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Interrogating the repressive voice of patriarchy: Analysis of Ama Ata Aidoo's story, "The Girl Who Can"

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Abstract

This paper seeks to interrogate the repressive voice in a patriarchal society. In Ama Ata Aidoo's "The Girl who can", the struggle of African woman in postcolonial African society is portrayed. The paper tries to unravel the struggles across the generations and education is deemed as the only tool to combat those inequalities. The research methodology includes close reading of the text.

Keywords: Patriarchy, feminism, identity, freedom, African women

Introduction

Stories, written with a feminist approach, against the socio-cultural background of post-colonial Africa unravel a picture of how African women have been struggling over decades to carve out a dignified identity of their own and to assert a strong, rightful place in the society. Of the several African women writers, inscribing sagas of the African women's fight for self-assertion, Ama Ata Aidoo is remarkable. She had been in the ministry of Education in Ghana. She glimpsed deep into the issue of the African girls' education out of a feeling that if they were to rid themselves of patriarchal oppression and of the many retrogressive strait jackets the colonial rule has left over them, they would unavoidably have to be educated because education has the most formidable liberating force, promising an all-round freedom and culmination of life to the height of developments.

In the year 1997, Ama Ata Aidoo's remarkable work "The Girl Who Can and other stories" came out. In the stories, Aidoo highlights the African women's brave and persistent struggle to overcome the inhibitions created by the male-dominated society to subject them to a narrow world, and to assert themselves in the larger world. In her story, the girl who can, Aidoo situates a female tripartite household in which generational conflict is shown through the interaction among the grandmother (Nana), her daughter (kaya) and her grand daughter (Adoja). In the story, the writer also touches upon such significant issues as gender roles, women's freedom, tradition versus modernity etc.

The seven year-old Adoja, featuring as the protagonist of the story, is the narrator.

Although a little older than a toddler, Adoja has a clear vision and a receptive, inquisitive and thinking mind, by the power of which she interrogates the social constraints that stand in the way of a girl's social progress. In this story, Nana, Adoja's grandmother who, in spite of being a woman, takes a strong exception to women's/ girls' access to the larger world where over a long period of time, men have established a sort of monopoly. Nana has a patriarchal mindset. She holds that woman ought to restrict themselves to domesticity, particularly to the role of child-bearing. Nana is very much distressed at Adoja's legs being thin because Nana harbors a peculiar notion that "a woman must have solid hips to be able to have children" and that she must have legs well-fleshed and well-calve to be able to bear children. Nana's point of view of women's physicality and her concept of women's role is so warped that it subsides a woman into a strong-legged animal whose existence finds its meaning in nothing other than breeding.

Nana thinks that Adoja's legs are "too thin to be of any use" in the sense that with such legs, she, Nana fears, would be unable to bear children.

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Nana is a traditionalist, and has a conservative bent of mind, specially in regard to women's education. Adoja's mother who is too submissive to voice a strong protest against her very authoritative mother's ground less grudge about Adoja's thin legs, does sometimes murmurs protests when Nana takes an exception to Adoja's school going, her education. She keeps telling Nana that on account of her been unschooled, she feels herself "locked into some kind of darkness", that is in a state of ignorance. She greatly desires Adoja to get educated, while Nana sniggers, and harps on complaining of Adoja's thin legs.

A positive change in Nana's perception comes about, after Adoja's school lets her run for the junior section in the district games. Adoja's emergence as an athlete in the male - dominated domain of sports draws Nana's attention to her legs in a special way. Adoja says "....., I have often caught nana staring at my legs with a strange look on her face, still pretending like she was not looking."

Adoja's winning "the cup for the best all-round junior athlete" precipitates land sliding change in Nana's outlook on women's role. So long she held dogmatically that women were meant to be a wife and a mother, and that was where her life was confined to. But now when Adoja whose thin legs she had always looked down upon as useless, has come up as a champion, Nana cries out with great joy, exclaiming "That ' even though some legs don't have much meat on them, to carry hips.... They can run."

Ama Ata Aidoo's intriguing short story, "The Girl who can" is rich in social significance. The writer raises quite a few burning questions associated with The African woman in particular. The first issue, which forms the central theme of the story, is what we have already thrown light upon --- women's physicality. The patriarchal society formulates for women a solid hip and a pair of strong legs which would help her discharge her solemn role of bearing children! In the story, Nana who definitely represents the patriarchal voice, comments "....., if any woman decides to come into this world with all of her two legs, then she should select legs that have meat on them: with good calves. Because you are sure such legs would support solid hips. And a woman must have solid hips to be able to have children." This is one of the many constructs that woman sustain at the expense of terrible humiliations because such a sordid patriarchal conceptions of women's physicality suggest that the male - dominated society considers woman to be sort of sub-humans, only meant to breed. However, in the story, "The Girl who can do it" Adoja's success in the race with her spindly legs brings in Nana's concept a salutary change, leading her to realize that women are not born just to bear children. They may be somebody's mother, somebody's wife, but that is not all that they are meant to be. They have much greater role to play, much greater works to accomplish. History has proved it for times without number. Adoja's athleticism, her success in track and field is very much symbolic of the fact that if given exposures, woman can prove themselves capable of dynamic, brave, enterprising and truly creative achievements. Through the presentations of Adoja's triumph in sports, the writer practically epitomizes The African women's struggle against odds and their triumph over them. The issue of women's education --- we have touched upon it earlier --- undoubtedly forms a very crucial theme of the story. Nana's obvious objections to Adoja's school- going is indicative of the patriarchal inhibition against women's education. Woman have always been confined to the

Sisyphian drudge of household chores, and obviously, just as it is depicted in the story --- breeding and bearing children. The traditional society has always winked at the necessity for educating women. There were so many superstitions in connection with woman education. We find how Nana dealt her daughter's idea of educating Adoja with a caustic sarcasm. It was only when Adoja got an opportunity of exposing her athletic skill that Nana realized how important it is for girls to attend school which, other than imparting formal education to them, also gives them an exposure to extra- curricular activities, and often elicit from them their inherent talents.

Conclusion

There is yet another issue, dealt with by the writer in the story under discussion. This is women's right to give an expression to their thoughts and feelings, their right to be heard. In a humorous vein, the writer shows how Adoja's tongue is under control of her social guardians. They are always there to determine what she should tell and what not. Thus, the headgears of the conventional society exercises a sort of censorship almost in the same way as the earlier colonial masters did.

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