‘The Woman Question’ and its Repercussions for Africa

In her 1994 article “How Could Things Fall Apart for Whom They Were Not Together?,” scholar Florence Stratton writes, of the “critical silence” surrounding the sexist undertones in author Chinua Achebe’s 1958 novel *Things Fall Apart*: “[it] can be attributed to the same cause as that to which Achebe assigns responsibility for the silence on [Joseph] Conrad’s racism: sexism ‘is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely undetected’” (35). As Stratton alludes, African authors, such as Achebe, have by no means been exempt from the patriarchal trends of contemporary literature. Increasingly, however, African writers have striven to portray female personas and focus on the lives of women. In her 1970 collection of short stories entitled *No Sweetness Here*, Ghanaian author Ama Ata Aidoo consistently exhibits a focus in such areas. Aidoo’s stories examine, among other issues, the effects of neocolonial culture on African women, and uncover telling correlations between sexually and culturally based oppressions in Africa. In her scrupulous look at the influence of colonial culture on African women, Aidoo, in *No Sweetness Here*, notably reveals a pair of trends which permeate the neocolonial African populous: namely, the prominence of material aspirations and the ensuing objectification of human beings.

Aidoo’s stories pinpoint instances of cultural mimicry as principal channels by which materialistic tendencies take root. Her African women often imitate the standards of beauty prevalent in consumerist, colonial cultures. Mansa, a Fante woman in Aidoo’s “In the Cutting of a Drink,” adopts such a beauty standard, as she is seen letting her straightened hair drop “on her shoulders like that of a white woman” and wearing “red
paint” on her lips that “looked like a fresh wound” (36). Earlier in the same story, the colonial influence on the behavior of African women surfaces as “the daughter of a woman” drinks beer “like a man” (34). Such changes, although apparently external, signal a fundamental shift towards colonial standards. In a 1991 interview, Aidoo touched on a similar idea as she stated that “clothes . . . are part of the minutia of civilization; they can symbolize cultural loss and cultural gain. . . . Women are expected to be African or Indian or Pakistani, by the way that we dress” (“A New Tail” 302). While Mansa’s hairstyle and lipstick may not initially seem to be of great import, it is ultimately, in their implicit confluence with colonial mores, these aspects of her appearance which confirm her discord with African tradition. This breach with traditional values is additionally witnessed through Mansa’s prostitution. After her brother asks about her “work,” she screams, “Let me tell you that any kind of work is work. You villager, you villager, who are you?” (36). By adhering to a foreign standard of beauty and set of values, Mansa seems to consequently gain a higher esteem for material wealth.

After identifying with the ‘Western’ culture of the colonizers, many of Aidoo’s women, allured by the culture’s emphasis on consumerism, associate with prosperous men in hopes of reaping material benefit. Setu, the central female character in “For Whom Things Did Not Change,” states “that there must be something wrong when young girls who have seen their blood not many moons gone, go sleeping with men who are old enough to be their fathers, and sometimes their grandfathers” (10). In “Two Sisters,” Mercy, herself a “young girl,” does precisely this with two distinguished politicians. After Mercy’s sister gets word of these acts and turns to James, her own husband, for
advice, he remarks, “Every morning her friends who don’t earn any more than she does wear new dresses, shoes, wigs and what-have-you to work. What would you have her do?” (98). Critic Chioma Opara claims that Aidoo includes such statements “to stoke our consciousnesses of female subjugation in Ghana and the need to change societal practices that have been compounded by postcolonial western values” (138). The original “societal practices” which Opara refers to as “compounded by postcolonial western values” appear to include those of polygamy.

The engagements of Aidoo’s prosperous men, in that they involve multiple women, may externally resemble traditional polygamous practices, but, in the mens’ regular objectification of women, conspicuous cultural discrepancies arise. “Traditional polygamy,” as critic Ketu Katrak notes in the afterword to No Sweetness Here, “with all its problems, requires male responsibility” (147). Aidoo’s “big men” demonstrate limited accountability in interactions with their “girlfriends.” Mensar-Arthur, a member of parliament in “Two Sisters,” repeatedly regards Mercy with a possessive tone as “my darling” and “my Black Beauty,” and reiterates her subordinate position through regular patronizing remarks, including references to her opinions as “childish.” After Mercy brings up the subject of her sister’s apprehension over her association with wealthy, older men, Mensar-Arthur attempts to resolve the situation by offering to purchase a sewing machine motor for her sister, and reminds Mercy, “I normally take good care of my girlfriends” (94-95). Such hasty monetary solutions epitomize the absence of liability among Aidoo’s “big men” as well as their cultural incongruity. Instead of confronting these issues, in which they are integrally involved, the “big men” attempt to evade them in classic consumerist fashion: with their wallets.
In their overt immorality, the acts of Aidoo’s “big men” overshadow the comparably impure assent of the women themselves and, in many cases, that of their close relatives. In “Two Sisters,” James attempts to explain to his wife Connie the rationale behind her sister Mercy’s involvement with Mensar-Arthur, as he asks, “Since every other girl she knows has ruined herself prosperously, why shouldn’t she?” (98). If taken to convey Mercy’s true rationale, this remark seems to imply that the objectifying treatment extended to Mercy cannot be considered exclusively as an act of guilt by Mensar-Arthur, as Mercy is by all means willfully involved in the process. Katrak echoes this idea, as she writes that Aidoo “portrays women like Mercy, who use their bodies as weapons to acquire material wealth and to climb the social ladder” (147). Aidoo does not depict such women, however, without taking the opportunity to lambaste their judgment, as well as that of any family members who may espouse similar priorities. In “For Whom Things Did Not Change,” for example, Setu, after reflecting on the sudden accumulation of riches by a young girl, exclaims, “I spit upon such big men! I spit upon such mothers! I spit upon such daughters!” (13). Although Connie similarly disapproves of her sister’s actions, her husband James suggests that such a perspective may indeed be anomalous, as he says, “Christ! See Connie, the funny thing is that I am sure you are the only person who thought it was a disaster to have a sister who was the girl-friend of a big man” (100).

Such attitudes, like the acts to which they pertain, elucidate the rapid displacement of traditional cultural tenets by those of Western civilizations, a pattern which afflicts the men and women of Africa. In 1991, Aidoo made reference to these circumstances, as she stated, “the term postcolonial makes me uncomfortable. Post
what? Because it has not gone yet” (“A New Tail” 308). Throughout No Sweetness
Here, Aidoo couples this acknowledgment with a cognizance of the transcendence of
gender lines demonstrated by colonial influences, and evokes a sense of the necessity of a
similar transcendence by African men and women in the name of realizing a more
autonomous culture. Critic Nana Wilson-Tagoe notes Aidoo’s awareness of this mutual
affliction, as she remarks that Aidoo’s works present scenarios “in which gender
intersects with several aspects of the larger world, and the redefinition of woman
becomes part of a general redefinition of men and society” (22). Poet Chimalum
Nwankwo adds that:

Aidoo’s feminist concerns are not treated in isolation from Africa’s political
instability, the new master complex of the so-called elite, the atavistic problems of
the rural African at the cross-roads of history, the fury and impotence of the
radical African, the lure of the Western world, and so forth. (152)

Many of these interconnected societal concerns share as a common denominator the
culturally-based subjugation and objecification of African peoples. In serving the newly
christened “elite,” facing adversity for professing “radical” beliefs, and following the
“lure” of the West, for instance, Africans have frequently met with exploitative and
dehumanizing forces. The objectification of African women illustrates these forces at
work every bit as thoroughly as the exploitation of labor, seizure of property or any other
such repressive practices. Nevertheless, female objectification seems to this day to
receive less emphasis than do other modes of cultural oppression in Africa. It is perhaps
for this reason that Aidoo asserts that “the revolutionizing of our continent hinges on the
woman question” (“In Their Own Voices” 26).
Works Cited

Aidoo, Ama Ata. “A New Tail to an Old Tale: An Interview with Ama Ata Aidoo.”


