

The Ghanaian Writer, Ama Ata Aidoo

CHANGING TIMES, UNCERTAIN LIVES

Helen Fallon

Ama Ata Aidoo, Ghana's best-known woman novelist, was born in 1942. Describing her early life she says, "I came from a people who told stories." At the age of fifteen she decided that she wanted to be a writer and four years later won a short story competition.

A student at the University of Ghana in Legon, Aidoo wrote her first play, *The Dilemma of a Ghost*. It explores African and Western perceptions of the world. Having completed his studies in the United States, Ato Yawson, a young Ghanaian, returns home with his American wife, Eulalie. He has married without consulting his family – a serious breach of the norms and values of his people – and now finds himself torn between his Ghanaian culture and his acquired American ideals. The tensions between traditional Ghanaian values, with their emphasis on communal living and group support systems, and an individualistic Western culture are further played out in the confrontations between Ato's mother and his wife.

"One of the fundamental differences I see between Africa and the West," Aidoo has remarked, "is the tension between the individual and the community. In the West, the individual is a God; in Africa, the collective is God."

The clash between Western and African values is also apparent in her novel, *Our Sister Killjoy*. She uses a mixture of techniques – proverbs, poetry, drama

and straightforward storytelling – to tell the story of a young African woman's first journey to Europe and of her increasing disillusionment.

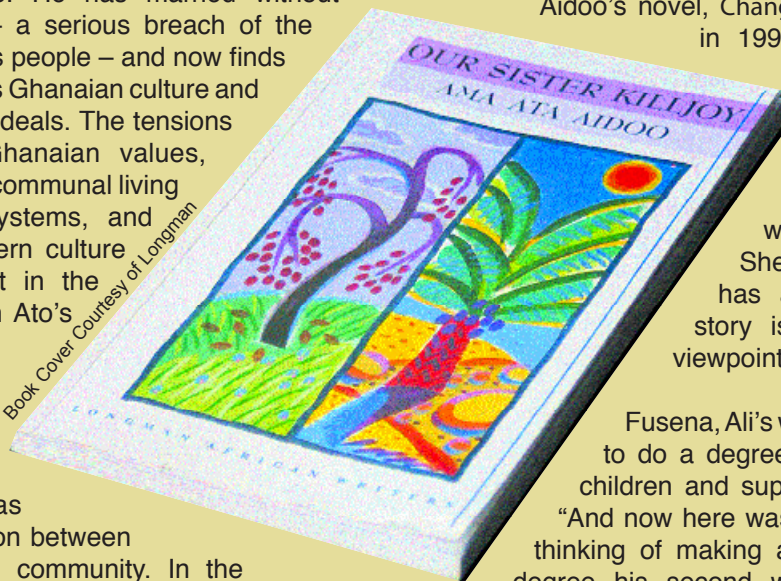
Fanti was her first language. Aidoo had to learn English and she uses it in a very original way. Her writing, with its lively and conversational style, is much closer to the oral African tradition than to a Western style of writing.

THREE WOMEN IN SEARCH OF AN IDENTITY

Aidoo's novel, *Changes: A Love Story*, published in 1991, was initially written as a radio play. Here she paints a vivid picture of the lives of contemporary Ghanaian women.

Recently divorced Esi has a well-paid job as a statistician. She falls in love with Ali who has a wife and children. The story is told from a number of viewpoints.

Fusena, Ali's wife, gave up the opportunity to do a degree in order to bring up their children and support her husband's career. "And now here was Ali telling her that he was thinking of making a woman with a university degree his second wife. So, Allah, what was she supposed to say? What was she supposed to do?" Fusena goes to the older women in Ali's family, some of whom are second, third and fourth wives. They ask themselves why so little has changed for their daughters – "school and all" – and advise her to



accept the situation.

Esi's friend, Opokuya, struggles to combine the role of wife and mother with a job as a nurse. Her words aren't uniquely African when she says, "the children and their father refuse to organize even the already-cooked supper when I'm around. You'd think that with me being away on duty at such odd hours they would have taught themselves some self-reliance, but no. When I'm home, they want to squeeze me dry to make up for the times they have to do without me."

The three women, Esi, Fusena, and Opokuya, lead very different lives in modern Ghana. But all three are dissatisfied. Esi, the divorced career woman, leaves her daughter to be brought up by her mother-in-law, but finds "there isn't much here that a single woman can do to relieve the loneliness and boredom of the long hours between the end of the working day and sleep. It is even more frightening to think that our societies do not admit that single women exist." Feeling lonely and defeated by her attempts at independence she becomes Ali's junior wife. However, her loneliness is not alleviated. Ali spends most of his time with his wife and child, visiting Esi occasionally and buying her expensive gifts to relieve his guilt.

"Why is life so hard on the professional African woman?" Esi asks Opokuya who counters with "Why is life so hard on the non-professional African woman? Isn't life even harder for the poor rural and urban African woman? But remember it is always harder for some other woman somewhere else."

TELLING IT AS IT IS

Changes: A Love Story gives Western readers a rare glimpse into the lives of contemporary middle-class Ghanaian women. In an interview in an English newspaper, the Guardian, Aidoo said, "As an African, I recognise polygamy's validity as it was traditionally practised in rural areas." What she challenges in Changes: A Love Story is polygamy in a modern urban setting, where the traditional rules of the practice – such as obtaining the consent of the first wife – are broken.

Aidoo's plays, short stories and novels depict strong women who struggle for intellectual, educational and



"At the age of 15, a teacher had asked me what I wanted to do for a career, and without knowing why or even how, I replied that I wanted to be a poet," says Ama Ata Aidoo. "I believe these moments were crucial for me because I had articulated a dream..."

(Photo: The Arts and Humanities Research Council)

professional independence in present-day Ghana, with its diverse languages, religions and customs. Ironically, modernization has not truly liberated women and Aidoo exposes the social ills of post-independence Ghanaian society, especially its treatment of women.

In 1982, Aidoo became Ghana's Minister for Education. After eighteen months in the post, she realised she could not achieve her goal of making primary education freely accessible to all. She resigned and moved to Zimbabwe to become a full-time writer. She travels and lectures extensively in Europe, North America and Africa and continues to write short stories, radio plays and poetry.

Changes: A Love Story won the 1993 Commonwealth Writers Prize for the Africa Region. ■

Helen Fallon is Deputy Librarian at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. She has taught at the University of Sierra Leone. Our Sister Killjoy is published by Longman, Changes: A Love Story by The Women's Press, London.