

Ama Ata Aidoo Challenged the Constructed Absence of African Women's Leadership

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Ama Ata Aidoo's writings provide a conscious women's rights assertion on the issue of leadership for the next generation. Even in her early writings, an affirmative critique of issues of concern to African women still bereft of full participation in the critical decisions of their countries consistently marked her intellectual and creative contributions. She viewed this as a constructed absence, as there was already a history of women's leadership that had not been fully actualized in the historical accounts, compared to the current political practice.

Ama Ata Aidoo's short story "She-Who-Would-Be-King" (from *The Girl Who Can And Other Stories* [Heinemann 1997:55–62], which is recommended as a young adult book for readers ten years old and up) offered an advanced engagement as well as a forecast on the future of African women's creative and political leadership. The historical setting of the story is 1977, twenty years before the book's publication date, and presents from the start a confident projection that women's leadership would soon be normative:

"So what did you say you will be when you grow up?"

She-of-ten-years-old:

"The President."

The rest of the story presents a debate about what interferes with a young girl's desire to lead: "Listen, I don't think the men of this country will ever let a woman be their President." "No? We shall see" (55).

Thus, in an interesting projection into the future, Aidoo takes the story to 2026, a timeframe that the author herself would not witness, and that we have not yet arrived at in 2023, also the year of her passing and the time of this writing. Significantly, adult actors and speakers and professionals engage this

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topic intergenerationally, and our little girl is now 36 and her mother is the Dean of the Law School. Aidoo is deliberate about indicating that there are multiple histories and levels of leadership, as we see “four generations of the family in the room” (56) in conversation on this topic, carrying forward the same leadership desire through to its realization. She situates the outcome of the story in a pan-African future, as desired by Ghana’s first prime minister Kwame Nkrumah. Africa has by then survived “man-made” calamities (58) and is now re-greening the continent. Thus, we have a more hopeful environmental context for the announcement on May 25, 2026.

We note relatedly that the conversation about African male leaders who refuse to give up power still has currency and is a kind of prediction from Aidoo. A correlation with the range of coups beginning in Mali in 2021 and reaching a climax in 2023 (in Niger, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Gabon) does not escape a contemporary reader:

This is Africa, isn’t it? No one resigns here. Certainly not heads of governments or any outfits for that matter. And they never allow themselves to get voted out of power. Not if they can help it. No, they are either thrown out in coups, or they sit on people’s heads until they rot with old age. (60)

Aidoo has her speaker refer to these individuals as “power-hungry old men... and power-hungry young men” (60).

These failures of independence via masculine models of leadership set the stage for the announcement that the daughter of the girl who wanted to be president has moved beyond the nation-state level to the continental and so becomes “The First President of Africa” (61) and a colloquial “She-King” (62). This failure of current male leadership is a point repeatedly emphasized by a number of African women leaders and has been articulated well by activists such as Wangari Maathai on the limitations of current male leadership and challenged by the presidential presences of a range of women from Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf (Liberia) to Samiah Suluhu Hassan (Tanzania). (See “Wangari Maathai on Creating ‘Revolutionary Citizen-Leaders’” in *Black Women’s Rights, Leadership and the Circularities of Power* [Rowman & Littlefield Lexington Books, 2022], 118–23).

Another interesting conjunction is that Ama Ata Aidoo had already engaged the current “woman king” popular culture phenomenon captured in a variety of films. One such example is the famous “The Woman King” (2022), which was set in historical Dahomey and which featured the Agojie warriors and the “African Queens” of Netflix (2023), centering the history of the legendary Njinga of Angola.

In “Feminist Literary Leadership in African Women’s Writing” (Chapter 2 of *Black Women’s Rights*, 64–69), I stated that Aidoo consistently promoted a feminist literary leadership in her creative-theoretical assertions of a range of women’s rights. What are now fundamental rights in an international law instrument such as the African Union’s Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa (2005) were issues that Ama Ata Aidoo had already

declared as necessary for attaining the full possibilities of African women and of African societies in general. Indeed, on the question of leadership, Article 7 of CEDAW (the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women) asserts that to remedy this discrimination:

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country and, in particular, shall ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right:

- (a) To vote in all elections and public referenda and to be eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies;
- (b) To participate in the formulation of government policy and the implementation thereof and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government;
- (c) To participate in non-governmental organizations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country.

Basically, the achievement so far has been in acquiring the right to vote (7a). Participation in the formation of government policy (7b) is yet to be realized. The participation stipulated in 7c is one of the avenues that women's organizations have sought to leverage.

We can conclude, then, that Ama Ata Aidoo had supported a range of issues pertaining to African women's rights in her writing and thus provided her own brand of African literary leadership ahead of current positions. As early as her first work, when she was still a college student (1965), Ama Ata Aidoo had begun the process of offering a theoretical/experiential articulation of issues that African women needed to have addressed if there was going to be a post-independence reshaping of social and economic conditions. Thus, in each of her works, from *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965) to *Anowa* (1970) and *No Sweetness Here* (1970) and later in *Changes* (1993), we have clear early framing in the literature of what could easily be called the "African woman question."

Cumulatively, we see an assertion that the advancement of the continent depended on the other "half the world"—women—acquiring full representation. This stance was clarified well in Aidoo's essay "The African Woman Today." In this article she details a number of women who have indeed been leaders, some "women-kings" across the African Continent. Demonstrating her knowledge of this history, she asserts that:

The Nzingha/Portuguese pattern was to be repeated in several areas of the continent over the next centuries. Queen after queen rose against the invaders. In the last years of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Yaa Asantewaa, an Asante (Ashanti, Ghana) queen led an insurrection against the British. Although her armies were defeated, "it is safe to say that she helped to create part of the theoretical basis for the political emergence of modern Africa."

True, all these women were monarchs who found it relatively easy to organize armies against foreign occupation. But history is also replete with accounts of insurgencies organized by women from non-monarchical traditions. One

example is the women of Aba in Eastern Nigeria, who in the 1920s so successfully harassed the British that the colonial administration had to move its headquarters from Calabar to Lagos. Around the same time in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), Mbuya Nehanda (Nyakasikana) was accused of fomenting an insurgency against the British. (“The African Woman Today” [*Dissent*, Summer 1992:], 319–25, also available as <https://blackagendareport.com/index.php/essay-african-woman-today-ama-ata-aidoo-1992>).

Much of this is now documented in several texts on the history of African women’s leadership and the range of the “women-kings,” some of whom have often been mistaken for men (*Black Women’s Rights*, Chapter 4:113–18).

Thus, her titling of *The Girl Who Can and Other Stories* is deliberate in its assertion of possibilities, climaxing with the story “She-Who-Would-Be-King.” At the level of a young adult story, Ama Ata Aidoo offered a conscious women’s rights assertion on the issue of leadership for the next generation. Let us keep an eye on her 2026 prediction as a possibility in her futuristic assertion of women’s leadership as inevitable.

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