Ama Ata Aidoo, Writer & Educator

To us she is a true Obaahemaa, treasured for her eloquence and bold self acceptance and has depicted in her works the role of the African woman in modern society. She has been an outspoken proponent for women's liberation in the national and international contexts and is an avid critic of the corruption and hypocrisy of the national bourgeoisie in post-independence Ghana. She has likewise made important contributions to both the development of African literature and literary criticism both as a writer and as a scholar. Ama Ata Aidoo is our beloved writer, poet, director for works for stage, advocate and professor.

As a writer, Ama Atta Aidoo stirred the hearts of millions and gained national acclaim with her first play The Dilemma of a Ghost (1965), which concerned the problem of conflict between traditional culture and Western education and values.

In subsequent years, Aidoo has written another play, two novels, two collections of short stories, and two collections of poetry as well as numerous essays on African literature and the status of women in African society. In short, she is filled with an abundance of wisdom and unique insights, which she takes great joy in sharing.

Aidoo was born in Abeadzi Kyiakor, Ghana, into a Fante family she once characterized as "a long line of fighters." She attended Wesley Girls High School in Cape Coast for her secondary school education. Encouraged by her liberal-minded father, Ama pursued an English degree in the University of Ghana at Legon, where she wrote her first play The Dilemma of a Ghost, and got it produced. Between 1964 and 1966 Ama was a Junior Research Fellow at the Institute of African Studies at the University, which influenced her writing by strengthening her commitment to the use of African oral traditions in her work. In 1974 she became a consulting professor to the Phelps-Stokes Fund’s Ethnic Studies Program and also received a creative writing fellowship to Stanford University in California. She has also won many literary awards including the 1992 Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book (Africa) for Changes.

In January 1982 she was appointed Minister of Education. As Minister, Ama wanted to make education in Ghana freely accessible to all - but after 18 months when she realised that she couldn't achieve her aims she offered to resign, but was subsequently sacked. She left the country a year later for Zimbabwe, where she lived for the next 9 years as a writer, and consultant on education and creative writing.

After nearly a decade in Zimbabwe and traveling around the world, Ama Ata Aidoo has returned home to Ghana where we sat down to talk with Aidoo about her efforts to raise up the next generation of female writers.

Aidoo’s foundation Mbaasem which was founded in June 2000 aims to support African women writers and their work. The foundation was conceived as a development-oriented, non-profit foundation, committed especially to creating a congenial environment for woman literary workers. (Read more on Mbaasem)

Mbaasem has been likened to the transformation of Ernest Hemingway's home in Chicago into a literary haven and museum. However, the main differences are that the rented premises of Ama Ata Aidoo do not bear the name of any writer, and secondly it houses only female writers.

Mbaasem means Women's words, or Women's Affairs. "I want to reclaim the term because when I was growing up and even up to today when men don't want to listen to women they say, 'Go away, this is women's stuff'. This is a form of denigration as if by being Mbaasem there is something unimportant or ridiculous about it. We are doing a couple of things on a few levels by using the term Mbaasem," says Aidoo.

"We hope to soon start our residential programme for writers to spend between two and 12 weeks at a time at the centre and for nonresident writers to also benefit from library and other facilities. We are going to have writers’ workshops and hope to help women with writing skills. With time, we will hire consultants to help our writers with editing their manuscripts and also to help them in getting published."

“One of the problems African writers face today is getting their material published. A problem which was somewhat alleviated when Heinemann established the African Writers Series during the 1960s.” Writers have however now turned to local publishers, which Aidoo says can often be as detrimental to a writer's success as is the case with some international publishers. She said: “I am learning that publishing locally does not always mean that you are going to get a better deal because publishers are and will always be publishers.”

"The euphoria among African writers in the immediate post-independent era was great with writers thinking the sky was the limit. It never occurred to me back then that there was a possibility of not getting published after writing a script. That was because I had Longman's representative in Accra knocking on my door as soon as The Dilemma of a Ghost was staged at the University of Ghana." It is my hope that Mbaasem will help our female writers deal with these challenges.

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