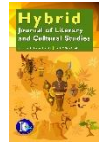




Literature and Culture: A critique of selected works of Kofi Awoonor and Ama Ata Aidoo



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Abstract

Humans strive to attain excellence by instituting norms that guide the conduct of constituent members. This effort is the basis of culture. One of the key mediums for transmitting culture is literature because it possesses the capacity to influence the way people think, shaping their attitudes. This paper, however, underscores the relationship between language and culture, sings some selected works of Awoonor and Aidoo as illustrations. For Aidoo, the focus is on her play "Anowa", while for Awoonor, two of his poems, namely "The Weaver Bird" and "The Cathedral" are used in unravelling the ways that literature helps the reader to achieve excellence in his or her endeavours. The paper attacks the monopoly of Western culture, exposing its hideous aspects, favouring multiple cultures, not one globalised culture. It calls for changes in aspects of Ghanaian culture that tends to suppress the attainment of full rights by women.

Keywords: Aidoo, Awoonor, critique, culture, Ghana, literature, society



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Public Interest Statement

Literature is an important tool used in transmitting knowledge and it connects ideologies to the world of reality. Awoonor and Aidoo through their literary works bring to light the relevance of African culture, the introduction of slavery and the dilution of African culture, as well as the subjugation of Africans by the imperial and missionary culture. In this paper, Awoonor and Aidoo highlight the accommodating nature of African culture and the consequences of Western culture and colonialism. It exposes the hideous ideas of Western culture and favours multiplicity of cultures. The paper elevates the full rights of women in African societies.

Introduction

The word 'culture' resists easy definition as it has diverse meanings and connotations. Lyons (2009, p. 301), for instance, sees it as having two notions: firstly, he equates it to a form of "civilization" or "excellence" seeing "human history as progress and self-development". Herder (1877), however, contested this position, insisting that "nothing is more deceptive than" the word culture and "its application to all nations and periods" (cf. Williams, 1976, p. 79). Herder assumes that culture is produced by communities based on their intrinsic needs. As such, the need of one society and how it relates to the universe will be different from the needs of another.

Bodley (2008) also assumes that "the ability of people to have culture comes, in large part, from their physical features[such as] having complex brains; free hands that can grasp and manipulate small objects; and a vocal tract that can produce and articulate a wide range of sounds". In another definition, Tylor (1871, p. 1) proposed culture as a system of human behaviour and thought which obeys natural laws and, therefore, can be studied scientifically: "Culture...is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of the society". For Mazrui (1996, p. 1), culture is a lens of perception, influencing how the people view themselves.

Analogous views about culture and nationhood are enshrined in Ghana's Cultural Policy (2004), which, among others, is geared towards promoting "national consciousness, national self-sufficiency and a strong sense of national identity", similar to the provisions in the Organization of African Unity's (African Union) 'Cultural Manifesto' (1969, p. 2).

Language, Communication and Culture

As Bodley explains, "people have culture primarily because they can communicate with and understand symbols. Symbols allow people to develop complex thoughts and to exchange those thoughts with others. Language and other forms of symbolic

communication, such as art, enable people to create, explain, and record new ideas and information". Put differently, Bodley is trying to say that it is through language that the values that serve as the basis of a culture can be transmitted, bringing about the state of perfection. This is the position Arnold championed in his *Culture and Anarchy* (1869, p. 44), embracing culture as having its "origin not in curiosity, but ... in the love of perfection".

Arnold defines culture as "a study of perfection" moved by the force and "not merely or primarily of the scientific passion for the pure knowledge, but also of the moral and social passion for doing good". Arnold foresees a multiplicity of cultures, but he was in favour of only one culture. He argues that leaders in these communities must be assertive, promoting what should be seen as the gold bearer, while attacking what they feel is inimical, calling for its scrapping. This means that if culture is seen as a crystallization of all that is best in a society, then 'anarchy' is the risk to that desired destination. Anarchy is, thus, a form of culture, but it is negative culture and an antithetical force the state of perfection genuine culture is expected to foster. According to Arnold, anarchy poses a danger to the whole fabric of society owing to "a working class which 'assert(s) an [Englishman's] heaven-born privilege of doing as he likes" (p. 105).

This clearly shows that some cultural products are based on the claim to racial superiority and, therefore, operate like an apartheid-like system, serving sectional needs. To be truly universal, it should be situated in a spiritual context; for it is through a religious ambit that impurities can be purified, rejuvenating the system. In this regard, it could be said that Arnold places culture and, by extension, literature in a spiritual context, as he saw culture as threatened by the process of secularization. He notes:

And religion, the greatest and most important of the efforts by which the human race has manifested its impulse to perfect itself (p. 47).

In this regard, literature is expected to perform a sacrosanct function. It is the interpreter of life. Arnold's view of culture imposes certain obligations on the individual: it forbids individualism. According to Bertens (2003, p. 172), Arnold was concerned about ruthless entrepreneurs who were busy creating an exclusively profit oriented dehumanizing economy, which has little interest in the labourers it exploits. In other words, humans must not become objects in the hands of other beings to be exploited.

Methodology

The method used in analyzing data for this paper is ideological criticism and textual analysis. Barret (1991) defines ideology as the process by which meaning is produced, challenged, reproduced and transformed. Ideological criticism is concerned with

theorizing and critiquing those processes of meaning production as social and political realities. It exposes three dimensions of the struggle present in the production of meaning; reveals the tensile relation between the production of meaning and language; highlights the multiple discourses operating within the text; and lays bare the complex nature of power relations that produce texts. It constructs the institutional context of texts, their reception and affects readers of those texts in particular social locations (Barret, 1991).

In relation to this paper, this method is used to unfold the hidden meaning in selected plays and poems written by Aidoo and Awoonor, the discourses produced within these literary works, the problems presented within the socio-political space and the ideologies they convey to readers. According to Foss and Littlejohn (2009), the primary goal of ideological criticism is to make the ideology visible. Sellnow and Sellnow (2001) observed that musicians are more than reporters, documenting an event; they present an illusion of life, amplifying a particular perspective of a situation. In the same vein, poets and playwrights are also important reporters and amplifiers of important events, occasions and practices. Hence, this paper aims to make visible important ideologies shrouded in poems and plays for better understanding and appreciation.

Secondly, textual analysis is a method that communication researchers use to describe and interpret the characteristics of a recorded or visual message (Frey et al, 1999). The rationale for choosing this method is to describe the content, structure, and functions of the messages contained in the selected poems and plays. It is also to systematically describe, analyze, interpret and evaluate the important messages and issues embedded in the selected poems/play for better understanding and appreciation.

Aidoo, Champion of Ghanaian Cultural Ideals

Some of Arnold's viewpoints about the relevance of the "sweetness" form of culture to contain the "anarchy" counterpart are well-exemplified in Aidoo's short play, *Anowa* (1983). The author embraces a number of cultural perspectives in her book, especially its denunciation of slave owning and money-grabbing. *Anowa* is partly an attack on the ruthless aspects of capitalism, imported to Ghana during the colonial period. Kofi Ako, Anowa's husband, represents the 'anarchy' that Arnold eloquently spoke of. Kofi represents greed and avarice. He is the "ruthless entrepreneur", the "profit-oriented" individual through whose activity a dehumanized economy is created. Kofi Ako develops a voluptuous appetite for selling other human beings to make money. Below is an extract of the play:

Anowa: What men?

- Kofi Ako: I hear they are not expensive ... and if ...
- Anowa: MY hus-band! Am I hear-ing you right? Have we risen so high?
Kofi Ako, do not let me hear these words again.
- Kofi Ako: 'Do not let me hear these words again.' Anowa, do you think I
am your son?
- Anowa: I do not care. We shall not buy men (p. 29).

Kofi Ako violates his culture with his aggressive business tendencies. By these actions, especially his decision to sell his manhood for money, Ako commits a sacrilegious offence which can only be expiated with his death to ensure spiritual cleansing of the despoiled land. As we are told by the Old Woman, Kofi Ako (p. 63) later shot himself. It is worth pointing out that selling one's manhood involves belief in the supernatural, which is an important aspect of Ghanaian culture. In the *Essays on Culture as Development in Africa*, Zulu (1996, p. 65) had expressed similar concerns about the impact of slavery on Africa.

Slavery, undermined the ability of African cultures to develop and progress. The basic form of social and economic organization in Africa is the community. Slavery destroyed communities by taking away healthy and productive men and women.

Kofi Ako's unethical business practices created in his wife an emotional nightmare. Aidoo uses Kofi Ako to wake up the reader to the insidious nature of slavery. Anowa died because she was driven to the edge by the husband, reminding the reader of the potency of unbridled capitalism to cause dislocations in society. As well, it signals the ability of men of goodwill to use culture as a mechanism towards imposing order to rein in such acts. This type of culture is aptly described by Arnold as anarchy as it enervates rather than energizing the society. The analysis also shows that oftentimes, more than one form of culture operates even in the local setting like Kofi Ako's community. Again, both the negative and the positive forms of culture contest for space. To prevail over evil, an upright person, in this case, Anowa, must be willing to stand up to the malevolence championed by the anarchy culture.

One critical aspect about culture illustrated in *Anowa* has to do with its link with religion. Aidoo draws on Arnold's observation that links culture to religion, placing the literary work in a spiritual context. The observance of religious rites helps people to differentiate the sacred from the profane. In the play, the reader experiences traces of religious ceremonies such as the libation episode captured in the prologue. These rites

are used by the author to evoke an atmosphere of serenity and harmony. Abura is a community whose belief in 'Asase Yaa' is sharpened by the bountiful mercies they have been experiencing from the Earth goddess. Providence has been good to the people, offering them everything in moderation. Religion is a social control measure in the community, a sub-culture helping to enforce order. It is a prerequisite for their communal blessing from the maker, and it helps in regulating their actions. The Old Man's (p. 5) words when pouring the libation point to this fact:

Here in the state of Abura,
Odomankoma, our creator, has given to man,
Everything happens in moderation:
The sun comes out each day,
But its heat seldom burns our crops;
Rains are good when they fall
And the Asase Efa the earth-goddess gives of herself to them that know
the seasons.

Thus, religion is crucial to the production of culture. In spite of the many good aspects of religious rites, Aidoo feels that there are some aspects of culture that require change. She also accepts that there are aspects of culture, especially the time-honoured norms that should be upheld. Even so, Aidoo wants women liberated from the fetters of inimical cultural practices. Her use of characters such as 'the-mouth-that-eats-salt-and-pepper', 'the Old man and the Old woman' serves as a chorus helping the listener appreciate the argument about the cultural types that ought to be preserved and those that must be eliminated.

But what shall we say of our child,
The unfortunate Anowa? Let us just say that
Anowa is not a girl to meet every day.
Old Woman: That Anowa is something else! Like all the beautiful maidens
in the tales, she has refused to marry...
Old Man: A child of several incarnations,
She listens to her own tales,
Laughs at her own jokes and
Follows her own advice. (p. 7)

Behrent (1997) says the 'Old woman' represents traditional society in many ways and sees the tragedy of the tale as a result of Anowa's disobedience, her wildness and her deviance from the role of the woman. Bodley's explanation as to how culture is produced is relevant here: "People have culture primarily because they can communicate with and understand symbols. Symbols allow people to develop complex thoughts and to exchange those thoughts with others. Language and other forms of symbolic communication, such as art, enable people to create, explain, and record new ideas and information". In this context, it should be realised that Aidoo is spearheading new ideas and thought to overcome the existing culture that portray women in a bad light, replacing it with a more positive narrative.

Another aspect of Ghanaian culture that Aidoo approves of is the need for respect for others. Respect, especially for the elderly, is an aspect of Ghanaian culture, which is much valued. Anowa's (p. 18) altercation with her parents over her choice of a husband portrays her as an insolent person. Anowa's disregard for customs was bound to bring her stern punishment.

Anowa: Please, Mother, remove your witch's mouth from our marriage.

Badua: And so you call me a witch? I wish I were a witch so that I could protect you from your folly.

Anowa: I do not need your protection, Mother.

Osam: The spirits of my fathers! Anowa, what daughter talks like this to her mother.

As Sarpong (1974, p. 77) elucidates, the natural outcome of marriage in African societies is children: "It (marriage) is something that affects the whole society. It is a matter of concern to two groups, that of the women and that of men. It is in this connection that marriage payment known as bride wealth is to be considered. However, in the case of this couple, not only did they refused to seek the permission of their parents as dictated by culture before marrying, no bride wealth was paid, meaning no marriage was contracted. Sarpong makes clear, Anowa and her husband are going to fail in their marriage as community norms inexorably prevail over individual liberties. They cannot emasculate their family from their marriage. The audience knew this will happen for the Old woman (p. 8) had predicted it: "The sapling breaks with the bending that will not grow straight".

African culture has perceived weaknesses. Cultures change over time, enabling a given society to either modify itself or discard inimical practices. The 'Old Man', touted by Behrent (1997) as the progressive voice in the play, often updates the listener about aspects of culture that must undergo change. For one thing, the Old Man, according to

Behrent, is less prone to search for one person to blame. The idea of cultures moderating overtime is well articulated in Aidoo's play. Indeed, one of the things that engaged Aidoo's attention in *Anowa* was to trace the sources of power within a cultural system, and how this power is often employed. Gramsci's (1899-1937) work on cultural hegemony and subordination is relevant here.

His study reveals that people sometimes actively work towards their own subordination, which coincides with the continuation of the dominant power groups. When the reader meets Badua in phase one of the play, she gives reasons why her daughter must marry instead of becoming a priestess. In that monologue, Badua re-echoes what society expects of women and seems to defend that role.

Badua: I want my child
To be a human woman
Marry a man, tend a farm
And be happy to see her
Peppers and her onions grow.
A woman like her
Should bear children
Many children,
So she can afford to have
One or two die. (p. 12)

Badua prescribes a domestic role for Anowa. But, Anowa is a non-conformist who refuses to live by the mother's edicts. As a protest play, *Anowa* can be considered as a symbolic representation of oppressed women. Of course, those who could not understand her resorted to labelling as a way of getting her in tow.

Old Woman: She is a witch.
She is a devil.
She is everything evil.
Old Man: Who?
Old Woman: Have you not heard? She (Anowa) thinks the world has
not seen the like of her before.

What is Anowa's crime? She speaks against the husband engaging in the slave buying. Because Ako is a male, despite his many failings, his people are willing to forgive him. However, Anowa could not be understood because she is a woman. A woman with

progressive ideas in this cultural setting is deemed inferior to a man regardless of whether that man makes sense or not. Aidoo (p. 52) feels this is an aspect of culture that must be reformed:

Anowa: I hear in other lands a woman is nothing. And they let her know this from the day of her birth. But here, O my spirit mother, they let a girl grow up as she pleases until she is married. And then she is like any woman anywhere: in order for her man to be a man, she must not think, she must not talk. O – o, why didn't someone teach me how to grow up to be a Woman?

The Old Man's ideas are a subversive strategy adopted by Aidoo to undercut the power of patriarchy and matriarchy, and to illustrate how this power is often abused to stifle the creativity of women kind. As recognised by the framers of the *African Cultural Manifesto* (1969):

We must go back to the sources of our values, not to confine ourselves to them, but rather to draw up a critical inventory in order to get rid of archaic and stultifying elements, the fallacious, and alienating foreign elements brought in by colonialism, and to retain only those elements which are still valid. (p. 1)

Allan (1999) says Anowa is a chasm between Africa's past and the present, and the difficult search for links. Anowa [the character] is seen as a symbolic representation of oppressed women. Kofi Ako represents patriarchy. He pushes Anowa to her end because of the power he wields as a man. Angmor's (1996) reading of Anowa reveals that although character is at variance with her environment, the reality is that "she is advance of her time" than her accusers. An inimical cultural practice Aidoo wants done away with is the practice of witchcraft.

Awoonor: Transmitting Ideas about the African Personality

Like Aidoo, Kofi Awoonor sees literature as a medium for transmitting ideas about the African personality. He also sees literature as one of the tools that can be employed in preserving African culture against the onslaught of foreign cultures. Awoonor is particularly concerned with the image of the African, especially the propensity of Africans to adopt foreign lifestyles to the detriment of their own. Angmor (1996) observes that

Awoonor's works depict nostalgia about his "dying native culture". This means that Awoonor sees literature as a means of preserving authentic Ghanaian culture. In the poem entitled "The Cathedral", Awoonor expresses disapproval about the way Ghanaians imbibe foreign values to the detriment of their own. He, particularly, looks at the impact of foreign values on Ghanaian culture. Using contrasting images, Awoonor gives consideration to "the senseless cathedral of doom", which is a representation of Western culture and compares it to "dirty patch" which is a symbolic depiction of the communal African system.

Like the ruthless slave dealers in *Anowa* (p. 6), with whom Kofi Ako was said have "found a common sauce-bowl in which they play games", Awoonor attacks imperialists "who sent surveyors and builders [to] cut that tree, planting in its place a huge cathedral of doom." These are the voracious capitalist that Arnold (1869) had warned mankind about. In replacing African culture with the European one, a new monetized ethic was introduced, becoming an antithetical force challenging communal African norms based on the ethos of consensus building. This is the community that Awoonor is wistful about. The basis of this community is cohesion, oneness, harmony and compliance to the group's norms. These attributes are at the very core of African mores. Awoonor feels that this way of life is being distorted by the influx of foreign cultures. "The last fires of the tree" as recorded in line five of the excerpt reinforces this fact. According to one account, the "the last fires of the tree" could be the "last lit for cooking" by the tribal owners of the land before they were evicted for the construction of the "senseless cathedral of doom."

The extract reveals the imperialist bent of the missionaries who invaded Africa supposedly to spread the word of God. Instead of a Christian mission, these builders [of the senseless cathedral] came to despoil the natural resources of the people. Their intentions were anything but godly; they were evil people primarily using religion as a means to gain access to the natural endowments of the people. Their deeds did not conform to the Biblical ethos, which warns against coveting a neighbour's property. In addition, they unjustifiably used the Bible to instil in their host a sense of inferiority. Meanwhile, the local people were men of goodwill. Awoonor uses the "Cathedral" to illustrate the European Christian culture as a pretentious one.

Awoonor's grief about the swap of Africa's way of life with other cultures is taken up in "The Weaver Bird", one of his sardonic poems. The meddling nature of British imperialism can be felt in the first lines of the poem: "The weaver bird built in our house and laid its eggs on our only tree". The use of the pronoun "our" emphasizes collective ownership, which is the hallmark of African culture. The pronoun accentuates the idea of African hospitality by allowing the weaver bird to lay its eggs on "our" only tree. As we shall see in the remaining lines of this poem, some guests are demonic; that is, they are robbers in disguise who can cause damage, defiling cherished "old shrines" with their

"excrement". Awoonor denounces foreign missionaries as taking undue and undeserved advantage of the generosity of their guests. They are corrupt people who preach virtue; they are so called democrats who employ brutish methods in implanting their ideology. This succinctly reflects the contradictory nature of Western culture. It thrives, partly, on exploiting other cultures. African culture on the other hand is accommodating:

We did not want to send it away
We watched the building of the nest
And supervised the egg-laying
And the weaver bird returned in the
guise of the owner. [Lines 3-6]

One can deduce from this extract the fact that the poet is angry with the "Weaver bird". This bird is adulterating African culture with its excrements, the missionaries. Awoonor feels that Africa is being adumbrated by foreign values. We see the communal vision spoken of in the "Weaver Bird" and "The Cathedral" being replaced by an invading culture. In *Anatomy of West African Poetry*, Afful-Boachie (2000) sees African culture and way of life is in danger of being overrun by Western culture. Awoonor's reference to Africa's past is not only to warn against the undesirable aspects of foreign culture; he is also stressing the need for cultural preservation as a way of rehabilitating what has been destroyed. Similarly, Mazrui (1996) argues that no developed nation accomplished its state of development by abandoning its culture in preference for other cultures, arguing that Africa can only develop if it returns to its culture.

Comparative Analysis of Awoonor and Aidoo's Literary Works

As evidenced in the foregoing analysis, literature is an aspect of culture and literature is language. As Ngugi observes, language is the carrier of culture. Awoonor sees African culture as being under siege from the intrusion of foreign influence. That is why he adopts a dismissive tone in accusing blacks who are assisting white racists to discredit their native culture. As Achebe (2001, pp. 1783-1794) expresses, there is nothing savage about Africa and it will be unwise on the part of Africans to follow the white man's "cultural eraser". Awoonor projects what Newell (2006) calls "African humanism" as against European notions of individualism. In this regard, Awoonor can be described as an idealist who sees African culture as pure, maintain its pristine nature.

We see similar images in Aidoo's world. The pouring of the libation and the talk about marriage are indicative of the pre-eminence of the African society over the individual. Thus, Aidoo revels in her cultural heritage as Awoonor. But, she is not in full

accord with all of its practices. She offers modifications. She sees aspects of the culture, especially those relating to women, as needing reformation. For instance, Aidoo opposes patriarchy and contests the right of men to use religion, as a pretext to impose certain restrictions on women as happened in the case of Anowa. Aidoo therefore promotes the ascendancy of women in all aspects of social life. Equally, she attacks the practice of witchcraft and the ruthless practice of slavery.

Whereas Awoonor is concerned with the abuse of power, especially in international circles, Aidoo is more concerned with the abuse of power in gender relationships. Like most African female writers, Aidoo challenges, to quote Newell, the "fixity of gender roles." Aidoo wants women to be part of the decision-making process. Awoonor, on the other hand, wants European nations to stop poking their noses in the affairs of other states. They must not use their superior economic status to impose their will on other nations the same way Aidoo does not prefer men to force their ideas on women.

Like Awoonor, Aidoo uses her work to illustrate the history of Ghana such as the advent of the slave-owning episodes that recapture for audience how slavery and colonialism came to Africa. This is similar to the images created about the white imperialist in the 'Weaver Bird'. Overall, Aidoo can be said to have a more flexible view of culture as against Awoonor's more rigid viewpoint. Awoonor proffers a communal vision where individuals subordinate their interests to the larger interest of society, which is the state of perfection and sweetness that Arnold spoke profoundly about. Aidoo is not against this will, but strongly objects to some aspects of the culture that she feels require reformation. Both, however, draw on the ideas of Arnold that sees culture being mixed with religion. They also oppose the scourge of imperialism, whether engineered by a foreign agent or by an insider. Drawing on Gramsci's ideas, both scholars illustrate how people, invariably, work towards their own subordination. For Aidoo, it is the issue of patriarchy where women unquestionably acquiesce to the requirement of unscrupulous men, while for Awoonor, it is about Ghanaians falsely copying from European culture and using it to enslave themselves.

Conclusion

At the heart of both literature and culture is the expression of ideas. Awoonor and Aidoo have amply demonstrated the relation between the two concepts and how they can help in communicating ideas and knowledge about society and its process. One of the enduring notions of culture is the fact that it often serves as a transmittable outlet for generating and diffusing knowledge. Both literature and culture help in the transmission of knowledge, ideas, norms and values of a given people and therefore setting standards

for future generations. In that regard, both literature and culture are expressions of some of the purest thoughts of a people. Like culture therefore, literature is a study in perfection.

Bionote

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