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**Intersection of Oral Tradition, Modernity, and Women's Wellness in *The Dilemma of a Ghost* by Ama Ate Aidoo.**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study examines the intersection and complex interplay of tradition, modernity, and women's wellbeing, drawing from Ama Ate Aidoo's play, *The Dilemma of a Ghost*. This research aims to bridge the gaps between the fields of literature, culture, and women studies, by examining the opportunities and difficulties that women face while navigating tradition and modernity. Modernity has effected women's access to education and medical care, but patriarchy and outdated traditional fertility practices affect women's freedom of choice and wellness, both physical and mental. Cultural identity is important, but change is a reality that must be understood. Following the experiential journey of the protagonist, Eulalie, the study offers a prism to look at the deeper issues of how women are the hardest hit, though both modern men and women, as represented by AtoYawson and Eulalie Rush, are subjected to this dilemmatic issue in their newly married life. Their sense for a longing of cultural identification but their genuine difficulty to adapt, is presented within the parameters of the play. The conflict which creates the dilemma of the individualistic modern generation, on being revisited by the ghost of collective tradition, is never fully resolved. That the playwright's intention is not to present a



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solution for a problematic situation, but to engage in discussion, the need for a balanced strategy, will be discussed

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## Introduction

African women writers have made major contributions to the global literary scene. African women entered the literary world much later than men did. During colonial times, western chauvinism and cultural barriers prevented African women from enrolling in the earliest mission schools. Women in Africa began writing to provide a female perspective on the continent's socio-political image, as male writers did. The researchers aimed to identify cultural barriers that hindered women's agency. As a result, they tackled issues relating to female marginalization. Today, African women are very vocal about women issues, of women as wives, mothers and daughters, gender bias, women subjugation, expectations placed on women by society and tradition and so on. Women are now writing in a wide range of genre that was formerly thought out of reach for women. This is the result of shifts in gender roles and women's educational prospects. African women writers such as Helen Oyeyemi, Chika Unigwe, Chimamanda Adichie, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ate Aidoo, and others have written in a more activist feminism oriented style. Women writers have given women the confidence to advocate for themselves and their opinions. These writers have inspired women to overcome patriarchal tendencies by expressing themselves via their literary works.

In the domain of women's wellbeing, the junction between tradition and modernity is a complex, constantly evolving process. A close study of the complex interplay of how these pressures affect women's health is the focus here. This study uses examples from Ama Ate Aidoo's play *The Dilemma of a Ghost* to explore the challenges and opportunities that women confront in navigating the complex web. Social expectations, cultural norms, and traditions have historically impacted women's health. Traditional practices, profoundly embedded in cultural roots, have significantly influenced women's health experiences globally. These practices address various subjects including mental health, nutrition, and reproductive health etc. while these practices are part of women's identity, they can also have negative impacts on women's health. Stigma, discrimination, and the pressure to fit into traditional gender roles can increase mental health difficulties including depression and anxiety. Modernity has significantly brought about considerable change amidst these firmly ingrained customs. However, this has also led to a confrontation between traditional beliefs and modern healthcare options. The challenges of balancing the cultural demands with their desire to live healthier and more fulfilling lives, is one that more and more women are experiencing.



The connection of cultural identity, and the exigencies of human experiences, many times provides a provocative ground for examination in the literary world, and Ama Ate Aidoo's moving play, *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, is one such examination. Through the lens of a marriage between Ato, a Ghanaian man, and Eulalie, an Afro-American woman, Aidoo artfully explores cultural tension and adaptation within this narrative. The play revolves around Eulalie's pregnancy, which highlights the marginalization of women and the question of indigenous traditional practices which are the prime focus. This analysis delves into the complexities of the character's relationships the play's overall themes. As the play progresses, the plot thickens. The tension between Ato family's traditional Ghanaian beliefs and Eulalie's western upbringing extends beyond lifestyle differences, emerges. It highlights the contrast in values and expectations, including the different approaches to health care, and exposes the conflict that arises when contemporary lifestyle clash with indigenous customs.

### **Methodology and Significance of the Study**

The study is a qualitative assessment and a close reading of the play will be carried out. The significance of the study lies in the examination of the intersection and impact of tradition and modernity on women's wellbeing. It evaluates the impact of societal expectations on women's functional roles, and points out the relevance of the issues beyond the play to the larger world of women. That the playwright's intention is not to present a solution, as such, but to engage in this much needed discussion and the need for a balanced strategy, in the fast growing world of intergenerational and cross cultural existence. Cultural identity is important, but change is a reality that must be understood, is highlighted.

### **Cultural Clash in Women's Health Practices**

Traditional cultural customs exist in all social groups and societies. These ideas are rooted in each community's unique cultural identity. Such ideas in certain demographics, may engage in dangerous health-related behaviors based on outmoded beliefs. Abuse-related trauma, dowry-related suicides, pregnancy practices and taboos, female genital cuttings (FGC), among other issues are some examples from African communities. In each of these cases, women are the ones affected by traditional cultural practices. Harmful traditional practices have a negative impact on women's health. Traditional beliefs can not only cause physical harm, but also increase the chance of developing the risk of HIV infection, obstetric difficulties, and hemorrhage.

The play highlights the intersection of cultural perspective, particularly regarding women's health. Eulalie's desire for taking birth control to postpone having children represents her modern viewpoint,



which contrasts with her husband Ato's family, who regards it as an alien concept. The family of Ato's practices traditional Ghanaian healthcare, which is rooted in conventions, rites, and outmoded therapies. There is some truth in what Nana, the grandma, and custodian of tradition, has to say. She is aware, of the strength found in her people's ancient healing procedures, once effective, and have now been damaged by colonialism and the introduction of a new culture. The play explores complex web of cultural dissonance surrounding women's role and wellbeing through a clash of old and modern ideas.

Aidoo's tale highlights how the cultural barrier can manifest in everyday situations. The disparity between Eulalie's expectations and Ghanaian traditional medicinal practices is evident in her dread of unfamiliar treatment environment. To aid in conceiving, family members prepare an herbal medicine to cleanse her womb in a naked manner during the annual stool sprinkling ritual. Sprinkling of the stools with wine or water honors the family's ancestors and expresses gratitude for a happy new year. The tension that results not only ripples through the family, but also reflects larger cultural issues that form the play, that of the intersection of tradition, modernity, and women's wellbeing, and the resultant dilemmic situation.

The impact of western perspectives on healthcare procedures and cultural globalization is reflected in Eulalie's upbringing and ideas. We see that when she is confronted with traditional practices, such as the ritualistic cleansing of the womb, she is skeptical, and illustrates how cultural paradigms come into conflict. Her story sheds light on how women's health is influenced by their cultural, social, and historical context, rather than being solely a medical issue. Navigating societal currents about women's wellness is challenging, as seen by the conflicting worldviews.

Comparing Ghanaian custom to Eulalie's western perspective raises questions about the effectiveness of different techniques for improving the health of women. While it is also true that there is the need for preserving traditions and the timeless values of traditional wisdom. The struggle between these two positions encourages readers to examine the benefits and drawback of each, highlighting the challenge of striking a balance in diverse cultural contexts. It remains to be said, that the story is set at a period of time when colonial influence runs roughshod over native traditions, in general.

### **Of Individual Choices and Women**

One of the primary objectives of the women's health movement is the individual's right to choose. Globally, an increasing number of women are actively making choices about their fertility instead of experiencing unplanned pregnancies. This change indicates a growing awareness and desire among



women to have control over their reproductive health. Contraceptives play a role in empowering women to take control of their reproductive health and make choices that align with their life goals and values.

There is no denying the widely accepted idea, practically throughout Africa, that having children is the primary goal of marriage, and the unquestionable role of women is to give birth, preferably a male child. It is customary in African tradition that a man should have a son who will continue the family tradition after him. When a man marries a woman in Africa and she does not conceive, the woman starts to feel anxious, fearing that the husband would consider another woman as his wife. The family of the groom becomes concerned, and advises him to find the black goat before it comes dark, which is their way of saying that the challenge at hand must be addressed quickly before it is too late. Aidoo skillfully illustrates this in the play, as Ato's family is anxious that his wife Eulalie is not establishing her value as a woman.

In any childless household, the woman is often blamed for the issue, and that no one ever considers the prospect of a male being impotent, is reflected in the play. This is reflected in the play where Ato's people place all the responsibility on Eulalie, blaming her for their apparent infertility. They cannot understand as to why Ato should not be upset over his wife's inability to have a child. African women writers oppose holding women responsible for infertility. In their literary works, they emphasize that women often seek answer to the couple's childlessness, by seeing several healers and using prescribed medications in an effort to become pregnant.

In the play, Ato and his wife agree not to start a family until they are ready. He assures Eulalie, "we shall postpone having children for as long as you want" (Aidoo, 10). Ato clings to his initial intention to earn money and also desires to live a more independent life without the responsibility of caring children. Intergenerational clash occurs, as such, in the play. The plan of Ato might not seem questionable from a western perspective, however it is seriously unsuitable in his culture. Matters came to such a heat that even Eulalie questions Ato whether delaying having a kid is a wise decision. As the patriarchal subject Ato advises Eulalie to follow their agreement and wait until they are ready.

For the Africans they consider children to be unique gifts from God, and so Ato's family regards the scenario as forbidden. They are anxious about Eulalie's inability to conceive. The conflict worsens when Ato's relatives discover that Eulalie is not barren but using contraceptives or birth control pills. Esi Kom is taken aback and asks, "Humans deciding when they must have children?..only a woman who is barren will tell her neighbors such a tale" (Aidoo, 51). Eulalie, being modern, has her own perspective, including the decision of when to start a family. Her choice of using birth control is something that the



traditional women of Ghana cannot comprehend. But as tension escalates, Eulalie becomes increasingly uncertain of such a choice, but it is her husband who presses on with their initial decision.

Both Eulalie and Ato face challenges with gender roles and societal expectations regarding family planning. Even though it was their consensus decision to put off having a child, it is the woman Eulalie, who is more susceptible to prejudice and social pressures. Gender norms can perpetuate prejudices and unfairly burden and obligations on women. The play explores the tension between traditional Ghanaian culture and the modern values, particularly on the issue of procreation. Cultural expectations can impact women's reproductive choices by influencing their timing and number of children. The play explores the lack of autonomy and agency for women in the setting of cultural tensions and societal expectations.

### **Motherhood as a Cultural Imperative.**

Motherhood is often seen as a cultural obligation in many communities. Cultural expectation around pregnancy can impact women's physical and mental health. Globally, women in their reproductive years are having fewer children. However, some African regions continue to have high hopes regarding childbirth. As per the report, Ghana's fertility rate, or "the average number of children expected per woman over a lifetime stands at 4.2" (Adetunji, 1). Women in Ghana face significant pressure to have children. The primary motive for marriage is to start a family, with many women hoping to do so soon after marriage. Children can contribute to domestic tasks which can increase household income in addition to providing social standing and emotional. As children mature, they can be a tremendous source of support for their parents.

Infertility has significant societal ramifications because of the great importance put on children. Infertile women often face shame, psychological suffering, and sometimes even targets of spousal abuse. Stigma from society and slander are common occurrences. Claims of infertility or barrenness may start when community members observe that a woman is unable to conceive after a certain time frame. This underscores why J.S Mbiti maintains that "marriage and procreation in African communities are unity: without procreation marriage is incomplete" (Mbiti, 107).

In the play, the two-female chorus highlights Akan society's conception of women as just objects for childbearing, with little value outside that role. This shows why they were shocked to learn that Eulalie might not be fertile. The word barren is used seven times with an exclamation mark to indicate the two women's terror upon getting the news, as if being barren were a curse. As Derek Wright highlights the African Akan proverb, "The Barren have no face in the other World," (Wright, 140), the customary



consequences of childlessness in many cultures is dreadful and widespread. They sympathize with Eulalie, as they understand the stigma of being infertile for a married woman in Africa: “Barren! If it is real Barrenness, Then, Oh stranger girl...I weep for you..For my world which you have run to enter is most unkind to the barren” (Aidoo 39-40). Their conversation highlights Esi Kom and her son’s struggle, the submissive role of women in Hamlet, and the benefits and drawbacks of having children, including a lack of care from them. They also mention Esi Kom, Ato’s mother, who is responsible for the Odumna clan without her son’s help. Esi Kom has until now relied completely on her brother and in-law to support the estate. Ironically, the Second Woman’s argument that childlessness is a blessing in traditional African society may be difficult to embrace, but it does have some truth. On the other hand, there is Esi Kom, represents the belief that women with children are fortunate, but must deal with the consequences of an unappreciative child. In the second act of the play nevertheless, “the woman of the chorus, who has no children, prays to Eternal Mother Nature, Queen Mother of child-birth, for her own chance of childbirth” (Guillory 18).

Fertility is a key indicator of female success in Akan culture. The family prioritizes making the most of their children’s opportunities and treats them with love and attention. However, a woman may face ridicule and rejection if they are unable to conceive. Barrenness is still a common reason for divorce disputes. Warren states that “if a new-born baby died before eight days the mother angrily whipped and mutilated the body, wrapped it in sword-grass, put it in a pot and buried it” (Warren, 13). Again, it was considered disgraceful for a woman to die during childbirth, as both the baby and the mother’s body were mistreated. Furthermore, the play depicts rituals used to improve fertility or to overcome barrenness. Eulalie was psychologically impacted by such beliefs and expectations to think of falling in line to find acceptance. Aidoo critiques this system, where a woman’s worth in marriage is tied primarily on the basis of their reproductive abilities. In addition she also highlights how it limits women to their biological responsibilities, silences their personal choices, and maintains gender subordination.

## Conclusion

The play *The Dilemma of a Ghost* delves into women’s welfare in a cultural context, presenting a complex tapestry of difficulties that extend beyond the play’s scope. Women wellness can be served as a metaphorical canvas in *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, that deftly illustrates the larger problems of cross culturalism and globalization. The connective strands of traditional heritage, emerging changes, cultural clashes, adaptability, resonate in the play. It imaginatively enables readers to see how cultural conflicts, directly and indirectly, affect the physical and mental health of women, in particular. It becomes clear



that a woman's life is entwined by societal norms and expectations, which affect their actions and choices. Intergenerational gaps, complexity of emotions, and cultural adaptation issues provide deep insights into the larger dynamics of women's well-being. These themes remain pertinent to current interest regarding womanhood. It prompts reflection on the way cultural factors persist in shaping women's health, physical and mental, beyond various global settings. In essence, the play serves as a mirror reflecting the interplay of tradition, modernity, and women's experiences, highlighting the complications and challenges faced by females in their womanhood. Though it all, the need for balanced individual choices on the part of the educated elites, and of understanding changing times on the part of rigid patriarchal communities, if cultural divide is to be bridged, is the motif embedded in *The Dilemma of a Ghost*.

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