

MASTER IN ADVANCED ENGLISH STUDIES: LANGUAGES AND
CULTURES IN CONTACT

UNIVERSIDAD DE SALAMANCA

Departamento de Filología Inglesa

2010-2011



Final Master Thesis

Supervisor

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Title

Anowa: The Revolutionary Woman as the Epitome of African
Feminism in the Post-colonial Theatre of Sub-Saharan Africa

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This thesis is submitted for the degree of Master in Advanced English
Studies: Languages and Cultures in Contact

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September 2011

Acknowledgments

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the supervisor of this thesis, Prof. Olga Barrios Herrero for her careful reading of the manuscript, her encouragement and suggestions. I also want to thank The University of Salamanca and all the teachers of this master who helped me to improve my knowledge and gave me an opportunity to learn about English Studies and Cultures in Contact. This thesis, finally, would not have been possible without the support of my family and friends.

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Anowa: The Revolutionary Woman as the Epitome of African Feminism in the Post-colonial Theatre of Sub-Saharan Africa

Introduction

African women's voices are stronger and more widely heard than ever making a contribution to their values, cultures and sociopolitical ideologies. The writer Ama Ata Aidoo is one of these female activists. Her play, *Anowa*, is an important postcolonial Sub-Saharan play from Ghana and represents the voice of those women who fight for freedom, respect and justice. *Anowa* is, therefore, more than a play, it is also a way to make changes and transform society and the concept of women. The purpose of this paper is to analyze and outline the reasons why *Anowa* represents African feminism and *The Revolutionary Women* of Sub-Saharan Africa. It will revolve around two main themes: first, the historical context of theatre in Sub-Saharan Africa and *Anowa* as a Post-colonial African play; and second, the role of African women and feminism in postcolonial society, and *Anowa* as the epitome of African feminism.

The revolutionary woman is one of the main concepts that represents the new African woman's identity. The African revolutionary woman is a feminist who is not afraid to talk or to ask questions and produces important changes whether at home, at work, through the arts or in the community. The characteristics of this revolutionary woman are: the fight for freedom, independence and equality for women and their communities. Likewise, this woman is willing to rethink the concept of women in Africa and what their role is. She is a woman who fights for the right to speak without being afraid of the impact of her words and her acts. Finally, the African revolutionary woman realizes that tradition sometimes is merely a convenient justification for the utterly unjustifiably (reinforcing gender inequality, the abuse

of power, etc). Traditional concepts such as maternity, marriage, and gender concerns are questioned by this new African woman. One example of this woman is *Anowa*, a young girl who is part of her community but is horrified by the slavery and injustice she witnesses. She is a *Revolutionary Woman*, and a person who offers a fresh and unprecedented definition of what it means to be an African woman, breaking away not only from the western but also some of the African tradition mentioned throughout this paper –specifically those concerning about gender and slavery-.

In the first chapter I will talk about the origins and the formation of theatre in sub-Saharan Africa and I will introduce *Anowa* as a Post-colonial African play. This chapter therefore, will be broken into three sections: the first one introduces three fundamental concepts about African culture: orality, rhythm and rituals. The second one mentions The Black Theatre movement and the influence of western theatre as an important factor in the gestation of Post-colonial theatre in Africa. I will explain the main characteristics of Post-colonial African theatre found in *Anowa*. Finally, the third section suggests the role of female artists in African theatre and their commitment to political and social issues in African society. The playwright Ama Ata Aidoo is also an example of *the Revolutionary Woman*. I will give a brief biography of this author and look at the impact of her work in Ghana. Having given the reader an overview of the play and Post-colonial African theatre, I will introduce the second and last chapter of this work which is named “*Anowa: the epitome of African feminism*”. This chapter addresses two main concerns: first I will introduce the definition of *African Revolutionary Woman* with an exposition of the Black women feminist movement and the main characteristics of the Post-colonial Black feminist. Once these concepts are understood I will introduce the second section where I argue why *Anowa* must be considered as an *African Revolutionary woman* who questions slavery, gender and also cultural institutions such as marriage and maternity.

1. Theatre in Sub-Saharan Africa: the Origins, the Formation of a Genre and *Anowa* as Post-colonial African Play

1.1 The Origins of the Theatre of Sub-Saharan Africa: Orality, Rhythm and Rituals

There is an African proverb which says that if you can walk you can dance, if you can talk you can sing. Proverbs like this one contain the quintessence of Africa, a continent which is full of sounds, colors and movement. Proverbs are an integral part of African culture, within which tremendous value is placed upon words, rhythm, and rituals. In order to understand what Sub-Saharan African theatre means, and why *Anowa* is a representation of that, it is important to first take into account the origins of this genre and the important role that theatre plays in an African's communal life. As I mentioned before, three fundamental concepts underlie the creation of this genre: orality, rhythm, and rituals.

African cultures are historically oral societies where their language is based on experience. Aphorism and proverbs in Africa are as common as musical culture, dance, and rituals. That is why African theatre has much in common with storytelling, verbal expressions, and music. In the essay "Orality, Literacy, and African Literature" (2008) the Nigerian academic Abiola Irele suggests that African orality leads to a different form of creativity and imagination –more dynamic, active and fluent- that differs from the classical, ordered structure of writing. In the context of theatre this new form of creativity determines the character of the plays, as well as the language, and permits the reinterpretation of African tradition.

If orality is the essence of African culture, rhythm is the vessel for this verbal expression. Through orality and rhythm; values, beliefs and heritage are exposed to everyday life without the necessity of any other means of communication. Storytelling is an example of the value of orality. As the reader will see in the character of Anowa, her expressions of concern raise questions about the human being, generate awareness, and push for greater openness to the contemplation of life and the world of the senses. Even before the existence of written language and before colonization, Africa was a place where theatre played an important role through rituals, orality and music. Studying African traditions and customs, reveals a heritage full of beliefs. According to Ngugi wa Thiong’O, African people were connected to nature through the working of the land and through rituals. That is what they used rituals to thank the spirits and superior beings, and to ask them for help. At those times, people used rites to bless the magic power of weapons. Also through fertility rites and ceremonies they celebrated and marked “birth, circumcision or initiation into the different stages of growth and responsibility, marriages and the burial of the dead” (Ngugi 36). In addition, Africans struggled with nature and with enemies who took away goats, cattle, and other possessions. These practices were performed and mediated by rituals and ceremonies. Spirits and gods were therefore represented through masks, dance, dramatic processions, fasting, and sacred practices. These rituals included the dramatic representation of major events such as battles as well as simple stories of everyday life. They were acted out anywhere -in the open air- and weeks or even months were spent on these ritualistic dramas. I could not better express the impact of rituals and theatre in African culture than Ngugi does while talking about pre-colonial Kenya:

Drama . . . was not, then, an isolated event: it was part and parcel of the rhythm of daily and seasonal life of the community. It was an activity among other activities, often drawing its energy from those other activities. It was also entertainment in the sense of involved enjoyment; it was moral instruction; and it was also a strict matter of life and death and communal survival (37).

As it was mentioned above, rituals are part of theatre and thus, are part of the origins of African theatre. Before and after colonization, rituals have been understood as part of the African performing arts; in the context of theatre rituals are a means of renovation and a path which leads to the ancestors. Through rituals the transformation of human consciousness takes place. That is why the oldest root of performance, as the African American writer Amiri Baraka suggests, is the ritual accompanied by rhythm and dance. All of these elements have an even greater transformative power than written words, and music is involved in the same way in the origins of theatre. It means “a profound speaking, moving, raising, perception, and teaching the old folks said” (Baraka 379).

These elements were redefined after colonization and during the Black theatre Movement which I will discuss, in more detail, later. It is beyond doubt that rhythm, rituals and orality have had an influence upon the worldview of African people in the past and continue to do so to this day. Artists and intellectuals such as Amiri Baraka or the Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal highlight the importance of these African traditions. As I will suggest in the second chapter, *Anowa* is a symbol of that open and revolutionary theatre, as it represents music, dance, African traditions, rituals, and orality.

1.2 The Black Theatre Movement and the Influence of Western Theatre: The Gestation of Post-colonial Theatre in Africa

“The Black Theatre Movement exploded as a spring of life freed by a new aesthetic created by artists who were committed to and voiced their community’s needs” (Barrios, *The Black Theatre* 14). This movement was the result of years of history, where the colonization of Africa, the relationship between tradition and new western influences, and a community’s desire for freedom produced new aesthetics and dynamics. During colonial times Africa was exposed to white rules and models not only in terms of politics, language and economics but also in terms of culture, beliefs, and the arts. Despite the appropriation of African territories and values, the black community never forgot their practices such as dance, orality and rituals. That is why their ideologies, practices and interpretations of life have been preserved and remain a crucial part of African theatre.

The struggle for Black liberation in the United States arose parallel to the political and freedom movements of the 1960’s in Africa. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950’s and 1960’s was a period of fighting for freedom when African American communities became the scene of movements such as Black Arts and Black Theatre. Events such as The Black Power movements in North America and The Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa created a new role for African artists and for spectators in the context of theatre. They struggled in the name of an ideology which demanded freedom and the incorporation of the historical, cultural, spiritual, artistic and other legacies of Africans. Also, through their theatre aesthetics, they rejected the demarcations dictated by western artistic parameters and looked at their own past to study and to find new strategies for their present, and in the same way, for their future. What is more, during this period the black community became the protagonist of

the new theatre and promoted the struggle against slavery, racism, colonialism, and neo-colonialism through the arts (Barrios, *The Black Theatre* 16).

Amiri Baraka became the main leader of The Black Theatre Movement and developed the ideology of Black Consciousness and Black liberation. Also, he pointed out the necessity of rethinking and restoring African History and their cultural values. That is why this activist and poet took a political stand and highlighted the importance of the relationship between politics and arts in the struggle for *the beauty of blackness*¹. Certainly, the impact of the W.E.B DuBois' struggle for freedom during the Pan-African movement, the impact of the Harlem Renaissance² in New York, or the impact of Martin Luther King and other activists, were fundamental contributions to the creation of The Black Arts and Black Theatre movements of the 1960's. Amiri Baraka agreed with the movement and political slogan that characterized this period: Black Power, a social movement that was anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist. The fight for social progress through the arts was then the aesthetic and spiritual essence of Black Power, where music and dance were part of their culture as Baraka (379) points out. The activities of these art movements generated new ways of reflection and vehicles for change within communities and society.

It is important to take into account the influence of western theatre in the foundation of these theatre enterprises. On the one hand, lay the African desire for revolution and the desire to find the essence of African arts. While on the other hand, the studies and opinions of Augusto Boal, Paulo Freire, Bertolt Brecht, Peter Brook, and Grotowski to mention a few,

¹ This slogan was formulated by the African American abolitionist John Rock and in 1960 became part of the movement called *Black is beautiful*.

² Since the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s, African American theatre began to become better known. This was a time when big cities like New York saw a flowering of African American art, blues, jazz, poetry, and fiction. Black theatre companies sprang up in Chicago, New York, and Washington, D.C. They produced musicals that were successful and popular with both whites and blacks, as well as plays about African American life.

were significant to African theatre as I am going to explain later. Postcolonial African theatre is therefore, an amalgamation of African theatre roots and western theatre. Paulo Freire was fundamental in the creation of Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Freire, the Brazilian educator, was a theorist of Critical Pedagogy and the principal exponent of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. His ideas about a new pedagogy, anti-colonialism and the struggle for the redemption of the oppressed influenced the notions of theatre in Boal and consequently, The Black Consciousness Movement in Africa. Boal considered theatre as a way to "encourage spectators to think for themselves" (Abreu par. 6), as an art that empowered people. He goes on to argue that theatrical productions "must not pacify spectators and have them, delegating their power of thought to the characters on the stage" (qtd. In De Abreu, par.5). These ideas were also influenced by Brecht's work who believed in a political theatre that forces the spectators to think and take action in their society. His theory about creating a distancing effect relates to the effect of breaking with the spectator's empathy, to surprise the audience and consequently to produce changes in their mentality³. Also he suggests that humanity needs a type of theatre which breaks traditional theatrical models to encourage the struggle for justice, liberation and consciousness (Barrios, "Evolución y situación" 286). Two more influential exponents of theatre were Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Brook. Grotowski considered theatre as a place of provocation where self-analysis is stimulated, and also as a vessel for social protest. The relationship between the actors and spectators creating a kind of live communion was essential for him (Barrios, "Evolución y situación" 296). Brook considered the importance of oral tradition, gestures, songs, and movements during the play. Likewise, the English theatre and film director Peter Brook was inspired by Grotowsky and Brecht. One

³ The idea is to lead the audience to be conscious about the structure, the fiction, and the construct of the play. The spectator then, realizes that this medium is unreal and becomes a consciously critical observer who also is taking place in the play.

of his greatest contributions to African theatre was his notion of *empty space*⁴ where he explores the essential and fundamental aspects of the stage and theatrical expressions. One example of this is the experiment led by Ngugi wa Thiongo in the Kamiriithu community in Kenya⁵, where the circular stage was in an open air place and they did not need much to create the theatre.

There is another crucial antecedent from the 70's that is important to mention and that I am going to explain further at the end of this chapter. That is the admirable initiative of Barbara Ann Teer, founder of the National Black Theatre in New York. She was one of the female activists in the context of theatre and one of the principal exponents of rituals of liberation. I would like to illustrate some of her proposals about rituals, with the following quotation:

I think that a ritual is a reverend rite that marks the passing from one space, one mind set to another more highly evolved space... It is always something that elevates you. That is how I view it. And so my job was and is to elevate the level of awareness of my people to a higher level of consciousness about who they are (Lewis 72).

Her initiative was also related to the concept of Theatre for Development. This initiative was consolidated especially after the 1970s. It has been further developed in Senegal, Nigeria and Ghana and nowadays is applied in several places even outside of Africa. Its main purpose is to strengthen the capacities of African communities and to help the most

⁴ See also Brook, Peter. *The Empty Space*. New York: Touchstone, 1996

⁵ The Kenyan author shares his experience in his essay "The Language of African Theatre" (2008) where he points out his work with the Kamiriithu community, one of several villages in Limuru, Kenya.

disadvantaged and marginalized within each community. Professor Ndumbe Eyoh describes this kind of theatre as popular and suggests that:

Popular theatre builds on the skills the people already have; the actors provide the songs, choreograph and the dances, create the scenario and are responsible for the themes to be developed. As an educational strategy it combines the entertainment value of the performing arts with their capacity to highlight issues in relation to community development. Through dramatization, people's attention can be focused on problems in a way that challenges their perception of their situation (37).

This kind of theatre can be developed in various scenarios such as churches, schools, playgrounds, the streets or rural areas. Likewise, the actors, more than mere professionals, are part of the communities. The content of the play is based on the necessities of the community and the public participates in the resolution of the conflict thanks to the possibility the open ending brings. Also theatre for development proposes the use of local language in order to facilitate an active participation from the public (Barrios. "Evolución y situación" 300).

What I have said so far in relation to The Black Theatre Movement and the influence of western theatre, is crucial in order to understand some of the main characteristics of Post-colonial Theatre in Africa. Thanks to the initiatives of these movements and thanks to African roots, Black theatre both in United States and in Sub-Saharan Africa is currently prospering. Black theatre is then, full of initiatives, creativity, and innovative ideas. In the following section, then, I will suggest the relation between some of the characteristics of postcolonial theatre and *Anowa*.

1.2.1 Characteristics of Post-colonial African Theatre in *Anowa*: Orality, Music, Rituals, Tradition and Experimental Techniques

Anowa, as a Post-colonial Sub-Saharan play from Ghana, exhibits the characteristics of the postcolonial African theatre as I will explain. The play offers the spectators a vision of how to make changes and transform society. In order to understand those characteristics first I will suggest the plot of the play, and then introduce four of the main characteristics of African Post-colonial theatre contained in the play and explained in the first chapter of this paper.

Anowa is a play that transmits the voice of a daring and brave woman. Through its main character, the reader can appreciate the reality of life in an African community. The spectator is given an insight into African beliefs on topics as diverse as life, work, slavery and especially about the image of women and their role in society. *Anowa* is a reflection of the human condition, of the fear, the envy, and the injustice which are a part of every person's life. It is also a reflection on women's right to talk and to play an active and equal role in society. The eponymous character is the only child of Badua and Osam. In spite of Badua's wish to find a suitable man for her daughter, Anowa refuses to allow them to make the decision for her and in the end she chooses Kofi, a man her mother considers a lay about and a "good for nothing" (Aidoo, *Anowa* 105). As a result of the disagreement with her mother and the apparent indifference of her father, Anowa and Kofi leave Yebi and start a new life. After two years of hard toil Kofi decides to buy slaves and little by little becomes a rich and well-recognized exporter. Simultaneously, Anowa's open opposition to slavery leads to accusations of her being a witch and of sterility within the local community. Finally, Kofi decides to separate from Anowa and to send her back to Yebi, but by this stage it is too late. She swears she will never go back there and, confronted with her husband's scheming, she

understands the true source of his intentions. This drives both characters towards a dramatic and inexorable denouement.

In her introduction to the play, Ama Ata Aidoo presents her ideas about the use of music and set design in theatre. The prologue which follows is narrated by an old man and an old woman and sets the scene for the rest of the play. The elderly play the role of the Greek tragedy chorus as the voice of the community or the voice of conscience. The play is divided into three acts⁶ and the music and some everyday objects play an important role. Some of the characteristics that provide an overview of the new and renovated performing arts in this play are: first, orality and storytelling; second, music, songs and dance; third the incorporation of tradition and fourth, the use of experimental techniques from a hybridization of games, movement and content.

Orality and storytelling as the first characteristic is represented throughout the play as a part of African creativity. There is a dialogue in the prologue between the old man and the old woman which are called the Mouth-That-Eat-Salt-and Pepper. They represent opposites and equilibrium between each other. The old man is serene and more orderly, his language is poetic. He enters the stage quietly while the old woman always seems to be the last of the two to leave the stage. She often speaks with agitation waving her stick and walking up and down the lower stage. Oral techniques like the old man's "hei, hei, hei!" (107) or the Osam's "Oh, oh!" (104) are used several times accompanied by music, songs or different voices. Also the Mouth-That-Eats-Salt-and Pepper introduces the image of Kofi and Anowa in a poetic way – which emphasizes the value of aesthetic language. Below is another example of the poetry and storytelling in the voice of the old man:

⁶ The phase one is called: *In Yebi*; the second phase, *On the highway*; and the third one, *The big house at Oguaa*.

Here in the state of Abura, which must surely be one of the best pieces of land Odomankoma, our creator, has given to man, everything happens in moderation: the sun comes out each day, but its heat seldom burns our crops; rains are good when they fall and Asaase Efua the earth-goddess gives of herself to them that know the seasons; streams abound, which like all gods must have their angry moments and swell, but floods are hardly known to living memory (101).

The presence of orality and the storyteller technique in the play, lends itself a reinterpretation of African tradition. Storytelling re-connects the actors with the audience, tradition with the present and it is the way in which the voice and ideology of a community is transmitted to all its members. As I mentioned in the first chapter, there are three concerns in African tradition which are fundamental in its theatre: orality, rhythm and rituals. In this case orality is present during the play not only in the form of the Mouth-That-Eat-Salt-and Pepper, but also by the proverbs of Anowa's father, the oral –and also hysterical- expressions of the mother, and the invocations to spirits made by all the characters. There is a moment in the third phase where Anowa is speaking with many men and women. There, Aidoo introduces the responses of the people creating a kind of call-response in dialogues –something prevalent throughout the play-:

I see you. Listen. Has any of you heard of a woman whose husband wanted to divorce her but would not tell her why? (*They look bewildered and answer 'no' as if it were a line in a musical round, sung softly: No, no, no, no, no, no... they all whisper aloud to each other*). Then please you may go... (*They all turn round at once.*) No wait... Eh- eh... I would like to send some of you . . . (124).

Rhythm is also related to orality and to the second characteristic that I wish to examine: the presence of music, songs and dance. As I mentioned in the first chapter, music, songs and dance reveal a part of Africans and generate new forms of theatre that lead to

different outlets for creativity and imagination. These elements incorporate African heritage and tradition. Aidoo suggests at the beginning of the play, the use of folk music, especially if it is Ghanaian or African and proposes that Anowa should be represented by an African musical instrument named the Atentenben which is intended as a symbol of her personality: “like her [Anowa], it is a single, delicate but wild wind instrument” (101). The music also enhances many pivotal points in the plot: “the horn . . . is usually old and turned dark brown by sacrificial blood. It is symbol of state, village or group power” (101). Other instruments should announce vital moments during the play. A variety of drums and the fontomfrom⁷ are used for this purpose. Village noises, songs and dance are present in some of the episodes that occur during the third phase where Anowa looks aged and is too tired to support her husband’s extravagant lifestyle. She looks back on her childhood and questions slavery once again while the music plays in the background lending importance to her memories: “suddenly, the voices of an unseen wearied multitude begin to sing” (119).

Even if there are moments without music, corporal rhythms and movement are always presents. For example at the beginning of the play, when Badua and Osam are speaking: “Osam jumps up and, confused, he and Badua keep bumping into each other as each moves without knowing why or where he or she is moving” (105). Movement is crucial as a typical characteristic of Africans and it is present throughout the play. Something similar occurs in the second phase when Anowa and Kofi have a big argument and then, the old woman appears and Aidoo suggests: “*she is even more excited than ever. And for the rest of the scene makes an exhibition of herself, jumping, raising her stick in the air, coughing, etc*” (117). As

⁷ “Very popular in traditional music from Ghana, the Fontomfrom Ensemble is used to communicate royal messages in Ashanti tribal settings, as well as to play some popular. The energetic poly-rhythms created with these drums can be extremely complex, and is usually very loud given the size and purposes of the drums” (“Ashanti Fontomfrom” par. 1).

a final example, there is an episode during the third part of the play where first a group of women, and then, several people enter the stage dancing while they sing or rather recite: “He is coming!/ nana is coming/ He is coming,/ the master of the earth is coming./ Give way/ O- o give way!/ ...” (118) After that, Anowa appears doing childish gestures, especially with her hands combining orality with rhythm and gestural expressions.

The third characteristic of African Post-colonial theatre in *Anowa* is the incorporation of tradition. Right from the initial phase, the stage design evokes African traditions in the spectator’s imagination. Anowa appears with the water-pot, with the upper part of her breasts visible. Everyday objects such as the fish trap, or a wooden tray full of cassava, yam, plantain, pepper, and tomatoes, are present throughout the play. Aidoo attaches great importance to little details. Tradition is present not only through orality but also through objects, clothes, sounds, and other elements:

Lower stage. Early evening village noises, for example, the poundig of fufu or millet, a goat bleats loudly, a woman calls her child, etc. Anowa enters from lower right, carrying an empty water-pot . . . She is wearing her cloth wrapped around her. [Kofi Ako enters] he is in work clothes and carrying a fish trap and a bundle of baits (103).

The invocation of spirits, music and laments, represents ancestral African values such as funeral traditions, the iconic figure of the priestess, notions of polygamy, marriage, and beliefs. Also Aidoo does not ignore slavery as a part of African history. She takes a critical position about it and acknowledges that tradition sometimes is merely a convenient justification for the utterly unjustifiable. Aidoo contextualizes the topic of slavery with the old man’s voice at the beginning of the play:

It is now a Little less than thirty years when the lords of our Houses signed that piece of paper – The Bond of 1844 they call it- Binding us to the white men who came from beyond the horizon (103).

During the play, slavery is a central concern. Aidoo, in this play, not only alludes to the burden of responsibility that should be borne by whites but also highlights the involvement of Africans in the slave trade. Finally, the fourth and one of the most essential characteristics of African theatre is the use of experimental and creative techniques like games, movement and content. African theatre involves the public in an interactive performance which is full of music, color, and improvisation. This is a creative theatre that, as Baraka points out “should wake us from the ‘dead’, from the blunted senses, the mediocrity, from the day-to-day evil our feelings have gotten wrapped up in.” (379). This innovative form of theatre can involve techniques as varied as the incorporation of masks, mime, music, and local language. The combination of these techniques is an example of African arts where tradition, cultures, values and different expressions are together. Aidoo as an African artist introduces some of these experimental techniques. One example of that is the dramatic moment at the end of the last phase with an open ending. After Kofi’s suicide, Aidoo offers the spectator the opportunity to choose the ending of the play. One possible ending shows Anowa in a state of madness, and talking to herself. The second and even more dramatic ending concludes with Anowa, committing suicide by drowning herself. Anowa’s parents, the community, the Mouth-That-Eat-Salt-and-Pepper, among other characters finish the play with lamentation and dirges. The choice is open, and the spectator must decide for themselves if the end symbolizes a victory or a defeat for Anowa.

All of these characteristics support the promotion of a theatre that conveys the beauty of African traditions and the necessity of freedom of opinion and expression. Through orality,

storytelling, music, songs, dance, the incorporation of tradition and the use of experimental techniques African artists create a revolutionary theatre. The intention of this theatre is not merely to entertain, but also to enrich the community in which it is performed. In addition, Post-colonial African theatre is socially as well as politically-engaged, ant-imperialist and also anti-colonialist. It seeks the defense of African identity.

Once I have explained the characteristics of African theatre in *Anowa*, I will go on to examine the role played by female artists in Post-colonial African theatre as well as their contribution to African cultures.

1.3 Female Artists in Post-colonial African Theatre and Their Commitment within Society: Ama Ata Aidoo as an Example of Engagement, Education and Artistry

The purpose of theatre is to entertain people and inform them, and if it is possible inspire them, by bringing societal issues upwards. It is immediate in a way that nothing else is. –Ama Ata Aidoo (qtd. In Perkins 11).

I have started the first chapter of this thesis by talking about the origins of the theatre of Sub-Saharan Africa, introducing the Black Theatre movement and the influence of western theatre. I will introduce, then, the role of the female artists in African theatre and their commitment to political and social issues in African society. I think it is proper to introduce this section with Aidoo's expression about theatre. She, like other African artists, considers that African theatre should have a purpose beyond entertainment. As I will mention later on, female artists in African theatre are raising consciousness in society through the arts. Ama Ata Aidoo, as a representative of this tendency, will be my main concern in this section.

In order to introduce some African artists and what they are currently doing, I will give a brief overview about the impact and influence of African American women in the African performing arts. Then, I will talk about some African artists who are showing different faces of their countries, cultures and values. This section will address three main concerns: the first being about African American women in the performing arts –from Angelina Weld Grimké to Adrienne Kennedy or Barbara Ann Teer-; the second one, about African women -like Violet Barungi, Tsitsi Dangarembga, and Julie Okoh, among others. Finally, the last section will be finished with a brief biography of Ama Ata Aidoo and the impact of her work in Ghana.

Before and after the 1950s African American women first, and then African women, were looking for their place and position in their communities. Professor Olga Barrios suggests a general overview about African American women in theatre in her essay “African American women in the performing arts” (2009). Barrios points out that African American women were seeking a redefinition of their identity as black women. Central to this debate was the question of how they should combine their role and ideologies with the performing arts in general, and theatre in particular.

For years, African American women as feminists and artists have been defending gender and race rights through theatre. Their initiatives also support the freedom of communities, the image of women, and the struggle for their ideals. Consequently women generate social change and a shift in the structure of their identities through their engagement with theatre. Before 1950 several African American women were noted for their controversial creations full of character and identity. Playwrights such as Angelina Weld Grimké and Pauline Hopkins introduced gender issues and created female protagonists in their plays. Likewise, male figures were absent in most of these works while female characters were placed in a domestic context, in the home. The most commonly recurring

themes were poverty, education, slavery and religion combined with music and a non-linear structure. During and after The Harlem Renaissance new themes like the mass executions during the African American lynching, miscegenation, and military presence emerged. (Barrios, "African American Women" 188-200).

The independence movements in Africa, the American Civil War and the struggle for civil rights in the 1950's, opened up the way for movements where female and sexual emancipation were at the top of the agenda. The number of black intellectual female activists in Africa and in America was constantly growing during these years. Among the most important figures in African American theatre were the playwright Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry and Adrienne Kennedy, a key figure in the Black Art Movement with her experimental, and at times surreal and psychological style. The role of women in African American theatre and its relation with feminism was especially visible in the dramatic arts. Dance, technology, experimentation and transgression all played an important role because, thanks to that, they sought to denounce injustices, to unite communities and to open up a dialogue between whites and blacks. Besides this, they also dealt with themes such as feminism, racism and class discrimination, to name but a few. A fine example may be found in the work of Aishah Rahman –an author who started writing plays professionally in the 1970s- who combines various styles and makes use of the absurd, surrealism, satire, rituals and jazz to create original plays charged with a rich subtext.

Barbara Ann Teer, as I already mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, was another example of the commitment and the impact of theatre in society. Inspired by the ideologies and initiatives of the Black Arts and Theatre movements, she founded the National Black Theatre of Harlem in 1968. As Barbara Lewis suggests in her essay, *Ritual Reformulations: "Barbara Ann Teer and The National Black Theatre of Harlem"*, Barbara Ann Teer proposed a theatre that was based on real life events. Her theatre was more than a resurgence of The

Harlem Renaissance, it was a reinvention, and as she suggested, a self-conscious art. Her proposal was to work within the African American Community, and to use rituals to recreate herself, the theatre company and the community in relation to an ancestral and alternative past. The ritual form and collective work were fundamental for the theatrical creations and the participation of all. Lewis points out that thanks to Teer's work and the commitment of the people involved:

There is now a sizeable resident community capable and desirous of supporting the arts, especially when those artistic endeavors speak directly to and about them. Consequently, the community's cultural component and the pride that were previously only specters struggling for substance have gotten stronger (69).

Something similar to what occurs to African American artists occurs in Africa as well. Even if a lot of African plays are not regularly published or produced⁸, several African female artists are doing collective creations with their communities and creating new theatrical expressions. As Professor Kathy Perkins suggests in her book *African Women Playwrights* (2009),

there are many more [African female playwrights], all working on a wide variety of theatrical productions, including radio dramas; staged prose; performance pieces utilizing text, dance, and music; and collective creations (2).

⁸ According to Perkins, few African women publish. Some of the reasons could be “the stronger oral African tradition, rather than written cultural tradition” (2). Other possible explanations are the subjugation during the colonization, the discrimination in gender, the difficulties to buy a book, among several other possible factors. What is important to highlight is that they are constantly making and renovating collective creations –which is difficult to publish because their pieces are changing all the time- and creating self publications as a way to share creative theatrical proposals. As Perkins points out, currently “publishing houses in the United States are increasingly receptive to African women authors” (5) and that is thanks to their work and commitment with society.

As the contribution in theatre of the above mentioned African American artists, African female contemporary playwrights are representing their cultures, society and politics through theatre. Some of them are emerging writers while others are currently receiving national and international recognition, like in the case of Ama Ata Aidoo or the South African playwright Luen Conning formerly named Malika Ndlovu. She is recognized as a poet, performer, arts administrator, and wife; Not only theatrical monologues –called U-Voice-, but also her contributions to Cape Town’s theatre development have led to her being internationally acknowledged. *Colored Place* (1996) is her first full-scale professional play and “gives a woman’s perspective on growing up Coloured in apartheid South Africa” (222). Conning is working with women’s performing arts groups in Cape Town and as in her play *Sister Breyani* (2009) she is exploring the complexity of family ties in African communities. African artists, as Perkins suggests, actually know the impact of their artistic projects not only in their specific context, but also on an international stage.

From among the several female African playwrights, I shall look at some who form part of the above mentioned Perkin’s anthology in more detail. Her book is almost the first collection of plays in the English language devoted exclusively to those written by African women. As Perkins said about her writing process, she opted for a “representational group of writers from the English-speaking African countries (with the exception of Nathalie Etoké who writes in French)” (5). Those women are representing South Africa, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Cameroon, Nigeria, Kenya, and Ghana. They also represent different faces of Africa with its various ideologies and values. Most of them are also novelists, short story writers, and poets like Violet Barungi. This Ugandan artist – who is also a mother of six – passionately writes about gender issues, human relationships, education of the female child, and love. Barungi, as other female artists, claims for African women’s rights:

I write because I enjoy writing, creating my own world. I also find writing (novels, plays and poems) a good medium for my observations on the patriarchal society that continues to marginalize and oppress women on the basis of their gender (Barungi, par 1).

Like Barungi, African playwrights are contributing to African theatre and also to the recognition of women in their communities. That is why the most commonly themes in their productions are about African children, social problems concerning the rights and the role of women, families, and African communities. Tradition and the impact of foreign influences are also recurrent priorities. A fine example may be found in the work of the Zimbabwean Tsitsi Dangarembga, who explores injustices against women and girls. She also supports women's right to own land in Zimbabwe, and writes about orphaned African children and the difficulties that they have to fight against. As Dangarembga, the Nigerian playwright and social activist Julie Okoh takes up issues related with gender and human rights in her plays. Okoh has also written articles and essays about theatre, education and sociopolitical African concerns.

There is another crucial exponent of the impact of female artist in Africa. She is the playwright and children's author, Efua Sutherland, a positive example of another female artist in Ghana. She was a pioneer in African theatre and believed in the relation between the arts and the fight for rights. In 1957 she established the Ghana Association of writers and then, she founded the Experimental Theatre Players in Accra in 1958. Two years later, her foundation became the Drama Studio of the University of Accra where several playwrights from the country such as Aidoo, were trained. In 1968 she created the Kusum Agoromba, and it worked as an itinerant theatre across different places like schools, churches and universities. I want to emphasize two of the relevant contributions that Sutherland made: the first one is related to the native languages and the second one, to the political implications of

her work. She was interested in indigenous languages and developed a popular theatre which included elements of the African oral tradition and reached beyond the elite. As Ngugi did when he decided to write in Gikuyu, the plays of Efua Sutherland were performed in the native languages of Ghana. Thanks to these initiatives, people who did not read or write were part of the public and not only derived entertainment but also learned and rethought their own needs, cultural values, and motivations. Her work had political dimensions and in 1980 she became advisor to President Jerry Rawlings in Ghana. She also founded experimental theatre groups and laid the groundwork for professional theatre in Ghana as well as for children's theatre.

There are several concerns to mention about African women and theatre, but I would like to highlight the contribution of the Ghanaian playwright, Ama Ata Aidoo, within the world of theatre and in a broader social context. Born in 1942 in the former British Gold Coast Colony, the African poet and playwright graduated with honors from the University of Ghana –Legon- in 1964. There, Aidoo's mentor was Efua Sutherland, founder of Ghana Drama Studio and an exponent of Ghanaian culture who wished to preserve African traditions by incorporating them into new dramatic works. Another influence in Aidoo's work was her father. He was a chief who acquired a keen admiration of the British during his participation in the fight for the independence of his country. As a result of this Aidoo also gained a thorough understanding of the culture of her country's former colonial masters. The struggle for the independence of her country, and her fight for equality and justice led Aidoo to become Education Minister of Ghana in 1982. She is universally recognized as a fundamental figure not only in theatre but also in education and sociopolitical activism. According to the web page *African Success: people changing the face of Africa*, Aidoo:

Taught English literature at the University of Ghana, Cape Coast, from 1970 to 1983, and was a consulting professor in the ethnic studies program of the Phelps-Stokes Fund from 1974 to 1975. In 1982 Aidoo was appointed Minister of Education in Ghana under the government of J. J. Rawlings. Due to pressure from the increasingly conservative government, Aidoo was forced to resign the position and subsequently left the country in 1983. She settled in Zimbabwe, later serving as the chair of the Zimbabwe Women Writers Group.

She also founded the Mbaasem Foundation⁹, an initiative that supports African women writers and their work. As a writer, Aidoo has produced works of fiction, drama, poetry, essays letters and criticism. Some of her central issues are “the legacy of the slave trade, the impact of neocolonialism on the educated Ghanaian elite, and the notion of exile and African diasporic identity. Often her stories focus on the role of women in the process of change” (Petri Liukkonen, par 3). The relationship between Africa and the western world; the demand for women’s liberation, and the African identity from a female perspective, are some of the main topics that Aidoo went on to develop in her plays and books. In 1965 she published *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1964), five years later, she wrote *Anowa* (1970), and continued writing several stories such as *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977), the collection of short stories named *No Sweetness Here* (1970), and her short story *The Girl Who Can* (1997) among others.

Bearing in mind the oppressive political regime in Ghana when she was writing in the 1970s, and the difficulties of being a public figure, Aidoo is an example of a woman who lives in accordance with her ideals. She has won many literary awards like the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book in 1992 or the Nelson Mandela Prize for Poetry

⁹ For further information also read: Aidoo, Ama Ata. “Welcome to Mbaasem.” *Mbaasem Foundation*. Aug. 2011. <<http://mbaasemghana.org/wp/>>.

in 1987. Currently, she is considered an icon of African female initiatives and sociopolitical activism.

The decisive influence of female artists in theatre is, then, evident and crucial for African development. I just mentioned a few like Violet Barungi, Tsitsi Dangarmbga, Julie Okoh, Efua Sutherland and Aidoo among others. They denounce some of the African traditions that nowadays continue to promote inequality between men and women. In addition, art for them must not remain detached from politics and has an important social function to fulfill, raising awareness and effecting societal change. What I have discussed thus far is just a general overview and an approximation of Sub-Saharan African theatre. At the beginning of this first chapter, I mentioned orality, rhythm and rituals as some of the origins of African theatre. Then I examined the principal events of The Black Theatre Movement and the influence of western theatre on the gestation of Post-colonial Theatre in Africa. Finally, in the conclusion of this first chapter, I proposed an outline of the role of female artists in Post-colonial African Theatre and their commitment within society. The next chapter then is going to discuss why it is vital to understand Black feminist ideology and its relation to the concept of the revolutionary African woman.

2. *Anowa*: The Epitome of African Feminism

2.1 The Black Women Feminist Movement, the Post-colonial African Feminist Movement and a Definition of *the African Revolutionary Woman*

Ain't a Woman?

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

Sojourner Truth

I feel it is apt to introduce this chapter with a quotation from Sojourner Truth taken from her intervention at the Women's Rights Convention in 1851 in Ohio. At that time, the majority of white women who were at the conference would not have felt comfortable making an impromptu speech, but Truth was a black woman, a former slave in a white women's conference and, as such, was bold enough to make a defense of what she believed in. She was speaking from her own experiences and giving an example of struggle and courage in front of women who disagreed with her presence at the podium. The activist African American Angela Davis refers to this historical moment and to Truth's speech saying that Sojourner Truth

simply talked about her experiences as a woman, a Black woman, a slave woman, a woman who worked. Her experiences were not the same as the experiences of the other women who had gathered there; yet she could speak

more militantly than they about womanhood and about women's rights. Because of her involvement in struggle, because she had been active in the campaign against slavery, she had organized, she had spoken publicly, she was not afraid to put the men who were there in their place ... (7).

Truth's speech was a foretaste of what years later would become the essence of Post-colonial feminism, the fight for recognition and freedom. Like Truth, Ama Ata Aidoo is one of the many African women who demand the recognition of women's rights and identity. She takes a political stand which is inextricably connected to her commitment to the female liberation struggle and to the need to find a sisterhood and to create new spaces for dialogue amongst them. As I mentioned in the last chapter, Aidoo is one of a group of feminist activists that have a commitment to social, political and cultural values in Africa. In recent years female artists and feminist critics have begun to occupy an increasingly influential role within many cultural and political movements. These initiatives seek the reunification of female identity and liberation.

The term feminism encompasses a range of sociocultural and political movements, as well as theories and moral philosophies concerned with global and local issues related to gender inequality and equal rights for women. To understand what Post-colonial African Feminism means and why *Anowa* (both the play and the character) is a part of that, first it is necessary to give a brief account of the origins of feminism. That is why I should like to first explain what is meant by the first Wave and the Second Wave and then, provide a definition of the Third Wave within which postcolonial black feminism is included and some related concepts such as Womanism and Stiwanism. Thus, in this chapter, I will discuss some of the origins and fundamental Post-colonial Black Feminist principles and my own definition of *Revolutionary Woman*, a figure embodied in the personality of Anowa.

The First Wave of feminism or traditional feminism emerged in the nineteenth and early twentieth century in the United States and the United Kingdom. Feminism appeared for

the first time as an international social movement able to function autonomously, with a strong sense of identity and a coherent body of theory. One of the most important matters at that time was women's suffrage. In terms of Post-colonial feminism, traditional feminism could be understood as the western Euro-American discourse that was addressed towards a privileged white, middle class and first world female public. Even though this movement dealt with the oppression of women and their exclusion from political affairs, it is also a reality that western feminism had defined the feminine in relation to the masculine and from a white perspective. Their concerns differed from other feminist groups which have since embraced a Post-colonial position wherein the needs and objectives are different as I will explain later.

The Second Wave of feminism then emerged, in the early 1960s and lasted up until the late 1980s. It was a movement that demanded an end to discrimination, and encouraged women to seek an active political role while also coming to understand aspects of their personal lives. At that time women gained the right to vote and focused on fighting sociopolitical and cultural inequalities. Within this climate the seeds of Black Feminism, the movement with which this paper is concerned, were sown. This movement emerged in the late seventies. Its proponents argued that the liberation of black women would bring freedom to all people, since it would require the end of racism, sexism and class oppression –issues that are also of concern to *Anowa* as I will mention later-. African American women decided to form a movement of their own as a result of their exclusion from white feminist organizations. The impact of racism generates then, the black liberation movement and the women's movement. Caribbean, Afro-Latin American, and Black British feminism were also included in this enterprise.

Among the most notable authors of this movement I shall look at two in particular: Alice Walker and Angela Davis. Walker describes the purposes of Black Feminism and

contrasts it with separatist white feminist ideologies. In her essay “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens” (1994) she offers encouragement to future generations of black women and talks about the difficulties of being a black woman in the eighteenth century, a time when one was likely to be made a slave upon being born. She mentions the abuse and pain that many generations of black women suffered, often to such a degree that they considered themselves unworthy even of hope. Most of them got married without joy, “became prostitutes, without resistance; and became mothers of children, without fulfillment ... They became more than sexual objects, they became saints” (402). For the writer in order to understand themselves contemporary African Americans must first reflect upon the experiences of their “mothers and grandmothers” (405). They were also artists but in general, they could not develop this gift because it was so difficult to keep the creativity alive when confronted with such unrelenting drudgery. Even if they wished to write, at that time it was a punishable crime for a black person to read or write and the freedom to be an artist did not exist. That is why Walker takes into account the need for contemporary black women to think about the heritage left by their mothers and grandmothers who, despite the difficulties they had to endure, were artists as part of their day-to-day lives; as gardeners, as storytellers, artists of life. In homage to these women¹⁰ who possessed the creative spirit that black women have inherited, Alice Walker introduces the notion of Womanism. This term encapsulates the essence of Black Feminism and, most importantly, includes everyone who expresses solidarity with the demand for women’s rights. Vital to the notion of Womanism is a love of music and dance, which have both been a part of African traditions since time immemorial. Womanism then, is a black feminist position that encourages women to love other women –sexually or non-

¹⁰ In support of this assertion, Walker offers in her essay “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens” some examples of the wealth of talent which has emerged from black culture such as Lucy Terry, Frances Harper, Elizabeth Catlett, and Katherine Dunham.

sexually- as well as themselves, heightening their appreciation of women's culture, emotions and strengths (Walker, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens" 404).

The other exponent of Black feminism, the African American Angela Yvonne Davis, was a radical black activist and one of the political activists and feminists who were associated with the Black Panther Party during the late 1960s through to the 1970s¹¹. In her book *Women, Race and Class* (1982) she points out the importance of the struggle for the emancipation of women and how it is vital to "recognize that sexism can never be seen in isolation . . . [She suggests that sexism has to be] placed in the context of its interconnections with racism, and especially with class exploitation" (6). The following quotation sums up what to be a black feminist activist means in Davis' words:

When we talk about the struggle for the emancipation of women - and this is what I think is an activist perspective - no matter how we are involved in the women's movement, whatever our connection, there must be a consciousness regarding the degree to which women's issues - the fight for the liberation of women - must revolve, first of all, around the majority of women and those women who have the most to gain: working-class women and women of color (7).

Aidoo, as Davis indicates, is raising consciousness through her plays and characters. During the play *Anowa* is not the leader of a movement nor engaged in a war. She is simply seeking her own freedom of speech and questioning concepts such as slavery and gender. She is seeking her own right to be considered a woman even if she has different conceptions about what a woman is supposed to be. The voices of Davis and Walker among others are going to be then, part of Aidoo's ideologies and plays. The second wave, introduced new

¹¹ The Black Panther Party was an African American revolutionary left-wing organization in the United States active from 1966 until 1982. For further information also read: "Black Panther Party." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 17 Jun. 2011.

ways of conceiving feminism and that contributed substantially to the ideology of the Third Wave and postcolonial feminism.

The Third Wave extends from the 1990s to the present and is related to African Post-colonial feminism. This movement shows alternative feminisms led by women of other races who argue that western feminism does not take into account the needs and demands of Post-colonial countries. Also the Third Wave argues that western feminists just emphasize the experiences of upper middle-class white women. Some Post-colonial African feminists, who are part of this movement among others, are Buchi Emecheta and Ogunديpe-Leslie.

Born in Lagos, Nigeria, Buchi Emecheta made her name as an African novelist and a feminist activist. Concerns such as water shortages, education, planting, the environment and how men and women may resolve the African socio-economic crisis infuse feminism with new perspectives. I want to emphasize the ideas of the Nigerian poet, feminist and activist Ogunديpe-Leslie because her ideas embodied most of the Third Wave concerns. Ogunديpe-Leslie also considered that African feminism should be rethought and developed. She opens up the African discourse on gender and defines what she thinks feminism has to be within the context of Post-colonial African feminism.

In her essay “Stiwanism: Feminism in an African Context” (2008) Ogunديpe-Leslie draws attention to Africa’s many differences and its inherently dynamic character. In particular she looks at the influence the African Diaspora¹² has had in creating African

¹² The African Diaspora refers to the movement of millions of enslaved Africans, and their descendants, between the years 1500 and 1900 throughout the world. The trans-Atlantic slave trade transported Africans to America, Europe, India and Australia. The African Union (AU) executive Council defines the African Diaspora as follows: “The African Diaspora consists of peoples of African origin living outside the continent [of Africa], irrespective of their citizenship and nationality and who are willing to contribute to the development of the Continent and the building of the African Union”. See more in: Alpers, Edward A. *Defining the African Diaspora*. University of California, Los Angeles: Paper presented to the Center for Comparative Social Analysis Workshop, 2001.

identity over the centuries, constantly feeding back into the culture of the continent, transforming and expanding it. African feminism was not merely a simple derivative of western ideas, but its roots are also to be found in the very beginnings of its history and in the relations that Africa has long maintained with numerous other cultures. Bearing in mind this process, an analysis of this continent must take as its point of departure the crucial notions of race, class and gender. An analysis of feminism in Africa presents the same problems as those encountered when attempting to define African culture in general. Firstly, as there are many types of feminism and secondly because the term itself has been challenged by lawyers, by the majority of African men and even by women who assume apolitical positions. Ogundipe-Leslie claims -taking up some of Black Feminism's ideas- that it is a gross misconception to consider African feminism as an imitation of western feminism or that it is a movement which is incompatible with African culture and inheritance. For her it is necessary to create a feminism which is distinct from its western counterpart, one which takes account of the needs of the African continent and the idiosyncrasies of its women.

On that context she defines the concept of Stiwanism as a way of explaining the role of African women. Stiwanism involves a new and different conception of feminism that includes African women. The acronym STIWA means "Social Transformation Including Women in Africa" (Ogundipe-Leslie 550). Consequently, Stiwanism deals with the needs of African women in order to reconstruct their social status and their inclusion in the transformation of Africa. As the writer suggests:

The creation of the new Word is to deflect energies from constantly having to respond to charges of imitating Western feminism and, in this way, conserve those energies, to avoid being distracted from the real issue of the conditions of women in Africa...Be a 'Stiwanist' (550).

In her loneliness Anowa represents, unknowingly, the concept of Stiwanism. The voice of the old woman in the play embodies the voice of women in general. They – including her mother- disagree with Anowa's outspoken opposition to the idea of promoting the enslavement of her own race. Anowa is thinking not only of the conditions of African women, but also of the conditions of Africans in general. She seeks liberation, respect and freedom from fear. She is not proposing a kind of gender role reversal; but rather aiming for an equality which respected tradition and the relationships between men and women. In fact, she agrees with polygamy, with the idea of marriage and several other African customs. What she cannot understand is the necessity of buying human beings, promoting slavery, and the obstacles which impeded women from being active, from talking and asking questions.

Anowa takes up issues related with gender and slavery as Ogundipe-Leslie suggests. Ogundipe-Leslie points out that Post-colonial feminism does not involve a gender role reversal, nor envy of the opposite sex. Nor is it restricted to the idea of opposing men or based upon the instigation of gender warfare. Similar to the second wave's ideology, she considers that the notion of feminism has to be reconsidered and reformulated. She argues that the term feminism, is derived from the Latin *femina* and as such, may be considered as "an ideology of woman; any body of social philosophy about women" (Ogundipe-Leslie 547). In this sense, everything which is related to the needs of women is part of feminism. Rightwing, leftwing, liberal, and socialist feminism are just a few of the many varieties. Independent of the notion of feminism, political activism is the one common trait which unites them all. Once this has been clarified, Ogundipe-Leslie addresses those who do not believe in the need for such a movement. She urges them to ask themselves if women who defend her beliefs have not always been present in Africa. The answer is straightforward,

feminist positions have existed in Africa from even before the terms were formally defined in the West:

There are many feminisms in Africa, depending on the center from which one is speaking or theorizing. These feminisms have to be theorized around the junctures of race, class, caste and gender; nation culture and ethnicity; age, status, role and sexual orientation. Certainly more research is needed to discover what African women themselves, particularly, the working classes and the peasantry think about themselves as women, what ideology [they] possess and what agenda they have for themselves, daily and historically (548).

Within the context described above, the notion of Post-colonial African Feminism and its relation with the play *Anowa*, its writer Aidoo, and the character Anowa provide an insight into the role of women in society and their commitment to equality and justice. Anowa is a girl who wants to effect change in her community, a girl who disagrees with slavery of Africans by Africans, and with the stereotyped image that the community has of women. When I suggest that Anowa is a *Revolutionary Woman* as the epitome of Post-colonial African feminism, I am focusing my hypothesis on what *Anowa* –both the play and the character- symbolize. This is precisely what I will set out to define; the concept of *Revolutionary African Woman*.

Anowa is a Post-colonial African feminist who is not afraid to talk or to ask questions and provokes significant changes whether at home, at work, through the arts or in the community. The characteristics of *The Revolutionary Woman* are: the fight for freedom, independence and equality for women and their communities. As well as being a woman of action she is also a woman with vision. She is willing to rethink the concept of women in Africa and what their role is. Courage is another of her intrinsic qualities. She is a woman who fights for the right to speak freely without being afraid of the consequences of her words

and her acts. Finally, the African *Revolutionary Woman* realizes that tradition sometimes is merely a convenient justification for the utterly unjustifiable (reinforcing gender inequality, the abuse of power, etc). Traditional concepts such as maternity, marriage, polygamy, and the relationships between men and women; are questioned and considered by this new African woman as I am going to explain later through Anowa's example. She is a young girl who is part of her community but is horrified by the slavery and injustice she witnesses. She is a *Revolutionary Woman*, and a person who offers a fresh and unprecedented definition of what it means to be an African woman, in the present day, breaking away not only from the western but also some of the African traditions as mentioned throughout this paper – specifically those which concern gender and slavery-.

Up until this point I have sought to provide a definition of what Post-colonial African Feminism means in order to clarify its relation with Anowa. That is why I have introduced some important facts such as: the first wave movement, the second wave of which Black feminism is an important part, and the third wave which includes Post-colonial African feminism. According to that I proposed the notion of *The Revolutionary Woman* which is pertinent to the main character of Aidoo's play: Anowa. In order to argue why Anowa embodies this notion I will focus my attention on three of the characteristics of *The Revolutionary Woman* which I consider as the most clearly present in Anowa. Those characteristics are: the fight for freedom from slavery and class oppression, the fight for gender equality and the impact of maternity and marriage in African women's lives.

2.2 Anowa as the New African Woman: Slavery, Gender and Maternity

KOFI AKO (very angrily) ... I don't think
 There is a single woman in the land who
 speaks to her husband the way you do to
 me... Why are you like
 this, Anowa? Why? ... Can't
 you be like other normal women?
 Other normal people? (Aidoo *Anowa* 122).

One of the reasons why Anowa cannot be like other women is that she cannot understand why people buy other people. She cannot understand why a woman cannot work like her husband, or why she has to remain silent in the presence of a man. Anowa is the kind of *Revolutionary Woman* who needs to ask questions and to understand the causes of slavery and gender discrimination. She fights for the right to speak freely without being afraid of the consequences of her words and her acts. From the beginning of the play, the reader identifies with a woman who is not afraid to talk and to make decisions as she does when she defends her decision to marry the lazy Kofi Ako, the man who she loves, against her parent's wishes.

Several times the reader sees a girl who is constantly questioning Kofi, herself, her parents and others. Even when she was a young girl, she was asking her grandmother questions about who the pale, the white men and the slaves were. But the answers she received were never enough for her. Answers like the one that the grandmother gave to her, aroused her curiosity and awareness: "a child like you should not ask questions... Shut up or your mouth will twist up one day with questions... shut up! It is not good that a child should ask big questions" (118). But Anowa continued talking and asking without restrictions. She demanded freedom even if her own husband had slaves and implored her to be silent.

There are, then, two revolutionary women's characteristics that I mentioned above and that I want to consider now: first the fight for freedom, independence and equality in relation with slavery and second, the necessity to rethink the concept of women in Africa and what their role is. Anowa embodies these two characteristics. The first one is developed during the whole play, through her outspoken nature and her exemplary behavior she is faithful to her beliefs and convictions. Not simply content with verbally condemning the institution of slavery she demonstrates her dissent by working tirelessly and refusing to accept that a slave perform a task which she considers her responsibility. She constantly questions slavery and inequality. Anowa tells Kofi that they do not need to buy slaves but he insists that he needs them for an important purpose. He says that "they were there to help them in their work" (112). For Kofi, there is nothing wrong with buying one or two people to help them, more if they can be bought cheaply. Despite his stubborn insistence Anowa's words will resonate in his mind throughout the play: "Kofi, no man made a slave of his friend and came too much himself. It is wrong. It is evil" (112). The old man's remarks on Kofi's activities are also deeply insightful:

[People] say he is buying men and women as though they were only worth each a handful of the sands on the shore... there must be something that is against the natural state of man and the purity of his worship of the gods. Those who have observed have remarked that every house is ruined where they take in slaves (116).

When Kofi enters into the slave trade everything begins to change between him and Anowa: "*Kofi became fat like a bullfrog in a swamp, while Anowa daily grew thin*" (116). Kofi assumes that buying slaves will enhance his virility and Anowa, liberated from domestic chores, will assume a more traditional wifely role. The drama in this play revolves around the ethical implications of slavery and the image of women with particular emphasis on

maternity, marriage and their role in society. When she and Kofi leave Yebi, Anowa works even more than Kofi. She is stronger than her husband and wherever the couple go, people at first presume Anowa to be Kofi's sister. For the community it is strange that a woman helps her husband like a man. This is one of the reasons why Kofi decides to buy slaves: his virility is placed in doubt by the community following which he decides to leave Anowa at home without permission to work. Kofi wants Anowa to become submissive and assume the role of the passive wife allowing him to become an archetypal African husband- strong, in charge of decision-making, a father to many children and authoritative. Kofi hides his weakness and sterility in the false persona he creates of Anowa. He and the community gradually come to regard Anowa as a witch just because she is different to other women. Kofi is aware of the injustice of his actions, he knows that Anowa is right but he cannot accept her ideas: "Shamelessly, you rake up the dirt of life. You bare our wounds. You are too fond of looking for the common pain and the general wrong" (116). To be a reflective, critical person in his eyes, thus, is to expose the ugly realities everyone would prefer to ignore. The ultimate result of this collective mentality is the conversion of Anowa into a figure that inspires intense fear and hatred. The old woman's opinion of Anowa is an expression of the general consensus: "she is a witch, she is a devil, she is everything that is devil" (116).

As Anowa questions the reasons used to justify slavery, she rethinks the concept of women and their role in marriage and she also embraces African feminism. I started this chapter with a quotation from Kofi where he is asking Anowa why she is so different to other women. A possible answer to Kofi's query could be that she is different because she has a hunger for knowledge, she needs to understand her own acts and life. This quotation shows what Kofi thinks about Anowa, but who is Anowa really? In order to understand why this character also embodies the image of the new African woman, questioning gender relations

and what it means to be a woman, I shall begin by discussing who she is in the opinion of the other characters, and then who she thinks she is, judging by her own statements.

The character named the Mouth-That-Eats-Salt-and Pepper is a kind of *vox populi* consisting of the opinions and poetry of an old man and an old woman. Even if the old woman agrees with Kofi most of the time, she knows that Anowa is special and unique:

Anowa is not a girl to meet every day. Anowa is something else! Like all the beautiful maidens in the tales, she has refused to marry any of the sturdy men who have asked for her hand in marriage. No one knows what is wrong with her! [And the old man responds] A child of several incarnations, she listens to her own tales, laughs at her own jokes and follows her own advice (102).

But what should be understood as a positive characteristic is not seen as something good by the old woman. She thinks that something is wrong with Anowa like her mother did before. Badua -her mother- was a woman who “complains at the beginning [of the play] and cries at the end” (101). She says that Anowa is her own daughter and even if the oracle suggested that she should be a priestess, Badua wanted Anowa to have children so she could be a grandmother as tradition determined. Badua knows that Anowa is horrified by the existence of the slave trade and views her daughter as a fool. That is why she says to her husband –Osam- that any other woman would be happy in Anowa’s position and her husband answered that “Anowa is not every woman” (113). The answer of the mother contains the different points of view but also the voice of the community: “Tchiaaa! And who does she think she is? A goddess?” (113). On the contrary, Osam believes in the oracles and expects Anowa to become a priestess. The oracles said that Anowa was wandering and her soul was “hovering on the outer fringes of life and always searching for something” (113). The father and also the old man think that Anowa is not a girl one meets every day, that she is something

else and that she acts in accordance with her beliefs. In the words of the old man she is beautiful and special:

Some of us think she has just allowed her unusual beauty to cloud her vision of the world... [She is] beautiful as Korado Ahima, someone's- Thin-Thread. A dainty little pot well-baked, and polished smooth to set in a nobleman's corner. (102).

It is evident therefore that Anowa inspires a range of opinions, but there is one thing everyone is agreed upon; that Anowa is different, unique. She always seems to be looking below the surface of things. She leaves such a strong impression on the community that she is seen as a witch by some, a priestess by others, and finds support among others. Sometimes she believes that her apparent sterility makes her somehow incomplete as a woman. Several times she asks herself why she cannot be like other women and why nobody taught her how to be a woman. Her free spirit is viewed with surprise by her husband and even by her mother. Sometimes the old man considers Anowa's acts as justified but at the same time he judges and questions her. The old man says in the second part of the play: "When was this infant born, that would teach us all what to do? Who is she to bring us new rules to live by?" (117) and that question resonates strongly throughout the play.

There is also a traditional conception of what a woman has to do. The old woman for example, asks herself what kind of woman Anowa is to think she knows better than her husband on all subjects (117). Her mother has the same traditional idea of womanhood. The reader becomes aware of this through her thoughts and words: "I want my child to be a human woman. Marry a man, tend a farm, and be happy to see her peppers and her onions grow. A woman ... should bear children, many children, so she can afford to have one or to die. (104) But Anowa is not like that and even if everybody questions her acts she knows that

she is different. Kofi constantly asks to her: “Anowa, what is the difference? How is it you can’t feel like everybody else does? What is the meaning of this strangeness? Who were you in the spirit world?” (116) and the old woman reinforces this idea with these words: “As the sourest yam is better than the sweetest guava, the dumbest man is always better than a woman. Or he thinks he is! And so Kofi shall teach Anowa he is a man! (117).

Questions about gender, about what it means to be a man or a woman, arise around Anowa. There is an episode when Anowa is working even more than Kofi and he tells her that she “should have been born a man” (109). But, why did he never decide to marry another woman even if Anowa has no objection to the idea? She knew that other women would be useful and would help her. What is more, other women would give Kofi offspring, something that Anowa supposedly could not provide. Kofi’s constant denial involves a secret that at the end of the play will be unveiled. Anowa was considered infertile and she was extremely hard-working, two aspects that did not correspond with the community’s idea about how a real woman ought to be. Kofi is considered Anowa’s brother. His virility is questioned because his woman does not bear him children and works harder than him. That is why Kofi realizes that he is going to be “the new husband” (111) and Anowa is going to be “the new wife” (111). The reader can gain an idea of the traditional conception of marriage and gender through the different conceptions of these issues that emerge during the play. It puts into question the relationship between men and women, between husband and wife, and also between parents and their children. Anowa expresses these questions explicitly in the following extract:

Someone should have taught me how to grow up to be a woman. I hear in other lands a woman is nothing. And they let her know this from the day of her birth. But here, O my spirit mother, they let a girl grow up as she pleases until she is married. And then she is like any woman anywhere: in order for her man

to be a man, she must not think, she must not talk. O – o, why didn't someone teach me how to grow up to be a woman? (121).

I want to finish these considerations about Anowa and her image as a *Revolutionary Woman* suggesting one more characteristic about the new woman and it is related with tradition. Anowa realizes that tradition sometimes can reinforce gender inequality or the abuse of power. In this case she was considered infertile and was judged because of that. At the end of the play Anowa discovers that the origin of the infertility came from Kofi and the reader can understand then, why Kofi was pretending that Anowa was considered a witch: he was hiding his infertility. Maternity then, will be one of those traditional concepts that are also going to be questioned by Anowa.

In the third part of the play the reader becomes cognizant of the idea that the community has about the meaning of womanhood. This idea voiced by the mother, the men, the old woman and also Anowa. The reader has multiples visions of these considerations and can imagine why Anowa is judged because of her supposed infertility. This vertiginous part of the play is distressing and melancholic. There are rumors circulating about Anowa and Kofi decides to send her back to Yebi while Anowa starts to speak to herself. She does not understand what to be normal means, she does not know what the causes for her apparent problem are. But the problem is there: people start to think about Kofi's virility, also people know that Anowa disagrees with slavery and again Kofi feels that his woman is superior to him. The problem is that Anowa is not a mother, and for people, to be a complete woman means to become a mother. Anowa is a girl who is married without children and is considered strange, wasted, with an empty belly, unproductive and unfortunate. The community talks about Anowa and say that something is wrong with her womb. When Anowa realizes that she cannot have children she questions her role and points out: "Mm...

children. It seems I'm not woman enough. And this is another reason why you ought to marry another woman. So she can bear your children" (115).

Finally she discovers with dismay that her husband is sterile, that he is dry on the inside and that if she is seen as a man, her husband would be seen as a woman. Anowa understands that her husband blames her for not giving him a son, when in fact, the weakness comes from him. Finally she realizes:

Kofi, are you dead? . . . Kofi, is your manhood gone? I mean, you are like a woman . . . there is no hope anymore, in there? Kofi... tell me, is that why I must leave you? That you have exhausted your masculinity acquiring slaves and wealth? (225).

I want to finish this section with Anowa's last words which I have cited above. Rather than preach or present her ideas or feelings, Anowa finishes the play by asking questions again. She puts the conventional relationships between men, community, family and women into doubt. In other words, she has a hunger for knowledge. She needs to understand her own acts and life. Is Anowa then, the epitome of African Feminism? Yes. She represents the revolutionary African women and is a symbol of the fight for freedom, for gender equality, against slavery and class oppression. Like the old woman says: Anowa "is following her own advice" (102).

Conclusions

I would like to conclude this thesis by recapitulating the key role of African women artists in society. On one hand, they are raising awareness about women's rights after years of oppression, silence or injustice; while on the other hand they are creating new African theatre aesthetics and original techniques. Ama Ata Aidoo depicts one face of Africa and the power of its women. Her character, Anowa, transmits the voice of a daring and brave woman and the human condition. She embodies the concept of *Revolutionary women* and is the epitome of African feminism in the post-colonial theatre of Sub-Saharan Africa.

Thanks to *Anowa*, both the play and the character, the reader is not only presented with a fine example of Post-colonial African theatre, but can also reach an understanding of the role of women in African communities. Anowa has led to a greater awareness of African needs and realities, particularly with respect to concerns such as slavery, gender issues, marriage and maternity. Her attitude is a call to resist abuses, and an attempt to understand African women.

Further research related into African theatre should bear in mind the relation between African female artists and their contexts. As I stressed throughout this thesis, African female theatre is inextricably tied to African culture, the commitment to society and the fight for women's rights. African theatre reflects the unique character of the continent it represents: full of color, sounds, movement, aphorisms, dance and rituals. It is not an isolated event from African everyday life and that is why *Anowa* represents new aesthetics. It incorporates several African legacies into the plot and employs new artistic parameters. All these topics are significant because through theses like this one, African voices and ideologies are crossing frontiers and receiving national and international recognition.

African theatre techniques are now applied in many places, even outside of Africa. Their female artists, with their commitment and passion, are generating social changes through the arts. The approach of Ama Ata Aidoo in African Theatre and African feminism is an example of the extraordinary power of women and the positive impact of their voices in African society. *Anowa* explores the human condition, the relationship between women and men, and calls for the reinterpretation of African tradition, beliefs, myths and heritage.

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