

Australia Ama Ata Aidoo's Diagnose and Representation of the Dilemma of the African American Diaspora in her play *Dilemma of A Ghost*

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ABSTRACT

The research investigates in details about the influence of cultural differences in Postcolonial Ghana as presented in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Dilemma of a Ghost*. The play centers on the cross cultural marriage of young couple; Ato Yawson, a Ghanaian who recently completed his studies in the United States and returns home, and Eulali, his African American bride. Ghanaian playwright Ama Ata Aidoo expresses the consciousness of the diaspora of Ato Yawson and his wife and the final effort of Yawson's mother to find a compromise. The husband is caught between the challenging demands of his wife and his family, He feels torn and irresolute as the folkloric ghost in the children's song in the play. Aidoo has a strong historical and political awareness of Africa's colonial past and post-colonial present, and the problems facing an African woman in Africa and outside it. She is like a physician, diagnoses the symptoms of the troubled postcolonial age in Africa. In her use of Dilemma tale technique, she raises difficult questions without easy solution leaving her readers to contemplate about. She calls for an action to resolve the painful dilemma of African life in a world of change where the past and present, tradition and modernity suffer a fierce conflict. The aim of the research is to prove that according to the concept of compensation there is neither absolute gain nor absolute loss for with every loss there is again and with every gain there is a loss. Without the concept of compromise the dilemma of diaspora will lead to catastrophic results.

Ama Ata Aidoo is one of Africa's most prolific and versatile writers. She has written plays, short stories, novels, poetry, essays, letters and criticism. Her impressive, innovative and scholarly achievements have been coordinated by a solid political activism that has seen at the forefront of the development of contemporary African feminism (Davies 71). Aidoo is constantly terrified by the colonial experience and its impact on the African minds. She concentrated on the individual suffering and agony of the male in general and female in particular because of the psychological impact of the colonial and post-colonial experience, the things, that according to Tuzyline Jita Allan in her comments on Aidoo's *Anowa* "make Aidoo one of the most ardent voices in the troubled postcolonial age" (147). The critic Helen Gilbert, on the other hand, states that Aidoo's play, *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965), reestablishes links between Africa and diaspora. It dramatizes the cultural clash between the western values and the native customs as it sheds light on themes like the legacy of the slave trade, the position of women in African society as well as the dynamics of African identity as far as diaspora is concerned (97). In her introduction to her book *African Women Playwrights*, Kathy A. Perkins states that "Any an-

thology of African female playwrights would be incomplete without Ama Ata Aidoo's classic piece, *The Dilemma of a Ghost...* that still resonate more than four decades (7). Aidoo comment on her own play saying:

I didn't have any idea—I was all of 23, and all I knew was that I wanted to write a play. I had no conception of an audience. I had no idea that I wanted to say anything to anybody... All I remember was that I had wanted to explore the dynamics of marriage between people from different backgrounds. When the idea came to me, I had wondered what I would write about [perhaps] a white boy and a black girl. And I dismissed that immediately because it seemed to me too easy... I knew right from the beginning that a marriage between an African American and a Ghanaian would present my imagination with the biggest challenge. (14)

The play tells the story of the marriage between Ato Yawson, a 'been-to' character (a continental African who visit the west and returns to the homeland) and Eulalie, an African-American who meets Ato in the United States. The crisis of the play centers on the conflict of the husband who is influenced by Western civilization and, as a result, is torn

between adhering to Western ideals or sticking to his African culture. According to Gay Wilentz, “The cross-cultural marriage puts the husband and the wife on a collision course with the husband’s family on several fronts” (44).

The title of the play is a reference to a children’s folk tale song about a wretched ghost seen at a crossroads, wandering up and down, wondering whether to go to Cape Coast or Elmina. The ghost seems to have irresolution and, keeps repeating “I don’t know, I can’t tell (Aidoo 28) Two children, a girl and a boy who look just like Ato did at that age, sing the song that awakens Ato who runs onto the empty stage—the children have disappeared—and he cannot decide whether he actually heard the song or was dreaming. Ato, like the ghost, feels as torn and devitalized immortalized in the children’s song appropriately titled *The Ghost*. The song indicates that Ato is “caught at crossroad and confused about what to do. He is paralyzed and not active” (Allan 174). Aidoo expresses her view on the diaspora saying:

I don’t know how people react when they leave Africa and go to places outside where there are concentrations of other Black peoples, but for me it was incredible. I just couldn’t believe that I could cross the whole of the Atlantic and go and find all of these people who are like people at home... But definitely this is the reason I keep coming back to this because I think it is part of what is eating us up. You can’t cover up history... It is time we faced the question of what happened that so many of us are in Harlem and so many in the West Indies... You see, grief accepted is grief over-come. (qtd. in Wilentz 39)

What is recognizable in the play is that Aidoo uses the dilemma tale convention in most of her literature to raise important issues. The dilemma tale, a traditional oral genre that is pervasive in African folklore, ends with some form of irresolution and makes it essential that the audience take responsibility for making a decision about the drama’s outcome. It does not give answers but instead initiates thought and discussion and demand response of the audience. This technique provides a sense of sharing and gives the theme an ever growing dilemma a universal scope.

Aidoo uses her skill as a storyteller to create modern folk art as performance oral literature. She paved the way to a long process of employing the narrative and dramatic tradition of Ghana to articulate issues of contemporary importance. She confesses that the Ghanaian forms of storytelling are the direct inspirational source for her narratives:

I come from a people who told stories. And my mother ‘talks’ stories and sings songs. *Anowa*, for instance, grew directly out of a story she told me although as the play has come out, she cannot even recognize the story she told. (qtd. in Gilbert 97).

Within the main body of the play there are two women, called 1st Woman and 2nd Woman, who narrate this dilemma tale. The two village women, who come on stage bearing

water pots on their heads as they have just come from the river, become a part of the chorus. They discuss the theme of motherhood, which will be prominent in the play. The first act prepares us for a communal perspective on the events to happen. Since the two women are participants in the play as

well as storytellers, they are involved with the actions of the other characters and constantly comment over incidents as they tell the story (Guillory 18).

According to Wilentz “*Bird of the Wayside*”, which remains only in the prologue, is similar to the chorus in the plays of Shakespeare, addressing the audience in verse, with a powerful, omniscient voice and fully awareness of the past, present, and the future. (46).

Women play important roles in the play. The voice of the community, as well as the voice of the story teller, always comes through the mouths of women. The language of Aidoo’s African women from the prelude’s *Birds of the Wayside* to the two women narrators, from Esi Kom and Monka to Nana, is totally poetic and lyrical, reflecting the domestic basis for much folk art in African culture (Gilbert 47). According to Joseph Mbele the bigger challenge among other challenges is the dilemmas of people who get married and they are from different background like the marriage between the white and the black or as in the case of Ato and Eulalie who two Ghanaians from two different backgrounds (11). Eulalie, in the same way as other diaspora Africans, holds a false romanticized idea about her “local” land and the general population. Eulalie at first romanticizes the possibility of Africa. In the prelude of the play *Dilemma of the Ghost*, Eulalie, while still in the states, discusses with Ato about moving to Africa, where she shows her lack of awareness about her new home:

EULALIE. I’m optimistic, Native Boy. To belong to somewhere again... Sure, this must be bliss.

ATO. Poor Sweetie Pie.

EULALIE: But I will not be poor again, will I? Just be ‘Sweetie Pie.’ Waw! The palm trees, the azure sea, the sun and golden beaches... (9)

She has come to Africa expecting to find lions, jungles and primitive peoples, and she tends to regard her husband’s family as “more savage than dinosaurs” (44). Eulalie gets terrified when hears funeral drums one evening, she thought drumming in Africa are like jazz or Spanish mambo:

EULALIE. Can’t you hear?

ATO. Ah, what is it? EULALIE. Can’t you hear the drums?

ATO. [Cocks his ears] Oh, those!

EULALIE. Aren’t you afraid? I am.

ATO. Don’t be absurd, darling. [Holds her close.] But I thought that one thing which attracted you about Africa was that there is a lot of drumming here.

EULALIE. [Relaxes and thinks] Y—e—s. But, you know, I didn’t guess they’ll be sort of like this.

ATO. You thought they would sound like jazz? EULALIE. Sure. Or rather like, you know, sort of Spanish mambo.

ATO. I see. [Chuckles.] But there is nothing specially frightening about this, is there? (25)

Mbele adds that Africa poses a unique cultural challenge to the African Americans. The African American students may want to go to Africa believing they will feel at home, because Africa is their mother land. Such expectations could be easily turned into disappointment and frustrations due to

cultural differences.(11). In my two weeks visit to the United States of America, Georgia State in 2013, I noticed that some African Americans wear necklaces of Africa map. It seems that the suffering of the Africans who were brought to America as slaves has let them cling to their tradition and cultures which are deeply rooted in the back of the minds of their offspring. They always have Africa in their minds as the mother land of their ancestors. Even when they became Christian, they have their own churches whose rituals are different from other churches.

Marriage is so important in the Akan culture that two individuals cannot just meet and decide to marry alone. It is an issue that involves families, clans, communities and so on. This is why in the Akan society, there is a proverb which literally says that —the route to marriage is a long route. It is a long route because marriage in African societies means strengthening ties between families and clans. Such unions are not temporary and cannot be overlooked since there are bound to be children of such marriages (Salm and Falola 30). The importance of marrying and creating children made the arranged marriages common at one time. Arranged marriages focus more about Family considerations than on personal ones. They link two Families together for political, social, or economic reasons. For the individual, love has been often not an issue. In general, men were older than their wives in the arranged marriages. An older man would likely have more status in the community, and thus the union would be considered more advantageous for the wife's Family (31).

In Act One of *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, all the family members get shocked when Ato tells them that he has already married. He surprises his family with the announcement that he has married an American:

ATO. [As if just awake from sleep] Ei, Uncle, are you talking of marriage?

ESI. It is nothing; I was only telling your aunt that I have sold your sheep to pay the bride price for you when you make up your mind to marry...

ATO. [Casually] But I am already married, Maame.

ALL. You are married? Married? Married? (16)

Nana even expresses disgust about the fact that Ato married without informing or consulting any member of the family on such a social issue:

NANA: [Spitting] My grandchild, so you have married? Why did you never write to tell us? (16)

They are quite shocked, since they imagine his wife to be white. He quickly assures them she is "as black as we all are" (17), and they are visibly relieved — until he goes on to explain that she is the descendant of slaves. This unexpected news creates a family uproar. Nana asks what she can say to the ancestors.

My spirit Mother ought to have come for me earlier

Now what I should tell them who are gone? The daughter of slaves, who come from the white man's land.

Someone should advise me on how to tell my story.(19).

In Ato's society, marrying a decedent of a slave is like marrying a woman of no family; and not to have a family history is the worst thing that can happen. As an Afro-diasporic returnee female subject, Eulalie becomes the center

of the dilemma, particularly as seen through her interactions with other females. There is her mother-in-law Esi Kom, her sister-in-law Monka, grandmother Nana, and the women of the village (Lindofors 96)

Eulalie's ignorance of her in-laws' language and customs and her assessment of them as inferior to her, has deepened the problem. At the same time, they see her as someone who does not respect traditions. They cannot understand her drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes. According to Owomoyela, "Eulalie's American upbringing has not prepared her for African patterns of relationship ...and the member of the Yawson family are unable to understand Eulalie's strange ways" (64). The romantic dreams of Eulalie concerning Africa have been shattered. Thus, it is evident that "African American and Africans have widely different conception of social relationships despite their shared blackness" (100) When Eulalie mother-in-law presents her with a gift of snails, a rare and expensive delicacy in the dry season, she throws them out into the yard, disgusted by their slimy appearance. She also makes her relatives feel unwelcome when they came to her house in the city, offering them refreshments and hospitality only when they demand them (Lindofors 96). When Eulalie visits her husband's village, she deliberately affronts her hosts and scandalizes the neighborhood by smoking and drinking to excess and declining to attend traditional ceremonies. She never bothers to learn the local language, never seeks to understand African customs, and never displays any friendliness or affection towards her husband's people. Indeed, it is rumored that she is forcing her husband to buy so many costly household appliances that he cannot repay the debts his mother had contracted to pay for his education(Wilentz 45).

The First Neighbor Woman and Second Neighbor Woman; serve as chorus, illustrates a major issue in the play as well as one which is of great significance to the African woman—children and childlessness. Their discussion on the merits of having children and being deprived of them exposes the subordinate status of women in the village as well as introduces the plight of Esi Kom and her son Ato to the audience. They also point toward Ato's mother, Maami Esi Kom, who has had to continue the Odumna clan without the help of her son. Hopefully, he will bring new wealth and prosperity to the family after his hard effort of learning. Up to this point Esi Kom has depended only on her brothers and brothers-in-law to hold up the estate (45).the two women comment:

1st WOMAN: Ah! And yet I thought I was alone in this...

The lonely woman who must toil

From morn till eve,

Before a morsel hits her teeth

Or a drop of water cools her throat.

2nd WOMAN: My sister, you are not alone.

But who would have thought that I,

Whose house is teeming with children.

My own, my husband's, my sister's...

But this is my curse

I am telling you, my sister,

Sometimes we feel you are luckier

Who are childless

1st WOMAN: But at the very last
You are the luckiest who have them.
Take Esi Kom, I say. (5)

There is great irony in this passage because on one hand, it is a curse in traditional African culture to be childless, so it is hard to believe the 2nd Woman's statement that the childless woman is luckier; yet, on the other hand, Esi Kom, who exemplifies the statement that women with children are luckier, is to suffer the consequences of an ungrateful child. The conversation of these two women sets up a communal perspective on the events they are to narrate by bringing. The chorus of the two village women, who represent the community, comment on Esi Kom's childbearing. It has not been profitable, says the second woman, who has a house full of children herself. It has brought her only unhappiness. Esi's daughter Monka will seem never to marry well, and her son, who went away to study, has come back with a "black-white" wife, when he could have married a well-respected member of the community, the daughter of Yaw Mensa. Even so, in act two, the second 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).

Ato's confident return home with his wife provokes a classic confrontation between past and present, between tradition and modernity. The central conflict, however, occurs over the issue of children, as Eulalie expected it might. Initially Eulalie wants to wait for a few years to have children and Ato agrees, but when they move to Africa she changes her mind. Ato wants to earn some money first; so he stays with the original plan. Ato does not want to have children; he wants to live a more liberated life. He tells his wife:

Lalie, don't you believe me when I tell you it's O.K.? I love you, Eulalie and that's what matters. Your own sweet self should be O.K. for any guy. And how can a first born be difficult to please? Children, who wants them? In fact, they will make me jealous. I couldn't bear seeing you love someone else better than you do me. Not yet, darling, and not even my own children.' (10)

Ato's view may look insane for his native people who think that a woman's role as a wife may be secondary to her role as a mother. People, who measure the worth of a woman by how many (male) children she can have. From a western perspective, what Ato says above may not be problematic, but in his cultural context, it is unacceptable (Guillory 18) Eulalie herself doubts whether this decision to put off childbirth is a wise one. She asks when she, in fear, hears funeral drums one evening: "Ato, isn't it time we started a family?" (27) However, Ato, playing his role of patriarchal subject, advises Eulalie to keep what they have agreed upon and have children only when they are ready:" Not at all. It's only that I think we better stick to our original plans. (27). The problem comes in when Ato's entire family comes to see him to ask him if they might administer some medicines to cure Eulalie of her barrenness which

is considered a curse in traditional Africa and in Akan society due to the value that is usually

placed on children in every marriage. Instead of telling his relatives about their decision, he chooses to say noth-

ing, allowing his family to see Eulalie as the problem and allowing Eulalie to see his family as hostile and uncivilized (Wilentz 46).

When Ato finally tells his mother the truth that his wife is not barren but using birth control, Esi Kom replies, "Why did you not tell us that you and your wife are gods and you can create your own children when you want them?"(91). Without telling their son Eto, the family prepare a medical potion with which they intend to wash her stomach and drive away the evil spirits that are preventing conception. Ato estranges these well-meaning people by stubbornly refusing to allow the ritual cleansing to take place; and, when he later informs Eulalie of what they had planned to do. Eulalie insults Ato about his village and the savage customs of his people. She bursts into one of her rages:

More savage than dinosaurs. With their snails and their potions! You afterwards told me, did not you that they wanted me to strip before them and have my belly washed? Washed in that filth! [She laughs mirthlessly.] What did you tell them I was before you picked me a strip-tease (47).

The husband slaps the wife and returns the insult by saying "How much does the American negroes know? (74) The whole action of the play is spread out over a year and caused the direct contact of Eulalie with Ato's kinswomen: Esi Kom, the mother, her daughter Monka, the grandmother Nana as well as the aunts and uncles. Over the entire time Eulalie, the African American wife from Harlem with her typical misconception of Africa mixed with a real desire to belong somewhere; can't accustom herself to African customs and life. She turns to alcohol, and continues to do much as she pleases, rather than adopting the position expected of her. She does not understand their language or their customs and look at them as quaint and backward, at the same time, they see her as a person who do not respect the traditions. They cannot understand her drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes. She doesn't fit in -- a situation that seems impossible to remedy. Wilentz argues that Ato's confident return home with his wife provokes a classic confrontation between past and present, between tradition and modernity. "Ato is the bridge between the two spectrums of experience, but he fails at his tasks" (46).

Ato, the "been-to;" who has traveled to America or Europe to receive an education and becomes so charmed of the West that he forgets or denigrates his own community traditions. He is preoccupied with the ghost dilemma which mirrors his inability to come to term with his own situation. He appears to be a human representation of the ghost because he is completely powerless in dealing with the problem of how to reconcile his wife and his Western education to the traditions and cultural practice of the family. At the end of the play, the two women of the chorus envision Ato as a ghost at his door. Earlier Ato had heard the children outside his door playing a traditional ring game and singing the song of "the ghost at the junction":

Shall I go to Cape Coast,
Shall I go to Elmina?
I can't tell.

Shall I?
I can't tell.
I can't tell.
I can't tell.
I can't tell. (52)

Ato is distressed by the song, which he loved to sing as a child. He wonders if he had been dreaming, but the voices come back to him when Eulalie returns after running off and is taken by Esi Kom, her mother-in-law, into the ancestral home. Esi welcomes her in, she who has no mother, but whose mother's ghost probably watches over her as she goes through her adventures in her husband's home. The voices of the children seem to remind Ato again at the end of the play that he is lost and the ghosts of his ancestors are watching him until he comes again into the fold, the community of his people, living and dead (Wilentz 46).

CONCLUSION

In one of her interview, Aidoo said "You come to literature or things like that and then that you really understand a term like neo-colonialism ... it is beautiful to have independence, but it's what had happened to our minds that is to me the most frightening thing about colonial experience" (qtd. in Parekh and Jagne). Aidoo uses the dilemma tale convention in most of her literature to raise issues with which the characters contend. There are no easy answers, but the questions need to be raised. Thus, the questions concerning the troubled postcolonial age in Africa and diaspora raised in the tale are left open for further discussion and thought. Aidoo looks to the role of theatre in social reform as to entertain and inform the audience and if possible inspire them, by bringing

societal issues upwards. Thus, by discussing how Aidoo exposed the Dilemma of the African American Diaspora in her play *Dilemma of A Ghost*, the paper stresses the importance of the role of theatre to diagnose the problems of our ever increasing problematic modern world. It is a sort of teaching by pleasing in the school of "Art for the sake of Life".

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