

Thirdsight and the Disambiguation of Health Communication: A Dialectics of Ama Ata Aidoo's "The Message" and Ghana's COVID-19 Situation

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Abstract: *In some earlier research, I developed a theory that I termed 'thirdsight'. This theory is conceptualised as the simultaneous performance of 'real-and-imagined modes of perception' that cause that which is perceived to appear as existing or occurring in circumstances or conditions which are at once concrete and abstract. These dimensions of perception combine to actualise diverse beliefs of experiences that inform the reception of and/or reaction to reality. In this paper, I draw on this to discuss how information about health – conditions, or outcomes – can become convoluted in layers of ambiguity so that the real is as illusory as the imagined and the imagined assumes the tangibility of truth. For this examination, I carry out a comparative analysis between health-related narratives as they play out in two otherwise tangentially unrelated contexts, which are however complementary in the ways in which they reflect upon each other. The primary sources of my investigation are social media information and responses around the COVID-19 global pandemic in Ghana, and Ama Ata Aidoo's fictional short story, 'The Message'. My analysis, from a critical Medical Humanities perspective, reveals how an African literary text dialectically reflects society through the correlations drawn between literature and health, fiction and reality.*

Keywords: Thirdsight, Disambiguation, Half-truths, Rumour, Medical Humanities, African Literature and Health, Covid-19.

Introduction

Information related to health is often shrouded in such 'medicalese' that its communication becomes plagued with ambiguities. These ambiguities could result from several (interrelated) factors including, inter alia, language, register, literacy level, exposure and access to information. While the creation of such ambiguities is often far from intended, their effects can culminate in a thick plot of notions and impressions taken for truth that demands a quick resolution to

avert further complications. This paper explores the possibilities of such ambiguities in health communication by reading Ama Ata Aidoo's short story "The Message" in tandem with/vis-à-vis a selection of 'popular' information circulated on social media regarding the COVID-19 pandemic in Ghana. I select this short story for the ways in which it exposes possible challenges in health communication and lends insights on how such challenges can lead to confusion. Such situations, although rife in our lived experiences, are not always captured, and so creatively, in literature. Therefore, this story provides the frame of reference to examine a much-ignored subject that begs the question of appropriate and accurate health communication that does not aim only to present the fact but also to consider the human in the detail. Besides, through the trope of the message, this story prefigures the kinds of misinformation and miscommunication that have been cast into greater relief by the pandemic. I focus on Ghana simply for the avant-garde possibilities that it provides for such important research.

Ghanaian Literature and the Medical Humanities

This paper is conceptualised as an investigation into the connections between Ghanaian literature and the medical humanities using the selected texts (social media discourses and the short story) as the basis for my analysis. Over the past two decades, a compelling debate has been sustained about the importance of the humanities to medical education and interventions. While such persuasions have gained ground in the Global North (Sprumont et al. 2017), in other places, especially in Africa, such a claim for the extensive relevance of the humanities to the sciences is still nascent (Tsampiras et al. 2018) and has been much less debated. Consequently, there exists a dearth in research from African contexts demonstrating the correlations between the humanities and the medical sciences. In the few instances where such projects have been attempted, they have often focused on areas of the humanities within the scope of social science and sociology, anthropology, cultural studies and linguistics, with even less attention turned to the area of literature. However, as Oyeboode (2010) argues, literature is, perhaps, that one lens that refocuses medicine "such that it comes to incorporate within its ambit what it means to be fully human" (242). This ability of literature to make medicine more humane in its dealings has been much validated in Western scholarship and, perhaps, practice. However, in many parts of Africa, Ghana included, the gnawing need for the humane persists in many aspects of medical practice, especially in the communication of health situations, conditions, events or outcomes. Such a lack of the humane in communicating about health has the tendency to heighten apprehensions and result in the creation of a "wider gulf" plagued with "concerns and worries" and "misunderstandings" (Oyeboode 244). In analysing my primary texts to explore the frequent failure of health communication to address the human condition clearly and effectively, this

paper corroborates early and long-held claims of the utilitarian purposes of literature in medicine (Beveridge 2009; Scott 2000; Charon et al. 1995).

In my discussion, I draw on a theory that I have termed ‘thirdsight’ to illuminate how real and imagined facts and information create perceptions that inform people’s actions (Osei-Bonsu 2018). As a framework, thirdsight is conceptualised as the simultaneous performance of ‘real-and-imagined modes of perception’ regarding an event, an object or a person which forces upon these entities a certain notion or identification of circumstances or conditions that are at once concrete and abstract, and which conjoin in the actualisation of a given or accepted reality (Soja 1996). This constructed reality, in turn, informs how the entities that have contributed to its formation are received, reacted to, or acted upon. This concept is informed by Lefebvre’s (1991) notion of the ‘double illusion’ of transparency and opacity which is further expounded in Soja’s analysis of thirdspace. To simplify Lefebvre’s theory, Soja explains that the double illusion constitutes “myopia (nearsightedness, seeing only what is right before your eyes and no further) and hypermetropia (farsightedness, seeing so far into the distance that what is immediately before you disappears)” (62).

Expanding my argument from these notions, I conceptualise thirdsight as “the effect of all forms of ametropia” that include myopia (not seeing the wood for the trees), hypermetropia (not seeing the trees for the wood), and astigmatism which results in distorted images due to blurred vision. These elements of thirdsight invariably culminate in the “potential multiplicity of meaning and in the possible failure, or compromise of ethical judgement” (Osei-Bonsu 86). Thus, thirdsight involves a number of processes that normally occur together and simultaneously, complementing each other in such a manner that they altogether frame meaning or the reception/understanding of ideas expressed within a given prism. These processes, often carried out in rapid succession and ad libitum, range from visualisation to imagination and include introspection, retrospection, projections, fears and wishes. The effect of these on the subject is that they at once experience and process the fear or pain they anticipate as well as purge these same emotions. While this may appear to resemble the Aristotelean notion of catharsis, it is only a tangential approximate as this purgation, also in the nature of a cleansing, allows the same subject or individual the possibility to ‘refill’ with more pleasant emotions, to expect better, and especially to develop the resilience to face whatever they may have to deal with. In this case, and quite unlike the Aristotelean concept, it is the same subject that processes the intense emotions and engages in their purgation resulting in the building up of their resilience to face any other unpleasant situations. From my analysis of the primary data selected for this paper, I will demonstrate that such resilience results from the effect that thirdsight produces on various subjects. My overall argument will deploy the concept of thirdsight to elucidate how information about health – conditions and/ or outcomes –

becomes convoluted in layers of ambiguity so that the real is as illusory as the imagined, and the imagined assumes the tangibility of truth.

The two texts that will be the focus of this article may initially appear mismatched because they emanate from or are related to different contexts: fiction/real-life. However, a closer examination will reveal that they are complementary in ways through which they reflect upon each other. My first primary text, Ama Ata Aidoo's short story "The Message" is a fictitious account of a grandmother who receives a message about a health procedure her granddaughter has undergone. This message, incomplete in its delivery and gaining in ambiguity as it is fed by rumours and presumptions, leaves the hapless grandmother with a sense of obscurity and in a fit of apprehension. My second primary source will be better referred to as a selection of texts and images gleaned from social media and constituted into a small corpus that forms a narrative around the coronavirus pandemic in Ghana. Although my efforts in this latter regard to trace a narrative around the pandemic have been somewhat eclectic, they have been guided by my thematic focus for this paper, thereby allowing me to delimit my selection of material to a few relevant choices. Thus, the texts selected enable me to expand my argument on how health communication can become ambiguated and what the effects of this may be on the recipient(s) of the information that has been communicated. With a focus on these texts, I discuss the ambiguating of health communication from two main perspectives, namely half-truths and rumours.

The Problem with Half-truths

In Aidoo's "The Message", Esi Amfoa, a grandmother in a village somewhere in the Western region of Ghana, gets a message that her pregnant granddaughter "has been opened up" (38; 41) at the Cape Coast Hospital and the baby has been "removed from her womb" (41). She receives this news through a "tengram" (telegram) sent to her by her granddaughter's husband (42), but it appears that the information stops short of assuring old Esi that her granddaughter is well and alive. Or, perhaps, the sender assumes that the grandmother would understand that the message implies that her granddaughter has had a safe delivery. Conversely, with no frame of reference to understand alternative, scientific methods of child delivery, old Esi Amfoa takes the message literally to mean that her granddaughter has died in the process. She, therefore, embarks on a journey to claim her grandchild's body from the hospital – she can at least give her a decent burial, she reasons. Upon arrival, she is shocked to see that her grandchild is alive and very well, and that she had merely undergone a caesarean section that enabled her to safely deliver a pair of twins.

From my theoretical perspective, I posit that through the processes of third-sight, Esi Amfoa imagines the worst upon receiving the message of the medical procedure that has been carried out on her granddaughter. This is

because the information, transmitted via telegram and necessarily abbreviated to conform to the exigencies of such a mode of transmission, only relays part of the story, not the whole. Besides, the message is relayed in such graphic detail that the hapless grandmother is left with little choice but to resort to her imagination to fill in the gaps. She does this by unconsciously engaging in variable processes of third-sight which leave her with a double illusion of the true implication of the message she has received. The result of this is that she assesses the fate of her granddaughter based on a half-truth. Inadvertently, she assumes that once her granddaughter has been “cut open” she must be dead. Based on this false assessment, she laments her misfortune:

I see Mensima coming. [...] And there is Nkama too [...] and Adwoa Meenu. [...] Now they are coming to [...] ‘poo pity’ me. Witches, witches, witches ... they have picked mine up while theirs prosper around them, children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren – theirs shoot up like mushrooms. (39)

In her lament, not only has she misjudged her situation, but she also attributes her presumed bad fortune to her neighbours, Mensima, Nkama and Adwoa Meenu who appear to be approaching to commiserate with her on her presumed misfortune. Clearly, she does not accuse them to their faces. But in her soliloquy, she labels them ‘witches’ and claims that they are the ones who have caused the death of her posterity while theirs ‘prosper around them’ and ‘shoot up like mushrooms.’ Esi Amfoa is not only misguided in her assumptions, but she is also blinded by them to arrive at other conclusions, warped in their conception, that are equally erroneous.

This reveals the major problem with half-truths, which is that they make their recipients myopic in their views, trapping them in a double illusion of transparency and opacity. They are able to lay claim to a certain amount of transparency because they have received some information, albeit incomplete. However, precisely because the information is incomplete, the recipients retain an equal level of opacity on the full import of the information or the situation or condition it alludes to. In terms of third-sight, this double illusion of transparency and opacity causes the recipient of the information, which is only partly true, to develop a condition of astigmatism. Simply put, this means that their perspective on things (or their overall vision or understanding) becomes impaired, as being affected by distorted images. In such a condition, they may mimic the first state of the biblical blind man who, upon initially receiving a certain ability to see, states that he sees “men like trees, walking” (Mark 8:24, The Holy Bible NKJV). Such an exaggerated comparison of men to trees in motion (walking) bears an element of the uncanny that appears to be the state into which Esi Amfoa is thrown upon receiving the message. While the message is necessarily cut short, it inadvertently presents only part of the truth and obscures what else needs to be known, thus leaving it to conjecture. The result of this is two-fold. The first is that the information provided is ambiguous in nature, leaving the recipient in a state of confusion. The second is that it raises the suspicion that whatever is being left unsaid is likely being concealed because

it is unpleasant. This two-fold outcome of receiving information in half-truths is witnessed in the main character who is similarly impacted by the message she has received.

From the half-couched message that she simply understands to mean that they “have opened up [her] grandchild at the hospital” (40), the hapless grandmother is left with a plague of fearful questions playing out in her mind: is her granddaughter dead or did she survive this opening up? Is the baby fine? What have they done to the body of her dead relative? Although the limits of the short story do not allow her confusion to be revealed, we are able to infer them from the text as Esi Amfoa herself attests: “I cannot even think well. It feels so noisy in my head” (39). In this confused state of mind, her confession of psychological distress and noisiness can be explained by what Hoffman (2000) describes as empathic distress, which he defines as the psychological discomfort that one experiences in relation to the suffering of others (4). Extending his argument, Hoffman points out that, as the empathic response to the suffering of another matures, empathic distress transforms into sympathetic distress (87). Such sympathetic distress takes on different forms, including the ability of the non-sufferer to separate themselves from the sufferer in order to better cater comfort and help to the sufferer, as well as the ability of the non-sufferer to identify with the plight of the sufferer through affect, thereby becoming a part-sufferer in their plight (Hoffman 2000, 80-81). So, through sympathetic distress, the non-sufferer ties their woes (albeit smaller) to the woes of the sufferer (albeit greater) and is thus able to react to the situation through self-directed or other-directed role-taking (Kumagai 2008). In the case of Esi Amfoa, her distress takes on a sympathetic turn as she considers herself to be equally embroiled in her granddaughter’s misfortune, causing her to lament her own fate: “it’s me[sic] has ended up like this” (Aidoo 39). Her relational distress deriving from this perceived misfortune is further amplified in the sympathy that she draws from some of her neighbours who recognise the magnitude of her misery as they identify it to be connected to “her grandchild. The only daughter of her only son [...] Kojo Amisa who went to sodja and fell in the great war, overseas” (40). That her only son had died in the ‘great war’ and away from home would have been agonising enough for her. That at the point of childbirth the only daughter of that only son was now metaphorically in the frontline of her own war must have been significantly disquieting for old Esi Amfoa. In such a state of distress, she is no doubt perplexed and apprehensive about the outcome of this ‘war’ for her granddaughter. Related to her distress, I suggest that from the onset of the narrative, the covert dread of this angst-ridden old woman is already prefigured in the interactions of unnamed characters gossiping about her predicament. As they disseminate among themselves the news that Esi Amfoa has received, the issue of her granddaughter’s welfare inevitably comes up. In reference to this, one of the women asks, “And how is she?” (38). In a manifestation of frustration, another sharply responds, “Am I not here with you? Do I know the highway which leads to Cape Coast?” (38). While this

response may reflect a bewildered state of mind yet unable to come to terms with the full import of the information being circulated, the sarcasm it exudes only conceals the fear of having to conceptualise what more the message could forebode. Such covert fear appears to be feeding torturous mental processes leading the individual to arrive at accepting the possibility of death as the incontrovertible outcome of the caesarean procedure the granddaughter has undergone:

And anyway how can she live? What is it like even giving birth with a stomach which is whole [...] eh? [...] I am asking you. And if you are always standing on the brink of death who go to war with a stomach that is whole, then how would she do whose stomach is open to the winds? (38)

In this comment about the probable fate of old Esi Amfoa's granddaughter, the use of the highly descriptive language, which draws on the metaphor of going to war to describe the process of giving birth, reveals how the speaker works out her argument to arrive at the logical assumption that Esi's granddaughter has died. This tactful comparison between childbirth (or any strenuous venture for that matter) and the event of going to war is by itself a common cultural metaphor used particularly among the Akan of Ghana. It bears witness to a historically sustained idea of pregnancy as pathological (Flemming 2002), and to the notion that childbirth is considered a matter of life and death, and that going through it could end either way – in disaster (death) or in victory (life). What is even more ingenious is how this metaphor is extended to suggest that child delivery through caesarean section is akin to having one's stomach open to the winds. Also drawn from a cultural idiom of distress and illness that cautions against allowing one's viscera to fill up with winds, this suggestion that the granddaughter at the point of childbirth has had her stomach open to the winds presents a vivid depiction of the capriciousness of the situation in which she is believed to have found herself, thereby leading to the imagined conclusion that she must not have survived her 'war' of childbirth. Though these ideas are not expressed directly by Esi Amfoa herself, the way they are bandied about by her neighbours give an insight into her own psychological processes and mindset which are evidently heavily informed by the cultural notions evoked. Thus, we are better able to appreciate her state of grief upon receiving the message that – incomplete in its composition – leaves her befuddled in ambiguity and in a fit of apprehensions.

Viral Half-truths

A parallel analysis of the effects of half-truths in the discourse surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic in Ghana reveals a similar outcome of cynicism and misjudgements. Thus, I suggest that when we read the short story alongside the pandemic situation in Ghana, we perceive a similar drama unfolding, one that results in the creation of a similar effect of ambiguities and heightened anxieties. At the beginning of the year 2020, few people in Ghana had heard

about the pandemic. Even for those who had heard about it, it had not gained in tangibility: it was ‘something’ that was spreading from China through other parts of Asia and probably to the West. On the 21st of January of the same year, a press release from Ghana’s Ministry of Health informed the public about the “outbreak of a novel corona virus infection” in China and stated that cases had also been reported in a few other countries (MOH Press Release 2021, 1). By 12 March of the same year, news broke out that two cases had been confirmed in Ghana.

One of the early reactions to this news among the general populace was first disbelief, and then panic. The former did not last long and quickly gave way to the latter which was due to the fact that little more was known about the virus than that it has a high potential to cause death within a short time of being contracted. The very next day, many private basic schools closed down as the information caught the Chinese whisper effect and quickly went viral in all permutations and alluding to all manner of connections. From this point forward, not only were more cases reported resulting in more panic, but there was also the rampant circulation of a lot of pandemic-related information and statistics, some of which was later revealed to be fake. Moreover, much of the free-floating information which bore some truth was often couched in half-truths due mostly to the paucity of immediately available information about the virus or to the inability of most people to fully understand what information was available. This resulted in the development of uncertainties around the narrative of the pandemic, thus giving way to ambiguity and anxiety.

One such half-truth was the notion that an increased use of vitamins and steam therapy could cure an infected person of the corona virus (Ghanaweb 2021). Before being formally captured on Ghanaweb and debunked as misinformation, this idea had circulated far and wide among the populace through social media platforms such as WhatsApp. Subsequently, the well-recognised news website (Ghanaweb) set about clarifying such information by stating that the use of vitamins and some herbal steam therapy could boost one’s immune system, making their bodies better able to combat diseases. Yet, it debunked the idea that these practices in themselves were in any way curative for any disease, including the corona virus for that matter.

Despite such efforts to counter misinformation, however, due to the suddenness of the pandemic, the formulation of many more half-truths appeared to be the inevitable outcome; and the more information was spread, the more ambiguous it all was. Such ambiguity stemmed mostly from the fact that some information contradicted others, creating a huge conundrum. The result was that well-meaning individuals also took it upon themselves to caution against misinformation and the tendency to speedily pass on unverified information. In one such caution, participants in a certain social media chat group of which I am a member¹ were advised against believing the claims of a certain socialite:

If you googled [him], you'll know he's not a medical doctor. In fact, he's not a doctor of anything. He seems to be a self-promoter with claims to being an astronomer, hypnotist, master of accelerated learning and linguist [...]. He claims COVID-19 dies at high temperatures and suggests disinfecting yourself by blowing super-hot air into your nostrils and sinuses with a hair dryer.

This caution followed on the heels of information that had been shared in the social media chat group of a video in which the said self-styled expert had made certain lofty claims about how to deal with the pandemic, among which was the suggestion to apply drastic measures for disinfecting oneself. Like others who eagerly wanted to demonstrate that they had the latest updates on the pandemic, this 'self-promoter' drew on existing information about the virus and then used that to conjecture all sorts of other ideas that bordered on the absurd. In effect, his claims, having been founded on half-truths, ended up giving way to scepticism in many of his viewers and listeners. It was in an effort to point out the absurdity of his claims that another individual exposed him as a fake, thereby questioning his credibility and debunking his theory.

Just as in the case of the foregoing example where the gaps in health-related information are filled with absurd conjectures, so are Esi Amfoa and her community of information-sharers left to speculate about the partial message she has received. In the above-cited instance of the pandemic narrative, the deficiency in the health information appears more to have created absurdity, but it could be suggested that much of such absurd information was also being circulated out of panic in the hope that some clarity would finally break through the ambiguity left by the information deficit. Thus, in the cited elite social media chat group, members were often admonished to not share unverifiable information as "circulating creates panic" (13 March 2020) and "fear and panic will only ESCALATE (sic) situations" (15 March 2020).

Rumours – By June dieë ...

Beyond fostering ambiguity and apprehension, the obscure message delivered to Esi Amfoa also foments rumour. Within the cultural setting in which the narrative is placed, such tendency to rumour, known as 'yese, yese' (literally translated from Akan as 'they say, they say'), is demonstrated through the interactions from and among the old woman's neighbours. Right from the beginning of the narrative, the reader, like one caught in the uncomfortable situation of unwillingly listening in on gossip, learns about Esi Amfoa's misfortune from other characters: "Look here my sister, it should not be said but *they say* they opened her up" (38, emphasis added). As this gossip spreads, it degenerates into unsubstantiated rumour that lacks import or essence. Such degeneration is evidenced in the vagueness of interrupted speech or the lack of specificity, marked, in some cases, by the use of suspension marks and, in other instances, by the sheer indefiniteness of expression:

I say...
They do not say, my sister.
Have you heard it?
What?
This and this and that...
A-a-ah! that is it...
Meewuo! (38)

In this example occurring early in the narrative, we get the impression that there are three women involved in the conversation, but none of them have any clear idea about the facts of the matter. While the expressions echo a direct transliteration from the substrate Akan language in which it is to be imagined that these women are conversing, the connotation they carry is that of plain gossip based merely on rumour. It may be assumed that the interlocutor who says ‘This and this and that’ may be gesturing with her hand so that she may create a vivid picture of the situation she is describing. Such gesturing, while creating emphasis, also has the effect of dramatising the issue to the extent that it draws from her listeners exclamations of horror – *Meewuo* (literally meaning ‘I am dead o’, or ‘I have died o’). This tendency to embellish information could be linked to the speaker’s need to appear credible by showing that she knows what she is talking about and that she has enough facts. To do so, she tries to fill in the gaps relating to the incomplete message she has heard by highlighting the part that she is most certain about.

However, such exaggeration also tends to create and feed rumour as it mostly emanates from assumptions. Thus, from the perspective of third sight, the conversation of the village gossips earlier cited allows us to become aware of the kinds of assumptions that frame Esi Amfoa’s scope of understanding and how she interprets the information contained in the message she has received. We also come to recognise the thought processes she engages in to make sense of it all. It is, therefore, little wonder that she would imagine the worst and prepare for it as her distorted visualisation feeds her uncanny projection of the likely morbid fate of her granddaughter. In line with this, she affirms to two other enquirers that her mission to the big city is “very serious” and “very heavy indeed” (40). Consequently, as part of her preparation to embark on this mission, she takes with her a “little bundle” (39) which constitutes one of her granddaughter’s “own cloths” (39) that she will ostensibly wrap her body in to “bring her [...] back home whatever happens” (39) so she may give her a befitting burial. From the perspective of a culturally informed insider, I draw a correlation between this bundle of cloth that old Esi Amfoa decides to take with her and the ‘heavy’ task she has to carry out, all puns fully intended. Such a correlation is symbolically packed with meaning because within the cultural setting that frames the narrative, when one needs to carry a heavy load, which would often be placed on the head, there is first the need to place a little bundle of cloth, known in the Akan culture as ‘kahyire’², on their head to help sit and balance the headload properly. Rather than just being tossed on the head, this

little bundle is usually loosely woven into the shape of a wreath before it is placed on the top of the head. That this loosely woven wreath-shaped cloth would help a person bear their heavy headload easier in some ways connotes its function to lend some comfort, no matter how small, to the bearer of the load. Esi Amfoa's yearning for such comfort is revealed in how she appears to be inviting this cloth, as though it were alive, to accompany her on her journey: "My little bundle, come. You and I are going to Cape Coast today" (39). Her invitation, endearing in its appeal, personifies the cloth, conferring upon it the dual role of a comforter/comfort-giver and a trusted companion in her misfortune. Besides being symbolically personified, the cloth also metaphorically alludes to the old woman's suspicion or fear that her granddaughter is dead. This allusion derives from the dual symbolism attributable to this little bundle of cloth that could be wrapped into a wreath-shaped roll (evoking death) to facilitate the carriage of a heavy headload. Inadvertently drawing on these tropes of death and the need to prepare to carry a heavy load, Esi Amfoa declares that her intention is to use this cloth to wrap up the body of her granddaughter so she may bring her home to be buried properly. So, immediately after summoning the cloth, she states:

I am taking one of her own cloths with me, just in case. These people on the coast do not know how to do a thing and I am not going to have anybody mishandling my child's body. I hope they give it to me. Horrible things I have heard done to people's bodies. Cutting them up and using them for instructions. Whereas even murderers still have decent burials. (39)

In this monologue, Esi Amfoa justifies her decision to take the cloth along by reasoning that she may need to collect the body of her granddaughter so she can bury her properly. Obviously, her reasoning stems from the lingering fear that her granddaughter may already be dead. Thus, she expresses the desire to forestall any desecration of the body of her possibly deceased relative, asserting that she deserves a decent burial which 'even murderers', implicitly undeserving, get. While she may be justified in the notion of wanting to claim her deceased if need be, her argument bears tinges of irrationality due to being premised on the rumour or hearsay that deceased people's bodies are cut up, therefore dishonoured, and used for instructions in the hospital. Her irrational fear is further bolstered by the reactions of her inquisitive neighbours who, claiming to have heard of her "misfortune" and posturing to empathise with her, brazenly ask if her granddaughter has "lived through" the procedure of having her "womb... opened up" (39). The result of this is that she conditions her mind to accept the worst outcome and to avert any further desecration of the body of her granddaughter, albeit based on 'yese-yese'.

In the grand narrative of the corona virus pandemic in Ghana, such tendency to rumour-taken-for-truth is profuse. This manifests, for the most part, through social media platforms in the form of theories and conjectures. As many of such theories, mostly conspiracy based, flourish, some of the damage they could potentially cause is mostly assuaged through a recourse to satire that

can be seen more as parody. One example of such parodying has been generated from the expression “by June diɛɛ”³. In the way this expression is left hanging with the ellipsis, it invites the listener to imagine the worst possible tragedy or outcome for the situation that it refers to. It is derived from some of the speeches made by the president of Ghana, Nana Akuffo Addo, to give regular updates on the state of the pandemic in the country. In the hope of gaining some lucidity, the general populace always looked forward to these speeches which came to be dubbed as ‘Fellow Ghanaians’⁴ and featured as the official national statement on the pandemic. In several of those early speeches, the president projected the month of June 2020 as a possible timeframe by which the country would have achieved certain targets in its efforts to manage the pandemic. However, as these speeches failed to dispel the fears or provide clarity to address the concerns of many people, and as the pandemic rolled on beyond June without any signs of abating, people took to lampooning the projection to imply that by the stated month everybody would be dead. Having become a hashtag and then later the name of a group page on Facebook, members of the group were invited to give their own projections to finish off the expression, and many submitted ideas that implied the worst for the country. One such witty example concluded that,

By JUNE diɛɛ [...]
...] Na Ghana aye beans! (Literally, “Ghana would have turned beans”).

By becoming the designated name of a Facebook group page, the month of June lost its specificity to any recognisable timeline and took on the general meaning of an indefinite future time. Similarly, the word ‘beans’ has recently developed an added meaning among the youth in Ghana to imply that something has degenerated into chaos or that someone has failed at an endeavour. Therefore, in the submission above, the group member appears to be implying that by any foreseeable timeline, the pandemic would have so ravaged the country that the result would be a collapsed economy. Expressing similar sentiments, other group members explicitly suggested that by any set time frame, “[...] na obiara awu” (everyone would be dead).

With such ominous projections in the general mindset, another parody that emerged was the grim act of dancing pallbearers ostensibly carrying the deceased to be buried. Accompanied by a rather upbeat rhythm, this burlesque act of coffin dancers became, across many social media platforms, a metaphor of death to reinforce the message of the health crisis. They symbolised, among other ideas, the notion that people were going to die in droves. Often this idea was mitigated by the message that such an omen could be averted if people adhered to the safety measures prescribed to be taken against the virus. Thus, it ultimately emerged that since many of the projections being made were deduced mainly from speculation, they mostly degenerated into satire which had the overall effect of dissipating some, if not most, of the heightened tensions of panic and fear that had been caused by the pandemic. Besides, the

satirisation of the ominous information related to the corona virus revealed the absurdity of ruminating on rumour rather than focusing on the necessary actions to take, even if those actions were informed by very little information.

Conclusion

Reading Aidoo's "The Message" alongside the Covid-19 pandemic in Ghana reveals ways in which communication about health can become confounded in layers of mystery that can deflect from the essence of reality. Positioned as an important harbinger of the pandemic, the short story signals the need to disambiguate health information to avoid such unnecessary confusion as is exemplified in the case of the 'tengram' that, supposed to bear good news, rather leaves the main character in a state of despair. Though the pandemic in itself is no good news, the government's handling and the public's exaggeration of information related to it cause a great amount of anxiety that is really unwarranted.

Overall, these arguments demonstrate that the described health-related situations are communicated with such ambiguity as makes the message they relay appear unreliable, resulting in a general sense of mistrust. Nevertheless, the same situations fortunately yield unexpected results. In the case of "The Message", Esi Amfoa experiences the very pleasant surprise of finding her granddaughter alive and healthy after having safely delivered a set of twins. In the other instance of the Covid-19 situation in Ghana, there has emerged from amidst all the gloom some humour, however mordant, in the form of memes and hashtags which have had the effect of making the foreboding situation more bearable. This latter phenomenon of humour in the midst of grim health circumstances hints at an idea that can be explored more extensively in further research on the correlations between Ghanaian literature and health.

Notes

¹ I extracted this information (and others like it) from a WhatsApp chat group of which I am a member. All the other members of this group are high-profile workers of a leading public University in Ghana. Therefore, for ethical reasons, I keep the name of the group anonymous and will only allude to it for information shared in there that is relevant to my discussion.

² Pronounced 'ka-shee-ray'.

³ This can be loosely translated to mean "judging from the way things appear, by June (things would be really bad or much worse)". The implication is that one should be prepared to expect the worst of a situation. The expression became a hashtag on Facebook and remains the name of a page.

⁴ This was the President's signature opening phrase for his addresses. The addresses themselves were titled "President's Address to the Nation [on] Measures Taken Against Spread of Coronavirus". Each Address was numbered with a series of updates and also dated. Currently, the president has delivered over 20 addresses on the state of the pandemic in Ghana.

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