

**NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE AND THE ROLE OF
COMMENTATORS IN AMA ATA AIDOO'S WORKS**

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In exploring minutely the complex political, economic, and social problems which she perceives on the post-independence-African scene, Ama Ata Aidoo has developed a unique narrative technique which blends intimately with her choice of characters. Her narrative technique and choice of characters emanate both from a considerable influence on her work of Ghanaian/African culture and a definite personal decision by the artist to represent and influence the reality of the political and cultural environment to which she belongs.

She thus makes it clear through a striking use of language and symbolism that the point of view of those who suffer from extreme powerlessness, unemployment and poverty must be given a hearing. Her protagonists are usually women: women bruised profoundly by their condition. Some of them search in tragic futility for reasons and most emerge defiant.¹

Her preference is for intimate, personalized narrations in correspondingly suitable setting using dramatic monologue and dialogue. It is not surprising that the bulk of her writing consists of (a) plays in which a few basic themes can be examined from several angles, brought to life and presented with emotive force and (b) short stories in which, faced with the challenge of making her point in a short narrative space, she concentrates on the literary techniques at her disposal to make a heavily loaded presentation of many subtle angles of a specific but complex situation. By concentrating a lot of attention on sociological and psychological specifics Ms. Aidoo is able to make her reader-audience fully aware of the wider national, international and human dimension of the experience she deals with in that seemingly narrow slice of life.

In this paper, we shall refer mostly to the collection of stories *No Sweetness Here* (Aidoo 1972) as well as to the short story "Satisfaction?" published in *Imaginative Writing* (1971). The plays *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (Aidoo 1965) and *Anowa* (Aidoo 1970) will also form a basis for discussion.

Structurally, Ama Ata Aidoo's plays and short stories are flexible and open ended. The flexibility of structure realistically approximates situations and settings for oral narration or personal face to face communication, and at the same time accommodates the use of illustratively embedded stories, flash back, allegory and extensive commentary. Here chronological sequence and a sustained dominant story line are of secondary importance. The crucial thing, it would seem, is to

evoke the psychological and sociological responses to traumatic situations from the point of view of the traumatized. Indeed it is important to note here that the structure of Ms. Aidoo's work while flexible in the manner explained above is on another level, tightly woven to achieve an intense cumulative effect on the sensibilities of her audience.

The works usually begin with commentators who may, like their real life parallels, break off their discussion at a mutually acceptable point, ("Something to Talk About On the Way to a Funeral"). Others with single commentator/narrators, and with these characters still wondering about and questioning a situation which implies that more could always be said; thus drawing the reader or audience into the complexity of the problem(s) being addressed. This kind of detachment might possibly also call the reader's attention to the point of view of the narrator. The last paragraph of "Everything Counts" clearly exemplifies this: "others were still studying for one or two more degrees. A Masters here. A Doctorate there That was the other thing about the revolution".² "For whom Things Did Not Change" ends with Zirigu's provocative question "My Young Master, What does independence mean?".³

In many instances, the open ended structure gives Ms. Aidoo the opportunity to reopen the debate about a particular theme since, according to her own definition of commitment, her works represent an ongoing process of reflecting on, exploring and promoting an idea.⁴ Consistent with this aim then, she is under no obligation to create or prescribe a hypothetical final solution for the problems she raises.

Finally the open ended structure can itself be used as a self-explanatory technique to dramatize for the reader/audience the intensity of the impact of events on the major characters and to maximize the audience/reader's awareness of the author's theme. This is especially true of the story "The Message" which, as we will see later is structured on the escalation of tension and ends on the note of an ironically forceful anti climax.

Other characteristics of structure in Ms. Aidoo's narrative technique manifest themselves in the use of the frame story in works such as "Something To Talk About On The Way To A Funeral" and "In The Cutting Of A Drink". The setting of the former involves a narrator and a participatory auditor. This setting is constant throughout the story even though flash backs employed by the narrator lead us into the life of the dead Auntie Araba and her protegee Mansa. Through the reactions of the Second Gossip or participatory auditor we are constantly reminded that we are receiving an interpretation of events rather than mere facts. This technique comfortably accommodates two different chronological periods, the latter period being an opportunity to comment on the former with the benefit of hindsight. We find the

same interaction between Mansa's brother and his audience in "In The Cutting of A Drink". Here, the narrative setting approximates the traditional family gathering where the narrator is formally reporting on a mission from which he has just returned. While he narrates we are constantly aware of the reactions of the family members. Our concentration is thus focused on three levels:

- a) the story line;
- b) the reactions of the narrator himself to substance of what he is narrating;
- c) the reaction of the participatory audience.

It would seem that we are meant to see (a) through (b) and (c). Most of Ms. Aidoo's stories except "The Late Bud" for example, involve the same kind of narrator - audience situation with an embedded plot which acts primarily as an illustration. A good example is "Certain Winds From The South" where the embedded plot is used by Mma Asana in the typical intimacy of a heart to heart talk between mother and daughter as an illustration of, or parallel to the current situation that her daughter is facing in order to help her bear it.

Ms. Aidoo manipulates not only narrative settings but also traditional narrative form and style. Looking at her plays and stories we see the use of allegorical figures such as "The Bird of The Wayside" in the Dilemma of a Ghost and "The Mouth - That - Eats - Salt - and Pepper" in Anowa. We also see the symbolic use of the children playing the traditional game of the "Ghost at the Cross roads" - the image upon which the whole of the Dilemma of a Ghost hinges. In other words these weave freely in and out of the world of story telling and the concrete, realistic world.

Structural features of some stories may even be adaptations from traditional tale telling techniques. This is a characteristic of "Two Sisters". It is told by the author in what would appear to be fairly conventional prose style, characteristic of literature written in English, but with very unconventional resort to traditional narrative technique. For example, probably to emphasise Mercy's unrealistic attitude to her economic situation we are told that her shoes sing:

Count Mercy, Count your blessings
Count Mercy, Count your blessings
Count Count, Count your blessings.⁵

Song interludes (mboguo in Akan) are important features of the traditional oral tale form: the audience/reader is transported into the world of story telling where inanimate objects can become personified. At the same time, this song is used as it might have been used traditionally to embellish the plot, to move it to the next phase or specifically in this case to make a moral comment and to draw attention to the implications of the

behaviour of the character in question.

Like the traditional story teller or a person functioning in the typical setting for oral narrative (both formal and informal), even if Ms. Aidoo's literary style can initially be described as fairly conventional, in this story she soon gets involved with her characters and the plot. As narrator she describes certain characters from a personalised point of view thus projecting herself onto the plot just as it is perfectly acceptable to do in the formal narrative setting. "James is cruel. He is terrible and mean. Connie breaks into fresh tears and James comforts her".⁶ The same is true of her description of the nurse in "The Message": "Scrappy-nurse-under-training, Jessy Treeson, Second-generation Cape Coaster-her grandmother still remembered at Egyaa No.7".⁷

The narrator/commentator is the essential figure in Ms. Aidoo's work. This figure takes different forms. "No Sweetness Here" illustrates the use of the Participant-Observer as narrator. The character taking this role, being an educated person teaching in a village is an outsider. By teaching Kwesi and being friendly with his mother Maami Ama, she has the opportunity to enter the life of the latter and this is the story she tells from a personalised sympathetic view but detached enough to make observations which would have been implausible coming from a villager without formal education. These include comments about the educational system imposed on the village that does not take into consideration the vital traditional festivals. This makes the role of Chicha, the narrator, multidimensional, introducing a broader comparative base for assessing happenings in the village.

The narrator of "In The Cutting Of A Drink" is in the same category as Chicha. As Mansa's brother, his narrative about this quest for her in the city has the added dimension of urgency and sensitivity. He is a participant in the story he relates but at the same time, he is an outsider being a man from a rural area in the big city for the first time. He brings to the narrative an experiential background alien to the environment that he is describing. Commenting on the norms and setting however, he shows that he is detached enough to have a broader comparative base for assessing life in the city than his kinsman Duayaw, for example, who has already been absorbed by the city. His clumsy efforts at living at the faster pace of the city and his obvious feelings of horror, amazement and fascination, awaken our consciousness of the true depth of human degradation taking place in the city.

The effect of having the protagonist as narrator is that we get a more penetrating view of the situation. The reader benefits more from a deep insight not only into what happens during the story but what or how much it means to the

protagonist. In other cases there are alternating narrators. In "A Gift From Somewhere", like "Certain Winds From The South", the first part is a description given in one time frame by the author. The protagonist then takes over to present another portion of her life. In the former story, the first part described by the author deals with traumatic past events in the life of Gyeawa. Gyeawa then takes over the narration from the author and interprets it in the context of her subsequent life.

An interesting alternation takes place in "For Whom Things Did Not Change". Zirigu the caretaker has been in dialogue with both his wife Seitu and Kobina the official government guest at the rest house.⁸ As the story progresses however, there is a break in form. Kobina takes over and makes lengthy, reflective remarks in a monologue about the state of the nation and the role of people like himself. He then says, "There was an air of festivity at the rest house because I had said I was going to eat what Zirigu and his wife ate".⁹ Like this sentence the rest of the paragraph is in a style that suggests that Kobina is the main narrator when indeed it is Zirigu. All that Kobina has done is to make an observation about the effect of his advances of friendship on Zirigu and the possible national and historical implications of this gesture, that is, the bridging of an apparently imperceptible but very real and widening gap between classes created by the colonial structure.

There are other types of narrators in Ms. Aidoo's works who should be considered. These are either allegories of communal observers or, more usually, a couple of people discussing issues the substance of which either constitutes the plot as a whole or various motifs within it. These narrators or observers appear in both her short stories and plays. In the story "Something To Talk About On The Way To A Funeral", it is through the conversation of two gossips as we have already seen, that the life of the dead Auntie Araba comes to light. Again in *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, we see the regular intervention of the 1st and 2nd woman who act as gossips reflecting on what is going on in the lives of the main characters. It is interesting to note the role of the less dominant gossip in intensifying certain motifs in this play. The 1st Woman in *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, upon hearing of the alleged barrenness of Eulalie, focuses our attention on this phenomenon by punctuating the 2nd Woman's narrative with the word "barren" throughout their conversation. The cumulative effect of this repetition is to dramatically paint for the reader/audience an intense image of the tragic and horrendous implications of barrenness in that specific social context. The 1st Woman's role is paralleled by Adwoa in "Something To Talk About On The Way To a Funeral". If we study her responses we find that she helps to build the sense of disillusionment that Mansa must have felt when the scholar

she married never arrived and the mortification of Auntie Araba his mother. This is for the most part achieved by Adwoa's frequent use of the Fante interjection of dismay *whopei* while she is being told those things. As commentator she emphasizes the social and personal significance of these incidents and also indicts the young man while preparing us for the emptiness of Auntie Araba's subsequent life.

Allegorical figures also have their role to play as narrators and/or commentators. We have in *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, the allegorical Bird-of-the-Way-Side who provides a background to issues to be presented in the play. The best description of the role of this character is given in the following self-evident portion of the prelude:

"I am the bird of the Way side
The Sudden scampering in the undergrowth
or the trunkless head
of the shadow in the corner
I am the asthmatic old hag
Eternally breaking the nuts
Whose soup, alas
Nourished a bundle of whitened bones
Or a pair of Women Your neighbours
Chattering their lives away
I can furnish you with reasons why
This and that and other things
Happened - - -.10

This character without a visible partner allegorically implies communality and furthermore obviously draws on the reader/audience as partner. In *Anowa*, yet another variant of the "dialoguing commentator" is utilized. This time we have two characters functioning together as one allegory:- The Mouth-That-Eats-Salt-And-Pepper. They can be seen as an allegory because like The Bird-Of-The-Way-Side, they embody any elements in society that would be observing and commenting on individuals and incidents. Indeed the name given to this allegory is a translation of an Akan saying that on the one hand is used when talking about gossips in general. On the other hand, this saying refers specifically to the fact that different stories or, in this case, shades of opinion can come out of the same mouth. The two contrasting commentators known together as The Mouth-That-Eats-Salt-and-Pepper are The Old Man and The Old Woman. They give us the general background to and comment on, specific events during the course of the play; but whereas The Old Man's commentary is more of an individual positive assessment, The Old Woman expresses the basically negative views held by the society. She does not attempt to reassess what she hears or what has been handed down to her from the tradition. For example, in Phase I of *Anowa*, after *Anowa* leaves her home the following

typical exchange between commentators takes place:

Old Woman: Hei, hei, hei, and what do the children of today mean?

Eh, what would the children of today have us do? Parenthood was always an expensive affair. But it seems that there is no man or woman created in nature who is endowed with enough power to be a mother or father. Listen. The days when children obeyed their elders have run out. If you tell a child to go forward, he will surely step backwards. And if you asked him to move back a pace, he would turn leagues.

Old Man: But what makes your heart race itself in anger so?

What disturbs you? Some of us feel that the best way to sharpen a knife is not to whet one side of it only. And neither can you solve a riddle by considering only one end of it. We know too well how difficult children of today are. But who begot them? Is a man a father for sleeping with a woman and making her pregnant? And does bearing the child after nine months make her a mother? Or is she the best potter who knows how her clay breathes?¹¹

Ms. Aidoo is thus able to simultaneously present a number of possible angles from which the plot might be viewed. She is also able to condemn commonly held views through the Old Man's comments that tend to refute the rather simplistic arguments expressed by the Old Woman.

From our treatment of the structure of Ms. Aidoo's works and her use of narrators, it should be clear that dynamic dramatic monologue or dialogue are crucial elements of her narrative style which sets her work aside from other reflective writings such as those of Awoonor and Armah.

Amamoo in *This Earth My Brother*, and *The Man (The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born)*, are protagonists who express their thoughts in a style which implies privacy and internalisation. Indeed Amamoo's thoughts take allegorical shapes that imply solitude. Ama Ata Aidoo's style, on the other hand, implies externalization of feelings and opinions. Characters "speaking" alone draw from the input of others, be they real or imaginary. Anowa for example in phase III of *Anowa* addresses the picture of Queen Victoria. On page 44, in reliving her childhood fears about slavery, she speaks to herself in dialogue taking on both the roles of her grandmother and her childhood self. We are aware of a certain externalization of pent up feeling.

'Satisfaction?' is a short story by Ama Ata Aidoo which does not appear in the collection *No Sweetness Here* but serves as a

very intense example of externalization by dramatic monologue. The whole story is a fiery tirade by Ekuwa Esuon the protagonist. At no point does she stop speaking. She moves from one issue to the other using as transition her interpretation or repetition of remarks from her audience - the rest of the women selling in the market with her. She calls them by name: Hei Esi Bo. She frequently uses the word "yes" to imply that she is either responding to or second guessing them. She also uses phrases like "So as I was saying," Or "As for the story, I have already told it so many times", all of which serve to propel the plot. Naturally we bear in mind the notion that movement of the plot is not necessarily linear but rather, a flow of cumulative intensity. Like "Satisfaction?". "The Message" is also propelled by dialogue. Its dynamism is controlled by commentary about the reactions of various characters to the embedded plot rather than aspects of the plot itself. As Mphahlele notes in the introduction to *No Sweetness Here*:

"The writer exploits the technique most fully and attains the highest sustained level of performance with it in "The Message". Throughout, the many voices become an effective orchestration and bring out in bold relief the protagonist's interior monologue, her anxiety and the rustic vitality of a people. The whole story drives through this communal energy"¹².

The following excerpt illustrates this point:

"Look here my sister, it should be not be said but they opened her up".

"Yes they opened her up".

Three lines later, we are obviously introduced to other enquirers:

"They do not say, my sister"

"Have you heard it?"

"What?"

"This and this and that - - -

After 14 lines in the same trend, we are introduced to Esi Amfoa the protagonist with:

"My little bundle, come, You and I are going to Cape Coast today".

Her speech, striking in its simplicity and showing her terror of both external communal forces, is followed immediately by more condolences:

"Esi, we have heard your misfortune"

Esi Amfoa's journey to Cape Coast is marked by communal concern. Some one says:

"Kobina run to the street, tell Araba Anan to wait for Wana Amofa".¹³

It is clear that Ama Ata Aidoo manipulates with mastery the technique of allowing her characters to present themselves and their opinions through their own idiom. She as author identifies

herself with her characters and has structured her works in such a way that she can make her own opinion known in no uncertain terms. Indeed, the mainly conversational style of her narrative has the effect of airing out views, perceptions and opinions. Although her works are those of reflection and analysis, they are uniquely externalized reflection rather than those of introspection.

Secondly, the structure of her works allows for progressive intensification of her major motifs. Her plots develop more significantly in depth rather than in any kind of linear, chronological sequence and the reader is struck by a note of poignant urgency as far as the exploited, especially women in post-independent Africa, are concerned.

Thirdly, by using direct commentator/narrators, commentator/protagonists and observer/commentators, she tends to reveal various moods of frustration and moments of deep insight which may also be her own. The conditions thereby revealed are not necessarily accepted with stoicism for along with their depiction often comes a very definite will to resist. Perhaps Sisie in "Everything Counts"¹⁴ and Anowa in *Anowa*¹⁵ characterize the mood of frustration and acute perceptiveness which lead to self alienation. Anowa for example is accused of seeing "things which all good men and women try to forget"¹⁶ and for "looking for the common pain and the general wrong"¹⁷. She goes mad being alienated from a society which identifies her as priestess and witch at the same time. Ekuwa Esuon in "Satisfaction?" however represents the spirit of overt rebellion, resistance and protest which Ms. Aidoo seems to be advocating. In her words which could be Ms. Aidoo's own she says:

"What surprises me about people is how they can go around saying we must not do this and we must not do that when "this" and "that" are probably the only one or two things left that we can do. What I am saying is that the things we really cannot do anymore are so many that we only destroy ourselves even more by fearing to do some of the one or two things left which we can still do"¹⁸.

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3. *No Sweetness Here*, p. 34.
4. See Ama Ata Aidoo's Essay, "Commitment" in *Burning Issues in African Literature*, 1971.

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6. **No Sweetness Here**, p. 121.
7. **No Sweetness Here**, p. 54.
8. **No Sweetness Here**, p. 23-26.
9. **No Sweetness Here**, p. 25.
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