

## **Drama and Communication: Interrogating the Topos of Relational Conflict in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa***

**Clement Eloghosa Odia**

Department of English and Literature,  
Faculty of Arts,  
University of Benin,  
Benin City  
[clement.odia20@gmail.com](mailto:clement.odia20@gmail.com)  
+2347038975183

**Peter O. Aihevba**

Department of Theatre Arts,  
Tayo Akpata University,  
Ekiadolor, Edo State.  
[peteraihevba@gmail.com](mailto:peteraihevba@gmail.com)  
+2348035921562

### **Abstract**

Integral to the discourse of relational conflict is the nexus between drama and communication. Social relations thrive in spoken dialectics and colloquies which find adequate expression in drama/theatre. Communication at various levels often require interpretations (both cognitive and perceptual) of social interactions. Thus, conflicts on interpersonal level ensue. This essay, critical and textual, attempts a fully interpretive understanding of the literary and social dynamics that exist in Ama Ata Aidoo's play. The causes of relational conflict in society are examined. The essay also attempts an indepth exploration of the critical theory of alterity, an aspect of postcolonialism to interrogate Aidoo's dramatization of relational conflict. Equipped with this theoretical insight, the essay carries out character evaluation in order to understand Aidoo's portraiture of relational conflict. Using Aidoo's *Anowa*, three factors are identified which have continued to brew this type of conflict, whether between a couple or among members of a family. This essay concludes that esteem, control and affiliation are principal causes of relational conflict.

**Key words:** Relational conflict, esteem, control, affiliation, incompatibility and literature

### **Introduction**

Ama Ata Aidoo occupies a significant space in the literary universe of modern African drama. Her contributions include the incorporation of the rich oral

tradition of the Ghanaian society into the fabric of her dramatic pieces. Also, she has been able to retell the experiences of Africans by focusing on the subject of slavery and colonialism and how they have disrupted the harmonious African culture.

This essay is predicated on the theory of alterity which is an aspect of postcolonialism. Alterity bothers on social relations which underscores the difference between 'the self' and 'another person' who is often regarded as the 'other'. Rosalind C. Morris and Gayatri C. Spivak argue that the process by which otherness is constructed is known as "othering". According to them, alterity refers specifically to "The self identity of the colonizing subject" (9). The issue of personality clashes and identity crisis often express themselves in shaping the interpersonal dialectics.

Postcolonial scholars have drawn the link between alterity and otherness asserting that both are used interchangeably. For Ashcroft et al, alterity highlights the frosty relationship that exists between the enslaver and the enslaved, the powerful and the powerless, the colonial overlord and the colonised subject drawing attention to the divergent opinions to which the people subscribed. The highpoint of postcolonial alterity is the construction of opposite personalities or characters through which the alterity is conveyed and etched in the consciousness of the masses. Otherness emerges from the process of constructing composite personalities without excluding the characters, thereby maintaining unity and adequate social interactions.

Works of literature, across the genres, have certain social orientations which often inspire writers to compose their ideas and at the heart of such literary compositions, the writer's pre-conceived notions, opinions, decisions to incorporate certain subjects and ideas into the mainstream of the works are entirely his or her own prerogative. This position aligns with Tony E. Afejuku's assertion of S.T. Coleridge's statement: "Almost every writing including autobiography, begins with a prime decision, according to Coleridge, which affects the writer's whole process of composition. Whatever this decision is induces and dictates to him strategy as he engages in his enterprise" (10). Whatever decision that may have inspired Aidoo to either consciously or fortuitously integrate materials of social relationships into her play, *Anowa* has unwittingly made this study unavoidable. Thus, the strategy which seems probable and practicable in exploring relational conflict resonates absolutely in the fact that modern African literature is written to address issues bothering the people.

This position finds expression in the view of Ogburn: "The writer, unlike other members of society, is compelled by his artistic calling to respond to the social circumstance" (90). The circumstance of incompatibility, misperception, and other triggers of relational conflict, perhaps may have influenced Aidoo into writing *Anowa*. According to Innocent Chiluwa, 'Modern African Literature is based on contemporary human experiences in order to remain relevant'. (2) It is against this backdrop that one finds Aidoo's preoccupation with various issues of relational conflict clearly perceptible. Contemporary Africa is one long stretch of conflict and it is unimaginable to think that the playwright will ignore a subject as recurrent as conflict in Africa.

Conflict is a broad subject with numerous aspects. The vastness of its scope can be seen from the different theories that have been written on it. W.W. Wilmot and Hocker J. say thus: "Conflict is a felt struggle between two or more interdependent individuals over perceived incompatible differences in beliefs, values and goals, or over differences in desires for esteem, control, and connectedness" (11). According to Wilmot and Hocker, struggle arising from differences bordering on beliefs, values and goals on the one hand can trigger conflict among individuals who are brought together in a socially motivated environment. In the other hand, conflict can result from differences occasioned by desires for esteem, control and connectedness. Intrinsic to this distinction are the elements of interdependence, affection and differences between individuals who are perceived to be incompatible.

Peter G. Northouse focuses on another aspect of conflict. He says as follows: "To understand conflict, we need to understand communication. When human communication takes place, it occurs on two levels. One level can be characterized as the content dimension and the other as the relational dimension" (176). Northouse sees conflict as an offshoot of communication. In this sense, communication is an indispensable human activity. For this reason, conflict is unavoidable because the communication will always arise. When this occurs, conflict can be seen to be associated with content and relationship. Furthermore, he says that conflict can be classified into two: content conflicts and relational conflicts. Commenting on the content conflicts, Northouse says:

When we communicate with one another, we become aware that others viewpoints are often very different from our own. If we perceive what another person is

communicating as incompatible with our own viewpoint, a conflict in beliefs or values is likely to occur (178)

Here, content conflict centres on differences in beliefs and values or in goals and ways to reach those goals. Still on the classification characteristics, Northouse adds that:

Sometimes we do not get along with another person, not because of what we are talking about (conflict on content issues) but because of how we are talking about it. Relational conflict refers to the differences we feel between ourselves and others concerning how we relate to each other (180)

Relational conflict is therefore concerned with the attitude of the people when they communicate which is capable of triggering conflict. He adds that “relational conflict is usually related to incompatible differences between individuals over issues of (1) esteem, (2) control and (3) affiliation”. Thus, people engage in needless conflicts when they fail to discern their differences in areas of esteem, control and affiliation. Watzlawick et al express the view:

Relational issues are inextricably bound to content issues. This means that relational conflicts will often surface during the discussion of content issues. Relational conflicts are complex and not easily expressed and confronted, it can significantly enhance the overall resolution process. (183)

To the above communication theorists, it is quite difficult to separate content conflict from relational conflict. In most discourse situations, the essential source of disagreement resonates through the content of the discussion just as the people’s attitude also leads to conflict between two or more individuals. From their views, relational conflicts are easier to resolve than content conflicts.

From the works of Wilmot and Hocker, Peter G. Northouse and Walzlawick, we have been able to identify some concepts of conflict. This essay argues that relational conflict is attributable to issues of esteem, control and affiliation.

**Issue of Esteem**

Conflicts in *Anowa* result from the issue of esteem by characters particularly when they perceive their sense of importance as having been bruised. A

good example is found in Badua and Osam's quarrel in respect of Anowa's apprenticeship to become a dancer priestess. One point that needs be made is that Osam feels that his esteem has been injured by Badua's refusal to accept his proposal to apprentice Anowa to a dancer priestess:

OSAM: As for her wildness, what do you want me to say again about that? I have always asked you to apprentice her to a priestess to quieten her down. But... (*Anova*, 11)

According to Osam, apprenticing Anowa to a priestess is the right way to go. Badua's insistence that she will not hear of it has some direct negative impact on Osam as the head of the family. First, the tone of regret dominates his speech above. His sense of pride has been punctured by Badua. This is evident in the use of a mark of discontinuity in the last sentence which of cause goes to further deepen his sense of frustration. Osam's disappointment is not as a result of his wife's opposition to him as a person but as a result of his esteem being brutally assaulted.

Secondly, Osam feels totally dejected not just because he has had his suggestion thrown out through the window but rather, because his personal esteem has been reduced to nothing:

OSAM: [*Very angry*] don't shout at me, woman! Who comes complaining to me about Anowa?... They say that that would have been to the good of us all. But now – there she is, as they said she might be, wandering... her soul hovering on the outer fringes of life and always searching for something... I do not know what? (*Anova*, 32)

This text further sheds light on the issue. Esteem, as seen in the above is also responsible for the conflict between Osam and Badua.

At every point in the play, we see conflict generated through acts considered to have seriously affected the self esteem of certain individuals or family. When Anowa finally tells her parents who she has chosen to be her husband,

it immediately infuriates them. Badua, her mother considers Kofi Ako, Anowa's choice as offensive:

- ANOWA: Mother, you have been at me for a long time to get married. And now that I have found someone I very much...
- BADUA: Anowa, shut up. Shut up! Push your tongue into your mouth and close it. Shut up because I never counted Kofi Ako among my son-in-law. Anowa, why Kofi Ako? Of all the mothers that are here in Yebi, should I be the one whose daughter would want to marry this fool, this good-for-nothing-cassava-man, this watery male of all watery male? This-I-am—handsome-one-with-a-stick-between-my-teeth-in-the-market-place... This... this...  
(Anowa, 14-15)

The sense of humiliation that Badua feels on hearing that Kofi Ako is Anowa's choice goes to reveal the damage that such a choice has on her esteem. Pouring out her frustration, she calls Kofi some damnable names. For example, she calls him "this fool, this good-for-nothing-cassava-man, this watery male of all watery male". From the choice of words used, it is clear why Badua disapproves of Kofi Ako as a suitable choice of a husband for Anowa.

Also, the acts of suicide which are committed in the play, though function as resolution of conflict; they are products of personal esteem. For example, Kofi Ako is unable to bear the shame that surrounds the exposure of the truth:

- ANOWA: Kofi, are you dead? (pause) Kofi, is your manhood gone? I mean, you are like a woman. (Pause) Kofi, is there not hope any more, is there? (Pause) Kofi... tell me, is that why I must leave you? That you have exhausted your masculinity acquiring slaves and wealth? (Anowa, 61)

As Anowa talks on, we see his slaves eavesdropping on what the couple is saying:

*[Kofi looks around and sees the peeping eyes. He is horrified. He gestures to ANOWA who doesn't know what is happening and goes on talking. He makes an attempt to go away and then sits down again. The slaves disappear] (Anowa, 61-62).*

Kofi Ako demonstrates the fact that he is a man who is incapable of bearing shame. One wonders why Kofi had to go the extreme of ritual sacrifice to acquire wealth if he had no stomach to face the consequences of his actions. Suicide, within the African milieu, is unacceptable as it disrupts the social harmony and cosmic order and peace. It is understandable that Kofi killed himself but what is baffling is Anowa's suicide:

OLD WOMAN: *Puei. Puei, Puei! This is the type of happening out of which we get stories and legends. Yebi, I wish you due, due, due.*

May all the powers that be condole with you? Kofi Ako shoots himself and Anowa drowns herself! This is too much. Other villages produce great men, men of wealth, and men of name. why should this befall us? What tabooed food have we eaten? What unholy ground have we trodden? (Anowa, 63)

The lamentation of Old Woman unveils salient information which the action does not reveal. Through her words, the audience gets to know what has happened to Anowa. Do not forget, Anowa has told Badua, her mother that she will never return no matter what:

BADUA: It's up to you, my mistress who knows everything. But remember, my lady – when I am too old to move, I shall still be sitting by these walls waiting for you to come back with your rags and nakedness.

ANOWA: You do not have to wait because we shall not be coming back here to Yebi; not for a long, long time, mother, not for a long long time.

BADUA: Of course, if I were you I wouldn't want to come back with my shame either.  
(*Anowa*, 17)

Viewed against this backdrop, it is clear why Anowa has to take her life. Her personal esteem is what is at stake. She prefers to die than to return to Yebi with her 'rags and nakedness'. The death of Kofi has further affirmed Badua's assessment of Kofi as a bad choice for her daughter, Anowa. The sense of pathos is achieved through Anowa's death and this helps to resolve all conflicts in the play. Also, Anowa, as a tragic heroine, fulfils the essential role of unifying all the disparate actions and synchronising all the units into a complete whole. Her death on a symbolic level underscores the validity of sacrifice for peace and moral uprightness to be upheld.

As for the suicide of Kofi Ako, his death represents the death of avarice, greed, and materialism in Oguua. His death accentuates societal cleansing. His blood has to wash away the moral sludge which his conduct has smeared on the society. As for Anowa, by drowning, she too has to cleanse herself of the contamination of not just her body but of her soul which, are products of a badly damaged esteem.

### **Issue of Control**

Relational conflict is also caused by individuals who refuse to be controlled, such characters consider control of their actions as an infringement on their inalienable rights. In *Anowa*, the conflict between Osam and Badua as a result of their relationship as husband and wife is centred on the latter's desire to control and dominate over the former. Badua, as we know, is a strong character, self-willed, domineering and manipulative. Her assertiveness repels Osam. She wants to control Osam and by so doing, upsets the hegemonic masculine authority already in place in the home. The picture painted of Osam in the play is one of non-assertive, docile and inactive. His docility smacks of a man dancing to the whims of his wife. Badua seems to always have her way in almost every issue. For this reason, Badua has grown to enjoy her domineering position, as it were. Take for example, Osam's decision to have Anowa apprenticed to a priestess is promptly opposed by Badua and her people. Also, when Osam indirectly supports Anowa's choice of a husband, Badua is infuriated.

At every discussion, Badua will always find a way to oppose Osam. A good example is when they discuss Anowa's refusal to pay her parents a visit:



OSAM: ... and has never been back since. I have always feared her.

BADUA: [shocked] you have always feared her? And is that a good thing to say about your own barrel-begotten child? If you fear her, then what then do other people do? And if other people fear her then since a crab never fathers a bird in their eyes, who are you? She only went away with her husband and has not been back since. (*Anowa*, 31)

Badua's statement is heavily laden with rhetorical questions. In fact, four of them are used in the above. Each expresses the enormity of the tension in their relationship and shows the critical dimension of the conflict between them. The first question reveals the cynicism and derision to which Badua holds Osam. Her shock at Osam's statement in which he claims to fear Anowa knows no bounds. The question that follows censures Osam and reproves his utterance as bad. In the question that follows, Badua berates her husband for even expressing his opinion. Finally, using a proverb, Badua compares Osam to a crab. As she has said, the proverbial crab cannot give birth to a bird. It can only give birth after its own kind. Thus, Osam is being ridiculed as the father of a recalcitrant daughter. This speech is a testament to the deep relational conflict happening between Badua and Osam.

Another instance of relational conflict predicated on the issue of control is the one generated by Anowa who refuses the domineering control and overbearing attitude of her mother. Anowa is a lady who is self-determined, full of ideals, bold and self-assured. Her personality, just like that of her mother, conflicts with each other. For this reason, Anowa is unable to accept any control when her choice of a husband is mooted. In fact, Anowa turns down all the men who meet her parents' expectation and personal assessment. When Anowa reveals the identity of the man she has chosen, it will be the one that her parents will disapprove. Osam is right when he explains the nature of Anowa as a child who will not be controlled:

OSAM: Anyway, I said long ago that I was removing my mouth from my daughter Anowa's marriage. Did I not say that? She would not allow herself to be married to

any man who came to ask for her hand from us and of whom we approved. Did you not know then that when she chose a man, it might be one of whom we would disapprove? (*Anowa*, 16)

Osam's accurate reading of his daughter's kind of person has allowed him to step back in exercising control on the subject of his daughter's marriage. He allows her to have her way. But Badua does not get it. She exerts her motherly influence and insists on controlling the choice of Anowa's husband to be. This insistence and attempt at controlling Anowa puts her on a collision course with her. Here is an excellent excerpt from the text:

ANOWA: Mother, I do not know what is wrong with you.  
BADUA: And how would you know what is wrong with me? Look here Anowa, marriage is like a piece of cloth...  
ANOWA: I like mine and it is none of your business.  
BADUA: And like cloth, its beauty passes with wear and tear.  
ANOWA: I do not care, mother. Have I not told you that this is my marriage and not yours?  
BADUA: My marriage! Why should it be my daughter who would want to marry that good-for-nothing cassava man?  
ANOWA: He is mine and I like him. (*Anowa*, 17)

Looking at the tone of both speakers, it is clear that there is so much conflict between them. And it is as a result of Badua's trying to lord it over Anowa, that the latter refuses to be controlled. Notice Badua's pessimistic attitude towards Anowa's decision to marry Kofi Ako. She is subtle, sly and cunning. But Anowa's tone carries a ring of finality. She is assertive, angry and uncompromising. There is this unbending sense of contentment in Anowa's tone concerning her husband. She will not hear of any contrary opinion. Like a true tragic heroine, she does not listen to reason. This fact, to a great deal, contributes to her tragic end in the play.

### **Issue of Affiliation**

The issue of affiliation is the last cause of relational conflict in the play. Affiliation presupposes relationship with people, their sense of attachment

or closeness, particularly, to others. In the play, we find Anowa's sudden attachment to her husband, the slaves in the home and the Oguua society at large. For this reason, there is this misperception about her. This leads to their suspicion of her as a witch who is responsible for her own misfortune. Through the words of Boy and Girl, we hear what people are saying about Anowa and how she spends time talking to her own self:

BOY:                   What has happened now?  
GIRL:                  Nothing. Now she flits about like a ghost, talking to herself. *'They stop and listen. The BOY moves up to upper left and peeps*] Is she coming?  
BOY:                  *[Not turning around]* No. *[Then he moves back towards GIRL]*  
GIRL:                  Listen, they were saying at the fish-kilns that she went and stared at the Takoa's baby so hard that the baby is having convulsions...  
BOY:                  *[Shocked]* Ow!  
GIRL:                  Takoa is certainly telling everyone that mistress, I mean mother, is swallowing the baby because she is a witch. (Anowa, 28)

Their view of Anowa, as pitiable as it is, is wrong. The people of Oguua fail to know that here is a woman grossly engrossed in her own thought. There is the internal burden weighing her down. She is inconsolable. Therefore, their misperception is partly responsible for the relational conflict between her and her immediate Oguua society. The height of their unfair accusation is to brand her a witch. Consequently, the implication of such a name is grave. To be called a witch is to cause someone to be alienated. Thus, Anowa suffers alienation from the people as they say all manner of unprintable things about her.

To further make matters worse, Anowa does nothing to improve the situation. In fact, she exacerbates things:

GIRL:                  It is because of this new affair. And the truth is, she herself talks more about it than anyone else. Whenever she thinks she is alone anywhere, she

begins: 'O my husband, what have I done, what have I done?' (Anowa, 49).

The effect of Anowa's withdrawn lifestyle manifests in her soliloquy. It is a necessary follow up that when one stops talking to people; one begins to talk to oneself. As she continues to talk to herself she cuts herself off from people. This situation further complicates the conflict between her and her husband who has ordered her to return to Yebi, her parents' home.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has demonstrated that relational conflict in Aidoo's *Anowais* caused by issues generated by esteem, issues relating to the desire or propensity to control others and of course, the issue associated with one's affiliation with others. The thrust of this paper has been to assess the extent to which the conflict examined thus far is a product of human relationships. Relational conflict is impossible without social interaction. As we begin to intermingle with those in our social environment, there is the possibility of exposing our sense of esteem to pressure; the pressure to assert oneself. As this happens, relational conflict begins to occur.

Just as relational conflict is associated with esteem so is it a product of control. The characters so far studied in this paper exhibit the tendency to refuse control particularly when all such controls infringe on the other's human rights. Their refusal to accept control presents them as fighting back. Relationships are critical and as such, they are critically connected to one's sense of filial relationship.

### **Works Cited**

- Afejuku, Tony E. "The Comparative Imagination: Indian and African Autobiographies". *Ibadan Journal of Humanistic Studies*. Vol.23, April 2013. 1-14. Print.
- Aidoo, Ama Ata. *Anowa*. London: Longman, 1970. Print.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tsifin. *Postcolonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Routledge, 2007.
- Chiluwa, Innocent. "The Literary Artist as a Visionary: Iyayi and the Literature of Change". *Biudiscourse*. Vol.2 (2). 2007: 95-106. Print.
- Hocker, J.L. and Wilmot, W.W. *Interpersonal Conflict*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Dubuque, I.A. Washington DC: Brown, 1995. Print.
- Morris, Rosalind, C. and Gayatri, C. Spivak. *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of Idea*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. Print.

- Northouse, Peter G. *Introduction to Leadership: Concept and Practical*. Third Ed. London: Sage, 2015. Print.
- Ogbeide, O. Victor. "Identifying the Colour of Socio-Political Decadence in Iyayi's *Violence and Heroes*". *Al-Mawaqit*. Numero 06 Decembre 2011. 90-103. Print.
- Watzlawick, P. Beavin, J. and Jackson, D.D. *Pragmatics of Human Communication*. New York: Norton, 1967. Print.