

A Phonological-Semiotic Study of Vowel Harmony and Emotional Valence in Ama Ata Aidoo's Feminist Poetry

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Abstract

This study examines how vowel patterning participates in the construction of emotional valence in four poems by Ama Ata Aidoo: *Images of Africa at Century's End*, *For My Mother in Her Mid-90s*, *Juliana (The Translation)*, and *Whom Do We Thank for Women's Conferences?* Drawing on Peircean semiotics and affective phonological theory, the paper combines quantitative vowel-category analysis with qualitative semiotic interpretation. More than 1,300 vowel tokens were manually annotated according to front/back and open/closed distinctions, and a chi-square test was conducted to assess whether vowel distributions differed significantly across the selected poems. The statistical result showed no significant cross-poem variation in vowel-category distribution, indicating that emotional valence is not marked by fixed or statistically distinct vowel profiles. However, the semiotic analysis revealed that localised vowel clusters often align with emotional and rhetorical shifts within individual poems. Through Peirce's categories of iconicity, indexicality, and symbolism, the study shows how vowel texture may support meanings of grief, intimacy, resistance, bodily presence, and feminist self-assertion. The paper therefore argues that vowel patterning in Aidoo's poetry functions less as a deterministic emotional code than as a situated phonostylistic resource. By bringing affective phonology into dialogue with African feminist poetics and Peircean semiotics, the study contributes to literary phonostylistics and offers a cautious model for analysing the affective force of sound in African women's poetry.

Keywords: Vowel Patterning; Affective Phonology; Peircean Semiotics; Emotional Valence; Ama Ata Aidoo; African Feminist Poetry

Introduction

The phonological architecture of poetry, the patterned organisation of sounds across lines and stanzas, plays a significant but often underexplored role in shaping emotional meaning. In poetic traditions where language intersects with memory, mourning, resistance, and empowerment, the sonic texture of vowels becomes more than ornament; it may contribute to how affect is organised and perceived. This study examines the emotional valence of vowel patterning in four selected poems by Ama Ata Aidoo, a foundational voice in African feminist literature, with attention to how phonological structuring may function as a semiotic resource for expressing collective and personal affect.

Phonological stylistics has long acknowledged that vowel quality can contribute to poetic effect. Low and back vowels such as /a/ and /o/, for instance, are often associated with solemnity, heaviness, or grief, while front vowels such as /i/ and /e/ may suggest brightness,

intimacy, sharpness, or immediacy (Tsur, 1992; Fónagy, 1983). Recent studies in affective phonetics have also shown that vowel formant structures can influence perceived emotional tone (Niebuhr et al., 2021; Auracher, 2017). Within this framework, vowels are not treated merely as linguistic segments but as sound patterns with possible affective force, capable of contributing to emotional resonance through articulatory and acoustic properties.

While such theories have often been applied to European poetic traditions (Attridge, 2015; Freeman, 2020), their relevance to African literature, and especially African women's poetry, remains less fully examined. Ama Ata Aidoo's work offers a compelling site for such inquiry. Her poetry fuses feminist critique with ancestral memory, communal ritual, and defiant resistance, often through compact and resonant soundscapes. Scholars have praised Aidoo's use of rhythm, repetition, and feminist voice (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997; Busby, 2019), but less attention has been paid to the phonological structuring of her verse as an expressive medium for emotional positioning. This gap is significant given the oral-literate hybridity of African poetic traditions, where vocal performance and textual patterning often converge.

This paper examines vowel patterning, specifically front/back and open/closed vowel distinctions, in four of Aidoo's poems: *Images of Africa at Century's End*, *For My Mother in Her Mid-90s*, *Juliana (The Translation)*, and *Whom Do We Thank for Women's Conferences?*. Using a combined model of phonological analysis and semiotic interpretation, the study investigates whether vowel distributions show measurable variation across the selected poems and how localised vowel clusters participate in the poems' emotional and rhetorical movement. Drawing from Peircean semiotics (Chandler, 2017), affective phonology, and feminist stylistics (Montoro, 2020), the paper treats vowel texture as a possible phonostylistic resource through which grief, gratitude, defiance, and solidarity are articulated in Aidoo's poetry. Through this approach, the study contributes to the phonostylistic reading of African poetry and offers a model for examining affective meaning in literary phonology.

Objectives and Research Questions

The study is guided by three objectives. First, it maps the distribution of selected vowel categories across four poems by Ama Ata Aidoo. Second, it tests whether vowel-category distributions differ significantly across the selected poems. Third, it interprets localised vowel clusters through Peirce's triadic model of signification in order to examine how sound may participate in the construction of emotional valence.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How are front/back and open/closed vowel categories distributed across the selected poems?
2. Do the selected poems show statistically significant differences in vowel-category distribution?

3. How do localised vowel clusters function iconically, indexically, or symbolically in relation to grief, intimacy, resistance, and empowerment?

Literature Review

Phonology, Poetics, and the Sound of Meaning

The phonological dimension of poetic language has long attracted the attention of stylisticians, linguists, and literary theorists. Early structuralists such as Jakobson (1960) foregrounded the “poetic function” of language, asserting that the organisation of phonemes—especially in relation to similarity (paradigmatic) and contiguity (syntagmatic)—plays a central role in shaping poetic effect. Following this trajectory, Tsur (1992) and Fónagy (1983) provided foundational insights into how vowel quality, stress, and rhythm participate in what Tsur termed the “poetic mode of speech perception.” Their work highlighted that particular vowel classes, due to their articulatory openness or acoustic formants, can evoke consistent affective associations—such as darkness, gravity, or joy. More recently, cognitive stylistics has offered empirical grounding to these intuitions. Studies in affective phonology have demonstrated that low back vowels like /a/ and /o/ tend to be associated with sadness, solemnity, or gravitas, whereas high front vowels like /i/ and /e/ are perceived as lighter, more joyful, or intimate (Auracher, 2017; Niebuhr et al., 2021). This mapping, though never absolute, has opened pathways for interpreting phonological texture as an emotional semiotic resource. Importantly, such patterns are not just by-products of sound but contribute meaningfully to how readers and listeners experience a poem’s mood, tone, or stance (Suleiman, 2020; Miall & Kuiken, 2001).

Literary Phonology in Feminist and Postcolonial Contexts

Despite these advances, phonological analysis has often been marginal in feminist and postcolonial literary criticism, where emphasis tends to fall on discourse, metaphor, narrative, and ideology. Yet, as Freeman (2020) argues, “the neglected sounds of literature” may carry as much interpretive weight as its thematic or syntactic structures. In feminist poetics especially, the body is often written through sound—through rhythmic ruptures, repetitions, and foregrounded vocality that resist or reframe dominant norms. Gilbert and Gubar (2000) point out that women’s writing frequently enacts a “counter-discursive rhythm,” where formal experimentation—including sound play—serves to subvert patriarchal structures. In African feminist poetics, this counter-rhythm is often embedded in oral forms, incantatory phrasing, and resonant acoustic signatures. Studies of African poetry have historically focused on oral-literary convergence (Okpewho, 1992), mythic structures (Irele, 2001), and political discourse (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, 1986). However, as scholars such as Nfah-Abbenyi (1997), Busby (2019), and Uwakweh (2022) have shown, African women poets often encode feminist resistance through subtle semiotic cues, including musicality, tonal contour, and lexical repetition. While these aspects are typically studied under rhythm or metaphor, few analyses have accounted for how vowel quality—itself a carrier of sonic affect—structures poetic meaning in African feminist texts.

Vowel Harmony as Semiotic Structure

While vowel harmony is conventionally understood in phonology as a systematic agreement process within a language, this study uses the term in a literary-stylistic sense to refer to patterned recurrence or clustering of vowels with shared articulatory features across poetic lines and passages. The concept of vowel harmony is usually discussed within phonological theory as a systematic constraint in natural languages, particularly those of the Niger-Congo and Altaic families (Casali, 2008). However, in literary contexts, vowel harmony may take on a more aesthetic and semiotic function. Scholars in poetic phonology argue that non-linguistic vowel harmonies—deliberate clustering or sequencing of vowels with shared articulatory features—serve to unify thematic moments, underscore emotive shifts, or signal character transformations (Lodge, 2009; Kiparsky, 2010). Drawing from Peirce’s triadic model, vowel harmonies may be understood as signs that operate iconically (resembling the affective tone they index), indexically (pointing to emotional or psychological states), or symbolically (signifying meaning through cultural convention). For example, in mourning poetry, recurrent low back vowels may iconically reflect the “weight” of grief, while in protest poetry, sharp front vowels may index assertiveness or urgency. This layered semiotic interpretation aligns with recent calls in stylistics to treat phonological features not as formal residue but as meaning-bearing units (Montoro, 2020; Stockwell, 2021).

Ama Ata Aidoo and the Sonic Politics of Feminist Poetics

Ama Ata Aidoo’s work is widely celebrated for its incisive exploration of gender, identity, colonialism, and communal ethics. Her poetry, in particular, fuses the lyrical with the political, the intimate with the historical. Scholars such as Nfah-Abbenyi (1997) and Anyidoho (2021) have shown that Aidoo’s poetic persona is shaped through dialogic layering—across generations, cultures, and bodily experiences. Yet little attention has been paid to the phonological texture of her verse. While her diction, metaphor, and narrative positioning have been studied, the systematic use of sound—especially vowel recurrence and sonic patterning—remains largely unexplored.

This gap is significant. Aidoo’s poems, particularly those that reflect mourning, intimacy, and resistance, rely heavily on sound to convey affective texture. As shown in Busby’s (2019) collection *New Daughters of Africa*, her sonic cadences resonate with both traditional oral poetics and contemporary feminist inflections. This study, therefore, positions vowel harmony as a core vehicle through which Aidoo crafts emotional meaning. By combining phonological analysis with semiotic interpretation, it uncovers a layer of feminist poetics that is at once bodily, political, and profoundly sonic.

Theoretical Framework

This study integrates two theoretical strands to examine the affective role of vowel patterning in Ama Ata Aidoo’s poetry: Peircean semiotics and affective phonological theory. Together, these frameworks allow sound patterns to be read not merely as

aesthetic features but as potentially meaningful signs that participate in the construction of emotional and ideological meaning.

Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of the sign, comprising the representamen, object, and interpretant, provides the semiotic basis for the analysis (Peirce, 1998; Short, 2007). In this study, vowel tokens are treated as representamens: material sound units that may evoke affective, cultural, or ideological associations within the poetic text. The object refers to the emotional or cultural concept towards which the sound pattern points, such as grief, resistance, intimacy, or empowerment. The interpretant is the meaning generated by the reader in response to the relationship between the vowel pattern and its textual context. Peirce's theory is particularly useful because it accommodates multiple modes of signification. Vowel patterns may function iconically, when sound appears to resemble the emotional quality being evoked; indexically, when sound points to a mood, stance, or cultural frame; and symbolically, when sound acquires meaning through convention, repetition, or shared cultural association (Santaella, 2015).

The study also draws on affective phonology, which examines how vowel quality and articulatory features may shape emotional perception in speech and poetic language (Wrembel, 2010; Bachorowski, 1999). Formant-based studies suggest that vowel height and backness, commonly represented through F1 and F2 values, can contribute to perceived emotional tone (Pisanski et al., 2016). For example, low and back vowels such as /a/ and /ɔ/ are often associated with heavier or more sombre affective qualities, while high and front vowels such as /i/ and /e/ may be associated with brightness, sharpness, or immediacy (Laukka et al., 2005). These associations are not treated in this study as universal or mechanically fixed. Rather, they provide a phonological basis for examining how vowel clusters may participate in emotional meaning when interpreted within specific poetic contexts.

By combining Peircean semiotics with affective phonology, the study treats Aidoo's patterned vowel use as a semiotic resource through which emotional stance, embodied voice, and feminist resistance may be textually organised. Vowel harmonies, understood here as localised groupings or recurrences of vowels with shared articulatory features, are therefore interpreted not as formal ornamentation alone but as part of the poems' affective and rhetorical structure.

Materials and Methods

This study adopts a mixed-methods design that combines quantitative phonological analysis with qualitative semiotic interpretation. The quantitative component identifies the distribution of selected vowel categories across four poems by Ama Ata Aidoo, while the qualitative component interprets selected vowel clusters through Peirce's triadic semiotic model. The analysis proceeded in four phases: corpus selection, phonological annotation, statistical testing, and semiotic-valence interpretation.

Corpus Selection

The corpus consists of four poems from Ama Ata Aidoo's *After the Ceremonies: New and Selected Poems* (2017):

1. "Images of Africa at Century's End"
2. "For My Mother in Her Mid-90s"
3. "Juliana (The Translation)"
4. "Whom Do We Thank for Women's Conferences?"

These poems were selected because they represent different but related affective and thematic orientations in Aidoo's feminist poetics, including mourning, gratitude, resistance, intimacy, and empowerment. They also contain sufficiently dense vowel patterning to support phonological and semiotic analysis. Each poem was transcribed line by line, and the written text was used as the basis for vowel identification. Since the study is concerned with literary phonostylistics rather than acoustic phonetics, orthographic representation was used as a practical proxy for broad vowel-pattern analysis. This decision allows attention to textual sound patterning while acknowledging that it cannot fully capture performed pronunciation, pitch, duration, stress, or speaker-specific acoustic variation.

Phonological Annotation and Categorisation

Each vowel token in the corpus was manually identified and assigned to one of four categories based on two phonological features: vowel frontness and vowel openness. The categories were:

1. Front-closed vowels: /i/
2. Front-open vowels: /e/
3. Back-closed vowels: /o/, /u/
4. Back-open vowels: /a/

The counting procedure treated each vowel occurrence as a separate token. In multi-syllabic words, each vowel was counted individually according to its relevant category. For example, where a word contained more than one vowel, each vowel was recorded separately rather than counting the word as a single unit. This procedure was adopted to preserve the density and distribution of vowel patterning across lines and passages.

The annotation was conducted manually by the researcher. No independent inter-annotator reliability check was carried out. This is acknowledged as a limitation because manual phonological categorisation can involve judgement, especially where orthography does not map neatly onto pronunciation. To reduce inconsistency, the same coding scheme was applied throughout the corpus, and the categories were kept broad rather than narrowly phonetic. Future research could strengthen this procedure by involving a second annotator, calculating inter-rater reliability, or supplementing orthographic analysis with acoustic analysis using software such as Praat.

Statistical Analysis

A chi-square test of independence was conducted to determine whether the distribution of vowel categories differed significantly across the four poems. The observed frequencies of the four vowel categories were compared with expected frequencies under the assumption of independence. This test was used to assess whether vowel distribution varied across poems associated with different dominant emotional valences.

The statistical analysis was not intended to prove a direct or deterministic relationship between vowel categories and emotional meaning. Rather, it provided a broad quantitative overview of the vowel distribution across the corpus. The results were then interpreted alongside the qualitative semiotic analysis, which examined how local vowel clustering operated within particular lines, passages, and emotional contexts.

Semiotic and Valence Coding

Each poem was assigned a dominant emotional valence based on its thematic content, tone, and poetic situation. The categories used were trauma/mourning, resistance, intimacy/gratitude, and empowerment/unity. These categories were not treated as rigid emotional labels but as interpretive guides for examining how vowel patterns relate to affective movement within each poem.

Selected passages with noticeable vowel clustering were then analysed through Peirce's triadic model. For each passage, the analysis identified:

1. the representamen, or material vowel texture;
2. the object, or emotional, cultural, or ideological construct evoked;
3. the interpretant, or inferred meaning generated by the reader;
4. the dominant sign function: iconic, indexical, symbolic, or a combination of these.

This procedure allowed the study to connect phonological recurrence with close textual interpretation. The semiotic vignettes were therefore not treated as statistical proof of emotional encoding, but as interpretive evidence of how sound, affect, and feminist meaning interact in Aidoo's poetic language. Each vignette was contextualised within the poem's broader emotional arc and cultural message, following established protocols for stylistic close reading and literary interpretation (Pilkington, 2000; Simpson, 2014).

Results and Discussion

Comprehensive Phonological and Emotional-Valence Analysis of Ama Ata Aidoo's Poems

This section presents the quantitative distribution of vowel categories across the four selected poems and then interprets selected vowel clusters through Peirce's triadic model of the sign. The quantitative component tests whether vowel distributions differ significantly across the poems, while the qualitative component examines how localised vowel clustering participates in emotional and semiotic patterning within individual passages.

Aggregated Vowel Counts, Expected Frequencies, and Emotional Valence

Poem	Valence	/e/ front- open	/o, u/ back- closed	/a/ back- open	/i/ front- closed	Expected /e/	Expected /o, u/	Expected /a/	Expected /i/
<i>Images of Africa at Century's End</i>	Resistance	142	123	92	69	133.4	124.2	97.7	70.8
<i>For My Mother in Her Mid-gos</i>	Gratitude/Intimacy	92	76	65	48	88	81.9	64.4	46.7
<i>Juliana (The Translation)</i>	Mourning/Trauma	78	89	72	52	91.1	84.8	66.7	48.4
<i>Whom Do We Thank for Women's Conferences?</i>	Empowerment/Unity	110	105	80	55	109.6	102	80.2	58.2

Statistical Assessment

The chi-square test of independence showed no statistically significant difference in vowel-category distribution across the four poems: $\chi^2 = 4.64$, $df = 9$, $p = 0.864$. This result indicates that the poems do not differ significantly at the level of aggregate vowel distribution. The quantitative result therefore does not support a claim that each emotional category is marked by a statistically distinct vowel profile.

However, the absence of a significant cross-poem distributional difference does not exhaust the phonostylistic value of the data. The qualitative analysis suggests that affective patterning operates more strongly at the level of localised clustering and intra-poem modulation than at the level of broad statistical separation across poems. In this sense, vowel harmony is better understood here as an interpretive index of emotional movement within particular passages rather than as a categorical marker that differentiates one poem from another.

Semiotic Vignettes

The following vignettes examine selected passages through Peirce's triadic model:

- Representamen: the material vowel texture in the poem.
- Object: the affective or socio-emotional construct evoked.
- Interpretant: the inferred emotional or ideological meaning generated by the reader.
- Sign function: iconic, indexical, symbolic, or a combination of these.

Images of Africa at Century's End

In the passage "flat noses, thick lips, and small ears," the recurrence of low and back vowel sounds, especially /a/ and /o/, contributes to the weight of the racialised bodily description. The representamen is the dense vowel texture; the object is racialised embodiment under a colonial or Eurocentric gaze; and the interpretant is the burden of aesthetic exclusion. The passage therefore functions iconically and indexically: the low vowels may be read as resembling heaviness while also pointing to the social inscription of Black bodily features. A second passage, "We always thought our beautiful black skin was the Problem," uses recurring front vowels, especially /e/ and /i/, around words that name collective self-perception and racialised beauty. Here, the vowel texture contributes to a sharper emotional register. The sign function is mainly indexical: the sound pattern points towards the pain of internalised misrecognition rather than merely describing it.

For My Mother in Her Mid-gos

In "I thank you for being alive today, alert, crisp," front-closed /i/ sounds cluster around the speaker's expression of gratitude and attentiveness. The representamen is the high, tense vowel quality; the object is intimate reverence for the mother; and the interpretant is an affective sense of closeness, vigilance, and gratitude. The passage may therefore be read as both iconic and indexical: the crisp vowel texture resembles the alertness being described and points to the speaker's reverent emotional stance.

In "see me touching wood, clutching at timbers, hugging forests," the movement towards /u/ and /a/ sounds accompanies gestures of protection and ritualised anxiety. The roundness and openness of the vowels create a bodily texture that fits the actions of touching, clutching, and embracing. The sign function is both iconic and symbolic: the vowel pattern resembles bodily enclosure while also recalling inherited protective gestures and cultural practices around death, fear, and survival.

Juliana (The Translation)

In the passage "Here we are, straw on straw, clutching at each one in the dark," the repeated low and open vowels contribute to the tonal weight of mourning. The representamen is the low vowel clustering; the object is communal grief and desperation; and the interpretant is the sense of collective vulnerability. The sign function is iconic and indexical: the open vowels may be read as resembling emotional depth while also pointing to a shared condition of bereavement.

The later plea, "We wish this meat you would spit out, Offer us back our Juliana," introduces alternation between front-open and back-open vowel sounds. This alternation corresponds to the poem's movement between sorrow and appeal. The passage functions symbolically within a ritual frame and iconically through its shifting emotional contour. The vowels do not simply decorate the plea; they participate in the felt movement between loss and the desire for reversal.

Whom Do We Thank for Women's Conferences?

In "Hairy legs and bottoms that make any Levi's cry for air," clusters of back vowels, especially /o/ and /u/, accompany the poem's comic and defiant reclamation of the female body. The representamen is the full vowel texture; the object is feminist bodily presence; and the interpretant is an assertion of corporeal self-possession against restrictive norms of feminine appearance. The sign function is iconic and symbolic: the fullness of the vowels resembles bodily expansiveness while also challenging conventional aesthetic discipline.

In "We were only ourselves: each alone as when we were born," front vowels such as /e/ and /i/ contribute to a more declarative tone. The object is individual selfhood within collective feminist agency, and the interpretant is a sense of clarity and self-assertion. The sign function is indexical and symbolic: the vowel texture points to rhetorical confidence while also participating in the poem's broader affirmation of feminist autonomy.

Cross-Poem Interpretation

Across the four poems, the most defensible finding is not that particular vowels statistically correspond to fixed emotional categories. The chi-square result does not support such a claim. Rather, the evidence suggests that local vowel clusters become meaningful when read in relation to the semantic, rhetorical, and emotional movement of each poem. Front vowels often occur in passages of sharpness, clarity, intimacy, or assertion, while back and open vowels frequently appear in passages of mourning, bodily presence, ritual anxiety, or emotional weight. These associations remain interpretive rather than deterministic, but they show how phonological texture can participate in the construction of affective meaning.

Vowel Harmony as Affective and Semiotic Patterning

The aggregate vowel distributions show a visible but statistically non-significant pattern across the poems. This means that the study cannot claim that vowel categories produce clear quantitative separation between emotional valences. Nevertheless, the semiotic vignettes show that vowel clustering often becomes meaningful within local textual environments. In accordance with affective phonological research, front vowels may support moments of clarity, intimacy, or resistance, while back vowels may intensify emotional depth, ritual invocation, or embodied presence (Auracher, 2017; Laukka et al., 2005).

This finding is important because it shifts the argument from broad statistical determinism to situated phonostylistic interpretation. Aidoo's vowel textures matter not because they form rigid emotional codes, but because they work with diction, rhythm, theme, and cultural reference to shape affective perception. The phonological evidence therefore supports a cautious claim: vowel patterns contribute to emotional valence when they cluster around semantically charged moments and when they are interpreted within the poem's wider rhetorical structure.

Iconicity, Indexicality, and Symbolic Meaning

The analysis confirms the usefulness of Peirce's triadic model for reading vowel patterns as semiotic resources. Some vowel clusters operate iconically, where the sound seems to resemble the emotional or bodily quality being represented. Others operate indexically, pointing to speaker stance, cultural mood, or emotional orientation. Still others work symbolically, especially where sound intersects with ritual, memory, gendered embodiment, or inherited cultural practice.

This layered reading is particularly useful in poems such as *Juliana (The Translation)* and *For My Mother in Her Mid-gos*, where grief, care, and ritual gesture are not conveyed by lexical meaning alone. The phonological patterning does not replace semantic interpretation; rather, it thickens it. The repeated /a/ sounds in mourning contexts, the front vowels in intimate or declarative moments, and the rounded vowels in bodily or protective passages all show that sound can participate in signification without becoming a fixed code. This aligns with Peirce's view of meaning as relational and interpretive, especially where signs acquire force through context, recognition, and repeated use (Short, 2007; Santaella, 2015).

Feminist Phonostylistics and Embodied Voice

Aidoo's vowel structures also matter because they attach sound to the politics of embodiment. In *Whom Do We Thank for Women's Conferences?*, for instance, vowel fullness accompanies the poem's refusal to sanitise or minimise the female body. The body is not treated as an abstract theme; it is made sonically present through rhythm, vowel weight, and comic excess. As Gilbert and Gubar (2000) argue, women's writing often challenges restrictive formal and ideological structures. In Aidoo's poetry, that challenge is not only thematic but phonological.

This embodied dimension is also consistent with Ahmed's (2014) understanding of emotion as something that moves through bodies, surfaces, and social relations. Aidoo's poems show that resistance, grief, gratitude, and feminist self-assertion are not only stated; they are acoustically and bodily organised. More than this, the vowel structures contribute to an affective materiality of voice, where poetic sound is experienced bodily rather than merely acoustically (Ahmed, 2014). The poems therefore invite a reading of phonology as part of feminist expression: sound becomes one of the means through which bodily memory, gendered agency, and communal feeling are made perceptible.

From Local Phonology to African Feminist Poetics

The broader significance of the findings lies in their contribution to African feminist phonostylistics. Existing criticism of African women's poetry often foregrounds theme, voice, ideology, and oral tradition, but less attention has been paid to how vowel patterning itself may support affective and political meaning. This study suggests that Aidoo's poetry can be read as an instance of localised phonological sign-making, where vowel clusters help organise experiences of mourning, care, resistance, and bodily assertion.

The reader-response implications of this argument should be treated cautiously. This study does not empirically test reader or listener perception. Even so, research in speech prosody supports the broader claim that vowel quality can influence emotional interpretation (Pisanski et al., 2016). Within the limits of a literary-stylistic analysis, this suggests that Aidoo's phonological textures may shape how emotional meaning is encountered, especially in performance-oriented or oral-literary contexts. Future studies could test this more directly through acoustic analysis, performance comparison, or reader/listener response methods.

Together, the findings show that vowel harmony in Aidoo's poetry functions less as a statistically separable emotional code and more as a semiotic resource embedded in local poetic movement. The poems do not merely use sound decoratively. They use vowel texture to support affective structure, cultural memory, and feminist voice. Through this phonological-semiotic lens, Aidoo's work can be understood as participating in a sonic archive of African feminist expression, one in which sound helps carry grief, intimacy, resistance, and collective self-recognition.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how vowel patterning participates in the construction of emotional valence in selected poems by Ama Ata Aidoo. By combining quantitative phonological analysis with Peircean semiotic interpretation, the paper has shown that vowel texture can contribute to the affective and rhetorical organisation of poetic language, even where aggregate statistical patterns do not produce significant cross-poem distinctions.

The chi-square result indicated no statistically significant difference in vowel-category distribution across the four poems. This finding is important because it places necessary limits on the argument. The study does not claim that particular vowel categories correspond directly or mechanically to fixed emotional meanings. Rather, the evidence suggests that vowel patterning becomes meaningful within local textual environments, especially where clusters of front, back, open, or closed vowels coincide with moments of mourning, intimacy, resistance, ritual anxiety, or feminist bodily assertion.

Through Peirce's concepts of iconicity, indexicality, and symbolism, the analysis demonstrated how sound may participate in signification without replacing lexical or thematic meaning. In *Juliana (The Translation)*, low and open vowel clusters support the poem's movement through grief and appeal. In *For My Mother in Her Mid-gos*, front and closed vowels help shape a register of attentiveness and gratitude, while rounder and more open vowels accompany gestures of protection and ritual anxiety. In *Images of Africa at Century's End*, vowel texture contributes to the emotional burden of racialised embodiment and self-recognition. In *Whom Do We Thank for Women's Conferences?*, fuller back-vowel patterns support the poem's comic, defiant reclamation of the female body. Across these examples, vowel patterning works as part of a broader semiotic field in which sound, meaning, body, memory, and feminist agency interact.

The study's main contribution lies in its demonstration that African feminist poetry can be read not only through theme, image, ideology, or voice, but also through phonological texture. Aidoo's poems show that sound is not merely decorative; it can help organise affective movement and cultural meaning. At the same time, the study remains limited by its reliance on orthographic representation and single-researcher manual annotation. Future research could strengthen this line of inquiry through acoustic analysis, inter-annotator validation, performance-based comparison, and reader or listener response studies.

Overall, the paper argues for a cautious but productive phonological-semiotic approach to African women's poetry. Vowel patterning in Aidoo's work is not a fixed emotional code, but it is a meaningful part of how the poems make grief, care, resistance, and embodied feminist selfhood available to the reader.

Data Availability

The data supporting this study consist of publicly available poems by Ama Ata Aidoo

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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