

THE GIRL WHO CAN

AUTHOR & STORY OVERVIEW

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

- Ama Ata Aidoo was born in Saltpond, Ghana, in 1942.
- She graduated from the University of Ghana and became an academic.
- She later served as Ghana's Minister of Education.
- She wrote novels, short stories, drama and poetry.
- She established a foundation to support African women writers.



STORY OVERVIEW

Seven-year-old Adjoa lives in Hasodzi, Ghana, with her mother, Maami, and grandmother, Nana. Nana repeatedly criticises Adjoa's long, thin legs because she believes a woman needs strong legs and hips for childbirth. Adjoa struggles to express her own thoughts because adults either silence her or laugh at her. When she represents her school in the district games and wins every race, her legs prove their strength and usefulness. Nana's attitude changes, and Adjoa demonstrates through action that a girl's value is not limited to becoming a mother.



KEY IDEA: Adjoa cannot always express her thoughts in words, so her success speaks for her.



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PLOT SUMMARY

- 1 Seven-year-old Adjoa lives in Hasodzi, a village in Ghana, with her mother, Maami, and grandmother, Nana.



- 2 Adjoa finds it difficult to express her thoughts because adults often laugh at her or order her never to repeat what she has said.



- 3 Nana regularly criticises Adjoa's long, thin legs. She believes a woman needs fleshy calves and solid hips in order to have children.



- 4 Maami defends Adjoa, but Nana silences her by criticising Adjoa's father. Adjoa quietly questions the belief that legs are useful only for supporting childbearing hips.



- 5 Although Nana thinks school may be a waste of time, Maami wants Adjoa to receive the education that she herself never had. Adjoa enjoys school and is a talented runner.



- 6 Adjoa is selected to represent her school in the district games. Nana becomes excited, washes and irons Adjoa's uniform and attends the races every afternoon.



- 7 Adjoa wins every race and receives the cup for best all-round junior athlete. Nana proudly carries the cup and admits that thin legs can run. Adjoa proves her point through action.



TURNING POINT: Adjoa's success makes Nana recognise the value of her thin legs.

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CHARACTERS & CHARACTERISATION

ADJOA



Thoughtful, observant and intelligent. At only seven, she questions adults' beliefs about girls and women. She is also patient, determined and talented. Unable to express every thought aloud, she proves the usefulness of her thin legs by winning every race.

NANA



Traditional, outspoken and authoritative. She criticises Adjoa's long, thin legs because she connects a woman's value with childbirth. However, she is a dynamic character: Adjoa's athletic success changes her thinking, and she becomes proud and affectionate.

MAAMI (KAYA)



Adjoa's loving and protective mother. She defends her daughter's legs and values education because she regrets not attending school herself. Although Nana often silences her, Maami quietly challenges traditional ideas.

THE TEACHERS



Observant and encouraging. They recognise Adjoa's running ability and select her to represent the junior section of the school at the district games. Their support gives her an opportunity to prove herself.

IMPORTANT RELATIONSHIPS

- Adjoa and Nana — loving, but affected by Nana's criticism until Adjoa's victory changes her attitude.
- Maami and Nana — they disagree about Adjoa's legs, education and the expected role of women.



TIP: Nana is **DYNAMIC** because her attitude changes during the story.

THE GIRL WHO CAN

SETTING & CONFLICT

SETTING

PLACE

The story begins in Hasodzi, a large village in Ghana's Central Region. It is a fertile low-lying area known for its good soil.



IMPORTANT LOCATIONS

Events occur at Adjoa's family compound, her school and the district games in the nearby town. The school is about five kilometres from the village.



TIME & ATMOSPHERE

The exact historical period is not stated. The final events take place during district sports week. The atmosphere moves from tense and restrictive to proud, joyful and hopeful.



CONFLICT

INTERNAL CONFLICT

Adjoa struggles to decide whether to express her thoughts or remain silent. She fears that adults will laugh at her or forbid her from repeating her ideas.



EXTERNAL CONFLICT

Adjoa versus Nana: Nana criticises her thin legs and sees them as unsuitable for a future mother. Adjoa believes that legs can have other important uses.



CONFLICT OF IDEAS

Maami and Nana disagree about Adjoa's legs, education and a woman's role. Their disagreement represents a clash between restrictive tradition and broader opportunities for girls.



RESOLUTION: Adjoa's victory proves her ability and changes Nana's attitude.

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MAJOR THEMES

1. GENDER ROLES

Nana believes a woman's body should prepare her mainly for childbirth. Adjoa's success challenges this narrow view and shows that girls' bodies and lives have many possibilities.



2. FEMALE EMPOWERMENT

Adjoa proves that she is capable, talented and valuable. Winning every race allows her actions to challenge limiting beliefs about what a girl can do.



3. VOICE & COMMUNICATION

Adjoa has intelligent thoughts but struggles to express them because adults laugh at her or silence her. Her athletic achievement becomes another powerful way of communicating.



4. EDUCATION

Maami values schooling because she feels trapped by her own lack of education. School gives Adjoa knowledge, enjoyment and the opportunity to discover and display her talent.



5. BODY IMAGE & SELF-WORTH

Nana judges Adjoa by her long, thin legs. The story teaches that a person's worth must not be decided by appearance or by traditional expectations about the body.



6. CHANGE & ACCEPTANCE

Nana changes after witnessing Adjoa's success. She moves from criticism to pride and affection, proving that experience can challenge prejudice and transform attitudes.



MESSAGE: A girl's abilities and future should never be limited by society's expectations.

THE GIRL WHO CAN

THE MEANING OF THE TITLE

The title celebrates Adjoa's ability and challenges every belief that tries to limit her.

1. SHE CAN THINK



Although adults underestimate her, Adjoa is thoughtful and intelligent. She quietly questions Nana's beliefs about girls, women and the purpose of legs.

2. SHE CAN LEARN



Adjoa enjoys school and benefits from the education Maami never received. Education opens possibilities beyond the traditional future Nana imagines for her.

3. SHE CAN RUN



The thin legs Nana considers useless enable Adjoa to win every race and become the best all-round junior athlete. Her supposed weakness becomes her strength.

4. SHE CAN PROVE HERSELF



Adjoa struggles to explain her ideas in words, but her success communicates the truth. She acts out what she has been thinking and changing Nana's attitude.

5. SHE REPRESENTS OTHER GIRLS



The title says 'the girl' rather than only using Adjoa's name. This broadens the message: every girl can have abilities, choices and a future beyond society's expectations.

TITLE IN A NUTSHELL:

Adjoa can think, learn, run, succeed and redefine what a girl can be.

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SYMBOLS & LITERARY DEVICES

1. SYMBOLISM – ADJOA'S LEGS

Her long, thin legs symbolise the qualities society judges unfairly. Nana sees weakness, but the races reveal strength, talent and possibility.



2. SYMBOLISM – THE CUP

The gleaming cup symbolises Adjoa's achievement and the proof of her ability. Nana carries it like a baby or another precious object, showing her new pride.



3. IRONY

Nana believes Adjoa's thin legs are useless, yet those very legs enable her to win every race and become the best all-round junior athlete.



4. REPETITION

'Never, never, but NEVER' emphasises how strongly adults silence Adjoa. The capital letters stress their authority and her fear of speaking freely.

Never,
never, but
NEVER

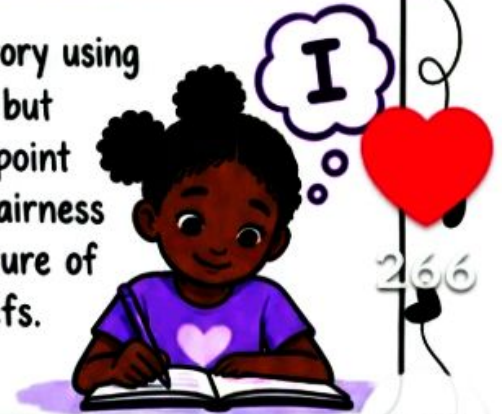
5. RHETORICAL QUESTIONS

Adjoa asks many questions about adults, legs and womanhood without expecting direct answers. These questions reveal her intelligence, curiosity and confusion.



6. FIRST-PERSON CHILD NARRATOR

Adjoa tells the story using 'I'. Her innocent but thoughtful viewpoint exposes the unfairness and illogical nature of the adults' beliefs.



EXAM TIP: Name the technique, give the example and explain its effect in context.

THE GIRL WHO CAN

♥ - TONE, MOOD & FEELINGS ♥

TONE

Adjoa's tone is innocent, thoughtful and questioning. Her observations are sometimes humorous, but they also criticise the way adults silence children and limit girls. At the end, the tone becomes proud, hopeful and triumphant.



MOOD

The story first creates a reflective and uneasy mood as Adjoa is criticised and silenced. During the district games, the mood becomes exciting and celebratory. The ending is warm, emotional and hopeful.



ADJOA'S EMOTIONAL JOURNEY

1. CONFUSED

Adults laugh at her thoughts or tell her never to repeat them.



2. HURT

Nana repeatedly criticises her long, thin legs.



3. CURIOUS

She quietly questions the belief that legs are useful mainly for childbirth.



4. HAPPY

She enjoys school, walking and running with her classmates.



5. EXCITED

She is selected to represent her school at the district games.



6. PROUD & VALIDATED

She wins every race, earns the cup and proves that her thin legs are useful.



♥ **CHANGE:** Adjoa begins unheard, but ends with her ability recognised by Nana. ♥

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IMPORTANT QUOTATIONS

1. “‘There are things I can think in my head, but which, maybe, I do not have the proper language to speak them out with.’”

MEANING:

Adjoa is intelligent and thoughtful, but she struggles to express herself and to make adults take her ideas seriously.



2. “‘They are too thin. And I am not asking you!’”

MEANING:

Nana criticises Adjoa's legs and uses her authority to silence Maami's attempt to defend her daughter.



3. “‘A woman must have solid hips to be able to have children.’”

MEANING:

Nana expresses a restrictive traditional belief that judges a woman's body mainly according to motherhood and childbirth.



4. “‘School is nice.’”

MEANING:

Adjoa enjoys education, walking to school and running with her classmates, unlike Nana, who questions the value of schooling.



5. “‘Thin legs can also be useful ... Thin legs can run ...’”

MEANING:

Nana finally recognises that Adjoa's legs have value beyond supporting childbearing hips. Her attitude has changed.



6. “‘It's much better this way, Acted it out. To show them.’”

MEANING:

Adjoa communicates through achievement what she was afraid to say aloud. Her actions successfully challenge the adults' beliefs.



EXAM TIP: Connect each quotation to a character, theme and event.

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VOCABULARY & EXPRESSIONS

1. DROUGHT

a long period with little or no rain



2. FERTILE

able to produce healthy crops or plants



3. COMPREHENSION

the ability to understand something



4. LIMBS

a person's arms or legs



5. CALVES

the fleshy, muscular backs of the lower legs



6. SPINDLY

very long, thin and weak-looking



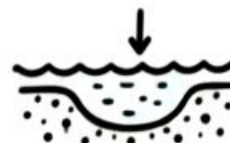
7. WRAP-AROUND

a piece of cloth wrapped around the body



8. SHALLOW

not deep



9. DISTRICT

an area of a country used for administration



10. STARCHED

made stiff by using starch



11. MUTTERING

speaking in a quiet, unclear voice



12. SPEECHLESS

unable to speak because of shock or surprise



EXPRESSIONS FROM THE STORY

'Weeping inside herself'

→ feeling deeply hurt without crying openly.

'Locked into some kind of darkness'

→ limited by a lack of education.

'Took it upon herself'

→ decided to do something without being asked.

'Acted it out. To show them.'

→ proved an idea through actions rather than words



TIP: Read the words around an unfamiliar term to work out its meaning.



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NSC-STYLE CONTEXTUAL QUESTIONS

TOTAL: 18 MARKS

INSTRUCTIONS:

- Answer ALL the questions.
- Write in full sentences unless instructed otherwise.
- Use evidence from the story where necessary.

- Choose the correct answer. Adjoa lives in ...
 A Hasodzi
 B Johannesburg
 C Saltpond
 D Zimbabwe
 (1)
- Explain the problem Adjoa experiences when she tries to express her thoughts to adults.
 (2)
- Why does Nana criticise Adjoa's long, thin legs?
 (2)
- Consider: 'Never, never, but NEVER.'
 4.1 Identify the literary device used.
 4.2 Explain the effect of the capital letters and repeated word.
 (1)
 (1)
- Why does Maami believe that Adjoa should attend school?
 (2)
- State ONE character trait of Nana before the district games. Support your answer with evidence from the story.
 (2)
- Explain the irony concerning Adjoa's thin legs.
 (2)
- Explain the significance of Nana carrying the cup on her back like a baby or another precious object.
 (2)
- Explain why the title, *The Girl Who Can*, is suitable.
 (2)

TOTAL: 18