



GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN AMA ATTA AIDOO'S *NO SWEETNESS HERE*

**Kwadwo Kombate,
Ali Moroⁱ**

Tutor of English, Department of Languages,
St. Joseph's College of Education,
Bechem, Ghana

Abstract:

The aim of this study is to offer a critical analysis of *No Sweetness Here* by Ama Atta Aidoo to identify forms of gender violence which is a violence intentionally perpetrated by husbands or male partners-people known to be intimate associates in the text. The feminist approach has been adopted as our theoretical framework. The text offers interesting representations of the complex ways in which female characters feature as gender abuse victims in situations where gender violence is prevalent. Descriptive analysis is the main method of data analysis in this study. The study revealed that the protagonist, Maami Ama suffered several forms of gender-based violence such as emotional, economic, marital, and social and discrimination in her matrimonial home. The author portrayed her as struggling against gender-based violence from her husband, her mother-in-law and sister-in-laws.

Keywords: gender, feminism, patriarchy, polygamy, gender-based violence

1. Introduction

The conditions of women in most matrimonial homes have been object of intense discussions because the culture is strongly patriarchal and conservative. Ama Ata Aidoo's text, *No Sweetness Here*, chosen emphasizes more on gender-based violence. It is explained as violence that reflects the existing unevenness in the power relations between men and women that perpetuates the subordination and devaluation of the female as opposed to the male. This violence exists within the framework of the patriarchy as a symbolic system that engenders an array of day-to-day practices which deny women their rights and reproduce the existing imbalance and discrimination between the sexes. The difference between this kind of violence and other forms of aggression and coercion lies in the fact that in this case the risk factor or source of vulnerability is the mere fact of being a woman. These aspects of gender-based violence grow very well in male

ⁱ Correspondence: email ntiadarkwahsamuel@yahoo.com

dominated societies. Throughout history, various forms of violence have manifested themselves in societies as a consequence of certain sectors' or groups' domination over others. In this context, gender-based violence is a key social mechanism for perpetuating the subordination of women according to Amorós (1990). Violations of women's human rights are directly or indirectly related to the gender system and to mainstream cultural values. The description of the gender-based violence meted out to Maami Ama in *No Sweetness Here* is of much concern to Ama Ata Aidoo as a feminist writer.

1.1 Background of the Study

The study is an investigation into gender-based violence in Ama Ata Aidoo's *No Sweetness Here* in Ghanaian traditional marriage setting to serve as a reflection of the society because literature reflects the perceptions and attitudes of the society which portrays human life through the characters by their words and deeds which convey messages for the purposes of correction, instruction, information and delight. As literature is life, characters in the text would have traits that have their unfair moments of gender-based violence due to their gender. Although, there is dual discourse surrounding gender-based violence where both men and women could claim victimhood (Archer, 2002; White et al., 2000) but most of the victims are women and girls because some Ghanaian societies are crated and edited to suit the needs of a patriarchal culture. Gender violence against women and girls is a widespread and systematic violation of fundamental human rights and an enduring form of gender discrimination. It occurs in every country of the world, rich and poor, stable and in conflict and affects most women and girls regardless of their age or socio-economic status. Globally, women are vulnerable and are at risk of enduring emotional and psychological trauma through harassment, terror and threats, intimidation, humiliation, degradation and exploitation. This extreme expression of male control and power over women often begins at infancy and may accompany them throughout their lives in various relationships as daughter, sister, intimate partner, wife and mother. All forms of violence against women and girls occur on a daily basis in homes, families, communities, institutions, workplaces. Despite the excess of international and national efforts, the issue of domestic violence still remains a significant social pandemic in Ghana perhaps due to the patriarchal nature of the country (Meursing et al., 1995, WHO, 2005).

The setting of *No Sweetness Here* is perfectly set from the premises of patriarchal structures where marriage imposes that women should be subservient and docile to their husbands. Every woman is encouraged to marry and get children not a child in order to express womanhood to the fullest because the basis of marriage among the patriarchal societies implies transfer of a woman's fertility to the husband's family group.

2. Statement of the Problem

Gender-based violence is a global pandemic that hits married women indiscriminately in Ghanaian societies being it rural or city. The issue of this violence has received much needed attention both local and international condemnations. It is of this reason that Ama

Ata aidoo, one of the greatest Ghanaian feminist writer's work, *No Sweetness Here*, is investigated to see if women in their matrimonial homes are also subjected to any form of gender-based violence.

2.1 Objectives of the Study

This study specifically assessed Ama Atta Aidoo's *No Sweetness Here* in an attempt to:

- examine the portrayal of female characters in *No Sweetness Here* by Ama Atta Aidoo.
- identify any form of gender-based violence in the text.

2.2 Research Questions

- 1) How is the female portrayed in *No Sweetness Here*?
- 2) What are the forms of gender-based violence in *No Sweetness Here*?

2.3 Significance of the Study

The study contributes to the field of literary criticism by presenting the role of women's writers as an important part of literary criticism and discussion.

Additionally, the study could be of an immense resource material for prose writers to gain a better understanding, awareness and perception of gender violence practices.

3. Theoretical Framework & Related Literature

Feminist theory is one of the theories that the study is relying on to unravel any form of gender-based violence against women in their matrimonial homes in *No Sweetness Here* by Ama Atta Aidoo. Tong (1992) posits that feminist theory is not one but many theories or perspectives which attempt to describe women's oppression, explain its causes, consequences and prescribe strategies for women's liberation. This notion is agreed by Kolawole (1992) who says that feminism could be segmented into four categories based on the understanding of different groups of people:

- The first group agreed that there should be equality between male and female in the society.
- The second group reasoning stood on the premises that woman could not be independent without societal re-structuring.
- The third group includes the feminist activists that are against sex discrimination. To these people, they are of the view that whatever is good for the gander is equally good for the goose and that male and female must necessarily have equal rights and privileges so that their responsibility will be the same. These people are known as lesbians who are against woman's subjugation or submissiveness to man.
- The fourth group is the African women activists that premised their theory on customs and traditions. They are mostly concerned with the woman's rights. Kolawole (1997) argues that womanhood is central and this is neither controversial nor conflictual to African woman. So, they are not seeking to be like men, look like

men, or necessarily act like men. During the 1960s, the concept of feminism in literature was hampered and the female writers tried to sort out the condition faced by women in society through their fictitious woman characters in their novels to reverse the trend because according to Toril Moi (1987) feminism is a doctrine advocating the granting to women of the same rights and privileges as are granted to men.

4. Gender and Violence

Feminist perspectives have traditionally viewed relationship violence as an expression of patriarchal oppression against women that is socially sanctioned (Lammers, Ritchie & Robertson, 2005). According to Johnson (1995), there are two main forms of violence. Some relationships suffer from conflict-related outbursts of violence such as situational or common couple violence. In this form, either partner may lose control and act violently, but this rarely escalates into more injurious or life-threatening behaviors (Johnson, 1995; Waltz et al., 2000). Alternatively, some relationships suffer from systemic male violence which is rooted in the patriarchal tradition of men controlling their women according to Johnson (1995). This form of violence is not often but very devastating and often involves economic subordination, threats, isolation, and other control tactics. It is referred to as intimate terrorism or patriarchal terrorism. With time, the severity of violent behaviors tends to intensify.

However, the relationship of gender to violence was once assumed that violence is only committed against women by male perpetrators but recent research suggests some women actively perpetrate violence against their male partners.

4.1 Gender-based Violence

Gender violence is an umbrella term for any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person's will and that is based on socially ascribed differences between males and females. Gender-based violence primarily affects women and girls, although boys and men also experience it. Gender-based violence can take many forms. It may be physical, sexual, economic, emotional, social or psychological abuse. It can also be through neglect, and financial and material exploitation. Most GBV is domestic, between family members. The forms of GBV that are most commonly heard of are sexual forms and battery. Sexual violence includes harassment (usually verbal, visual, body language or by stalking), indecent assault (physical unwanted and uninvited sexual contact), rape (including marital rape) and attempted rape, sodomy (unnatural sexual acts), child sexual abuse, forced prostitution, child prostitution and harmful traditional practices.

However, gender violent behaviour does not always involve tangible violence or physical violence but nonphysical. Nonphysical gender violence is any behaviour or attitude that is designed to control, subdue, punish or isolate another person through the use of humiliation or fear. It includes any of these: verbal assault, dominance, control, isolation, ridicule or the use of intimate knowledge for degradation according to Follingstad, Coyne, Gambone (2005). It targets the emotional and psychological well-

being of the victim and it is often a precursor to physical abuse. Gender violence also known as gender-based violence or gendered violence in the household can occur to people of all genders.

Violence against women is thus observed to be a violation of women's physical and/or emotional well-being, which manifests in various forms. But whatever its form, it constitutes a means of social control in which the subservient position of women is highlighted and their vulnerability accentuated (Carter & Weaver, 2003). It is a debilitating experience perpetrated largely by people (usually men) who have either promised to love the victims through matrimonial or conjugal pledges; or those who are expected to love and care for them because they are kith and kin: husbands, boyfriends, partners, relations and parents (Carter & Weaver, 2003; Clark, 1992; Schlesinger et al., 1992). Gender Violence against women in Ghana manifests in emotional, psychological and economic terms as well as through certain cultural practices Appiah & Cusack (1999). Emotional violent behavior ranges from verbal abuse (belittling, berating, constant criticism) to more subtle tactics like intimidation, manipulation, and refusal to be pleased as observed by Engel (2002).

4.2 Patriarchal Societies and Gender-based Violence

According to Harrap's Chambers Compact Dictionary (2000), patriarchy is defined as a "*social system in which a male is head of the family and descent is traced through the male line*". In some patriarchal societies, women are faced with all sorts of dehumanization ranging from deprivation, negligence, maltreatment, marginalisation, oppression, subjugation, exploitation, humiliation and isolation which emanate from aspects of the people's culture. In such societies, for instance, women are seen not heard. They live in the shadow of men from their maiden homes to their matrimonial homes; hence they are regarded as second class citizens. Generally speaking, feminist movements locate the oppression and subordination of African women which is seen to be historically common and widespread in the patriarchal domination of women by men according to Fortier (2002).

In fact, they share the basic view that western civilization is pervasively patriarchal and it is organized and conducted in such a way as to subordinate women to men in all cultural domains: familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal and artistic according to Abrams (1999). With the rise of feminism, African women began reconsidering their beliefs about patriarchy. They realized that the inferior position they long occupied in patriarchal societies is not at all naturally but socially or culturally programmed. That is, if man's power is defined as redeeming manhood, then manhood is defined as the right to patriarchal heads of families. Kolawole (1992) similarly observed that women are always saddled with the task of raising and upbringing children. The males seem to appeal to women that no amount of pains, agony and suffering that might be inflicted on them by the husbands must be overlooked by the wives. Women are always at the receiving end in their matrimonial homes.

Ama Ata Aidoo uses Maami Ama as a portrait of African women who are seen as baby-machines, and beasts of burden in their matrimonial homes.

5. Methodology

5.1 Introduction

This section is aimed at discussing the procedure and steps taken to discover the findings on the different aspects of this research and the methodology that are employed in the data collection and analysis.

5.2 Method of Data Collection

The study employed qualitative research method. The major technique used is the descriptive analysis of the text. Ama Atta Adioo's literary text, *No Sweetness Here*, was selected as the source of data for this study. To make the analysis meaningful, important extracts from the text are analysed in order to identify the portrayal of women characters and instances of gender-based violence using the feminist theory as guide.

6. Data Analysis

6.1 Gender-based Violence in Ama Ata Aidoo's *No Sweetness Here*

Ama Ata Aidoo portrays Maami Ama, the first wife of Kodjo Fi as a victim of various types of gender violence in *No Sweetness Here*. Maami Ama's plight represents numerous African women who are victims of gendered violence such as betrayal, abandonment by irresponsible husbands, economic, emotional or psychological and obnoxious cultural practices. Ama Ata Aidoo's text becomes the site to ventilate pent-up feelings about the experiences of women with respect to gender violence. The story shows womanhood to be unfair and constrictive. In the short story, Maami Ama is degraded by all the characters in the story except "Chicha". Throughout the story, Maami Ama is put down by husband, co-wives and her in-laws. She expresses her emotional pain in the following:

"“Yes, I am,” she went on . I should . What am I going on like this for? What is man struggling after? Seven years is a long time bear ill-usage from a man coupled with his wives? What have I done to deserve the abuse of his sisters? And his mother!” (Aidoo, 71).

This shows the constant harassments and vilifications that come her way, even though it is unwarranted. Along with these, Maami Ama once complained to her mother about the maltreatment she was getting from her husband and her mother told her, *“In marriage, a woman must sometimes be a fool.” (Aidoo, 72)* These instances depict the state of the psychological or emotional violence a woman has to go through in life as a wife. Since psychological violence do not leave visible marks on the victim, men may regard it as a less dangerous form of domestic violence, or as not violence at all. Nonetheless, this has some negative impacts on victims. Psychological violence is seen as the most blatant and problematic form of domestic violence in the lives of women as it may have some potentially damaging psychosocial effects.

Withdrawal is another form of gender-based violence Maami Ama has to painfully endure as a wife of Kojo Fi. Withdrawal is a form of domestic violence which is expressed in withdrawing from normal interaction with the victim. It is often intended to make the victim uneasy. It could be stopping normal communication, going out and coming home at odd hours, refusing to eat food served him by the victim without any clue on what the problem is. Maami Ama expresses her ordeal in this way:

"You would ask, Chicha! I don't know. They suddenly began hating me when Kwesi was barely two. Kodjo Fi reduced my housekeeping money and sometimes he refused to give me anything at all. He wouldn't eat my food....." (Aidoo. 72)

Ama Ata Aidoo highlights the oppressive aspects of patriarchal system as well as gender-based violence that hinder women from developing a full sense of selfhood. Ogunipe-Lesie (1994) argues that women are shackled by their own negative self image by continuous internalization of the ideologies of patriarchy and gender hierarchy. This internalization makes the typical African woman to react with fear adopting dependency complexes and attitudes to please the man. Patriarchy, therefore, implies male rule and privilege, and entails female subordination. This assertion is true because Maaami Ami allowed this inhuman treatment from the husband to go on for more than half a decade. From the text, one can see that her mother did not stand against the maltreatment but rather asked the daughter to bear with the violence.

Verbal violence is another form of gender-based violence some Ghanaian women suffer in their matrimonial homes. This form of gender violence is expressed through verbal language which is deflationary and condemnatory which includes insults and curses. No one enjoys insults and no one feels safe under this type of violence. The following extract from the text illustrates this maltreatment:

"Seven years is a long time to bear ill-usage from a coupled with contempt and insults from his wives. What have I done to deserve the abuse of his sisters? And his mother!" (Aidoo, 71)

Aidoo uses *No Sweetness Here* to address the substantial weight of the various social burdens that are constantly imposed on some Ghanaian women in their marital homes. This kind of violence against women denies women their most basic rights and freedoms, including freedom of opinion, equality and justice before the law, to marry (or not) according to their own free will.

Economic violence is a form of gender-based violence that has not received specific attention until very recently. Although its definition and boundaries are not clear, economic violence or economic harm refers to a conduct directed to depriving the victim of all or any of its economic or financial resources in controlling the victim. In the story,

Maami Ama is depicted as a victim of economic harm to represent how some women are treated in their matrimonial homes. This statement from the story exemplifies this: *"that planting time, although I was the first wife, he allotted me the smallest and thorniest plot."* By this action from Kodjo Fi, Maami Ama would not be economically independent. In the case of being financially dependent, it becomes very difficult for a woman who needs to leave a marriage may be able to do so if she has the social support of her family and some financial autonomy but for a woman who has neither then stepping out of a marriage can be extremely challenging if not impossible. In short, the primacy of woman's role as wife and mother curtails women's capacity in these contexts and elsewhere to exercise autonomy within and outside of marriage. A good and self-sacrificing mother does not stay home with her children but goes out working hard for the family. Mothers see this as their financial obligations to feed their children as the dominant bond of motherhood in everyday life.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

The textual analysis of the story *No Sweetness Here* provides evidence of the gender violence in the traditional marriage setting in some rural societies in Ghanaian. Ama Ata Aidoo highlights only the impacts of nonphysical gender-violence on the wellbeing of a married woman in a Ghanaian traditional marriage setting. This nonphysical violence can cause women to suffer substantial emotional and psychological distress. Psychologists and feminists have identified that the emotional form of violence is more harmful and has longer-lasting consequences than the physical violence (Bandura, 1997; Marshall, 1999). Since psychological violence does not leave visible marks on the victim, men may regard it as a less dangerous form of domestic violence, or as not violence at all.

Gender-based violence against Maami Ama, the protagonist, in the fictional story is not only from her husband but her mother-in-law, co-wives and sister-in-laws. This scenario is in line with the line of argument from a feminist point of reference that women's violence is a strategy of bargain with patriarchy and disengagement in order to ensure their own survival and security in a society that is dominated by the power of men and by the rules of their game. So in order to be able to gain economic, social or political rewards, women are required to sacrifice long term gender interests and collude with men even if this implies inflicting violence on fellow women. Although some female characters are also enemies of themselves, the men probably bear more of the responsibility for ending oppression of women since patriarchal men have been the main perpetrators of that very oppression.

Patriarchal and traditional values are ones that oppress women in order to excel the success of man because more women are always at the receiving end in this pandemic of gender violence. Maami Ama would not have gotten the varying verbal insults from her mother-in-law and sister-in-laws if Kodjo Fi didn't turn a blind eye to these things.

The author points an accusing finger at Ghanaian societies that educate women to generate a subservient mind to withstand gender-based violence for more than half a

decade from her husband, her mother-in-law, and her sister-in-laws. Regardless their own choice, women have to get ready to bear many children and she has to toil in order to feed them as in the case of Maami Ama who wished to have more children

Ama Ata Aidoo's No Sweetness Here portrays the nature of hardship a mother has to encounter in her marriage life in a Ghanaian society. The author recreated the daily routine of life in a typical village—the cycle of work and rest that typifies the life of ordinary women. In the case of Mami Ama, the protagonist, who has reasons to be happy but is not. Though she and her husband have been physically married for a long time, they have long been spiritually divorced. The abuse by her husband and his extended family and of the ridicule of her friends frames the lives of many ordinary women who are victims of gender-based violence. The story of Maami Ama is used as a protest against all forms of nonphysical gender violence directed at motherhood. Mami Ama as an orphan gives everything to her marriage so as to secure happiness, but she gains nothing. When the divorce takes place, she will be separated from her only son, who will automatically be given to his father for custody. To reflect how the child means everything in her whole life, Mami calls him, "*my husband, my brother, my father, my all-in all*".

The divorce scene, which presents one of the most unkind and most brutalizing treatments of womanhood in the Ghanaian fictional story, affords Aidoo an opportunity to launch an open attack on gender-based violence mothers go through in some rural communities in Ghana. The reader witnesses the members of Mami's husband's family gang up with their son to humiliate a woman he once loved. The maltreatment that Mami receives is indeed pathetic; at the moment of separation she is branded foul names, abused, and then asked to refund her husband the dowry he paid on her. All her labours to feed and clothe her son and to cater for his education without her husband's support come to nothing. Kwesi is taken away from her.

The plight of Maami Ama, the central character, lends support to the Ghana Statistical Service (2009) study which reported a higher rate of psychological violence than sexual or physical violence. That study revealed that the use of insulting words, cessation of communication or withdrawing, belittling or humiliation, threat of divorce and refusal to eat food served by wives were substituted for sexual or physical violence in order not to face the rigors of the law. Since psychological violence do not leave visible marks on the victim, men may regard it as a less dangerous form of domestic violence, or as not violence at all.

Ama Ata Aidoo's choice of only dwelling on nonphysical aspects of violence may suggest that that form of domestic violence in the lives of married women has some potentially damaging psychosocial effects. For instance, a husband's refusal to eat his wife's food has serious traditional implications and consequences; it is a sign of indignity and social ridicule because a woman is not only obliged to satisfy her husband sexually, but she is expected to ensure that he is well-fed. A woman's inability to meet this, and a husband's continuous refusal to eat her food could result in divorce.

Ama Ata Aidoo celebrates womanhood in general and motherhood in particular. She does that by placing focus on women's strength, determination and capacity to survive in spite of the oppressive socio-cultural conditions of their society.

In addition to issues of gender-based violence, Ama Ata Aidoo advocates both genders to demonstrate the necessity of social harmony between men and women if social balance is to be maintained.

7.1 Recommendation

The paper recommends the formulation of a national policy on nonphysical gender-based abuses as highlighted in the text because they reflect real life's experiences and setting up of standards and guidelines for case management in Ghana whenever it is abused. The study also recommends adequate equipment at district health facilities for sufficient forensic investigations as well as training of health workers in case management including counseling.

Finally, it recommends wider inter-sectoral collaboration in order to enhance prevention of gender-based violence at the community level.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

About the Author

Kwadwo Kombate, Tutor of English, Mphil English. Research interests: Literature, Language, Discourse Markers and Pragmatics. Participations: Attended workshops and conferences organised by Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology and University of Education, Winneba, Ghana.

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