

Cross-Generational Sororities: Honouring the Feminist Legacy of Ama Ata Aidoo in Ayobami Adebayo's *Stay with Me* (2017)

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Abstract: Ama Ata Aidoo remains a celebrated feminist icon in Africa's literary scene. Among her plays, novels and short stories, we come across (self-)empowered, determined and insubordinate women who rebel against certain forms of patriarchal violence. Her "transformative feminism" (Arndt, 2002) also engages with concomitant issues to the woman-question like nation-building, transculturation or nationalism. In this article, I seek to explore how some of the most prominent works of this Ghanaian author have influenced contemporary Nigerian writer Ayobami Adebayo as focused on her debut novel *Stay with Me* (2017) and, more specifically, as revolving around a central theme in African literature: motherhood and child rearing. In order to carry out this task, I articulate this analysis upon the original notion of "cross-generational sororities," proposed to examine the metachronous influence foundational feminist authors have had on contemporary generations of African women writers who engage with similar topics while exploring productive strategies to resist patriarchal authority across time, borders, cultures and histories. I conclude that Adebayo naturally picks up on a number of key issues discussed in Aidoo's works, but I also contend that the former actualises some of the topics touched upon by her literary godmother, thus cementing a new African feminist consciousness. **Keywords:** Ama Ata Aidoo; Ayobami Adebayo; cross-generational sororities; African motherhood; African feminist consciousness.

ES Sororidades Intergeneracionales: Honrando el Legado Feminista de Ama Ata Aidoo en la Novela de Ayobami Adebayo *Stay with Me* (2017)

Resumen: La escritora Ama Ata Aidoo se ha consolidado como una figura feminista muy homenajeada en el panorama literario africano. En sus obras de teatro, novelas y colecciones de relatos encontramos mujeres (auto)empoderadas, decididas e insumisas que se rebelan abiertamente contra ciertas formas de violencia patriarcal. El "feminismo transformador" (Arndt, 2002) de Aidoo también lidia con temas concomitantes a la cuestión femenina como son la construcción de la nación postcolonial, la transculturación o el nacionalismo. En este artículo, se pretende explorar cómo algunas de las obras más reconocidas de esta autora ghanesa han influido en la novela de la escritora nigeriana contemporánea Ayobami Adebayo *Stay with Me* (2017) y, más concretamente, centrado en uno de los temas más importantes en la literatura africana: la maternidad y la crianza. Para llevar a cabo esta tarea, se ha articulado el análisis de ambas autoras en torno a la noción de "sororidades intergeneracionales," término propuesto con el fin de examinar la influencia metácrona que esta autora feminista de referencia ha tenido en las generaciones contemporáneas de escritoras africanas que en sus obras tratan temas similares, y de explorar las estrategias empleadas para resistir la autoridad patriarcal a través del tiempo, fronteras, culturas e historias. El artículo concluye que Adebayo naturalmente se nutre de temáticas discutidas en las obras de Aidoo, pero también se puede afirmar que la autora nigeriana actualiza algunos de los temas que vertebran los textos de su antecesora, por ende apuntalando una nueva conciencia feminista africana.

Palabras clave: Ama Ata Aidoo; Ayobami Adebayo; sororidades intergeneracionales; maternidad africana; conciencia feminista africana.

Sumario: 1. Introducción; El Legado Transformador/Feminista de Ama Ata Aidoo; 2. La Femenidad Africana Reconsiderada: Re-Examinando la Figura de la (No) Mujer Maldita; 3. Estrategias de Resistencia Femenina contra la Violencia Patriarcal; 4. Conclusiones: Hacia una Nueva Conciencia Feminista Africana; Bibliografía.

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1. Introduction: Ama Ata Aidoo's Transformative/Feminist Legacy

Considered as one of Africa's most venerated and prolific authors, Ama Ata Aidoo's creative and academic contributions have granted her a privileged position within the African literary and intellectual scene. Aidoo, who was born in 1942 into the Akan society in central Ghana, is regarded as a feminist icon whose works, Sara Chetin states, aim to "inscrib[e] an African female subject which challenges the existing African (male) and western notions of African womanhood" (1991, p. 86) in a moment when the testimonies of African women writers were deliberately unheard or even muted. Another scholar, Hildegard Hoeller, emphasises that Aidoo's texts (in which literary genres blur and oral elements are originally woven together with the written word) are fundamentally attuned with "the plight of the African woman as she struggles for an emotional, political, and moral independence –before and after Ghana's independence" (1998, p. 36), thus establishing a parallel between the shifting female identity and the new Ghanaian national paradigm. In this light, I contend that Aidoo is best analysed as an integral part of what Pius Adesanmi designates as "the feminist *durée*" (2004, p. 233; italics in the original).

This *durée*, which comprises the works of prominent African women writers such as Guinean Camara Laye, Nigerian Buchi Emecheta, Kenyan Grace Ogot, Egyptian Nawal El Saadawi, South African Bessie Head, Cameroonian Calixthe Beyala or Senegalese Mariama Bâ, to name just a few, attends to the stories that disrupt the static and one-dimensional portrayals of "acceptable" femininity their male counterparts have thoroughly disseminated. In the works written by canonised African male authors, female characters have been characterised as passive and vulnerable subjects defined by their procreative role within heterosexual relationships, and as submissive wives, dutiful daughters and unconditional mothers. Additionally, they also came to symbolise the idea of Mother Earth and, particularly during the period of nationalisms and independence, women became allegorically conflated with the idea of Mother Africa and the independent African nation. Chetin adds that women have been represented in the works of renowned male writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka or Ayi Kwei Armah following certain mythic conceptions found in their indigenous cultures that ambivalently portray females as "powerful, life-giving forces" and as "destructive, punishing creatures who must be feared" and, thus, "debased in their non-mythic roles" (1991, p. 16). For their part, African feminist authors belonging to this *durée* were highly committed to deconstruct masculinist representations of African womanhood in this dual process of bringing the female gaze to centre stage so as to debunk the patriarchal discourse, and to present kaleidoscopic images of female subjectivity.

However, African women authors not only were in charge of dismantling monolithic representations in this "reworking of previous [and] male-authored literary stereotypes" (Saltori Simpson, 2007, p. 155), but they also had to face another controversy related to their own alignment with feminism and with the development of a fully-owned feminist consciousness. Some African writers have clearly disassociated from a cause that was regarded as hegemonic, culturally imperialist and deliberately oblivious to the realities of indigenous, formerly colonised and racialised women coming from underrepresented and non-white regions. Obioma Nnaemeka bitingly summarises this Eurocentric conception of Feminism (with capital "f") when claiming that what for her constitutes a universalising practice has traditionally "faced the difficulty of articulating simultaneously commonality and difference" (Nnaemeka in Arndt, 2002, p. 10), while underlining the need to pluralise its political subject in order to accommodate other agendas, struggles and forms of resistance.

As a response to this, African and African-American scholars have proposed their own theorisations regarding women's liberation and equality. For instance, Chikwenye Ogunyemi suggested the intersectional term *African womanism* as a form of "expanded feminism" that incorporates racial, geographical and economic considerations in the struggle against sexist discrimination (Arndt, 2002, p. 39), while Clenora Hudson-Weems came up with a similar term, *Africana womanism*. Others, such as Obioma Nnaemeka's *negofeminism*, Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie's *stiwanism*, Chioma Opara's *femalism*, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *snail-sense feminism* or Catherine Obianuju Acholonu's *motherism* together with Alice Walker's *womanism*, centre on the particular experiences and realities of black women worldwide, giving prominence to the institution of motherhood and to complementary gender relations between men and women (Arndt, 2002, p. 48). However, and considering this oftentimes divisive "polyvocality of [black] feminisms" (Rodríguez et al., 2015, p. ix), Roland Chukwuemeka Amaefula warns us that "the reign of patriarchy" can only be abolished if "there is unity of purpose," not an insistent atomisation of one such purpose, acknowledging the fact that the cohabitation of the multiple strands of feminism might not be harmonious but that a higher need for cooperation and ally-hood is even more urgent if gender equality across borders, cultures or generations is to be achieved (2021, pp. 302-303).

Regarding Ama Ata Aidoo's adherence to feminism and its theoretical counter-alternatives, she has reiterated that she identifies with an African-centred and anti-colonial positioning within this ideology, which clearly shows in her oeuvre, as I prove further on. For instance, when asked if she held herself as a "feminist," Aidoo replied:

When people ask me rather bluntly every now and then whether I am a feminist, I not only answer yes, but I go on to insist that every woman and every man should be a feminist—especially if they believe that Africans should take charge of our land, its wealth, our lives, and the burden of our own

development. Because it is not possible to advocate independence for our continent without also believing that African women must have the best that the environment can offer. For some of us, this is the crucial element in our feminism. (Aidoo in Frías, 2003, p. 383)

In her intersectional exploration of the varied factors that determine African womanhood, a transformative/feminist Aidoo delineates the multiple forms of exploitation women are subject to (i.e. sexism, colonialism, racism, classism, religious fundamentalism, etc.) while claiming that African women's liberation from gender oppression cannot be understood but in conflation with the anti-colonial and nationalist struggle.¹ In this sense, the writer makes clear that, if Africans genuinely aim to become truly independent nations, African women can no longer remain oppressed or discriminated on the basis of gender; they too shall become liberated from the shackles or patriarchy and (neo-)colonialism. In her works, we can find both traditional and modern representations of female identity that negotiate heterogeneous, and often contradictory, notions of femininity in this search for a suitable place (and space) in twentieth-century Ghana. Waleska Saltori Simpson rightly points out that Aidoo's female characters' identities "are constantly under construction, as is the world around them" (2007, p. 157), highlighting the connection between the Ghanaian national, political and social situation, especially after gaining independence in 1957, and the position of the Ghanaian woman within this fast-evolving society.

Currently, several scholars have identified an epistemic shift in the way feminism and female identity are interpreted in the twenty-first century, on the continent and in the diaspora. For instance, in her monograph *Feminism and Modernity in Anglophone African Women's Writing: A 21st Century Global Context* (2022), Dobrota Pucherová carries out a re-mapping of feminism in present-day Anglophone African women's writing as explored in the selected works of literary stars such as Nigerian Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Somali Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Nigerian-Tamil Akwaeke Emezi or South African Angela Makholwa among others. Attuned with Chielozona Eze's postulates that claim African feminism is now experiencing a true rebirth (2014), Pucherová holds too that this current generation of decidedly mobile women writers is more embracing of feminism than previous ones, who regarded it with scepticism and even contempt. This has been possible partly due to the fact that twenty-first-century African writing is no longer conceived as *writing back* to the West, but a more "receptive" attitude is being progressively adopted by writers on the continent and elsewhere.

This theoretical resignification has also been possible due to the processes of digitalisation, globalisation and the cross-pollination between African-originated and Western ideological apprehensions of this movement. This is what Pucherová refers to as the "transculturation of feminism" (2022, p. 8), a modern(ised) expression of "transnational feminism that is more inclusive and welcoming of other gender expressions, and that openly defies patriarchal practices towards African women legitimized by tradition" (Serón-Navas, 2023, p. 127), with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's viral TED talk "We Should All Be Feminists" (2012) as, perhaps, most notably epitomising this new African and transatlantic feminist consciousness (see Rodríguez et al., 2015; Lascelles, 2021). Drawing on the postulates by South African theorist Pumla Gqola, Pucherová states that feminism in the African literary arena is no longer enunciated as a "culturally self-enclosed," but rather as a "global movement against sexism" whose main focus is the female body, conceived as "the crucial site of women's oppression as well as their freedom" (2022, p. 9), and the recognition of "women's demands as universal human rights" (p. 14). Therefore, current feminist debates proposed by this generation of African women authors revolve around issues such as same-sex desire, transgressive sexualities and the discussion of gender-non-conforming identities, which signals to the pluralisation of the traditional African female subject; sexual/reproductive rights and erotic autonomy; Afropolitanism as a space of sisterhood that preludes new vistas for female re-signification; or the concurrent discussions about women's right to self-determination and that of the postcolonial nation. The second author under scrutiny in this article, Nigerian-Yoruba Ayobami Adebayo (1988,-), can be understood as belonging to this re-appropriated, expansive and intersectional encompassing of African feminism, as I prove later on in the analysis of her debut novel.

In a critical effort to elucidate the renegotiated notions of African femininity(ies) and to enquire how African feminism(s) is being recalibrated to meet the demands of black women globally, I intend to carry out a comparative exploration between a selection of texts by Ama Ata Aidoo –namely her plays *Anowa* (1987) and *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965), her novel *Changes: A Love Story* (1991) and her short story collection *No Sweetness Here and Other Stories* (1970)–, and the debut novel by third-generation Nigerian-Yoruba author Ayobami Adebayo, *Stay with Me* (2017).² I focus on a central theme in African literature: motherhood and child rearing, in an attempt to scrutinise how this foundational topic within (African and Euro-American) feminism has been originally approached by these two women writers. Furthermore, I have articulated this article upon the concept of "cross-generational sororities," which I propose, on the one hand, to discuss the massive influence Aidoo, as a literary foremother, has had on the narratives of this third-generation Nigerian writer.³

¹ I use the term "transformative" feminist/m as drawing on Susan Arndt's classification of African-feminist literary texts (2002). According to this theorist, in this type of narratives there is a recognisable and direct criticism against patriarchal attitudes and behaviours. These stories acknowledge men's ability to deconstruct themselves and *transform*, and "are driven by the conviction that discriminatory gender relationships may be [potentially] overcome" (p. 85).

² Ama Ata Aidoo has also published another short story collection titled *The Girl who Can and other Stories* (1997); two volumes of poetry, *Someone Talking to Sometime* (1985) and *An Angry Letter in January* (1992), and another critically-acclaimed novel: *Our Sister Killjoy: or Reflections from a Black-Eyed Squint* (1977). For her part, Ayobami Adebayo recently published her second novel *A Spell of Good Things* (2023).

³ The periodising label "third-generation Nigerian writer" was originally proposed by Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton (2008) to refer to the authors born primarily after 1960 whose works have been published from the mid-1980s onwards. This designation

And, on the other, to diachronically address how similar topics approached by both authors have evolved so as to introduce a new African female subjectivity in which women can actually access “the best that the environment can offer,” so as to recuperate Aidoo’s seminal words (Aidoo in Frías, 2003, p. 383).

Attuned with Pius Adesanmi’s concept of the “feminist *durée*” mentioned earlier and with Kinana Hamam’s conception of postcolonial women’s writing as a “metachronous project” (2014, p. 22), I understand this notion of “cross-generational sororities” as part of a shared and non-linear project that includes the literary works of a constellation of African women authors such as Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Sefi Atta, Ayobami Adebayo, Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi, Aminatta Forna, Ama Ata Aidoo, Maaza Mengiste, NoViolet Bulawayo, Leila Lalami or Ahdaf Soueif, among others, and that centralises transgressive images of African identity defying patriarchal and (neo-)colonial mandates. As Kinana Hamam lucidly puts it, the texts belonging to this trans-historical project of fictional sororities engage with “change and empowerment as a movement not only forward but also backward; that is, back to multiple times and locations in which (past) women’s narratives are operative at present and in the future as they teach and inspire us” (2014, p. 22). Hamam’s statement confirms this idea of an interweaving of literary influences, works and tropes among the several generations that comprise this fictional project oriented towards the liberation of black women worldwide.

I have divided this article into two main sections, in which I carry out the comparative study of Aidoo’s and Adebayo’s selected works. In the first part, African womanhood is revisited so as to scrutinise the figure of the doomed (non-)woman as approached from the perspective of multiple African female subjects who present dissident forms of motherhood, and who actually rebel against institutionalised notions of maternity and femininity. I specifically focus on how these writers propose divergent female paradigms that manifestly call traditional practices into question in an effort to denounce the oppressiveness of long-enforced socio-cultural norms. In the second part, I tackle some of the main strategies of female resistance implemented to resist patriarchal oppression in Ama Ata Aidoo’s and Ayobami Adebayo’s (her)stories. I pay close attention to the image of the outcast or the deviant (m)other, and the positive re-appropriation these authors do of this archetype. Besides, I also reflect on (arrested) female sexuality and erotic fulfilment as a form of liberation and empowerment for women in both contexts. Finally, I attempt to illustrate how the women writers under scrutiny in this article have contributed to the advancement of a new African feminist consciousness, while simultaneously proposing some directions for future research on this topic.

2. African Womanhood Revisited: Re-Assessing the Figure of the Doomed (Non-)Woman

The novels, short stories and plays written by Ama Ata Aidoo are characterised by the centrality of female characters that are in the process of self-definition. Thriving in a period of profound national and societal changes, the fictional women featuring Aidoo’s works embody the tensions between tradition and change as part of this process of national and personal re-invention. In this challenging scenario, Aidoo’s gender misfits stand out for their insubordination, their questioning of external mandates and, perhaps more centrally, their transgressive orchestration of a new Ghanaian female identity. This is most clearly perceived in the way motherhood and child rearing are tackled in some of her works.

Traditionally, motherhood has been regarded as an ambivalent institution: both an empowering and a (self-)destructive experience. In an African context, mothers are conceived as enduring, selfless and powerful presences in the lives of their children and within their communities, where they are “revered as creators, as providers, cradle rockers, nurturers, and goddesses” (Akujobi, 2011, p. 2), reinforcing the sacred status of mothers. In this light, childbearing is, thus, held as the quintessential element that defines “acceptable” womanhood and confers women a privileged status within their communities, publicly validating them when they fulfil this task. Iniobong I. Uko also points out that both wifhood and motherhood “constitute the core of a woman’s life mission and define the essence of true womanhood” on the continent (2014, p. 2). As one of the characters states in the short story “A Gift from Somewhere” from Aidoo’s collection *No Sweetness Here and Other Stories* (1970): “Now all I must do is to try and prepare myself for another pregnancy, for it seems this is the reason why I was created... to be pregnant for nine of the twelve months of every year [...] It is the pattern set for my life” (Aidoo, p. 105-6). Delphine Fongang further adds that motherhood is “a source of strength and a position of identity construction that allows African women not only to achieve status in society but also to establish their sense of fulfilment and happiness in life,” concluding that African women’s social prestige and self-worth are “intrinsically linked to their pro-natal ability” (2015, p. 87). Therefore, childbearing becomes a defining dimension of women’s identity as their agency, strength and even psychological well-being are derived from the very experience of life-giving.

Considering the way motherhood is conceived in an African context, one can appreciate why African feminisms have strongly gravitated towards this central theme in women’s lives. For instance, in *Motherism: An Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism* (1995), Catherine O. Acholonu proposes the term *motherism*, an Afro-centric and eco-friendly alternative to Euro-American feminisms in which the mothering experience becomes a preeminent and emancipating reality for women. Renowned scholar Oyeronke Oyewumi has also theorised about the idea of *matripotency*, that is, the supremacy of motherhood, in her book *What Gender Is Motherhood? Changing Yoruba Ideals of Power, Procreation, and Identity in the Age of Modernity* (2016). Oyewumi holds that motherhood should be conceived as a sort of quasi-divine state that is fundamental for

is generally used to debate the literary production of emergent Nigerian writers that “now reside in Euro-America,” and “whose corpus forms part of a borderless, global, textual topography” (Adesanmi and Dunton, 2008, p. ix).

the development of communities and nations. In order to do this, she argues that this experience should not be regarded as a form of oppression or subordination but rather, as a strategy leading to social transformation.

However, and despite the fact that most African feminists and numerous male and female writers have clearly extolled the mothering experience, this reality has also been construed as a site of oppression and vulnerability that further alienates women, calling into question the so-called joys of motherhood, to acknowledge Buchi Emecheta's seminal text (1979). When the mothering experience is regarded from a patriarchal lens, it can turn into a form of unfair victimhood (Fongang, 2015, p. 91), even into a form of (self-)annihilation that essentialises women to the extent that those who are socially perceived as barren or those who freely decide not to procreate become "deviant" (non-)women. As Ketu H. Katrak argues, if a woman is not able to have children, she is automatically regarded as "a failure, not a complete woman" whose lineage will end with her and her husband (2006, p. 213). This idea is clearly dissected in the short story "The Message" when the grand-mother erroneously thinks her grand-daughter has died in child-birth and she utters the following words in which she equates the death of her great-grand-daughter with a painful form of social death: "Now, that is the end of me and my roots... Eternal death that has worked like a warrior rat, with diabolical sense of duty, to gnaw my bottom. Everything is finished now" (Aidoo, 1970, p. 55).

The most bitter face of motherhood is also addressed in Aidoo's literary texts vis-à-vis the reality of oppressive marriages. In the short story "No Sweetness Here" from the same collection, a woman decides to divorce her husband and is willing to let her only child remain with his father if the elders of her community ask her to do so. When the protagonist files for divorce, she is described as a "discontented woman" (Aidoo, 1970, p. 80), but also as a "bad woman" and a "witch" (p. 88) because she has chosen an alternative way of being a woman, even though the kind of maternity that she puts into practice can be described as the traditional type, in which women are exclusively perceived as self-sacrificing and selfless mothers (Gil Naveira, 2016, p. 113). Once the protagonist divorces her husband, she is forever held as an indecent individual and the community she belongs to punishes her because she is no longer married to "a man for whom [she] ceased to exist a long time ago" (p. 81), and also because she seems "willing" to renounce her only son. In Akan society, children are an extremely valuable investment to the familial unit as they will become a very useful help in the house and, when parents age, they will be expected to take care of them. This idea is neatly summarised in Aidoo's play *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1987) when a village woman says that "[c]hild bearing is always profitable" (p. 21). However, in the first story discussed, "No Sweetness Here," the protagonist's only child is bitten by a snake, dying shortly after; a tragic event that reinforces the woman's outsiderhood since she will die as a divorced, childless woman with no one to take care of her.

This outsiderhood attributed to unconventional women is also found in Aidoo's polyvocal play *Anowa* (1987). Together with themes such as the slave trade in the Gold Coast region or the lack of roots, other issues come to the fore in this theatrical piece in which the author taps into the experiences of a woman, Anowa, who "has refused to marry any of the sturdy men who have asked for her hand in marriage" (Aidoo, 1987, p. 67). Described as a disobedient woman who "listens to her own tales," "[l]aughs at her own jokes" and "[f]ollows her own advice" (1987, p. 7), Anowa is presented as an eccentric character because of her outspokenness and overt questioning of conventionalisms such as becoming a priestess, as her father wanted her to be, or as marrying a person chosen by her own family and not by her. This "woman-in-becoming" (2001, p. 108), as Assimina Karavanta defines her, eventually marries a man of her choice, with whom she relocates to a different community but, unfortunately, it turns out she cannot have children. Anowa's childlessness together with her husband's involvement in human trafficking reinforces what this scholar designates as the protagonist's "apartness" and subsequent sense of unbelonging (Karavanta, 2001, p. 112).

Since she is the one deemed infertile, she even encourages her husband to get a second wife so that he can have a progeny of his own, while Anowa ends up mothering enslaved children. For this, the protagonist is reprimanded by some of the members of her old community, who describe her as "a witch" and as "everything that is evil" (Aidoo, 1987, p. 100), addressing as well the tensions between the individual and the collective. Nonetheless, even though she openly refuses to follow societal impositions, she readily accepts polygamy as a solution to their lack of offspring. It is for this reason that scholars like Owen Seda have emphasised the "dual" quality of the story, which can be regarded as "progressive" since it defies deeply entrenched patriarchal conceptions "by subverting certain discriminatory female stereotypes and normative perceptions of women," and as "regressive" since it shows "an ambivalent attitude towards female emancipation" (2016, p. 35). This dual quality of the text regarding female liberation is most distinctly addressed in the final scene, in which Anowa is believed to have gone mad and she ends up committing suicide. Anowa's presumed insanity as a result of being a marginal character inside and outside her own community and her gender together with her subsequent removal from the realm of the living allows for a subversive interpretation of this fictional woman. Her overt repudiation of the slave trade her husband is eager to be part of frames her as a madwoman who, ironically, "speaks what the others cannot hear and 'sees' what the others are blind to" (Karavanta, 2001, p. 113), emphasising the disruptive and eye-opening role of a woman who would rather commit suicide than living according to others' convictions.

Furthermore, the idea of motherhood as the defining element of "respectable" or "valid" womanhood is also interrogated in Aidoo's second play *Dilemma of a Ghost* (1987), which focuses on Eulalie, an African American woman who has just relocated to the continent with her Ghanaian husband. Both Eulalie and her spouse Ato have previously agreed on postponing having children until they are completely settled down. However, Ato's family starts pressuring Eulalie because they cannot understand that a woman refuses to have children on purpose. Aidoo contrasts Eulalie's views on the mothering experience with an overprotective and pathological representation of motherhood embodied by the husband's mother. Eulalie's mother-in-law,

who can be successfully equated with the idea of Mother Africa, is stereotypically portrayed as the suffering mother who has been left behind by a son who travelled to another continent and has now decided to return. In this fashion and as part of a gerontocracy, the husband's mother's inadequate demands on having grandchildren can be analysed as a strategy to criticise what for her constitutes a form of "unacceptable" womanhood, both because her daughter-in-law is non-African and she remains deliberately childless. It is for this reason that Eulalie is regarded as a barren and consumerist outsider who prefers to buy "machines" instead of having a child of "flesh and blood" (Aidoo, 1987, p. 39).

Likewise, this excessive insistence on procreation can be approached as a way of ensuring the enactment of fully African traditions or, in other words, of asserting their Africanness/Ghanaianess. However, as time passes by and Eulalie does not get pregnant, she starts being held as a disgraced woman and is constantly discredited by her husband's family, who come to the conclusion she must have been invaded by "the spirit of the evil" that desperately needs to be expelled from her body if she wants to "bring a child" (p. 44). Eulalie's refusal to become an obedient, compliant and subordinated wife "exacerbate[s] her portrayal as unreasonable and unacceptable arrogant" (Seda, 2016, p. 40-41) to the eyes of the community she is now part of. As a consequence, and as we will analyse too in Ayobami Adebayo's *Stay with Me* (2017), Eulalie eventually abandons her husband and goes back to the US, leaving behind a traumatic and limiting relationship that demands her to exist as someone who is strictly confined to her biological capacities.

Another example of women who are trying to redefine their identity and sense of self can be found in Aidoo's novel *Changes: A Love story* (1991). This narrative addresses the personal conflicts and emotional turmoil of Esi Sekyi, a successful and self-made woman who is constantly struggling to assert herself in a society that penalises women who do not follow traditional family dynamics. Initially, Esi decides to divorce her husband on the grounds of marital rape and they both agree to have joint custody of her biological only daughter. R. Jothi Rathinabai points out regarding the role of this emancipated urban dweller in postcolonial Ghana that Esi is characterised by her quest for "fulfilment beyond her domestic role as a mother and wife with a college degree and a prominent career" (2018, p. 471). Neither coupledness nor motherhood constitute for the protagonist elements that ensure her own worth as a woman since she refuses to be (socially) validated as based on their biological potentialities and conjugal arrangements. So, for example, when her grandmother tells her that "we all [rural and urban Ghanaian women alike] marry to have children," Esi replies that "that is such an old and worn-out idea" and that relationships should not be designed around childbearing but around true love, respect and trust (Aidoo, 1991, p.51).

In this story in which love and romantic relationships are fundamentally revisited and subverted from the perspective of a recently-divorced woman who agrees to start a relationship with a polygamous and Muslim man, the protagonist tries to make sense of her own positioning within a society in transition that is still very much determined by long-enforced practices that constrict women's independence. Esi is confronted with this idea in a conversation with her best friend Opokuya, who mentions that men are rarely interested in "intelligent and active women" but they demand someone who is "permanently in their beds and in their kitchens" (Aidoo, 1991, p. 54), and that women who decide to remain single or aim for a totally different relationship are the ones society penalises them the most. In fact, as Opokuya wittingly points out, unmarried women are virtually non-existent because they "[are] branded witches" since their "single state [is] an insult to the glorious manhood of our men" (p. 57); the consequence being that society pressures them into remarrying or "[going] back to [their] former husband[s]" (p. 57-58).

Once Esi divorces her husband, she now becomes a single woman that calls into question this very idea of a conventional union between a man and a woman that actually benefits all parties involved, just like wives' obligation of engendering as many children as possible. Since she is not willing to follow every single societal demand placed on women, she thus becomes a social outcast who is constantly reprimanded for her "unnatural behaviour" (p. 198); an instance of this backlash and shaming being when her ex-in-laws called her "a semi-barren witch" (p. 84) because she not only asked for divorce but refused to have another child with her ex-husband while still married. Also, when she is with her second lover, Ali Kondey, she does not understand why they cannot have a relationship without being mediated by a wedding and so she is told that women marry so that they "become occupied territory" and other men cannot reclaim them (p. 109). Esi eventually becomes Ali's second wife but they start drifting apart and Esi comes to the understanding that marriage (be it a Christian or a Muslim institution) does not guarantee happiness for women because, as it is designed, it collides with women's well-being and aspirations outside the domestic arena. This is so because men are "products of patriarchal socialization" (Arndt, 2002, p. 73) and thus, there is a certain asymmetry in the relationship between Esi and her sexual/marital partners. Whereas the female protagonist aims for reciprocity and mutual understanding, Aidoo reminds us that the Ghanaian women explored in her works are not on equal footing with their husbands since society does not promote this, but women work all the same to achieve that goal and thus be part of a more egalitarian society.

I now focus on the second author under scrutiny in this article, Ayobami Adebayo, in a critical effort to explore the influence her predecessor Ama Ata Aidoo has had on her works, more specifically, on her widely-acclaimed debut novel *Stay with Me* (2017). This narrative revolves around a Yoruba woman named Yejide who, after being married with her husband Akin for several years, has not had progeny. This Nigerian author brilliantly represents a couple that cannot have children not because the woman's body is not capable of engendering but because the husband is infertile, destroying the belief that women are the ones barren. It is for this reason that Akin resorts to his brother Dotun and asks him to impregnate his wife so that they can finally fulfil their dream of a family. Once this happens, Yejide becomes pregnant and discovers that all of her children are born with sickle-cell disease. When the protagonist realises none of her children will survive due

to this genetically-transmitted disease, she mentions that “[t]he things that matter are inside [her], locked up below [her] breast as though in a grave, a place of permanence, [her] coffin-like treasure chest” (Adebayo, 2017, p. 5). In this Gothic quote, Yejide’s own body is symbolically associated with a dead place, both because her body is unable to engender healthy children, and because her failure as a mother entails her metaphorical social death in Yoruba society. In this sense, it will prove fruitful to gather the words uttered by Yejide’s mother-in-law, who tells her that “[w]omen manufacture children” and if she cannot do what is expected of her, then she is “just a man” and “[n]obody should call [her] a woman” (p. 47). Once again, we find the degradation and rejection women usually experience at the hands of their families and communities on the grounds of their (unfulfilled) biological roles.

These harsh words against the protagonist exemplify the previously-discussed axiom within African societies that motherhood is the *sine qua non* condition that defines womanhood. In fact, Yejide initially subscribes to this traditional and hegemonic form of womanhood that is cemented upon women’s “pro-natal ability” (Fongang, 2015, p. 87) but then, when she experiences its darkest face, she detaches from this idea, which makes her be perceived as an abject and deviant (m)other both because of her presumed barrenness and, later on, because she has given birth to terminally-ill children. This embodied *outsiderness* is somewhat shared with Aidoo’s (anti)heroines Anowa, Eulalie and Esi since, to a certain extent, all of them fail to meet the biological, cultural and social expectations set for them which, ironically, paves the way for radical forms of self-signification outside prescriptive notions of womanhood that perceive women as *wife-material* and *in relation* to their male relatives and progeny. In Adebayo’s novel, the mothering experience, which turns out to be particularly traumatic and painful, is not conceived as the inescapable biological destiny women must mandatorily comply with in their search for self-assertion, and so other alternatives that do not entail the essentialisation of women’s identities inevitably come to the fore.

3. Strategies of Female Resistance against Patriarchal Violence

In their quest for self-definition, the (anti)heroines in Aidoo and Adebayo’s novels, plays and short stories implement a number of strategies to resist patriarchal violence while putting forth counter-hegemonic forms of female subjectivity. The protagonists in *Anowa* (1970), *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965), *Changes: A Love Story* (1991) and *Stay with Me* (2017) actively refuse to be seen as failed, doomed or incomplete (non-)women. While all of them experience vilification or discrimination on the basis of not being married (anymore) or not having/wanting to have kids, they all oppose to be part of the process of victimisation, that is, to be seen as passive and agencyless subjects. As I have argued in the previous section, Esi refuses to meet social expectations in terms of romantic relationships, motherhood or even sexuality; Anowa disobeys her parents when she chooses to marry a man of her choice and runs away with him to another place; Eulalie marries someone outside her culture, relocates to another continent and agrees with her partner to postpone motherhood despite the repudiation and overt non-acceptance she receives upon her arrival to her husband’s village. Finally, Yejide rebels against societal impositions when she decides to leave her remaining family behind, and against being exclusively defined as a deviant (m)other or flawed woman. In this liberating attempt at self-preservation, they all rebel against rigid societal norms and traditional demands instituted against Ghanaian and Nigerian women. However, whereas Aidoo portrays gender misfits who are despised and demonised due to their childlessness or husbandlessness, exploring women who are described as “witches” or “semi-barren monsters,” Adebayo re-appropriates the figure of the outcast to actually reclaim the agency patriarchy denies transgressive women, thus positivising the idea of the doomed childless woman.

In her original attempt at de-romanticising motherhood, Adebayo not only examines this institution as a form of oppression, especially when motherhood is conceived as a core trait of the African female experience, but she also explores a transformative manifestation of this reality. When Yejide realises none of her children will survive, she decides to abandon Rotimi, her third daughter, and her husband Akin in an effort to detach from a painful form of maternity and to reclaim the control over her own life. It is at this moment when, like Eulalie and Anowa, Yejide abandons her family and relocates elsewhere, showing a dual form of physical and emotional exile. Despite being a really tough decision, it allows her to transcend her role as a victim and to position herself as a woman whose identity is no longer subject to her role as caregiver or wife. Choosing not to be exclusively seen as an adulterous woman whose children did not survive in what for her entails a horrible mothering experience ironically enables her to subvert patriarchal power. In this process of female self-actualisation that certainly finds its parallel in the convulsive political situation of 1990s Nigeria, Yejide is now able to make sense of herself as a Yoruba woman whose life project is not commanded by traditions, conventionalisms or other types of external impositions.⁴ Towards the end of the novel, Yejide reunites with her husband and her now a teenager daughter Rotimi, who has survived the disease, in what becomes a cathartic moment that allows the protagonist to come to terms with her own identity as a dissident (m)other.

Another form of female resistance that is worth discussing as it is explored in the works of both seminal authors is the topic of female sexuality. As with motherhood, the sexual experience is ambivalently regarded as liberating and pleasurable and as alienating and unfulfilling. It is through sex that women are reduced

⁴ In Adebayo’s text, as in Aidoo’s works in the Ghanaian context, a parallelism between a fragile 1990s Nigeria, particularly during the military *coup d’état* orchestrated by Gideon Gwaza Orkar in 1990 together with the riots that erupted as a consequence of the annulment of the 1993 election, and the death of Yejide and Akin’s progeny can be established. In this light, the failure of the Nigerian national project after gaining independence is metaphorically explored in this novel via the death of this couple’s offspring, symbolically criticising the viability of this West African country as it is designed nowadays.

to one of the most intimate forms of gender violence as they are expected to be passive beings directed towards their (male) partners' demands. It is for this reason that most women in the works under scrutiny experience at some point a very specific manifestation of "arrested" sexuality in which their pleasure and sexual needs are completely obviated. Women's bodies become, in the sexual terrain, sites of invasive male control and subordination, conceiving them as mere "phallic receptacle[s]" (Ogundipe Leslie, 1987, p. 6), not as autonomous beings whose sexual needs matter. However, the female characters featuring Aidoo's and Adebayo's works rebel against unequal relationships in an effort to recuperate their sexuality and pleasure, to not feel ashamed to ask for what they want or to simply have their sexual needs met. Intimacy for women is not portrayed as something tabooed or censored, but rather as another form of expressing themselves in which they subversively take ownership of their bodies while affirming their desire and universal need for bonding, which is particularly relevant in a context where women's sexuality is constructed within hegemonic narratives of "violence, sexual epidemics, population explosion, domination, mutilation, repression and lack of choice" (Bakare-Yusuf, 2013, p. 28). In this reappropriation of their sexuality, intimacy thus operates as an empowering form of liberation when women's bodily and emotional needs are met, but also when the (consensual) sexual encounter takes place with partners women are on equal grounds with. In order to explore this notion, I will more specifically focus on Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story* and Adebayo's *Stay with Me*.

In Aidoo's novel, Esi is presented as a successful, fully autonomous and married woman. However, Esi decides to put an end to their relationship as a result of the erosion of it, which culminated in her husband Oko raping her. I agree with R. Jothi Rathinabai that the husband's unashamedly trespassing of his wife's physical boundaries can be symbolically understood as his pathetic and unjustified attempt to "claim power over her body," which he thinks belongs to him and, simultaneously, to regain the "authority, self-respect and pride" (2018, p. 471) he so desperately longs for within their marriage. In forcing his wife to have sexual intercourse with him even when she had openly declared she did not want to, Oko not only demands control over Esi's body but, in doing so, he forecloses the possibility of Esi reclaiming ownership of her (desiring) body and of her own sexual needs, which are clearly overlooked, together with her own integrity as a human being.

In Adebayo's *Stay with Me*, Yejide's erotic autonomy is also "supervised" by her husband, who hides from her that he has erectile dysfunction (and thus infertility hinted). Regarding the control Akin exerts over his wife's sexuality and fertility, Jacob Allen Crystal argues that "Akin's ownership of Yejide's body," and her subsequent dehumanisation, is justified to a certain extent on the grounds of motherhood because Akin metaphorically holds her wife's body "as a site of colonization, something to be enslaved" in order to fulfil the promise of childbearing (2019, p. 19). This conception of Yejide's sexuality as exclusively procreation-oriented propels him to ask her brother Dotun to get her wife pregnant in what the former sees as an "investment" (Adebayo, 2017, p. 57), without Yejide knowing it. Dotun agrees to have sex with Yejide because he "had always wanted her" (p. 188) and because Akin assured him Yejide was aware of their arrangement to impregnate her. Adebayo puts forth contrasting visions of lovemaking between the two sexual partners: whereas Yejide describes the sexual encounters with her husband as tedious and unfulfilling, leaving her incapable of "drown[ing] in the tingly sensations his tongue and fingers gave" (p. 112), her sexual interactions with Dotun are overtly depicted as a source of erotic fulfilment for the female protagonist, who is able to vocalise the physical demands that Dotun will so readily accept. She describes them as encounters that "doused the fire that was smouldering in the pit of [her] belly, and stemmed the wetness gathering between [her] legs" (p. 156). Yejide feels instant physical pleasure and emotional gratification since Dotun meets her sexual needs while sympathising with and validating her own maternal anxieties. Hence, whereas there is an imbalance of power between Akin and Yejide in the sexual arena, Dotun and Yejide's carnal relationship is characterised by certain horizontality and complementarity.

This idea of sex as a site of liberating reciprocity and emotional gratification for the female character is also observed in *Changes*, more specifically through Esi's relationship with Ali after divorcing her husband. Waleska Saltori Simpson holds that "sexual magnetism" is precisely what binds them together in this relationship that illusively provides Esi with an alternative love story in which her independence and sense of identity is presumably not threatened (2007, p. 164). However, once Esi becomes Ali's second wife, their relationship starts to fall apart because, as Saltori Simpson aptly points out, she is "[c]aught up in the love she feels for Ali" and the "socially sanctioned institution of [polygamous] marriage," which essentially relies on "male right and authority" (p. 164). Thus, fulfilling and joyful sex entails for Yejide and Esi a powerful way to assert their sense of selfhood that, Iniobong I. Uko highlights, has become "fundamental for female self-definition" and agency (2014, p. 7). Nonetheless, and without ignoring such one subversive potential of intimacy for women, social expectations play a key role in delimiting their intimate worlds, basically because female sexuality is family and procreation-oriented. An instance being when Yejide and Dotun relationship is finally out in the open, she is the one to be committing an "abomination" (Adebayo, 2017, p. 187). Despite the fact that her husband Akin has previously married a second wife, Yejide is the one perceived as an adulterous woman, confirming that sexual liberation for females – framed as part of the overall re-negotiation Adebayo carries out of Yoruba womanhood – comes with a certain level of external rejection, marginalisation and social backlash that men clearly do not experience.

4. Conclusions: Towards a New African Feminist Consciousness

In this article, I have attempted to analyse the invaluable legacy Ghanaian Ama Ata Aidoo has left behind as exemplified, most specifically, in her literary works together with the impact this feminist/transformativ

author has had on present-day African writers such as Nigerian-Yoruba Ayobami Adebayo. As part of this shared fictional project, what Pius Adesanmi terms as the “feminist *durée*” (2004, p. 233; italics in the original), to which both Aidoo and Adebayo are integral components, they have put forth nuanced and subversive portraits of African female identit(ies) in order to counteract and diversify traditionally patriarchal representations of black womanhood. In this context, I have incorporated the term “cross-generational sororities” to examine how similar issues have been discussed by authors belonging to different literary generations, such as the ones under scrutiny here.

In fact, Adebayo naturally picks up on a number of key topics previously addressed in Aidoo’s works such as women’s struggle for liberation, the tradition vs. modernity dilemma or motherhood and the quest for self-definition, but I would also contend that the former actualises some of the themes touched upon by her literary godmother, thus cementing a new African feminist consciousness that is decidedly cross-generational, transnational and intersectional. As I have previously gathered, theorists like Dobrota Pucherová (2019; 2022), Cheryl R. Rodríguez et al. (2015) or Chielozona Eze (2014) have concluded that twenty-first-century African authors have adopted a more receptive attitude towards this ideology, which is regarded as a transcontinental and inclusive space in which to openly engage with the embodied violence and oppression women experience globally, and that allows for the articulation of creative actions striving towards gender equality and the recognition of human rights for every/body.

Furthermore, and in this study of Aidoo’s feminist legacy among present-day generations of African women writers, I have focused on a foundational theme in African literature: motherhood and child rearing. In an African context, motherhood, Delphine Fongang claims, “is intrinsically and intimately linked to every aspect of women’s life” (2015, p. 90), delimiting their social and psychic identity, and operating as a tool “to establish [women’s] sense of fulfilment and happiness in life” (p. 87). The authors examined here explore ambivalent portraits of the m-othering experience, defining it as empowering and fulfilling but also as alienating and painful, while problematising the patriarchal conception that motherhood constitutes the core trait of “acceptable” womanhood. In this fashion, Aidoo originally presents women who find fulfilment beyond their roles as wives and mothers or women that cannot engender and are thus ostracised and repudiated; however, maternity is still presented as a key dimension in their lives.

For her part, Adebayo de-romanticises hegemonic motherhood in her re-appropriation of the figure of the doomed childless (non-)woman. This writer focuses on a Yoruba woman for whom childbearing becomes an emotionally-traumatising experience that turns this (anti)heroine into an outcast. Nonetheless, Adebayo originally subverts normative motherhood in her exploration of a person who opposes the idea of being perceived in relation to her husband or her deceased progeny, and that leaving her remaining family and community behind becomes the only way to regain her agency and become truly liberated. Finally, I agree with Chielozona Eze’s statement that pioneering women writers have attempted to “establish women as a presence rather than an absence” (2014, p. 100) in order to create their own literary tradition and languages against a dominant masculinist canon. Nowadays, African women writers across borders, origins, cultures and histories continue this task with the purpose of making visible their voices and intimate realities. It is for this reason that it will prove fruitful to build critical bridges among the works of pioneering and present-day women writers whose texts centralise and actualise female identities as part of this metachronous feminist project of African literature characterised by the key notion of “cross-generational sororities.”

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