Middle Passages and the Healing Place of History

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In all of her writing—drama, short stories, poetry, and fiction—Ghanaian author Ama Ata Aidoo writes about the lives of women engaged in quests of self-exploration in Ghana and in their migrations abroad. She uses the *heteroglossia* of the many voices of the community as observers and participants confronting the dilemmas of neocolonial Ghana, or Ghana after Kwame Nkrumah, its first president after independence in 1957. Ama Ata Aidoo, product of the matrilineal Fanti people of Ghana, has always recognized the complexity of the woman’s role in traditional African societies, as well as in colonialism and neocolonialism. In her drama and fiction—including *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965), *Anowa* (1970), *No Sweetness Here* (1970), *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977), and *Changes: A Love Story* (1991)—Ghanaian women continue to negotiate spaces for themselves as mothers, wives, workers, and nationalists. They often migrate from village to city, from Africa to Europe or America, and back again. In attempting to reclaim their identity, they must often migrate from home to what Gloria Anzaldua calls “borderlands,” places where “people of different races, sexualities, classes, genders occupy the same territory . . . places where multiple identities collide and/or renegotiate space” (qtd. in Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, 66). Aidoo’s writings emphasize transition and movement, and in women’s migrations and self-exile, their reclamation of identity.

Ama Ata Aidoo began writing drama as an undergraduate at the University of Ghana, where she participated in the university writers’ workshop founded by Efua Sutherland. Like Sutherland, who believed in the importance of theatre as an instrument of social change and also as a way of preserving the folklore, music, mime, and dance of the people, Aidoo also views
her plays as an important expression of Ghana’s cultural life. In her plays The Dilemma of a Ghost (1965) and Anowa (1970), we see Ghana at a crossroads between traditional rural society and urbanization. With the changing roles of men and women, Ghana needed to hear voices speaking out, often arguing, about the women’s role in the survival of the national culture.

With independence, many African theaters experienced a turning point that “coincided not only with the rise of a new generation of literary talent,” says Karen C. Chapman, “but also with a new sense of practical, shared enterprise—a sense of collective identity that . . . was able to explore itself freely and be explored” (7–8). Ama Ata Aidoo participated in this new adventure in Ghanaian theater. Her first play, The Dilemma of a Ghost, which she wrote as an undergraduate at the University of Ghana, was first performed in 1964 and published in 1965. In the play she enters into themes of African recognition of the diaspora and slavery, the conflicted identities of the African American wife, Eulalie, and her husband, Ato, the “been-to,” a pejorative term in African literature used to describe someone who has traveled to America or Europe to receive an education and becomes so enamored of the West that he forgets or denigrates his own community traditions. Her second play, Anowa, published in 1970, is based on the same African legend as Flora Nwapa’s Efuru—that of the lake goddess worshipped by barren women. Aidoo explores the themes of self-exile, woman’s identity, motherhood, and the African involvement in the slave trade. She uses the dilemma tale convention in most of her literature to raise issues with which the characters contend. The dilemma tale, a genre that is ubiquitous in African folklore, ends with some form of irresolution and makes it essential that the audience take responsibility for making a decision about the drama’s outcome (Odamtten 18–20).

Aidoo often uses a protean storyteller—“The Bird of the Wayside,” which appears by that name in The Dilemma of a Ghost and Our Sister Killjoy, “The-Mouth-that-Eats-Salt-and-Pepper” in Anowa, the squinting Sister Killjoy in the novel by that name, and Ama and Aba in Changes—to comment on the action and the social/political context of the narratives. The narrator also serves as a chorus that gives the reader a second, even third, reading of the drama. The Dilemma of a Ghost opens with a prologue presented by “the Bird of the Wayside.” The Bird is associated with strangers or wayfarers; in the prologue she does not define herself except to say that she is a shadow, “an asthmatic old hag,” “a pair of women chatting” (Dilemma 33). What we will hear is a story of the Odumna clan, not everything, “for the mouth must not tell everything. Sometimes the eye can see / And the ear should hear” (Dilemma 33). It is the story of an old family, many of whom have become rich and left the village, but this is the story of one who had become a
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The community watches and comments as the protagonists—Ato, the young scholar, and Eulalie, his African American wife from Harlem, also very recently a student—come to the stage. The two village women, who come on stage bearing water pots on their heads as they have just come from the river, become a part of the chorus. They discuss the theme of motherhood, which will be prominent, as the young African American woman, Eulalie, searches for her identity in the village of Ato’s youth. They also point toward Ato’s mother, Maami Esi Kom, who has had to continue the Odumna clan without the help of her son. Hopefully, he will bring new wealth and prosperity to the family after all of his learning. Up to this point Esi Kom has depended only on her brothers and brothers-in-law to hold up the estate.

The grandmother (Nana) also awaits the coming of Ato. She plays a pivotal role in the play and in the community. The grandmother in a matriarchal African society, and particularly among the Fanti, the group to which Ama Ata Aidoo belongs, is honored because she is “believed to be closest to the ancestors, who were important because they could assume god-like status” (Hill-Lubin 37). Ato goes to speak to Nana before he goes to speak to his mother. She is thinking about the ghosts of the ancestors when he comes. When the family members come (Ato’s mother, Esi Kom, his sister and uncles), they have fun calling Ato the “master scholar” and trying to bring up the delicate subject of marriage. When Ato admits to his family that he is already married, to a woman named Eulalie, not a Fanti name, Nana asks what she can say to the ancestors: “The daughter of slaves, who come from the white man’s land. / Someone should advise me on how to tell my story. . . . / My Royal Dead / That one of their stock / Has gone away and brought to their sacred precincts / The wayfarer (my italics)” (Dilemma 50).

Maureen Eke describes Eulalie as a wayfarer, but also a sojourner, and in some ways the Yoruba abiku spirit, who is “migrating between two worlds, the past (dead) and the present (living). . . . For Ato’s people, she represents the ghost from their past come to haunt them in the present” (61). Naana Banyiwa Horne argues that in The Dilemma of a Ghost, “Motherhood is situated at the cusp of limitation and transcendence” (308). Mothering is both at the crux of maternal agency and subjectivity in Aidoo’s works and in much of African culture. For example, the chorus of the two village women, who represent the community, comment on Esi Kom’s childbearing. It has not been profitable, says the second woman, who has a house full of children herself. It has brought her only unhappiness. Esi’s daughter Monka will seem never to marry well, and her son, who went away to study, has come back with a “black-white” wife, when he could have married a well-respected member of the community, the daughter of Yaw Mensa. Esi Kom was all
To Ato’s family the most unforgivable thing about the marriage of Eulalie and Ato is that the two are using birth control and plan to have children only when they are ready. Eulalie herself doubts whether this decision to put off childbirth is a wise one. “Ato, isn’t it time we started a family?” (58) Eulalie asks when she, in fear, hears funeral drums one evening. However, Ato, playing his role of patriarchal subject, advises Eulalie to stick to their plan and have children only when they are ready (58–59). When the family thinks that Eulalie has a problem with infertility, they come to wash her stomach, heal it, and make her fertile again. The washing will drive away all evil spirits and bring her the ancestors’ blessing. Eulalie does not truly understand, but Ato does. He says, “They [the family] would say we are displeasing the spirits of our dead ancestors and the Almighty God for controlling birth” (80–83). When Ato finally tells his mother the truth that his wife is not barren but using birth control, Esi Kom replies, “Why did you not tell us that you and your wife are gods and you can create your own children when you want them?” (91).

At the end of the play, the two women of the chorus envision Ato as a ghost at his door. Earlier Ato had heard the children outside his door playing a traditional ring game and singing the song of “the ghost at the junction”:

“Shall I go
To Cape Coast,
Or to Elmina
I don’t know,
I can’t tell.
I don’t know,
I can’t tell.” (Dilemma 93)

Ato is distressed by the song, which he loved to sing as a child. He wonders if he had been dreaming, but the voices come back to him when Eulalie returns after running off and is taken by Esi Kom, her mother-in-law, into the ancestral home. Esi welcomes her in, she who has no mother, but whose mother’s ghost probably watches over her as she goes through her adventures in her husband’s home. The voices of the children seem to remind Ato again at the end of the play that he is lost and the ghosts of his ancestors are watching him until he comes again into the fold, the community of his people, living and dead.
The dilemma of Ato and Eulalie is a continuing theme of Aidoo. Angeletta Gourdine calls the dilemma of the play “the reconciling of historical dissonance” ("Slavery in the Diaspora Consciousness" 31). Eulalie, a child of the diaspora, does not have an ancestral memory of the past in Africa, and the people of Ato’s village have not easily accepted this “black-white woman,” who, in her guise as a free-spending modern American, squanders her husband’s money on machines she does not need and expresses disdain for the foods, hospitality, and religious traditions of her husband’s family. The clash of cultures that Eulalie brings about is the result of the rupture caused by the African past—the Middle Passage, slavery, and racism that Eulalie and her ancestors faced in the United States—and alternatively, the historical amnesia that the people of Ghana and the rest of Africa assume to ameliorate the tragedy and guilt of the past and the oppressive conditions of the present. Eulalie assumes several divergent identities during the play. Her marriage and migration to Africa have been daring. She is a child of Harlem and in the scene when she speaks to the ghost of her mother, she tells her how well she has done in marrying her “Native Boy” and that the country is much better than she would have thought. Her mother counsels her to keep on moving to the top: “Lalie, you must not stop. Chicken, you must make it to the top. . . . You’ll be swank enough to look a white trash in the eye and tell him to go to hell” (Dilemma 55). Aidoo’s near-caricature of the African American girl from Harlem is somewhat of a mimicry. Her drinking, smoking, and other actions, including throwing away the snails that the mother brought them as a delicacy, and her insults to Ato about his village of “stupid, narrow-minded savages,” finally lead to her husband’s slap and return insult, “How much does the American Negro know?” (87). Eulalie neither transcends the limitations of her upbringing nor counters the latent patriarchy of her husband’s society.

Although Esi Kom accepts Eulalie in the end, she is the ghost of the past, which the people of Ato’s village are not willing to face. No one wants to hear about the complicity of Africans in the Atlantic slave trade, although the historical slave ports of Elmina and Cape Coast mentioned in the children’s ring game refer to that part of African history. In a similar vein, Eulalie’s negotiation of a space for herself in the diaspora gives her a sense of connection with the center of African womanhood and motherhood. However, as Trinh T. Minh-Ha points out, “The center itself is marginal. . . . Wherever she goes she is asked to show her identity papers. What side does she speak up for? Where does she belong (politically, economically)? Where does she place her loyalty (sexually, ethnically, professionally)?” (216). Eulalie is welcomed into the Odumna household at the end of the play, but does this mean she
is ready to give birth to a first child? And will she continue to remind Ato’s people of slavery and its part in Africa’s tortured past? How secure is her identity in the space she has negotiated?

Aidoo, like her mentor Nkrumah, seems to believe that an African recovery of its past is essential to the continent’s move toward a productive future. In her second play, *Anowa* (1970), Aidoo continues to work with this theme of “historical dissonance” (Gourdine, “Slavery,” 31). Aidoo uses the legend of Anowa to bring together many of the prevailing ideas about women’s identity as mother and wife in African society and to create a character who defies these definitions, demanding partnership with her husband in marriage and voicing her opposition to her husband’s business in slavery. Aidoo also chooses a particular historical moment in Ghanaian history—1870—thirty years after the Bond Treaty, which put the Gold Coast more squarely under British rule, to describe the dilemma as the Fanti moved toward materialism and imperialism, particularly the “new wealthy trader class of Ghanaians,” notably Kofi Ako, Anowa’s husband (Odamtten 71).

Through words of the chorus, which in *Anowa* is composed of the Old Man and Old Woman called “The-Mouth-That-Eats-Salt-and-Pepper,” the reader learns that Anowa is a “strange woman” and “a child of several incarnations” (*Anowa* 7). At many times during the play, characters, including Anowa’s mother and father, allude to her other-worldliness. Her father thinks that the mother should have apprenticed her to a priestess, “to quiet her down” (11); she is really a prophet, “and a prophet with a locked mouth is neither a prophet nor a man” (13). The women of the community, including her own mother Badua and the Old Woman of the Mouth-That-Eats-Salt-and-Pepper, criticize Anowa without pity. Anowa does things that no other woman has ever been able to do successfully. First, she chooses her own husband without consideration of her mother’s wishes. Then she disagrees with her husband, Kofi Ako, openly when he decides to make money by trading slaves. While her husband makes millions and becomes the richest man on the Guinea coast, Anowa revolts, never buying new clothes or jewelry, not even shoes, dressing just as poorly as she did when they walked miles from one trade post to the other to run their trading business in the early years of marriage. The community, who criticized the couple so much in their early years, then observes them with amazement. The father Osam and mother Badua discuss the progression of the marriage:

BADUA: Yes, for someone whose soul is wandering, our daughter is prospering. Have you heard from the blowing winds how their trade with the white man is growing? And how they are buying men and women?
OSAM: Yes, and also how unhappy she is about those slaves, and how they quarrel from morning to night. . . .
BADUA: Which woman in the land would not wish to be in her place?
OSAM: Anowa is not every woman.
BADUA: Tchlaa! And who does she think she is? A goddess? (33)

As her husband’s wealth increases, Anowa weakens physically and looks within to find her own identity. She sees herself as a wandering soul and a wayfarer. “To call someone a wayfarer,” she says, “is a painless way of saying he does not belong. That he has no home, no family, no village, no stool of his own; has no feast days, no holidays, no state, no territory” (37). She has chosen exile instead of the gender constrictions of her village of Yebi. But her husband’s “Big House” is also gender-restrictive. The highway, where she and her husband built their trade business together, is the only place where she has been free to negotiate her own space. As Carole Davies puts it: “Anowa’s preferred space is that shifting site of transition and movement. Anowa’s borderlands are the intersections of gender and class, colonial and neo-colonial relationships, masculinity and femininity, freedom and constraint” (Black Women, Writing and Identity 67).

Phase Two of Anowa is titled “On the Highway.” In the early days of the marriage, Anowa plays an equal role with Kofi Ako in establishing their trading business. They work and sweat together. In the first scene the audience sees Kofi Ako exhausted from carrying monkey and other skins that they will soon trade. Anowa is also carrying skins and is even shivering from her own exhaustion. They have traveled about 270 miles toward the coast with thirty more miles to go. In their exhaustion, Anowa suggests that Kofi Ako take on another wife, who could help them in their efforts. He says that he is not interested in another wife, although he needs her help desperately (she is, in effect, the brains and the brawn behind the business), but he thinks that it would be good to acquire some men to help them in the business.

ANOWA: We were two when we left Yebi. We have been together all this time and at the end of these two years, we may not be able to say yet that we are the richest people in the world but we certainly are not starving.
KOFI AKO: And so?
ANOWA: Ah, is there any need then to go behaving as though we are richer than we are?
KOFI AKO: What do you want to say? I am not buying these men to come and carry me. They are coming to help us in our work.
ANOWA: We do not need them.
KOFI AKO: If you don’t, I do. Besides you are only talking like a woman.

ANOWA: And please, how does a woman talk? I had as much a mouth in the idea of beginning this trade as you had. And as much head!

KOFI AKO: And I am getting tired now. . . . What is wrong with buying one or two people to help us? They are cheap. . . . You know, Anowa, sometimes, you are too different. . . . I know. I could not have started without you, but after all, we all know you are a woman and I am the man. (Anowa 29–30)

Anowa recognizes that her husband’s entry into the slave trade is a way of promoting his business as well as making money in its own right, but it also ends their highway years of “liminal” space. Anowa and Kofi Ako meet in what Homi Bhabha calls a “liminal,” “hybrid,” or “third” space, where they are able to negotiate their differences in gender, class, and cultural traditions. Bhabha describes this location as a space that “makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti-nationalist, histories of the ‘people.’ It is in this space that we will find those words with which we can speak of Ourselves and Others. And by exploring this hybridity, this ‘Third Space,’ we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves” (“Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences” 209). Anowa and Kofi Ako are both in effect exiles from their homelands and for a while are willing to accept their strengths and weaknesses as individuals independent of their social constructions. Kofi Ako is not ashamed to say that Anowa is superior to him in strength and wisdom. “You ought to have been born a man,” he says. She is not restricted by her culture at this time either and suggests that her husband should marry another woman. “At least she could help us” (Anowa 24). However, almost immediate with his idea of partaking of the new capitalist culture brought about by the Bond Treaty, Kofi Ako begins to criticize Anowa and claim his superior male status. He announces to Anowa, as she sleeps, “Anowa, I shall be the new husband and you the new wife” (27). He also insists that the reason she cannot see herself in the future is because she has no children. “Women who have children can always see themselves in the future” (36). Later we find that the true reason for the couple’s inability to have children is Kofi Ako’s impotence brought about by his obsession with acquiring wealth. The liminal space of the highway, which allows the couple the liberty to define themselves as they see fit, ends with their reentry into society and their life with slaves at the Big house at Oguaa (Phase Three of the play).

Anowa knows that Kofi Ako’s participation in the slave trade and willingness to use humans as material for his own gain is wrong. She sees in his actions a return to the behavior of African ancestors in slavery; she is
the priestess and must uncover the truths of Africa’s past. The sinfulness of slavery had been made more real to her by the story that her grandmother told her about the Atlantic slave trade when she was a child and the terrible dream she had that night and will always remember. In her despair she tells her dream to the slave women in Kofi Ako’s “big house at Oguaa”: “I dreamt that I was a big, big woman. And from my insides were huge holes out of which poured men, women and children. And the sea was boiling hot and steaming. And as it boiled, it threw out many, many giant lobsters boiled lobsters, each of whom as it fell turned into a man or woman, but keeping its lobster head and claws. And they rushed to where I sat and seized the men and women as they poured out of me, and they tore them apart, and dashed them to the ground and stamped upon them” (Anowa 46).

The dream of the forced migration of Africans to the Americas during the Atlantic slave trade works on several levels. Maggi Phillips discusses the “manifold dimensions” of dream activity in modern African literature (90). Phillips describes dream activity in Africa as “the site of ritual psychic healing; dreamselfs travel out of bodies, and sorcerers, gods, goddesses, spirits, and the dead physically enter the dreamers’ presence; finally, dreaming transgresses chaos and contacts the highest sacred authority” (90). In Anowa’s dream, she becomes Africa herself and feels the multitudes of African men, women, and children, violently taken away from her by the white men. The psychic schism that she feels because of her knowledge of the complicity of Africans in the slave trade is not healed by her telling of the story, but she does share the dream with everyone in the “Big House,” in hopes that the acknowledgment of the past will be liberating to herself as well as to all the others who listen.

When she acknowledges to everyone that her husband is the problem for their infertility, that he has been emasculated by his greed in acquiring slaves, and when he hears her, Kofi Ako walks off and shoots himself (the audience hears the gunshot offstage). Then, in a very melodramatic way, Anowa addresses the furniture and the painting of Queen Victoria to tell them that she is leaving as well. The Old Woman of the Chorus runs in to tell the audience that Kofi Ako has shot himself and Anowa has drowned herself—that it was all Anowa’s fault: “Anowa ate Kofi Ako up.” She has “behaved as though she were a heroine in the story” (Anowa 63–64).

In both plays, The Dilemma of a Ghost and Anowa, the heroines (perhaps anti-heroine, Eulalie) and Anowa (reworked mythological subject) are restlessly searching for their identities. Their identities are unclear, partly because of their complicated existences somewhere between traditional and modern society, but also because of Aidoo’s changing alternatives for African womanhood. Eulalie, flawed character that she is, still attempts to declare
independence from traditional African society in her decision, along with her husband, to use birth control, until she takes her mother-in-law’s hand and walks into the communal existence of the village. The dilemma tales are left with these questions: Is this a healing move or a submission? Even if Anowa’s suicide is an act of resistance to a restrictive society that she cannot accept as a part of her lived experience, does her death reflect triumph or defeat? As Opoku-Agyemang writes: “The disappointment of Anowa lies in its silence over the alternative avenues of growth for the intelligent, independent woman” (21). Both plays end as dilemma tales, posing questions about women’s attempts to establish their subjectivities.

In Aydo’s book of short stories, No Sweetness Here (1970), urban as well as village women are renegotiating their space in neocolonialism, a time when many held on to the patriarchal restrictions of African societies, while, on the other hand, women are moving to the city to take advantage of new job opportunities and progressive attitudes. In the city many of them are accepting the Western ideals of beauty, wearing wigs and Western dress; some are becoming prostitutes.

As with her use of orature in drama, Adoo bases many of her stories on dialogues between characters, as in the story “Something to Talk about on the Way to the Funeral.” The story is told by two women who are walking to the funeral of their old friend and neighbor, Aunty Araba. They describe the development of their neighbor’s character and her difficulties in finding her way in the society despite her various strengths. The narrator addresses Adwoa as “my sister,” conversing with her often in their “nation language.” For example, Adwoa says she has just had time to pick up her akatado (outer garment) before coming. Reminding the reader that the story takes place during the neocolonial period, she points out that her husband was not able to attend because he was not able to leave his government work, but would come with her to the next Akwanbo (village festival).

A typical community person in African society, Aunty Araba is talented, but sacrifices herself to her community and her family. Her voice had always been “delicate”; Adoo describes her voice as she does Africa on Sissie’s return in the novel Our Sister Killjoy, and Sissie describes Africa as a place “that felt like fresh honey on the tongue” (Our Sister Killjoy 133). She says that Aunty Araba’s voice had a “thin sweetness that clung like asawa berry on the tongue” (No Sweetness Here 114). The Bosoe dance group would sing a “bread song” at the funeral, for they had turned one of Aunty Araba’s bread songs into a Bosoe song. She had baked wonderful bread and sold it in the market, although her ovenside became a marketplace in itself. However, despite her strengths, Aunty Araba had had many troubles
in her personal life; the origin of them all could be attributed to her “lawyer-or-doctor-or-something-like-that” (“a big man”) (No Sweetness Here 115). She had a child (who later became “the scholar Ato”) with the “lawyer-or-doctor-or-something-like that,” who was already married: he was “the lady’s husband” (husband of a woman of a higher class). Because of Aunti Araba’s pregnancy, her mother treated her very badly, and after the baby’s birth she moved away from her parents’ home and started to earn money by baking delicious and delicate breads. They would have sold better to the city people than those in the village. “Our people in the villages might buy *tatare* and *epitsi*, yes, but not the others” (117). She finally started baking ordinary bread and married the ordinary laborer, Egya Nyaako. She worked harder than ever to give her son, Ato, a good education, but before he was six, her son was fighting her, and later his natural father, the “lawyer-or-doctor-or-something-like that,” claimed him.

When her son Ato’s girlfriend from the village, Mansa, got pregnant, as Aunti Araba had in her youth, Mansa and Aunti Araba became close friends and Aunti Araba taught her breadmaking. Nevertheless, Ato refused to marry Mansa because he had also impregnated another girl, of higher class. After the rejection, Mansa left for the city. It was rumored that she became a prostitute, but Aidoo ends the tale by showing that Aunti Araba had passed on her strength to the young woman. In the city Mansa made a living by baking bread with machines. But Aunti Araba became sick. About three months earlier, she had come “to squat by her ancestral hearth” (125).

When the two friends arrive at the funeral, they wonder if Aunti Araba’s son, Ato, would come to the funeral. Would this “lady-wife” come? Would the rejected Mansa come?

“Hmmmnn . . . it is their own cassava! But do you think Mansa will come and wait for Aunti Araba?”

“My sister, if you have come, do you think Mansa will not?” (126)

In the eleven stories of No Sweetness Here the women face societal problems—adapting to European criteria of beauty (“Everything Counts”); moving to cities to work, sometimes taking up prostitution or other demeaning jobs (“In the Cutting of a Drink,” and “The Message”); surviving to take care of children and grandchildren in the rural areas, while the men go away to join the army or work in the city (“For Whom Things Did Not Change”); negotiating with the continuation of polygamy in neocolonial Ghana (“No Sweetness Here”). In the many voices of women in the city and rural areas, Aidoo uses the ancient art of storytelling and verbal performance to portray
the varied lives of Ghanaian women. She uses her dilemma tales to raise questions about womanhood and society that remain unresolved. In the neocolonial period, the African woman is left to define herself under changing conditions.

After publishing her two plays, the collection of short stories (*No Sweetness Here*), and several years of lecturing and traveling, Aidoo published her first novel, *Our Sister Killjoy: Reflections from a Black-Eyed Squint* (1977). Odamten categorizes *Our Sister Killjoy*, as well as her earlier *No Sweetness Here*, as a *nutinyawo*, or collection of prose-poetry narrative performances, ending with a final meditation, “A Love Letter” (119). Traveling from Africa to Europe and back again, Sissie, the protagonist, undergoes a “journey from innocence to experience as she leaves Ghana to sojourn in both Germany and England, and as she returns to Ghana” (Ivory 250). Her observations of Europe are a learning and maturation process, which inevitably open her eyes from the youthful state of a *Black-Eyed Squint*, and teach her to see sociopolitical and racial truths that determine so much of her experience. She begins to see around the “ticky-tackies we have / saddled and surrounded ourselves with, / blocked our views, / cluttered our brains” (*Our Sister Killjoy* 5).

Upon receiving a scholarship from the government to study abroad, Sissie, one of the young people chosen to represent Africa, leaves her home in rural Ghana, travels to Accra, then to Lagos, Nigeria, to meet a plane from Johannesburg, South Africa, that would take her on to Europe. The narrator remarks that most planes were not allowed to stop at Accra because planes from Johannesburg, South Africa, “and other Afrikaaner cities formed a backbone to their African business” (*Our Sister Killjoy* 10). Before leaving on the plane, Sissie is invited to the ambassador’s house, where she is unfortunate enough to meet Sammy, an obsequious African, who tells her how lucky she is to be chosen for this trip to Europe: “she derides his role-playing as a Sambo,” notes Ivory (253). Sammy is a type that she will meet often on her journey. Later, being asked to leave the front seat with the Europeans from South Africa to sit at the back of the plane with “her friends” (other black Africans) confirms her beginning racial awakenings.

Leaving Africa and crossing the Mediterranean into Europe, Sissie says to herself, “Good night Africa. Good morning Europe” (*Our Sister Killjoy* 11). But the dawn that she expected turns out to be a false promise, tempting like the plums that the young German housewife, Marija, offers her on her first stop in Bavaria, Germany. “Plums,” the title of this section of the book, are completely new to Sissie, and she loves them for their traits similar to her, their “Youthfulness / Peace of mind / Feeling free: / Knowing you are a rare article, / Being / Loved” (40). These poetic words of the nar-
rator express the warm feeling of the young Sissie as youth and freshness in a cold, sterile environment, which she looks upon very skeptically, tempt her. Marija, the young wife, in her loneliness, with only her young son, Little Adolf, and her absent husband, Big Adolf, is just as happy to learn something of the world outside of her narrow experience; Ghana, which she confuses with Canada, is worlds away. The dream life ends, however, when Marija tries overtly to start a lesbian relationship with Sissie. Her feelings for Marija have not been completely one-sided, but, as Gourdine says, “Sissie sees her desires as not only a potential source of shame for herself and her family, but also as further evidence of Europeans’ negative influences on the African psyche” (*The Difference Place Makes* 96). Both Sissie’s private and public selves are involved. Relieved that the time in Bavaria has come to an end, Sissie says goodbye to the lonely Marija, whose ancestry, Sissie reminds herself, includes the slaveholders, colonizers, and imperialists of Europe.

Sissie’s next stop is London, where she sees nothing but “been-to’s,” Africans who have given up their original intentions of returning home because of their infatuation with, and false dreams of acceptance by, London society. All the Africans she meets declare themselves to be students. To Sissie, London seems to say to the many black “students,” “Tell us / Boy / How / We can make you / Weak / Weaker than you’ve already / Been” (*Our Sister Killjoy* 87). Blacks were poor and poorly clothed. If and when they went back home as “been-to’s,” the ghosts of their former selves, they “lied” about the wonders of living overseas. One of the major topics of conversation in London was of the dying white man who had received the heart of a young black man who had died on the beach. “His heart had been removed from his chest and put in the Dying White Man’s Chest” (95). The African intellectual friend that she meets—Kunle—thinks that the event was one of “the beauties of Science” and the hope of future race relations. Kunle, who has stayed in England for seven years, finally returns home to help his family, but showing off as a “been-to,” he hires a chauffeur to drive him to work and unfortunately dies in an accident when the chauffeur is going eighty miles per hour. The double irony is that his insurance does not cover an accident caused by such an irresponsible chauffeur, and his family in Ghana will receive no money.

On Sissie’s return flight to Ghana, she writes a letter to her male friend in London. Aidoo’s orature is complex here, for while she is writing, she imagines her friend’s responses. The boyfriend explains that he has reached the top of his profession in London. “And, anyway, all this preaching at us to come home. . . . What is there? Apart from stupid and corrupt civilian regimes, coups, and even more stupid and corrupt military regimes?” (127).
The doctor friend/researcher will stay in the sophisticated place where he has made his name and enjoys the facilities of the best hospitals and laboratories. Sissie returns home to her “Africa . . . that felt like fresh honey on the tongue: a mixture of complete sweetness and smoky roughage. . . . Crazy old continent” (133).

Although Sissie never mails the letter, she is able to carry on her dialogue about the things that mean the most to her—“the importance of language, . . . group survival and . . . reconstructing the future. . . . It [the letter] celebrates Sissy’s strength as a woman but mourns what she has lost as a result of her newly defined womanhood” (Chetin 157). Chetin sees Aidoo’s decision to end her book with a letter that she does not even send as a new type of closure “that wants to leave behind, to exclude all those who do not share her African female-centered consciousness, a consciousness turned in on itself as a means of resisting attempts to appropriate an image of African womanhood for needs other than the writer’s own” (149). The image of the African woman that Sissie personifies is a woman whose identification of her own voice leads to her acceptance of her African home and rejection of migration or “exile.” Her travels, in fact, reinforce her developing voice. She puts the restoration of home—nationhood—above romance.

Romance, however, is of crucial importance to Aidoo’s next novel—Changes: A Love Story (1991). What is particularly surprising in this novel is that the modern career woman, Esi Sekyi, not only divorces her first husband but later starts a relationship that leads to her becoming the second wife in a polygamous affair. Tuzyline Jita Allan, in her Afterword to Changes, notes that “the love plot is a common feature in Aidoo’s work” (178), but critics generally subordinate the love plots “to the loftier” issues of cultural conflict, communal authority, and cultural disintegration” (178). However, in her works Aidoo always couples the personal and the political. A comprehensive reading of her works must encompass both realms.

Esi, a career woman of postcolonial Accra, Ghana, definitely put her career as analyst in the Department of Urban Statistics well above any duties she owed as a wife. As a matter of fact, she and her husband, Oko, have had many battles that affect them and their only child Ogyaanowa long before the morning that Oko commits what Esi calls “marital rape,” a term that would not have been validated in any African society. Esi settles on divorce, in spite of the fact that her husband’s folks call her a “semi-barren witch and told her that they thought their son and brother was well rid of her, thank God” (Changes 70). Esi’s mother and grandmother think of her as a fool for considering divorce from a good husband, “her own husband” (95). The grandmother answers Esi’s question about love: “Love? . . . Love? . . . Love is not safe, my lady Silk, love is dangerous. It is deceitfully sweet like
the wine from a fresh palm tree at dawn. . . . Ah, my lady, the last man any woman should think of marrying is the man she loves” (42).

Becoming the second wife of the man that she loved, Ali Kondey, who is good-looking but married to his teacher-training school sweetheart with three children, is not all that Esi hoped for, particularly when he starts to stay away for long periods of time, first to visit his other family and three years later to spend time with his new secretary. The life of the modern urban African woman is difficult. There are still customs that she must follow, even in Ali Kondey’s negotiation of a second marriage with the elders of her family and with his own. One of the main things required by both families is that he secures his first wife Fusena’s acceptance of the arrangement. “In the village, or rather in a traditional situation, it was not possible for a man to consider taking a second wife without the first wife’s consent. In fact, it was the wife who gave the new woman a thorough check-over right at the beginning of the affair. And her stamp of approval was a definite requirement if anything was to become of the new relationship” (97). Changes do not occur without nodding to the past and tradition. However, marriage conventions and power relations were changing dramatically in the urban areas. As the two community persons, Ama and Aba of the chorus, note, in modern times it was not just the power of the second wife’s father (his wealth, connections, land, etc.) that led to a man’s decision to marry again:

ABA: We must not forget that these days it could be the woman herself who could have such power.

AMA: Indeed it is not necessary for her to be anybody’s daughter if she has the power of beauty, of youth, political, financial. . . . Nor should we forget high education, a degree or two.

ABA: A government job with side benefits. . . . One of the largest pay packets!

(102)

Such is the case with Esi. She brings her own power, education, and financial package to the marriage.

Odamtten views *Changes* as a continuation of ideas and techniques that Aidoo uses in her earlier works. He calls the novel “a new tail to an old tale” (the title of his chapter 6). “Echoes of her [Aidoo’s] other works reverberate through these pages and in her characters’ words and actions, so that we are almost taken in by the Bird of the Wayside’s performance. . . . We are allowed to forget neither the personal in the political nor the political in the personal decisions of each of the characters” (Odamtten 162–63). Esi has changed from Aunti Araba of the short story “For Whom Things Have Not Changed,” who gives all to her son, loses her son to his natural father when she and her
husband divorce, and, finally, is rewarded by a large community funeral that her son might not take the time to attend. Esi has gained in self-assertion and awareness and does not lose her life because of a son’s callousness. She has changed from Anowa and is able to confront her husband and face the hostilities and questioning of the community. Moreover, Esi has laid claim to her body and her identity and has written her own narrative of the modern African woman and her acceptance of ancient traditions.

Nevertheless, the end of Changes shows that Aidoo’s novel is still a dilemma tale, and the answers to all major problems are not resolved. Esi will not divorce her second husband; she will remain his second wife, although it has become evident to her that he is a womanizer, for she has trained herself to embrace material things and job advancement and to accept the inadequacy of his love. Many questions remain: “So what fashion of loving was she ever going to consider adequate? She comforted herself that maybe her bone-blood-flesh self, not her unseen soul, would get answers to some of the big questions she was asking of life. Yes, maybe, ‘one day, one day’ as the Highlife singer had sung on an unusually warm and not-so-dark night” (Changes 166). We see Aidoo’s vision of West African womanhood as growing and changing through all her works. The question at the end of her tales remains, “What to do?” A collective of audience, author, and characters will have to decide.

During the neocolonial period in which Ama Ata Aidoo writes her narrative-performances, she explores the many roles that African women play, both public and private. In their quests to establish their identity, both African and diasporic, they often find themselves as wayfarers—dislocated from their roots but also from themselves. Eulalie, of The Dilemma of a Ghost, is wayfarer, sojourner, and orphan, in search of her source, the motherland, but confused by the popular Western conceptions of Africa, which she has to transcend before being able to accept or be accepted by her ancestors. Ato, Ama Ata Aidoo’s earliest “been-to,” is lost as well, for he has adopted Western ways, although the West has not accepted him, nor his village, now that he has changed.

The willingness to remember its past history in the Atlantic slave trade and its complicity in it, as well as to recognize the diaspora of African descendants all over the world, is, as Nkrumah believed, important to Africa’s restoration. Recovery of the past and ancestral memory is a recurring theme in Aidoo’s literature. Anowa puts herself into self-exile, partly to get away from the gender restrictions of her society, but that migration away from her home takes her into another part of her history, which has always horrified her—the slave trade, which her husband has become implicated in, even during the 1870s. The quest for materialism, in terms of the sell-
ing of human flesh, still holds. “The reconciling of historical dissonance” (Gourdine, “Slavery,” 31) is not achieved in Anowa, nor is Anowa able to attain black female subjectivity. Our Sister Killjoy/Sissie and Esi of Changes are also in search of clarity about their identity and the roles they must play for themselves and for Ghanaian society. The issues are raised, although they remain dilemmas for the characters and the audience.