

EAST/WEST CULTURAL RELATIONS IN AMA ATA AIDOO'S DILEMMA OF A GHOST

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ABSTRACT: *The paper investigates the description of East/West cultural relations in Ama Ata Aidoo's Dilemma of a Ghost. Close analysis of the text proves that the hegemony of the English language and Western structures still manifest themselves in the twenty first century. Indeed, English is a tool used by Neocolonialism, seemingly to bring speakers of the language from all over the world closer. Reading a text in English inherently involves drawing upon the heritage received from the native speakers of the language. The superiority of English language and literature may, then, be taken for granted and may be part of the subconscious. Hence, the hegemony of the English language further reaffirms the existence of the state of colonialism in spite of the withdrawal of foreign armed forces and foreign government officials from traditional British colonies and protectorates.*

KEYWORDS: East, West, Neocolonialism, Aidoo, English.

INTRODUCTION

“The bullet was the means of physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation” (Ngugi wa Thiong’o 1130).

The investigation of East/West cultural relations is an integral part of the mission of the Department of English Language and Literature in the East and in the Arab World in particular. Representation has been a core issue in literary studies since the nineteenth century when Orientalists got interested in describing the East, creating stereotypes, and placing East and West in juxtaposition. In the early years of the twenty first century the Postmodernist shift which has led to throwing doubt upon grand narratives and to revisiting concepts of center, truth, and identity. The paper argues that Homi Bhabha’s formula which appeared in the 1990s, for dealing with East/West encounters and involved finding a Third Space where negotiations, enunciations, and reconciliations might take place has not been a success. The basic research question discussed in this paper, then, is what options cultures of Third World countries have within the context of globalization where concepts of “self” and “other” on the social, political, and cultural levels are constantly revisited, and where English is the dominant language of science, business, politics, entertainment and literature?

The quandary is that non-Western cultures are represented through Western paradigms: Western languages, notions originated in the West, literary techniques developed in the West, and assumptions made within Western discourse. The paper looks at Ama Ata Aidoo’s play *Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965) from an Egyptian perspective in the twenty first century. This may raise questions about the relevance of Postcolonial writing in a globalized context. The paper investigates the concept of Bhabha’s Third Space in relation to the play as well as the play’s position, representing Postcolonial literature, in the structure of knowledge perceived by an Egyptian specialist in English language and literature who has access to literature from other parts of the world only in European languages, English and French. The English language in

this case may be seen as a ‘third space’, a space where a non-native speaker of English reads a text written by a non-native speaker of English about non-native speakers of English, a space where culture finds voice in a foreign language, and a space where images about foreign lands and other cultures are translated into a text in English.

Postcolonial Literature and East/West Relations:

Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* (1994) places itself in juxtaposition with Franz Fanon’s views in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) suggesting that a Third Space may replace Fanon’s rigid worldview dividing the colonizer and the colonized. Bhabha also engages with the definitions of Postcolonial literature given in Postcolonial discourse as in Bill Ashcroft’s *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) and Ania Loomba’s *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (2015). Fanon describes the milieus inhabited by the colonizer and colonized respectively and states unequivocally that reconciliation between colonizer and colonized is unattainable:

No conciliation is possible, for of the two terms, one is superfluous....The native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light. The native town is a crouching village, a town on its knees, a town wallowing in the mire. It is a town of niggers and dirty Arabs... The colonized man is an envious man. And this the settler knows very well; when their glances meet he ascertains bitterly, always on the defensive, "They want to take our place." (39)

Feelings of envy, resentment, and animosity dominate the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Cultural interaction, therefore, cannot take a positive fruitful path towards coexistence and relations of mutual influences. The view that the colonized are set out to avenge themselves against the colonizer forms the basis of the resistance suggested in postcolonial discourse in "all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (Ashcroft et al 2). Along the same lines, Loomba stresses contestation and resistance in her account of postcolonial discourse:

It has been suggested that it is more helpful to think of postcolonialism not just as coming literally after colonialism and signifying its demise, but more flexibly as the contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism....It also allows us to incorporate the history of anti-colonial resistance with contemporary resistances to imperialism and to dominant Western culture. (32-3)

Hence, *Dilemma of a Ghost* figuring an African-American character as one of the central characters and presenting East/West relations between Africa and the United States falls within the category of Postcolonial literature. The interaction between the young man coming back to his village in Ghana with his African-American wife and his people may be analyzed from the perspective of Bhabha’s Third Space to see whether or not the characters in the play may function in "[t]hese in-between spaces for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal- that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (Bhabha 1-2). Later, Bhabha postulates that "[i]t is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be approached, translated, rehistoricized and read anew" (37). *Dilemma of a Ghost*, though not about traditional colonization nor is it a response to the British Empire, falls within the category of Postcolonial

literature according to Loomba and since the play investigates East/West relations, the notion of Bhabha's Third Space becomes pertinent.

East/West Relations in *Dilemma of a Ghost*:

Ama Ata Aidoo is a Ghanaian writer born in 1942. Her output comprises plays, novels, short stories and poetry, all written in English. Her works include the play *Dilemma of a Ghost* (1956) and a collection of short stories entitled *No Sweetness Here* (1970). Aidoo published little between 1970 and 1985, when *Someone Talking to Sometime*, a collection of poetry, appeared. Her later titles include a collection of children's stories: *The Eagle and the Chickens* (1986), a poetry collection: *Birds and Other Poems* (1987), the novel *Changes: A Love Story* (1991), *An Angry Letter in January and Other Poems* (1992), *The Girl Who Can and Other Stories* (1997), and *Diplomatic Pounds and Other Stories* (2012). Aidoo moved to Zimbabwe to become a full-time writer and also lived and taught in the USA. She has won many literary awards including the 1992 Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book (Africa) for her novel *Changes*. Aidoo's work comes from Modern-day Ghana and may be seen as representing the post independence era. Modern-day Ghana, which consists primarily of the former Gold Coast, gained its independence on March 6, 1957 after being under the influence of the British Empire since the later part of the nineteenth century when Britain made the Gold Coast a crown colony in 1874. By 1901 the Asanti and the North were made a British protectorate.

Events in *Dilemma of a Ghost* take place in a village in Ghana where a Ghanaian young man comes back from the United States with his African-American wife. The play, therefore, creates two spaces; one physical made up of the house in the African village and the nearby places and one theoretical constructed of the fragments presented in the play about the United States whether in the words of Eulalie, the African American wife or through the conversations of the village people about life in the white man's land. To the Egyptian mind, though African and though familiar with British occupation, these two spaces are foreign and the images created of them come through a text in English, the language of the once dominant British Empire and the global language of today. Hence, the English language may be considered a metaphorical third space where cultures meet. On the literal level, the culture of the West and that of the Akan people interact in the play as reflected in the events and the setting.

Dilemma of a Ghost revolves around a simple plot where events take place mostly in the house of Ato's family:

The action takes place in the courtyard of the newest wing of the Odumna Clan house. It is enclosed on the right by a wall of the old building and both at the center and on the left by the walls of the new wing. At the right-hand corner a door links the courtyard with a passage that leads into the much bigger courtyard of the old house. In the middle of the left wall there is a door leading into the new rooms. A terrace runs round the two sides of the new sector. (Aidoo 5)

The setting is significant implying the existence of old and new notions in modern-day Ghana and assuming that both deep-rooted traditions honored by the village people and Western influences coming to the village along with the arrival of the young man whose family spent a lot on money on sending him to the "white man's land" may contribute to creating a "third space" (Aidoo 35). Providing a chance for Ato to obtain a university degree from the States seems to have been an important goal for the whole family. "A great part of the land was sold and even that was sufficient for nothing...Finally, the oldest and most valuable of the family

heirlooms, *kenets* and golden ornaments, which none of us younger generation had ever seen before, were all pawned" (Aidoo 35). When the young man, Ato, comes back to his home village in Ghana after having received the long awaited for university degree from the United States bringing along an African American wife, Eu, conflicts, misunderstandings, and problems emerge. The wife finds it difficult to adapt to the lifestyle and the social habits of Ato's family in spite of her eagerness while the couple were discussing going back to Africa to go to a place where she would "belong to somewhere again....Sure, this must be a bliss" (Aidoo 9). She is frightened when she hears the drums (Aidoo 25), does not like their food (Aidoo 32-3), and complains about Ato's respect for his people's views (Aidoo 47). Then, the serious problem she faces is that concerned with the couple's decision not to have children, which raises questions and develops feelings of resentment on the part of Ato's family. Ato does not dare confess he is part of the plan to use birth control, fearing his family would "say we are displeasing the spirits of our dead ancestors and the Almighty God for controlling birth" (Aidoo 45). Therefore, *Dilemma of a Ghost* reflects Akan culture in the sense that one major thematic concern of the play is related to motherhood, the importance of begetting children, the role of the extended family, and the conflict of cultures (Sanka et al 89-90). Eu's failure to conform to the traditional role of the "woman" in Akan culture brings about the family's wrath in a society intolerant of women's defiance of societal rituals and traditions. The tension is only contained when Ato reveals that it has been his decision too and reconciliation is achieved at the end of the play.

Reconciliation takes place at the end when the representatives of the local culture make the effort and accept the change. Eu doesn't change nor does she go into the negotiation process described by Bhabha as the only means via which identity is created and recreated all the time. Adaptation is not easily achieved and culture involves many aspects other than the color of the skin. Eu believes the traditional practices of Ato's family to be "a blasted mess" (Aidoo 41) made up of "savage customs and standards" (Aidoo 47). She further elaborates that they care for nothing "but their own prehistoric existence" (Aidoo 47). Eu is worried about her "unadaptability" (Aidoo 32) and does not welcome her mother-in-law when she comes for a visit hoping to "spend one or two days with [her] daughter-in-law, teach her how to cook [Ato's] favourite meals" (Aidoo 34). Until the final scene in the play, Eu and Ato's mother, Esi stand in opposition to each other. Eu represents Western culture, in spite of the color of her skin, and Esi stands for Akan traditions. Therefore, the final scene where reconciliation takes place may be understood on a symbolic level. Influences from the West may be accepted if they come through an insider. Ato is the insider in *Dilemma of a Ghost* and his acceptance, or actually decision, not to have children now absolves Eu and puts an end to the conflict in the play. This may be seen as a success from the perspective of Bhabha's Third Space. A scene of reconciliation takes place at the end when Esi, Ato's mother, realizes that her son is Eu's accomplice in the plan not to have children:

Esi: ...my son. You have not dealt with us well. And you have not dealt with your wife well in this. (Aidoo 51-2)

Therefore, Esi is sympathetic with Eu and when she comes unto the scene, "[i]t is Esi Kom who, following Ato's gaze and seeing her, rushes forward to support her on" (Aidoo 52). The play ends with the two women walking back into the house together. "Esi Kom supports Eulalie through the door that leads into the old house" (Aidoo 52).

The final scene in *Dilemma of a Ghost* sends the message that culture is fluid and compromise is a key to inclusion, continuation and co-existence. However, it emphasizes the superiority of

Western culture in the sense that Eu has not shown willingness to adapt to or to embrace any of the cultural practices of her husband's people. Furthermore, Ato is the product of Western education, though not of the colonizer's education as such. His mother, his family, and the village people look up to him and refer to him as "master"(Aidoo 14) and as "white man" (Aidoo 15). Ato received education in the United States, which is a significant reference to the role of the United States after the end of the Second World War. Receiving education abroad has given Ato a privileged position in the family. It is assumed, for example, that they "should reserve the new addition to the house for the exclusive use of the One Scholar. Not that they expect him to make his home there. No...he will certainly have to live and work in the city when he arrives from the white man's land" (Aidoo 8). However, throughout the play, the gap between Ato and the rest of the characters is emphasized in the words of the village women about the money Ato and his wife spend in the city buying "cigarettes, drinks, clothes, and machines" and about Eu using "machines for doing everything" (Aidoo 38).

Dilemma of a Ghost in the context of Globalization:

The study of *Dilemma of a Ghost* in English in Egypt in the twenty first century raises questions concerning the nature of the world we live in with reference to Neocolonialism and the dominance of the English language, the structure of knowledge, and images of place in literary texts.

Neocolonialism manifests itself in the dominance of the English language. English has become a Third Space exhibiting the same power relations between the colonizer and the colonized, and showing the supremacy of the culture and language of the colonizer. Non-native speakers of English learn the language from the white man, the term the village people use in *Dilemma of a Ghost* to refer to the Americans in general and to Ato, their "white master" (Aidoo 15) who received education in the "white man's land" (Aidoo 8). Along with the language come value systems, images of self and other, and connection to cultural products of significance. Hence, Ato is seen as Savior and his arrival back in his village is seen as an opportunity for the family and as it may "mean paying of all the debts at last" (Aidoo 12). This experience is given through a text written in English as English is the official language in Ghana. Therefore, the voice of the colonized or the rather the decolonized reaches the world only through the English language. The representation of self and culture then given in literary texts written in English by non-native speakers of English may raise questions regarding authenticity and reliability. The English language then turns into a space where voices try to find a place and where identities are constantly created. English is the official language in Ghana as it is the case of a number of other African countries which were once part of the British Empire. Language "and the use to use language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe" (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1126). The use of English in Ghana may be traced back to the Berlin Conference in 1884 in which "the division of Africa into the different languages of the European powers" took place alongside the carving up of Africa into European colonies (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1127). Hence, English became the language of education not only at the university level but also in colonial schools which shaped students' sensibility and made "[t]heir entire way of looking at the world, even the world of the immediate environment, was Eurocentric" (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1142). In the global context in the twenty first century, English is the language of virtual reality as well as business, science, and literary production circulating the world.

The structure of knowledge the modern and postmodern times have witnessed has been created along the lines of the process of building Western overseas empires, most powerful of which

is the British Empire. Reading a text in English set in an African country suggests the investigation of the place of English in the world and the structure of knowledge in our immediate context. Loomba provides an account of the rise of English as the language of knowledge with reference to introducing British education in India which is similar to Ngugi wa Thiong'o's rendering of his encounter with formal education in Kenya:

A British Education Despatch of 1854 explicitly connected 'the advance of European knowledge' in India to the economic development of the subcontinent. English education would 'teach the natives of India the marvellous results of the employment of labour and capital', and 'rouse them to emulate us in the development of the vast resources of the country' (quoted in Adas 1989: 284)...Thus, across the colonial spectrum, European technology and learning was regarded as progressive. (Loomba 40)

Throughout the modern times and in our postmodern context, European languages and specially English have become the languages of science, knowledge, literature, and education. The term progress has been associated with the West and values of punctuality, hard work and rationality have been seen as reflecting Western civilization. The political and economic hegemony of the United States has also contributed to the place of superiority Western Civilization has been enjoying. Therefore, the structure of human knowledge for the past two century has been Western. The acceptance of Eu at the end of the play, even though her choices are in direct contrast to the beliefs and values of the Akan culture, may symbolize the triumph of the Western voice in the play, represented by Eu and Ato. This message of inclusion and acceptance provides the play with a happy ending but does not exemplify Bhabha's Third Space, which stipulates a process of enunciation absent in the play. Therefore, *Dilemma of a Ghost* does not seem to challenge the notion of "the superiority of Western culture", which may be viewed as a fantasy (Swacha). It sustains the superiority of Western culture with the acceptance of Eu and Ato's decision to postpone having children in spite of the traditional views of bareness as a curse in Akan culture (Aidoo 39).

It seems it is not feasible to challenge the superiority of Western culture after spending so much on the young man's education in the States as Esi did. She describes the "lonely journeys [she] made to the unsympathetic rich, how often did [she] weep before [Ato's] Uncles and great Uncles while everyone complained that [her] son's education was ruining [the family's] house" (Aidoo 35). Therefore, the play does not offer forms of resistance nor does it contemplate challenging the superiority of the West. This reflects the relations between former colonies and the colonized in general. In the postcolonial era language, economics, and political interests are the most important challenges embedded in East/West relations. "The politics of imperial knowledge will continue to exacerbate the twenty first century crisis of knowledge until Western scholars, politicians, and educators begin to understand the intimacy between dominant power blocs and information as well as the cultural hegemony of monological Western epistemologies and the data they validate" (Kincheloe 12). Embracing the view that the superiority of North Atlantic nations is a fantasy cannot be achieved through a decision or within the framework of an ideological or philosophical stand. Intellectual, ideological, and political power rests upon economic basis. Back in the nineteenth century European countries, in their attempt to establish self-sufficiency in the world of industrialization and competition for raw material and sources of energy, "created colonial empires that would provide the materials and markets that were lacking at home" (McDonald 4). This was translated into annexing posts in China and opening them to Western trade, establishing trade posts in Congo,

opening Japan to trade, occupying Egypt, and controlling India. The scramble for Africa and the distribution of African countries among European powers has affected the history of Africa. Dependent economically and scientifically on the West, African countries cannot take this conscious decision of adopting the notion that the superiority of the North Atlantic is a fantasy as Kwame Nkrumah asserts in *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (1966). In addition, European languages have established themselves in many of these countries as the official languages. In the case of Ghana, for example, English is the official language in spite of the fact that about eight other languages are being spoken in the country.

As a result of the dominance of the English language and the hegemony of the Western structure of human knowledge, images of places in the world are transmitted through cultural texts in English. Comparisons between the cities, buildings, streets, schools, clubs, and social activities associated with the colonizer, the civilized, the educated and those belonging to the colonized form an essential part of the literature depicting East/West relations such as *Jacqueline Carol's Cocktails and Camels*, E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, Lawrence Durrell's *The Alexandria Quartet*, Nuruddin Farah's *Maps*, Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*, and Anne-Marie Drosso's *In Their Father's Land*. In *Dilemma of a Ghost* the city is associated with jobs, activities and lifestyles appropriate for those who have come back from the white man's land, from the West. The village, where local myths and traditions prevail does not offer a suitable environment for Ato and his wife. Though the village where events take place in the play is not described in minute physical detail, the overall image is that this village in Ghana is primitive, people live in proximity to each other; it is noisy when there is a celebration; it is poor offering little opportunity for making a living, and lacks the luxury of the West.

As such, *Dilemma of a Ghost*, as an example of Postcolonial literature has not contributed to giving the subaltern a voice. In the play, the voice of the local culture does not have scope to show its character, its hopes for a future free from colonization, and its vision for a place for itself in the world within the new paradigms of power relations in the Postcolonial era. The local voice presents itself in traditions and rituals associated with resentment and anger at Eu who does not have children and cannot fit in the cultural milieu where her husband's family lives. It turns out at the end of the play that there is an understanding between Ato and his wife concerning starting a family and that it is not her decision alone not to have children now. When this is revealed, Ato's mother shows sympathy and decides to become nice to Eu because she is an orphan and the play ends on this note of sympathy.

CONCLUSION

Written in 1965 and figuring a central character coming back from the United States where he got a university degree and where he married an African-American wife, *Dilemma of a Ghost* may not be seen as a Postcolonial text, unless Postcolonial is to be seen as a Neocolonial tool. Reading the text in English, I believe subversive elements in the text and actually in the experience of reading a text in English about an African country contributes to the foreignness of the text. English is a tool used by Neocolonialism, seemingly to bring speakers of the language from all over the world closer. Actually, English, with reference to the study of *Dilemma of a Ghost* for the purpose of this research, is a foreign language on two levels: it is foreign to the author and it is foreign to the reader. True this makes the English language a Third Space. Yet, it is a space where much may be missing or confused. And it is a space that belongs to a third party, the native speakers of the English language and the amalgamation of

knowledge built up in this language. Reading a text in English inherently involves drawing upon the heritage received from the native speakers of the language. This covers classroom experiences, whether as a student or a teacher, patterns of thinking, paradigms of analysis, and exposure to literary texts in the language, mostly written by British and American writer. The superiority of English language and literature may, then, be taken for granted and may be part of the subconscious. Hence, the hegemony of the English language further reaffirms the existence of the state of colonialism in spite of the withdrawal of foreign armed forces and foreign government officials from traditional British colonies and protectorates.

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