives the readers an insight into the life-style of Adjoa's or Aidoo'd people. They take their bath in the bath-house behind their living hut or in the river on their way home from farm in the evening. The women wear long

wrappers that cover their legs, probably so that men do not get easily attracted or seduced by them. An atmosphere of a rustic or pastoral people is thus created. As a gifted and very intelligent child, Adjoa proves to have an analytical mind. She concludes that her grandmother and mother must have the approved size of legs since either of them has had a child of her own:

> Therefore, the only naked female legs I have ever really seen are those of other little girls like me. Or older girls in the school. And those of my mother and Nana: two pairs of legs which must surely belong to the approved kind; because Nana gave birth to my mother and my mother gave birth to me (31).

Another bone of contention in the family is whether or not Adjoa should be allowed to go to school. Owing to Nana's prejudice, Adjoa is initially allowed to go to school as a happy riddance because her legs are supposedly of no use for child-bearing. Nana states: "Ah, maybe with legs like hers, she might as well go to school" (31). Again, the protagonist Adjoa exhibits that positive spirit of determination to succeed in life. She rejects defeat and repudiates the retrogressive cultural gender myth intended to inhibit her from achieving success because of her gender. It is that same positive spirit that Aidoo would like all the oppressed like Africans and women, in particular, to emulate for their eventual emancipation. The satire on Adjoa's grandmother, Nana, is striking. She even carries the cup on her back just as she would have carried a baby. The satire is on the treatment of the cup as if it were as precious as the baby that Nana feared that Adjoa could not have because of her kind of legs. Since Nana's only yard–stick for measuring a woman's success is in the production of a baby, she might as well carry Adjoa's trophy on her back the way a baby is normally carried in West Africa. Adjoa, the first-person narrator externalizes Nana's introspection and muttering thus: "Thin legs can also be useful… thin legs can also be useful… That even though some legs don't have much meat on them to carry hips…they can run…Then who knows…" (32-3)? Circumstances have forced Nana to swallow her words. She now carries Adjoa herself on her knees muttering. If Nana were to complete that sentence, she would probably have added, "Who knows… perhaps thin legs can support hips that can carry a pregnancy, after all." Ironically, it is a seven year old girl, Adjoa, who now passes judgment on adults saying: "Grown-ups are so strange" (32).

The story, "The Girl Who Can," opens with transliteration so as "to give a genuinely African flavour to the characters' speech" (72), as Eustace Palmer would put it. Nearly the entire story is presented in what Bernth Lindfors refers to in his article, "The Palm-Oil with which Achebe's Words Are Eaten," as the "African Vernacular Style" (4) or through transliteration in which Aidoo represents in English the utterances of a character based on an indigenous African language pattern. The sentences are fragmented with many of them starting with a co-ordinate conjunction "and" or "but". This

makes the language sound very colloquial and informal. Here is a good example: "THEY SAY that I was born in Hasodzi; 'and it is a very big village in the Central Region of our country, Ghana" (27). The addition of the first two words in capital letters demonstrates the transliteration of the African thought-pattern in English and a modification of the syntactical pattern of the English Language. But for that effect of injecting a genuine African flavor into the character's speech, the sentence would simply have read thus: "I was born in Hasodzi, a very big village in the Central Region of Ghana."

This story represents an intelligent girl-child's point of view concerning adults. It is an indictment on the aspect of patriarchy which allows adults to dominate children "as a birth-right priority", according to Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics.* Here is Adjoa's mild complaint to that effect:

> Because it is always difficult to decide: whether to keep quiet and not say any of the things that come into my head, or say them and get laughed at. Not that it is easy to get any grown-up to listen to you even when you decide to take the risk and say something serious to them (27).

Adjoa is confused because no one ever explains to her why sometimes she is asked not to repeat some of the things she says. Her grandmother Nana's reaction is to prohibit her from repeating some of the witty things she says; to burst out laughing until tears run down her face; or to repeat what Adjoa says to other grown-ups, and each starts laughing until all of them have tears running down their faces. It is a mark of an intelligent child that there are other times when some of the things she says "would not only be all right, but would be considered so funny that they would be repeated so many times for so many people's attention.

To remind us that she is still a child and cannot argue conclusively like an adult, Adjoa summarizes: "In my eyes, all my friends have got legs that look like legs; but whether the legs have got meat on them to support the kind of hips … that I don't know" (32). From her perspective, the legs of members of her peer group which are accessible to her view, unlike those of adult women whose legs are usually hidden under their wrappers, look like legs. As for her own legs which Nana said were too tiny, Adjoa would have liked to ask her not to worry, because after all they are her legs.

Another evidence of her child-like mind is her inability to discern the distance between their little village and the small town nearest to it in which her school is located. "According to the older boys and girls, the distance… is about five kilometers. I don't know what five kilometers mean" (27). Because Adjoa is a positive minded child, "school is nice…walking those kilometers did not matter" (31), whereas other children complained. Although still a child, Adjoa has a discerning enough mind to detect the fallacy in the judgment of adults:

> Like all this business to do with my legs. I have always wanted to tell them not to worry. I mean Nana and my mother. That it did not have to be an issue for my two favourite people to fight over. But I didn't want either to be told not to repeat that or it to be considered so funny that anyone would laugh at me until they cried (29).

Adjoa's strong will and determination can be assessed from her introspection. In the end, Adjoa uses her legs for sports in school where she excels and wins first prizes. In her humility, she does not tell anyone at home. Then, the teachers pick her to represent the junior section of her school in the district games where she wins the trophy.

The notion of positivism in the title of the story is not limited to women alone. It extends to include Africa and Africans as well, since women and Africans are Ama Ata Aidoo's primary concerns in her fiction. She would want women extricated from the chains of male domination and self-abasement, complacently accepted through indoctrination or negative socialization. In like manner she would want Africans striped of a colonial mentality and the belief that nothing good can come from Africa. Instead, Aidoo envisions a positive or conducive climate and fertile vegetation, not only for the protagonist's place of birth, but also for the entire African coninent. Even deserts will become fertile: "They also say that when all Africa is not choking under drought, Hasodzi lies in a very fertile low land in a district known for its good soil (27).

The two principal characters, Adjoa in "The Girl Who Can" and the President or She-King in "She-Who-Would-Be-King" belong to the same historical era, a period of affluence, abundance and surplus food in Africa when the soil is fertile. Nana or Adjoa's grandmother in "The Girl Who Can" and the "Old Queen" or the She-King's grandmother have both passed through hard times when women were seriously oppressed and when there was drought and famine, a period of lack of ostentation. This is insinuated when Nana mildly reprimands Adjoa thus for not finishing her food: "You Adjoa, you don't know what life is about … you don't know what problems there are in this life…" (27). Similar hard times in the life of the "Old Queen" can be adduced from the following comment by the third person editorial omniscient narrator:

> Her life has been very difficult, and full of surprises that were not always pleasant. She could never plan her life. So time had taken her into some awkward places (56).

The two grandmothers have experienced hard times in the past, particularly as women, before this new era of comfort and affluence. The pun on the word "problem" is note-worthy when Nana tells Adjoa that she doesn't know what problems there are in this life… (27). Whereas grandmother, Nana, is talking of the hard times which she experienced in the past before the condition of life improved, especially for women, Adjoa talks about the

problem or the difficulty she experiences whenever she does not find adequate language skills as a child to express certain ideas which she has in her head. By envisioning this period of affluence for women, Aidoo is evoking an anticipated awareness and acceptability of the possibilities and capabilities of women by the society. Aidoo's envisioned prosperous moments for women in Africa are beginning to materialize, especially with the swearing-in on January 16, 2006 of the first ever female President in an African country, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as the 24th President of Liberia.

Adjoa can be classified as a gifted or an exceptionally intelligent child, a girl-child for that matter. She is like the eponymous Anowa who sees much more than meets the eye and abhors slavery which is not only condoned but is also practised by her husband, Kofi Ako. Adjoa is also like Sissie in *Our Sister Killjoy* who claims that her African indigenous language should have been more adequate to convey the meaning of her thoughts which come out shackled in English. The following is Sissie's complaint from *Our Sister Killjoy:*

> Eh, My Love, What positive is there to be, when I cannot give voice to my soul and still have her heard? Since so far, I have only been able to use a language that enslaved me, and therefore, the messengers of my mind always come shackled (112).

The complaint about the inadequacy of English, the language of Sissie's enslavement can be contrasted with the following statement from Adjoa, in "The Girl Who Can":

> And they say I am seven years old. And my problem is that at this seven years of age there are things I can think in my head, but which, maybe, I do not have the proper language to speak them out with. And that, I think, is a very serious problem (27).

CONCLUSION

This collection of short stories, *The Girl Who Can and Other Stories*, reveals that Ama Ata Aidoo represents African women in life–like conditions to help Africans and African women, in particular, to better understand themselves and their social environment. The notion of positivism encoded in the title of this collection, *The Girl Who Can and Other Stories*, is not limited to women alone. It is meant to be extended to Africans as well, since women and Africans constitute Aidoo's primary concerns. Just as Aidoo redefines African womanhood by validating the African woman's image and creating transcendental and triumphant roles for her in an attempt to extricate her from the chains of male domination and self-abasement, complacently

accepted through socialization; in like manner the writer, Aidoo, attempts to stripe Africans of a colonial mentality and the belief that nothing good can come from Africa. Instead, she envisions a positive or conducive climate, fertile vegetation, and better government led by women, not only for Adjoa, the eponymous "girl who can" or the protagonist's place of birth, but also for the entire African continent. If even deserts can become fertile, as envisioned in the short story, "She-Who-Would-Be-King," then even men's years of tenacious clinging to traditional gender myths that discriminate against women will yield to the acceptability of women as complementary or equal partners in progress so that the African society can get positively transformed.

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