

**Esther Pujolràs i Noguer**  
**An African (Auto)biography: Ama**  
**Ata Aidoo's Literary Quest**

This dissertation has been supervised by Dr. Felicity Hand  
Cranham

Departament de Filologia Anglesa i Germanística

Facultat de Filosofia i Lletres

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

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# *Introduction*

## *As Always ... a Painful Declaration of Independence*

I have been happy  
being me:

an African  
a woman  
and a writer.

Just take your racism  
                  your sexism  
                          your pragmatism  
                                  off me;

overt  
          covert or  
                  internalized

And  
damn you!

“An Angry Letter in January,” Ama Ata Aidoo<sup>1</sup>

In 1991 Ama Ata Aidoo’s novel *Changes. A Love Story* was awarded the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize (Aidoo, 1991). She was not a novice

writer at all; her writing career had started almost twenty years earlier and her presence in the world of African letters was indisputable. This novel meant the definitive critical recognition of Aidoo's work worldwide as the numerous translations into different languages testify.<sup>2</sup> The reading of *Changes* is preceded by some apologetic, confiding, cautionary words by the author, which I believe to be significant for an understanding of what this novel represents within Aidoo's oeuvre:

Several years ago when I was a little older than I am now, I said in a published interview that I could never write about lovers in Accra. Because surely in our environment there are more important things to write about? Working on this story then was an exercise in words-eating! Because it is a slice from the life and loves of a somewhat privileged young woman and other fictional characters – in Accra. It is not meant to be a contribution to any debate however current.<sup>3</sup>

*Changes* is a contribution to a very “current” –I would add “universal”-debate: the politics of love, and, what is interesting in this *particular* case is that the debate is carried out in the *particular* space of Africa and articulated in the *particular* genre which is the novel. The novel – understood here as the “modern” novel- is a genre that came to birth because the new world that was emerging out of modernity needed a new literary space which would allow it to define itself, develop and flourish.<sup>4</sup> The novel was soon tied to the idea of nation and national languages, so much so that, as the South African author J.M. Coetzee argues through the character of Elizabeth Costello, we can talk about the “English novel,” the “Russian novel,” the “French novel,” . . . what about the “African novel”?<sup>5</sup>

*Changes* is not an overt presence in this dissertation and yet I use it as the work that opens the door to the other, earlier texts without



whose existence this novel, I contend, had no possibility to come to light. It is in those other texts where Aidoo's voice, perennially imbibed with Africanness and femaleness is being shaped. Notwithstanding, this Africanness and this femaleness are not easily granted, they require a neat, careful, caring, infinitesimally precise chisel with which to carve out the nuances that conform her experience as writer and woman and African. Who is Ama Ata Aidoo? What living facts can we ascribe to her literary self?

Ama Ata Aidoo is an **African woman writer**. Born in 1943 in the central region of Ghana, her life has met colonialism –Ghana was the former British Gold Coast colony-, has been involved with the struggle for independence –her father was a chief who was imprisoned by the British because of his participation in the fight for the independence of his country- has enjoyed and celebrated the euphoria after independence, has resented and criticised the neocolonialist aftermath of independence and, throughout, she has always maintained a firm footing in her being a woman. I read her literary quest –her search for a voice - as an attempt to bring together the different and differing aspects that have shaped her experience as a woman in Africa. I claim that her work cannot be fully apprehended without appreciating the often ambivalent, ambiguous and contradictory realities that forge her identity –her (auto)biography- as a writer, a woman and an African. In other words, her literary quest delineates the personal journey that took her from a past inception as Christine Ama Ata Aidoo to the present inscription as Ama Ata Aidoo. Her acceptance of the African name –Ama Ata Aidoo- in detriment of the European one –Christine- should be understood as a process in which a subject is defined *through* and *by* writing.

In Aidoo's fiction the old, we could even call legendary, fight between the personal and the public, the individual and the political is articulated within the overwhelming reality of the modern African nations, which, we cannot forget, is a legacy from colonialism. When Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence* expressed his concern about the textual bulk of tradition that haunts the imagination of writers when trying to define their own voice, he was unshakably grounded in Western soil, that is to say, he was exclusively considering the literary tradition of the West (Bloom, 1973). But what happens when the voice sought after is the outcome of a polemical –to say the least- inheritance, that of a markedly textual Western tradition, on the one hand, and an unquestionable and determining African experience loaded with the heft of its own oral tradition, on the other? As Ada Uzoamaka Azodo and Gay Wilentz assert in their introductory chapter –“A Breath of Fresh Air”- to *Emerging Perspectives on Ama Ata Aidoo*, Aidoo's fiction is “the site of the dilemmas of modern African nations between the personal and the public, the individual and the community.” And, they add,

(...) The heroines embody their author's life tensions, ambitions, desires, and griefs. The more public the work appears, the more indeed it calls us back to the personal basis of the fiction: the effects of exile, alienation and isolation on personal lives; the role of family and society in forging human understanding; African oral tradition as expression of self, especially women's lives in a time of changes, conflicts, choices, crises, and the instinctual including sexuality. If we have not so far seen the entire journey of a woman writer expressed in her creative works, we prophesize here that we will not be kept long waiting (Azodo et al., 1999: xix).

As a matter of fact, in 1994 Vincent Odammten did devote an entire book to the analysis of Aidoo's work: *The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo: Polylectics and Reading Against Colonialism*, of which Azodo and Wilentz seem to be oblivious (Odammten, 1994). Odammten's book is the first – and so far the unique- attempt to capture “the entire journey” of Aidoo's literary adventure. Henceforth, in view of Odammten's work, Azodo and Willentz's critical compilation together with the numerous articles and chapters in books which feature Aidoo's fiction as the central topic of analysis, I need to answer the question which forces its way irremissibly into this introduction: what interest does this present dissertation purport in the specific context of Aidoo's work and what innovative reading can it offer in the larger world of African literature in English?

The first work that marks Aidoo's literary departure is a play, *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, written in 1965 when she was only twenty-two years old. Taking into account that *The Girl Who Can*, a collection of short stories published in 1997 is her latest work to date, we evidently must confront the fact that the label of prolific writer resists Ama Ata Aidoo. Hers is not a profuse oeuvre and yet, I believe the ground she ploughs and cultivates is immensely fertile in terms of its significance not only in the milieu of African literature but also in the terrain of the tradition of women's writing. One of the objectives of this dissertation is to prove how Africa and women seamlessly conflate with each other, generously feed on each other and powerfully merge in a voice which nurtures as well as denounces, a voice which is modeled in tenderness as well as implacable ferocity, a voice which, above all, demands a space for African women to develop as fully-fledged subjects.

I maintain that two phases of development are to be discerned in the work of Ama Ata Aidoo. The first one corresponds to the writing of

her earlier work which comprises the following texts: *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, *Anowa*, *No Sweetness Here* and *Our Sister Killjoy* or *Reflections from a Black-eyed Squint*. The second phase is configured by *Changes*. *A Love Story*, *Someone to Talk to Sometime*, *An Angry Letter in January* and *The Girl Who Can*. It is in the first phase where the traces of Aidoo's literary quest are most noticeable in, precisely and ironically, their tentativeness, their need to try out, for example, different genres. Thus, *The Dilemma of a Ghost* and *Anowa* are plays, *No Sweetness Here* is a collection of short stories and *Our Sister Killjoy* is a generically unclassifiable text. But even when they are captured in genres they challenge the Western conception of the literary term they have been assigned since, while displaying their presence on the written page, they are, at the same time, enmeshed in the oral tradition of Africa. It is also in this first phase where the ominous ghostly presence of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* hovers above and around the textual space of Aidoo's creative work and it is in *Our Sister Killjoy* where this uncanny literary spectre is directly confronted and thus its virulence artistically mollified.

The second phase I delineate is punctuated by *Changes*. *A Love Story*, so far Aidoo's sole novelistic episode. I opened this introduction with this novel for two reasons: first, given the prize allotted to it, to highlight the relevance and reputation of the writer whose work is the basis for this investigation and second, to stress the significance of an African writer's use of what I consider to be the most Western of Western literary genres, the novel, originated as it was in the cradle of modernity. I interpret Aidoo's *late* accommodation to novelistic discourse as her imperious need to first orchestrate a dubious literary and cultural inheritance with her African and female voice. As far as the other works that I have included in this second phase are concerned,

except for *The Girl Who Can*, a collection of short stories, they are both poetry collections. *Our Sister Killjoy* was published in 1977 and Aidoo's next work, *Someone Talking to Sometime*, in 1985. It took her almost ten years until she managed once again to take up the pen. It seems as if the confrontation with *Heart of Darkness* that *Our Sister Killjoy* elicited, left her exhausted, unable to produce anything for a considerable period of time. I call Aidoo's early wanderings in poetry "poetic contemplation" because in this collection of poems her voice studies carefully, meditates and muses over the contemporary situation of Africa and women in Africa. Her second poetic interlude, *An Angry Letter in January*, published one year after *Changes*, and continuing the line initiated in *Someone Talking to Sometime*, scrutinizes blackness and femaleness against the background of the face of the new Millennium rising on the horizon. The calmness and peacefulness that enveloped the tone of *Someone Talking to Sometime* takes on an aggressive and angry cadence in this poetic letter written in January.

Her latest book, *The Girl Who Can and Other Stories* cannot be faced as a whole enterprise in itself for seven out of the eleven stories that form this collection were published individually in journals, magazines and anthologies. I read her latest work –so far– as a continuation, a developing and a firm statement of her voice as an African and a woman. *The Girl Who Can and Other Stories* re-visits the topics that conform her work; the motion of "going full circle" captures the spirit of her writing which, I hope, will not end here.

This dissertation concentrates on the first phase of Ama Ata Aidoo's work where the development of her voice –and all that this entails; conflicts, reconciliations, re-assessments, endless struggles, inveterate belief in lost causes, articulateness and silence– fuses with the impingent history of our times, the history that came to be as a result of

the political freedom gained by former colonies. In short, what this investigation aims at is offering an illustration of how a postcolonial voice came into being.

## Structure and Critical Framework

The work of Ama Ata Aidoo destabilizes Eurocentric discourse in an insidious, consistent and unremitting way. I take the term “Eurocentric” from Patricia Hill Collins’ *Black Feminist Thought* and I understand “discourse” as defined in Foucault’s *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (Collins, 1991; Foucault, 1972). Hence, my intention in using the term “Eurocentric discourse” is twofold: on one level, “Eurocentric” condenses the criticism-literary, sociological, philosophical and historical- launched upon a tradition modelled around two axis: maleness and whiteness; on the other level, “discourse” is apprehended as the combination of practice and way of speaking whose *very* nature furnishes the *very* criteria by which its results are judged successful. A vicious circle is thus drawn, for if maleness and whiteness feed the nature and so furnish the criteria by which this discourse, this particular combination of practice and way of speaking, is rendered successful, then, there is no *successful* way out of maleness and whiteness. Or is there?

Luce Irigaray’s *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Irigaray, 1974) provides us with the tools to dismantle this Eurocentric discourse. Grounded in the field of philosophy, Irigaray’s text displays an incisive and unrelenting critique on what she calls the “male gaze” that has forged the Western philosophical tradition, eternally leaving “woman” –

the maternal- as an “insignificant” and troublesome appendage to “man.” Her deconstructive reading of Plato’s cave stands at the core of this dissertation and I use the cave –as image, as trope, as founding stone of philosophy, as source of inspiration- to delineate the two parts of this research enterprise. What follows is a description of these two parts with their corresponding chapters.

## **PART I . THE CAVE: COLONIALISM IN BLACK AND WHITE**

According to Plato, the cave is that which has to be left behind, for inside, reality perceived as Ultimate Good, Ultimate Truth, evades the eyes of the prisoners. If they are to be free, they have to leave the cave. However, as Irigaray demonstrates in her reading of Plato’s cave, the “cave” has not been adequately visited; its winding contours, its diverse bifurcations have all been sacrificed to a linear path that, theoretically, liberates *all* prisoners. However, although the linear path does indeed liberate prisoners, it does not liberate *all* prisoners. As long as the prisoners are white and male, the path will lead them to daylight, but if they happen to be black or female, or both black and female, the path will turn against them and push them further into the back of the cave, their enslavement thus perpetuated.

Without plunging into a direct discussion and analysis of the work of Ama Ata Aidoo, my intention in this first part –the first two chapters- is to show how Eurocentric discourse envelops the myth of the cave and how, together with the maleness that Irigaray’s reading unfolds there is another dimension of the discourse, whiteness, that demands to be considered.

## Chapter 1. Unveiling the Ghost: *Heart of Darkness* or Africa- Chronotope Zero

Joseph Conrad's controversial novel, *Heart of Darkness*, published in 1898, haunts the imagination of African writers for its depiction of Africa as nothingness. *Heart of Darkness*, however, is an ambivalent, ambiguous, terribly and terrifyingly contradictory text which requires a closer examination. It is my contention in this first chapter that Conrad's novel captures the plea of the individual who, knowing himself to be tied to a discourse –Eurocentric discourse– that enslaves him, is nonetheless unable to free himself from it. Using the metaphor of the cave, we could affirm that, determined though he is to leave the cave, his movements lead him relentlessly back inside. Why can he not liberate himself? Where does the failure of Conrad's critique of the ruthless exploitation of Africa carried out by European powers reside? Why does his text throw Africa into a pit of nothingness? What are the implications of this in the future work of African writers? What kind of tradition do African writers face when taking up the pen? How is their "anxiety of influence" expressed in their works?

I am perfectly aware of the arguable nature of my acknowledgement of *Heart of Darkness* as a beginning for African writers. In an attempt to justify a position which could easily be branded as colonial, privileging the Western canon over the African oral tradition, I would like to delimit my scope of African writers in terms of generation and language. What I am trying to convey at this point is the fact that in the present times, I believe we can talk about a first generation of African writers and a second generation. The first generation of African writers comprises authors whose experiences were modeled around a



knowledge of first hand colonialism; they lived under European “tutelage” and they enjoyed –and endured- national independence. Their experiences, when textually articulated, are inevitably linked with a European language. The author whose work is the topic of this dissertation belongs to this first generation of African writers and in her experience, vital and textual, the reconciliation of her African and English legacy is a key aspect of her work. What is fascinating about Aidoo’s work and which this dissertation will reveal, is her blending of English with African traditions. However, as the last chapter will discern, *Heart of Darkness* is a ghostly presence to be confronted, defied and defeated in order to let her creative self be developed and strengthened. The experience of second generation African writers is not, unlike their predecessors, shaped by their first hand colonialism; they are born into independent nations, their concerns, as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie points out, are geared towards reflecting an Africa which is already on the map, however misrepresented.<sup>6</sup> As a consequence, their focus is more national than continental. For Ama Ata Aidoo, Chinua Achebe, James Ngugi wa’ Thiongo, Léopold Sédar Senghor, to name but a few, Africa was complete nothingness, and although they may root their writings in their own countries, there is always a continental spirit that clearly identifies them as African.

## **Chapter 2. (Auto)Biographical Fiction: The Facing and De-Facing of Africa.**

This chapter aims at expounding methodologically how my reading of Ama Ata Aidoo’s literary quest is enshrouded by the term “(auto)biography.” I use Paul de Man’s study on autobiographical

discourse, namely “Autobiography as De-Facement,” to sustain my understanding of “autobiography” as a “figure of reading,” (De Man, 67: 1984) which, in my case, foregrounds the analysis of Aidoo’s work as contained in two coordinates: woman and Africa.

Once the void into which Africa has been launched is acknowledged, this emptiness has to be filled if Africa is –and Africans are- to exist. Négritude and Pan-Africanism are two complementary examples of how African authors –in the case of négritude in the field of literature and in the case of Pan-Africanism in the fields of politics, economics, sociology and history- have filled the emptiness that the European imaginary made of Africa.

Pan-Africanism and more so its literary manifestation, négritude, recovered Africa, gave it a face that stood in valiant opposition to the mysterious, nullifying darkness that inhabited Conrad’s text: a nurturing, tender and powerful black mother emerged, the Mother Africa trope. Florence Stratton’s *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (Stratton: 1994), singles out this trope as the definitorial aspect of what she calls the male African literary tradition and asks herself why the work of African women writers displays contradictory feelings as regards the use and/or rejection of the trope. What is there in the trope that works so well for African male writers but which somehow escapes the experience of women as evinced in the work of African women writers?

The critique of “négritude” that ensues is indissolubly linked to a revision of the Mother Africa Trope from a feminist perspective. Finally, what this joined critique shows is an indebtedness of modern (out of modernity) writers – African and Western alike; male and female alike- to a controversial, polemical, ambivalent and often contradictory legacy –Westernness and Africanness- which is gathered in the historical reality

of the black Atlantic. Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Gilroy, 1993) demonstrates how the discourse on modernity cannot be fully articulated unless we place it next to the reality of slavery captured visually by the ship that transported slaves from Africa to the West and marked the route known as the black Atlantic. A new discourse is being shaped: double consciousness, a discourse ingrained in the apparently irreconcilable legacy of a markedly Western textual world and an African experience. Thus, Eurocentric discourse turns into double consciousness. It is in this discourse of double consciousness that I place the work of Ama Ata Aidoo.

## **PART II. THE CAVE REVISITED. TOWARDS A SUBJECTIFICATION OF AFRICA AND AFRICAN WOMEN.**

The objective of Part I is to provide the historical, literary and critical background that lies behind the work of Ama Ata Aidoo. In this second part, I will engage in a direct analysis of her work understood as both a continuation and detraction from this background. I purport that, reacting against the objectification of Africa as exerted by the Eurocentric imaginary, on the one hand, and the African male imaginary, on the other, what lies at the heart of Aidoo's fiction is a process of subjectification of Africa as envisioned through the depiction of her female characters. Once the inconsistencies of Eurocentric discourse have been revealed, the cave is revisited, but with a significant difference: this time the journey is endorsed by Paul Gilroy's double consciousness; femaleness and blackness take centre stage.

### Chapter 3. Without Cracks? Fissures in the Cave: The Middle passage.

Modernity pictured a world divided into nation states. Although in texts from the Enlightenment period the words “man” and “citizen” are used interchangeably to designate the whole of mankind, the truth is that the word “citizen” reveals a belief in the grouping of people –of men- in different communities. Romanticism fed on this ambivalence and, with Herder as major representative, proclaimed the alignment of nation (culture) with national language. What ensues is an association of nation and national language with home but this equation proves to be highly polemical and, we may add, debatable.

Indeed, if we translate this European equation –nation, national language, home- into African, into the inherited “reality” of the Africa of the modern states, we stumble against a world that resists being codified by such an analogy. The Pan-African Ideal rescued the continent from the European-made division of the territory, promulgating the universality of the black world and yet an impelling question emerges: is there any stranger *within* this black world? Any borders that the unifying thrust of the Pan-African Ideal has failed to envision? Can Africa be apprehended as “nation”? How is the idea of “national languages” translated into African? Where is “home” to be located? What is “home”?

The facing –filling up the nothingness- of Africa that Pan-Africanism and négritude carried out was centred on the belief in a black world that stretched beyond the confines of geographical frontiers. What united them was the middle passage, that common history of suffering and subjugation that brought together *all* blacks –those from the continent and those from the Diaspora.- Can “the middle passage”

be encapsulated in *one* -read “unique”- common history of suffering and subjugation experienced by the “universal reality” of the black world? In other words, can we freely affirm that the experiences of continental Africans are contained in the experiences of diasporan Africans? Is the aftermath of the Middle passage to be assessed under the same coordinates in Africa or in the Diaspora? *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965), Ama Ata Aidoo’s first public incursion in the literary world, entails a re-examination, a re-reading of the middle passage from the perspective of an African woman in the aftermath of Independence. The ambiguities, ambivalences, contradictions of the legacy of the nation states are beginning to be shaped in this play which foregrounds the matrimony between Africa and Afro-America in the figures of Ato –an African man- and Eulalie –an African-American woman-. Mimicking Kristeva’s search for the “stranger” in *Strangers to Ourselves*, I engage in a quest for the stranger that unbalances the otherwise borderless and seamless reality of the black world (Kristeva, 1991). Henceforth, three questions arise: is the figure of the “been-to” –the African that has gone to the West to get an education and goes back to Africa- to be analysed as carrying the seeds of strangeness? Where is the stranger to be located? And, last but not least, what does the stranger represent in this independent milieu?

If *The Dilemma of a Ghost* detected the stranger, the fissures in the overwhelming universe of the middle passage, in her second work, *Anowa* (1970), also a play, Aidoo confronts the excruciatingly painful and persistently hidden truth about the black Atlantic: the direct African involvement with slavery. To exemplify this, Aidoo resorts to Anowa, “the mythical woman, prophet, priest whose life of daring, suffering and determination is reflected in the continent of Africa,” as Mercy Amba Oduyoye describes her in *Daughters of Anowa* (Oduyoye, 1995: 6). The

result is an insidious amalgam of myth and history, in which Eurocentric discourse, when faced with an African “way of seeing” –to use John Berger’s term–, displays unabatedly its whiteness and maleness (Berger, 1972). Myth and history, the primitive and the scientific, the irrational and the rational blend, conflate with each other. Is the source of the African dilemma, of the postcolonial being that inhabits an independent Africa, to be found at the crossroads of these dualities? What does *Anowa* (the play) and Anowa (the character) stand for? What does Aidoo’s deliberate recovery of this emblematic figure that embodies Africa entail? How is the Mother Africa trope re-imagined?

Throughout the play, strangeness ominously envelops Anowa, thus leading her towards her (and Africa’s?) final doom ... is woman to be acknowledged as the stranger? What is there that makes Anowa a stranger? Is myth to be associated with Africanness while leaving history in the Western realm? As the work of Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor demonstrates in *The Great Cosmic Mother. Rediscovering the Religion of the Earth*, Western discourse has resolutely and purposefully eliminated the mythical dimension of its discourse to keep its “maleness” and “whiteness” intact (Sjöö and Mor, 1987: HarperSanFrancisco). This aforementioned book together with Mary E. Modupe Kolawole’s *Womanism and African Consciousness* (Kolawole, 1997: Africa World Press, Inc.) and Oyeronke Oyewumi’s *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Oyewumi, 1997: University of Minnesota Press) will provide the critical tools to delucidate the intricacies of *Anowa*, the source of the dilemma.

#### **Chapter 4. The Postcolonial Arena: *No Sweetness Here* or The Travails of Africans after Independence.**

Published in 1970, *No Sweetness Here* is a collection of short stories in which Aidoo's observant eye glimpses at the situation of her country after independence. The outcome of this observance is a picture of what I call "the postcolonial arena" where individuals strive to survive amid the turmoils of a world that, although independently African, imitates the doings –or rather wrong doings- of the West. The many voices that inhabit *No Sweetness Here* are not those of the "been-tos," the educated African élite, but rather those of the destitute, the unheard ones, the ones that Aidoo's perceptive eye captures and uses to face this independent Africa. In this chapter –via *No Sweetness Here*- I embark on a journey around independent Ghana, a journey that discovers a world where the urban and the rural collapse, where the city is experienced as a source of evil and also redemption, and, most important, where women once again struggle to have their voices heard and hence leave their imprint in this postcolonial arena. As the short story that gives the collection its title, "No Sweetness Here," reveals, the message is not an optimistic one. There is no sweetness for Maami Ama, the protagonist of the story, a mother, an African woman, who, alone in the world, -she has been repudiated by her husband and abandoned by her own family- loses her only "possession," her only hope for a better future, her only son.

Using once again the metaphor of the cave, I contend that, in *No Sweetness Here*, Aidoo visits the supposedly liberated postcolonial arena of independent Ghana to discover the overwhelming presence of the cave. There seems to be no liberation for the African subject, subjugated to the yoke of a neocolonialism that denies him/her the right to lead an independent existence, for, as the protagonist of "For Whom Things Did Not Change," lucidly asks "My young Master, what does

“Independence” mean?” *No Sweetness Here* delineates a dialogic ground where the African dilemma –as grasped in the triad that nation, home and Africa conforms- is revisited. The voices are heard, the cave, though, is not left. A question transpires: is there any way to leave the cave? Or, to use Irigaray’s terminology, where does the “forgotten path” –that which will take us to daylight, the hope to get out of the cave- lie?

### **Chapter 5. The White Hole: *Our Sister Killjoy or Reflections from a Black-eyedSquint.***

I read *Our Sister Killjoy or Reflections from a Black-eyedSquint* as the turning point in Aidoo’s African (auto)biography. This unclassifiable text –it has been labeled as a novel and yet Aidoo herself *dismissively* sees it as a collection of short stories that happen to share the protagonist-stands at the core of her development as a writer and-, I claim should also be placed at the core of contemporary African literature.<sup>7</sup> *Our Sister Killjoy* is the author’s deliberate plunging into the nothingness of what I call the “white hole” of the West. Sissie, the protagonist, embarks on the reverse journey taken by Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* and “visits” the West. Hers is a minute dissection of what she encounters first in Germany and later in England, a dissection that comes from her eye, black and female. The immensity of the heart of darkness that conforms the West overwhelms her, threatening to silence her, and yet she manages to overcome this void by placing her eyes in Africa. Eurocentric discourse is dismantled but this time the maleness of Irigaray’s critique proves futile if not apprehended together with whiteness.

In *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*, Houston A. Baker Jr. uses the trope of the “black hole” as a



unifying rhetorical figure that can explain the black literary experience (Baker, 1984). The work of Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright sustains his study of the black hole which, borrowing the term from physics, he describes as “an area of space which appears absolutely black because gravitation there is so intense that not even light can escape the surrounding areas” (Baker, 1984: 144). The relationship between the black hole of physics and the black hole of literature is established on the grounds of the gradual withdrawal from the outside world that the black individual experiences while growing up. Paradoxically enough, this withdrawal, this plunging into the black hole, this throwing oneself into a pit of nothingness, is what endows the black individual with the knowledge and the power to rise above it. The “black hole” helps him to distance himself from the world and thus, firmly placed in the “inside” (of the black hole), he is able to develop an “outside” (out of himself) perspective to analyse what is going on in the “outside” (the world at large). The black hole of physics gives way to the black (w)hole of literature. My use of the masculine pronoun is deliberate for, I proclaim, the trope of the black hole as seen in Baker’s study is powerfully male.

I face the analysis of *Our Sister Killjoy* from a dual perspective: on the one hand I feed on Baker’s trope acknowledging a significant difference, namely the black hole is here intentionally and determinately white; on the other hand, I resort once again to Irigaray and read Sissie’s journey as her particular wanderings inside the cave. Sissie’s/Aidoo’s interpretation of the cave, unlike Irigaray’s, is, therefore, tainted with maleness and whiteness. As an alternative to Baker’s notoriously *male* black hole, I find in the *female* reading of the trope as enacted by Evelyn Hammonds an invaluable theoretical source which injects *Our Sister Killjoy*’s interpretive strata with reinvigorated meanings (Hammonds, 1997).

Finally, the voice of Aidoo via Sissie, endowed with the knowledge she has gained from her plunging into the white hole of the West, has delineated the “forgotten path” that will liberate her - metaphorically and literally- and will lead her out of the cave. It seems to me that only by plunging into the cave of Eurocentric discourse, visualised as the West, will Aidoo, the author, survive, that is to say, continue her writing. Should this plunging into the void be assessed as the acknowledgement of, as Kristeva would have it, “a stranger within herself”? How is “strangeness” expressed in *Our Sister Killjoy*? Is the Pan-African Ideal articulated and if so, how? How is the triad nation-home-Africa expressed? Can the notion of a “national language” be sustained? Is language experienced as a source of empowerment, or rather, a source of enslavement, or both?

Nowhere will the presence of Irigaray’s text be more persistently felt than in this chapter. Both authors –Irigaray in philosophy and Aidoo in literature- use a strikingly similar dialectical technique to question Eurocentric discourse. This technique consists of calculated digressions from what constitutes the main text, inquisitorially launched at the reader to turn him/her into a –sometimes unwilling- participant in this re-visiting of the cave. Taking into account that Irigaray’s text was published in 1974 and Aidoo’s in 1977, maybe the similarities should not call our attention that much, but the fact that Irigaray’s text is nowadays considered a hallmark in feminist discourse whereas Aidoo’s is still met with the dismissive label of “experimental” should be emphasized.

The analysis of *Our Sister Killjoy* that this chapter takes up should also be acknowledged as a vindication of a text that, unfortunately and despite being largely quoted, has fallen short of noteworthy critical attention. An intense unsettling flair seeps through this text which

discards literary allegiances, scrutinizes every nook and cranny of Eurocentric discourse and, above all, asserts an unyielding, however painful, independence. Aidoo's pungent remark as regards the critical *dis-claim* of this work, as well as the source of the disowning, is clear: "I am convinced that if *Killjoy* or anything like it had been written by a man, as we say in these parts, no one would have been able to sleep a wink these (sic) couple of years."<sup>8</sup> Maybe, though, the crux of the matter is that *Our Sister Killjoy* could only have been written by a woman.

This dissertation is the outcome of a long-time interest in the creative work by women writers, on the one hand, and Africa, on the other. Ama Ata Aidoo came to me unexpectedly via *Changes. A Love Story*, and by unexpectedly I intend to convey the intuitive feeling of discovery that such an encounter professed. I was not looking for Ama Ata Aidoo specifically, but rather, I found myself in a quest for a female author that would fulfill my desire to get close to Africa. Her novel, *Changes*, managed to spur my literary curiosity at the same time that it placated my fears. An explanation, I feel, is here required: I am a white woman, born and educated in Europe, still living in Europe, a reality that distances my experience, geographically and culturally, from that of Ama Ata Aidoo. But in *Changes* I met a world in which my experience as a white, European woman did not feel estranged. A textual arena was spreading before me in which a pervasive sense of complicity linked me, as a reader, to the incongruities and intuitions of the lives of the main female characters, Esi and Opokuya.

Esi and Opokuya, best friends, meet one day, quite unexpectedly, in the lobby of a hotel. We infer, from the narrator, that they haven't seen each other for a long time and so they go to the bar and there one

beer follows another, small talk leads the way towards personal matters and, immersed in conversation, their lives are once again effortlessly sewn together. Their friendship resumed, some days later they meet in the same bar in the same hotel. The passage below captures one instant of the verbal exchange that takes place between them:

‘Say that again, my sister,’ agreed Opokuya. ‘But mind you,’ she thought she should seize the calmness in the discussion at that point, and press home an idea, ‘unlike so many cities abroad, there isn’t much here that a single woman can do to relieve the loneliness and boredom of the long hours between the end of the working day and sleep.’

‘You mean when a single woman is actually living alone?’

‘Yes.’

‘You can say that again. It is even more frightening to think that our societies do not admit that single women exist. Yet ...’

‘Yet what?’

‘Single women have always existed here too,’ she said with some wonder.

‘O yes. And all over the continent ...’

‘Women who never managed to marry early enough.’

‘Or at all. Widows, divorcees.’

‘I wonder what happened to such women.’

‘Like what?’

‘Think about it carefully.’

‘I am sure that as usual, they were branded witches.’ Esi said, laughing.

‘Don’t laugh Esi, it’s serious. You may be right. Because it is easy to see that our societies have had no patience with the unmarried woman. People thought her single state was an insult to the glorious manhood of our men. (...)’

(Aidoo: 45, 1991)

This was a scene I could perfectly translate into my own world; this was a conversation which, I felt, I could perfectly have had with any of my friends. At that point I sensed that my scholarly contribution did not have to be an intrusion.

I met Ama Ata Aidoo in Accra in the year 2000. Ever since, she has demonstrated her kindness and generosity towards me through her disposition to answer the many questions I, sometimes, impatiently launched. I cannot describe verbally the sensation of relief and contentment that possessed me when I realized that behind the great writer I knew she was, there stood a great woman, a committed human being whose forever observant eyes swallowed the world with an extraordinary mixture of wisdom and sense of humour. I am extremely happy to affirm that I have found in the *object* of the dissertation an invaluable *subject*.

**Note:** The title of the introduction “As Always ... A Painful Declaration of Independence” is actually the title of the poem that *introduces* Aidoo’s collection of poetry, *An Angry Letter in January*.

# PART I

## *The Cave: Colonialism in Black and White*

Is the beginning the same as origin? Is the beginning of a given work its real beginning, or is there some other, secret point that more authentically starts the work off?<sup>1</sup>

Edward Said, *Beginnings, Intention, Method*

The search for beginnings is an incommensurable task; it is tainted by a sense of incompleteness and inadequacy and yet it is an unavoidable condition of any human enterprise. We need to begin somewhere, even though elusiveness envelops our beginning, pointing maybe to another source which might enlighten our arguments or darken their persuasive force by leading us to yet another beginning. I want to begin somewhere, I want to infuse my beginning with a place, a museum, and a time, 2000. I want to begin with a text, “The Museum” by the Sudanese writer, Leila Aboulela, which will path the way towards other texts, other beginnings<sup>2</sup>.

“The Museum” is a story of estrangement, the estrangement experienced by Shadia, a young Sudanese woman who is thrown into a quest of self-discovery while she is pursuing an MSc in Aberdeen. This is a painful discovery about who she is, as an individual, and where she comes from, Africa. It is also the discovery of the inseparability of subjectivity and history, it is the realization that there is no subjectivity to be constructed outside history, it is the revelation that subjects are entangled in a network of relations that binds them to a past which

affects their present and moulds their future. Shadia's story of estrangement though, unearths another narrative, the unfulfilled love story that approaches her to Bryan, a young Scotsman, and which takes them finally to the African museum of Aberdeen.

Shadia agrees to go to the African museum with the hope that she will be filled with glimpses of her home and thus assuage her overwhelming and increasing feeling of strangeness. However, once inside the museum, Shadia is assaulted by images of an Africa which she cannot recognize as her home, which instead of reassuring her unsettle her to no end, to the extent that she cannot bear being in the museum any longer, and so a sentiment she can neither control nor understand, compels her to leave. What does she see in the museum that disturbs her so much? What unredeemable power do these images exert on her that make her run away from the museum grounds?

What Shadia sees in the African museum of Aberdeen is a compendium of the imperialist past, objects like "papyrus rolls, copper pots" (116) and "guns," (116) "sketches of jungle animals," (118) accompanied by the "biographies of explorers who were educated in Edinburgh" and who "knew what to take to Africa: Christianity, commerce, civilization." (116) This is not what she expected, "she wanted to see minarets, boats fragile on the Nile, people" (117) and all she is shown is animals and objects and explorers. She cannot put her emotions, a mixture of despair, deceit and rage into words and so she walks away but while she is running up the stairs, she feels the row of guns inside the glass cabinet "aiming at her. They had been waiting to blow her away. Scottish arms of centuries ago, gun-fire in service of the empire." (118) A breach separates her Africa, her sunny and colourful home, her people, from this other Africa of the museum, an Africa made up of animals, savages and explorers. Will this rift ever be bridged?



We should not forget that Shadia is not alone in the museum. Bryan, her Scottish friend is there, but what he sees in there is a commending human impulse towards knowledge, the need to get away to discover new worlds in order to, maybe, discover oneself, “I understand why they travelled. (...) They had to get away, to leave here ....” (117) Bryan acknowledges a shared desire which links him with those explorers, male and Scottish like him. He fails to understand Shadia’s crying, he cannot possibly comprehend the powerlessness that invades her when she realizes that “the imperialists who had humiliated her history were heroes in his eyes.” (117) Their incipient love story is brought to an abrupt ending when their two different visions of the same historical event are woefully confronted. A yearning to share her Africa with him is still inside Shadia but she has no voice to teach him that other language in which “letters” curve “like the epsilon and gamma,” and in which “words” are read “from right to left, ” (119) for the museum has made her small, deprived of all strength, diminished, debased to nothingness, rendering her voiceless.

And now I would like to recuperate another text, another beginning which will allow me to unearth the meaning lurking behind the museum of Aboulela’s story. The text I am calling forth is Plato’s allegory of the cave (Waterfield, 1993).<sup>3</sup> Plato’s allegory of the cave depicts a game of representations. The prisoners who are doomed to live inside the cave, chained by their feet and their heads, see reality through the reflection they get on the wall of the cave from the objects transported by the free men that live outside the cave. These reflections are possible because of a fire which is burning further up the cave behind them, hence enveloping them in a world of shadows which they interpret as reality. What is more real, the objects carried by the free men in and out

of the cave, or the reflections of these objects on the back wall of the cave?

Plato's answer leads us towards the truth which resides behind the objects being transported, relegating reflections to the level of imitation, of mere shades. Let us go back to the museum now and let us consider what the museum contains, namely, a representation –a reflection?- of Africa. We could affirm that the museum projects a reflection of Africa, just as the fire in the cave projects a reflection of the objects carried in and out of the cave. Shadia and Bryan see exactly the same reflection and yet what they see, what they apprehend, is not the same. What kind of game of representation is being played at this point?

In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger categorizes the act of seeing as the first and primordial human activity , thus privileging sight over the other senses (Berger, 1972). “It is seeing,” he adamantly resolves, “which establishes our place in the surrounding world” (ibid: 7). However, this world surrounding us has to be explained with words and so the controversy unfolds, since, as Berger suggests, we might explain that world with words, but “words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it” (ibid: 7). The relationship between words and the surrounding world does not, according to Berger, result in a perfect, linear correlation of representation and unique meaning, but rather, as he *inconclusively* concludes “the relation between what we see and what we know is never settled” (ibid: 7).

What Shadia sees in the museum and what she knows cannot be settled. What both Shadia and Bryan see in the museum is conditioned by their knowledge, in other words, the representation of Africa that the museum reflects is contingent upon their experiences, their knowledge about Africa which, as the story discloses, could not be more remote. It is not the sight of Africa that separates them –after all, they see the

same representation- but their knowledge, their explanation of what they see. Berger captures this disharmony in an analogy: “each evening,” he urges us to realize, “we *see* the sunset. We *know* that the earth is turning away from it. Yet the knowledge, the explanation, never quite fits the sight” (ibid: 7). Where does this leave Africa and its representation? Is there any explanation that might fit the sight?

Plato’s cave leaves us the possibility of redemption, that is to say, the possibility for one of these prisoners to escape, feed on the knowledge of the *real* world outside the cave and, once loaded with this knowledge, come back to the cave once again to share what he knows. Nevertheless, as Plato’s text suggestively formulates,

‘If he went back underground and sat down again in the same spot, wouldn’t the sudden transition from the sunlight mean that his eyes would be overwhelmed by darkness?’ (Waterfield, 1993: 243)

Shadia’s eyes are indeed overwhelmed by darkness. But, who is Shadia? Shadia is an African woman whose journey to the West, here represented by Aberdeen, takes her back to a cave which, contrary to Plato’s escaped prisoner, she had not inhabited before. The fact that she did not inhabit it, nevertheless, does not mean that the cave is not there, as she is painfully made to realize in the museum. There is a knowledge that projects a representation of Africa viewed through the lens of maleness and whiteness, as the biographies of the Scottish explorers that appear in the museum testify to. There is also another knowledge that projects another representation of Africa, an image of the continent coloured by the experiences of those like Shadia for whom Africa is not a distant land but home. Could those two deferring

knowledge(s) coalesce in one truthful representation of Africa? Could Shadia and Bryan finally see the same Africa?

The colonial past belongs to the world at large. It is my belief that colonialism is a legacy –and a responsibility– that the West shares with its former colonies. It is also an inherent aspect of the literary imaginary which determines the way writers see what they represent. When it is the representation of Africa which is being launched, African writers must face an imperialistic tradition which has minimized the continent to a pit of darkness which, in the Anglophone tradition, is embodied by the heart of darkness of Conrad’s text, the novella entitled non-gratuitously *Heart of Darkness*.

The work of the Ghanaian writer, Ama Ata Aidoo, captures her experience as woman and as African. The reflection of Africa that her work projects, if its significance is to be fully grasped, requires a reading against a literary tradition whose maleness and whiteness denies her femaleness and blackness a space. It is for this reason that this first part of the dissertation is an analysis of the imaginary that gave rise to a text like *Heart of Darkness* and the consequences that such a text had for the subsequent African writers. Henceforth, chapter one aims at dissecting Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, a text which haunts the imagination of a great deal of Anglophone African writers to the extent that a certain writing back attitude to the darkness deployed in this novella can be discerned in their work. Imbued with Said’s quest for origins, this need to respond, this compulsion to “talk back,” consciously or unconsciously, to Conrad’s text, could be interpreted as a sort of beginning, starting point, departure, for their literary development. Chapter two delineates this literary development that springs from the void that Africa became in the colonial imaginary and which is marked by the need of African authors to fill up the continent

with a knowledge that undermines the vision of the Imperialist projection.

Africa is enshrined in a cave whose image is projected through the white and male lens of Western colonialism and this is not, unfortunately, an aspect from the past.<sup>4</sup> I deliberately wanted to mark a beginning with a contemporary text which reproduces a vision of Africa still present in the Western imaginary and hence the appearance of Leila Aboulela's "The Museum." This beginning took us to another text, Plato's cave, whose underlying metaphor I use to frame the development of Ama Ata Aidoo's writing. The cave, with its shadows, pervading sense of unreality and darkness leads the way to the ghost of yet another text, an unwelcoming and threatening beginning for some African writers, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.<sup>5</sup> Let us now unveil the ghost.

# *One*

## *Unveiling the Ghost: Heart of Darkness or Africa-Chronotope Zero*

I listened, I listened on the watch for the sentence, for the word that would give me the clue to the faint uneasiness inspired by this narrative that seemed to shape itself without human lips in the heavy night-air of the river.<sup>1</sup>

*Heart of Darkness,*

Joseph Conrad

And it was Africa, the continent out of which the Romans used to say some new thing was always coming, that got cleared out of the dull imaginary wonders of the dark ages, which were replaced by exciting spaces of white paper. Regions unknown! My imagination could depict to itself there worthy, adventurous and devoted men, nibbling at the edges, attacking from north and south and east and west, conquering a bit of truth here and a bit of truth there, and sometimes swallowed up by the mystery their hearts were so persistently set on unveiling.<sup>2</sup> (HD, 145)

“Geography and Some Explorers,” Joseph Conrad

Do you understand the sadness of geography?<sup>3</sup>

*The English Patient*, Michael Ondaatje

Fewer novels have exerted bigger controversies in the world of African literature written in English than Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Published in 1899, *Heart of Darkness* is, on one level, set to denounce the atrocities of what Conrad himself experienced as ruthless Belgian exploitation of the Congo, and yet, on another level, Conrad’s emblematic tale is framed in a constrictive and constraining narrative that itself falls prey to the very imperialistic practices it is so adamantly determined to unfold. The contradiction that springs from *Heart of Darkness* has been apprehended by literary critics who see in its dual path of indictment and condonation of Imperialism a cornerstone in the development of the literary imagination of an author –and a work– that stands at the heart of English literature.<sup>4</sup> A firm condemner of the novel is the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe who, in his famous 1977 article, “An Image of Africa:

Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" (Achebe, 1977: 261) unveils what he believes to lie at the core of Conrad's tale: indiscriminate racism poured onto a continent, Africa, which, time and again, has been systematically debased to mere nothingness, passionately displaced at a degree zero in the history of the world. Yet, whose world is being contested? , whose history is being claimed?, and who is the master puppeteer responsible for the debasement of the second largest continent on earth?

To give a name to the culprit would be far too easy and far too misleading. That Europe is held responsible for the relentless expropriation of African territory is, in a way, to state the obvious. However, to try to discern where, why and how Conrad's genuine longing to unmask the horrors of Belgian Imperialism in the Congo turns into a fiction of justified –and justifiable- racism is, to my view, essential to understand the further development of African literature.

It is not surprising that Chinua Achebe –prime denunciator of the novel- is, first and foremost, an African writer. His 1958 novel, *Things Fall Apart*, is a hallmark in the history of African literature; in other words, just like *Heart of Darkness* is –as Achebe poignantly remarks- unavoidable in any English literature course, so is his 1958 tale on the later historical developments that his country, Nigeria, went through as a consequence of colonialism an unavoidable text in any course in African literature.<sup>5</sup> Achebe's outrageous tone in "An Image of Africa" responds to his being an African writer enmeshed in the contradictions of a literary tradition that places his continent and his people at a degree zero, from which he knows he cannot escape –after all, he is using the language of this tradition, English, as his means of writing- and yet he manages to confront it face to face.<sup>6</sup> Achebe's condemning article voices out the awesome presence of a text whose denunciatory strain is

mollified by an unrestrainable plunging into a racist apprehension of Africa and what the African continent stands for.

It could be argued that the literary imagination of any writer in any part of the world writing in any of the existing human languages is assaulted by “anxieties,” -borrowing the term from Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence*- by ghosts that threaten the flow of the creative work.<sup>7</sup> However, the anxiety of influence that Achebe is signalling out in his standpoint as a specifically and significantly African writer and which he discloses overtly in the aforementioned essay is the overwhelming reality of a text that keeps on appearing systematically in the imagination of the African writers endeavouring to take up the pen. Conrad might be dead, he argues, but “his heart of darkness plagues us still” (Achebe, 1977: 259). It is worth quoting Achebe’s full text:

Whatever Conrad’s problems were, you might say he is now safely dead. Quite true. Unfortunately his heart of darkness plagues us still. Which is why an offensive and deplorable book can be described by a serious scholar as “among the half dozen greatest short novels in the English language.” And why it is today perhaps the most commonly prescribed novel in twentieth-century literature courses in English Departments of American universities (ibid: 259).

Interestingly enough, if we look up the meanings of the word “ghost” in the Oxford’s Dictionary, we are granted the following definitions; definition number one reads as follows: “the supposed disembodied spirit of a dead person, conceived of as appearing to the living as a pale, shadowy apparition”; definition number two approaches “ghost” to “a haunting memory” and definition number three alludes to a “faint semblance; slight trace.” It seems to me that when Achebe comments on the “safely dead” reality of Conrad, the man, and at the



same time emphasizes the fact that “his heart of darkness plagues us still”, he is, in some way, echoing the disembodied spirit of a dead person –Conrad, in this case- of the first definition of “ghost” which, nevertheless, appears to the living – African writers- as the pale, shadowy apparition of his text, *Heart of Darkness*. This is a text which unremitantly haunts their memory, leaving behind a recognizable faint semblance, a tempting slight trace for them to follow or, as Achebe would certainly purport, to resist and confront.

Now to the question I am to confront: Why then a chapter on *Heart of Darkness* when the topic of this present dissertation is the work of a Ghanaian writer, Ama Ata Aidoo? Following Achebe’s critical insights, I do believe that any African writer writing in English has to face the ambivalence that inhabits Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, and in this respect, the work of Ama Ata Aidoo can be interpreted as a valuable and copious attempt –sometimes more successful than others- to valiantly stare at this darkness and engage it in a dialogical questioning so that, in the end, a powerful African, and in her case female, voice finds her articulation.

There is, however, another question whose haunting presence unsettles, in this case, the author of this dissertation. Why do I persistently use the term “Africa” to refer to the work of a writer whom I nationalized as “Ghanaian”? I do not view Africa as a monolithic entity, but I recognize a unifying stance in the way the Western imaginary captured the continent and, as a consequence, I believe that this long-sustained vision influenced writers from the African continent who saw in the unitary essence of Africa a source of empowerment to define voices embedded in a shared experience of colonialism. An allegiance to a Pan-African Ideal is to be detected in the work of a great number of black writers –continental or diasporic- and this is certainly pervasive in those

writers who took the pen in the years following independence. The word “Africa” is therefore not limited by its geographical meaning, but rather, it is used as a signifier that encompasses an essence which cannot be encapsulated by one single national belonging.

A certain ambivalence is to be discerned in the work of a first generation of African writers who meander through the continent and the nation, displaying a national locality while retaining a continental spirit of liberation. Ama Ata Aidoo’s work displays such duality; it is profoundly rooted in Ghanaian soil but, at the same time, it trespasses the geographical boundaries of her nation and celebrates an African ethos which is palpably continental.

This chapter stems from the understanding that the literary journeys that conform the development of Conrad, the author, as exemplified in *Heart of Darkness*, and that of Ama Ata Aidoo as enacted in the works that shape her African (auto)biography, are imbued with language, a language comprehended in the fashion of Foucauldian “discourse” which defines it as the combination of practice and way of speaking and whose *very* nature furnishes the *very* criteria by which its results are judged successful.<sup>8</sup> Conrad’s indictment of colonialism feeds on a discourse that defeats its intuitive insights and thus enslaves him further in the realm of imperialism. The result is Achebe’s painful realisation that “Africa is to Europe as the picture is to Dorian Gray –a carrier onto whom the master unloads his physical and moral deformities –“(Achebe, 1977: 261). At the other end of the continuum stands a whole generation of African writers –among them Ama Ata Aidoo- with the proposal for a new linguistic path, a way out of darkness, a possibility to begin, a beginning stamped by Said’s conception of it as “the first step in the intentional production of meaning” (Said, 1975: 5). How **she** manages to achieve this is, in the long term, the aim of this

research project and why he fails to enact his insight is, in the short term, the objective of this first chapter.

*So let us make reading the myth of the cave our point of departure*

*Speculum of the Other Woman, Luce Irigaray*

Plato's myth of the cave is a story about day and night, about light and darkness, about dream and reality, about shadows and objects, about speech and silence, about fires and curtains, about masters and slaves, about life and death, about knowledge and deception, about something as old as the search of the Truth, of the ultimate Origin. It is also a journey –or, at least the possibility of a journey- undertaken by one of the prisoners in the cave that liberates himself, escapes from the cave and reaches, finally, daylight with all its consequences (Waterfield, 1993).

The image of people chained to one another ever since childhood, their necks and legs tied up so that they are only allowed to look straight ahead, their saddening ignorance of the outside world just lying a few steps away, their innocent interpretation of the “reality” lurking outside, their abominable fate at the back of a dark cave can only be redeemed by the tale of one of them being liberated, finding the way out of the cave and finally reaching the marvellous sight of the outside world, with the beams of the sun falling onto his still feeble eyes which little by little are reinforced by the “real” knowledge that feeds them with images of what things are really like. This former prisoner, though, and as should be expected from someone endowed with the sense of morality that marks Plato's reasoning, is overwhelmed by the urge to go back to the cave, to tell the truth behind the shapes and shadows of the dark world of the cave and, so to speak, liberate his once fellow prisoners and encourage them to follow him in his way towards light. His preaching, though, might encounter the stubbornness of these prisoners who, deceptively safe in the space they occupy at the back of the cave, resist any attempt at seeing things differently. This journey into light and back to darkness with its faint dialogics of opposing views echoes in

our minds the narrative voices of the story depicted in *Heart of Darkness*, that of the unnamed narrator, that of Marlow and that of Kurtz. In other words, isn't the game of opposites delineated by the journey of the liberated prisoner in Plato's cave, to some extent, the story depicted in *Heart of Darkness*? Through Marlow, Conrad motions us towards a centre, an idea, an origin, a heart?, inside a cave, a path – delineated by the river- which is acted out in a world of opposites and which can be exemplified in one of the best known passages of literature in English:

Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, and impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine. The long stretches of the waterway ran on, deserted, into the gloom of overshadowed distances. On silvery sandbanks hippos and alligators sunned themselves side by side. The broadening waters flowed through a mob of wooded islands. You lost your way on that river as you would in a desert and butted all day long against shoals trying to find the channel till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had known once –somewhere- far away- in another existence perhaps. There were moments when you have not a moment to spare to yourself; but it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants and water and silence. And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. (HD, 35-6)

This seemingly elusive journey into the African continent which envelops Conrad's narrative is, nevertheless, firmly tied around three axes that give shape to the story and that suspiciously awaken images

of this central text of Western thought, Plato's myth of the cave. These three axes can be defined as follows: (1) a search for some kind of "essence" or "truth, (2) a pervading sense of "morality", and (3) an atmosphere of theatrical performance. However, and this could, at first, be interpreted as the major difference between the two texts under scrutiny here, these three axes are, in the case of *Heart of Darkness* and contrary to the enlightenment process of Plato's text, enveloped on a journey into hell, a pact with the forces of darkness which, nonetheless, revives a topic –to which we are well-acquainted- that stands at the core of the tradition of the literary imagination in a world scale. Just like the search of the truth, of the ultimate essence, the burden of morality and the danger of the invasion of "unreality" took us back to the myth of the cave, this devil-tainted journey to the African continent leads us to the stories produced around this other myth, which in the Western tradition is masterfully embodied in the character of Dr. Faustus. I would like to look at how these three axes are wielded in the narrative texture of this journey into hell.<sup>9</sup>

That *Heart of Darkness* will unfold as a narrative whose objective is to reach a kind of immutable essence is made clear from the very beginning of the tale by that other narrator, the one that introduces us readers to Marlow. And this other narrator asserts that the narrative about to unfold requires a special narrator and thus pinpoints Marlow not as "the typical seaman" but as a "wanderer," (9) a statement that he expands on in the following passage:

The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be accepted) and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale

which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that, sometimes, are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine. (HD, 9)

Hence both narrative and main narrator are conferred an aura of that essentiality that permeates Plato's text. Just like Plato's liberated prisoner will encounter the "truth" outside the cave, so will Marlow find "the meaning of an episode" lying "outside"; and where Plato's prisoner counted on the light from the sun to see, Marlow's visibility – the narrative already conflating with the journey into hell- comes from "the spectral illumination of moonshine." (HD, 9)

Amid the ruthless economic drives of the Manager of the station and his men, Marlow's and Kurtz's are furnished with some higher aim in mind which places them on the side of "virtue," or, as one of the Company's agents puts it "You are of the new gang – the gang of virtue." (HD, 28) Conrad is eager to single out, from the very beginning of the narrative, two groups of European wanderers through African territory: the ruthless exploiters, the pirates in search of riches to which the Manager and his nephew belong, and the "virtuous" ones, the ones who, like Kurtz and Marlow, end up there moved by another intention which, no matter how "inscrutable" (HD, 36) –like the continent envisaged- it might be, nonetheless and to start with, differentiates them from the others.

Marlow himself realises his position as a "special man for the company" (HD, 14) when recalling the time spent with his aunt, the one who recommended him for the post, before his parting,

In the course of his confidences it became quite plain to me I had been represented to the wife of the high dignitary and goodness knows to how many more people besides as an exceptional and gifted creature –a

piece of good fortune for the Company- a man you don't get hold of every day. Good heavens! And I was going to take charge of a two-penny-half-penny river-steamboat with a penny whistle attached! It appears however I was also one of the Workers, with a capital –you know. *Something like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle.* (my italics, HD, 15)

Kurtz is, however, the recipient of the most outstanding praise. He is repeatedly alluded to as “a gifted creature” (HD, 48) and, as a matter of fact, the very same agent that located Marlow and Kurtz in “the new gang” of travellers, labelled him as “a prodigy (...) an emissary of pity, and science, and progress, and devil knows what else.” (HD, 28) The dialogue this agent maintains with Marlow and wherein these words are uttered is motioned by a stern belief in the moral dimension of the enterprise that the European Administration has set up in African territory,

We want, 'he began to declaim suddenly,' for the guidance of the cause entrusted to us by Europe, so to speak, higher intelligence, wide sympathies, a singleness of purpose!' 'Who says that?' I asked, 'Lots of them,' he replied. 'Some even write that; and so *he* comes here, a special being, as you ought to know.' (HD, 28)

Kurtz, we learn later on, was entrusted by “the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs” (HD, 50) to make a report on the situation of Africa and thus use it as guidance to further development there.

The world inside the cave is a deceiving representation of what lies outside; the prisoners at the back of the cave are doomed to see the projection of reality that the burning fire reflects on the low wall that



separates them from the outside, from Reality, as it is. This reflection-projection-representation hints at a theatrical performance articulated in Plato's text,

There's firelight burning a long way further up the cave behind them, and up the slope between the fire and the prisoners there's a road, beside which you should imagine a low wall has been built –like the partition which conjurers place between themselves and their audience and above which they show their tricks (Waterfield, 1993: 240).

This pervading feeling of theatrical performance invades and gets hold of Marlow's experience on his journey into Africa where he struggles desperately to fight away the sense of irreality that soars menacingly above him and that he discards by "attending to small things" (HD, 36). The passage below is an example of how this sense of theatricality is conjured up through Marlow's experience threatening to possess him all through the narrative:

(...) The dusk came gliding into it long before the sun had set. The current ran smooth and swift, but a dumb immobility sat on the banks. The living trees, lashed together by the creepers and every living bush of the undergrowth, might have been changed into stone, even to the slenderest twig, to the lightest leaf. It was not sleep –it seemed unnatural, like a state of trance. Not the faintest sound of any kind could be heard. You looked on amazed and began to suspect yourself of being deaf –then the night came suddenly and struck you blind as well. About three in the morning some large fish leaped and the loud splash made me jump as though a gun had been fired. When the sun rose there was a white fog, very warm and clammy, and more blinding than the night. It did not shift or drive, it was just there standing all round you like

something solid. At eight or nine perhaps, it lifted, as a shutter lifts. We had a glimpse of the towering multitude of trees, of the immense matted jungle, with the blazing little ball of the sun hanging over it –all perfectly still –and then the white shutter came down again smoothly as if sliding in greased grooves. (HD, 41)

What are then the implications of this reverse journey undertaken by Marlow –and Kurtz- into, as he himself puts it “the heart of darkness” (HD, 37), “the uttermost ends of the earth” (HD, 8)? The prisoner of the Conradian cave seems to travel into –not out of- the “Inferno” (HD, 20) of the cave. Readers are made to feel this journey into hell from the very beginning of the narrative. When still in Europe, upon entering the headquarters of the Company that is about to hire him, Marlow is confronted with the eerie sight of two women ominously dressed in black, the old one with the unrandom presence of a cat on her lap, a wart on her cheek, and spectacles on her nose, “guarding the door of Darkness” (HD, 14). Marlow is overwhelmed by “an eerie feeling” (HD, 14) and he confesses that

(...) Often far away there I thought of these two, guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall, one introducing, introducing continuously to the unknown, the other scrutinising the cheery and foolish faces with unconcerned old eyes. ‘*Ave! Old knitter of black wool. Morituri te salutant.*’ Not many of those she looked at ever saw her again –not half- by a long way.  
(HD, 14)

References to hell abound in *Heart of Darkness*, where the big river that delineates Marlow’s journey resembles “an immense snake uncoiled” (HD, 12) that enchants the imagination of the young boy Marlow, where

the adult Marlow prepares himself to meet “the great man himself,” (HD, 14) -the Manager-, and “sign the contract” (HD, 13) that will conduct him to the heart of Darkness, where everything on the journey “crawled towards Kurtz” (HD, 37), to this “familiar Shade” (HD, 75), to this “impenetrable darkness,” (HD, 68); this man claimed by “many powers of darkness” (HD, 49), this man who “had taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land.” (HD, 49)

What is, in the ultimate case, the meaning of the myth of the cave? What does this reverse journey that Conrad is pointing out in his narrative amount to? If the myth of the cave is Plato’s attempt to dismantle the true source of happiness, that is to say, the finding of this ultimate Truth, ultimate Idea, ultimate Reality, ultimate Origin, ultimate Goodness, then why does Conrad’s tale –which seems to be leading readers towards this ultimate Truth, ultimate Reality, ultimate Origin in the image of Kurtz- end with such an unhappy and terribly dark feeling? The “Truth” discovered by Marlow is a “Lie”, the promise of a “Life” outside the cave that frames Plato’s text is forever tainted by death, by “a flavour of mortality,” (HD,29) a lie which he passionately asserts “is exactly what I hate and detest in the world –what I want to forget” and yet he cannot for he continues to tell his story of death and deception. The ending of Conrad’s tale leaves the prisoner for ever imprisoned in the heart of darkness:

The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky- seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness. (HD, 75)

Is this absolute relentless void into which the narrative dissolves a result of Marlow’s and Kurtz’s journey into night as opposed to the

daylight journey which a true enactment of Plato's text would exude? According to Luce Irigaray, the answer is no.

In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray, firmly grounded in feminist soil, sets herself the arduous task to read into the hallmarks that conform the history of Western philosophy and thus, unfold and deconstruct the male-oriented thought that holds strongly on the Western world of Ideas.<sup>10</sup> One such cornerstone she unremittantly questions is Plato's myth of the cave. In her re-reading of this key passage in Western thought, she incisively points out the perfect symmetry that permeates the whole tale and which she defines as an unavoidable "theatrical trick" that allows us to enter "the functioning of representation" (SOW, 244) and thus, the world of meanings. It is worth quoting Irigaray's passage at length, while trying to recreate in our minds Marlow's journey. We will realise that the same game of symmetry portrayed by Irigaray is also at work in Conrad's text:

The entrance to the cave takes the form of a long passage, corridor, neck, conduit, leading upward, toward the light or the *sight of day*, and the whole of the cave is oriented in relation to this opening. Upward – this notation indicates from the very start that the Platonic cave functions as an attempt to give an orientation to the reproduction and representation of something that is always already in the den. The orientation functions by turning everything over, by reversing, and by pivoting around axes of symmetry. From high to low, from low to high, from back to front, from anterior to opposite, but in all cases from a point of view in front of or behind something in this cave, situated in the back. *Symmetry plays a decisive part here* –as projection, reflection, inversion, retroversion –and you will always already have lost your bearings as soon as you set foot in the cave; it will turn your head, set

you walking on hands (...) This theatrical trick is unavoidable if you are to enter into the functioning of representation. (SOW, 244)

We cannot help noticing the similarities between Irigaray's text and the passage of *Heart of Darkness* I quoted on page 35 (HD, 35-36). The movement is the same, linear, perfectly symmetrical, guiding you towards some primal existence, enveloping you in the belief that, at the very end of the journey –at the back of the cave or Kurtz's station-, there you will meet face to face, the Truth, the Idea. The whole process demarcated by the journey is performed as a powerful and haunting sensation of loss, "you will always already have lost your bearings as soon as you set foot in the cave," (SOW, 244) affirms Irigaray and "you lost your way on that river," (HD, 35) states Marlow. What I would like to emphasize at this point is the fact that, although, as we have mentioned earlier, Conrad's tale seems to reverse the myth of the cave, motioning Marlow towards darkness rather than daylight, this does not unsettle the ground upon which the discourse of both texts unravels, namely, the symmetrical and theatrical way of representation, for, as Irigaray poignantly remarks, the orientation itself functions, in all cases "from a point of view in front of or behind something in this cave." (SOW, 244) That is to say, whether you start from the bottom or from the top, the process of signification remains the same; the trajectory unaltered by the point of departure.

The outcome of this prophetic journey is, despite –and because of– its very deceitful symmetrical nature, blemished by failure, for the Truth, the Idea, the Origin at the back of the cave is already pre-determined at the outset. No alternative path is there to lead us towards another reality from the one which we have been made to believe exists, for "whichever way up you turn (...), you always come back to sameness."

(SOW, 263) The reader is pushed towards a journey into hell from, as we have marked earlier on, *the very beginning* of the narrative where everything, as becomes a theatrical performance, has been disposed of already, everything set up in advance. If journeys are traditionally granted a sense of discovery and development, what discovery is there at the end of Marlow's journey and, by the same token, what development does the narrative shape?

Irigaray's penetrating analysis of Plato's text makes her realise that the men in chains at the back of the cave are indeed "prisoners in the space-time of the project of its representation" (SOW, 244). The introduction of the term "space-time" in her text is crucial to the understanding of the liberated prisoner's journey and, thus, Marlow's and Kurtz's journey, as a narrative that unfolds in a certain space at a specific time. And now the question we should ask ourselves: what is the space and what is the time that encompass the narrative of *Heart of Darkness*? Or, as Bakhtin would have it, what is the chronotope that moulds the discourse of *Heart of Darkness*?

We can indeed affirm that Marlow's journey into the heart of the African continent is a movement through the space delineated by Africa as much as through a certain time in history, the Scramble for Africa. However, if we leave this affirmation at this point, the implications of the linking of space and time into a single unit which the Russian critic Bakhtin coined as the primordial element that defines novelistic discourse is fatally discarded.<sup>11</sup> According to Bakhtin, not only does the chronotope wield space and time into a single unity, but it also determines the artistic unity of the literary work in its relationship with reality. This seemingly simple acknowledgement of a spatial and temporal axis in literary works is nonetheless imbued with an understanding of the literary act as a complex, sometimes contradictory

and above all, meaningful interpretation of the real world as Bakhtin explains in the essay entitled “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel.” The text as a multilayered whole whose meaning we disclose by opening layer after layer is what, in Bakhtinian fashion, lies at the heart of the artistic chronotope. Thus, it is its chronotopic value what distinguishes artistic thought from abstract thought. In Bakhtin’s words,

(...) In literature and art itself, temporal and spatial determinations are inseparable from one another, and always colored by emotions and values. Abstract thought can, of course, think time and space as separate entities and conceive them as things apart from the emotions and values that attach to them. But *living* artistic perception (which also of course involves thought, but not abstract thought) makes no such divisions and permits no such segmentation. (DI, 243)

Needless to say, the values and emotions attached to the chronotopic unit infuse *Heart of Darkness* with a meaning that outstretches its apparently uncomplicated description of a journey into the heart of Africa. In other words, the implication of the chronotope, of the union of time and space, goes far beyond the roaming of a hero over a specific space –Africa- in a concrete time –the Scramble for Africa-; what is significant here is how this journey is embedded with meanings that reveal the existence of a predominant world view or, as we shall see later, a predominant enslaving discourse. What is then the chronotope in *Heart of Darkness*?

In his wanderings through the European novel, Bakhtin defines several chronotopes which, to his mind, conform the tradition of novelistic discourse. We could argue that at least two of these chronotopes he points out are also to be found in *Heart of Darkness*. The first that comes to view is what Bakhtin calls “the chronotope of the

road.” (DI, 242) On the road, random encounters take place. What Bakhtin implies by random encounters is the accidental meeting of the most varied characters that “intersect at one spatial and temporal point.” “People who” Bakhtin goes on “are normally kept separate by social and spatial distance can accidentally meet; any contrast may crop up, the most various fates may collide and interweave with one another.” (DI, 243) This is indeed true of Marlow’s journey on which he comes across the Manager of the station, his nephew, the Russian fellow, the African woman –Kurtz’s mistress- and Kurtz himself. Yet most significantly the chronotope of the road also involves a process of growing up; in Bakhtin’s words, it is “the course of a life” (DI, 243) where the journey from innocence to experience that the character goes through is loaded with knowledge. And this is again indeed true of Marlow’s journey and Kurtz’s before him, for both of them are in their search of light-darkness seeking this ultimate Truth, this ultimate Idea, this ultimate Knowledge.

However, this chronotope of the road that Bakhtin establishes in his analysis of novelistic discourse is not devoid of polemics when it comes to the analysis of a text such as *Heart of Darkness*. Bakhtin very clearly states that “one crucial feature of the “road”” is that “the road always passes through *familiar territory*, and not through some exotic, *alien world*, (...); it is the *sociohistorical heterogeneity* of one’s own country that is revealed and depicted.” (DI, 245) And then he continues by adding as way of explanation that “for this reason, if one may speak at all about the exotic here, then it can only be the “social exotic” – “slums,” “dregs,” “the world of thieves”.” (DI, 245) Is it slums, dregs, the world of thieves, in short, the “social exotic” what Marlow encounters on his journey? To some extent, we could answer affirmatively. Marlow’s remembrance of the black men that accompanied



him on his journey could be taken as an example of this world of slums and dregs and thieves, or rather, cannibals,

(...) their faces were essentially quiet, even those of the one or two who grinned as they hauled at the cabin. Several exchanged short grunting phrases which seemed to settle the matter to their satisfaction. Their head-man, a young broad-chested black, severely draped in dark-blue fringed cloths, with fierce nostrils and his hair all done up artfully in oily ringlets, stood near me. 'Aha!' I said, just for good fellowship's sake. 'Catch 'im,' he snapped with a bloodshot widening of his eyes and a flash of sharp teeth –'catch'im. Give 'im to us.' (HD, 42)

Bakhtin cautions us to be very wary of the nature of the "road," for this very nature, or "peculiarity" (DI, 245) as he himself names it, is the key that serves to distinguish this chronotope of the road from another chronotope present in the novels of travel such as "the ancient novel of wandering, the Greek sophist novel (...) and, " most significantly in our case, "the baroque novel of the seventeenth century." (DI, 245) What is the element that differentiates and thus, grants these novels their distinct chronotopic value? As far as Bakhtin is concerned the function played by the road is here "played by an "alien world" separated from one's own native land by sea and distance." (DI, 245). Once we have reached this point, I would like to turn to the baroque novel of the seventeenth century since it is in the core of this genre where the image of the Gothic castle emerges as the reminder of a chronotopic reality, that of the "alien world" into which the heroine of Gothic novels is forcefully thrown, going through several survival trials, always in the hope that she will be saved eventually and thus, returned to the "real world." Bakhtin's description of the castle reads as follows:

(...) The castle is saturated through and through with a time that is historical in the narrow sense of the word, that is, the time of the historical past. The castle is the place where the lords of the feudal era lived (and consequently also the place of historical figures of the past); the traces of centuries and generations are arranged in it in visible form as various parts of its architecture, in furnishings, weapons, the ancestral portrait gallery, the family archives and in the particular human relationships involving dynastic primacy and the transfer of hereditary rights. And finally legends and traditions animate every corner of the castle and its environs through their constant reminders of past events. It is this quality that gives rise to the specific kind of narrative inherent in castles and that is then worked out in Gothic novels. (HD, 246)

We do not encounter castles as such in Marlow's journey and yet Kurtz's reclusion in his station is perceived by Marlow as that of someone who has to be liberated somehow –from his own delusion- and returned to reality. Although we cannot talk about a castle in a literal way, Marlow's description of Kurtz's station awakens in our minds, if only tangentially, the images of the Gothic castles which we, from the hero's standpoint, observe from afar positioned on a higher footing:

“The Manager stood by the wheel murmuring confidentially about the necessity of getting well away down the river before dark at all events, when I saw in the distance a clearing on the river-side and the outlines of some sort of building. ‘What's this?’ I asked. He clapped his hands in wonder. ‘The station!’ he cried. I edged in at once, still going half-speed.

“Through my glasses I saw the slope of a hill interspersed with rare trees and perfectly free from undergrowth. A long decaying building on the summit was half buried in the high grass; the large holes in the peaked roof gaped black from afar; the jungle and the woods made a background. There was no enclosure or fence of any kind, but there had

been one apparently, for near the house half a dozen slim posts remained in a row, roughly trimmed, and with their upper ends ornamented with round carved balls. The rails or whatever there had been between had disappeared. Of course the forest surrounded all that. (HD, 52)

In Gothic novels, as Bakhtin pointed out, the time contained in the castle is historical “only in the narrow sense of the word,” (DI, 246) what is the nature of the time that envelops Kurtz’s gothic-like station really about? For we, as readers, know that the “upper ends ornamented with round carved balls” (HD, 52) are really the skulls of human beings brutally slain for, apparently, the sake of civilization. What historical past, if any, envelops Marlow on his journey into the heart of darkness? His goes further back than history itself, his journey into an “alien world” is markedly pre-historic, it is, in fact, the denial of a past. As he himself states,

(...) We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. (...) The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us –who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings, we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse. We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember because we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign –and no memories. (HD, 37)

Going back to our former question: what is the chronotope in *Heart of Darkness*? If, as Bakhtin purports, the chronotope is paramount to the meaning of the narrative, constituting the “organizing centers for

the fundamental narrative events of the novel,” (DI, 250) materializing as “the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied,” (DI, 250) then consequently in the answer to the question lies ultimately the meaning that shapes the narrative before us. Nevertheless, the narrative texture of *Heart of Darkness* does not easily bend to being labelled as either a text where the chronotope of the road reigns in full sway displaying the “social exotic” or as a text that shares the chronotopic qualities of Gothic novels that takes us to “alien worlds,” their similarities to both chronotopes notwithstanding. There is a key element in Marlow’s journey into the heart of Africa that denies allegiances to any of the above chronotopes, on the one hand, and which unsettles the very unit space-time that defines and comprises the ground for the chronotope to be, on the other: the loss of the sense of time. Marlow’s account of his journey is stamped by a gradual loss of the sense of time, a fact that is intensified by the increasing theatrical and dream-like atmosphere of the surroundings to the extent that the world finally disappears “swept off without leaving a whisper or a shadow behind” (HD, 36). As he purposefully declares, this “senseless delusion” (HD, 36) that enraptures him is nothing but “truth stripped of its cloak of time” (HD, 38). We mentioned earlier the sense of loss that invades the liberated prisoner on his journey inside and outside the cave as expressed in Irigaray’s reading of Plato’s text, a sense of loss shared by Marlow upon entering the “river.” Now we realise that the spatial loss is intrinsically tied to a temporal loss. In other words space-time proves to be indissoluble. Where does this “time-less chronotope”<sup>12</sup> which seems to weave the narrative texture of *Heart of Darkness* leave us? What is the direct consequence of such “time-lessness” for the (representational) meaning of the narrative?

And yet “time” is essential for the chronotope to exist and, what is more, for its representation. Bakhtin expands on “the representational importance of the chronotope,” in the following passage:

We cannot help but be strongly impressed by the *representational* importance of the chronotope. Time becomes, in effect, palpable and visible; the chronotope makes narrative events concrete, makes them take on flesh, causes blood to flow in their veins. An event can be communicated, it becomes information, one can give precise data on the place and time of its occurrence. But the event does not become a figure. It is precisely the chronotope that provides the ground essential for the showing-forth, the representability of events. And this is so thanks precisely to the special increase in density and concreteness of time markers –the time of human life, of historical time- that occurs within well-delineated spatial areas. (DI,250)

What happens when, by using Bakhtinian terms, the time markers are neither dense nor concrete but inexistent? Where does this leave the representational force of the narrative? What is the “pro-ject”<sup>13</sup> of representation in which space-time the prisoners of the cave, according to Irigaray, lie eternally enslaved?

Our point of departure for the analysis of the narrative that conforms *Heart of Darkness* was to establish the aspects that linked Conrad’s text to a fundamental text in the history of Western thought, Plato’s myth of the cave. We delineated the symmetrical and theatrical way of representation that binds them together and now, facing the end of the journey, we expect the ultimate Truth to come to view. Marlow as the liberated prisoner acknowledges on the journey he has undertaken “the chance to find yourself. Your own reality –for yourself – not for others –what no other man can ever know.” (HD, 31) The others, the

prisoners at the back of the cave “can only see the mere show, and never can tell what it really means.” (HD, 31) What is the “reality” he faces at the end of the journey? What is the ultimate Truth of *Heart of Darkness* really about?

Conrad’s truth at the end of *Heart of Darkness* is this most frightful unenlightening darkness fleshed out in Kurtz. However, Marlow, masterly conducted by Conrad, touches upon the nature of this truth “stripped of its cloak of time,” (HD, 38) time-less and timeless, as it is, a truth he is so adamantly pressed to reveal: language, voice, discourse. It is as if all along the journey Marlow knew about the impossibility of success in the task he was about to undertake, as if he was aware of the fiction he was entering, as if he sensed the disruption between nature and criteria that the Foucauldian idea of discourse envisages as an indissoluble unity to guarantee its success. For Conrad is not oblivious to the utter ruthlessness of exploitation. It is not by chance that he has Marlow observe that

(...) The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. The idea at the back of it, not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea –something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to ... (HD, 10)

The above passage is actually contained in Irigaray’s exegesis of the allegory of the cave as “fictive representation of the repetition that leads, and can only lead, to the contemplation of the Idea. Eternally fixed.” (SOW, 249) The difference between Conrad and Irigaray though lies at the core of their differing stances as, in this case, man and woman, or rather, “the other woman,” the one that resists being defined

by the male gaze. Where Conrad cannot go any further, “eternally fixed” as the idea “at the back,” the idea one “can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to ...,” Irigaray sees the “forgotten path.” (SOW, 246) In between the inside world of the cave and the outside world there is a passage which by the very fact that is re-enacted in the cave is forgotten in the world of dichotomies “categorical differences, clear-cut distinctions, absolute discontinuities, all the confrontations of irreconcilable representations.” (SOW, 246) This is a key passage, Irigaray urges us to realise, for it is in its actual crossing where negotiation takes place. In Irigaray’s words “what has been forgotten in all these oppositions and with good reason, is how to pass through the passage, how to negotiate it – the forgotten transition.” (SOW, 247) It is in the forgotten transition that the dialogical dimension of narratives which Bakhtin ascribes to novelistic discourse can flourish. And these dialogues do not miraculously sprout out from the world represented in the work for they are already outside the world represented, entering “the world of the author, of the performer, and the world of listeners and readers.” (DI, 252) Unlike the dialogical display<sup>14</sup> of voices that Bakhtin expects in the chronotopic entities of narratives, Marlow, floating in a time-less world, is motioned exclusively by the thought of *seeing* Kurtz. Nevertheless, as the fateful and fatal meeting with Kurtz approaches, he realises it is not a face he is expecting but a voice, a discourse. As Marlow himself puts it,

There was a sense of extreme disappointment, as though I had found out I had been striving after something altogether without a substance. I couldn’t have been more disgusted if I had travelled all this way for the sole purpose of talking with Mr. Kurtz. Talking with ... I flung a shoe overboard and became aware that that was exactly what I had been

looking forward to –a talk with Kurtz. I made the strange discovery that I had never imagined him as doing, you know, but as discoursing. I didn't say to myself, 'Now I will never see him,' or 'Now I will never shake him by the hand,' but, 'Now I will never hear him.' *The man presented himself as a voice.* (my italics, HD, 47-8)

Marlow, in his role as actor and audience, participates in the game of symmetry and yet reveals the theatrical, fictional nature of the world of dichotomies he is experiencing. By acknowledging Kurtz as one single voice, as discoursing, deprived of time, and so, paradoxically eternal and unreal, Marlow caresses, so to say, the origin of not the Truth but the Lie –or the fiction, the farce- yet fails to name it: Eurocentric discourse.<sup>15</sup> And this is where Irigaray takes over.

The stage is thus set up, “but for whom?” of what?” (SOW, 251) inquired Irigaray. Conrad constructs a theatrical farce where a pre-fixed Idea of something named “Africa” is performed before a white, male audience. Conrad –through Marlow- is one of the prisoners of the cave, enslaved within a discourse that restrains him from truly turning towards the origin, which is nothing else than the possibility of another/other reality(ies), another/other truth(s). And despite all this, the feeling of exhaustion that the narrative displays and which the language that inhabits, shapes and moulds the tale conveys, is sensed as a genuine desire to get at something so far unknown while, at the same time, realising that the road taken is not the right one. If *Heart of Darkness* is to bear a mark of novelty it is precisely, and paradoxically, its felt sense of an ending which is ironically seized by the reader as a beginning in itself. In other words, the beginning of the narrative conflates with the ending. We should not understand this conflation as the means Conrad uses to mark his tale as an impasse, a mere dream or nightmare from which we wake up, for, if that be the case, a time would be restored and,



subsequently, a chronotopic value would be inscribed in the narrative. But it is not Marlow's voice we hear at the end of the tale, the voice comes from this other narrator, the unnamed one and it is not on the African Congo the characters are sailing but the English Thames, leading them into "the heart of an immense darkness" (HD, 75) from which they cannot escape. What this blending of rivers and narrators suggests is, once again, a profound and irrevocable timelessness.

Interestingly enough, in his analysis of another emblematic journey into hell, Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, Edward W. Said interprets the nature of the protagonist's disfigurement as a "breaking through time." And, he continues,

(...) In breaking through time, the artist grasps the absolute beginning, free of all natural, historical, and social *restraints*, and in so doing becomes doubly barbaric, both absolutely primitive and the representative of the absolute refinement of all history and art (Said: 1975, 185; italics mine).

The similarities between Faustus and Kurtz cannot be left unnoticed. We mentioned earlier how Kurtz is regarded as a superior man, a man with a moral aim in mind, a man for whom the boundaries between civilization and savagery finally conflate, a man who is the author of a book, a man who, as Marlow confers, "had taken a high seat among the devils of the lands." (HD, 49) Conrad's narrative via Marlow's voice is persistent in its designation of the journey as one tinged by primitiveness, as one leading to the "uttermost ends of the earth." (HD, 22) Readers find themselves emmeshed in references to primitiveness all through the narrative: "the earliest origins of the world," (HD, 35) "the playful paw-strokes of the wilderness," (HD, 43) "the somber and brooding ferocity," (HD, 43) "the glimpse of the steamboat had (...)

filled those savages with unrestrained grief,” (HD, 44). This immersion in this vocabulary reinforces the spirit of nothingness that inhabits the journey. As Said insightfully sustains, on a journey such as Faustus’s – and we may add Kurtz’s and Marlow’s- the “beginning and the end are finally one, since by demonic logic a radical element in its purity is an absolute presence basically resistant to time or development; hence the fact of its beginning is also its end” (Said, 1975: 185).

Navigating through time-lessness leaves the narrative of *Heart of Darkness* in a chronotopic void whose meaning is finally grasped in Marlow’s almost despairing realization that what he has been chasing all through his journey –all through his life- is this barbaric voice, that of Kurtz’s discoursing, that terrifying truth he fails to give a name to: Eurocentric discourse.

What lies at the heart of *Heart of Darkness*, at the point where, echoing Bakhtin, “the knots of narrative are tied and untied” (DI, 250) is nothingness, the terrible realisation that, in fact, there is nothing “new” to be said, the narrative demanding no narrator for, as Conrad reveals “it seemed to shape itself without human lips,” (HD, 30) the narrative resistant to time and development. And yet Marlow insists on having a voice “and for good or evil mine is the speech that cannot be silenced,” (HD, 38) he proclaims. Conrad was absolutely lucid in underpinning a “speech that cannot be silenced,” but his mistake –if mistake be considered- was to render Marlow this voice, for Marlow, like him, is a prisoner in the farcical performance of the cave because although he can acknowledge the experience as a performance he is still unable to “negotiate” the way out of the cave, to enact Irigaray’s “forgotten transition,” to engage himself in a dialogic relationship with the world, for what world is there to dialogue with? The world disappears, there is only one single discourse, that of Kurtz’s, that of Europe’s, and as

Marlow painfully asserts “We live as we dream, alone.”<sup>16</sup> (HD, 30) And yet Conrad’s unresolved, exhaustive and circular narrative has taken a big step: the unsettling of a discourse grounded upon a game of symmetry which precludes a deceptive world view and hence foresees and tangentially proclaims the end of such a world view. For *Heart of Darkness* might fail to *name* the culprit of deception –Eurocentric discourse- enslaved as it is within this very discourse it displays, and yet in Kurtz’s madness abides the potential which is not resolved, the potential for the other reality(ies), the other truth(s) of Irigaray’s forgotten transition to be unfolded. As Irigaray purposefully declares, to fail to recognize the Truth pre-determined by the system of representation that defines meanings and authorises the language encoded in the meaning-formation process, is to fall into madness. In other words, in the reality of the myth of the cave, we are all to see the same, every object, every shadow leading to the same primeval origin, the same Truth. Madness envelops those who see otherwise, that is to say, another truth. The powerful, uncontested and dictatorial Truth is recalled tongue-in-cheek in Irigaray’s text,

But this truth, which is madness to fail to recognise –madness being a kind of excess, of drifting away from all relation to truth, unpegged to truth’s standard –would always already have covered over, erased (or sublimated?) the scene of another, forgotten, “truth” or “reality” whose fate is secured and sealed by the discourse of Socrates. (SOW, 267)

And so, who is the carrier of “the speech that cannot be silenced”? I believe the utter nothingness that envelops Conrad’s text to stretch far beyond the depiction of the African continent. However, this stretching is a result of the circular development –or rather, non-

development- of the narrative, encompassing “the sepulchral city” of Brussels of the beginning and the London of the ending, BUT at the heart of the journey there is AFRICA. In other words, without the African continent there would be no *Heart of Darkness* and what can we expect from a chronotope that multiplies by zero its spatial and temporal axis? If the chronotope zero of the narrative is to carry a representational function this is unquestionably the primitiveness, the nothingness, the heart of darkness at the back of Plato’s cave that Africa unabatedly stands for.

As an African writer, Chinua Achebe’s article expounds a speech that cannot be silenced; as a woman, Irigaray’s re-reading of Plato’s allegory of the cave forwards a speech that cannot be silenced. Ama Ata Aidoo, as an African and a woman, weaves a work that proves she also is endowed with a speech that cannot be silenced. The ghost unveiled, the chronotopic value of Africa can be imprinted.

## *Two*

*(Auto)biographical Fiction: The Facing and De-Facing of Africa*

It is uncomfortable. This fairly new feeling of being under pressure to talk about oneself ... But it is there, the product of a curiosity in others. To know about the freak that is you, and of your own need to declare your existence ... or your right to exist. To be. (...) the pain, the frustrations and almost despair exclusive to being an African (or black), a woman, and a writer.<sup>1</sup>

“Unwelcome Pals and Decorative Slaves or Glimpses of Women As Writers and Characters in Contemporary African Literature,” Ama Ata Aidoo

Thus the outlawed element –called the slave and the repressed in other symbolic systems- rules without appeal or recall the very text that outlaws it. This becomes clear if we question its overdetermination, and unmask the figures, forms, signs, that ensure its present coherence .<sup>2</sup>

*Speculum of the Other Woman*, Luce Irigaray

Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* launches the African continent into an irretrievable dark pit. To circumscribe *Heart of Darkness* in the realm of fiction and oppose it to the realm of “reality” in an attempt to mollify the excruciatingly painful implications of colonialism is first, to obviate the dubious frontiers that divide fiction from reality and, secondly, to undermine the power of tropes, which nurture and furnish literary discourse. As we have described in the previous chapter, *Heart of Darkness* haunts the imagination of the African writer who struggles to

restore a chronotopic value to the African continent. Two questions emerge: (1) how does the African writer face the African void? And (2) how does the African writer carry out this reinscription in time and space? A question at the back of the mind: is there any literary trope available to shape the experience of the African writer in the terrain of his/her work?

In this chapter I will demonstrate how the trope of prosopopeia as comprehended by the literary critic Paul de Man, outlines the development of the African voices that emanate amid the turmoil of the postcolonial arena and struggle to materialize and thus re-imprint their existence in the world at large. What is then the nature of the trope of prosopopeia?

“Autobiography As De-Facement,” the essay where de Man introduces and probes the trope of prosopopeia, constitutes the fourth chapter in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, a book which, as the title overtly points out, has nothing to do with postcolonialism.<sup>3</sup> Why then its presumed presence in the literary devices of African writing? Paul de Man’s essay stems from his critical stance on the non-fictional quality of autobiographical works. In the history of literary criticism on autobiographical discourse, two lines of thought –which are nonetheless interrelated and very often occur concurrently in the same critical work– have to be distinguished: the much contested literary status of autobiography as a major genre, on the one hand, and the ubiquitous distinction between autobiography and fiction, on the other.<sup>4</sup> De Man dismisses immediately the elevation of autobiography to major literary genre that the first line of thought in literary criticism on autobiographical discourse sets as a goal in itself, for, as he boldly affirms, this can only result in “embarrassment” and he further adds,

(...) compared to tragedy, or epic, or lyric poetry, autobiography always looks slightly disreputable and self-indulgent in a way that may be symptomatic of its incompatibility with the monumental dignity of aesthetic values. Whatever the reason may be, autobiography makes matters worse by responding poorly to this elevation in status. (RR, 68-9)

Thus, it is the taken-for-granted distinction between autobiography and fiction that de Man finds particularly troubling and which he unsettles by propounding prosopopeia as the trope of autobiographical discourse. Interestingly enough, the work upon which de Man's critical analysis unfolds is a text by William Wordsworth, "Essays Upon Epitaphs."<sup>5</sup> The introductory remark "interestingly enough" does not respond to any random act for if we were to pinpoint a distinctive autobiographical work by Wordsworth, "The Prelude" would be signalled out as "the" autobiography par excellence. Nevertheless, and as de Man purposefully will disclose, the borders that separate autobiography from fiction are very blurred indeed. Why then the choice of "Essays Upon Epitaphs" to prove his point?<sup>6</sup>

What is "Essays Upon Epitaphs" about? What kind of experience is there related? The narrative current of "Essays Upon Epitaphs" is very simple: a traveller sets out on a journey and on this journey he encounters the lettered stones of epitaphs. The inscription, the letters on the stone that conform the epitaph are, according to Wordsworth, the means human beings have at hand to beat mortality and have thus, in a way, immortality inscribed in humanity by an act of remembrance, which, in the ultimate case is an act of love. And, most significantly, as de Man urges us to notice, "Essays Upon Epitaphs" is a discourse of "self-restoration" where the deceased, by the aforementioned act of



remembrance, is *restored* to the world of the living. I would like to turn to Wordsworth's essay in full length:

The first requisite, then, in an Epitaph is, that it should speak, in a tone which shall sink into the heart, the general language of humanity as connected with the subject of death (...) This general language may be uttered so strikingly as to entitle an epitaph to high praise; yet it cannot lay claim to the highest unless other excellencies be superadded. Passing through all intermediate steps, we will attempt to determine at once what these excellencies are, and wherein consists the perfection of this species of composition – It will be found to like in a due proportion of the common or universal feeling of humanity to sensations excited by a distinct and clear conception, conveyed to the reader's mind, of the individual whose death is deplored and whose memory is to be preserved; at least of his character as, after death, it appeared to those who loved him and lament his loss. (...) It is truth, and of the highest order; for, though doubtless, things are not apparent which did exist; yet the object being looked at through this medium, parts and proportions are brought into distinct view which before had been only imperfectly or unconsciously seen: it is truth hallowed by love. (EUE, 931)

The common belief that in autobiography subject-protagonist and author converge and that it is life that produces autobiography is undermined by de Man's incisive and unsettling question: "can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of this medium?" (RR,

69) For if that be the case the mimetic game at work that determines autobiographical discourse as *the figure to the referent* is opened up to another possibility, that of *the referent to the figure*; a referent which ends up being “no longer clearly and simply a referent at all but something more akin to a fiction.” (RR, 69)

If the distinction between fiction and autobiography is undecidable and if, as de Man suggests, autobiography “is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading,” (RR, 70) what figure –or trope– encapsulates the reading of “Essays Upon Epitaphs”? We already know the answer: the figure of prosopopeia, now we need to delucidate what this figure of speech entails.

When the traveller of Wordsworth’s text is invited to “pause”<sup>7</sup> by the voice that suggestively emanates from the inscription of the epitaphs, he is invaded by a flow of images,

(...) visible appearances or immediate impressions, lively and affecting analogies of life as a journey –death as a sleep overcoming the tired wayfarer– of mis-fortune as a storm that falls suddenly upon him– of beauty as a flower that passeth away, or of innocent pleasure as one that may be gathered– of virtue that standeth firm as a rock against the beating waves; –of hope “undermined insensibly like the poplar by the side of the river that has fed it,” or blasted in a moment like a pine-tree by the stroke of lightning upon the mountain-top –of admonitions and heart-stirring remembrances, like a refreshing breeze that comes without warning, or the taste of the waters of an unexpected fountain. These, and similar suggestions, must have given, formerly, *to the language of the senseless stone a voice enforced and endeared by the benignity of that nature with which it was in unison.* (italics mine, EUE, 931)

In other words, it is his life, his experiences that invade his imagination on the journey undertaken, so much so that that which is recovered, remembered, is not only the name on the epitaph but his own life, in a way, his own “epitaph.” And the language that motions him all along is that of the “senseless stone” which is given a voice. This is where de Man’s analysis takes the floor by affirming that the account of one’s experiences –call it autobiography or otherwise– is “the fiction of the voice-from-beyond-the grave” (RR, 77), and this fiction is enacted in the figure of *prosopopeia* which, as its etymology *prosopon poien*, reveals, “confers a mask or a face” to “an absent, deceased or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter’s reply.” (RR, 77) Hence, “voice assumes mouth, eye, and finally face.” (RR, 77)

Throughout his argument, de Man stresses the specular cognition inherent in the trope of *prosopopeia*, for echoing Wordsworth, he urges us to realise that the epitaph “is open to the day; the sun looks upon the stone.” (RR, 75) The tropological spectrum derived from *prosopopeia* and which delineates a journey that goes from *sun* to *eye* to *language* is engendered by the sun, used in its duality as figure of nature and figure of knowledge, which in our minds awakens the memory of this other text, Plato’s allegory of the cave, discussed in the first chapter. Thus, going back to “Essays Upon Epitaphs,” and as de Man forcefully states “the sun becomes the eye that reads the text of the epitaph.” (RR, 75)

Thus, I would like to round up de Man’s study on autobiographical discourse as grounded in Wordsworth’s “Essays Upon Epitaphs,” by highlighting first, the conflation of autobiography and fiction that the analysis exumes and secondly, the specular dimension granted the trope of *prosopopeia* -with its *sun* to *eye* to *language* journey-, which brands it

as a figure sustained on visibility and voice. To proceed, a question to be tackled: what does all this have to do with African literature?

To turn our eyes to Africa, I would like first of all, to go back to the passage from Wordsworth's "Essays Upon Epitaphs" quoted on page 60. Three words capture and summarise the ultimate and conclusive experience of the traveller facing the lettered stones of the epitaphs: truth, knowledge and love. The letters "Pause, traveller" inscribed in the stone of the epitaph are the catalyst that stirs his coming to terms with the meaning of life, of existence and all this harbored by a positivistic reliance on love. It is the search for the ultimate understanding, the ultimate knowledge, the ultimate truth that besets the life of human beings. It is this very search that galvanized Marlow's journey, yet Wordsworth's traveller is reassured by an enlightening and affirming humaneness at the end of his journey; he is enveloped by a sense of fulfilment that totally escapes the protagonist of Conrad's text. What separates their irreconcilable experiences is a reality in all its manifestations—geographical, historical, economical, political and literary—: Africa.

The familiarity, the understanding, the perfect communion with nature, the love with which Wordsworth's traveller meets the Epitaphs function as a counterpoint to Marlow's experience in African territory where he is bombarded by unfamiliar sights, ignorance and a nature that does not entice him to commune with it but rather to separate from. In order to unleash an exercise of simultaneous reading and to reinforce the dismal gap that distances Wordsworth's traveller from Conrad's, I would like to reproduce a passage from *Heart of Darkness* which contrasts with the two passages from Wordsworth previously quoted:

Every day the coast looked the same, as though we had not moved, but we passed various places –trading places- with names like Gran' Bassam, Little Popo, names that seemed to belong to some sordid farce acted in front of a sinister back-cloth. The idleness of a passenger, my isolation amongst all these men with whom I had no point of contact, the oily and languid sea, the uniform sombreness of the coast, seemed to keep me away from the truth of things with the toil of a mournful and senseless delusion (Conrad, 1898: 16-7).

*Heart of Darkness* could be read in an epitaph-like light and interpreted as Conrad's particular obituary of Africa, but this is an epitaph which, unlike Wordsworth's epitaphs, leads to nothingness, to the utter void. Why is it that the sun, this most powerful tropological figure, evades Conrad's text? Marlow's, Kurtz's, Conrad's eyes remain blind to the African stone. And more significantly still, the lettered stones that conform the epitaphs of Wordsworth's text and which motion the imagination of the traveller are eternally deluded in the darkness of Conrad's narrative, for, as de Man remarks "an unlettered stone would leave the sun suspended in nothingness." (RR, 77)

The African writer, like Wordsworth's traveller, pauses at the heed of this seemingly dark, unlettered stone of the epitaph of Africa for *their* eyes, burdened with the light of their experiences as Africans "see" what Marlow's, Kurtz's, Conrad's eyes cannot fathom. Their task as African writers is to letter the stone and to successfully "letter the stone" they draw strength from the prosopopeia essence of de Man's autobiographical discourse.<sup>8</sup> African writers must *face* –in its dual meaning of confrontation and shaping- "the absent, deceased, voiceless entity" that the Western imagination has made of Africa by conferring "upon it the power of speech," (RR, 77) and the figure, the trope that

posits this possibility is that of prosopopeia. Through the African voices, Africa assumes “mouth, eye, and finally face,” (RR, 77) its restoration is being enacted.

The inscription in immortality that envelops Wordsworth’s essay is particularly interesting to read in the context of *Heart of Darkness*. Upon Kurtz’s death and Marlow’s return to Europe, the latter is seized by the terrible responsibility to “write” Kurtz’s epitaph: should Kurtz be remembered as a “great” man, or rather, should his memory be painted by the decrepit creature Marlow encounters at the end of his journey into the African continent? The ambivalence of Marlow’s position is expressed through his own words:

(...) I thought his memory was like the other memories of the dead that accumulate in every man’s life –a vague impress on the brain of shadows that had fallen on it in their swift and final passage, but before the high and ponderous door, between the tall houses of a street as still and decorous as a well-kept alley in a cemetery, I had a vision of him on the stretcher opening his mouth voraciously as if to devour all the earth with all its mankind. He lived then before me, he lived as much as he had ever lived –a shadow darker than the shadow of the night, and draped nobly in the folds of a gorgeous eloquence (Conrad, 1898: 72).

I read Marlow’s ambivalence towards Kurtz’s epitaph as yet another example of his inability to go any further in his interpretation of what he has experienced, as we pointed out in the previous chapter. The placidness of imagination encountered by Wordsworth’s traveler contrasts with Marlow’s haunting vision of Kurtz; his actions foment this ambivalence for, on the one hand, he refuses to give Kurtz’s book –the

recorded, written account of his experience- to several people who voraciously want to know details about commerce and trade in Congo and which would inscribe him in the European world of great names, and, on the other, he opts for telling a lie to Marlow's fiancée for her to preserve a memory of his as a "great man." (Conrad, 1898: 72)

However, de Man's argument does not stop at such celebratory, perfectly rounded-up ending. For the "facing" that is involved in prosopopeia only makes sense if conscripted in a system of representation that renders language metaphorical. In other words, if language is figure (or metaphor, or trope), the representational process that "faces" *can, should and must* "de-face;" or, echoing de Man, the very representation process that "faces" *can, should and must* deprive and disfigure "to the precise extent that it restores." (RR, 81) And this "facing" and "de-facing" is what gives prosopopeia its literary force and what makes de Man's study on autobiography relevant to the work of African writers.

The relationship between Africa and Africans does not work in a linear way, that is to say, there is no unique African experience that can be attributed to Africa. Indeed it could also be argued whether we should refer to Africas, in the plural. The use of the plural would be more appropriate and thus, rather than "experience" in the singular, we should turn to "experiences." In the same way that the relationship between author and referent proved to be highly debatable under de Man's scrutiny, so does the relationship between African authors and Africa-as-referent constitute a ground for debate. For, is the stone lettered equally by the different African voices? Naturally no. There is a process – a lettering of the stone- but no single lettering, no unique epitaph.

Chinua Achebe's Presidential Fellow Lecture for The World Bank Group presented on June 17, 1998, summons the ongoing demise of

Africa stored in Western, goodwilling notwithstanding, minds.<sup>9</sup> His text poignantly called “Africa Is People” is the outcome of his personal experience in an anniversary meeting of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) held in Paris. His “initial puzzlement” (AIP, 1) at receiving the invitation –“I accepted without quite figuring out what I could possibly contribute to such a meeting” (AIP, 1) - continued throughout the meeting –“Here was I, an African novelist among predominantly European and American bankers and economists; a guest, as it were, from the world’s poverty-stricken provinces to a gathering of the rich and powerful in the metropolis,” (AIP, 1) - until he received “something like a stab of lightning.” (AIP, 1) Here was he, an African novelist, listening to the structural devices engineered by first-rate Western economists to solve the impoverishment problems of Africa, a problem which, as the recent results showed in the African countries where such economic schemes were functioning, stubbornly prevailed. Could it be that the financial planning forwarded by such economists simply did not work? “Be patient, it will work in time, trust me,” (AIP, 1) retorted an American expert. Achebe’s reply is worth quoting in length:

Here you are, spinning your fine theories to be tried out in your imaginary laboratories. You are developing new drugs and feeding them to a bunch of laboratory guinea pigs and hoping for the best. I have news for you. Africa is not fiction. Africa is people, real people. Have you thought of that? You are brilliant people, world experts. You may even have the very best intentions. But have you thought, really thought, of Africa as people? (AIP, 1-2)

To urge the readers worldwide to think of Africa as people is what lies at the core of the work of African writers. How are they to fill the



chronotope? By inscribing people in time and space, by supplying the continent with the voices and faces that have been erased and forgotten in the laboratories of the Western imagination. As Achebe stated, “Africa is not fiction,” yet there is a fiction in Africa, a language of the imagination striving to leave its imprint in the world at large.

Books on the history of Africa abound and yet, even the most Africa-friendly fall irretrievably into a listing of historical facts directly welded to the European deeds in the continent. John Reader’s *Africa: A Biography of the Continent* offers a space where an innovative approach to the history of Africa is laid down.<sup>10</sup> The deliberate use of the term “biography” in favor of “history” puts forward a different analysis of the shaping of the African continent, since the past events that are systematically recorded, analysed and correlated in the branch of knowledge designated as “history” take on a “people” flavour when the word “biography” is encoded. Let me elaborate on this further, the abstractness that a list of events exudes is counterbalanced by a prosopopeic process –that of facing- where chronology is no longer the master axis. As Reader himself expresses in the preface,

As a “biography” of the continent, this book presents Africa as a dynamic and exceptionally fecund entity, where the evolution of humanity is merely one of many developmental trajectories that are uniquely evident there. (...) Human evolution is an important case in point, because critical stages of human evolution were adaptive responses to the ecological imperatives of the African environment. (...) Quite apart from its inherent logic, pursuing processes (rather than the historical sequence of events, for instance) frees the narrative from the tyranny of time and place. The book does not deal with Africa region by region, period by period. Instead, it covers in detail the instances in which the

*process* under discussion is most clearly demonstrated, leaving as implicit the fact that similar courses of development undoubtedly occurred elsewhere and perhaps at other times. (italics mine, Reader: xi)

Behind Achebe's inveterate claim "Africa Is People" and Reader's sensitive approach to Africa as " a dynamic and exceptionally fecund entity" there lurks a prosopopeic act in which by a process of facing Africa and its people -who, as Ngugi wa' Thiongo stated, "have been written off the pages of international discourse and history"- the zero chronotope is being contested.<sup>11</sup>

The specular imagery that foregrounds Plato's myth of the cave and which shapes Wordsworth's argument in his analysis of epitaphs is grounded upon the perfect game of symmetry that Irigaray pointed out as *sine-qua-non* condition for the theatrical set up -farce- to be sustained. This symmetrical perfection is based on the unidirectional, univocal reflection of an original Truth, original Reality which nourishes the mandates of Eurocentric discourse, or as Irigaray would put it, the discourse of the Law of the Father. The Sun illuminates the stone, and the eyes of the poet are fed by the rays of the Sun yet the specificity of each reflection is missed in the mechanics of a discourse that congregates all reflections in one, the one demarcated exclusively by the eyes of the Father-Sun-God. These Eurocentric eyes enslaved as they are in the specular imagery that grants them their existence and power - and limitation- cannot see "the specificity of the reflections" and thus Africa is erased, forgotten, negated, de-faced, its "bio-graphy" renounced. Hence, not confronting the Law of the Father, not questioning Eurocentrism, not opposing the Father's setup will result in, according to Irigaray,

(...) refusing all knowledge, henceforth of the specificity of the reflections, or indeed the specularizing setup, the speculative machinery, all of which are thus saved from determinations or conflicts and run no risk of *historical* manipulations or recasting, “for example.” Conforming to the Father’s “discourse” is thus equivalent to the “son’s” renouncing “his” image, “his” reflection, “his” bio-graphy.<sup>12</sup>

African writers cannot conform to the Father’s “discourse” for this discourse negates their very existence as Africans; Africa’s image(s), Africa’s reflection(s), Africa’s bio-graphy(ies) will not be renounced.

It is from the trope of prosopopeia that I intend to read the work of Ama Ata Aidoo and I deliberately call it African (Auto)biography as an indebtedness to the above contributions -Achebe’s, Reader’s and Irigaray’s- together with Paul de Man. De Man’s powerful and ambivalent treatment of the term “autobiography” branding its allegiance to the trope of prosopopeia, the art of facing and de-facing, instills on the work of African writers a sense of vitality that beats the nothingness of Africa’s *Heart of Darkness*. “Autobiography,” as de Man repeatedly informs us is “not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding which occurs, to some degree in all texts.”<sup>13</sup> (RR, 70) How the biographical Africa is restored in the unlettered epitaph of historical Africa depends on the “auto,” that is to say, the experiences of the peoples of Africa as evinced by the African writers and since, as we mentioned earlier, the use of the plural on account of African experiences is paramount, that act of “facing” and “defacing” Africa to “face” it again is end-less. It is about time to see how the stones have been lettered for, “Who and what we are” is, as Aimé Césaire argued, “A most worthy question!”<sup>14</sup>

*I*

*Lettering the Stone: Négritude and  
the Pan-African Ideal*

Who and what Are we? A most worthy question!<sup>15</sup>

*Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, Aimé

Cesaire

But why listen to the African world and [its] writers when you know that the least song, no matter how much the author felt it, contains a powerful explosive which can question the foundations of the colonial order, and the very structures of the Western universe and the world? Don't be deceived. We live in an epoch where artists carry testaments, where they all more or less are committed. One has to take sides; all the great works of an African artist or writer bear witness against the racism and imperialism of the West.<sup>16</sup>

*Présence Africaine*, Alioune Diop

If the eighteenth and nineteenth century marked the development and flourish of Imperialism in Africa, the twentieth century is stamped by the decline of Imperialism after the sense of absolute power that ingratiated Europeans faltered with the aftermath of the two World Wars. Imperialism weakened, the road to independence opened up for Africa, but what was Africa like when the movements for independence beat their drums and had their voices heard in the milieu of the African continent?

The road to independence was caught at the crossroads of two facts of European imperialism whose repercussions filter through to our contemporary world: (1) the division of Africa into nation-states and (2) the invention of a traditional Africa that suited Europe (Davidson, 1991

& 1972; Reader, 1998). The demarcation of national boundaries which was carried out by European powers in the 1880's was a direct consequence of the international acknowledgment of the Congo Free State which Leopold II of Belgium so tenaciously sought after in the Berlin Conference of 1884-5. This worldwide recognition of the Congo as Belgian territory spurred the feelings of ownership of the other European powers who decidedly set upon themselves the task to divide up the African continent into European-made frontiers, totally oblivious of kinship and ethnic realities and showing no concern for African culture areas. The scramble for Africa was thus performed. The outcome of such disproportionate manipulation of an entire continent is, factually speaking, that "no fewer than 177 ethnic "culture areas" in Africa are divided by national boundaries" (Reader, 1998: 569). That was an Africa painted exclusively in European colours, alien to Africans. The world at large could be encapsulated on a map whose contours were demarcated by European conquest alone as the experience of the child Marlow demonstrates,

(...) when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (...) I would put my finger on it and say: When I grow up I will go there. (...) There was one yet -the biggest- the most blank, so to speak- that I had a hankering after (Conrad, 1898: 11).

What the scramble for Africa amounts to, is, in fact, Europe's filling up of this extremely blank space that fed the imagination of many young Marlows.

The interwar years experience a change of attitude of European powers towards their African colonies. The conquering drive that motioned Europeans to Africa, their alleged civilising intentions notwithstanding, was aimed exclusively at exploiting the African resources for European improvement. The European interest towards their African colonies fluctuated depending on whether the profit made was deemed sufficient for the State revenue. Bismarck's ambiguous position towards the German colonial policy exemplifies well Europe's ambivalent interest in Africa. The Chancellor detected the impracticalities of implementing a political schema that involved the maintenance of colonies abroad, yet the patriotic feeling that swept Germany at the time overwhelmed Bismarck's sensible insight and he too surrendered to colonialist euphoria, expecting companies, not the State, to take full responsibility. Expectations were not fulfilled and the colonial Empire turned against Bismarck who was forced to resign.

The case of Leopold II of Belgium was a different matter. Prompted by his father's -King Leopold I- failed attempts at establishing a colony with firm, political links with the homeland, a place where Belgian citizens could emigrate, he set himself the task to obtain a colony and turned this goal into his personal venture. We must take into account that the tiny country that Belgium is, experienced in the nineteenth-century a rapid process of industrialization with a subsequent considerable increase of population. Therefore a colony would, in Leopold I's mind, become a vessel for large-scale emigration. His son took up his father's unsuccessful endeavour and materialised it in the Congo Free State. However, we must stress the fact that Leopold II financed the project and thus pursued his ambition with money coming from his personal wealth.

In a way, Leopold II's desire to have the Belgian imprint on African soil acknowledged unleashed a will from the European countries to hold strongly onto the African territory allotted to them in an attempt to keep it away from foreign hands, and as a pawn to be used in the event of negotiation. To put it bluntly, the reasoning goes like this: I want it so that another one will not have it. The truth is that except for South Africa with its diamond and gold mines and Congo whose resources were strenuously exploited by Leopold II's "dubious methods," Africa, on the whole, did not prove to be a very lucrative investment. As Reader bluntly indicates,

(...) the figures showed that the continent was neither a good investment nor particularly relevant to European economies. During the 1870s, for instance, Africa accounted for little more than 5 per cent of Britain's trade –and most of that came from Egypt and South Africa.- Even Rhodes's British South Africa company did not pay a single dividend during the thirty-three years it administered Rhodesia (Reader, 1998: 570).

Nevertheless, a significant change occurred as a concomitant of World War I: the "conquering drive" behind European ventures in Africa turned into an acceptance of responsibility towards the African possessions. In other words, Africa was viewed as an obligation that needed to be taken care of. This care was translated into the establishment of civil institutions that promoted and consolidated the prevailing capitalist model of the nation-state. Africa continued to be viewed by Europeans as a pre-historic "blank space," yet now, harnessed by "knowledge" –the private company men that populate Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* were substituted by college degree administrators-, morally secured by civilising aims and determined to establish nationwide



government, these high commissioners engaged themselves with the study of what *they* regarded as African traditions. The by-product of such study was actually the *invention* of African traditions. It is interesting to notice how once Europeans took on moral responsibility for their African colonies, education stood first in the list of requirements to become an Administrator. An honours degree from a distinguished university –Oxford, Cambridge or Trinity College in Dublin, in the British case- was expected together with a good athletic record, as Edward Lumley, Tanganika’s District Commissioner between 1923 and 1945 asserted (Reader, 1998: 605).

In *Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the West*, Edward W. Said contends that the Orient has been conceptualised, interpreted, in short, *invented* by the West to preserve the strength and identity and therefore power of European culture. “Orientalism,” according to Said, has to be tackled as a discourse that managed to *produce* the Orient “politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period” (Said, 1978: 36). Differences notwithstanding, it is my belief that Africa’s invention by Europe is an instant of “Orientalist discourse” in which not the Orient, but an “Africa” is being produced *politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively*. It is not by chance that, as Reader indicates, “between 1905 and 1914 about eighty books on African ethnography had been published in Europe” and that linguists took on an interest in “the grammar and phonetics of African languages.”<sup>17</sup>

Thus, as Reader points out, and in a sort of “Orientalist” fashion, “in the post-First World War years, African studies moved on from the mere recording of “primitive” peoples and their physical characteristics to the study of their institutions, customs, beliefs and modes of

livelihood” in an attempt to make the civilizing process “more acceptable to the indigenous population” (Reader, 1998: 607).

Among the most pernicious of the traditions bequeathed to Africa by the colonial period tribalism firmly stands out. The existence of different ethnic groups is not a characteristic which can be attributed exclusively to Africa but the nasty, dark connotations that the word “tribe” aroused at the beginning of the twentieth century certainly is. The classification of people into different “tribes” involved first an identification of the tribe and its kinsmen/women to be followed by a pinpointing on a map of their territorial domain. But most significantly, colonial “science” also *ordained* the relationships that bound the tribes together, impervious to the fact that among the Maasai and the Kikuyu in Kenya, the Zulu and the Xhosa in South Africa, the Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo in Nigeria, and the Hutu and the Tutsi in Rwanda and Burundi, there was more that kept them together than actually separated them. Yet the maps had to be drawn and the classification enacted, hence expounding the perilous dimension of what Soyinka denominates “the European compartmentalist intellect.”<sup>18</sup>

Europe approached Africa as a father to a child, a child who must grow into a functioning member of the world community on economical and political terms, yet what escaped Europe at this point was that the allegiance to the father –there was no doubt that Africa had to be governed by European powers- was not permanent. Independence loomed ahead, for while the division of Africa was being enacted, the West was being confronted with a movement which would provide Africans with a tool to defeat this very division: Pan-Africanism.

“Division” stood at the core of the Africa invented by the colonial powers: the continent was divided up into European-created nation-states, on the one hand, and the classification into perfectly distinct

ethnic groups –tribes- carried out by the scientific colonial mind exuded separatism rather than union. Pan-Africanism, on the contrary, is a call for unification, the unification of the black peoples around the world. As the word itself reveals, the prefix “pan” –meaning “all”- encompasses the belief in the union and cooperation of all members of a specific group, in our case, the group being the whole of the black world. But, how did “Pan-Africanism” originate and what did “Pan-Africanism” entail for Africa and Africans?

The origins of the Pan-Africanist movement are not to be found in African territory but rather, and principally, in the Western hemisphere of the world for it was developed by members of the African diaspora. The movement came to be a reaction to the fever of racism and intolerance that befell non-whites around the world with black people positioned at the very bottom of the evolutionary ladder. As a matter of fact, in the nineteenth and twentieth century in Europe, racism and cultural chauvinism were at their peak. The combination of commerce, Christianity and military force proved to be quite successful in demonstrating Europe’s display of power from a practical point of view and indeed when this success is measured concomitantly with a scientific thought that declared whites superior on grounds of an evolutionary discourse based on social Darwinism, the superiority of the white race was not to be disputed. Unless, of course, you are one of the non-privileged blacks who refuses to be systematically placed at the bottom of evolution. Among those who resisted, we should mention three of the founding figures of Pan-Africanism: Edward Blyden from St. Thomas, Virgin Islands –he was later naturalised Liberian-, W.E.B. du Bois from the United States –he later obtained Ghanaian citizenship- and Marcus Garvey from Jamaica.<sup>19</sup> Although a common goal united them – the full liberation of the black race-, their ways to combat oppression

and their philosophy regarding the essence and future of black people differed, sometimes significantly, from one another. Henceforth, Blyden emphasized the “Africanness” and “uniqueness” of the “race” of people originating from Africa endorsing a “repatriation” of American blacks to Liberia, W.E.B. Du Bois launched his criticism against the supremacy of whites on an intellectual basis and to him we are indebted for the organisation of the first four Pan-African congresses held between 1919 and 1927, and, finally, Marcus Garvey who infused “the high-powered level of intellectual and political discourse to the level of mass organisation” (Anyidoho, 1989: 14), and who is credited with the coining of the phrase “Africa for the Africans.” Their differences notwithstanding, what I would like to highlight here is the Pan-Africanists’ postulation that there exists a black world whose boundaries, as Kofi Anyidoho contends, are not defined geographically but linguistically by the word “black,” which is in itself a very slippery category, as James Weldon Johnson’s “white black” protagonist exemplifies in one of Afro-America’s most remarkable novels, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. In Johnson’s novel, the unnamed narrator, a very light-skinned black, relates his travails in life as he successfully manages to cross the colour line and finally –though unhappily- settle down as a member of the white race.<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting here how Kwame Anthony Appiah in *In My Father’s House* problematizes Pan-Africanism on the grounds of its being defined exclusively by race, a fact he admonishingly declares a “burdensome legacy.”<sup>21</sup>

However, the fact remains that, over and above definitorial difficulties, the existence of a black world is agreed on, and what keeps blacks around the world united is a common shared record of pain and oppression where the Middle passage prefigures as the door to the very

unwelcoming presence of the slave past, which links black people around the world to a common cultural history of subjugation. The Pan-Africanist congress of 1945 held in Manchester gathered the presence of young Africans, the benefactors of the changing attitude of colonial powers towards Africa that occurred after World War I and which promoted the education of colonial subjects. Among the young Africans present in the congress, we should mention Nkwame Nkrumah, future president of Ghana, Jomo Kenyatta, future president of Kenya, and Nnamdi Azikiwe, future president of Nigeria. All of them envisioned in the Pan-African Ideal a means towards the independence of the whole of Africa. Nkwame Nkrumah's success in leading and organising the independence movement of Ghana, former Gold Coast, marked a beginning in the subsequent independence movements in other African countries which held Ghana as a model to be followed. Nkrumah's Pan-African Ideal stretched beyond the confines of Ghana to include the whole of sub-saharan Africa; for him a future United States of Africa was a possible reality. It is to him that we are indebted for the formation of the O.A.U (Organisation of African Unity). Hence, the discourse underlying the Pan-African Ideal is the acknowledgment of a history of pain and oppression that unites black people all over the world. The Middle passage is a crucial chapter in the history of diasporian blacks as well as Africans, the reality of the slave past enveloping the individual histories of blacks inside and outside the continent. Miriam Makeba, South-Africa's emblematic singer, captures this unifying spirit in her song "West Wind," where she pleads with Mother Africa to keep the whole of its African children united: "don't divide us, unify us."<sup>22</sup>

Pan-Africanism should not be understood as a movement that originated under certain circumstances and lasted for a specific period. The Pan-African Ideal is an unbending reality which lies at the heart of

the coinage and emergence of the term “Afrocentricity,” a sociological treatise-cum-doctrine that postulates that only by placing Africa at the center of their experiences can black people truly be liberated. The creator of the term, Molefi Kete Asante, captures the Pan-African Ideal inherent in Afrocentricity in his firm belief in the unity of the black world. Henceforth, in his preface to *Afrocentricity*, the book where the Afrocentric doctrine of liberation is enacted, Asante affirms that,

I wrote *Afrocentricity* because I was convinced, and I remain convinced, that the best road to all health, economic, political, cultural, and psychological in the African community is through a centered positioning of ourselves within our own story. We can never again be shoved to the side in our own history or relegated to being back-up players to Europeans in the grand drama of humanity. Ours is a remarkable journey of liberation over the past five hundred years. We are on the verge of sanity, often with excursions into insanity from time to time as we try to throw off the vestiges of Europeanized minds. (Asante, 2003: vii)

This exhibition of union among Africans and liberation from the colonial powers that enslaved them, could not be brought to effect unless the world “black” was cleansed from the inferior meaning enforced by Eurocentric discourse. “Black” had to be re-named, validated and celebrated. And nowhere was this process of revalorization most effectively purported than in the literary field where the term “négritude” was coined. Whereas Pan-Africanism worked more around political coordinates, “négritude” served the literary ventures of those black authors –the term was by no means restricted to African authors- whose first task as writers was to letter the stone of the epitaph of their black experiences. In other words, we could affirm that

the Pan-africanist political force found its literary expression in “négritude.” The work that ensues is Aimé Césaire’s *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, published in 1939, the seed of “négritude.”<sup>23</sup>

Aimé Césaire was not an African from the African continent, he was born in Martinique, a French colony, -nowadays a département- and his literature was shaped by the French language, not English. However, as we emphasized already, the frontiers of the “black world” envisaged by Pan-Africanism integrate linguistic differences in the belief that there is a common experience of oppression and sufferance for all the blacks scattered around the world, so, the “négritude” coined, expressed and celebrated in the work in French of a Martinican poet does indeed have a place in the black world of African literature in English. Just like the origins of Pan-Africanism transport us back to the diasporic black world, the seed of négritude, or at least, the first inspirational source of the négritude writers, is to be located in the Diaspora and more specifically in the North-American continent where the richness of black culture was explored and vindicated by the black voices that constituted the Harlem Renaissance. This art movement geographically located in New York’s Harlem district and temporarily conscripted in the mid- and late- 1920s was decisive to reevaluate the increasingly debased black world projected by white America’s racist imagination.

Poets like Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer and Countee Cullen draw their literary material from their experiences of being black in white America. In the light of their creative work, this “black experience” is expressed through an exploration of “colour” or, to put it simply, what it means to be black in America, and in a discovered allegiance with an African past that binds them to a universal sense of humanity and thus inscribes them in the realm of the world as active, free beings. Hence, in “The Harlem Dancer,” McKay conveys, identifies

and shares the feeling of strangeness that invades the black individual through the figure of the black dancer, “But looking at her falsely-smiling face, / I knew her self was not in that strange place” (McKay, 1917: 35); in Hugues’ “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” the poet’s voice recalls his African past, “I’ve known rivers: / I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human veins / My soul has grown deep like the rivers / I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young / I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep./ I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it” (Hughes, 1922: 65); the religious drive of Countee Cullen’s voice in “Heritage” has to be read as his plea to have “black” inscribed in Christianity, “Lord, I fashion dark gods, too,/ Daring even to give You / Dark despairing features where,/ Crowned with dark rebellious hair, / Patience wavers just so much as / Mortal grief compels ... /“ (Cullen, 1925: 24). Finally, in an attempt to draw attention once again to the slipperiness of the term “black,” I would like to quote Jean Toomer’s introduction to his book of poems *Cane* where the polemics of the colour line in America is summed up,

(...) Racially, I seem to have (who knows for sure) seven blood mixtures: French, Dutch, Welsh, Negro, German, Jewish and Indian. Because of these, my position in America has been a curious one. I have lived equally amid the two race groups. Now white, now colored. From my point of view, I am naturally and inevitably an American. I have strived for a spiritual fusion analogous to the fact of racial intermingling. Without denying a single statement in me, with no desire to subdue one to the other, I have sought to let them function as complements. I have tried to let them live in harmony. Within the last two or three years, however, my growing need for artistic expression has pulled me deeper and deeper into the Negro group (Toomer, 1923: 2).



Césaire's *Notebook* is primordial in the study of African literatures because in there we encounter seven topics that conform the literary skeleton of the black experience and which have endured or been contested in the work of other black writers thus showing their prevalence in the literary history of the black world. What is significant to stress at this point is how these topics are still prevalent in most of the contemporary work of black authors. These seven topics are the following: (1) the revalorisation of the term "black" gathered in "négritude," (2) the universal connection that unites the "black world," thus granting it a distinct existence, (3) the problems posed by "language" tropologically expressed in the figure of the slave, (4) the need for origins as linked to the violence of history and geography –what has been lost in the middle passage–, (5) the recurrent metaphor of the "black hole", (6) the search for a unified liberated self as opposed to the split, divided enslaved self and, finally (7) the encoding of the female trope. I would like to proceed by expounding and enlarging the above topics as they appear in Césaire's poem.

### **1. The Revalorisation of the Term "Black"**

*Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* is, as the title indicates, a return journey to the native land, the diasporian black, Césaire in this case, comes back to his home, Martinique. His feelings upon returning involve a first phase where the poverty, decadence and darkness of home envelop him. However, in the gloom of this night the promise of "daybreak" announces a change which defines the mood of the second

phase of his journey, and which ploughs the ground for “négritude” to emerge.

It is necessary to trace back the history of the neologism in order to fully understand the implications of Césaire’s “négritude.” Before the Second World War, in French, the word “négro” was used as a derogatory term whereas the word “nègre” was considered as a more neutral, objective way to refer to black people. Nevertheless, the Antilleans considered themselves “noirs,” as opposed to “nègres,” a term which, according to them, should be applied to the people of that distant continent, Africa. Césaire’s neologism –we cannot forget he was Antillean himself- should be read as the conflation of “négro”, “nègre” and “noir” in the light of a new reading that upturns the derogatory meaning and accepts and celebrates “blackness” in all its manifestations,

Eia for the royal Cailcedra!  
 Eia for those who never invented anything  
 for those who never explored anything  
 for those who never conquered anything  
 but yield, captivated, to the essence of things  
 ignorant of surfaces but captivated by the motion of all things  
 indifferent to conquering, but playing the game of the world

truly the eldest sons of the world  
 porous to all the breathing of the world  
 fraternal locus for all the breathing of the world  
 drainless channel for all the water of the world  
 spark of the sacred life of the world  
 flesh of the world’s flesh pulsating with the very notion of the  
 world! (NR, 35)

(...)

I accept ... I accept ... totally, without reservation ...  
 my race that not ablution of hyssop mixed with lilies could purify  
 my race pitted with blemishes  
 my race ripe grapes for drunken feet (NR, 39)

A change is taking place in the black mind of the poet “a sudden and beneficent inner revolution” (NR, 26) that makes him now “honor my repugnant ugliness” (NR, 26) For “négritude,” as Césaire explains,

(My negritude) is not a stone, its deafness hurled against  
 the clamor of the day  
 my negritude is not a leukoma of dead liquid over the earth's  
 dead eye  
 my negritude is neither tower nor cathedral  
 it takes root in the ardent flesh of the sky  
 it breaks through opaque prostration with its upright patience.

(NR, 35)

The same revalorization process of blackness lies at the heart of the changing nomenclature that the black world has experienced in the United States. The jump from “colored” to “black” to “Afro-American” evinces a preoccupation to liberate “black” from the degrading stigma of inferiority. Nowhere in the black world has the polemics of naming shaped the individual's search for identity more forcefully than in the Afro-American experience. The fact that slaves were stripped of their African names and re-named by their white masters while retaining their white master's surname as a sign of property, invaded the experience of

debasement of black America. The jump from “colored” to “black” should be read in the light of Black American people’s need to specify and clearly define their place in the world. By confronting and rejecting the “colored” term coined by whites, black people re-named themselves as “blacks” infusing the term with the celebratory –as opposed to the dejectory “colored,”- meaning we find expressed in Césaire’s poem. The term “Afro-American” was later agreed upon as an attempt to echo the African origin of black Americans while preserving their Americanness. My emphasis on the importance of nomenclature in this particular case is an answer to a generalised criticism on political correctness which, under certain circumstances, might be very well grounded. However, in the black experience, naming is not a matter of political correctness, but a right to exist. As Anyidoho sharply acknowledges,

(...) a people denied the ability to name themselves, their own experiences, and in a language native to their very souls, are a people degraded to the state of shadows, shadows to other selves. Even more dangerous, they are a people in the danger of annihilation (Anyidoho, 1989: 23).

## **2. The Existence of a “Black World.”**

The common heritage of suffering that gives universal unity to the black world is embraced in the following passage,

What is mine, these few thousand deathbearers who mill in the calabash of an island and mine too, the archipelago arched with an anguished desire to negate itself, as if from maternal anxiety to protect this impossibly delicate tenuity separating one America from another; and these loins which secrete for Europe the hearty liquor of a Gulf Stream, and one of the two slopes of

incandescence between which the Equator tightrope-walks toward Africa. And my non-fence island, its brave audacity standing at the stern of this polynesia, before it, Guadeloupe, split in two down its dorsal line and equal in poverty to us, *Haiti where negritude rose for the first time* and stated that it believed in its humanity and the funny little tail of Florida where the strangulation of a nigger is being completed, and Africa gigantically caterpillaring up to the Hispanic foot of Europe, its nakedness where death scythes widely. (italics mine, NR, 15)

Césaire is expressing poetically Anyidoho's affirmation that "to talk of the black world is to talk of the world's five continents and most of its inhabitable islands, especially the islands of the Atlantic, the Pacific, even the South Seas" (Anyidoho, 1989: 2). I have deliberately italicized the sentence which makes a reference to the first slave rebellion which took place in Haiti, for the story of Toussaint L'Ouverture, leader of the revolt, is a recurrent theme in the work of authors from the black world, a fact that expresses once again the black imagination's embracing of a shared past. But the implications of the figure of Toussaint L'Ouverture go beyond the shared past that unites the black world and needs to be expanded. Thrown into the blank page of pre-historic times, black people's faces were erased from the narrative of history. However, certain chapters of this narrative can be silenced but not completely erased. This is the case of Toussaint L'Ouverture, the leader of the largest slave revolt which took place in Haiti in 1791 and Boukman, a black slave and witch doctor who in a voodoo ritual made a pact with the spirits of the islands and boldly proclaimed the freedom from the French. In the black writer's struggle to *face* the black world, the figure of Toussaint L'Ouverture, a black who confronted whites and defeated both the English and the French armies, on the one hand, and Boukman, a

slave who dared to publicly confront the French, on the other, stand out as positive images of blackness.<sup>24</sup> It is therefore not surprising to find them in the pages of black writers dedicated to filling up the nothingness heritage of Europe-based narratives. To illustrate the prevailing presence of these two historical figures in the writings of black authors, I would like to mention two contemporary instances where the healing and restorative power of Toussaint L'Ouverture and Boukman are evoked: the first one is Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, published in 1977, and the second one is Edwidge Danticat's *Krik? Krak!*, published in 1997 (Shange, 1977; Danticat, 1997).

Shange's text captures the plea of seven colored women –the seven ladies of the rainbow- who inhabit and shape the world of Afro-America. The lady in brown, in the voice of a first person narrator, tells the story of a clever and sensitive eight-year-old black girl who, discontented with the segregated world of 1952 St. Louis she is made to live in, discovers in a book the figure –and existence- of Toussaint L'Ouverture and “platonically” falls in love with him. The little black girl is mesmerised by the story of a black man that confronted the whites and led and won a slave revolt for in her segregated world black men obeyed the white people but did not confront them. But here is he, Toussaint, a black man who “didn't low no white man to tell him nothin / not napoleon / not maximilien / not robespierre” (Shange, 1977: 27). For the little black girl living in the segregated world of the American South, Toussaint L'Ouverture turns out to be the first positive image of a black she comes across, “my first blk man,” she calls him and she later confesses how he “became my secret lover at the age of 8 / i entertained him in my bedroom / widda flashlight under my covers / way into the night” and how “we discussed strategies / how to remove

white girls from my hopscotch games.” (ibid: 27) Toussaint L’Ouverture motions her to rebel, to stand up for her rights, and once she has met him, there is no turning back for as she affirms “Toussaint L’Ouverture was the beginning uv reality for me” (ibid: 26).

In the short story “A Wall of Fire Rising,” included in Edwidge Danticat’s *Krik? Krak!*, seven-year-old little Guy memorises a speech by the Haitian slave revolutionary, Boukman, which he is taught in school. The words of the slave via little Guy come to life in the hearts of his parents who listen intently and proudly, hoping that their son’s education will escape the poverty-stricken reality surrounding them. Both writers, African-American Ntozake Shange and Haitian-American Edwidge Danticat, recuperate and celebrate two historical figures that fought for the freedom of black people (Danticat, 1997: 51-80).

### **3. Language: a liberating or an enslaving tool?**

One of the fears threatening the black imagination is language, or to be more precise, the voicing out of those experiences formerly enslaved in a discourse that simply denies them their right to exist. As Ngugi wa’ Thiong’o bitterly resents in *Decolonizing the Mind*, “the physical violence of the battlefield was followed by the psychological violence of the classroom”<sup>25</sup> where the languages of the colonizers were enforced upon the colonized. How can we express our experiences as blacks –used in the Pan-African sense- if the means we are given are the very languages that enslave us?, is the question that stands at the back of the black writers’ minds. Césaire captures the voice-slave diatribe in the recuperation of the image of a slave who committed suicide by choking on his own tongue. This way of committing suicide was an extended practice among slaves who preferred death to slavery. But the poet-narrator finds himself at the beginning of the poem here and this image

recalls his own fears at not resolving what he is undertaking, the writing of the poem, the search for his voice, the uttering of his experience as black,

At the end of daybreak, the famished morne and no one knows better than this bastard morne why the suicide choked with a little help from his hypoglossal jamming his tongue backward to swallow it. (NR, 4)<sup>26</sup>

And the fears continue haunting the poet who is now transported to the classroom where the “sleepy little nigger” is taught his lessons in the colonial language,

And neither the teacher in his classroom, nor the priest at catechism will be able to get a word out of this sleepy little nigger, no matter how energetically they drum on his shorn skull, for starvation has quicksanded his voice into the swamp of hunger. (NR, 5)

But the end of daybreak is approaching and the uneasiness grows in the poet’s mind and he finally blurts out his words, resolutely naming the culprit –the past that enslaves the black experience- and “facing” it – confronting it and giving it a face- by addressing it as “you,” gets the burden off his chest.

But who misleads my voice? Who grates my voice? Stuffing my throat with a thousand bamboo fangs. A thousand sea urchin stakes. It is you dirty end of the world. Dirty end of daybreak. It is you weight of the insult and a hundred years of whip lashes. It is



you one hundred years of my patience, one hundred years of my effort simply to stay alive.

Rooh oh (NR, 21)

The process of voicing is, however, slow and tiring, recognition often lacking, for, as the poet regrettably states “vainly in the tepidity of your throat you ripen for the twentieth time the same indigent solace that we are *mumblers of words*.” (italics mine, NR, 23)

#### 4. The Search for Origins. The Middle passage.

As Césaire poetically grasped, the geographical dimension of the black world expands throughout the world’s five continents, and yet, as Anyidoho points out, two segments of the black world are to be distinguished: continental Africa, and the African diaspora (Anyidoho, 1989: 2). He –Anyidoho– urges us further “not to dwell only on where people may be found in significant numbers“ (ibid: 2), but also and most significantly on “how they got to these places in the first place” (ibid: 2). And “how they got to these places” is what ties the two segments of the black world, Africans and diasporian Africans, to a common history and geography where the middle passage and the slave trade appear as two sides of the same coin. A reference to the work of Paul Gilroy should be made at this point for it pungently reveals the centrality of the middle passage in the moulding of a black world and in its decisive role in the making of modernity.<sup>27</sup>

Stranded on the shores of places unknown, away from their African homeland, the slaves were deprived of their geographies, of their history, of their names, in short, of their identities as human beings. The poetic voice of Césaire’s *Notebook*, determined to unleash the history

that moulds black people, acknowledges and accepts the years under slavery that have systematically debased them,

And since I have sworn to leave nothing out of our history (I who love nothing better than a sheep grazing his own afternoon shadow, I may as well confess that we were at all times pretty mediocre dishwashers, shoeblacks without ambition, at best conscientious sorcerers and the only questionable record that we broke was that of endurance under the chicote<sup>28</sup>... (NR, 28)

But the daybreak lies ahead and with it the waking up of the black world, its incessant search for origins is ingrained in the poet's remembrance of and recognition of himself in so many black individuals "who never knew" their "father or mother, unheard of in any town hall and who wandered" their "entire life –searching for" their "name." (NR, 41)

The arbitrary division of the world carried out by colonial powers and the European-created geographies that ensued, overlooks the experience of the poet who clearly manifests his belonging to "no nationality recognized by the chancelleries" (NR, 29). His geography as enveloped in the geographies of the black world is spread out in the five continents but enclosed in one shared experience of suffering, of "spilled blood." (NR, 43) This is the heritage that he accepts, this is the geography, the history that restores his –and his people's- identity as members of the human race, and which his words enclasp, "and my special geography too; the world map made for my own use, not tinted with the arbitrary colors of scholars, but with the geometry of my spilled blood, I accept" (NR, 43)

## 5. The Black (W)hole.

Wrapped up in a mantle of nothingness, the black experience struggles to find a place where its blackness is fleshed out and heard. At the end of the poem, the poet's voice rises above the pit of nothingness it has been previously thrown into,

rise, Dove

rise

rise

rise

I follow you who are imprinted on my ancestral white cornea.

rise sky licker

and the great *black hole* where a moon ago I wanted to drown

it is where I will now fish the malevolent tongue of the night in

its motionless veerition.<sup>29</sup> (italics mine, NR, 51)

I would like to pause at Césaire's deliberate use of the figure of the black hole as a source of both enslavement and liberation. The poet "wanted to drown" in the "great black hole" but now, at the end of the poem, raised above it, he fishes "the malevolent tongue" with which to articulate the black experience. In order to fully understand the implications of the trope of the black hole/whole, we need to resort to Houston A. Baker's analysis of the figure in *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature*. Borrowing the term "black hole" from physics, he defines it as "an area of space which appears absolutely black because the gravitation there is so intense that not even light can escape the surrounding areas" (Baker, 1984). The relationship between the black hole of physics and the black hole of literature is established on the grounds of the gradual withdrawal from the outside world that the black individual experiences while growing up. Baker bases his analysis on the work of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and

his conclusions are to be drawn from the context of Afro-American literature as the title of his book clearly states. However, the black individual's quest of identity as exemplified by the narrator's of Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Wright's *Black Boy*, verbalises also Césaire's experience in *Notebook* and, we may add, the experiences of black writers around the world, African writers included. The black characters that inhabit the text of black writers –and here I intentionally use the term “black” in a Pan-Africanist fashion- must confront what Baker calls the “zero image,” an image that stems from the dominant culture's definition of blackness as nothingness. In the first phase of this confrontation, the black individual plunges into this nothingness that the black hole represents not to be annihilated but rather to deliberate on the true meaning of “blackness,” drawing from the bulk of his/her own experience as a black being. In a final phase, the black individual, burdened with the knowledge that s/he has gathered from his/her seclusion in the black hole, will emerge from it in a sort of resurrection, prepared to confront the stereotyped, white-originated images of blackness. It is at this point that the *black hole* becomes the *black whole*.

The *black hole* of physics turns into the *black (w)hole* of literature, thus unfolding the paradox inherent in the trope: the black voice retreats to the nothingness prescribed by Eurocentric discourse and yet this nothingness is made productive by the black mind who utilizes it to frame and voice his/her experience and inscribe his/her name in the world.

It is in the *black (w)hole* that the black voice of the poet is being shaped, a voice that

(...) drills the night and the hearing like the penetrance of an apocalyptic wasp.

And the voice complains that for centuries Europe has force-fed us with  
 lies and  
 bloated us with pestilence,  
 for it is not true that the work of man is done  
 that we have no business being on earth  
 that we parasite the world  
 that it is enough for us to heel to the world whereas the work  
 of man has only begun  
 and man still must overcome all the interdictions wedged in  
 the recesses of his fervor  
 and no race has a monopoly on beauty, on intelligence, on  
 strength  
 and there is room for everyone at the convocation of conquest  
 and we know now that the sun turns around our earth lighting  
 the parcel designated by our will alone and that every star falls  
 from sky to earth at our omnipotent command. (NR, 44)

## **6. The Unified Liberated Self *Versus* the Split Enslaved Self.**

The search for “wholeness” that the black writer expresses in his work evinces a prior state of division of the self that asks to be restored to a recalled former unity. The forced displacement of diasporian blacks has delved into the black psyche and caused a split sense of identity that emmeshes the black experience by placing it at the crossroads of an alleged -and erased- African culture and the omniscient presence of the cultural white supremacy. Hence, the poet cautions us, there are those who ludicrously follow the white line, “there is the nigger pimp, the nigger askari, and all the zebras shaking themselves in various ways to get rid of their stripes in a dew of fresh milk,” (NR, 45) but there are also those who, like himself, acknowledge the drama of standing at the crossroads,

(...) and the determination of my biology, not a prisoner to a facial angle, to a type of hair, to a well-flattened nose, to a clearly Melanian coloring, and negritude, no longer a cephalic index, or plasma, or soma, but measured by the compass of suffering

and the Negro every day more base, more cowardly, more sterile, less profound, more spilled out of himself, more separated from himself, more wily with himself, less immediate to himself. (NR, 43)

## 7. The Encoding of the Female Trope.

What will the black writer feed on to restore his self, to resuscitate it from division and debasement and thus move on from –and out of– the crossroads? The answer is to be found in “négritude,” not the “old négritude”(NR, 47) of the “very good nigger” (NR, 46) of European narratives, but the “négritude” recalled in the fighting spirit of the slave revolts that are metaphorically reconstructed in the image of the slave ship that “cracks everywhere,”

I say right on! The old negritude  
 progressively cadavers itself  
 the horizon breaks, recoils and expands  
 and through the shedding of clouds the flashing of a sign  
 the slave ship cracks everywhere ... Its belly convulses and  
 resounds ... The ghastly tapeworm of its cargo gnaws the  
 fetid guts of the strange suckling of the sea!  
 And neither the joy of sails filled like a pocket stuffed with  
 doubloons, nor the tricks played on the dangerous stupidity of  
 the frigates of order prevent it from hearing the threat of its  
 intestinal rumblings

In vain to ignore them the captain hangs the biggest loud-  
mouth nigger from the main yard or throws him into the sea,  
or feeds him to his mastiffs

Reeking of fried onions the nigger scum rediscovers the bitter  
taste of freedom in its spilled blood

And the nigger scum is on its feet (NR, 47)

And so is the black voice who utters his “virile prayer” (NR, 37) and saves and demands his earth, the earth ravished by conquest, the primal earth where “everything is free and fraternal” (NR, 13). The prayer of self-recovery, celebration of blackness, unification of the black world that *Notebook* proclaims is endorsed in a tropological figure that shapes the earth as distinctly and forcefully female. As the poet’s words enthusiastically manifest,

earth great vulva raised to the sun  
earth great delirium of God’s mentula  
savage earth arisen from the storerooms of the sea a clump of  
Cracopia in your mouth  
earth whose tempestous face I can only compare to the virgin  
and foolish forest which were it in my power I would show in  
guise of a face to the undeciphering eyes of men  
all I would need is a mouthful of jiculi milk to discover in you  
always as distant as a mirage –a thousand times more native  
and made golden by a sun that no prism divides –the earth where  
everything is free and fraternal, my earth (NR, 12-13)

This embodying of the conquered earth as female is what shapes one of the cornerstones of négritude alongside Césaire’s *Notebook*, Senghor’s

poem “Femme Noire” (Senghor, 1965: 105). The anthropomorphisation of Senghor’s Africa in the figure of a woman whose beauty, sensuality and eternity emerges enveloped in an all-powerful black being, has to be understood as a response to the ill-formed impressions of the European gaze which systematically projected Africa as savage, ugly, mysterious and menacing. In Senghor’s own words,

Nude woman, black woman,  
 Clothed in your color which is life, your form which is beauty!  
 I grew in your shadow, the sweetness of your hands bandaged my  
 eyes  
 And here in the heart of summer and of noon, I discover you,  
 promised land  
 from the height of a burnt mountain,  
 And your beauty strikes my heart, like the lightning of an eagle.

Nude woman, dark woman,  
 Ripe fruit of the dark flesh, somber ecstasies of black wine, mouth  
 that  
 causes my mouth to sing;  
 Savanna of pure horizons, savanna trembling under the fervent  
 caresses of the East wind,  
 Carved tom-tom, tense tom-tom, grumbling under the fingers of  
 the  
 conqueror,  
 Your low contralto voice is the song of the lover.

(...)

Nude woman, black woman,  
 I sing your passing beauty, fixing your form in eternity,



Before a jealous fate turns you to ashes to feed the roots of life.

This is indeed a very different black woman from the one encountered by Marlow on his journey throughout the African continent. In Conrad's narrative, the black woman is "savage" and "wild-eyed" and her "barbarous ornaments" set off her wildness. Marlow meets her with awe and in an anthropomorphising leap likens her to the earth surrounding them,

She walked with measured steps, draped in striped and fringed cloths, treading the earth proudly with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments. She carried her head high, her hair was done in the shape of a helmet, she had brass leggings to the knees, brass wire gauntlets to the elbow, a crimson spot on her tawny cheek, innumerable necklaces of glass beads on her neck, bizarre things, charms, gifts of witch-men, that hung about her, glittered and trembled at every step. She must have had the value of several elephant tusks upon her. She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress. And in the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul (Conrad, 1898: 60).

The strangeness with which Marlow approaches the sight of the black woman is not devoid of an acknowledgement of power in the black figure standing before him,

(...) Suddenly she opened her bared arms and threw them up rigid above her head as though in an uncontrollable desire to touch the sky, and at the same time the swift shadows darted out of the earth, swept around on the river, gathering the steamer in a shadowy embrace (ibid: 60-1).

And yet it is a power shrouded in a fearful mystery that distances him from her, whereas Senghor's black woman's power abides in her nurturing hands and the "suns" of her "eyes" which relieve the anguish of the poet. But, naturally, Senghor alludes to a black woman that has always been an intrinsic part of himself, "I grew in your shadow," "your hands bandaged my eyes;" for him –and as for Césaire- this black woman is his land, his home, his mother which he discovers and sings to. Where Marlow perceives savagery, tenebrity, passion, inscrutable mystery and utter strangeness, Senghor and Césaire as poets of *négritude* recognise home, sweet and powerfully and beautifully black.

*Négritude* grasped the nothingness that pervaded around the word "Africa" in the imagination of Eurocentric discourse and filled it with a celebratory and meaningful sense of blackness. The unifying of the black experience as brought about by the Pan-African belief in a black world sustained by a common history of subjugation lettered the stone of the epitaph of Africa and thus contributed to the facing of Africa as a hospitable and nurturing land which defeated the unlettered, inscrutable mysterious apprehension of the Eurocentric imagination. Nevertheless, as I pointed out earlier, the prosopopeic reading that I proposed and outlined before, demands that the process of facing be accompanied by a process of de-facing, a disfiguration which will restore ultimately another face. If we apply this disfiguring-restoring procedure to the

négritude-facing of Africa, what results is a de-facing, or critique, of négritude. Césaire posed the question: Who and what are we?, and proceeded to answer it. Yet Césaire's answer is moulded by *his* experience as a diasporic black who struggled to have his voice heard amid the turmoil of colonial times. Later generations of African writers who *face* Africa as a postcolonial, independent reality feed on Césaire's question to start their literary quest but their answer can no longer be wholly sustained by négritude. Négritude needs to be reevaluated and reassessed; its pervading presence in the works of African authors, however, turns it into a cornerstone of the literature of the black world. Either to be embraced or to be contested, négritude and the poem that forged it, illuminate the voice of black writers, diasporic or continental Africans alike. The work of Ama Ata Aidoo feeds on négritude, digesting some of its postulations, rejecting, questioning and re-shaping others.

## *De-Facing Négritude: The Mother Africa Trope and the Discourse of Double Consciousness*

Around essence and essentialism, I should remind you, there is a long history of turmoil in African thought. You may have heard of the négritude movement of the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>30</sup> (43)

*Elizabeth Costello*, J.M. Coetzee

The second chapter –or lesson– of Coetzee’s novel *Elizabeth Costello*, bears the name “The Novel in Africa.” In this chapter, Elizabeth Costello, renowned Australian writer and absolute protagonist of Coetzee’s text, embarks on a fifteen-day cruise that will take her, among other places, to the Antarctica. There we also meet Emmanuel Egudu, a Nigerian writer, an old acquaintance of hers with whom, as we find out later on, she had been more intimately related in the past. Both have been invited to –or hired for to be more precise– the cruise to “entertain” the passengers through their enlightening lectures: Elizabeth’s centres on the future of the novel, Emmanuel’s on the African novel.

What seems interesting to me here and what has moved me to use this chapter from Coetzee’s novel as a starting point for a critique of négritude is the apparently opposing views on the novel –and, consequently, on the African novel– that both writers, Elizabeth and

Emmanuel, hold. Elizabeth's posture is one of universalism, claiming the existence of "a common past, a shared history," "thousands and millions of individual fictions" (EC, 38) which the novel has successfully "locked into one another." (EC, 39) Novel writing, according to her, becomes an exercise "on making the past coherent" (EC, 39). In his lecture on the African novel, however, and positioning himself at the other end of the continuum, Emmanuel unremittantly defends the uniqueness of the African novel. According to him, the African novel has a recognizable oral quality and a communal drive that separates it from the Western novel, distinctively individualistic, meant to be read alone.

A question for each "fictional" writer threatens the unhindered flow of their respective arguments: whose common past, whose sacred story is Elizabeth Costello referring to?; and, if orality and communality is what brandishes the African novel as "African," how does Emmanuel account for the very fact that African writers do *write* their novels and that readers worldwide are going to *read* them?

Coetzee's mastery as a writer envelops the reader in an intellectually alluring speculation on the nature of literature in which two positions, the ones taken by the two writers, are confronted in a terrifyingly convincing way. What I mean by "terrifyingly convincing" is that we are drawn to Elizabeth's conjectures when she defends the universalist essence of the novel, we even sympathise with her critique on the alleged orality of the African novel, what she purposefully calls "the mystique of orality" (EC, 46) and yet, we are also drawn to Emmanuel's plea to understand the uniqueness of the African novel, to commiserate with the terrible fate of the African writer whose survival depends, at least as Emmanuel puts it, on his ability to tightrope between African essences and Western tastes. Nevertheless, what stands at the core of their seemingly divergent stances is their

genuinely, inherently contradictory statements. Elizabeth's most heated defence of the universality of novel writing reveals a most communalist view on literature,

'The English novel,' she says, 'is written in the first place by English people for English people. That is what makes it the English novel. The Russian novel is written by Russians for Russians. But the African novel is not written by Africans for Africans. African novelists may write about Africa, about African experiences, but they seem to be glancing over their shoulder all the time they write, at the foreigners that will read them. Whether they like it or not, they have accepted the role of interpreter, interpreting Africa to their readers. (...) That, it seems to me, is the root of your problem. Having to perform your Africanness at the same time as you write. (EC, 51)

As for Emmanuel, his defence of the uniqueness of the African novel, brandishing its oral quality as undebatable and undefeatable, unfolds an essentializing trend that aligns him with the very "Western" universalist position he is so determined to disentangle himself from. He confesses his own incapability of being true to his "essence as an African writer," (EC, 43) thus confessing his belief in an essence called "African." Even if African writers use European languages to express their African experiences, their African essence remains untouched for

(...) they are born in Africa, they live in Africa, their sensibility is African ... What distinguishes them lies in life experience, in sensitivities, in rhythm, in style. (...) A French or English writer has thousands of years of written tradition behind him ... We on the other hand are heirs to an oral tradition. (EC, 44)

The binary opposition at work could be summarised as follows: Western versus African, written versus oral, universal versus communal, Elizabeth versus Emmanuel?, or rather, Emmanuel versus Elizabeth?. To place Elizabeth and Emmanuel under one of the binary oppositions alone and thus follow either one sequence –Western / written / universal- or the other –African / oral / communal- proves to be an impossible task. If we take Elizabeth’s statement, for example, could we freely affirm that what makes “The English novel” “English,” “the Russian novel,” “Russian” is the same that makes “The African novel” “African”?

As I have previously shown, the African experience cannot be encapsulated as just another experience for the circumstances that made it African cannot be equated with those that made the English novel, English, so to speak. The very term “African novel” is, to say the least, controversial. Whenever the English novel is alluded to, the English language comes unquestionably along. No such thing occurs when we refer to the African novel for ... what is the language of the African novel? The individual fictions of Africans have to be first listened to to later have them included in that common past, that shared story which Elizabeth pointed out in her lecture, and which, we sense, remained oblivious to her main concern. All the way through, Eurocentrism envelops Elizabeth’s discourse, while Emmanuel’s is enshrined in an exotic cocoon of Africanness. As a consequence of listening to the individual fictions of Africans, a re-examination, a re-writing of that common past, that shared story ensues, and that is what neither Elizabeth from her Eurocentric expansionist perspective nor Emmanuel from his reductionist Africanness can fathom.

And yet what seems most revealing to me is not the limitations and shortsightedness of Elizabeth’s and Emmanuel’s positions, but

rather, the contradictions inherent in her Eurocentrism and his Africanness. In other words, what I claim that should be asked is why the binary sequence I pointed out earlier on cannot be successfully completed by adding Elizabeth and Emmanuel on one side or the other, why can “Elizabeth” and “Emmanuel” be placed on either side, why can “Elizabeth” and “Emmanuel” be exchanged? The answer is to be found in the concept of “double consciousness.”

In *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Paul Gilroy demonstrates how the discourse on modernity cannot be fully articulated unless we place it next to the reality of slavery captured visually by the ship that transported slaves from Africa to the West and marked the route known as the black Atlantic (Gilroy, 1993). This journey, reprehensible and cruel, created nonetheless a discourse that shaped modernity, namely double consciousness. It is in W.E.B. du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* where the concept of “double consciousness” appeared for the first time as a way to reflect the difficulties to reconcile the fact of being black and an American citizen, “one ever feels his twoness, -an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (Du Bois, 1903: 154). Du Bois’s text strives to fulfill this reconciliation and by doing so he shows an indebtedness to his specific black cultural background as well as to the legacy left by white, Western thinkers. Gilroy reads du Bois’s double consciousness not as a concept enveloping black individuals in America alone but as a conceptual tool “to illuminate the experience of post-slave populations in general” (Gilroy, 1993: 126). Hence, Gilroy centers the discourse of “double consciousness” at the core of the modern experience of blacks and whites alike. Elizabeth and Emmanuel fall prey to this double consciousness without *consciously*



realising it. Their respective defences of their –apparently- divergent positions, their inherent contradictions hide their unacknowledged double consciousness. And yet this double consciousness, if not openly acknowledged, is nonetheless *sensed, felt*, for they are intelligent human beings aware of their own contradictions.

Emmanuel’s discourse embraces *négritude* and what *négritude* purports: a belief in an African essence, markedly sensual and oral, which stands in firm opposition to a Western essence, markedly intellectual and written. Nevertheless, Emmanuel senses the impracticality of the very discourse he defends when he declares to his audience: “how in these anti-essential days, these days of fleeting identities that we pick up and wear and discard like clothing, can I justify speaking of my essence as an African writer?” (EC, 43) A conflictive legacy surrounds him: Eurocentrism and Africanism.

It is around this conflictive legacy that I want to place the work of Ama Ata Aidoo. Her writings feed on and rebel against this *apparently irreconcilable* double consciousness that a commingled legacy of Eurocentrism and Africanness exudes. The colonial past cannot be erased from African history, from the fiction of African individuals; Eurocentrism is part of their inheritance and yet their Africanness is a reality, not a pawn to be deposited in exchange for uniqueness.

Négritude served its purpose; the African dark pit that the European imaginary painted was replaced by a landscape which, *négritude* poets claimed, was truly and essentially African. And this landscape was powerfully black, nurturing, sensual and welcoming, the embodiment of an ideal Black Mother, the Mother Africa Trope being thus engendered.

Négritude’s fall into essentialism has been the cornerstone of much criticism and yet what I would like to demonstrate in this chapter

is how this essentialism is –no pun intended- *essentially* male. To put it in another way, the de-facing of négritude that I intend to carry out is elaborated via a critique of the Mother Africa Trope which, as Florence Stratton affirms, stands at the core of the African male literary tradition.<sup>31</sup> According to Stratton, the voices of African women writers are to be located precisely in the fissures of this male literary tradition. As an African and a woman, the voice of Ama Ata Aidoo is likewise to be positioned in these very fissures. So, what constitutes the African male literary tradition?<sup>32</sup>

In *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*, Stratton discloses the inherent masculinity that permeates the work of male African writers to the extent that she manifestly differentiates an African male literary tradition from a markedly African female literary tradition.<sup>33</sup> The question captured by the title of the first chapter, “How Could Things Fall Apart for Whom They Were Not Together?,” (CAL, 22) reveals the contestatory mood of Stratton’s analysis in her unfolding of the masculinity process involved in Achebe’s treatment of Igbo culture in the novel that marked a starting point in the development and establishment of African Anglophone written literature. Although, as a counterpoint to *Heart of Darkness*, Achebe’s facing of Africa is rendered groundbreaking, Stratton poignantly demonstrates that, as far as *Things Fall Apart* is concerned, African women are doomed to an eternal de-facing, unredeemingly excluded from “Achebe’s constituency of readers.” (CAL, 38) Stratton’s disclosing of the masculinity trend in African writing is further expanded on in the second chapter where she proceeds to single out the Mother Africa trope as the literary device which forms the backbone of the work of African male writers. The rest of the book is devoted to showing how African women writers contest, confront and resolve the inconsistencies of a discourse that denies their

experiences as African women by “presenting an alternative view of colonization and African society.” (CAL, 38) The significant element of Stratton’s analysis abides in her identification of the African male literary tradition with the consistent use of the trope of Mother Africa, to the degree that she boldly affirms that “the trope is ... not just a periodic feature of the male literary tradition, it is one of its *defining* features. For it does not occur in works by African women writers.” (CAL, 50) And she asks:

Why would women writers repudiate a convention so entrenched in the literary tradition they have inherited and one which, furthermore, from a (masculinist) formalist critical perspective is usually seen as making a work richer, more integrated, more complex, more intriguing? Does the trope serve the interests of men? Is it detrimental to the interests of women? (CAL, 50)

I take Stratton’s two last questions and attempt to answer them myself by first positing another question which, I believe, Stratton’s otherwise insightful study, does not tackle: why, stemming from the *négritude* tradition, do African male writers embody Africa in the figure of a woman? or, let’s put the question differently: what lies behind the womanisation of Africa? The deconstruction of Western discourse that Irigaray offers us in her minute dissection of Plato’s myth of the cave, provides us with the theoretical tools which will aid our analysis and particular dissection of the process of womanisation of Africa as initiated by *négritude* poets and further purported in the work of African male writers.

As we pointed out in the first chapter, the allegory of the cave is grounded in a game of symmetry sustained by a system of dichotomies –life and death, light and darkness, truth and fake ...- which determine

the success of Plato's discourse. Once the game of symmetry is disclosed, once the system of dichotomies is revealed, Plato's metaphysics falls into a pit of contradictions, of silences, which shake the foundations of what is considered to be the basis of Western philosophical discourse. However, Irigaray's most purposeful dichotomy and that which is the recipient of her most determined questioning is that of mother (female) and Father (male).<sup>34</sup> She names the cave, the abode of prisoners, *hystera*,<sup>35</sup> hence drawing an analogy between cave, womb, woman's body. Underlying Plato's myth, and as Irigaray's text reveals, there is an identification of body, earth, that which is related to the maternal and the womb, the *hystera*, the cave. What this identification entails in the story of Plato's text is a recurrent urging from the part of the author to abandon this site of darkness shadowed by fakes, peopled by prisoners, for the reassuring outside world of Truth. Inside and outside, darkness and light, fake and Truth, mother and Father, the sensuous world<sup>36</sup> -i.e. the world of the senses- and the intelligible world of Ideas, the way up -and away from the cave- and the way down -close to the cave-; two options open up to the prisoner: either the mother, that amorphous matter that constitutes the womb and enslaves you in the cave or the Father, the soul that frees you and takes you away from the cave and welcomes you in the Ideal World of Truth, for as Irigaray reminds us "the mother-matter gives birth only to images, Father-Good only to the real." (SOW, 301) The linearity of the journey, as we discussed in the previous chapter, is out of question, yet the firm tie with the womb, the earth, the maternal is, unfortunately for Plato's vision, also unquestionable. To put it in another way, although the prisoners -human beings- struggle to escape from darkness, to release their bodies from this enslaving sensuous world, to get rid of the mother, their journeys -their lives- will be tainted and tempted by the

memory of that maternal world which proves to be difficult to banish. Yet it has to be banished if we are to attain happiness, to encounter ultimate Good and thus enter the Ideal World of Truth. The Father lights the way up to this Ideal World and the mother calls you back to the cave yet what we are witnessing here is not a fight between equal opponents for in Plato's text the mother cannot possibly win; she is already beaten at the very beginning. Plato's text leaves no alternative path: the mother-the maternal has to be repressed, forgotten; she is irrefutably negated; from a Platonic point of view, there is nothing in the cave, the blurred –and blurring- reflections carried out in darkness are nothing but a deceptive mirage. And yet the cave, the *hystera*, as Irigaray insists, is the *hystera protera*; that is to say, the origin. The denial of the mother proclaims the negation of the origin; as Irigaray expresses it, “blindness with regard to the original one who must be banished by fixing the eyes on pure light.” (SOW, 315)

The Eurocentric discourse that shapes the Western imaginary encapsulates Africa in the nothingness of the Platonic maternal, in the abyss of the chaotic realm of the senses, in an amorphous mass that has to be conquered, controlled and demarcated. Following the fashion of the specular metaphor that shapes Irigaray's text, we could affirm that it is the male Eurocentric gaze at work when Africa is thus envisaged. The male African gaze, though, does not see chaos and nothingness when looking upon Africa. The contribution of négritude poets to the revaluation of Africa has gone through the womanisation of the continent in an attempt to recover the origin that the recurring and reiterative denying of the mother-earth-sensuous world, the *hystera*, in short, demands. Thus, behind Césaire's “my earth,” “free and fraternal” and Senghor's “nude woman, black woman” clothed in the color of life, there lies the poet's claim to recuperate the mother that the Eurocentric

(male) gaze has unremittingly debased to nothingness. Marlow's eyes meet a mysterious and savage Africa drowned in pre-historic times, Césaire's and Senghor's recognize their mother, nurturing and beautiful, in whose shadow, they –the sons- grew, its pre-history turned eternity.

Is the poet's recovery of Mother Africa to be read as a revolutionary act? Should the new meaning instilled on Africa by the poet's voice be deemed revolutionary? From a négritude standpoint, the visibility granted to Africa and Africans is in itself revolutionary since Eurocentric discourse revolved around the conjecture of the invisibility of the dark continent. However, the methodological procedure involved in the womanisation of Africa by the négritude poets remains enslaved within the manouverings of Eurocentric discourse. In other words, and as Wole Soyinka's criticism on négritude in *Myth, Literature and the African World* discloses, Africa, however black and powerful and beautiful is encircled still by the aura of the slandered world of the senses, Europe retaining the intelligible, "real," and loftier world of the Ideas. Négritudinists' innovation is rendered futile when we dig out the premises upon which their "Africanist" discourse is construed, namely the world of dichotomies that sustains Eurocentric discourse and which they unsuccessfully, as Soyinka shows, try to dismantle.<sup>37</sup> According to Soyinka, négritude found itself amid two confronted -and yet complementary- dichotomies: the white man is superior, capable of understanding and therefore of reaching the intelligible world of Ideas, a fact that places him at the top of the evolutionary ladder, whereas blackness –or négritude- tinged by darkness, ignorance, that is to say, complete negativity is doomed to stand symbolically at the bottom, metaphorically trapped inside the cave. This is the very same dichotomy that Irigaray's analysis deconstructs: where Soyinka spots whiteness, Irigaray identifies maleness, where he contemplates blackness, she

recognizes femaleness. The metaphysical construction remains unaltered: the top is the “I” –read Europe, the Father- the bottom, the “Other” –read Africa, the mother-. From this metaphysical framework, Soyinka’s assertion that the failure of *négritude* resides in its flawed analytical procedure makes perfect sense. As he himself puts it,

The fundamental error was one of procedure: *Négritude* stayed within a pre-set system of Eurocentric intellectual analysis of both man and society and tried to re-define the African and his society in those externalised terms. (MLAW, 136)

The revolutionary strain of the process of womanisation of Africa as enacted by *négritude* poets entails an appraisal of intuition and the world of the senses but, and this is the key of Soyinka’s criticism, the metaphysical construction underlying Eurocentric discourse remains. *Négritude* adds a new syllogism to the “I” and “Other” symmetry of Eurocentric discourse: “Intuitive understanding is *also* a mark of human development. The African employs intuitive understanding. Therefore the African is highly developed.” (MLAW, 128)

*Négritude* poetry is enshrouded by a longing for the articulation and fulfillment of racial identity. This can –and should- be understood as a justifiable reaction to the repetitive denial of such identity by a discourse that locates blackness at a degree zero. Nevertheless, this otherwise understandable reply to Eurocentric discourse is motioned by a quest for racial identity which seeks an affirmation of Africanness and which Soyinka sarcastically calls “the commerce for Africanness.” (MLAW, 131) It is at this point that Soyinka’s attack on *Négritude* takes on a more personal vein for he clearly pinpoints the movement as one created by and for a small *élite* of “uprooted individuals” (MLAW, 135)

whose search for self was being conducted “merely in Paris” (MLAW, 135) or “in the metropolis of the French colonies,” (MLAW, 135) thus distancing their urban, highly intellectualized experiences from those being drawn at the core of Africanness, where, as a matter of fact, Africa abides. In other words, their experience, stamped by uprootedness cannot –and should not– be taken as *the* African experience for, as Soyinka insists,

At the same time as this historical phenomenon was taking place, a drive through the real Africa, among the real populace of the African world would have revealed that these millions had never at any time had cause to question the existence of their Negritude. (MLAW, 135)

For those millions that conform the “real populace of the African world,” (MLAW, 135) as Soyinka contends, *négritude* was a fact, not a self-seeking reverie. Is Soyinka’s criticism pointing out a breach in the overwhelming wholeness of the experience of the black world? However united by a history of suffering and subjugation, does this common history of suffering and subjugation draw the same experience of blackness? As the title of Soyinka’s book indicates, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, the belief in the existence of a distinctive African worldview is unquestionable. Nevertheless, Soyinka’s analysis suggests a differing apprehension of the black experience as experimented by diasporic Africans and those who live in the continent.<sup>38</sup> There is a transition marked by the middle passage which paints the black experience in different shades.

I would like to emphasize that Soyinka’s criticism of *Négritude* is addressed to its mimesis of Eurocentric discourse which, according to him, reveals a lack of “Africanness” in itself, yet the womanisation of



Africa and its consequences for the shaping of the African woman's experience is never an issue in his study. As a matter of fact, no work by any African woman writer is mentioned, analysed or considered in his book.<sup>39</sup> The debate on African literature is still constrained by maleness and no matter how critical his view on Eurocentric discourse is, I intend to prove that, as far as his depiction of African women is concerned, he too falls into patriarchal discourse. In order to carry out this critique, we need to return to Irigaray's *hystera* and négritude poetry for the implications of the recovery of Mother Africa undergone by négritude have not been fully grasped by Soyinka's analysis.

Négritude's detractors –among them Soyinka- have branded the movement romantic and indeed in the poets' line of thought traits belonging to romanticism are detected. If we read Césaire's *Notebook* and Senghor's "Black Woman" simultaneously with Wordsworth's "Essays Upon Epitaphs," we realise that in the three cases the eyes of the poet are "illuminated" by the Sun, metaphorically feeding his soul, nurturing his poetry which is granted the power to restore immortality in man. Nature is the path towards eternity, to ultimate knowledge if one is only able to read into it. Poets can decipher nature; the beams of the Sun fall onto nature and illuminate their eyes. They are, after all, Shelley's "unacknowledged legislators of the world" (Shelley, 1821: 777), their creative power resembling that of God. We need to stress the fact that nature in itself cannot perform anything; *she* is immobile, *her* strength subservient to the directives of the Sun that illumines *her*, "for nature," as Irigaray recalls, "is less brilliant than the star that dominates her." (SOW, 309) It is also the Sun's rays that fall onto Africa envisaged as nature and earth, illuminating the eyes of the, in this case, négritude poets. Their nature might be painted by the colours of Africa, their landscape shaped by what Chinweizu et al. call the "flora and fauna of

their locality,” their cadence modulated by the “spirit, structure, devices, attitudes and forms of Africa’s orature” (Chinweizu et al., 1985: 284-85) yet the specular imagery at work is Plato’s – the romantic touch on nature notwithstanding- and, as Irigaray urges us to see in her deconstruction of the trope, the movement is always vertical, unilateral, leading us towards Truth, the Ideal World which is the world of God, the world of the Father, the world of sameness. Whose gaze is thus being unleashed? Irigaray is unyielding in her answer: the male gaze. The specular scenography that outlines the journey of the poet/traveler in Wordsworth’s “Essays Upon Epitaphs” –the sun illuminating the stones, the poet *reading* into the letters of the Epitaph, re-mem-bering, restoring immortality to mankind- is also to be found in Césaire’s return journey. The Father, in both cases, looks upon and engenders the mother, be it the nature of romanticism or the Africa of négritude.

In négritude the male gaze is displayed in all its splendour: Africa as mother is looked upon by the eyes of the son, which rightly illuminated –geared- by the Sun-God discover beauty and goodness. The Négritude poets manage to solve the dilemma presented by Plato’s text and which Irigaray purposefully recalls: the maternal –the mother, the earth, matter, the cave- is that which is negated, that which has to be banished BUT it is also that which is there, we are body and soul, matter cannot disappear at the snapping of our fingers, our bodies are indeed the proof of our link to the mother, to the earth, to nature, he is the “son, he still retains something of the mother, of the “place of becoming”,” (SOW, 317) yet how and at what cost is the dilemma solved? What is the process involved in the resolution of the dilemma? What do we do with the mother?

If the mother has to be negated yet the link with the mother –that earthy umbilical cord- resists oblivion and therefore erasure, if the total

independence of the empire of the Father has to be reinstated at all costs, his male omnipotence thus guaranteed, then, subsequently, the contact with the mother must be kept at a minimum. The Father, that uncontaminated Truth who simply *is*<sup>40</sup> – as opposed to the “son” who becomes (like) the father- germinates the mother through a conception which in order to maintain the paternal supremacy must necessarily be immaculate. The result is a refinement, idealization of the mother; the only redemption allowed to her in such dichotomized, unilateral and univocal discourse. As captured in Irigaray’s words,

(...) what becomes of the mother from now on? The mother (is the) becoming of (re)production which is progressively “sublated,” raised, refined. She is idealized, but only by being reversed: conception becomes not only eternal but that in/by which death itself would engender life. (SOW, 316)

The eyes of the romantic poet, ingratiated by the powerful rays of the Sun, *read* into nature and their creation/conception –poetry- restores immortality in men. Death, that most frightful human destiny, is therefore beaten, for the conception thus apprehended “becomes not only eternal but that in/by which death itself would engender life.” (SOW, 315) The unlettered stone of Africa’s epitaph is lettered, created, engendered by the eyes of the négritude poets –her African black sons- who geared by the specular construction of their romantic ancestors, illumined by the all-powerful rays of the Sun, read into Africa-nature-earth and thus, overcoming the death sentence passed by the Eurocentric imaginary, Africa, in a reversal move “becomes not only eternal but that in/by which death itself would engender life” (SOW,

215) , or, as S nghor’s poetry conveys “Nude woman, black woman, / I sing your passing beauty, fixing your form in eternity.”

Behind Irigaray’s immaculate conception, there lies the Mother Africa of N gritude poets. Raised, refined, idealised, black Mother Africa defies the chaos into which *she* was thrown by the European imaginary. Yet Eurocentric discourse prevails for it is the distinctly *male* gaze – though turned black- of the poets that determine the African landscape. As Stratton declares,

The poetry celebrates *his* intellect at the same time as it pays tribute to *her* body which is frequently associated with the African landscape that is *his* to explore and discover. (italics mine, CAL, 41)

The immaculate conception that foregrounds the Mother Africa trope as performed in N gritude is clearly manifested in that first, emblematic poem by C saire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*. There, Africa-as-earth is captured in the image of a “great vulva” engendered by the rays of the sun to which it is “raised,” the phallic scenography inscribed in the words “delirium of God’s mentula,”<sup>41</sup> – or, as Irigaray would have it, that “reminiscence of the ideal ex – stasy” (SOW, 315) which the “virile prayer”<sup>42</sup> of the poet uses to re-produce – in Irigaray’s sense of eternally producing the same image- the “tempestuous face” of a virgin. Once again, the eyes are those of “men” thus reinscribing the male gaze in the textual production, instigated by a “sun that no prism divides,” and once again, the Mother Africa recovered must be made virginal and made to stay virgin, forever idealised. (see passage by C saire quoted on page 95 of the present chapter)

Nowhere is the specular imagery, the phallic scenography and female passivity of the Mother Africa trope more stringently grasped than in Ayi Kwei Armah's short story, "An African Fable."<sup>43</sup> There, the protagonist, given the revealing name of "the Warrior," -thus emphasizing the conquering drive of the sons of Africa- encounters, on the journey of his self-seeking quest, a woman, dark and beautiful. The beauty and darkness that envelop this Mother Africa is metaphorically articulated through the mystery and allure that the night bestows upon beholders who, like Plato's escaped prisoners, struggle to see beyond. This is how Armah's narrator apprehends this encounter in his tale,

Her dark, black self gave him satisfaction, and there was a difference in the nature of this satisfaction.

A night may be painfully beautiful in its darkness, but the beholder of the night is never satisfied while the night lasts. For while the night lasts the beholder's perception of its beauty and his enjoyment of this beauty is soured by his inability to see all there is to see of this beauty. It is this limitation, this impotence, perhaps, which so frustrates the beholder of the night, and it is possible that all this is because a beauty that retreats into darkness, or, what must be even more disturbing, a beauty that is itself for the most part an unperceivable darkness, by calling upon the beholder to possess and to use his powers of penetration, sooner brings into question the lack of such powers, the beholder's impotence, than does a different beauty, one which comes out on the way and makes of the beholder, in a sense only, a receiver of impressions already too strong to be missed (Armah, 1968: 194).

The phallic scenography that surrounds the narrator's prose -"powers of penetration," "impotence"- is transparently unearthed by the later

development of the tale where the Warrior, after having witnessed the brutal rape of the woman by another warrior, kills him, yet this otherwise “heroic” slaying is followed, in turn, by his own rape of the woman. Armah’s condescending narrative confers the Warrior the redeeming power of the inner contradictions of the male gaze: love and desire for the female coupled with contempt and repulsion. In Armah’s own words:

(...) The Warrior bent down in pity and his intention was to wipe the hated blood away from the woman’s breast. But the recent fear and the resolution and the gathering of his strength for that sufficient blow had left the Warrior with a head of power that must be expended if it was not to break something within. And this baffling beauty of the woman’s self, the night-like beauty that seemed to urge the beholder to pierce it in order to perceive it, of itself was deepening, not assuaging, the Warrior’s confusion. And the confusion was no longer only in his mind and in his heart, but was descending over all his being. (...) So the Warrior looked down at the woman, and he was filled with a feeling that had everything to do with love and desire, and everything to do with contempt and repulsion. And caught up in this mixture, and flushed with his victory, the Warrior went into the woman and raped her (ibid: 196).

And throughout the narrative the woman remains immobile, impervious – except for a helpless crying- to the rapes of the men, accepting the rapes as part of her condition. The utter passivity that engulfs her *ad infinitum* is conveyed in the last paragraph of the tale where a symbolic – almost complacent- eternity is evoked,

The woman looked past the Warrior's resting head, past the crescent of his ear out over the waters in a gaze that took in both the sea and the sky, and there was no separation between them, and in her eyes and in her mind there was no separation between now and then, nothing at all between the present and the depths of ages that should long have been forgotten (ibid: 196).

The paradox inherent in the womanisation of Africa unveils its own contradictions: the very same idealization process which *ideally* frees the mother, in fact, enslaves her further in the Platonic unreal world of objects for, in this metaphorical exercise, *she* is recklessly objectified. But as we are made to remember by Irigaray's reading, all the way through it is the *sons* who must be liberated and if the achievement of freedom for the *sons* of Africa demands the mother's objectification, so be it. And if that objectification takes on the idealization process of Mother Africa as witnessed in Césaire's *Notebook* and Senghor's "Black Woman," –and even Armah's African fable in his idealisation of the woman's rape– the result is the setting at work of what Stratton calls "the pot of culture strand" (CAL, 41) which vogues for the existence of an unchanging African essence embodied by the pure, nurturing, eternal and black Mother Africa.

Once the independence of Mother Africa from the colonial Father has been metaphorically and politically achieved, the postcolonial sons feed on this tropological figure to depict the neo-colonial state of the nation.<sup>44</sup> Thus, as Stratton concludes, "woman serves as an index of the state of the nation" (CAL, 41) which defines the other mode in the workings of the Mother Africa trope within the male literary tradition, "the sweep of history strand." (CAL, 41) Hence, the vilification of the continent –now clearly demarcated by the boundaries of nation states– by corrupted neo-colonial forces is embodied in the emaciated spirit of a

prostitute. The virginal –pure and eternal- Mother Africa is removed from her pedestal and retrieved to the depths of the cave as befits the *impure, pure* matter of Plato’s hystera. The womanisation process experienced by Africa in this re-vision of the trope by the “sons” of négritude remains nevertheless untouched: Mother Africa is still the Ideal to strive for, it is the corruption of the sons, tempted by the material world of the senses, that vilifies the Mother. Irigaray ironically cautions us,

As for those who may have neglected to re-member the source of the only good, they would be left to “the world,” abandoned to the earth, a prey to metamorphoses, destiny of shadows. Buried, perhaps, in some dark hole where they are attracted and held captive, again, by their dreams and fantasies. (SOW, 316)

The source of the only good is, by no means, the *hystera protera*, the womb, the maternal, the mother, the cave, but the Father, the Ideal world outside the cave. The mother is idealised and refined exclusively for the sake of the Father, and of the sons. If the sons fail to reach for the Father, *rise* to the Father, so to speak, the source of their failure resides in their link with the dangerously material earthiness of the mother who condemns them to stay at the back of the cave. The Ideal Mother Africa is thus berated, abused and denigrated, embodied as a prostitute. Another dichotomy is thus being drawn: mother-prostitute. This is a logical consequence of Eurocentric -markedly patriarchal- discourse, for the marginal traits of the position granted to women have them emerge as frontiers that delimit what falls inside the Law of the Father or what slips outside this Law. They share, as Toril Moi concedes, “the disconcerting properties of all frontiers” (Moi, 1985: 167), neither



being fully inside nor outside, neither known nor unknown; they are apprehended by Eurocentric discourse as either darkness and chaos – thus Africa as prostitute- or supreme light and purity- thus Africa as virgin.- Nevertheless, and in any case, I would like to stress the fact that this mother-prostitute dichotomy serves the interests of the sons of Africa. The resolution of the mother question as carried out by *négritude* implies this elevation of Mother Africa to the Ideal world of the Father, yet detractors of *négritude* stumble against the very same premise.

Where does this sublatedness and/or debasement of Mother Africa leave the *daughters* of Africa? What are the consequences of the Mother Africa trope in the literary dimension of female characters? The embodiment of Africa as female results in a mystification of African women as either eternally good, nurturing, beautiful and black or terribly earthy, bad and corrupted. This is the fate awaiting women characters in the male African literary tradition as is highlighted in Stratton's work. Within the workings of the tropological procedure, no other way is offered to women characters. Hence, Lawino in Okot p'Bitek's emblematic poem, "Song of Lawino," is made to embody the values of traditional Africa: she is black, she lives in the village and she praises motherhood. These are the very characteristics that oppose her to Clementine, the second wife of Ocol, Lawino's husband, who is said to paint her face with white powder, who lives in the city and who repudiates motherhood (p'Bitek, 1966). Once again, the eyes of the male poet construct and define Africa as their -the sons'- Mother Africa.

Soyinka's critique on the commerce for Africa he detected in *négritude* and which he attacked on the grounds that it moved against the definition of a true African world, is oblivious to its own share in *négritude*, namely, the Mother Africa trope, one of the definitorial axes of the movement. By way of example, I would like to reproduce a

fragment from Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* that Stratton herself quotes in her book and where the male protagonist, Ofeyi, in his role of lover-poet engenders the female protagonist, Iriyise,

Conjurer, incantatory words floated through Ofeyi's lips ... And why not, thought Ofeyi? Vision is eternally of man's own creating. The woman's acceptance, her collaboration in man's vision of life results time and time again in such periodic embodiments of earth and ideal (Soyinka, 1980: 82).

The specular imagery that frames the trope, the idealization of woman and its subsequent objectification, the Father's inscription in the mother, is evinced in Soyinka's immaculate conception. Yet Iriyise, following in the design of the nation-state falls in disgrace and becomes a prostitute to be re-generated in a symbolic return to origins -to life in the village of Aiyéró- as powerful Mother Africa, whose male-authorised mightiness allows her to participate in nature and bring in the rains,

In wrapper and sash with the other women of Aiyéró, her bared limbs and shoulders among young shoots, Iriyise weaving fronds for the protection of the young nursery. ... Her fingers spliced wounded saplings with the ease of a natural healer. Her presence, the women boasted, inspired the rains (ibid: 20).

Both Iriyise's idealization and fall are not to be understood as the outcome of her own doings but the machinations of the sons of Africa.<sup>45</sup> In its glorification and degradation, Mother Africa remains a silent, passive object.

Négritude's recovery of Africa through its embodiment in the figure of a woman was an attempt to grant visibility and existence to a

reality that Eurocentric discourse denied. The Mother Africa trope thus engendered promulgates an Africa that is powerfully black, nurturing, ideal and eternal. Soyinka's criticism explores the inconsistencies of a discourse which, while serving as a counterpoint to Western ideology, it nonetheless perpetuates the very same ideology it is determined to destroy. According to Soyinka, négritude's endeavour is delineated by a quest of the Africanness that their exponents have neglected in their wanderings among the metropolis of the West and their immersion in Eurocentric discourse. What Soyinka fails to realise is his own indebtedness to this Eurocentric point of view when the female African experience is contemplated. For both négritude representatives and négritude detractors, firmly stationed in their maleness, in the Law of the Father, obviate the "independent" existence of the female, that is to say, their construction of the female experience is subjected, subservient, subordinated to the male African experience, which, according to them, conforms THE African experience.

Mother Africa is there to save the sons of Africa from the constraints of Eurocentric discourse; Mother Africa restores their dignity as sons of Africa yet Mother Africa as fabricated in the imagination of the poets of négritude and their male descendants –both followers and detractors– leaves the *daughters* of Africa stranded on the shores of mystifications: eternal goodness or utter degradation, Mother Africa or prostitute.<sup>46</sup>

Ama Ata Aidoo's unyielding stand as woman and African secures the articulation of African women's voices and in her work, their experiences as African women transcend the mother-whore dichotomy inherent in the trope of Mother Africa. As an African woman writer, she, as Norma Alarcón would have it, puts "flesh back on the object" (Alarcón, 1981: 182-90) of male consumption, Mother Africa. Yet this

fleshing out of Africa takes on faces, thus reinforcing the prosopopeia which underlies the present analysis of Ama Ata Aidoo's work and which presupposes a continuous and simultaneous facing and defacing of the Mother –and the Father- in an (auto) biography that defies both the maleness and whiteness of Eurocentric discourse. The trope must be re-imagined, Irigaray's transition must be negotiated. The re-imagining of the trope, the negotiation that Irigaray's transition acclaims in her/our way out of the cave, conceives a refracted specularisation –the missed reflections of the Eurocentric gaze- in which the revalorisation of “blackness,” the universal connection of the black world, the polemics of language, the search for origins, the metaphor of the “black hole,” and the strife for a unified self, are encoded within the experiences of African women.



## PART II

### *The Cave Revisited: Towards a Subjectification of Africa and African Women*

For if she begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking-glass shrinks; his fitness for life is diminished. How is he to go on giving judgment, civilizing natives, making laws, writing books, dressing up and speechifying at banquets, unless he can see himself at breakfast and at dinner at least twice the size he really is?<sup>1</sup>

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

The philosophy of encounter has so far considered the question of the Other and our relationship with him, our attitude to him, generally, within a first-hand, direct situation and within the sphere of the same culture. This philosophical trend has yet to enter the field of inquiries into the relationships between the Self and the Other when one of the sides belongs to another race, religion or culture. To what extent will this complicate the flow of our reflections, making them more elaborate, difficult and ambiguous?<sup>2</sup>

Ryszard Kapuscinski, *The Other*

But this cave is already, and ipso facto, a speculum – An inner space of reflection.<sup>3</sup>

Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other*

*Woman*

In 1928 Virginia Woolf was commissioned to give two lectures at Cambridge under the heading “Women and Fiction.” The result was a groundbreaking long essay entitled *A Room of One's Own*, where the relationship between women and fiction was analysed under the invigorating perspective of a woman terrifyingly aware of her condition as woman and as writer.

Woolf's essay takes readers on a journey of self-discovery where desire for knowledge becomes an inexhaustible source of energy that fuels her wanderings on the *sacredness* of patriarchal ground. It is in the immaculate gardens of Oxbridge where, we are told, a first thought shapes itself in her mind, a thought poetically captured in the image of a little fish which “a good fisherman puts back into the water so that it

may grow fatter and be one day worth cooking and eating” (Woolf, 5: 1929). But this little fish of hers, this “insignificant” thought of hers carefully laid on the grass is severely interrupted by a man’s figure, a beadle, horrified at the sight of a woman treading upon the turf destined for male feet. Her walk is resumed but not on the turf; the gravel, as she declares, “is the place for me” (Woolf, 5: 1929). The thought continues to thrive, though, more insidiously than before, more forcefully than ever for the temptation of knowledge is so near, so within her reach that excitement and longing totally possess her: there, in the middle stands the library, where, she recalls, the manuscripts of Milton’s *Lycidas* and Thackeray’s *Esmond* are kept, protected and revered. Exhilarated by the promise of knowledge, she goes up the stairs that take her to the entrance of this altar of learning but there, once again, the figure of a man stands between her and knowledge. Her gender prevents her from entering. Only through a written authorization by a college fellow, will she be allowed to accede to the realm of knowledge. Her incipient thought, her intellectual development, is henceforth thwarted for a second time.

In what I believe to be an extraordinary instance of instinctual wisdom, Woolf detects the culprit of her banishment and gives it a name, patriarchy. She also gives it a face, the face of civilization, the statue of the Duke of Cambridge, and in particular, “the feathers in his cocked hat” that wave at the rhythm of “the instinct for possession, the rage for acquisition which drives” the patriarchs “to desire other people’s fields and goods perpetually; to make frontiers and flags,” in short to civilize (Woolf, 27: 1929). This thirst to accumulate alien properties is not civilization, Woolf concludes, but the lack of it. In the textual space of *A Room of One’s Own*, civilization and patriarchy feed on each other, form a communion where whiteness and maleness are



placed at the top of the signifying ladder. Woolf's reading of patriarchy discovers a "civilization" which, she surmises, is no civilization at all. Henceforth, women's insertion in civilization, from which terrain we must remember they have been excluded, implies a re-assessment of the term itself, that is to say, a re-evaluation and re-definition of what civilization *should* stand for. Although Woolf identifies the inherent failure of this civilization, and therefore the need to create an *other* civilization, she does not pursue the investigation any further.

Nevertheless, I deem it worth recovering Woolf's exact words to realize the connection she draws between patriarchy, Empire and civilization:

They too, the patriarchs, the professors, had endless difficulties, terrible drawbacks to contend with. Their education had been in some ways as faulty as my own. It had bred in them defects as great. True, they had money and power, but only at the cost of harbouring in their breasts an eagle, a vulture, for ever tearing the liver out and plucking at the lungs – the instinct for possession, the rage for acquisition which drives them to desire other people's fields and goods perpetually; to make frontiers and flags; battleships and poison gas; to offer up their own lives and their children's lives. (...) These are unpleasant instincts to harbor, I reflected. They are bred of the conditions of life; of the *lack of civilization ...* (Woolf: 27, 1929, italics mine)

Although Woolf's text disclaims any postcolonial connection -the temporal and cultural imbrications of its inception do not allow for it-, and although her criticism was clearly launched on maleness, I contend that her vocabulary exhumes the Empire upon which British patriarchy was firmly grounded.

Her theory of the looking-glass has long become a cornerstone of feminist criticism. In patriarchy, women become a looking-glass where men see themselves reflected twice their size; this reflection reassures their stature as commanders of civilizing enterprises, as makers of laws, as heads of their family household and, by extension, masters of the family of the Empire. But, what if –the conditional tense abounds throughout Woolf’s text- the looking-glass begins to show another reflection, in other words, what if the looking-glass begins to tell the truth?

Plato’s cave returns to the story. There, knowledge, truth, reflections abide. However, Plato’s cave is not impervious to the postcolonial reality that moulds the reflections at the back and which produce a map of the world whose richness is measured by colour and complexity. As Kapuscinski puts it,

(...) *the map of the world has changed*. In the first half of the twentieth century this map was arranged on the principles of a pyramid. At the top were historical subjects: the great colonial powers, the white man’s states. This arrangement broke down before our eyes and in our lifetime, as more than a hundred new – at least formally independent- states inhabited by three-quarters of humanity appeared on the historical arena almost overnight. And so here is the new map of the world, colourful, multicoloured, very rich and complex (Kapuscinski: 58, 2008).

The reflection of this map of the world requires the cave to be re-visited otherwise, and as we have seen in the previous part, the projection at the back of the cave is condemned to a deceiving black and white re-

production of what Kapuscinski calls “the philosophy of encounter,” an encounter which is essentially coloured.

Part II proposes a return to the cave equipped with Irigaray’s speculum. This concave mirror used to dilate a passage for closer examination will re-read Plato’s cave and reveal an inner space of reflection where the maternal is recovered and re-assessed. Plato’s *hystera* becomes, under the dissection of Irigaray’s speculum, a site where the maleness of Eurocentric discourse is destabilized. But in order to paint the world in colours we need this other dimension of Eurocentrism to be debunked, namely, whiteness, and this is the point where Ama Ata Aidoo’s work comes to the fore.

Aidoo’s work is an attempt –successful, I contend- to bring Irigaray’s *hystera* back to Africa, that is to say, to recover the maternal in the African heart of darkness by defeating the idealization process that Mother Africa has gone through under the hands of négritude. Mother Africa encounters, in Aidoo’s fiction, a space where reflections of women *as subjects* are projected. An analysis of these projections configure the ground of chapter three, - “Without Cracks? Fissures in the Cave: The Middle passage”- chapter four –“The Postcolonial Arena: *No Sweetness Here* or the Travails of Africans after Independence” and, finally, chapter five - “The White Hole: *Our Sister Killjoy or Reflections from a Black-eyed Squint.*”- The subjectification of Mother Africa commences.



# Three

## *Without Cracks? Fissures in the Cave: The Middle passage*

And now, what if someone –tis, an anonymous someone of the male gender –were further to brutalize the man whose chains he had earlier taken off, by forcibly dragging him, against his will, with a hybris contrary to his “natural” bent, along the “steep and rugged ascent” out of the grotto, and holding “him fast until he is forced into the presence of the sun himself”? What if the unknown did not let go of the man, but prevented him from springing away or running off, until he had carried out his personal project of tearing the man away from the shadow of his former home and dragging him into full daylight? Don’t you think that the man treated this way, man-handled, lacerated perhaps, “saved” in this manner, would be “pained and irritated”?<sup>1</sup>

Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*

I propose, for the beginning of this chapter, an exercise of imagination: let’s imagine that one of the prisoners of Plato’s cave is dragged out of the cave and that we follow him on his journey out. Imbued by a feeling of empathy towards him, we share his blindness when his eyes are confronted with the direct rays of the sun, we commiserate with him when disappointment overwhelms him and we share his desire to go back to the cave from which –we should not forget- he was *dragged out*, in other words, he was forced to leave. And now, impregnated by the

European imaginary, let's give the cave an identity, Africa. An analogy follows, seamlessly, the prisoners are the Africans, dragged out of their cave and taken to the shores of the American continent, as slaves.

The proposed exercise of imagination is entirely inspired by the quote by Irigaray that introduces the chapter. I am quite sure that the postcolonial dimension that I give to my reading was not in Irigaray's mind, focused as she was on her feminist critique of Plato's text, but although I am well aware of the amount of manipulation that my interpretation entails, I believe that, first, this exercise of imagination recovers a piece of history paramount in the African imaginary: the middle passage, and second, as I shall promptly point out, the language that shapes Irigaray's extract recalls a rhetoric of slavery that tallies with the master-slave discourse. What is more, I would like to emphasize that the text by Irigaray is called, I would like to think not arbitrarily, the passage. A "passage" evokes a journey, especially by water, a voyage, but a "passage" also indicates a transition, the passing from one condition to another. And indeed the journey initiated in the African continent and finished on the shores of America marks a pungent, forceful transition: the passing of the condition of "free man" to "slave." The language that Irigaray's text displays transports us easily to a discourse of slavery in which the Atlantic slave trade is re-enacted: "chains," "brutalize," "forcibly dragging him against his will," "man-handled," "lacerated," even a reference to the "former home" is evoked. No wonder, then, that the prisoners, when confronted with the Platonic light of the sun are enveloped by blindness; for, who would not after months of darkness and disease in the slave ship?

The Atlantic slave trade is exactly what Ama Ata Aidoo recalls in her first two plays and this is precisely what she urges us –her audience– to re-enact: the middle passage with all its horror, ambivalences,

contradictions and perennial presence in the imaginary of writers of the black world. She manages to do so via two plays, *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965) and *Anowa* (1970).<sup>2</sup> However, the journey she –hand in hand with her audience- embarks on is a journey against the grain of the European imaginary as embodied by Plato’s metaphor, for she takes us back to the cave, to Africa, and, as Irigaray forcibly demonstrates from her feminist standpoint, the cave is, in the end, no dark void. The journey back proves to be highly desirable, even revolutionary, since what it establishes is a change in the narrative standpoint which results in a change in the development of the narrative. Given that the *linearity* of Western discourse as exemplified by the Platonic metaphor has been already contested in the first part of the dissertation, what follows is a visit through the “fissures” (SOW, 249) of the caves, the “forgotten path” (SOW, 260) delineated by Irigaray, the cracks that, I will contend, mould “modernity.” To put it more bluntly, this journey back to the cave cannot follow the route of the European imaginary, the linear narrative that simply obviates bifurcations and, as a consequence, the possible narratives that these bifurcations might lead to. In the most critical of stances, this linear narrative sacrifices the “other” narratives for the sake of an imagined unity, yet, in any case, the “fissures” remain, either unacknowledged or forgotten.

The presence of the middle passage in Aidoo’s first works is linked to an analysis of the discourse of modernity. This indissoluble tie between the middle passage and modernity is scrutinised and amply developed in Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness*, a book whose title clearly testifies to the inseparability between slavery and Western liberalism in the making of the discourse of “modernity” (Gilroy, 1993). Following Gilroy’s perspective, and before plunging into a direct analysis of Aidoo’s plays, I would like to pose two

questions: (1) How does the middle passage modify –and disturb– the canonical discourse on “modernity”? In other words, how does the middle passage force us to re-think “modernity”?; (2) What does the middle passage represent in the development of a “black identity”? And, as a result of this question, how –in the sense of what strategies– does Pan-Africanism feed on the middle passage to claim the existence of a black world?

When, in history lessons, the period known as the “Enlightenment” is recalled, it is as if an aura of light enveloped us. As the very word “enlightenment” reveals, the path towards light, made possible by the power of reason, is shaped. The world of darkness is definitely over, religious beliefs are contested on scientific grounds and freedom acknowledged as a goal to be achieved, a right of *all* human beings. This view of modernity as a good “per se” is, still nowadays, widely and, I may add, suspiciously sustained. As support for my argument, I would like to mention the case of one writer, Lebanese born Amin Maalouf. Thus, Maalouf, in his book, *On Identity*, a critical study on the current polemics of assessing an identity in this our contemporary, diasporic world, resorts to an exhortation of “modernity” which ominously discloses a dormant defence of that which he sets himself to criticise, namely, the linear, unambivalent, conclusive scientific drive of Western discourse. Hence, Maalouf euphorically equates the “Enlightenment” as

(...) that extraordinary springtime of creative humanity; that total revolution –scientific, technological, industrial, intellectual and moral; that long, patient, detailed toil on the part of evolving peoples who every day experimented and invented, ceaselessly challenging old certainties and shaking up outdated attitudes –all this was not just some other event. It was something unique in history, the event that laid the



foundations of the world as we know it today. And it took place in the West –in the West and nowhere else (Maalouf, 1996: 57).

It is not my intention to rebuke Maalouf's postulation on the "extraordinary springtime of humanity" that this particular historical period generated, but rather, I would like to pose the very same key question that Partha Chatterjee asks as a starting point of his insightful study on the particularities and intricacies of nationalist discourse in the postcolonial context: why are the values of "modernity" –its "goodness" taken for granted- and its inevitability unquestioned (Chatterjee, 1986: 10)?

There are two aspects of Maalouf's text which I want to single out for they disclose, to my mind, his blindness towards what Chatterjee calls the taken-for-granted "goodness" of modernity together with its unquestioned inevitability. These two aspects are: (1) the tremendous positive view on "modernity" that Maalouf's words exude –that total revolution –scientific, technological, industrial, intellectual and moral- and (2) the link between "modernity" and the West which he categorically establishes. Maalouf's text is, after all, a definite statement about a reality grounded, we presume, in history. However, if we cast doubt on the feasibility of this reality, what follows is an unfolding of the cracks, the fissures of the cave of Western thought, so to speak, which, eventually, will discover another dimension of "modernity."

As Gilroy states, "the junction point of capitalism, industrialisation, and political democracy" (Gilroy, 1993: 16) is what gives substance to the "discourse of Western modernity" and, as he later adds, it is at this junction where the black Atlantic has to be placed, for this placing will reveal this other dimension of "modernity" which will undermine the "moral" thrust of the modern revolution, on the

one hand, and which will indissolubly link this revolution with the unpleasant reality of the slave trade, on the other. Henceforth, in an attempt to place my analysis at this very juncture, and in order to do so in a visual way, I would like to resort to a painting, Turner's "The Slave Ship."

The full title of Turner's painting was "The Slave Ship. Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying - Typhoon coming on." The reason that has moved me to recall the full title of Turner's painting is to shed light on one aspect of the slave trade which had become sound business practice, the throwing of dying slaves overboard to claim insurance for their loss. Slaves were commodities, bought and sold, transported from one place to another, their humanity was deemed irrelevant, inexistent and, as the commodities that



J.W.M. Turner, *The Slave Ship. Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying - Typhoon coming on* (1840)

they were, insurance on slave cargoes were common at the time. Hence, slave traders were entitled to a refund for those slaves who perished at sea. However, the insurance policy clearly stipulated that slave traders could only claim a refund for those slaves perished at sea, not those who perished from brutality, disease or the dreadful conditions on board. What resulted from such a policy was the breathtaking scene captured

by Turner in his painting: profit-minded captains threw the dead and dying into the ocean so that they could claim a benefit for the lost merchandise. The horrendousness of the painting is made even more vivid when we are confronted with the fact that the scene captured on the canvas corresponds to a true, horrific story that occurred in 1783 and which tells us about how the captain of the slave ship Zong ordered dying slaves to be cast into the sea so that “they could be described as having been “lost at sea” and insurance be claimed on them” (Vaughan, 1999: 246). The “reality” of the painting is thus blatantly, irrefutably established.

Where does the significance of the painting lie in a critique of modernity?

“The Slave Ship” was exhibited in 1840 in London, at the Royal Academy, to coincide with the world anti-slavery convention. Turner, “the” British painter *par excellence*, was also a representative of English liberalism, that “Englishness” that defended freedom and justice and which launched him into a resolute fight against slavery. What the painting represents, as Gilroy poignantly asserts is “capitalism with its clothes off” (Gilroy, 1993: 16), that is to say, plantation slavery. Henceforth, placing Turner’s painting at the junction point of “capitalism, industrialisation, and political democracy” casts doubt on the quality of the “moral” revolution that a canonical apprehension of the discourse on modernity seems to uphold. To put it in other words, Turner’s slave ship makes us re-think the morality of the revolution by placing darkness alongside enlightenment.

My reading of *The Dilemma of a Ghost* and *Anowa* is foregrounded by a critique of “modernity” that aligns with Gilroy’s placement of the black Atlantic at the center of its discourse. Gilroy sustains his view through a set of varied cultural manifestations -literary, musical,

philosophical- gestated in the milieu of Afro-America. What I contend is that Aidoo's contribution to the re-evaluation of "modernity" resides in the change of locality –and therefore, perspective- that the reader is forced to take when faced with her texts. In other words, the middle passage is recalled, narrated and re-enacted *from* and *within* African terrain.

Taking the whole of Turner's work into consideration, "The Slave Ship" is, significantly, one of his least known paintings. Among other things, the painting is to be found in Boston, not in London, and the story about how it ended on American soil is worth remembering for, I believe, it reveals yet another aspect on the discourse of modernity, namely the inherent moral ambivalence of its thinkers. The painting was bought by John Ruskin, a bastion of English liberal thought, and like Turner, a firm condemner of slavery. Ruskin, a renowned art critic at the time, admired Turner to the point of classifying him as "the greatest and most profound exponent of modern art" in his influential *Modern Painters*, published in 1843 (Vaughan, 1999: 247). Ruskin shared the horrifying view of slavery that the painting projected and "The Slave Ship" remained in his possession for 28 years. But, in 1899, the painting ended up in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. What happened to Ruskin that propelled his selling of the painting? The answer to the question is not decisive in the sense that all explanations as to why Ruskin decided finally to sell this painting by an artist that he profoundly admired are fuelled by mere suppositions. However, these suppositions hold something in common: the persistent link of the painting's ownership with the Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica.

In 1864, Edward John Eyre became Governor of Jamaica. There, he forcefully suppressed a native rebellion, known as the Morant Bay Rebellion, by conducting a fierce and vigorous operation that ended up

with exaggerated reprisals and the death sentence of the Baptist preacher, George William Gordon, a black member of the legislature. Governor Eyre's attitude towards the suppression of the rebellion provoked opposing reactions in British society which were most articulately expressed in British liberal circles: some liberal thinkers firmly proclaimed their condemnation of Governor Eyre's savage doings, while others defended his resoluteness by arguing that the rebellion was, in any case, a regretful episode that endangered civilisation at large and which, for that reason alone, had to be, necessarily, suppressed. Ruskin was among those intellectuals who defended Governor Eyre.

Whether on account of his direct involvement in the defense of Governor Eyre as regards the latter's behaviour in the Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica, or another reason unknown to us, it is said that Ruskin started to find the painting too painful to look at and he finally decided to put it up for sale at Christie's. Three years had to pass before the painting met a buyer, an American collector from New York.

Ruskin's attitude towards the painting, his first reverence of it and his later dismissal, reveals an ambivalence from the part of liberal thinkers –the defenders of universal freedom and justice– towards that overbearing reality of the black Atlantic. Did his defense of Governor Eyre conceal an uncertainty towards his own beliefs on “modernity”? In other words, was there any sign of remorse which, venturing on an amateurish Freudian interpretation, Ruskin might have expressed in his rejection of the painting? Ruskin's attitude towards the painting gathers an uncompromising ambivalence: he cannot bear looking at it, so he gets rid of the slave ship; in other words, he opts, at least on the surface, for forgetfulness. What was going on inside his mind, we cannot judge for we do not know.

The most ambivalent position on modernity, however, comes from Turner himself. When the painting is analysed in the background of its historical British context, the helpless hands of the drowning slaves take on a significance which endangers the all-encompassing liberal project of “modernity.” This is what Abigail Ward’s study on the painting urges us to take into account (Ward, 2007: 42; 47-58). Thus, she notes how a steady stream of black people from America arrived in Britain in the years following the American War of Independence, and how their presence was soon to be felt politically for they became active participants in the working-class movements of the time. As evidence of the impact of black people in the radical movements of the time, she provides us with the example of William Davidson, a black cabinet-maker, who, as a response to the Peterloo massacre of 1819, schemed to murder the members of the Cabinet in what came to be known as the Cato Street Conspiracy of 1820. As a consequence, an alignment between working-class radicalism and a “potentially dangerous notion” of black radicalism arose in the minds of those British liberals, among whom we should count Turner, who thought it would be better to maintain a “racially homogeneous British sense of nation” (ibid: 50). Therefore, and as a direct outcome of contextualising the painting, Ward’s interpretation guides us towards discarding its “memorial function” and embracing its forgetting function as refers the black person’s role in contemporary Britain by “focusing on the past, rather than the growing political consciousness of black people” (ibid: 50). Her argument is further supported by her analytical reading of David Dabydeen’s long poem “Turner,” itself inspired by Turner’s painting, which characterizes the protagonist, who is given the name Turner, as both a slave-ship owner and a paedophile.<sup>3</sup>

Whether as an amendment to Ruskin's forgetfulness or as deviant maneuvering to discard black people's involvement in the making of the British nation, the overwhelming reality of the Atlantic slave trade cannot be shunned. This reality is what Gilroy places at the core of his aforementioned book, where he states explicitly the significance of the ship as the new chronotope of the discourse of modernity, as the embodiment of the horror and ambivalences of the haunting reality of the slave trade but, we should not forget, it also epitomizes the junction point of capitalism, industrialisation and political democracy.

Ships ... refers us back to the middle passage, to the half-remembered micro-politics of the slave trade and its relationship to both industrialisation and modernisation. As it were, getting on board promises a means to reconceptualise the orthodox relationship between modernity and what passes for its prehistory. It provides a different sense of where modernity itself be thought to begin in the constitutive relationships with outsiders that both found and temper a self-conscious sense of Western civilisation (Gilroy, 1993: 17).

*In The Dilemma of a Ghost* and *Anowa*, Aidoo reconceptualises "the orthodox relationship between modernity and what passes for its prehistory" and, in doing so, she re-thinks the Pan-African Ideal. The Pan-African Ideal rescued the continent from the European-made division of the territory, promulgating the universality of the black world and yet an impelling question emerges: is there any stranger *within* this black world? Any borders that the unifying thrust of the Pan-African Ideal has failed to envision?



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***Nation, Home, Africa ... The Birth of  
the African Dilemma or The Dilemma  
of a Ghost***

*The Dilemma of a Ghost* marks Aidoo's debut in the literary world. The play was performed by the Student's Theatre at Commonwealth Hall's Open Air Theatre, University of Ghana, 12-14 March 1964. Two years later it was published. Aidoo was only 22 years old. *The Dilemma of a Ghost* features a young couple: Ato Yawson, Ghanaian, and Eulalie Yawson, née Rush, Afro-American. They meet and fall in love in America and once they have graduated, they decide to start a new life in Ghana. The play is developed in more or less one year and it is divided into five acts with a prelude where the audience is introduced to the main characters, Ato and Eulalie, while they are still in America. Apart from this prelude where we witness Ato and Eulalie on American soil, the rest of the play takes place entirely in Ghana.

So far, I have provided a very sketchy summary of the background that conforms Aidoo's play and yet in this very brief account it is already

possible to discern the symbolic significance of Ato and Eulalie's matrimony, namely the union between Africa and Afro-America. Are we really witnessing the fulfillment of the Pan-African Ideal in the matrimony between Ato and Eulalie, or rather, does Aidoo have her audience detect the fissures, the cracks in this most desired ideal of brotherhood-sisterhood among all the members of the black world? In other words, can the Pan-African Ideal be conceived as a feasible reality?

I would like to start my analysis of *The Dilemma of a Ghost* by first drawing attention to an article by Maryse Condé, published in 1972 in *Présence Africaine*, entitled "Three Female Writers in Modern Africa: Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo and Grace Ogot" and in which, as we can easily gather from the title, she analyses the work of three women writers, Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo and Grace Ogot in what she terms "modern Africa." Condé devotes exactly one paragraph –to be more precise, seventeen lines- to her analysis of *The Dilemma* and in just this one paragraph, she manages to resolutely dismiss the play from the literary arena. Why such negative criticism? Where does Condé locate the literary failure of the play?

Condé centres her critique of the play on just one character, Eulalie, whom she brands as "alien" and whom she rejects on the grounds of being oversimplified. I believe it is worth recuperating Condé's own words:

For her first play, Ama Ata chose to portray not a Ghanaian or an African but an Afro-American woman. I have no intention of blaming her for trying to depict the experiences of an alien (...) The oversimplification of Eulalie's character totally overshadows the otherwise worthwhile aspects of the play and, in the end, *The Dilemma of a Ghost* leaves us with the impression of a mere exercise in futility (Condé, 1972: 137).

The problem of Condé's extremely brief analysis of *The Dilemma of a Ghost* resides in her synthesizing of the whole play in just one single character, oblivious of the rest of the characters and the symbolic meaning purported by the marriage of the two main characters. Unfortunately, this is not just one of the problems presented by Condé's criticism alone for this line of criticism, which is characterised for concentrating the entire meaning of the play in the female characters, is evinced in a great deal of criticism –much more sympathetic to Aidoo's text notwithstanding- formulated from a feminist perspective (Eke, 1999).

Vincent O. Odamtten's reading of Aidoo's play points out this failure in criticism and he wisely cautions us against interpreting Aidoo's drama as "a feminist celebration, the quintessential drama in praise of traditional African womanhood" (Odamtten, 1994: 16). His perspective instead motions us to pay attention to "the whole society" (ibid: 16), not just women, since a reading set on the female characters will obliterate the sociological-historical dimension of the text and will, in the end, produce limited and limiting interpretations which in its most extreme manifestation will discredit the text as "a mere exercise in futility." Odamtten's thoughtful interpretation is foregrounded in the need to contextualise the text within the neocolonialist reality that surrounds the drama. In short, he undauntingly states that "we must learn to read against neocolonialism" (ibid: 20).

In "Under Western Eyes. Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," Chandra Talpade Mohanty stressed the absolute necessity to contextualise in time and space any analysis on Third World Women (Mohanty, 1991). According to Mohanty, Western feminist discourse is tainted by a universalizing thrust that places third world women in an eternally "other" position delineated by poverty, illiteracy and tradition.

Mohanty's criticism on Western Feminism is launched on its discursive incapacity to apprehend the "reality" of Third World Women simply because it perpetuates a dichotomy –Western Women versus Third World Women- that incidentally creates an "average third world woman" that "leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being "third world" (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized,etc.). This "average third world woman" is therefore confronted with the assumed "modernity" of the educated Western woman who has "control over" her "body and sexuality" and is endowed with the freedom "to make" her "own choices" (ibid: 56).

I echo Mohanty's claim on contextualisation first, to complement Odamtten's own contextualising claim and, second, to recover the paramount significance of women in this reading against colonialism. In other words, what I am trying to do is to build a bridge between Odamtten's perspective and a feminist perspective, one whose aim is more wide-ranging than the one expressed by Condé. My belief is that we need to acknowledge the crucial role exerted by third world women in the unfolding of the inner ambivalences of the discourse on modernity. *The Dilemma of a Ghost* re-thinks modernity, demands a contextualising of the play and this contextualising involves a recognition of women as an active presence in the learning to read against colonialism.

A contextualisation of *The Dilemma of a Ghost* takes us to Ghana right after independence, around 1960. Ghana gained its independence from the United Kingdom on 6 March 1957 at zero hundred hours. Ghana, the former Gold Coast has printed its name in history as the first African nation to gain its independence from a colonial power. However, history in its continuing process of re-writing and re-evaluation has forced us to acknowledge that this was not indeed the case: Ghana was

not the *first* African nation to step into the postcolonial arena but the *second*, the first being Sudan in 1956, as Campbell dutifully amends in *Middle passages. African-American Journeys to Africa, 1787-2005* (Campbell, 2006). It is in this very book where Campbell also adds that, in spite of Sudan's earlier independence, it was Ghana "that seized African-Americans' imaginations" (ibid: 316), and, one could add that it was not only the imagination of African-Americans which was being thus seized but the imagination of blacks –and non-blacks- around the world. Why is Ghana repeatedly thought of as being the first African nation? What did Ghana represent for black people worldwide and, more poignantly still, what did it represent for black Americans?

Ghana's allure resides in, on the one hand, its location on the coast that marked the departure of millions of Africans to the New World Slavery, and, on the other hand, its charismatic president, Kwame Nkrumah, who synthesized a most longed for blend of African traditionalism with Western modernity. This is as far as Campbell's conjectures on the issue lead us, and the truth is that Ghana, whether its title as first independent African nation is merited or not, does hold a privileged position in the Pan-African world and most meaningfully in the imaginations of black Americans. Who was this Kwame Nkrumah, black president of a free, black nation?

David Birmingham, author of *Kwame Nkrumah. The Father of African Nationalism*, a biography of Ghana's first president, urges us to consider the significance of the existence of an independent black nation in the context of Afro-America and the black Civil Rights movement. As he points out, before the slogan "black is beautiful" gained currency in the U.S., Nkrumah had already given people "a pride in their black skins and a confidence in themselves which slavery and colonialism had eroded" (Birmingham, 1998: 95). Sharing Birmingham's view, Odamttem

adds that “under the leadership of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, the former British colony of Gold Coast had become the independent “Black Star” of progressive African politics during the late fifties and early sixties” (Odamtten, 1994: 22), to the extent that “progressive intellectuals and activists from all over the world were making trips to Accra” (ibid: 22). Ever since the eighteenth century, and for very diverse motivations, African-Americans have turned their eyes towards Africa, projecting onto the continent their hopes for a life of dignity, something that persistently eluded them in the United States.<sup>4</sup> Yet in the milieu of the civil rights movement, a *black* president whose identity as head of state was being acknowledged worldwide, a *black* president of a *black* nation whose flag featured a *black* star representing the *black* race was a source of inspiration for many black Americans who were still regarded as second-class citizens in their own country. It is not surprising that many of them welcomed president Nkrumah’s invitation to build the nation and fled to Ghana as professionals of different sorts: teachers, doctors, university professors, etc. It is worth remembering here that Nkrumah spent almost ten years in the United States where he developed his philosophy of an independent Africa held together by the Pan-African Ideal, so, his offer to African-Americans is perfectly understandable. In the imaginations of these African-Americans Ghana came to represent the dream of freedom, equality and happiness –the three bastions of American citizenship- which remained unattainable in their American home.<sup>5</sup> Among those who tried their luck in Ghana, I would like to mention a then young and little known Maya Angelou whose book *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* captures her stay there and a long time reputed and revered scholar W.E.B. Du Bois who gave up his American passport to embrace Ghanaian citizenship.<sup>6</sup> There were many others, much less known than Maya Angelou and W.E.B. Du

Bois but whose stories are just as revealing and captivating. One such anonymous protagonist might have been Eulalie Yawson, the “protagonist” that Condé regards so unfavourably in her article, the “alien” Aidoo dares to deal with in *The Dilemma of a Ghost*.

However, the independent “Black Star” of the late fifties and early sixties is also home to the ambivalences of the discourse on modernity, for, it cannot be denied that the fight for independence is rooted, at least in its origins, in a nationalist discourse firmly grounded in Western soil. It is not my intention to provide a thorough analysis of how Western nationalist discourse is re-modelled in the reality of the postcolonial nation-states, but I would like to stress that, as Chatterjee’s contribution to the study of postcolonial nationalisms clearly demonstrates, the change of location –the jump from colonial states to postcolonial states– endorses a “great deal of complexity in the relations between thought, culture and power” (Chatterjee, 1986: 26). Relations of dominance and subordination constitute the basis of the discourse of colonization with the “dominant” culture –read colonialist– ruling over the “subordinate” culture –read colonized– but once independence is gained, once the colonialists have been thrown out of the country, a new question needs to be formulated and this question must probe into the new relations of power that postcoloniality creates. Echoing Chatterjee, the question is thus formulated: “what are the specific ways in which frameworks of thought conceived in the context of the dominant culture are received and transformed in the subordinate culture?” (ibid: 27)

Aidoo’s first incursion in the literary world can be considered an exercise –and I do not intend to undermine her task here by labelling the play an “exercise”– to define and come to terms with these new relations of power that the postcolonial arena brought about. These power relations are circumscribed in three topics which persistently will

reappear in Aidoo's future work: education, language and women. Hence, how do education, language and women function in the microcontext of the text under discussion, on the one hand, and how are these three topics to be assessed under the macrocontext of the postcolonial Ghana of the sixties?

To start with, the very title of the play propels the reader towards an African literary tradition, the dilemma tale and yet the play is not written in Fanti –which is, in fact, Aidoo's mother tongue- but in English, the language of the colonialists, a language with a marked literary tradition of its own. In his analysis of *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, not only does Odamtten centre his reading around this African literary tradition but he also criticizes the lack of interest that Western critics have shown towards the dilemma tales. What does the dilemma tale consist of? In Odamtten's own words, “essentially, the dilemma tale is a narrative whose primary function is to stimulate serious, deep-probing discussion of social, political and moral issues that confront human beings in their everyday lives” (Odamtten, 1994: 19). The effectiveness of the dilemma tales abide in the unavoidable critical reading that they exert upon the audience. In other words, they stimulate a questioning of the general ideology of society by placing this ideology in the dialogical ground of the text where different voices are shaped and heard and which interact with each other and with the audience at large. The result is that “the dilemma is always extended out of the text and into the context of the audience” (ibid: 21). Featuring as a typical African form of short story, the dilemma tale is endowed with a moral ambiguity whose ending does not solve anything and so, the conflict or problem posed is passed onto the audience who while being entertained is also being instructed (Bascom, 1985). As a matter of fact, the dilemma tale is aimed at helping to establish social norms.



We cannot but see astounding similarities between the African, “traditional” dilemma tale with the Western “modern” *Verfremdung-Effekt* (Willett, 1959; Demetz, 1962; Eddershaw, 1996). When Bertolt Brecht coined the term “*Verfremdung-Effekt*” (also known as estrangement or alienation effect), little did he imagine that his groundbreaking theory was germane to a literary practice carried out for centuries in Africa.<sup>7</sup> Brecht’s “*episches Theater*” also sought a distancing from the audience in order to make them reflect upon the problem being posed on stage. His was a reaction against “classical,” Aristotelian theatre which demanded a total identification of audience and characters. Even Brecht’s societal concerns were met by the exigencies of the dilemma tales: both texts aimed at entertaining while instructing.

Why did Aidoo imprint her first text with the qualities of the dilemma tale, what estrangement effect was she after? If there is a quality that defines *The Dilemma*, this is the strangeness that inhabits the text, a strangeness which is carefully cultivated around the two characters whose union conforms the text, Eulalie and Ato Yawson. One final question to be posed: what does this cultivation of strangeness aim at?

In order to analyse the cultivation of strangeness that emanates from Aidoo’s play, I would like to resort to Julia Kristeva’s *Strangers to Ourselves* (Kristeva, 1991). This lucid, meticulous and challenging study on the nature of the stranger throughout history –the quest for the stranger covers a period starting in classical times, followed by the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, Romanticism to finish with the current times- is woven around a key question Kristeva poses at the very beginning of her analysis: is a society without foreigners possible? The reader is thus being led towards a reflection upon the societal need to have strangers, but in the meantime, one realises that what is being

challenged is one's own seamless adherence to society, in other words, what Kristeva persuades us to do is to meditate on and recognise our own strangeness. Society creates strangers whose nature varies according to the societal needs. When Kristeva posed the question "is a society without foreigners possible?," she was treading upon Western ground. The very same question when posed upon African soil, in the context of post-colonial Africa to be more precise, takes on a different dimension for it opens up Gilroy's counter-discourse of modernity, the black Atlantic, which in Aidoo's play is visually embodied by the character of Eulalie. Now the perspectives have changed: it is the Africans that look at the strangers that defy and conform their society and not the other way round.

It seems to be easy to target Eulalie as the stranger. She is, after all, the only non-African character of the play whose life takes an unexpected turn when she meets Ato in America, marries him and moves to Ghana. Eulalie embodies almost too perfectly the ambivalences and complexities of African-Americans in their relationship with Africa as captured by Campbell's words:

African-American ideas about Africa have always been complex and conflicted (...) Was Africa a refuge from racist America or a field of service on which African-Americans could prove their mettle and win full inclusion in American society? Were Africans brethren, "kindred o'er the sea," or savage heathens, entombed in the darkness of sin and superstition? (Campbell, 2006: 144)

Eulalie's soliloquy in Act Two is an explicit account of her African idealizations and expectations. In Africa she is to find "a refuge from racist America" where her mother was forced to work non-stop to keep her in college: "Ma ... with her hands clapped with washing to keep me in

college” (24) and where beauty ideals did not embrace black features, “silly girls dream that they are going to wake up one morning and find their skins milk white and their hairs soft blonde like them Hollywood tarts” (24). But in Africa, “there will be washing no more” (24), and her husband, mimicking the slogan “black is beautiful” is proudly described as “the blackest you ever saw.” (25) Even her change of names –Rush, the American surname, is replaced by the African Yawson- is a motive for happiness and redemption. The loss of identity that the middle passage entailed was forcefully stigmatised by the names slaves were given once on American soil: their African names were rejected and replaced by the surname of their owners thus reaffirming their status as slaves.<sup>8</sup> In a symbolic turn of events, Eulalie’s personal middle passage gives her back an African name. To her, Africa is home, “So at last here am I in Africa” (23) she happily extorts and “I’ve come to the very source” (24) and yet her knowledge about Africa is constrained by what she has seen in tourist pamphlets, “the palm trees, the azure sea, the sun and golden beaches” (9), and “the jungle and the wild life” (24). To enhance the symbolic significance of Eulalie’s soliloquy, her words are addressed to her dead mother in the hope that, as she earlier on pleaded with Ato, “can’t your Ma be sort of my Ma too?” (9) Africa, the source, the African name Yawson, Ato’s Ma ... the roots Eulalie is searching for conflate in one single figure: a mother, Ato’s mother, to be more precise. This longing for a mother sums up Eulalie’s expectations from Africa, but how is Eulalie, the African-American, apprehended by Ato’s family?

Ato’s family do not greet his marriage to Eulalie gleefully. They view Eulalie as a stranger, and a dangerous one at that: “the offspring of slaves,” (19) “the wayfarer,” (19), “she has no tribe” (17), fearfully recalling a past they are most reluctant to welcome. That common

history of suffering and loss that, according to the Pan-African Ideal, unites black people around the world, results in an unsettling bridge when confronted with Pan-African reality. The communicative ground between Africa and Afro-America that this bridge could theoretically become collides with a linguistic and –as we shall see later on- cultural barrier: Eulalie and Ato’s family do not understand each other *literally* for they speak different languages. Eulalie does not speak Fanti and Ato’s family do not speak English. They cannot even pronounce her name properly and keep referring to her as “Hurere/Hureri” (16,33,34,36) A translator is needed for them to communicate. Ato, husband to Eulalie, son-brother-nephew-grandson to his family, is the one character upon whom this translating role falls.

Who is Ato really? Ato is what has come to be known as a “been-to.” As the term indicates, a “been-to” is someone who *has been* to the west –in Ato’s case the United States- and who returns home, to Africa –to Ghana in this particular case-. But what does the figure of the “been-to” represent? Or more incisively still, what does the figure of the “been-to” represent in the context of postindependent Africa?

*Ideally*, the “been-to” is the perfect bridge to join African values with Western progress –Kwame Nkrumah’s blend of African traditionalism with Western modernity embodied this “ideal”-. The fact of *having been* to the West to get an education endows him with scientific-oriented knowledge that he can balance and complement with his own traditional-oriented knowledge. This perfect alliance of knowledges is the cornerstone to build a future on African soil. However, *in reality*, the task of mediator of the “been-to” is very often associated with failure –this is indeed Ato’s case and, we could argue, up to some extent it was also Nkrumah’s-<sup>9</sup> or, in the best of hopes, it is a proclaimed

ambivalent and contradictory role. *Having been* to the West is not, by any means, a guarantee of success.

In the context of *The Dilemma*, Ato, the “been-to” of the play, should *ideally* perform his role as communicator between his African-American wife and his family splendidly: in theory, he knows both places –Ghana and the United States- and he speaks both languages –Fanti and English.- And yet, he fails. What is the reason for his failure? The answer might sound simple but in its simplicity lies the truth: Ato fails because he is a bad translator.

Ato’s bad translation is not evinced on a linguistic level, but rather, on a cultural level. In a very different context to that exposed by *The Dilemma*, Walter Benjamin postulated his theory on translation by centering the bulk of the translation process on the “task” of the translator, asserting that

(...) any translation which intends to perform a transmitting function cannot transmit anything but information –hence, something inessential. This is the hallmark of bad translations (Benjamin, 1970: 69).

Information is something that Ato manages to transmit but, as the bad translator that he is, he fails to transmit the *essential*, the essential being in that case the cultural framework that engulfs Eulalie in her stay in Africa. As the African-American that she embodies, she falls prey to easy idealizations about Africa but one must also acknowledge her insistence on having her idealizations and expectations confirmed by Ato himself at the very beginning of the play, in the prelude. However, instead of “correcting” her “tourist-brochure” impressions, instead of furnishing her with the knowledge that will help her to adapt and embrace Africa, Ato dismisses her altogether, “can’t we ever talk, but

we must drag in the differences between your people and mine?” (9) But the differences are there, no matter how forcefully Ato tries to ignore them, and as the story gradually progresses, a culture clash is carefully unraveled.

Esi Kom, Ato’s mother, and Moka, Ato’s sister, pay the newlyweds a visit. Esi Kom, fulfilling her role as nurturing mother, brings them a bag of snails for Eulalie to cook. Thinking that in the city where they live, snails are hard to come by, she believes she is offering them a precious gift. But Eulalie is not used to seeing, and much less eating snails, as she blatantly tells Ato, “My dear, did you see a single snail crawling on the streets of New York all the time you were in the States? And anyway, seeing snails and eating them are entirely different things!” (32) When later on Esi Kom learns that Eulalie threw the snails away, she is painfully hurt by her daughter-in-law’s scorn. Who is to blame? Eulalie? Esi Kom? We cannot blame Eulalie for finding the snails disgusting and we fully commiserate with Esi Kom’s disillusionment at her daughter-in-law’s contempt. She has made an effort to get the snails as she sadly tells her son “I have travelled miles to come and visit you and your wife. And if you threw my gifts into my face and drove me out of your house, how can I forget it? (34) What under other circumstances might have resulted in just a funny relapse on cultural misunderstanding, the snails incident is, in the context of *The Dilemma*, another dramatic step towards the climax of the play, the culmination of the culture clash, the fertility ceremony.

Eulalie and Ato have decided to postpone having children so, immersed in Western science as they are, they take precautions. Ato’s family ignore this fact and believe that Eulalie has a problem to get pregnant. It is for this reason that they organise a ceremony with the intention to drive the evil spirits away from Eulalie’s body hoping that

she will soon be with child. The outcome is, to use Eulalie's words "an awful mess" (45) and, once again, a failure at Ato's translating. Ato has not told his family anything about their plans to have children and Eulalie believes that Ato has dutifully informed his family about their procreation plans. Contrary to what it might seem on a first reading, the culture clash that the scene enacts is not performed on the grounds of the old dichotomy between tradition and progress, but rather, on the grounds of complete misunderstanding. To put it in another way, the clash is not one of methods –the African invocation of the spirits versus the use of contraceptive pills- but a clash of intentions –the African party believes Eulalie wants to have children but cannot versus Eulalie's belief that they already know about their plans for the future.- Ato, no surprise by now, stands in the middle, his role once again unaccomplished. This time, though, his incapacity to translate, to transmit the message, has a dramatic turn: Eulalie leaves him.

As the communication gulf between Eulalie and Ato's family grows wider and wider due to Ato's failure as translator, Eulalie's Americanness –or Westernness- increases. If, at the beginning of the play, Africa was a "refuge," and Africans were "brethren, kindred o'er the sea," while we are nearing the end, Africa becomes a "rotten land" (48) and Africans are observed from a very different rubric, more in tune with the vision of them as "savage heathens, entombed in the darkness of sin and superstition." Eulalie's words after she has found out about the fertility ceremony should be taken as a clear postulation of this change in perspective:

(...) What else would they understand but their own savage customs and standards? (...) Have they any appreciation for anything but their own prehistoric existence? More savage than dinosaurs. With their snails and

their potions! You afterwards told me, didn't you, that they wanted me to strip before them and have my belly washed? Washed in that filth! (...) What did you tell them I was before you picked me, a strip-tease? ... Go and weep at the funeral of a guy you never knew. These are the things they know and think are worthwhile. (47)

Ato's task –that of the “been-to”-is, nevertheless, a difficult one. Both parties –the African one as concretized by his family and the African-American one as epitomized by his wife- hold different expectations from him. His family has invested a lot of work and money to send him abroad to be educated and, in exchange, they assume that their economic situation will improve. From the very beginning, the fact that Ato's education has been a burden for the whole family is stressed. Monka, Ato's sister, expounds the family's travails to send her brother to the “white man's land” (35):

(...) The money ... the money ... This is something that no one should hear anything about. 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, *kentes* and golden ornaments, which none of us younger generation had ever seen before, were all pawned. They never brought them into daylight ... not even to celebrate the puberty or marriage of a single girl in this house. But since our master must buy coats and trousers, they brought them out on this occasion. They were pawned, I say. And have they been redeemed? When, and with what? Ask that again. (35)

Nothing has been redeemed for, among other things, Ato needs the money he earns to buy the “machines,” as Esi Kom puts it, to suit her American-Western wife's lifestyle.



As for Eulalie, Ato is, as she calls him throughout the play, her “native boy,” (9,10,26,41) thus encapsulating him in a cocoon of Africanness, clearly investing him with an indigenusness that she, as African-American lacks. To further exalt Ato’s symbolic meaning, Eulalie refers to him as “gallant black knight” (45) and “darling Moses” (43), thus conferring upon him a heroic dimension which overwhelms the “human” Ato who cannot live up to it. In the literary tradition of the Middle Ages, the knight was a lady’s devoted champion who fought on her behalf, forever at her service, living entirely for her: this is what Eulalie, in a way, expects from Ato. But Ato is also “my darling Moses,” hence evoking the biblical figure of the leader who led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. An analogy is ominously shaping itself: Eulalie views Ato as the leader who will lead her out of slavery in America. This is indeed a heavy burden to carry upon one’s shoulders and when he proves too human to embrace such heroism, Eulalie’s “darling Moses” of the beginning becomes a “damned rotten coward of a Moses.” (47) Her fiercest accusation reaches a culminating point when, upon her refusal to attend a funeral service, she undauntingly tells Ato: “I ain’t coming, eh. Or you are too British you canna hear me Yankee lingo?” (46) She purposefully accentuates her American speech and, in yet another turn of the screw, she erases Ato’s Africanness altogether, “tainting” him with Britishness.

Torn between his family’s expectations as “our white master” (15) and his wife’s idealization of him as her “darling Moses,” (43) Ato is engulfed by a recurring dream in which he sees himself as a child singing a song called “The Ghost” which, as the title of the song indicates, features a ghost who is stranded at Elmina Junction, not knowing which way to go: “Shall I go to Cape Coast, or to Elmina?” (28) Twice is Ato fearfully enveloped by the dream: the first time this happens we are at

the beginning of Act Three –more or less the middle of the play-, and the second and last time Ato is confronted with the dream corresponds with the end of the play. What does the dream represent and why is Ato so dreadfully haunted by this ghost?

On a first level of analysis, and bearing in mind that the ghost is at the crossroads, not knowing which way to go, we could easily foresee Ato's doomed existence in the middle, playing the "white master" to his African family and "Moses" to his African-American wife, incapable of coming to terms with his own inner questions. "I used to wonder about so many things then" (29), he regretfully recalls when he is first haunted by the dream, the "then" taking us/him back to his childhood, thus highlighting the gap between then –Ato as a child- and now –Ato as an adult.- On a second level of analysis, though, we realize that Elmina and Cape Coast are not just two places chosen at random but two places laden with a menacing purport: both locations were departure ports for slaves. The black Atlantic is, once again, making its way into the discourse of contemporary Africa.

Rescuing Odamtten's words that the dilemma tale "is always extended out of the text and into the context of the audience," we are left with an impending question: how are we to swallow this dilemma tale which Aidoo throws at us? And entwined with this question, a new query throbs in our minds: who is the "us" that conform the audience? The narrator answers this latter question when in the prelude we –as audience- are addressed as "stranger." (7) And yet we are called "stranger" by someone who calls himself/herself "the Bird of the Wayside," that is to say, the one whose nest hangs on the roadside, a stranger himself/herself. The cultivation of strangeness we mentioned earlier on is made apparent in this profusion of foreignness which motions us to believe in a Kristevan fashion that we are all "strangers to

ourselves.” This fatal relativism, however, does not answer the former question I posed: how are we to swallow this dilemma tale that Aidoo throws at us? Taking into account that the core of the dilemma tale is an unsolved conflict, a problem thrown at us, this ungraspable mass called audience, I, as part of this audience would like to venture into something close to an interpretation and so, I steer towards the end of the play.

In the last scene, Ato, deeply distressed by his wife’s disappearance runs towards his mother’s home. Once there, the Pandora box is unsealed: Esi Kom learns how her son has lied to them and to his wife and woefully reprimands him for it: “You have not dealt with us well. And you have not dealt with your wife well in this.” (52) It is just at this point that Eulalie appears in the background and as the stage directions describe

*“(…) She is weak and looks very unhappy. She nearly crumples in front of the courtyard while ATO stares dazedly at her. It is ESI KOM who, following ATO’s gaze and seeing her, rushes forward to support her on. After a few paces into the courtyard, EULALIE turns as if to speak to ATO. But ESI KOM makes a sign to her not to say anything ... “*

This is the only scene in which we are allowed to see Esi Kom genuinely caring for Eulalie, “Come, my child” (52) she tenderly addresses her. Has Eulalie finally encountered the mother she was longing for in her soliloquy? Has her searching for a sense of identity and home been, in the end, accomplished? I would like to round up the end of *The Dilemma of a Ghost* by recalling another African-American’s experience in Africa,

that of the poet Langston Hughes, which well encompasses Eulalie's and so many other African-Americans' own hopes and disappointment:

Traveling to Africa was supposed to have solved the problem. "Africa!" he had cheered, when the "dust-green hills" of the continent first materialized on the eastern horizon. "My Africa, Motherland of the Negro peoples! And me a Negro!" But the resolution he sought eluded him. (...) He had crossed the ocean, jettisoned his books, penned poems about palm-trees and tom-toms, yet he remained a stranger, unable to bridge the great historical chasm that separated him and other African-Americans from Africa (Campbell, 2006: 214-15).

Eulalie, like Hughes before her, also crossed the ocean and dreamed of palm-trees and tom-toms, does she have to remain forever a stranger, though? She is still a stranger when we reach the end of *The Dilemma*, but her strangeness has somehow been mollified by Esi Kom's wise reassurance that "No stranger ever breaks the law" (51) and if he does, it is the "townsman's" fault for not having told him for "Before the stranger should dip his finger / Into the thick palm nut soup, / It is a townsman / Must have told him to." (52) The responsibility then, is a shared one.

What will happen afterwards, we do not know. We leave Ato at "the middle of the courtyard," (52) looking "bewildered and lost," (52) while the voices of the children singing "Shall I go to Cape Coast? / Shall I go to Elmina?" (52) invade his mind. As for Eulalie and Esi Kom, they are inside the family house, maybe bridging "the historical chasm that separated" African-Americans from Africa. This "historical chasm," though, implies an unwelcomed revision of a past that most Africans would prefer leaving dormant in case certain unpropitious truths about the direct African involvement in the black Atlantic slave trade be

revealed. As Esi Kom tells Ato, “(...) we must be careful with your wife / You tell us her mother is dead. / If she had any tenderness, / Her ghost must be keeping watch over / all which happen to her ... /” (52) Once again, the ghost, once again, the black Atlantic slave trade, that fissure in the cracks of the discourse of modernity appears.

We started our analysis of Ato by posing the question: who is Ato? This is a question the grown-up, educated Ato does not dare –is unable to- ask himself and therefore he lets himself be swallowed up by the agonizing dream that torments him and which leaves him immobile, at the crossroads, imbued by the literal and metaphorical meaning of the English idiom. Utterly confused, he has indeed reached a turning point in his life. Maybe there was a touch of unfairness in our brandishing Ato as a bad translator. In the aforementioned article, “The Task of the Translator,” Benjamin mentions an aspect of the texts to be translated which he perspicaciously calls “translatability” (ibid: 70). According to Benjamin, some texts are rendered easily translatable, in other words, they bend smoothly, moulding effortlessly to other languages, their degree of “translatability” is high. On the opposite side, we have those texts which do not subjugate placidly to other languages, and hence their “translatability” is rendered low. If we take into account that the “texts” to be translated are cultural frameworks, a whole way of seeing life, we understand a little bit better the scope of Ato’s burden. “The question of whether a work is translatable has a dual meaning,” cautions Benjamin, “either: will an adequate translator ever be found (...) ? Or (...) does its nature lend itself to translation and, therefore, in view of the significance of the mode, call for it?” (ibid: 70) Ato, in view of the development of *The Dilemma*, is not an adequate translator but that does not necessarily imply that such a translator cannot exist.

It is significant that Aidoo surreptitiously delineates a space where the cultural gap can potentially be bridged when she makes daughter-in-law and mother-in-law hold hands. Aidoo refrains from formulating any final statement but Esi Kom's and Eulalie's hands certainly render an image of hope. The future does not lie in Ato's misleading translations but in an un-translated female space created by his mother and his wife. Women, Aidoo seems to suggest with this final promising image, hold the future in their hands, not men. What Aidoo is offering –an aspect which will be further developed in the next section with the analysis of *Anowa*- is an alternative to patriarchal society.

Aidoo's dilemma tale hails the audience to be aware of this postcolonial arena that is being shaped after independence struggles have fruitfully come to an end. A "new" stranger is entering the stage, the "been-to," the scholar who has been educated in the west and who returns to Africa. Were we to complement Kristeva's quest of the stranger by adding a chapter which featured the stranger in postcolonial Africa, we would certainly be bound to give the "been-to" centre stage. In a sagacious comment by the two neighbours –referred to as the first woman and the second woman- whose function throughout the play is to comment on and anticipate events, the central role of the future "been-tos" of Africa is thus expressed: "the young people of the coming days are strange ... very strange." (38) And in their strangeness, there lurks the middle passage.

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## *Myth, History, Africa: Anowa as the Source of the Dilemma?*

In an interview dated 22 May, 1989 in *Time* magazine, Toni Morrison, apropos her Pulitzer-winning novel *Beloved*, confesses her reluctance to deal with a period of history –slavery- which, as an African-American, she would have rather erased completely from her mind. “I had this terrible reluctance about dwelling on that era,” she declares, only to discover that “I didn’t know anything about it, really.”<sup>10</sup> *Beloved* revisits slavery times in America through the story of Sethe, a slave who manages to escape but who, unfortunately is caught after “twenty-eight” (Morrison, 1987: 116) days of enjoying freedom. In a desperate act of love, Sethe tries to kill her children for she is determined, at whatever cost, to preserve their freedom. All the children are spared but Beloved, the baby girl who, as time passes by, comes back, as a ghost, to haunt Sethe. As Morrison affirms, “I thought this has got to be the least read of all the books I’d written because it is about something that the characters don’t want to remember, I don’t want to remember, black people don’t want to remember, white people don’t want to remember. I mean, it’s national amnesia.”<sup>11</sup> In an attempt to amend this national amnesia, to make Americans *remember*, Morrison hands over *Beloved*. The baby ghost that haunts her mother has come back to disturb the imagination of a whole nation; slavery weighs heavily on the making of America.

However, it is not only the imagination of African-Americans that are painfully seized by the remembrance of slavery; the direct participation of Africans in the Atlantic slave trade reveals yet another

dimension of the traffic in human beings which, in this case, Africans would have liked to forget. To prevent this national forgetfulness, the play *Anowa* makes its appearance. Published in 1970, almost twenty years earlier than *Beloved*, Aidoo, in her second literary incursion, bravely confronts the ghost that haunted Ato in *The Dilemma*. When Ato informs his family about his marriage to Eulalie, an African-American woman, Nana, his grandmother, fearing what lurks behind Eulalie's African-Americanness, bursts into a dramatic speech that recalls the nightmare of slavery:

My spirit Mother ought to have come for me earlier.  
 Now what shall I 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.  
 My children, I am dreading my arrival there  
 Where they will ask me news of home.  
 Shall I tell them or shall I not?  
 Someone should lend me a tongue  
 Light enough with which to tell  
 My Royal Dead  
 That one of their stock  
 Has gone away and brought to their precincts  
 The Wayfarer! (19)

And so, endowed with "a tongue light enough," Aidoo, comes to tell us the story of the wayfarer, Anowa. But who is Anowa and what is *Anowa*?

The plot of *Anowa* is indeed very simple. Anowa, the protagonist, is a young woman who, against her parents' wishes, marries the man of her choice, Kofi Ako. Her parents object to her marrying Kofi Ako because, among other things, he is "a fool" (74, 76), "a good-for-



nothing-cassava-man” (77), brandishing him as a useless breadwinner. And yet Anowa insists on marrying him, leaves her parents’ house and starts a trading business with her husband –they sell the skins of animals- which leads them to economic success but marital unhappiness. Motherhood is denied to Anowa and tragedy envelops the end of the play: Anowa and Kofi Ako take their own lives. This plot is contained in a text that is woven into a carefully constructed drama. Divided into three parts, which are called phases, –thus highlighting the evolving nature of the text- the story of this young African woman unfolds in a perfectly controlled dramatic rhythm which culminates in the final climax, her and her husband’s death. Imbued by an acute sense of place, each phase develops in a specific setting. Thus, in Phase One, we are introduced to Anowa in Yebi, her village, with her parents, Badua –the mother- and Osam –the father- and we witness the beginning of the tragedy, Anowa’s decision to marry Kofi Ako and leave home to return never again. In Phase Two, we encounter Anowa and Kofi Ako, “on the highway,” (82) working hard to make their business a prosperous one and happy to be together, but, as if preparing the audience for the fatal denouement, Aidoo makes us observe the gradual change from happiness to unhappiness that engulfs the couple: the business prospers, so, Kofi Ako buys slaves to help them and Anowa, his wife and helpmate, is relegated to the space of the house. “I like being on the roads,” (88) she resents, upon Kofi Ako’s insistence on her staying inside the house. It is also in Phase Two when the issue of motherhood, and more specifically, Anowa’s impossibility to conceive, is for the first time introduced. Definitely confined by the four walls of the Big House at Oguaa, Phase Three offers us a distressed Anowa who gradually drowns in her despair dragging Kofi Ako along, leaving the audience with the bitter taste of death. The Big House at Oguaa is the cauldron where motherhood and

slavery, in a perfectly orchestrated crescendo, conflate to shape Anowa's dramatic end.<sup>12</sup>

The title of the play, *Anowa*, is, by no means, a random choice on Aidoo's part. The author is acutely aware of the mythical import of the name granted to her heroine and she knows that, by calling her Anowa, she is deliberately framing her text within the African oral literary tradition. *Anowa* transports us to the "mythical woman, prophet, priest whose life of daring, suffering and determination is reflected in the continent of Africa" (Oduyoye, 1995: 6). This is how Mercy Amba Oduyoye recalls Anowa, proclaiming her the main source of inspiration for her contemporary sociological study on African women. She entitles her book *Daughters of Anowa*, in a resolute move to imprint Anowa's name in the shaping of African womanhood. Yet, does Aidoo's Anowa share the same story as the mythical Anowa?

Aidoo's *Anowa* does not read –and, I should add, it is not meant to be read– as a *faithful* recreation of the life of this mythical character from African oral culture. Aidoo herself affirms that the original pre-text of *Anowa* is a "sort of legend" (Azodo, 1999) that her mother used to tell her –as a matter of fact, Aidoo dedicates the play to her mother "Aunt Abasema" / who told a story and sang a song" (57)– and throughout the play there are references to "the girl in the folk tale." (75) What Aidoo's assertion suggests, on the one hand, and what the references to the mythical Anowa found in the text point to on the other, is a reading which demands an exercise of double consciousness. The text entices the audience into a game of double consciousness. In other words, the audience is made aware of the mythical aura that envelops the heroine. This creates a double consciousness in the spectators' minds, a recognition of an indebtedness of the tragedy of Aidoo's *Anowa* to a mythical dimension that haunts their own

imagination, for their experiences as human beings might be tied to the same cultural milieu that nurtures the life of Anowa. Once again, recalling the audience's experience in *The Dilemma*, we realize that in *Anowa* a sort of Brechtian V-Effekt –estrangement effect- is created. Oduyoye's reaction to Aidoo's text grasps this game of double consciousness exerted by the interaction between the protagonist of the play and the "girl in the folktale," the mythical woman that inspires her:

Anowa, the protagonist of Ama Ata Aidoo's drama, has never ceased to fascinate me. Anowa's dreams and her would-have-been priestly vocation haunt me. Her insistence on chosen toil as self-realization and her ideal of life-in-community empower me. Yet, the most powerful vibrations from Anowa –and this is what most frightens me- is her final capitulation to the dictates of society. And I ask, why? (Oduyoye, 1995: 9)

Following Oduyoye's dictates, I also pose the same question: why?

Any literary enterprise is moved by both a desire and a necessity to come to terms with the world around us and this is exactly what myths offered to mankind: a way to understand their position as individuals amid the vastness of the universe. But, as Mary E. Modupe Kolawole warns us, the mythical lore "plays a central role in transmitting values and instilling discipline" and in the shaping of "gender roles and socialisation" (Kolawole, 1997: 55). And both Kolawole and Oduyoye underscore the process of disempowerment that women have endured in their depiction in myths. Although the aforementioned critics move around African terrain, it is fairly easy to detect the same debasing phenomenon in the Western mythical tradition. A look at the fairy tale tradition is enough to see how the mythical lore has functioned as a

restraining force for women, confining them to their roles as virginal damsels, faithful wives and nurturing mothers.

It is not surprising then that one of the aspects that define the women's writing tradition is precisely mythical recreations aimed at changing the values that instigate certain gender roles as opposed to others in an attempt to re-mould the rules of socialisation. To mention but a few, we have Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, a collection of short stories which are re-writings of fairy tales, Sandra Cisneros' poem "Six Brothers," a re-telling of Andersen's tale, *The Six Swans* and, finally, utilizing *Rapunzel* as feeding ground, I would like to draw attention to, first, the re-creation that the aforementioned writer produced in the very short story entitled "Rafaela Who Drinks Coconut & Papaya Juice on Tuesdays" and secondly, Anne Sexton's poem "Rapunzel" (Carter, 1995; Cisneros, 1992 & 1989; Sexton, 1971). These mythical recreations that women writers have carried out need to be understood as a reconceptualization of womanhood that will hopefully lead to women's empowerment. Going back to Kolawole, I share her view on the need "to evaluate traditional myths and the recreation of modern myths and archetypes by female writers," for, as she later on adds, "the study of myths is indeed a valuable tool for studying a people's culture, and literature, in particular" (Kolawole, 1997: 56). I confront the reading of *Anowa* from this perspective, that is to say, as Aidoo's attempts to understand, via a mythical recreation, the plea of her protagonist, Anowa, a woman who strives to find her position in the reality she is made to live in. In short, I will try to answer Oduyoye's question: why does she finally capitulate to the dictates of society? Or, should the end be interpreted as Anowa's capitulation to the dictates of society?

Modernity is tightly connected with "Westernness," as I have repeatedly pointed out. The hallmark of the eighteenth century in Europe

was an inveterate belief in the power of reason, thus freeing the minds of men from the irrationalities of superstitions and having religious truths replaced, little by little, by scientific explanations. The nineteenth century consolidated the power of reason yet the twentieth century experiences a recovery, with the advent of psychoanalysis, of mythical lore.<sup>13</sup> What Freud and Jung –whom we could allude to as father and disciple of psychoanalysis- demonstrated was the fact that mythical lore has always been a fundamental part of a people’s culture and as such its presence cannot be obliterated from our unconscious –individual, after Freud’s fashion, or collective, as Jung would have it.- Criticism on the mythical dimension of *Anowa* abounds and yet it fails, from my point of view, to tackle the issue, as Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor point out in *The Great Cosmic Mother*, of the sociopolitical dimension of myth, relegating thus the meaning of the tragedy of *Anowa* to a Jungian interpretation of archetypes, constraining her fight to the realm of psychoanalysis (Sjöö et al., 1987). Therefore, *Anowa*’s tragedy is resolved as that of a woman ahead of her times or her madness interpreted as her impossibility to procreate (Brown, 1981). In the aforementioned book, Sjöö and Mor, echoing Robert Graves, affirm that “the loss of our mythic history is the loss of our sociological history” and yet Westernness is persistent in erasing the mythical history of the West for the sake of a rational, scientific, and, as Sjöö and Mor prove in their study, patriarchal discourse (Graves, 1966: 98). We need to recall here that Freud’s and Jung’s unfolding of the mythical layers that conform Western discourse did not align with a woman-friendly perception of what the discovery might have revealed, delimiting their vindications of the mythical lore to a clearly male-oriented line of thought (Freud, 1961 & 1950; Jung, 1964).

In *The Great Cosmic Mother. Rediscovering the Religion of the Earth*, and as the title of their book suggests, Sjöö and Mor “rediscover” and thus recuperate a divinity called the Great Mother which reigned in ancient societies so often derisively referred to as “primitive” societies. Their basic tenet is that Christianity and Islam brought about a ferocious attack against and subsequent erasure of what they call the Mother’s people. Christianity and Islam, in their belief in a superior Father God, established the Law of the Father in detriment of the cult of the Great Mother and what Sjöö and Mor reveal in their rediscovery of the “religion of the earth” is a *history* of women’s disempowerment which demands to be read “in the context of ancient political realities.” It is worth quoting the whole passage:

The Great Mother was the projection of the self-experience of groups of highly aware and productive women who were the founders of much of human culture. In this sense the Great mother is not simply a mental archetype, but a historical fact. Ancient icons, symbols, and myths cannot be understood if they are disembodied from this fact. They cannot be understood as “mind trips” alone, but must be seen in the context of ancient political realities (Sjöö et al., 1987: 31).

What interests me most about Sjöö and Mor’s argument is their insistence on unfolding the historical reality that surrounds the mythical lore. As a matter of fact, what Graves tries to unveil and recuperate in *The White Goddess* is the mythical history of the West. But, is this idea of “recovery” of myth congenial with the African imaginary? Does Africa need to “recover” –in the sense of regaining that which has been lost– its mythical history, or rather, is this already an inherent part of the cultural habitat that shapes its people? In *Anowa*, Aidoo does not in the least suppress this mythical history, on the contrary, she embraces it

and uses it to help delucidate the intricacies of a world firmly grounded in double consciousness, in other words, a discourse that is engendered at the crossroads of myth and history. What is, then, the political reality enveloping *Anowa* and *Anowa*? What is the history of *Anowa/Anowa*?

In the best Bahktinian fashion, we can affirm that the chronotope – that union of space and time- that defines Aidoo’s play could not be more definite: in the prologue, through the characters of the old man and the old woman, we are clearly introduced to the place where the action is set, the state of Abura on the coastline of Ghana, “Here in the state of Abura,” (65) and the time where the story is to be located, thirty years after the Bond of 1844, “It is now a little less than thirty years / When the lords of our Houses / signed that piece of paper - / The Bond of 1844 they call it-.” (68) What is the Bond of 1844 and what significance does it hold for the history of Ghana, on the one hand, and the story of *Anowa*, on the other?

The British colonial attitude towards Ghana –at that time known as the Gold Coast- did not vary much from the prevalent one in other parts of the Globe: depending on the Empire’s economic interests, the British were prone to make pacts with either one party or another.<sup>14</sup> Thus, in the case of Ghana and as an example of British “adaptability,” by 1816 a treaty was signed with the Ashanti –who came from the central hinterlands- by which Britain recognized their rule over the Fanti –who were to be found on the coast, in the South-. The Ashanti were reputed for their warlike nature and conquering drive and, on top of this, they possessed one commodity Europeans longed for: gold. In the eighteenth century, the Ashanti managed to build an Empire by invading their Southern neighbours. This invasion meant direct access to the coast which, in practical terms, would be translated as direct trade with the Europeans. Needless to say, the Southern neighbours, the Fanti, were

not particularly satisfied with the arrangement since their role as intermediaries in the trade was dangerously effaced. As a consequence, the Fanti's forced integration into Ashanti territory has to be viewed as shaky ground, as a potential site for dissent which the British acknowledged and took advantage of.<sup>15</sup>

By the second half of the nineteenth century, a change of events –and inclinations– took place: Sir Charles Macarthy, governor of Sierra Leone, took over the control of the forts in 1822 and, disdainful as he was of the warlike and powerful Ashanti, he took advantage of an incident with an Ashanti trader to declare a “war” against the Ashanti. What happened, apparently, was an exchange of insults: the Ashanti trader insulted the British governor and a policeman, in the service of the British, insulted the Asantehene –the Ashanti King–, with the unfortunate outcome of the arrest of the policeman. As an answer to what Macarthy conveniently interpreted as an act of irreverence towards the British, he confronted the Ashanti unsuccessfully for he was wounded and, it is said that he later committed suicide so as to avoid being captured. However, in an attempt to safeguard the Empire's pride and power, in 1826, the British government commanded an attack against the Ashanti. This time their allies were the Fanti. Upon the success of the expedition, the Ashanti signed a treaty in 1831 recognizing the independence of the Fanti.

So far, though, British rule over Ghana/the Gold Coast was of a somewhat unofficial nature. There was not really any official recognition of British jurisdiction in Ghana/the Gold Coast, this institutionalization of British domination was not enacted until 1844, the year of the Bond. The Bond of 1844 was a document that certified the “formal” alliance of the Fanti with the British against the Ashanti. The declaration, which in one of those ironic turns of history was signed on 6 March, asserts the



recognition on the part of the Fanti of British power and jurisdiction in exchange for protection<sup>16</sup>:

Whereas power and jurisdiction have been exercised for and on behalf of Her Majesty the Queen of Great Britain and Ireland, within divers countries and places adjacent to her Majesty's forts and settlements on the Gold Coast, we the chiefs of countries and places so referred to, adjacent to the said forts and settlements, *do hereby acknowledge that power and jurisdiction*, and declare that the first objects of law are the protection of individuals and property.<sup>17</sup> (my italics)

However, this dyad British rule and British protection resulted in a conflictive relationship between the Fanti and the British for, on the one hand, the British magistrates usurped the judicial powers granted to the chiefs and, on the other hand, the poll tax -thus the forced payment of taxes- was introduced. The ominous nature of the enterprise is captured by the words of the old man in the prologue who tells the audience to

(...) bring your ears nearer, my friends, so I can whisper  
you a secret.

Our armies, well-organised though they be,  
Are more skilled in quenching fires than in the art of  
war!

So please,  
Let not posterity judge it too bitterly  
That in a dangerous moment, the lords of our Houses  
Sought the protection of those that-came-from-beyond-  
the-horizon

Against our more active kinsmen from the north; (66)

Taking into account the historical context, it is easy to identify “Those that-came-from-beyond-the-horizon” as the British and “our more active kinsmen from the north” as the Ashanti.

There are two emblematic years in the history of colonial Ghana: one is 1844, the year that marked the official recognition of British jurisdiction in the Gold Coast and the other one is 1874, the year in which the Gold Coast was officially annexed to Britain, thus instituting its status as “British colony.”<sup>18</sup> This year, 1874, thirty years after the Bond, is precisely when the story of *Anowa* is developed. What did this institutionalisation of colonisation represent in the context of the Gold Coast and how is this portrayed in *Anowa*?

The path towards annexation is marked, once again, by a certain British ambivalence towards its colonial dominions. The truth is that the British Government intended to *gradually* transfer the administration of West Africa to the natives. In the case of the Gold Coast, King Aggrey of Cape Coast and other Fanti rulers, as a reaction against what they considered to be unfair British taxes and jurisdiction, formed a confederation –which has come to be known as the Fanti Confederation– in an attempt to protect their rights. What this confederation really represented, though, –and this is how the British viewed it– was an initial step towards complete independence. It is not surprising then that the British opposed it for they wanted to hold the reins in the transfer of power and the Fanti Confederation endangered their privileged presence at the forefront of the transaction. The ongoings of history bring about, sometimes, peculiar coincidences: while the Fanti were organising themselves into a confederation, their “neighbours from the North,” once their enemies, were definitely defeated by the British. And so, the recently acquired Ashanti domains together with the former protectorate were incorporated into the British crown colony of the Gold

Coast. What this incorporation represented was institutionalised colonialism and, in practical terms, it meant the spread of “legitimate” trade throughout the territory that conformed the Gold Coast and the expansion of missionary activities.

Odamtten’s anti-colonialist reading of the work of Ama Ata Aidoo poignantly entitles “In History” the chapter devoted to the analysis of *Anowa*. According to him, the British annexation of the Gold Coast in 1874 is paramount for a meaningful interpretation of the play. Following his argument, I situate *Anowa* “in and against this context of rising nationalism and aggressive British imperialism” (Odamtten, 1994: 48). If, in the large context of the history of Ghana, the change from protectorate to colony meant a spread in trade and missionary activities, within the literary context of *Anowa*, it represents a definitive move towards modernity with its Western, patriarchal discourse leading the way. However, we cannot disregard its counter-discourse, the black Atlantic. Aidoo severely criticises and cautions the audience against this move towards modernity –its unappealing counter-discourse dragging along- and in doing so, she turns to the character of a woman, Anowa.

The expansion of “legitimate” trade we mentioned before had, in fact, little legitimacy, if by this term we understand an action which conforms to the law since the unlawful traffic with human beings held sway at this time. The fallacy of the legal apparatus is made more vivid if we take into consideration the fact that the British Parliament abolished the Transatlantic Slave Trade in 1807 and that the British were supposed “to end domestic and international slavery” (ibid: 47). Hence, one of the consequences of the annexation was the reinforcement of an activity which was masked as “legitimate” trade. As for what lies behind the proliferation of missionary activities is a gradual christianization of the territory which, when looked at from the perspective of Sjöo and

Mor's *The Great Cosmic Mother*, really masquerades the proliferation of patriarchy, the Law of the Father. How is this process of modernization and patriarchization evinced in the development of our heroine?

If, in the previous play, *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, Aidoo urged us to detect the stranger in the postindependent world of Ghana, here in *Anowa*, in the late nineteenth century, at the peak of British colonialism, one question lurks: who is the stranger? There is a stranger who is easily recognizable in this colonial milieu and that is the colonialist, the white man, propitiously called throughout the play "the stranger." This stranger enters the African arena through the agency of trading, and more specifically, the buying and selling of human beings. The black Atlantic creates this stranger and the connection that links him with Africans is a reciprocal interest in trade, under general terms, and in the slave trade, more specifically. What I mean is that, from the very beginning, Aidoo acknowledges the slave trade as a "crime" that binds "the-white-men-from-beyond-the-horizon" and Africans to the same degree of responsibility, thus exonerating neither one nor the other:

(...) there is a bigger crime

We have inherited from the clans incorporate

Of which, lest we forget when the time does come,

Those forts standing at the door

Of the great ocean shall remind our children

And the sea bear witness.

And now, listen o ... listen, listen,

If there be some among us that have found a common

sauce-bowl

In which they play a game of dipping with the stranger,

Who shall complain?

Out of one womb can always come a disparate breed;

And men will always go  
 Where the rumbling hunger in their bowels shall be  
     stilled,  
 And that is where they will stay.  
 O my beloveds, let it not surprise us then  
 That This-One and That-One  
 Depend for their well-being on the presence of  
 The pale stranger in our midst (67)

And yet, there is another stranger whose presence threatens the well-being of the community and whose strangeness is promptly imprinted by the old woman in the Prologue, and this stranger is no other than the protagonist of the play, Anowa. On what grounds is Anowa's strangeness perceived and assessed?

We come across Anowa's strangeness before we actually encounter her, for, the old woman in the Prologue, promptly introduces us to "That Anowa," who "like all the beautiful maidens in the tales, she has refused to marry any of the sturdy men who have asked for her hand in marriage. No one knows what is wrong with her!" (66) Two consequences should be drawn from the old woman's words: first, her linking Anowa to a mythical world, thus purposefully claiming two spheres of agency –tales and "reality"- and placing her in this *other, unreal* world, and, secondly, her absolute certainty that there is indeed something wrong with Anowa because she has rejected marriage. For the sake of my analysis, I would like to pose another question, a question that envisions another possibility, a possibility that stretches beyond the taken-for-granted belief that there is something wrong with Anowa, namely: is there anything wrong with Anowa? I will risk an answer, Anowa's wrong has to be measured in consonance with her being a woman. To put it in other words, her strangeness is apprehended by her

identity as woman. Hence, a “new” –or, as a matter of fact, very old, as we shall see- category of stranger enters Aidoo’s world: woman.

I want to recover a passage from Leslie A. Fiedler’s classic, *The Stranger in Shakespeare*, for, to my belief, it captures splendidly well the allure and threat that the woman as stranger has haunted, haunts and will haunt the literary imagination:

(...) there remains among us –the “us” of Europe, all the way to its remote American and Russian poles- an unassimilated, perhaps forever unassimilable, stranger, the first other of which the makers of our myths, male as far back as reliable memory runs, ever became aware. And that stranger is, of course, woman, as scarcely anyone has to be told in a time when –after a couple of generations of celebrating their minor triumphs- the spokesmen (sic) of women are crying out in rage and hysteria that their sisters are still aliens in a culture and society dominated by men. But this the arts have, of course, always taken into account; and, indeed one function of drama arises precisely from this awareness, shared on different levels by writer and audience, that such unredeemed strangers move always in our midst (Fiedler, 1972: 38-9).

In view of Fiedler’s quote, there is one “chronotopic” consideration to be made: his delimiting of the “unassimilated, perhaps forever unassimilable” woman-stranger in the spatial confines of the West and the temporality of women’s liberation struggles. Fiedler did not write the book from what nowadays we may call a postcolonial and/or feminist perspective, he actually never pretended to do so, but it is interesting to emphasize that his Shakesperean “strangers” are –in this order-: woman, the Jew, the Moor and the New World Savage. What’s more, Fiedler’s study was launched in 1972 and Aidoo’s publication of *Anowa* goes back to 1970, so, at least from a temporal axis, if not spatial, the contexts

out of which the texts come might share some common preoccupations. How these preoccupations are differently experienced is what concerns us here. Hence, let's situate this woman-stranger in Africa.

Anowa's refusal to get married aligns with a recklessness and wildness which, according to her parents, enveloped her ever since childhood. This is the reason why there were talks about making her "a priestess" to which her mother, Badua, was always opposed, hoping that marriage would cure her child's impetus and calm her down (70,71). However, she did not count on her daughter's determination to marry a man she highly disapproved of. Anowa's confrontation with her parents drives her away from Yebi, from home, to never come back again, for as she audaciously asserts "I shall walk so well that I will not find my feet back here again." (79) And yet it is not her rebelliousness as daughter – or at least *not only* as such- that plunges her into the desolate homelessness of the end of the play. As a matter of fact, contrary to her mother's expectations, Anowa is happy with her husband, Kofi Ako. Anowa's relationship with her husband works fine until the crucial moment when their wealth increases due to the successful economic transactions carried out with the white people. While Anowa is *on the road*, making a living together with her husband, their matrimonial vows remain truthful, their mutual commitment to help each other genuine. Nevertheless, once economic success is granted, the transaction with the British acquires a societal dimension that unleashes the tragedy of the character of Anowa. It is at this point of the story that Kofi Ako wants Anowa to stop working and "look after the house" (96) and "be" his glorious wife ... and the contented mother of his "children." (99) A change is taking place that will affect their lives irremediably to the extent that, in the end, only death will relieve them. This change needs to be accounted for.

To fully grasp the purport of this change in the rubric of Africa, I will resort to the work of sociologist Oyeronke Oyewumi.<sup>19</sup> Oyewumi's work is based on the premise that the "universalist" tenets sustained by Western feminist perspectives do not apply well to realities other than Western. Her criticism is launched onto what conforms the focus of Western feminist discourse, the nuclear family. The fact that feminist concepts are rooted in the nuclear family, argues Oyewumi, results in the equation woman=wife. Oyewumi's objection to Western feminist discourse is addressed not to the fact that feminist conceptualization starts with the family unit, but rather, to the fact that it "never transcends the narrow confines of the nuclear family" (ibid: 5). Since a family household –read nuclear family household- is "centered on a subordinated wife, a patriarchal husband and children" (ibid: 4), what follows is that, as Nancy Chodorow proved, all gender distinctions are foundational to the establishment and functioning of this family type, to the extent that women's identity is defined, described and delimited by her role as wife (Chodorow, 1978). According to Chodorow, motherhood is subservient to wifeness. However, Oyewumi alerts, within an African setting, this equation woman=wife is no longer tenable. As she herself puts it,

(...) in the African conceptual scheme it is difficult to conflate woman and wife and articulate it as one category. Although wifeness in many African societies has traditionally been regarded as functional and necessary it is at the same time seen as a transitional phase on the road to motherhood. *Mother* is the preferred and cherished self-identity of many African women (Oyewumi: 1096).

Analysing Anowa's growing strangeness in the light of Oyewumi's criticism, we realise that her tragedy is unleashed by her husband's



immersion in –and her resistance to– a discourse that instills Western patriarchy: it is not by chance that Anowa’s demise goes hand in hand with Kofi Ako’s economic success. Kofi Ako translates his success into the possession of an ostentatious house wherein he wants to place Anowa, whom he now acknowledges as his *wife*, and not as his companion. It is interesting to point out that, while they were on the highroad, people took Anowa for Kofi Ako’s sister as he himself affirms, “wherever we go, people take you for my sister at first,” (87) for people marvelled at her unconditional help, telling him that “your wife is good ... for your sisters are the only women you can force to toil like this for you.” (87) But he nonetheless wants to make her the “new wife.” (87) As for him, and as befits the “new” household he is set to build, he emerges as the male head, the patriarch, the breadwinner, the “new husband.”<sup>20</sup> (87) When taken within the framework of this discourse, Kofi Ako’s words to Anowa “be my glorious *wife* and the contented *mother* of my children” (99, my italics) make perfect sense. Not only do Kofi Ako’s words circumscribe Anowa’s identity as his wife but they also unveil the subservience of mother to wife, a subordination which, as Oyuwemi insists, is alien to the African conceptual scheme. Anowa resists being identified this way and as her resistance grows fiercer and fiercer, her strangeness becomes more and more insurmountable. Following the tradition of the “woman as stranger,” Anowa becomes the recipient of such derogatory nomenclature as “witch,” (100, 108) “devil,” (100), “anything that is evil.” (100) These labels are the burden to carry for their deviance from normalcy, that is to say, for their search of an identity beyond the confines of wifehood. Consequently, we can comprehend Kofi Ako’s helpless outburst at Anowa’s resistance: “Can’t you be like other *normal* women? Other *normal* people?” (113, my italics)

And now the cataclysm of Anowa's misfortune: the impossibility to procreate. What is the source of Anowa's impossibility to procreate? Anowa's infertility is directly connected with her husband's disputed manhood. As a matter of fact, Anowa does not root her marital problems and her unhappiness in *her* infertility. She provides solutions for it, solutions that reside in her African conceptual framework, a conceptual framework which allows a man to have another wife, and which lead her to tell Kofi Ako, "I shall get you a wife," (115) which he firmly opposes. It is pointless to look for a scientific explanation as regards the source of her barrenness, because the explanation, the source, lies elsewhere, beyond the realms of scientific –may I add, Western discourse-. What Aidoo urges us to do here is to situate the drama in a cosmology where what is at stake is the art of creation itself. To put it another way, we need to transport Anowa's tragedy to the realm of myth in order to comprehend the full implications of her unfulfilled motherhood. Anowa is caught at the crossroads of her community's fatal and fateful encounter with a discourse that overdetermines her destiny: modernity. Aidoo enshrines this fatal and fateful encounter with modernity in a trope, the Mother Africa trope.

At the peak of her delusion and in the climax of her unhappiness, Anowa is assaulted by a recurrent dream in which out of her body men, women and children are poured to be later devoured by the big, giant red lobsters that a boiling sea throws out. The first time that this dream haunted her she was a little girl, "eight, or ten. Perhaps I was twelve." (104) Her grandmother told her about her travels, about "huge houses rising to touch the skies, houses whose foundations are wider than the biggest roads I had ever seen." (104) The inquisitive mind of the little girl touches upon forbidden knowledge when she asks: "Tell me Nana, who built the houses" (104) Nana is reluctant to answer for the big

houses -the forts at Elmina and Cape Coast- will lead to the “pale men” and these will irrefutably lead to the black Atlantic slave trade. But Anowa’s determination to know cannot be refuted so the old lady finally reveals that which “all good men and women try to forget.” (106) As if possessed by what “all good men and women try to forget,” that night Anowa is assailed by the dream and, “since then,” she declares, “anytime there is mention of a slave, I see a woman who is me and a bursting of a ripe tomato or a swollen pod.” (107) Anowa, the woman, becomes this larger Anowa, this myth that embodies Africa, and yet what Aidoo has us see is not the négritude’s black, nurturing, beautiful mother that soothes the imagination of African sons but an aborting mother that haunts the imagination of this African daughter. We might be tempted to interpret this dream-nightmare as Aidoo’s rejection of motherhood but this would result in a closure of the trope, that is to say, mothering would be conscripted by Anowa, the woman-protagonist of the play alone. The trope must open up to let in the game of double consciousness that Aidoo demands from her audience, so that the other Anowa, Oduyoye’s “mythical woman” can also breathe. In *Anowa*, Aidoo persuades us to free motherhood from the confines of modernity –and so, wifhood, dependence on a husband, subservience to a patriarch– and locate it instead in a cosmology grounded in the Mother.

By setting the act of creation in cosmology we are drawn towards an interpretation of procreation as a celebration of life firmly connected with nature and sex, an interpretation that –as Sjöö and Mor demonstrate in *The Great Cosmic Mother*, on the one hand, and Robert Graves in *The White Goddess*, on the other – firmly opposes the tenets of a discourse based on God the Father. Anowa is enveloped in a sexless relationship with Kofi Ako: she confronts Kofi Ako by asserting that “we have not seen each other’s beds for far too long.” (117) However, it is

at the end of the play when Anowa's lucid madness unearths the cosmological dimension of the couple's infertility: when faced with Kofi Ako's intention to send her away, she questions his manhood, "tell me, is that why I must leave you? That you have exhausted your masculinity acquiring slaves and wealth?" (121) thus establishing a direct connection between her husband's manhood and his economic success plus continuing purchase of slaves. Hence, instead of a celebration of life, the audience –together with the heroine- witnesses death, "we are dying," (117) woefully asserts Anowa.

Aidoo's embodiment of Mother Africa in the figure of Anowa and its subsequent counter-celebration of life is to be placed at the crossroads of two narrative modes, history and myth, which contrary to what Western discourse –the discourse on modernity- abrogates, complement each other. In other words, *Anowa* impels the audience to believe that we do not need to discard history because we embrace myth or the other way round. To explain comprehensibly the realities of the world surrounding us, *Anowa* demands a reading grounded in double consciousness for Anowa's tragedy cannot be assessed by her mythical dimension alone since her historicity intrudes in the development of her character. As a matter of fact, Anowa's drama is paradoxically enshrined in her being an *ordinary, real* woman, endowed with a frightening contemporaneity.

And this leads to a re-consideration of this "unassailable" stranger of all times: woman. Odamtten's otherwise very insightful analysis of *Anowa* does not, to my belief, highlight the fact that Anowa is indeed a woman, an African woman, and that the discourse that is engendering the African reality that comes from British colonialism is markedly and decisively patriarchal. Anowa's apprehension towards the course of

events that besiege her and her husband and her world could be read in the light of Sjöö's and Moor's words,

Culture is a people's own vision of themselves in relation to the world, created by themselves through a blood-continuity of time and space. Political invasion, via cultural colonialism, weakens the creative will of the conquered by destroying the people's coherent vision of themselves (Sjöö et al., 1987: 24).

Out of this context, Anowa's assertion "it is just that when I throw my eyes into the future, I do not see myself there" (96) makes perfect sense for the coherent vision of herself and her people is maimed, shattered, destroyed; the gate of cultural colonialism wide open. And what lies at the gate of this cultural colonialism, haunting the imagination of postcolonial, contemporary Africans is the middle passage, this black Atlantic that, as Ato's grandmother fearfully points out in *The Dilemma*, brings about "the wayfarer" (19) In *The Dilemma*, the wayfarer was embodied in Eulalie, Ato's African-American wife, but in *Anowa*, the wayfarer encompasses the whole of Africa. Anowa's proclamation of herself as a wayfarer, "I am only a wayfarer, with no belongings either here or there," (96) and the conflation she draws between herself and her husband's slaves "what is the difference between any of your men and me? Except that they are men and I'm a woman? None of us belongs," (97) accentuates the climate of homelessness that invades her, Anowa, and the play, *Anowa*. The middle passage, modernity's counter-discourse, disrupts the equation Africa=home. Naana Banyiwa Horne's analysis of the politics of mothering interprets Aidoo's particular use of the Mother Africa trope, envisioned as Anowa's nightmare, as the maternal image of the "slave

mother,” and what home is a slave entitled to? In the light of Banyiwá Horne’s reading, Anowa’s homelessness is entirely coherent. Anowa’s harrowing description of a wayfarer captures the deep-set homelessness that the middle passage created in the heart of the African experience,

A wayfarer is a traveller. Therefore, to call someone a wayfarer is a painless way of saying he does not belong. That he has no home, no family, no village, no stool of his own; has no feast days, no holidays, no state, no territory. (97)

We recalled how Mercy Amba Oduyoye rejoiced in the figure of the mythical Anowa and how she declared herself fascinated by Aidoo’s recreation, and yet there was something about Aidoo’s Anowa that frightened her, namely “her final capitulation to the dictates of society” and she wanted to know why. Unsettling Oduyoye’s understanding of Anowa’s death as a surrender, I already ventured a question: should we interpret the end as Anowa’s capitulation to the dictates of society? I believe the time has come to recover this question. It is not a yielding mood that characterizes Anowa’s performance throughout the play, but rather, a resisting one. She resists marrying the man of her parents’ choice, she resists being circumscribed in the “home,” she resists her husband’s purchase of slaves, she resists patriarchy, in short, she resists being swallowed by the Western discourse that has taken hold of Kofi Ako altogether. This resistance is what makes her a “stranger,” and this strangeness is apprehended as an “illness,” as Kofi Ako’s words attest to,

What is the meaning of this strangeness? Who were you in the spirit world? (...) It is an illness, Anowa. An illness that turns to bile all the good things of here-under-the-sun. Shamelessly, you rake up the dirt of

life. You bare our wounds. You are too fond of looking for the common pain and the general wrong. (99)

But Kofi Ako speaks from modernity's perspective: his words are created in an already colonised mind, enacted in an already colonised setting as the pictures above the fireplace in the central hall of the Big House at Oguaa testify: Queen Victoria, leading the display, at the centre, Kofi Ako on the left, and the crow, the totem bird of the Nsona clan –Kofi Ako's people-, on the right. The picture of Anowa and her people is nowhere to be seen, her presence erased, her voice endangered, yet she resists being silenced and what her resistance entails is an unfolding of this counter-discourse that "rakes up the dirt of life," that "bare(s) the wounds" of Africa and, as a matter of fact, the whole world. In other words, Anowa is not silenced, her death is a reaffirmation of her African female identity, the Mother Africa she embodies resists "mothering" colonialism.

*Anowa* unfolds the dark, the pagan, the female, the primitive world of the Mother which the discourse of God the Father cannot suppress, at least as far as the world of Anowa is concerned. Sjöö and Mor draw an analogy between the Mother and the people's blood identity, Aidoo feeds on this analogy when she, using Norma Alarcón's phrase, "puts flesh back on the object" (Alarcón, 1981: 187), and makes the history of Anowa tangible and real. Aidoo motions us to see Anowa as the embodiment *in history* of the contradictions that befall Africa and Africans in their encounter with colonialism.

In *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, I deliberately focused on the final image of Esi Kom, the African mother, and Eulalie, the African-American daughter, holding hands, thus symbolically reading in this gesture a reinscription of matrilineal kinship. I would like to finish my analysis of

*Anowa* with a spirit akin to the one expressed by Esi Kom and Eulalie in *The Dilemma*, in other words, I would like to assuage the disrupture that *Anowa*'s marriage generated between mother and daughter.

The world of *Anowa* is rooted in the matrilineal society of the Akan people, the same society that nurtured Aidoo's experience.<sup>21</sup> Aidoo's writings are not encumbered by a naïve sense of the good-per-se tenets of matrilineage, that is to say, she does acknowledge patriarchal instances of empowerment in her matrilineal society and addresses the oppression of women within matrilineal contexts as well. She cautions us not to blend the concept of matrilineage with the adjective "matriarchal":

Matrilineal as in the simple business of the inheritance of material wealth and who matters: your grandfather or your grandmother; and within the Akan society it's your grandmother. (...) I got this incredible birds-eye view of what happens in that society and I definitely knew that being a woman is enormously important in Akan society. People say to me, 'Your women characters seem to be stronger than we are used to when thinking about African women.' As far as I am concerned these are the African women among whom I was brought up. (...) Of course, the head of the family is still a man and we are taught that men are ruling in proxy for women in Akan society. So that is why I am very careful not to say that Akan society is matriarchal because women are supposed to have the authority but not the power to rule (Nasta, 1992: 295).

Aidoo's words as regards matrilineal Akan society are paramount not to misunderstand *Anowa*'s strangeness-as-woman as a *unique* product of Western patriarchal discourse. We need to remember here that *Anowa*'s womanhood is, from the very beginning of the play, brandished as unusual, unconventional, unreal and this is expressed



within the matrilineal world of Akan society. A woman's strangeness is to be feared for her strangeness is what makes her different, and this difference poses a threat to men's power in society. When Anowa's unhappiness reaches Yebi, her village, her parents embark on a hopeless argument about what they should have done to prevent their daughter's tragedy. They agree on the issue of her strangeness and yet the way this strangeness is approached by father and mother is completely different: whereas Osam –Anowa's father- asserts "I have always feared her," (91) Badua –Anowa's mother- accusingly retorts "Yes ... strange, but that does not make me say I fear her." (92) Osam recoils in his maleness and fears his daughter's strangeness, and so he reacts by distancing himself from her. Badua's lack of fear in her treatment of Anowa's strangeness can be understood as a binding sense of a shared womanhood. We do not see this mother and daughter holding hands, but we are left with an insidious question from the old man, a question that makes us, the audience, witnesses, participants and perpetrators in Anowa's demise: "Who knows if Anowa would have been a better woman, a better person if we had not been what we are?" (124) This question, we should not forget, is postulated from the insidious and frightening contemporaneity of Anowa.

## *Four*

***The Postcolonial Arena: No  
Sweetness Here  
Or the Travails of Africans after  
Independence***

... the word is the ideological phenomenon par excellence. <sup>1</sup>

Peter Hitchcock, *The Dialogics of the  
Oppressed*

... Gellner is so anxious to show that nationalism masquerades under false pretences that he assimilates 'invention' to 'fabrication' and 'falsity', rather than to 'imagining' and 'creation'. In this way he implies that 'true' communities exist which can be advantageously juxtaposed to nations. In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined. <sup>2</sup>

Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*

Debates on the credibility of fiction abound on the shelves of literary criticism. The nineteenth century envisaged realism –encapsulated in the shape of the realist novel- as the governing sign to measure the value of a text. The event of modernism added a new flavour to the way literary texts were viewed and the realistic element was modeled, or rather, distorted by a non-chronological temporal experience. The advent of magic realism marked the definite and definitive overthrow of raw

realism as the unique and absolute domain of the text, and yet novels which claim to be “realistic” have not ceased to be written. The discussion on realism is thus still in motion.

It is precisely on the grounds of realism that Sanjay Subrahmanyam elicits his criticism on the 2008 Man Booker Prize-winning novel, *The White Tiger* written by Aravind Adiga. Subrahmanyam’s conscientious and well-documented article praises Adiga’s attempts to portray a face of India in the time of globalization which, to date, has found little space in current Indian literature in English (Subrahmanyam, 2008: 42-43). However, according to Subrahmanyam, the novel’s claim to realism is undermined by the voice of the main character and narrator of the story, Balram Halwai, whose credibility and verisimilitude cannot be sustained. In the critic’s own words,

The novel is not, contrary to confused assertions in the Indian press, another attempt at a form of Indian magic realism in the wake of Salman Rushdie or Arundhati Roy. No one has telepathic or supernatural powers here; time is broadly Newtonian in its flow. This is a novel that wants to be realistic, even if the realism is meant to be understood as tinged with black comedy. There may even be some moralizing intention, with Adiga denouncing the greed and corruption of the New Indian Society. But the merit of the book must eventually rest on the credibility and verisimilitude of the voice of Balram Halwai (ibid: 43).

What is the problem with Balram Halwai’s voice? As his surname indicates, “Halwai” –meaning sweet-makers-, Balram belongs to one of the lower castes, he has hardly had any schooling and his mother tongue is not English, but some unspecified North-Indian language. And yet Adiga makes him the narrator of the story and the story is written in English, a language that Balram is only very distantly familiar with.

Subrahmanyam sheds light on the inconsistencies of some of Balram's idiomatic expressions which, he notes, do not exist in any North-Indian language, and which he acknowledges as merely English terms. We should not interpret Subrahmanyam's perspective as simply one which denies non-English-speaking characters a space in an English text. As a matter of fact, he acknowledges the difficult task that befalls writers-cum-translators who struggle to make those characters sound believable in English. He concedes that the translator "always faces dilemmas ... and can never get it quite right," but he sententiously adds when referring to Adiga's novel "we also know what it is to get it disastrously wrong" (ibid: 43).

Do "we" all know what it is to get it disastrously wrong? His final and concluding paragraph seems to contradict himself for he assumingly believes that the inconsistencies of Balram Halwai's voice which he, an Indian literary critic proficient in North-Indian languages finds irretrievable, will be left unnoticed by a readership which is oblivious of these and other linguistic and cultural nuances. His fatalistic position seeks refuge in one of the most cited and resourceful formulations in postcolonial criticism, namely, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's lapidary question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (Spivak, 1988: 143-164):

Some two decades ago, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak wrote a celebrated essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' At the time, a folklorist is said to have responded: 'More importantly, can the bourgeois listen?' We can't hear Balram Halwai's voice here, because the author seems to have no access to it. The novel has its share of anger at the injustices of the new, globalised India, and it's good to hear this among the growing chorus of celebratory voices. But its central character comes across as a cardboard cutout. The paradox is that for many of this novel's readers, this lack of verisimilitude will not matter because for them India is and

will remain an exotic place. This book adds another brick to the patronizing edifice it wants to tear down (Subrahmanyam, 2008: 43).

I decided to start my analysis of *No Sweetness Here* with a review which might, at first sight, seem a digression towards a text, Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, distant in time and space from the work of Ama Ata Aidoo, because I believe it pinpoints issues which are decisive, primordial and recurrent in the depiction of the postcolonial world in writing.<sup>3</sup> What Subrahmanyam's essay displays is first, a preoccupation with "realism," with picturing the world exactly as it is, secondly, the author's error at allotting the power to tell the story to a narrator who is linguistically handicapped from the very beginning –he does not speak English and yet the narration unfolds in English- and, thirdly, and as a direct consequence of the faulty narrator, the authorial voice, the "authority" of the author, so to speak, is severely maimed, thus leaving his task unsuccessfully accomplished. And last but not least, a reference to a hopeless readership -which he thinks of as "Western" although he refrains from calling it overtly so- that will never grasp the idiosyncrasies and misrepresentations of a world it knows little about. Henceforth, appropriating Spivak's question "can the subaltern speak?" he finalizes his criticism on *The White Tiger* by implying that the subaltern cannot speak and that the Western reader will not mind, thus foreclosing communication, dialogue, exchange, falling once again into utter negativism.

My allusions to *The White Tiger* will end here. I do not intend to enter a discussion on the accuracy of Subrahmanyam's criticism but rather what I would like to emphasize is that his essay interestingly launches the old relationships exerted on a textual level between the sign -India- , the narrative voice / narrator, the authorial voice / author,

and readership (reader, audience) in the postcolonial context of the postcolonial nation. My critical analysis of *No Sweetness Here* is inscribed in this game of old relationships and this is what links my approach to the one posited by Subrahmanyam. However, unlike Subrahmanyam on *The White Tiger*, I contend that Ama Ata Aidoo's *No Sweetness Here* is a successful artistic exercise on writing the postcolonial nation.

The question which urges to be asked now is how Aidoo manages to successfully write the postcolonial nation and this calls for a methodological positioning from my part. My reading of *No Sweetness Here* stems from two main sources of criticism, studies on nationalism and the nation, on the one hand, and Bahktinian dialogism, on the other. The first line of criticism via the works of Benedict Anderson, Homi Babha and Elleke Boehmer, will disclose the nation as an imagined space where the monologic discourse on history is challenged by the experiences of the subaltern, who, in *No Sweetness Here* does manage to speak. Bahktin's dialogic imagination offers an incommensurable space where the multiple, complex and ever-changing social relations that conform novelistic discourse can flourish but, above all, my recurrence to Bahktin is due to his inscription of language in the social, thus liberating it from the abstract prison of structuralism and allowing it to function as a means of struggle, as a tool for the subaltern to use. In the first part of the chapter which I have called "Problematizing History and the Nation Paradox," I offer a theoretical approach to questions of nationalism and nation formation which, by means of problematizing and undermining the concept of "History" (with capital "H") will lead to an understanding of history as one form of narration. It is in the second part of the chapter, "Writing the Independent Nation," where this form of narration, shaped as *No Sweetness Here*, will be analyzed under the

rubric of dialogism, strategically punctuated with the geopolitical perspectives on space provided in the work of geographer Doreen Massey.

# I

## *Problematizing History and the Nation Paradox*

Grounded in the work of Foucault and Deleuze, Spivak's question on the "speakability" of the oppressed subjects, revolved around the formers' exclusive –and unacknowledged- concern with the First World.<sup>4</sup> Her now widely quoted essay urged intellectuals to look at the "other side of the international division of labor from socialized capital, inside *and* outside the circuit of epistemic violence of imperialist law and education" (Spivak, 1988: 74) and see if from there the subaltern could *really* speak.

Spivak's question has provoked many different –and differing- answers, but what is important to point out is that nowhere in her text

does she openly and overtly refuse the agency –or the possible agency– of the subaltern. Speaking from her position as theorist, her criticism is launched on what she terms the essentialism of the “Other,” the almost imperceptible tendency to represent the oppressed as one single entity, the conscious or unconscious obliteration of the differences that may constitute them *differently* as subjects, and thus free them from what seems their eternal reproduction as objects, even if the initial intention of critics might be otherwise. For critics like Deleuze and Foucault, Spivak concedes, understand “history” as one form of narration and they even recognize “History” (with capital “H”) as the privileging of one form of narration, in this particular case, imperialism, and yet this, according to her, is not enough. What counts is “to offer an account of how an explanation and narrative of reality was established as the normative one” (ibid: 76). At this point Spivak is referring specifically to the imperialist narrative of history, but what is interesting for my analysis of *No Sweetness Here* is to see how a text historically embedded in the aftermath of imperialism, that is to say, a text which focuses conscientiously on Ghana, an African nation, after independence, differs ostentatiously from the depiction of the nation offered by Adu Boahen, Ghanaian historian whose work develops within a non-imperialist frame. In other words, we are faced with two texts, Ama Ata Aidoo’s *No Sweetness Here* and Adu Boahen’s *Ghana: Evolution and Change in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century* which take the same slice of Ghanaian history and yet the taste we readers are left with after swallowing up *No Sweetness Here* is significantly different from the one we get after reading Boahen’s account of the same period of Ghanaian history.<sup>5</sup> We are confronting two different forms of narrating the nation.

Published in 1970, the stories that give shape to *No Sweetness Here* encompass a period of the history of Ghana –from independence



under the leadership of Kwame Nkrumah in 1957 until the coup d'état that marked the demise of the man himself in 1966- which I dare to label as "crucial." Ghana held the –disputable- honour to be the first African country to gain independence.<sup>6</sup> Its leader, Kwame Nkrumah, was a firm believer and staunch defender of Pan-Africanism and viewed the independence of Ghana as a first step towards a future independent and united Africa. It is not surprising then that Africa –and the rest of the world- had their eyes set on Ghana for the consequences of the success or failure of this independent African nation were to be felt beyond its borders. The question, very simply put, would run like this: we are independent, now what?

Nowhere is the need to contextualize the literary work more pungent than in this collection of stories. If the objective of our analysis of *Anowa* was to bring back history to the story of Anowa and if in *The Dilemma of a Ghost* we were urged to detect the new stranger that was being shaped in the history of independent Ghana, in *No Sweetness Here*, History –with capital "H"- is problematized. However, we need to emphasize here that this "History" has already been given a postcolonial face; we are not talking here about the narrative of the Empire, but rather about the historical narrative of Ghana as viewed by one of its historians, Adu Boahen. In *No Sweetness Here*, the facts that weave the historical narrative of Ghana during this specific period of time are to be read against the individual histories of specific people, the characters that inhabit Aidoo's text. It is in the literary terrain of *No Sweetness Here* where the meaning(s) of independence are astutely, severely and tenderly contested by disclosing the inconsistencies of the linear narrative of History, be that moulded from an imperialistic perspective or an African one.

*No Sweetness Here* is a profoundly local text. By defining *No Sweetness Here* as “local,” I intentionally encapsulate the text in a specific time and space, rendering it a *locality* which infuses it with a very concrete historical essence. We are painting Ghana with the colours of the immediate years after independence, and yet this *locality* is transformed, universally enlarged when observed through the Pan-Africanist speculum that fed the imagination of the African intelligentsia. Let us now turn to “History,” as envisaged in Boahen’s book, to determine the factual information we are offered in reference to this decisive and critical historical period to, later on, confront it with Aidoo’s histories.

According to Boahen, we need to distinguish two phases in Nkrumah’s government (Boahen, 2000: 192). The first phase would comprise the period starting with the declaration of independence –the 6<sup>th</sup> of March 1957- and finishing in July 1960, and the second phase would span from July 1960 to the military coup d’état which took effect on 24<sup>th</sup> of February 1966. Relative success was the common denominator of the first phase of Nkrumah’s government, a success which was practically translated into social well-being. As Boahen puts it,

the shops of Ghana remained filled with imported goods and all sorts of consumer luxuries. Indeed, Ghanaians experienced an unprecedented standard of living during the first three years after independence (ibid: 200).

And he goes on to add to the list of achievements the ones experienced in the social fields where education was promoted at all levels and where new hospitals, health centres and clinics were being built:

The number of primary schools increased from 3,571 in 1957 to 3,713 in 1959, and that of middle schools from 1,311 to 1,394. That of government and approved secondary schools rose from thirty-eight in 1957 to fifty-nine in 1960, most of them built by the Ghana Educational Trust which Nkrumah set up in 1958, and that of private schools from twenty-two to fifty-two. The total enrolment in these secondary schools rose from 12,119 to 20,000 between 1957 and 1960. (...) In the field of health and social services, comparable progress was made. (...) Campaigns were launched against widespread diseases such as yaws, smallpox, tuberculosis and leprosy. By the end of 1960, about 400 Ghanaians had been given scholarships to study medicine abroad with a view to increasing the number of doctors in the country (Boahen, 2000: 200-201).

From this “objective” historical overview, one would expect a spirited and uplifting portrayal of what I have called the postcolonial arena of *No Sweetness Here*, which is obviously not the case. It would be argued whether Aidoo focuses on the second period described by Boahen, that is to say, the period in which Nkrumah’s politics begins to disintegrate on both a national and international level. That would be inaccurate, or, to say the least, not entirely accurate for two reasons: first, Aidoo’s collection does span the whole period of Nkrumah’s government and secondly, Boahen’s description of the second phase of Nkrumah’s government revolves around Nkrumah’s impossibility to fulfill his Pan-Africanist dream mainly due to the opposition he got from his own collaborators who conformed the elite, namely, the Ghanaian bourgeoisie. Except for the characters of the two short stories that open up the collection, a university professor and a government official, the rest of the characters in *No Sweetness Here* are far from the circles of the Ghanaian bourgeoisie. Aidoo’s stories move on lower-class ground,

intermittently interspersed with emerging middle-class characters, whose lives are not precisely characterized by buoyancy. Interestingly enough, the only criticism that Boahen launches on Nkrumah's first three years of successful government and the only instance in which he approaches the polemics unleashed by the different treatment granted to rural areas – which, as we shall see, is a recurrent theme in Aidoo's collection- as opposed to the favored urban areas, is gathered in one single paragraph:

Some aspects and effects of these activities, however, merit criticism. In the first place, too much attention was paid to the urban areas or towns while the rural areas or villages were on the whole neglected. This resulted in increasing the rate of migration, especially of young school leavers, from the villages into the towns, which, in turn, worsened urban unemployment and housing problems. A lowering of the standard of education at elementary, secondary and teacher-training levels was the inevitable result of the phenomenal rate of expansion at those levels. *But these criticisms are nevertheless only minimal in the face of the overall achievements of Nkrumah and his government in this field during the first three years of independence* (ibid: 201; italics mine)

*No Sweetness Here* focuses entirely on the consequences and, therefore, the “realities,” that Boahen's single paragraph, very tangentially, points out. What does this disparaged approach to Ghana's immediate post-independent years tell us about the narratives employed by the authors, Boahen and Aidoo? Boahen's book is a history book where a list of facts are displayed and which claims to provide an objective overview on Ghana's past. Aidoo's book, however, is of a very different nature. With Aidoo we enter the contradictory and polemical realm of art, the unsteady ground of writing fiction. In short, we are dealing with different types of discourse.

“History” is a word that epitomizes all the recorded events of the past which constitute the life of a country. “History,” however, -and more compellingly- is also rendered the category of scientific discipline, thus considering it as a branch of knowledge that deals systematically with the recording, analyzing, and correlating of past events. Boahen’s *Ghana: Evolution and Change in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* fits perfectly in this conception of “history.” Yet a claim on a scientific, systematic recording, analyzing and correlating of past events cannot be sustained by *No Sweetness Here*, among other things, because we are dealing first and foremost with fiction, and hence, we are treading upon the space delineated by the word “story” rather than “history.”

The meanings that the word “story” releases move away from “systematic recording” and any claim to “science” they may display is severely and straightforwardly rejected. Inherent in the word “story,” there is the idea of fictitious account, invented narrative, a tale whose allegation to truth is, in the best of cases, questioned. But, and there lies the link between “history” and “story,” both are narratives. And, what’s more, fiction might claim a strong hold on reality, as I purport to be the case in *No Sweetness Here*.

Hence, where are we to place *No Sweetness Here*, a text which questions History’s linear, abstract, scientific discourse, but whose realistic foundation resists being contentedly apprehended as mere “story”? My view is that in this collection of stories Aidoo delineates a third narrative space that could be captured linguistically by the term “histories.”<sup>7</sup> I write “histories” purposefully in the plural and I reject the capital letter I used in “History” to highlight the impossibility to trap the different, differing and varied personal narratives of the characters that inhabit *No Sweetness Here* in one single linear narrative, that is to say, in one single list of historical

facts. The space created by Aidoo favours heterogeneity over homogeneity, it is resonant with powerful individual voices which, nonetheless, are wielded by a sense of community and although it is geared by a socially committed conscience, the ground it treads is powerfully symbolic. The postcolonial arena that Aidoo points out in *No Sweetness Here* can indeed be encoded in Homi Bhabha's definition of "nation":

(...) an obscure and ubiquitous form of living the *locality* of culture. This locality is more *around* temporality than *about* historicity: a form of living that is more complex than "community"; more symbolic than 'society'; more connotative than 'country'; less patriotic than *patrie*; more rhetorical than the reason of State; more mythological than ideology; less homogeneous than hegemony; less centered than the citizen; more collective than the cultural differences and identifications that can be represented in any hierarchical or binary structuring of social antagonism (Bhabha, 1990: 298).

*No Sweetness Here* is an example of what Bhabha calls "writing the nation" and it is from this conception that I undertake the analysis of Aidoo's collection. As a matter of fact, the distinction between "History" and "histories" that I pointed out can be reformulated in both a more sophisticated and enlightening way by Bhabha's distinction between "pedagogy" and "performance." According to Bhabha, the idea of the "nation" is intrinsically linked with the reality of "the people." However, this link is marked by a tension between the two terms, that is to say, the link is not fluid -homogeneous, linear - but convoluted - heterogeneous, fractured-. Disharmony is what relates the nation with the people because the people are both the historical objects of the nationalist pedagogy and the subjects of a process of signification. To

put it in another way, the pedagogical –our “History,” our list of historical facts- is severely contested by the multiple articulations of the performative –our “histories,” our individual experiences.- It is at this tense juncture where Bhabha places the space of the national narrative, also referred to as “nation-space,” thus condemning the nation-space to a state of perpetual discordance:

The people are neither the beginning or the end of the national narrative; they represent the cutting edge between the totalizing powers of the social and the forces that signify the more specific address to contentious, unequal interests and identities within the population (ibid: 297).

But, Bhabha adds, this perpetual tension, this never-ending discordance, this eternal disharmony which envelops national narrative and which eventually shapes the site of writing the nation, is an outcome of the ambivalences and ambiguities of the discourse of modernity, the discourse that lies at the core of the narrative of Empire, as critic Edward Said has persistently remarked in *Culture and Imperialism* (Said, 1993). Let us quote Bhabha at length:

The scraps, patches, and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects. In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of *writing the nation* (ibid: 297).

In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson charts crucial historical moments that triggered off the creation of “nations” and fed the spirit of nationalisms in the West (Anderson, 1983). Two moments are decisive in this process of nation-creation: one is the invention of the printing press in 1440 and the other one is the spread of imperialism during the late eighteenth and the whole of the nineteenth century. The invention of the printing press marks the origins of the raising of a kind of national consciousness which would be fully consolidated with the spread of imperialism. As a matter of fact, the concept of “nation” lay behind the conquering drive of European states whose identity –and power- was defined by their possessions in distant lands which were referred to as colonies. New terms had to be coined and one such term was that of the “colonial state.” We could affirm that the concept of “nation” was strengthened by Imperialism. But what we are facing in Bhabha’s writing the nation, and which Anderson only mentions but does not really grapple with, is the turning point in history when the colonial states turn into postcolonial states. The nation that Aidoo writes in *No Sweetness Here* is postcolonial but it captures the very crucial moment in which the colonial state becomes the postcolonial state, a turning point in the history of the nation and henceforth in the nation as narration. In order to grasp this very moment in which the colonial nation becomes the postcolonial nation, I refer to the nation which is being written in *No Sweetness Here* as “independent” rather than “postcolonial.”

In order for the nation to flourish, it is necessary, according to Anderson, to engage the people in a process of remembering and forgetting. The imagined community that the nation exemplifies requires the existence of a shared past which serves as the link which unites the different individuals which claim citizenship to a certain nation. Hence,



the people that conform the nation must share a belief in a communal experience which is encapsulated in a past which, in its turn, must be solidly embedded in the linear, homogeneous, authoritative discourse of a unified and unifying national History. And yet, and here lies the allure of the imagined community that is the nation, this past is remembered as it is forgotten, in other words, this past is –totally or partially- imagined as well. The implications of such a remembering and forgetting process are not difficult to presage, for the very idea of the nation is questioned by its very reliance on a basis –a common past- which is shaky. As Bhabha puts it, “the narration of the nation must be viewed in light of an *ambivalence that haunts the idea of the nation*” (Bhabha, 1990: 311). If, to Bhabha’s assertion, we add the fact that the idea of the nation we are dealing with is that of the neophyte postcolonial African nation which is being shaped between the faltering limits of tradition and modernization, the ambivalence takes on a monumental dimension. It is from this monumental ambivalence that *No Sweetness Here* is constructed and it is this ambivalence which makes its text so totally different to that of Boahen’s.<sup>8</sup>

The nation is a recurrent presence in the postcolonial debate and its pressing ambivalent nature has characterized its very inception. Nationalisms were tightly embedded in the literature of liberation struggles and what we need to emphasize here is the fact that the territory that the colonized claimed back from the colonizers was the space demarcated by the nation which, ironically, –as we have seen in Chapter 2-, was the space *invented* by the colonizers. African identities were formed around the nation concept, the quest of self-representation was, up to a certain extent, a representation of the nation, free –at least theoretically- from colonial subjugation. But there is an element in the national imagining process which, just as durable as the nation concept

itself, has resulted in an extraordinary resilient –and very often unrecognized- existence. I am referring to “gender.”

In *Stories of Women. Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*, Elleke Boehmer provides us with a prescient and judicious study of what she calls the “gendered history” of the nation in postcolonial writing (Boehmer, 2005). Her point of departure is her realization that the quest of self-representation which triggers off postcolonial writing is contingent upon an embodiment of the nation as “woman.”<sup>9</sup> As a consequence of such embodiment, “woman” is objectified by the nation but her very objectification is what grants the citizens of the nation who are defined as male, their identity as free, independent, postcolonial subjects. However, can we affirm that the nation has been successfully freed when half of its subjects are denied access to true subjectification? This is the underlying question that permeates the book and which Boehmer succinctly poses in her introduction via her analysis of Chinua Achebe’s short story “Girls at War” (Achebe: 1986, 98-118).

In this short story, and as Boehmer perceptively points out, Achebe captures the disillusionment and exhaustion that caused the upshot of the Biafra conflict in Nigeria in the figure of a girl, Gladys. What’s more, we see her through the eyes of the narrator, Reginald Nwankwo, an official in the Ministry of Justice. The positioning of the narrative voice is thus circumscribed entirely by what **he** sees. And what he sees is first a young girl, vulnerable and immature, who wishes to help her country by becoming part of the militia. Later on, he sees a girl, still young, but her former vulnerability and immaturity have given way to a resolute strength and self-confidence which is exemplified by her “male” military uniform. It is in the third meeting where the gendered history of the nation is most clearly and painfully presented to us: the war is going badly for Biafra, the once confident and optimistic “new” nation is facing

defeat, and Reginald, out on the road in search of some food for his family, meets the girl, but this time the “girl” is wearing a wig and expensive shoes which, he concludes, must be smuggled goods. The once courageous, self-confident and strong girl has been corrupted. But Gladys is not just a “girl,” her significance growing under the rubric of what she stands for, namely, the nation, –Biafra- for as Reginald states, Gladys “was just a mirror reflecting a society that had gone completely rotten and maggoty at the centre” (ibid: 114). However, the national struggle for liberation undertaken by Biafra, hopeless yet, under Achebe’s perspective, also ennobling, must find a more satisfactory resolution, so he opts for redeeming Gladys –and thus, the nation- in a final act of self-sacrifice. Caught in an air raid, Gladys runs to help a disabled soldier and they both die.

“Girls at War” is an excellent instantiation of the process of engendering the nation for it reveals yet another level of ambivalence in the artifice of national imagining: the nation as a potential site for liberation and/or enslavement. Gladys, we should remember, has an active role in the liberation struggle –she becomes part of the military and gains a certain degree of independence while she remains a soldier-, she is indeed an exponent of the interdependence between national resistance movements and women’s emancipation movements (Boehmer, 2005: 6). The problem for Gladys and what she stands for – the nation- is that when revolution comes to an end –either because of gained independence or failed independence-, the nation-space is domesticated, relegating women to the private sphere and launching men to the public world. For, as Boehmer reminds us throughout the book, “women must be objectified by the nation” but “the normative citizen is defined as male” (ibid: 4).

The ambivalence presented by the nation as a potential site for either liberation or enslavement and which, echoing Boehmer, I would like to capture as the “nation paradox” can only be acknowledged if we place “gender” at the center of the national imagining. And this is where Boehmer’s book, to my mind, takes on a significant role in the fashioning of postcolonial criticism for she reveals how, in postcolonial discourse, gender has always been subsidiary to the category of race. As she herself puts it:

A study of the interrelationship of gender and nationalism which places itself within the ambit of postcolonial critique, has two important impacts on that body of critical discourse. For one, it usefully re-reminds postcolonial theory of the significance of the nation (...) For another, it persuasively introduces (and reintroduces) the constitutive reality of sexual difference to a critical practice that has till very recently, unless in passing, tended to overlook this formative legacy. In mainstream postcolonial studies, gender is still conventionally treated in a tokenistic way, or as subsidiary to the category of race (ibid: 7).

The nation-space delineated in the text that conforms *No Sweetness Here* is en-gendered through the histories of women. This affirmation should not be read as an impairing of the importance of male characters, or worse still, as a direct denial of the presence of male characters in the book, but rather, what I propose is a viewing of the text as a potential site for development of an alternative narrative of the nation which is *necessarily* gender-centred.

With Boehmer’s words at the back of my mind, I acknowledge the nation as an invitation for women “to enter modernity and public space” (ibid: 6) *as citizens* (my italics); re-stating the subjectivity they gained as active participants in the liberation struggles of their countries.

Women's agency during revolution, as Mary Ann Tétreault amply demonstrates in *Women and Revolution*, needs not be questioned (Tétreault, 1994). What is at stake is their representation and representativeness in the independent nation for as Gwendolyn Mikell reminds us,

In the early part of this century, women's declining political status was directly related to the oppressive control of the colonial regime. African women took strength from the fact that their participation was essential if their countries were to end the colonial experience and achieve independence. However, after independence, male suppression of African women's political autonomy increased, despite the contributions women had made to nationalist politics and despite state claims to equitable approaches in education, policies and laws (Mikell, 1995: 408).

With *No Sweetness Here* Aidoo offers us a space to ensure both female representation and female representativeness.

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### ***Writing the Independent Nation***

In his study on Pan-Africanism, Anyidoho pointed out in a cautionary manner, the slipperiness inherent in the word "black" which, paradoxically, is utilized as a defining and delimiting concept to claim the union and existence of a "black world."<sup>10</sup> A similar paradoxical phenomenon occurs when the concept called up is that of the "nation."

For the “nation,” in all its persistent and pervading existence in the making of modernity, even in its strongest manifestation as the element that gives identity to a group of people, exudes slipperiness. The definition of nation as a community of people with a territory, history, economic life, culture and language in common, united under a single government, falls prey to inadequacies which might be rendered emotional in nature –not all the people that are supposed to inhabit the space of a nation feel part of this nation- but, which are, nonetheless, justifiable on their own terms.

It is complex enough to apply the above definition of “nation” to Western space where unrecognized “nations” claim their right to existence, and yet, when it comes to circumscribing the African space into different African nations, the complexity grows in dimension. We *might* accept a common territory, history and economic life, but can we so generously submit to the entitlement to a joint culture and language? The meaning of “nation” is somehow at stake if we try to trap it and confine it geographically, culturally, economically and linguistically. Another approach to “nation” is required in order to understand the edifying process of “writing the postcolonial nation.”<sup>11</sup>

My proposal is to look at “nation” from the perspective of “space” propounded by geographer Doreen Massey, which will allow me to move from *nation-state* to *nation-space* in an attempt to extricate limiting boundaries –geographical, cultural, linguistic- to the notion of “nation” (Massey, 1994). It is my contention that although “nation” as experienced via state served its purpose in offering a sense of national identity after independence, it failed to flesh out this identity in the varied subjectivities that were created after independence and which, paradoxically, might endanger the very notion of national identity. To sustain this argument I recur to Massey’s work on space.

Massey's re-conceptualization of "space" originates as a reaction against the understanding of time and space which sustains traditional geography. In traditional geography, time, as Massey points out, is equated with movement and progress whereas space is apprehended as stasis and reaction. This division of time and space, on the one hand, and the equation  $\text{time}=\text{movement} / \text{space}=\text{stasis}$ , on the other, give rise to a definition of a sense of place, of belonging, of rootedness which is constructed upon the notions of "stability" and "unproblematical identity" (ibid: 151). When "nation" is understood as a geographical, cultural, economical, political, linguistic reality, we assume that stability and identity purport this space. And yet, as we have previously noted in various instances, stability and identity are indeed very elusive when we try to capture the nation resulting after independence from colonial powers.

Massey proposes a re-examination of space and time based on the inseparability of both terms, thus contradicting the uncontested belief held in the field of geography which conceives space and time as separate entities.<sup>12</sup> As she tacitly puts it, "space and time are inextricably interwoven" (ibid: 152). Undoubtedly influenced by Einstein's theory of relativity, Massey advocates for an underlying reality which consists of a four-dimensional space-time in clear opposition to the three-dimensional space and one-dimensional time that a traditional perspective supports. This four-dimensional space-time does not preclude a disappearance of space and time as independent entities, but rather it calls for a treatment of space and time as mutually dependent even if this dependence is felt as frictional. In Massey's own words,

It is not that we cannot make any distinction at all between them but that the distinction we do make needs to hold the two in tension, and to

do so within an overall, and strong, concept of four-dimensionality (ibid: 261).

The consequence of envisioning space-time as inseparable, mutually dependent entities –even if in tension– forming a four-dimensionality is that space can no longer be sustained as absolute, in tune with stasis, but relational and, therefore, in tune with movement. Space is delineated by social relations and because of this, space cannot be static, it has to be necessarily dynamic in its very inception, not perceived as an appendage of time, but *in* time. What follows is Massey’s definition of space:

Space is not a ‘flat’ surface in that sense because the social relations which create it are themselves dynamic by their very nature. It is a question of a manner of thinking. It is not the ‘slice through time’ which should be the dominant thought but the simultaneous coexistence of social relations that cannot be conceptualized as other than dynamic. Moreover, and again as a result of the fact that it is conceptualized as created out of social relations, *space is by its very nature full of power and symbolism, a complex web of relations of domination and subordination, of solidarity and co-operation* (ibid: 265; italics mine)

This powerful and symbolic space which is woven by relations of domination and subordination, of solidarity and co-operation is none other than the nation-space captured textually in *No Sweetness Here*.

How are we to approach a textual analysis of *No Sweetness Here*? At first sight, *No Sweetness Here* appears to the reader as a collection of eleven short stories which could be analysed independently from each other. As a matter of fact, this is the way *No Sweetness Here* has been traditionally presented to the reader. Criticism on the book shows how



the interrelationships among the stories are dealt with in an aleatory way showing no sign of a cohesive thread that stitches them together. Thus, Linda Strong-Leek focuses only on three stories –“Everything Counts,” “No Sweetness Here,” and “Two Sisters”- and centers her analysis on the resisting role of women in independent Ghana (Strong-Leek, 1999). Peter Wilfred Stein, showing a similar line of development to the one evinced by Strong-Leek, also focuses on the role of women and what he calls the “language of endurance” which, in his analysis, is what defines the mood of the collection of stories, labeling them as profoundly female in nature; in his view, the language of endurance is the language attached to the female characters only (Stein, 1999). Naana Jane Opoku-Agyemang offers, so far, the most interesting approach. Her analysis takes on a more formal procedure and pays attention to the peculiar way of narrating the stories, what she calls “narrative turns.” She emphasizes the importance of *storytelling* and even goes so far as to detect and name the forms of storytelling Aidoo uses in this collection of short stories:

We recognize nine different methods of narration. There is the story as *amanee*, in “In the Cutting of a Drink.” “Something to Talk About On the Way to the Funeral” is a *dramatic* short story. There is a *slice of life* in “For Whom Things Did Not Change.” “A Gift from Somewhere” is a *soliloquy*. The title short story, “No Sweetness Here,” though also a soliloquy, is delivered from a *dual perspective*. The use of *parallelism* is obvious in “Certain Winds from the South” and “Something to Talk About on the Way to the Funeral.” Both “The Late Bud” and “Two Sisters” employ *direct contrast* in the telling of the stories. “Other Versions” is a *three-tiered* story, a variation of a theme. The structure of “Everything Counts” can be termed a *reminiscence* (Opoku-Agyemang, 1999: 128-9).

Even more interestingly, she links the practice of storytelling with Ghanaian women, their female narrative voices operating “within the domestic sphere or as members of a professional performing group” (ibid: 127). But despite this formal, woman-centered analysis, does Opoku-Agyemang nowhere in her article expressly view *No Sweetness Here* as a compact, solid, unitary whole, a short story cycle in fact.

When facing *No Sweetness Here*, my position differs from the one expressed by the above critics for I view this peculiar collection of short stories as a unit, a complete, rounded piece of work which in the world of West African storytelling would be captured by the word *fefewo*.<sup>13</sup> A *fefewo* is a total dramatic narrative performance in which the storyteller transmits to a live audience a set of stories which are welded in narrative phases and displayed as stories in a chain. What I am trying to convey here is the fact that each phase consists of a set of stories which are sequentially arrayed, each phase opening up the way to another in a continuous flow.

By acknowledging *No Sweetness Here* as a *fefewo*, I am inscribing it in the oral tradition of West Africa but, at the same time and because the text is written down in English, I am also claiming its presence in the field of Anglophone African literature. This is obviously not the only case of a work by an African author which shows a clear indebtedness to the African oral tradition. The truth is that most African texts feed on their autochthonous oral traditions, so, in this respect, we cannot attach uniqueness to *No Sweetness Here*. Nevertheless, what Aidoo’s text offers to us is a peculiar way of blending the oral with the written and to explain this particularity I will need to recur first to Bakhtin’s dialogism.<sup>14</sup>

Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism stems from his belief in the social nature of language, on the one hand, and the certitude that the word as

sign renders a site of struggle over meaning, on the other. When applied to the game of relationships that any communicative exchange demands, the consequences are paramount, for when we enter a dialogue we do so loaded with a language which, because of its very social, historical nature, we can never claim as ours alone. Language is intrinsically embedded in what Bakhtin calls “heteroglossia,” resisting unification into one single form of language. And yet, as Bakhtin alerts, the centripetal forces of authority posit a language as the model to follow determining the lens through which we are to apprehend reality. But, and here lies Bakhtin’s revolutionary statement, the realities of heteroglossia can never be fully erased for they will always find ways to have their voices heard, however subliminally, and it is precisely in the realm of literary language, and more specifically in novelistic discourse, where heteroglossia reigns supreme.

The communicative exchange in which a speaker and a listener are engaged will, according to Bakhtin, necessarily reveal this heteroglossia. The language of the speaker is not just the language of the speaker alone but also the anticipated accentuations of the listener whose response is also overpopulated with the words of other speakers. Therefore, the sustainability of meaning is endangered, it is indeed very easy to fall into some sort of post-structuralist stance and proclaim the impossibility to attach meanings to objects, let alone, subjects. Dialogism, then, is meaningful as long as we concretize text and context.<sup>15</sup> Our text is *No Sweetness Here* and our context is independent Ghana, the struggle over sign epitomized as the meaning of the African nation.

The dialogical is a complex enough phenomenon in itself but when we attempt to define the relationship among narrator-characters-reader in a text like *No Sweetness Here*, the complexity it discloses renders it

almost an impossible task. The first element which challenges our task is the inescapable presence of orality. How does Aidoo translate the oral into the written, a task which grows in difficulty when we add the fact that the original oral is Fanti and the written is English? Craig MacKenzie captures the complexity of this process in the following revealing passage:

(...) the deployment of oral forms in the written work of African writers is a more complex process than would perhaps appear at first sight. Frequently theorized about but seldom achieved, the effective transposition of the oral into the written involves successfully negotiating the ontological gap between oral and written modes. This entails a shift from the spoken to the written word, from live audience to absent reader, from reciprocity and interaction to a process of private interpretation removed (sometimes distantly) in time and place (MacKenzie, 2002: 347).

To this transposition from the oral to the written, I need to add a second element that further challenges Aidoo's task, namely, the representation of the oppressed or how not to fall prey, as Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi exhorts, to Spivak's axiom that "the 'spoken for' is 'no speaking subject'" (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997: 5). And last but not least, a third element is called for, the reader, or to put it in the form of a question, how is an abstract readership invited to take active part in this live performance?

I read *No Sweetness Here* as a dialogic space where the sign, the independent African nation, strives to construct a meaning. This space is, after Massey's fashion, dynamic, four-dimensional, defined by social relations. These social relations which give shape to the space do so dialogically, establishing a complex network of connections in which narrator, characters and reader are actively entangled. The success of

Aidoo's task should be measured by the translatability of her text, or put in another way, her ability to translate a total dramatic performance, a *fefewo*, into a written work. And this she achieves through the peculiar narrative voice that keeps the performance, *No Sweetness Here*, together.

How different is the reader's experience when *No Sweetness Here* is apprehended as a whole unit rather than individual short stories? To start with, it gives an entity to the space being represented, it substantiates the sign-independent Ghana- , it turns abstractness into tangible reality. In its turn, this feeling of completeness makes the reader closer to the text by sensing its predominant oral quality, directing him/her towards the whole storytelling performance. However, this approach of *No Sweetness Here* as *fefewo* was completely excised when the book was published by Longman. As we have mentioned earlier, a *fefewo* is characterized by a set of phases, the stories being part of a specific phase. In *No Sweetness Here*, there are five different phases distributed as follows: the first phase consists of two stories, "Everything Counts" and "For Whom Things Did Not Change," whereas the second phase is shaped by one single story, "In the Cutting of a Drink," which is followed by a third phase built upon four stories, "The Message," "Certain Winds from the South," "No Sweetness Here," and "A Gift from Somewhere" which lead the way towards the fourth phase where we find two stories, "Two Sisters" and "The Late Bud" to finally reach the fifth and last phase, which is conformed by two stories, "Something to Talk about on the Way to the Funeral" and "Other Versions."

Unfortunately, if we look at the Longman edition, it is practically impossible for a reader -this is certainly the case for a Western reader who is not familiar with the tradition of African storytelling- to detect

the different episodes of the performance. The fact that all the stories take place in Ghana in the immediate years following independence comes seamlessly from the text and is easily grasped by the reader but the grouping of the stories into five different phases escapes the reader unless the author expressly indicates so. And Aidoo indeed indicated it in the first publication of the book in Ghana, which makes us realize she wanted the reader to approach the work in such a way and the means she used to do so was visual; she inserted blank pages whose purpose was to divide the performance into five different phases and to group the stories into these specific five phases.<sup>16</sup> The Longman edition, which we should not forget is the edition that has survived and the one which is being used nowadays, simply ignored the blank pages. It merely wiped out the existence of the five phases and hence, it disinherited the text from its specific African ties, the dramatic performance known as *fefewo*.

Visual aid notwithstanding, it is the narrative voice of *No Sweetness Here* which works effectively to generate and preserve the text as a compact unit. On a first level, specific narrators are to be detected in each story which range from third-person narrators (“Everything Counts,” “For Whom Things Did Not Change,” “Certain Winds from the South,” “A Gift from Somewhere,” “Two Sisters,” “The Late Bud,”) to characters within the tale which are turned into the tellers of the story (“In the Cutting of a Drink,” “The Message,” “No Sweetness Here,” “Something to Talk About on the Way to the Funeral,” “Other Versions”). However, the reading of *No Sweetness Here* discloses yet another narrative level, less apparent than the easily discernible narrators mentioned above, but, ironically, more substantial in its very inessentiality. I am referring to a narrative voice that hovers above the text rather than directly inhabiting the text, less authorial than an

omniscient narrator but endowed with a more prescient presence than that allotted to an omniscient narrator. And this presence is felt by the reader in two ways: (a) as a powerful dramatic voice which radiates orality and (b) as a “conscience manifestation,” as a thought that intrudes in the mind of the narrator and carves its way into the minds of the readers. In the first instance, this voice represents the ultimate act of impersonation –the voice embodied in a living character–, in the second instance, this voice represents the ultimate avoidance of impersonation –the voice disclaiming any specific allegiance to a body, a character, its presence ethereal but not for this reason, less real. This narrative voice is thus defined by its very ambivalent nature, experienced by the reader as both absolute concreteness or absolute etherealness, as both embodiment and disembodiment, as both essentially oral and manifestly written. This voice Odamtten recovers from Aidoo’s first literary manifestation, *The Dilemma*, and thus gives it a name “The Bird of the Wayside” (Odamtten, 1994: 80-115). As its very nomenclature reveals, this is a voice with a peculiar positioning, it is near, *along the side* of a road but it is not *in* the road, it is delimited and conscripted by the road but, at the same time, it eludes the road, it is part of the road and yet it claims its waywardness. And it is a bird, a creature of the skies, a fluttering presence above the earth, but also capable of walking on and inhabiting this earth. In short, it is the voice which “can furnish” us “with reasons why / this and that and other things / happened” (Aidoo, 1965: 7) but this can only be validated if the stories are contemplated as a whole.

I will undertake an analysis of the collection of short stories that consolidate *No Sweetness Here* respecting Aidoo’s division into the five different phases she visually indicated in the first publication of the text. Each dramatic performance is built upon a distinctive and salient aspect

of the independent nation, an aspect that contributes to the emergence of new social relations and henceforth, after Massey's fashion, results in the charting of another space. However, ingrained in each dramatic performance, there is a surfacing idea, a seed subtly planted by the narrative voice –the Bird of the Wayside- which will take centre stage in the next phase, reassuring and substantiating the storytelling thread by creating allegiances which will, in turn, imagine yet another space. The independent nation that Aidoo imagines in *No Sweetness Here* configures a space socially related where the five dramatic episodes are likewise interconnected.

### **Phase 1. On National Culture. The Native Intellectual and the People**

A quote from a speech by Sékou Touré delivered to the second Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Rome in 1959 opens up chapter 4 of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*.<sup>17</sup> Touré's words are a call for the union between African artists and African people, a demand for the African artist to be "at one with the people," to blend with the people in a joint adventure to seek the "freeing, the progress and the happiness of Africa." (WE, 166) Touré's energizing words are Fanon's platform to produce his introductory forceful statement: "Each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfil it, or betray it" (WE, 166) and expanding Touré's "artist" into the figure of



the “native intellectual,” he proceeds by disclosing the mission awaiting this group of educated Africans. Hence, chapter 4 of *The Wretched of the Earth*, which bears the title “On National Culture,” devotes the thirty-odd pages that shape it to the examination of the role of the native intellectual in the struggle for liberation from colonial powers. Fanon’s “national culture” is an attempt to locate the native intellectual in the independent nation and to prioritize his indispensable function in the making of the new free nation emerging as a result of independence.

According to Fanon, the experience of the native intellectual whose role is always examined via his relationship with the people, is framed by three different phases. Phase one is characterized by assimilation to the culture of the colonized; the native intellectual, who has studied in the colonial metropolis, has fed on Western discourse, has read the great Western classics, has swallowed up Western philosophy, in short, his mind has been bent towards the belief in the greatness of Western thought. But on his return to the native land –to echo Césaire’s groundbreaking poem- , the intellectual, confronted with the view of his land and his people, is overwhelmed by a sensation of estrangement. He feels a stranger to his own people, he feels dislocated, uprooted and helplessly absorbed by a desire to belong. Disturbance is what defines this second phase and this is what the native intellectual sets himself to defeat. In the third phase, which Fanon names “the fighting phase,” the role of the intellectual is circumscribed by revolution; he is transformed into “an awakener of the people,” his function finally effectively enacted.<sup>18</sup>

Sissie and Kobina, the protagonists of “Everything Counts,” and “For Whom Things Did Not Change,” are the disturbed intellectuals Fanon describes in the second phase. Their disturbance is defined by a feeling of estrangement and a persistent longing to overcome it and

thus become one with their people and their nation. They are both concerned about the future of their land –Ghana- and they are both convinced of the relevant role they are to play in this future which emanates after independence. They are also caught in between the slippery meanings of nation and culture and the more insidious connection between them formally arrested by the term “national culture.”

Although Fanon acknowledges the difficulty to define a national culture –a difficulty which finds a resolution in the end- he nonetheless dismisses any polemics as regards the use of the terms “nation” and “culture.” Whereas he grants a spell of inadequacy in the definition of culture which he feels compelled to amend, he does not envisage nation as a problematic concept. Fanon inherits the European-made conception of nation and nowhere in “On National Culture” does he question it. For him, the European-conceived space of African nations is unquestioned, it is an uncontested given and so, consequently, the inconsistencies he foresees in national culture are dependent upon “culture” and not “nation.”

Fanon’s search for a definition of culture stems from a breach he underpins in what he sees as a general tendency to equate culture with traditional customs. He is adamant to deny any equivalence between these two terms by signaling the futility of the disturbed native intellectuals who irresolutely try to overcome their estrangement from the people by throwing themselves into tradition. Thus, Fanon despondently argues, the native intellectual “wishes to attach himself to the people; but instead he only catches hold of their outer garments.” (WE, 180) For Fanon culture takes on a much more interesting value, it renders it a surprisingly contemporary vision in his understanding of it as

something essentially fluid and impossible to circumscribe by a set of fixed meanings. In his own words,

Culture has never the translucidity of custom; it abhors all simplification. In its essence it is opposed to custom, for custom is always the deterioration of culture. The desire to attach oneself to tradition or bring abandoned traditions to life again does not only mean going against the current of history but also opposing one's own people. (WE, 180)

However enlightening Fanon's incursion in the indeterminacy of culture, he does not delve into the implications of the intrinsic complexity of the term. After all, the germ for Fanon's work is revolutionary struggle and "On National Culture" demands a contextualization defined by the effervescent years of the fight for liberation. Thus, Fanon's resolution is a call for action in which "culture" remains subjected to "nation" and in which the "nation" is taken at face value. As Fanon clearly states "culture ... represents one aspect of that nation" and he further adds "to fight for national culture means in the first phase to fight for the liberation of the nation, the material keystone which makes the building of a culture possible." (WE, 187)

Sissie and Kobina's attempt to define their role in independent Ghana turns into a search for their own subjectivities but the formation of these subjectivities is contingent upon a re-evaluation of the concept of "national culture," which will unveil the idiosyncrasies attached to both "nation" and "culture." Let's look at how this works for each character.

Sissie returns home as a young lecturer determined to help to construct the nation after independence. She treads upon the university campus loaded with the knowledge she has gained in the West –Aidoo

does not specify where about in the West- and which, she senses, distances her from her people, represented in her case by the female students that sit before her in the lecture room. The cause for her estrangement is caught by the sight of an object, the wig that her female students are all wearing. The wig is not an innocent object at all; the grotesque connections of the wig are stated from the very beginning when both Sissie and the reader are reminded of the fact that they are “made from other people’s unwanted hair,” (NSH, 2) thus debasing this object to a second-rate quality which is metonymically passed on to the people who are wearing it. And yet, the wig-as-signifier plays a vital role in Sissie’s location of herself in the game of identities that the independent nation unveils.

To Sissie, the wig is charged with ambivalence. She used to wear the wig before, just when she was as young as her students and was studying in the West and it is now, in her role as native intellectual, that she has made the decision not to wear it. The opening scene establishes the ambivalence that persecutes Sissie throughout the story and which threatens her own subjectivity:

She used to look at their serious faces and laugh silently to herself. They meant what they were saying. The only thing was that loving them all as sister, lover and mother, she also knew them. She knew them as intimately as the hems of her dresses. That it was so much easier for them to talk about the beauty of being oneself. Not to struggle to look like white girls. Not straightening one’s hair. And above all, not to wear the wig. (NSH, 1)

What we are witnessing in this opening scene is an attempt on Sissie’s part to define herself in relation to an other, whose “serious faces” she used to –in the past- look at. As we read on, it becomes clear that the

serious faces are those of the black men she claims to know very well “as sister, lover and mother.” Her self is henceforth shaped in her contraposition to an other. Fanon comes back to mind.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon tacitly asserts that “the black man must be black in relation to the white man” (Fanon, 1952: 63). In his psychoanalytic approach to the relationship between colonizer and colonized, Fanon demonstrates how the black man is subjugated to the white man through a process of racial othering. As a by-product of modernity, the psychoanalytic theory of identification takes shape within the larger context of colonial expansion and imperial crisis. The black man wishes to be white, to possess whiteness so to speak, for whiteness as the master signifier, represents all that is good and desirable. However, in his struggle to be white, the black man is always doomed to fail for “whiteness” is a meaning –a signified- which will always elude him. Fanon’s politics of identification is particularly insightful for, as Diana Fuss indicates, he considers the possibility that colonialism may inflict its greatest physical violence by precisely attempting to exclude blacks from the very self-other dynamic that makes subjectivity possible (Fuss, 1994: 20-42). The only possible outcome is painfully and clearly reflected by the title of his book, *Black Skin, White Masks*; subjectivity is relegated to the category of mask, an eternal concealing process that will never germinate into a fully developed subjectivity.

What happens when we try to apply this self-other dynamic to Sissie’s situation? The process of othering that Sissie undergoes when she looks at her male counterparts is not one of racial otherness –or, to be more precise, at least *not only* racial otherness-, but one of gender otherness and the difference that marks her female identity is conscripted by an object, a signifier, the wig. And the wig, in this process of gender othering –wearing it marks you as female and not

wearing it as male- seems to hold the key to the entrance to national culture. That is to say, Sissie is somehow reprobated by her male others when she is wearing the wig for they determine that the wig distances Africans from their culture. When confronted with her male colleagues' criticism, and as an attempt to understand and defeat this criticism, she draws an analogy between gender and the wig which falls into a negation of gender altogether. Gender is not an issue in Africa, gender, she concludes, is like the wig, an imported Western value:

Because, you know, one did not really go to school to learn about Africa. As for this, what did the experts call it? War of the sexes? Yes, as for this war of the sexes, if there had been any at all in the old days among her people, they could not possibly have been on such a scale. (NSH, 2)

She is utterly mistaken when she denies gender a place in Africa but at this moment, grounded as she is in Western soil –it is important to highlight the fact that they (both she and her male counterparts) are in the West- she cannot come up with a more satisfactory explanation. The wig, though, remains a site for contestation; they -African males, would-be native intellectuals- insist on placing the wig on some site of revolution, an attitude that Sissie dismisses in a pragmatic tone,

She just stated clearly that the wig was an easy way out as far as she was concerned. She could not afford to waste that much time on her hair. The wig was, after all, only a hat. A turban. Would they please leave her alone? What was more, if they really wanted to see a revolution, why didn't they work constructively in other ways for it? (NSH, 3)

For these future native intellectuals, the wig bears the marker of national culture; wearing it means you work against the nation, not wearing it

means you are contributing to the preservation and development of a national culture, you are becoming one with the people. The question is: who is wearing the wig? Women. So women are once again given the responsibility to carry culture upon their shoulders, another instantiation of en-gendering the nation.

Sissie's subjectivity is, however, challenged –and her allegiance to the nation put to the test- when she comes back to Ghana and confronts her female students, who, we should remember, are all wearing the wig. Sissie feels no need to wear the wig once at home and she expected women in Ghana not to wear it, so the sight of her young female students wearing it –“not cut discreetly short,” as she used to, but “blatantly, aggressively, crudely”(NSH, 3)- estranges her from them. Does Sissie fulfil the role of Fanon's disturbed native intellectual? The answer is yes, she is certainly disturbed, but in the independent nation opening up before her eyes, the nature of the estrangement is a perception of the people as Westernized others, not native-African others. How is she to approach the people when the people seem closer to the West than she is? Even her own relatives expect her to provide them with *Westernness* “what car are you bringing home, Sissie?” (6) or “we hope you brought a refrigerator.” (NSH, 6) These are comments she meets with a mixture of surprise and unpleasantness.

Sissie regards her role as university teacher as a crucial step in the nation-building process for in her resides the power to tell her students that “their role in nation-building was going to be crucial.” (NSH, 4) Why, then, does she let her subjectivity be threatened by the sight of those very students just because they are wearing the wig? Why is the wig such a powerful signifier?

In her reading of Fanon's politics of identification, Fuss cautions us that “when situated within the context of colonial politics, the

psychoanalytic *assumption* that every conscious imitation conceals an unconscious identification need to be carefully questioned” (ibid: 25). Following Fuss’s words, we could formulate the following question: should the fact of wearing the wig –Sissie in the past and her female students in the present- be read as their –black women- unconscious –or conscious- desire to be white? Sissie has already responded to her reasons for wearing the wig when she was trying to justify herself before her male colleagues, but her reaction when she sees her students wearing the wig hints at a more profound and sinister meaning lurking behind the object-signifier. She desperately struggles to find an explanation and all is in vain,

She couldn’t understand it so she told herself she was dreaming. Maybe there was a simple explanation. Perhaps a new god had been born while she was away, for whom there was a new festival. And when the celebrations were over, they would remove the masks from their faces and those horrid-looking things from their heads. (NSH, 4)

Unfortunately, though, “a week went by and the masks were still on.” (NSH, 4) It is later, at the end of the short story, when she finally understands.

There is a beauty contest on T.V and, reluctantly, she watches the whole parade of Ghanaian women whom she does not regard as particularly beautiful. She is struck by the fact that “all the contestants had worn wigs except one,” (NSH, 7) and that one had been the winner. The reasons for her winning the beauty contest are not due to her African features, but on the contrary, to her non-African features, especially “her hair, a mulatto’s,” which “quite simply, quite naturally, fell in a luxuriant mane on her shoulders.” (NSH, 7) At this, Sissie reacts by



vomiting, “she vomited and cried and cried and vomited for what seemed to her to be days.” (NSH, 7)

What is it that Sissie cannot digest? The gender othering we discerned in Sissie’s process of subjectivity reveals yet this other level of othering, the racial othering that Fanon described in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Sissie’s discovery when she observes the beauty pageant is that in the new independent African nation women remain enslaved to a perpetual reproduction of otherness which denies them any possibility to develop as subjects. All aspirations to a black subjectivity will be masked by whiteness, either in the form of a wig or in the faded colour of light-complexioned skins. The crude ambivalence of the national culture is viscerally rejected by Sissie in her vomiting for days. The nation is engendered abroad by *male* native intellectuals and the nation is engendered at home by an internalized racial othering which seems to apply to women alone. Where are we to place the role of the native intellectual in this independent milieu? To start with, there is a difference between *female* native intellectuals –as represented by Sissie- and *male* native intellectuals –as represented by her male colleagues in the West-. The latter seem exempt from the responsibility to wear African culture, in other words, their Africanness is never questioned, whereas the former are to perpetually wear a mark of Africanness, a fact that singles them out as the “bearers of culture,” a much criticized aspect of African womanhood that Aidoo openly denounces in an interview,

Clothes (...) are part of the minutia of culturization; they can symbolize cultural loss and gain. Such things are pointedly illustrated in terms of women: women are the ones who wear the traditional clothes, the saris in India, the slits in Ghana. Women are expected to *be* African or Indian or Pakistani by the way they dress. Men talk about it whilst wearing their

Western suits. At a conference, elite men will stand up in three piece suits and talk about the need to be culturally authentic. We women have to wear clothes, keep our hair (Aidoo, 1992: 323).

And yet, the most spectacular aspect of this story is that the male intellectuals stay in the West, refuse to return home, postponing the moment to really, actually build the nation. For Sissie concedes that “they had been so very right. Her brothers, lovers and husbands,” (NSH, 7) but she also adds, guided by the eyes of the Bird of the Wayside, “nearly all of them were still abroad. In Europe, America or some place else. They used to tell her that they found the thought of returning home frightening. They would be frustrated.” (NSH, 7) Out of cowardice, the male intellectuals leave the role of nation-building to female intellectuals like Sissie who painfully must realize how dangerously, unjustly and ambivalently en-gendered the nation is.

In “For Whom Things Did Not Change,” the native intellectual striving to locate himself in the independent nation is Kobina, a young scholar from the South of the country who has been sent to the North and stays in a Government rest house there. Here the reader is transported to another part of Ghana, the North, whose history had been closely related to slavery –the Akan word to refer to those peoples is “Donkorfo” meaning “slave”- and whose population is, in contrast with the Christian South, Muslim.<sup>19</sup> Readers are thus invited to acknowledge differences among the people who paint the space of the Ghanaian nation and to recognize the hierarchical nature of the relationship that links the South with the North through the characters of Kobina and Zirigu.

What distinguishes Kobina’s attitude towards the independent nation he is consciously helping to build is his desire to breach the

differences inside the space of the nation. He fulfills the role of Fanon's native intellectual in his struggling to be one with the people. If Sissie confronted and defined her subjectivity through her male peers and her female students, Kobina's self-other politics of identification is enacted via Zirigu. In other words, Kobina defines himself through Zirigu whom he takes to be "the people."

Zirigu is a Ghanaian from the North, a Muslim, uneducated, who has been working for ten years as a caretaker in the rest house where Kobina is staying. From his position as caretaker he has been witness to the changes that independence has brought to the country. The guest house becomes a space where the nation is narrated through Zirigu's keen observation. At first, Zirigu had to serve the white officials who demanded their own Western food to be cooked and who requested their own Western drinks to be bought, later on the white officials were replaced by black ones but their tastes continued to be those of the white men and so the food to be cooked was Western. No much change as far as Zirigu is concerned, white or black they were "big men" he had to serve. It is now that he is confronted with another sort of "big man," a young master who is different, for unlike his black predecessors, he refuses to ingest Western food, he does not drink alcohol and he does not bring young women with him. He even asks Zirigu to eat the same food he and his wife, Setu, eat.

Food is one of the many manifestations of culture, but the fact that food can be accounted for as a cultural symbol does not immediately follow that it also becomes a national symbol. This is the case presented in this story. The food Zirigu and Setu eat is *tuo*, the drink is *pito* and both *tuo* and *pito* are from the North of the country not from the South so, in a sense, Zirigu's food and drink are alien to Kobina, a Southerner. However, Kobina insists on eating Zirigu's food. If Fanon's

native intellectual proved his identification with the people by wearing traditional garments, Kobina's approach to the people is evinced by his eating Zirigu's food. This ingestion of food should be read in terms of Kobina's longing to become one of the people, in an attempt to literally swallow up the differences within the nation-space in a respectful, non-hierarchical manner: I am like you, we feed on the same culture.

Does Kobina's ingestion of Zirigu's food solve his estrangement as native intellectual? How is Kobina's estrangement experienced? Food is not the only cultural symbol that distances Kobina from Zirigu, there is a more alienating factor working in this relationship: language. The nation that Ghana encloses cannot claim a linguistic unity for the nation-space is populated by more than 67 autochthonous languages. Ironically, and as is experienced in former British colonies, linguistic unity among the different languages of the nation-space is granted by English, the language of the colonizers.<sup>20</sup> Kobina and Zirigu communicate through English but it is precisely their different command of the language that situates both parties in an unbalanced relationship. Readers deduce this hierarchical association through the different accentuations that English acquires when perceived either through Kobina or Zirigu. The following excerpt exemplifies this imbalance:

'Massa, Massa, Massa ...'

'Y-e-s?'

'Massa, Massa, Massa ...'

'Y-e-s?'

'You say: "Zirigu, wake me for eight." At eight, I com', you no wake. At 'a pas' eight, I com', you no wake. Now, you go wake because 'e be nine o'clock.'

'But Zirigu, the door was not locked. You could have come and dragged me out!'

‘Ah, Massa, you make me laugh. Me, Zirigu, com’ where yourself sleep com’ pull you?’

‘I no fit.’

‘Okay, we shall not argue further about it. Thank you for managing to get me up at last.’

Nevertheless, and I believe that here resides one of Aidoo’s successful translations from the oral into the written, whenever Zirigu and his wife Setu speak, their words come as a perfectly English-moulded utterance and this is not experienced by the reader as abruptness, as inadequacy but, on the contrary, it flows naturally, their voices and their thoughts transparently heard; to use Spivak’s terms, they –as the oppressed- speak and are not spoken for. What Aidoo manages to transmit through this mechanism is a perception of both Zirigu and Setu as fully-fledged subjects with a mind of their own, their indisputable presence in the independent nation thus imprinted.

I would like to resume now the issue of estrangement as lived by Kobina and his determination to settle his identity in the independent nation. As we mentioned earlier on, Kobina seeks in Zirigu the other who will grant him his self. Kobina’s apparently unself-conscious approaching movements towards Zirigu are deceiving for they are not performed on the grounds of equality but rather hierarchy. This hierarchical relationship resists a conscious recognition on the part of Kobina but it is the task of the narrative voice –the Bird of the Wayside- to let the readers perceive this inequality. The conversations Kobina and Zirigu are engaged with always turn around the unusualness of Kobina’s requests, to which Zirigu does not keep silent but refutes and debates. One such conversational exchange captures the moment in which Kobina asks to

eat Zirigu's food. Faced with Zirigu's resistance, Kobina, anchored in his superior understanding, and deaf to Zirigu's explanation, spurts out

(...) As a man of the land and your wife's husband you are a man and therefore you do not cook. As a black man facing a white man, his servant, you are black, not a man, therefore you can cook. (NSH, 17)

Kobina is oblivious to Zirigu's real preoccupation, which is none other than his job. The problem that Kobina's request presents to him is that he has not been trained to cook African food, his training as a caretaker for white people involved learning how to cook Western food only. His is not an identity problem, it is Kobina who turns it into one:

When a black man is with his wife who cooks and chores for him, he is a man. When he is with white folk for whom he cooks and chores, he is a woman. Dear Lord, what then is a black man who cooks and chores for black men? (NSH, 17)

Kobina's formulation displays an interpretation of black identity based entirely on race. Colonization has emasculated black men, turning them into "women," and the challenge that the independent nation must face is inscribed in Kobina's question: "what ... is a black man who cooks and chores for black men?" To put it in other words, the independent nation must restore masculinity to the black men. Seen through Kobina's perspective gender is not only subsidiary to race, gender is not even made into an issue. As a result of this, in the independent nation, and as seen through the native intellectual that Kobina stands for, black men must recover the space denied to them by colonization, whereas the possibility of a space for black women to reclaim is not considered.

The politics of identification that the story develops, however, does not end here. There is a twist in the end which changes completely the self-other dynamics so far delineated and which questions not Zirigu's identity but that of Kobina's. Upon Kobina's insistence, Zirigu finally consents to sharing their –his and his wife's- food with him. Not only do they share the food and drink but also the space, the kitchen, eating all together. Once the space between master and servant has been breached, Zirigu erases his subordination to Kobina and approaches him, for the first time in the story, as an equal. Zirigu grows in stature, he takes centre stage, to the extent that Kobina is removed from the story altogether. There is no dialogue to connect master and servant, there is only a monologue, concisely and beautifully articulated by Zirigu in immaculate English. Aidoo, in a generous gesture, dignifies his presence by entrusting him a voice, powerful, honest and sensitively humane.

His is an account of pre-independent years and immediately post-independent years proffered with an astoundingly precise mastery. Thus, readers are informed about his participation in the Second World War, his endurance to racist abuses from whites and blacks alike, his betrayal from his own brother, his human desire to improve his future, his concern for his children's education and, above all, his disillusionment with independence. On an imaginary level, independence harbored hopes for every Ghanaian but on a real level, independence escaped the lives of those like Zirigu. The improvement Zirigu aspired to after independence was limited to having electricity and a proper bathroom; this he cherished with all his heart and so when the work done in the guest house amounted only to cleaning and painting, deception, followed by anger, took hold of him. These are Zirigu's words,

When the white people were here, and they were our masters, it was only understandable that they should have electric lights and water-closets and give us, the boys, latrine pails and kerosene lamps. But now we are independent they are going to make this house new. My own people will give me a closet and an electric light. (...) But there were no electric lights and in the lavatory, no water-closet. I discovered they had taken away the old pail and given me a new one. Ah, my Master, I did not know I wanted these things so much until I knew I was not going to get them. They had taken the old pail and given me a new one. My own people who are big men do not think I should use these good things they use. Something went out of me then which has not returned since. I do not understand why I was so pained and angry, but I was. (NSH, 27-28)

Kobina is masterfully silenced by Zirigu. Zirigu's story not only undermines and questions his role as native intellectual in the independent nation space but, in an upturning of positions, "For Whom Things Did Not Change" becomes the story of Zirigu. Zirigu's subjectivity has never been endangered for, as he himself puts it, "I am still Zirigu," (NSH, 26) the only subjectivity who is still on the making is Kobina's, trapped within Zirigu's last question: "My young Master, what does "Independence" mean?" (NSH, 29) The rest house was not made into a new house after independence, as Zirigu painfully asserts, and so, in a similar manner, the change that the nation-space of independent Ghana has experienced so far can be relegated to a brush of paint.

After listening to Zirigu's story, should we infer that there is really no hope for the independent nation? The Bird of the Wayside does not take flight without leaving a trace of optimism. The hopeful future has to be found in the figure of Setu, Zirigu's wife. Although in the background, her presence is the one who guides Zirigu all through his life, who saves him from despair after his deceptive encounter with independence,



whose work outside the home pays for her children's education. She is the character to provide the most insightful analysis of colonization and its most frightful consequence, neocolonialism. It is worth quoting it at length,

But listen, my husband. If one day when you are not looking, a man comes and takes your farmhouse or your kraal, and he begins doing all the things a good man should not do; sells all the yams in your barns without leaving any for planting; boils your eggs as soon as they have been laid and does not spare one for a single hen to hatch; gives great feasts to all his family and all his friends, with your lambs and calves; and generally carries on in such a way that your heart hurts as though it is falling into your bowels every time you look on; and yet you are not able to do anything for many, many years, but then one day, thanks to Allah, you get your farmhouse or your kraal back, what then do you do, my husband? So, from the first day, you too begin to kill or sell what is left of your old and miserable cows, sheep and chickens? And if an egg is just laid, you boil it right away, and generally continue the destruction of your property which that robber had started? (NSH, 11)

Hers is the voice who administers the next episode of the *fefewo* when she discloses a new space being formed in the independent nation, the one occupied by young women –“those girls” (9)- who leave their villages to go to the cities, easily tempted by promises of comfort and riches.

## Phase 2. The City As the Stranger.

There is a tendency in academic and political discourses on Africa to mark “tradition” as the defining element of its societies. Viewed from

this perspective, Africa is rendered virtually history-less, rooted in a tradition which, ironically, has no roots for its origins are never sought. In short, it is a tradition founded entirely by what Achille Mbembe calls “facticity,” and which he explains as follows,

(...) there is nothing to justify; since things and institutions have always been there, there is no need to seek any other ground for them than *the fact of being there* (Mbembe, 2001: 3-4).

The changelessness of African societies, their suspension in timelessness, places their existence *outside* the realm of history rather than *in* history. However, and as has been discussed in previous chapters, this nothingness that envelops Africa –and African societies– and which Mbembe captures in the phrase “being nothing,” is an expected outcome of a particular way of understanding and seeing the world which was markedly Western (ibid: 4). The social theories that grounded the approach to Africa described above were construed in Europe and their aim was to offer an explanation for the emergence of a particular urban form of modernity. And this urban form of modernity was emblemized by the city.

With the advent of independence, the African nation is confronted with a Western modernity which it tries to adapt and inscribe onto its African reality. This was Nkrumah’s objective as far as Ghana was concerned. He believed that for the country to achieve economic plenitude, modernization was a must and for this reason the urban areas were clearly privileged to the detriment of the rural areas which were, in some cases, utterly neglected (Boahen, 2000; Birmingham, 1998). Migration thus followed. Waves of migration from the country to the city

created a set of new social relations that configured the space of the independent nation.

“In the Cutting of a Drink,” the story that shapes the second phase of the performance, captures this migratory phenomenon. The first aspect to highlight as regards this story is its powerful oral quality which manages to vividly entangle readers in a narrative that unfolds through the voice of its protagonist. The story could be catalogued as a monologue displayed by a narrator, whose name is never disclosed, before an audience composed of relatives and friends as the way he addresses them –“my uncle,” “my mother,”- attests to. Nowhere does Bahktin’s living language find a better footing than in this monologue where listeners and speaker anticipate one another’s expectations –“My mother, do not interrupt me, everyone present here knows you tried to do what you could by your daughter,” (31)- and actively engage one another –“Do you cry ‘My Lord’, mother? You are surprised about what I said about the marriage? Do not be. I was surprised too, when he talked that way. I too cried ‘My Lord’ ... Yes, I too did, mother.” (32)- Hence, the reader is asked to witness, rather than read, this performance which is developing in a village setting but whose content takes us to the city.

Through his compelling storytelling, the narrator entices us to hear his story about the search of a lost sister who twelve years ago left the village and never came back. He embarks on a journey which will take him to the city, which, from the very beginning, he experiences as a site of strangeness.

We roam the city through his eyes and with him we grow dizzy before the sight of the passing cars and join his bewilderment and wonder when facing the lights at night – “the whole place was as clear as the sky” (33)-. This *first* strangeness, as related above, is savoured humourously, with no feeling of transcendence attached to it, and yet,

later on this strangeness grows with the city, obfuscating him to the point in which he can no longer even recognize his own sister. How is this more insidious estrangement processed by our narrator?

As strangeness gradually creeps in his mind, he is overwhelmed by a sense of displacement which is expressed through his association with women. To put it another way, strangeness is intertwined with femaleness. Hence, it is the sight of his friend, Duayaw, and his girlfriend eating together which disturbs our narrator, “ ... it seems as if people do this thing in the city. A woman prepares a meal for a man and eats it with him.” (33) And later on, when faced with the sight of women drinking beer, he is bereft of words, unable to comprehend the reality opening before his eyes “I sat with my mouth open and watched the daughter of a woman cut beer like a man,” (34) a reality which further unsettles him when a woman he does not know asks him to dance. Strangeness is thus being en-gendered, embodied by woman but this womanisation of strangeness unfolds yet another level of foreignness when he, the villager-narrator, is confronted with a language, the white man’s language, which these women use to establish communication with him. This white man’s language “which everyone, even those who have not gone to school, speak in the city,” (35) is thus linked specifically with the city and as such, he, a villager, is alien to it. The city estranges him linguistically for he does not speak the white man’s language. This white man’s language that inundates the city is, like the city itself, a Western-created form of modernity which has slipped through the independent African nation via colonialism. A breach between the city and the country is thus being delineated but this rift is, in the experience of the narrator, en-gendered through women. They are, after all, the ones who approach him speaking the white man’s

language and, what is more, they ask him to dance the white man's dance.

Does the Bird-of-the-Wayside intend to locate strangeness in women or is she pulling the strings towards another path as yet unacknowledged? In other words, who are these women in the city who feed on the white man's culture, speaking his language and moving with the rhythm of his dances? The end of the story provides us with the answer. The narrator finally agrees to dance with one of these women who, when she realizes he does not speak the English she approaches him with, turns to Fanti. Communication then seems through and with it the realization that the young woman with the long hair that "fell on her shoulders," (36) and the lips "with that red paint" which "looked like a fresh wound," (36) her skin trapped in her tight dress, "there was no space between her skin and her dress," (36) was none other than his sister, lost for twelve years in the city.

We are facing here a cruel and most painful manifestation of estrangement; the one that sears the cord that binds you to your own blood, the one that blinds you to the extent that your eyes cannot discern your own sister. Lurking behind there is the ominous site of estrangement that the city impersonates and which devours these young women who leave their villages for the promise of a better future in the cradle of modernity. The Bird-of-the-Wayside opens the eyes of readers to the Western founding of this modernity and thus to the neo-colonialism which penetrates the independent African nation and which enslaves, above all, these young women in a "job" in which they are impelled to sell their bodies. Prostitution is, after all, one of the many forms through which slavery is revealed. All Africans are prey to this estrangement whose origins are closely embedded in a colonial past but these young female villagers are particularly susceptible to the

estrangement of the city. On the ladder of the oppressed their position is, ironically, at the very top. Class and gender feed each other; they cannot be separated.

However, and here lies the force of Aidoo's writing, in the very blood lines which the city threatens to cut off are the seeds for the defeat of estrangement. Once Mansa, the sister, has been discovered by the brother, re-union is on the horizon. There is a sense of bondage being wielded which cannot be explained through rationalizing processes; it is more attuned with what Raymond Williams sensitively formulated as a structure of feeling, a trace of the lived experience of a community distinct from the institutional and ideological organization of the society, a profound feeling of belonging which is essentially and universally human (Williams, 1973).

Mansa, the once lost child turned into a grown up woman, promises to come back at Christmas' time. The lost child has been recovered and a new tale has been released: the country and the city or where to place the border between modernity and tradition. This is the line of development of the third phase of the performance.

### **Phase 3. The Country and the City. On the Threshold of Tradition and Modernity?**

It is practically impossible to initiate a discussion about the relationship between the country and the city without allowing Williams' groundbreaking study on the topic to come to mind. I am referring to *The Country and the City*, published in 1973 (Williams, 1973). The long sustained belief that, when viewed against the modernity of the city with its temptations and disillusionments, the country represented a pre-

lapsarian Eden, was debunked by Williams' presentation of the country as a location marked by hardships and, sometimes, even loneliness. The fact that Williams' analysis was centred exclusively in Britain makes the transposition of his conclusions to African soil susceptible to criticism. To enact such transposition is far from my intention. What I would like to reclaim here is Williams' foregrounding statement that country and city are intimately interrelated and that an understanding of how this interrelationship works will shed light on our experience as human beings in society. Our individual experiences, our personal crises cannot be envisaged outside the crises of our society and the crises of our society cannot be understood unless placed in the juncture of city and country. In Williams' own words,

The contrast of the country and city is one of the major forms in which we become conscious of a central part of our experience and of the crises of our society (ibid: 289).

Phase 3 of the performance is shaped around Williams' assertion. In order to understand the city, its strangeness and its very existence, the country has to be visited and experienced for the new social relations that the space of the independent African nation gives rise to need to be explored in the junctures of this interrelationship. "The Message," "Certain Winds from the South," "No Sweetness Here," and "A Gift from Somewhere," the four tales that are assembled in this third phase, display stories which connect in often conflictive but always indissoluble ways the country with the city. The result is a reassessment of modernity and tradition based on the inherent resistance of the terms themselves to remain within fixed boundaries in the independent nation-

space. And this is a space charted primordially by the individual experiences of African women.

The imagined community that Anderson believed the nation to be, found its most effective function in its capacity to congregate anonymous individuals through (a) forms of cultural representations circulated via print capitalism, e.g. novels and newspapers and (b) institutions and practices that contributed to a standardization of language and administration (Anderson, 1983: 37-46). Anderson's analysis detects in the figure of the colonial administrator an embodiment of the nation's ability to unify cultural representations and language into a national consciousness. What Anderson's analysis fails to see and remains totally unspoken in his account of the nation is the exclusions and the margins of this national consciousness, that is to say, those anonymous individuals who resist –consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or unintentionally- being thrown into the imagined community. The idea of national belonging is thus endangered for this nation, this imagined community, as Bhabha affirms “ (it) necessarily excludes and differentiates as much as it unifies in its establishment of a social territory” (Bhabha, 1995: 140). The social territory that the independent African nation establishes presents a site, following Bhabha's nomenclature, for the location of culture –and national identification- to be contested on the grounds of the relationship between country and city.

The characters whose experiences shape the performance –Esi Amfoa in “The Message,” M'ma Asana in “Certain Winds from the South,” Maami Ama in “No Sweetness Here” and Mami Fanti in “A Gift from Somewhere”- are confined to the margins of the nation. Their agency in the making of the space of the independent nation is curtailed by the preponderance of an imagined community whose identity is



secured by the European conception of the nation-state. In “Language of Class, Ideologies of Immigration,” Aijaz Ahmad identifies the nation-state as the “bourgeois state” which was inherited from colonialism which was none other than the nation-state inherited from the European bourgeoisie.<sup>21</sup> Ahmad’s inclusion of class in the making of the nation-state is of paramount significance since, he concludes, the independent nation is the nation of the native bourgeoisie, educated in the West and proficient in the European languages of the metropolis, a community closer to the urban ideas of the Western bourgeoisie than to the realities of their rural fellowmen. Ahmad details his study with examples from India, but I believe that, differences notwithstanding, a similar phenomenon swept African nations, especially as regards the definitive function of the English language in the creation of the independent nation. As Ahmad emphasizes, in this independent state, markedly bourgeois, English, and not an autochthonous language, becomes the language of national integration formalized as the language of the administration, in other words, institutional language. In this respect, Ahmad’s postulation is akin to the standardization process in language and administration that Anderson detected as a key element for the proliferation of national consciousness. What Ahmad’s conception of the bourgeois state hints at is the direct transfer of that Western-created national consciousness to the postcolonial national consciousness that emerged as a consequence of independence and which is tied to one class specifically, the bourgeoisie. English did not decline after independence, all the contrary, if anything, its use was considerably increased. As Ahmad sententiously affirms,

The fact that English has proliferated, instead of declining, in this later phase indicates the greater elaboration and deeper penetration of the

state into all aspects of civil society, through administration, profession, commerce, schooling, mediology; the state is the chief employer, the principal educator, the largest property-owner ... (Ahmad, 1992: 74)

How are those, whose access to the English language is severely constrained, enter the institutions which define the nation-state? This third phase is a search for the exclusions, the margins of national consciousness, the voicing of those whose language denies them entrance into the nation-state but which, nonetheless, construe the independent nation-space. And this search starts with Esi Amfoa's journey to Cape Coast to recover the corpse of her dead granddaughter.

When news of the terrible fate befallen on her granddaughter –she has died in childbirth, but, worse still, they “opened her up” (38) to have the baby removed- reach Esi Amfoa, she determinedly sets herself the arduous task to go all the way from the village to the city to give her granddaughter proper burial. Esi Amfoa's plea meets the empathy of neighbours who bid her farewell and commiserate with her grief and accompany her to the lorry which will take her to the city. The likes of Esi Amfoa cannot afford to hire a taxi or take a train or a bus to the city so a lorry shared with other people is her means towards Cape Coast. Readers discover in the space of the lorry the multiplicity of voices which configure the heteroglossia ingrained in the nation-space. Here it is articulated in a lively exchange of utterances concerning the old woman's tragedy,

‘O, Nana do not weep ...’

‘Is the old woman weeping?’

‘If the only child of your only child died, won't you weep?’

‘Why do you ask me? Did I know her grandchild is dead?’

‘Where have you been, not in this lorry? Where were your ears when we were discussing it?’

‘I do not go putting my mouth in other people’s affairs ...’

‘So what?’

‘So go and die.’ (43)

A structure of feeling delineated by the old woman’s tragedy unites the people in a sense of community which moves the driver, Draba, to accompany her to the hospital for he condoles with Esi Amfoa’s helplessness in the city environment. It is there, in the hospital, where the bourgeois state embodied by the nurse, Jessy Treeson, meets its margins, devastated Esi Amfoa. The old woman is left voiceless, her suffering silenced by the rudeness of a nurse who refuses to hear Esi Amfoa’s plea simply because she does not speak any English. The granddaughter’s inscription in the hospital, a state institution, was effected through the language of the state, English, and so her Christian name replaced her African name. Yet Esi Amfoa ignores her granddaughter’s Christian name and so the so longed-for reunion -as expressed through the excruciatingly painful recovery of a dead body- is denied to her. The lorry driver, acting as a translator, comes to her rescue, and a three-voiced exchange of utterances envelops the dialogue,

‘Nana we are there.’

Is this the hospital?

‘Yes, Nana. What is your child’s name?’

Esi Amfoa. Her father named her after me.

‘Do you know her European name?’

No, my master.

‘What shall we do?’

‘... *Ei* lady, Lady Nurse, we are looking for somebody.’

‘You are looking for somebody and can you read? If you cannot, you must ask someone what the rules in the hospital are. You can only come and visit people at three o’clock.’

Lady, please. She was my only grandchild ...

‘Who? And anyway, it is none of our business.’

‘Nana, you must be patient ... and not cry ...’

‘Old woman, why are you crying, it is not allowed here. No one must make any noise ...’

My lady, I am sorry but she was all I had. (44)

This time, with the insistence of the lorry driver genuinely touched by the old woman’s helplessness and angered at the nurse’s ruthlessness, communication finally does take effect and it is revealed that Mary Koomson is Esi Amfoa’s granddaughter and, to the grandmother’s surprise, she is not dead. A Caesarean cut was necessary to remove the twin babies but her life was saved.

What nation is the independent nation that replaces the African name, Esi Amfoa, -since, we should remember, this is also the name of the granddaughter-, by the English-Christian-European name, Mary Koomson? What identity is granted to those whose Africanness is so brutally subjugated to Englishness? The Bird-of-the-Wayside makes this statement irrefutable through the phrase “Mary Koomson, *alias* Esi Amfoa,” (my italics, 46) hence overtly denouncing the hierarchy implicit in the naming. If an “alias” is an assumed name, and if names allude to an identity, what identity is here being assumed, African Esi Amfoa, or English Mary Koomson? And to make the excision in the nation-state even more profound, what identity is allotted to old Esi Amfoa who does not even have an English name?<sup>22</sup>

The nation-state silences old Esi Amfoa but the Bird-of-the-Wayside allows us to listen to her delicate inner thoughts when, among the many voices of the lorry, hers, in an exercise of what Ato Quayson calls interdiscursive writing,<sup>23</sup> surfaces,

Eternal death has worked like a warrior rat, with diabolical sense of duty, to gnaw my bottom. Everything is finished now. The vacant lot is swept and the scraps of old sugar-cane pulp, dry sticks and bunches of hair burnt ... how it reeks, the smoke! (43)

Esi Amfoa may be illiterate, she may not speak English, but this does not make her stupid, insensitive or inarticulate. And thus, her story, empowered by the Bird-of-the-Wayside's unbending voice, leads the way towards another brave and illiterate woman, M'ma Asana.

"Certain Winds from the South" transports us to the North of the country and it tacitly discloses the issue of migration. The characters involved are members of a family: M'ma Asana and her daughter, Hawa, her grandson, Fuseni, born ten days ago, and her son-in-law, Issa. The story begins with Issa informing M'ma Asana about his intention to go South "to cut grass," (50) which, we understand, is the worst kind of jobs he can aspire to but, unfortunately, it is the only way available to him to escape utter poverty and starvation,

'But my son, why must you travel that far just to cut grass? Is there not enough of it all round here? Around this kraal, your father's and all the others in the village? Why do you not cut these?'

'M'ma, you know it is not the same. If I did that here people will think I am mad. But over there, I have heard that not only do they like it but the government pays you to do it.'

‘Even still, our men do not go South to cut grass. This is for those further north. They of the wilderness, it is they who go South to cut grass. This is not for our men.’

‘Please, M’ma, already time is going. Hawa is a new mother and Fuseni my first child.’ (50)

M’ma Asana responds to the news with a mixture of resignation, sadness and wisdom. For Issa’s news triggers off another story, a story of the past which haunts the present and (un)shapes the future; this is a story about her own life.

When M’ma Asana breaks the news about Issa’s departure to her daughter, Hawa, we are introduced to her own story of desertion. Her husband, Hawa’s father, was a soldier who was sent to fight in the white man’s war against the Germans. M’ma Asana’s reaction to and understanding of the war contrasts significantly with that of her husband’s. Whereas he throws himself devotedly to the idea of fighting against the Germans, acknowledging a communal indebtedness to the colonial forces, M’ma Asana disentangles herself from any feeling of moral obligation towards the English. In this prospect of a war, she only senses estrangement and the ominous threat of separation. All M’ma Asana desires is to go South with her husband for, as he has told her, the Government give houses to married soldiers. The advent of the war upsets the couple’s plans; the conversation between husband and wife below is a reflection of their very distinctive attitudes towards the white man’s war,

O you people, have you not heard of the German people?

He had no patience with us. He told us that in the South they were singing dirty songs with their name.

But when are we going, I asked him.

What he told me was that that was why he had come. He could not take me along with him. You see, he said, since we were under the Anglis-people's rule and they were fighting with the German-people ...

(...) what has all that got to do with you and me? Why can I not come South with you?

Because I have to travel to the lands beyond the sea and fight ...

In other people's war? (54)

M'ma Asana's husband did "travel to the lands beyond the sea" and he presumably fought against the Germans but, as the development of the story sadly relates, he also found death in those distant lands.

The audience shares M'ma Asana's storytelling with her daughter, Hawa, for this is a story she is revealing to her daughter –and to us as readers- for the first time. Why did she keep this story to herself during all these years and only at the precise moment when her son-in-law announces his departure does she feel compelled to unveil it?

In an astounding display of lucidity, M'ma Asana sees in Issa's departure the same desertion she had been a victim of. She was deserted by her husband; her daughter is being deserted by hers. One story leads to the other and the chain that locks them together is the same, "government's people." (55) Let us hear M'ma Asana,

Those people, the government's people, who come and go, tell us trade is bad now, and once again there is no tinned fish and no cloth. But this time they say, this is because our children are going to get them in abundance one day.

Issa has gone South now because he cannot afford even goat flesh for his wife in maternity. This has to be, so that Fuseni can stay with his wife and eat cow-meat with her? Hmm. And he will come back alive ... perhaps not next Ramaddan but the next. Now, my daughter, you know

of another man who went to fight. And he went to fight in other people's war and he never came back. (55)

In M'ma Asana's story, the "government's people," are the colonial state, in Hawa's story, the "government's people," are Ahmad's bourgeois state; in both instances individuals like M'ma Asana and Hawa are to be eternally displaced on the margins. And yet they are women, who, deserted as they are by their husbands, face their turn of fate with commendable endurance. They have each other, their reliance sustained through their womanhood,

I am going to the market now. Get up early to wash Fuseni. I hope to get something for those miserable colas. There is enough rice to make *tuo*, is there not? Good. Today even if it takes all the money, I hope to get us some smoked fish, the biggest I can find, to make us a real good sauce. ... (55)

The close bond between mother and daughter that M'ma Asana and Hawa incarnate is rephrased in the relationship between Chicha and Maami Aba, the protagonists of "No Sweetness Here." In this story we travel to Bamso, a village, where Chicha –the Fanti word for "teacher"– has been sent by the government to teach in the village school. There, Chicha develops a close friendship with Maami Aba, the mother of Kwesi, one of her pupils, whom she often visits after the classes finish and with whom, we are told, she shares her food. Theirs is a friendship guarded by Chicha's recognition of her own mother in Maami Aba, "she looked so much like my own mother." (60)

Unlike the previous two stories, in "No Sweetness Here," we face a narrator who is not a villager, although the tale evolves in a village setting. We need to approach this story as one performed through the



eyes of an educated woman of the city whose experience is modeled in the juncture of country and city. If Esi Amfoa's and M'ma Asana's eyes met strangeness in the face of the institutional nation-state, Chicha's – the administration representative in the village-, meets hers in the village. We are made participants of her gradual acquaintance with the ways of the village, hence, in a way, she is stating her own *foreignness* which, nevertheless, she seems to be willing to overcome. This is how she relates her daily exchange of greetings with the old people on her way home after school is finished,

(...) As I passed the old people, they shouted their greetings. It was always the Fanticised form of the English.

'Kudiimin-o, Chicha.' Then I would answer, 'Kudiimin, Nana.' When I greeted first, the response was 'Tanchiw'.

'Chicha, how are you?'

'Nana, I am well.'

'And how are the children?'

'Nana, they are well.'

'Yoo, that is good.' When an old man felt inclined to be talkative, especially if he had more than me for audience, he would compliment me on the work I was doing. Then he would go on to the assets of education, especially female education, ending up with quoting Dr. Aggrey. (58)

The above quote, apart from highlighting how our narrator familiarizes with the ways of the village, presents us with "education" as the basis of the relationship between her and the village. We should not forget that "Chicha" is, after all, "teacher," so she is throughout the tale identified by her profession. Education reveals itself as a link between country and city and will play a decisive role in the denouement of this specific story,

proving to what extent education is central to the making of the independent nation.

Let us now turn to the other protagonist, Maami Aba, the woman in whom Chicha is able to see her own mother. For those who believed that divorce was an outcome of the ways of the city, Maami Aba comes as a surprise, for, village woman as she is, she is also divorced. Divorce is not apprehended in the village as a strange case but, quite naturally, as an integral part of life in the country. Maami Aba was married to Kodjo Fi, “a selfish and bullying man, whom no decent woman ought to have married,” (60) but whom she married nonetheless. The cause for the divorce, as Maami Aba relates to Chicha, was the fact that although she was the first wife and gave him a son, Kwesi, she was the wife he treated most horrendously, he “reduced my housekeeping money and sometimes he refused to give me anything at all. He wouldn’t eat my food,” (61) and he allotted to her “the smallest, thorniest plot” (61) to plant the seeds. Upon such unbecoming treatment, Maami Aba decides to get a divorce from him, to which he agrees.

However, at the time of the unfolding of the narration, the divorce has not been settled and, as a consequence, the terms of the agreement have yet to be reached. At the core of the settlement lies the question regarding the future of the boy, or, to put it bluntly, who is going to keep the boy, the father or the mother? Although the boy has lived with the mother all these years –he is now ten and he was only two when the parents unofficially divorced-, Chicha, unacquainted with the ways of rural legal procedures, is told by Maami Aba that the father is entitled to claim the boy, “I sat there listening to these references to the age-old customs of which I had been ignorant.” (62)

What we are witnessing here is a divorce trial which, retrieved from the village environment, could perfectly take place in any court

room in any city. Chicha's comments ponder on the traditional essence of Maami Aba's divorce arrangements, but the Bird-of-the-Wayside induces us to see a recognition of a *trans-traditional* quality lurking behind "the Ejecting Fee," "The Knocking Fee," and "The Knife Fee." (67) The outcome of the trial could not be more unfair to Maami Aba, a woman on her own –both her parents are dead- with only her son to embrace happiness, for Kwesi, it is finally decided, should go and live with his father. Maami Aba accepts her lot, ignoring that a further tragedy awaits her. Kwesi dies of a snake bite and there is nothing that the chief medicine man can do to save his life.

What does Kwesi, the little boy, represent? What is his role in this story? How are we, audience-readers, to face his most unexpected death? Kwesi is branded with a special stature from the outset of the story. Chicha clearly singles him out of all her pupils because she is so completely drawn towards his beauty,

His skin was as smooth as shea-butter and as dark as charcoal. His black hair was as soft as his mother's. His eyes were of the kind that always remind one of a long dream on a hot afternoon. It is indecent to dwell on a boy's physical appearance, but then Kwesi's beauty was indecent. (57)

Kwesi, this ten-year-old village boy, becomes a vessel of desire where the hopes of mother and village and teacher, are laid. The desire, though, is woven entirely around the issue of education, hence placing schooling at the core of the national dream. Kwesi metamorphoses into a recipient of the national dream: after primary school, he would continue his education in a grammar school, and later on, he would go to college and all the sacrifices his mother had to make on his behalf would

finally turn into happiness. His untimely and tragic death puts an end to all hopes. As Chicha remorsefully recounts,

(...) I went over the most presumptuous daydreams I had indulged in on his account. 'I would have taken him away with me in spite of his mother's protests.' She was just being absurd. 'The child is a boy, and sooner or later, she must learn to live without him. The highest class here is Primary Six and when I am going away, I will take him. I will give him a grammar education. Perhaps, who knows, one day he may win a scholarship to the university.' In my daydreams, I had never determined what career he would have followed, but he would be famous, that was certain. Devastatingly handsome, he would be the idol of women and the envy of every man. He would visit Britain, America and all those countries we have heard so much about. He would see all the seven wonders of the world. 'Maami shall be happy in the end,' I had told myself. 'People will flock to see the mother of such an illustrious man. Although she has not had many children, she will be surrounded by her grandchildren. Of course, away from the village.' (72)

Behind Chicha's "presumptuous daydreams" there is to be located the presumptuousness of the state which by launching its educational institutions presumes first, that the nation will be modernized, and secondly, that modernization is a good per se. No clear lines can be drawn here between tradition and modernization, and I believe that the divorce trial offers a clue as to the difficulty of delineating the threshold of modernity-tradition. The medicine man could not cure Kwesi, but the narrative does not lend itself to believe that a doctor would have cured him, either.

"No Sweetness Here" exhumes ambivalence. The-Bird-of-the-Wayside intrudes in Chicha's narration by uncovering the ambivalence of

her accounts. Education is treated ambiguously. On the one hand, education's decisive role in the making of the independent nation is indisputable –the villagers send their children to school, they acknowledge and praise Chicha's task, they are perfectly familiar with the figure of Dr. Aggrey, Nkrumah's Minister of Education-, but, on the other, this educational zeal can harbor the seeds for potential foreignness, for as Chicha's daydreams reveal, Kwesi's education would take him and his mother "*Of course, away from the village.*" (my italics, 72) Is there any space for education and village to remain together, or rather, does education, in the end, always and necessarily evolve into a non-communal experience?<sup>24</sup> Chicha herself is an example of this ambivalence; she sounds content with her teaching job in Bamso and yet, in her daydreams, in her reveries about the future, Kwesi, the educated man, is removed from the village environment altogether.

An acute sense of symbolism envelopes Kwesi. Although he is presented to us as an ordinary ten-year-old boy who loves playing football and who gets dirty after hours spent outdoors with his friends, we are also asked to be accomplices of his specialness; he is astoundingly beautiful and he is the only son of this lonely woman, "from his infancy they had known only each other, a lonely mother and a lonely son." (65) When he dies so unexpectedly, his death entrances the village in a communal stupor, it is as if this could not have possibly happened, for "Kwesi was the first boy to have died since the school was inaugurated some six years previously, " (71) hence once again the triad village-education-Kwesi is outlined.

To my mind, there is a symbolic layer in "No Sweetness Here" which uproots the audience and lures them to see beyond the story lines traced by Chicha. Does Bamso encapsulate the independent nation awakening after years of colonial subjugation? It is indeed a space where

communal links are established, a space where the state has entered by means of a school and a teacher, a space where the hopes for a future are launched, and, above all, a space which resists boundaries, where the threshold of modernity-tradition is “frayed at the edges” (Bhabha, 1996: 53-60).

The truth remains that Kwesi died and that Chicha cannot provide any satisfactory account on why this happened. Nor does the village. The Bird-of-the-Wayside does, but hers is a verdict on the unanswerability inherent in the big questions of life. Neither a modern approach, nor a traditional one can really explain Kwesi’s death.

And yet, once again, the performance leads us towards hope for, in the end, Chicha goes to Maami Aba’s home to stay the night and share her suffering. So far, Chicha had remained a sort of outsider; in her last words resides the promise to become definitively one with the community,

I went out shutting the door behind me. ‘I must go home now,’ I spoke to myself once more. The sun was sinking behind the coconut palm. I looked at my watch. It was six o’clock; but this time, I did not run. (74)

The last story to complete the episode is conscripted by a title which exhumes hope and mystery, “A Gift from Somewhere.” It is indeed a gift what Mami Fanti receives when her child is unexpectedly brought back to life. Rationality cannot possibly account for what seems a miracle which, ironically, has been dismissed by the narration itself. The story opens with the desolation that greets the Mallam’s eyes when he visits the village where Mami Fanti lives,

Now the village was quiet. But these people. How can they leave their villages so empty every day like this? Any time you come to a village in these parts in the afternoon, you only find the too young, the too old, the maimed and the dying, or else goats and chickens, never men and women. (...) He entered several compounds which were completely deserted. Then he came to this one and saw the woman. (75)

The woman is a desperate Mami Fanti whose life so far has been stigmatized by death; all her children have died and now she is helplessly facing the death of his last child. The Mallam is a mixture of holy man and medicine man whose function in the rural community is effected by his assumed power to cure, both physically and emotionally. He is aware of his healing function and he is also aware of his impossibility to cure the little child. However, because he is entrenched in his societal role of emotional healer, he opts for offering the poor woman an instant of hope and assures her that this one will turn up alright, and so relief sets on her face, "... for an instant a smile passed over her face." (76) And yet, the child gets worse. It is clear to the Mallam that there is nothing he can do to save the child's life but, in a useless attempt to mollify the mother's suffering, he gives her hope in the form of a prescription,

'Mami, I myself say, this child will live. Now himself he is too small. Yourself you must not eat meat. You must not eat fish from the sea, Friday, Sunday. You hear?' She nodded in reply. 'He himself, if he is about ten years,' and he counted ten by flicking the five fingers of his left hand twice over, 'if he is about ten, tell him he must not eat meat and fish from the sea, Friday, Sunday. If he himself he does not eat, you Mami Fanti, you can eat. You hear?' (79)

Mami Fanti hears, but she is no fool. She does not believe the Mallam at all, for while she is nodding, she is thinking "Who does the Mallam think

he is deceiving? This is the third child to die.” (80) As for the Mallam, he is so certain of the futility of his prescription that all he yearns for at this moment is to vanish completely, “I cannot remain here. It will be bad of me to ask the woman for so much as a penny when I know this child will die.” (80) And so he disappears, never to be seen again.

If in “No Sweetness Here,” we witnessed an unexpected death, in “A Gift from Somewhere,” we welcome an unexpected life for the child, Kweku Nyamekye, survives. Contrary to all expectations, mother and Mallam alike, Kweku comes back from what seemed a clear death, inaugurating a new life for Mami Fanti who gives birth to three more children. Who sent Mami Fanti this most precious gift? Was it “a gift from God through the Mallam of the Bound Mouth?” (81) or rather, was it “the god of Mbemu from whom I came,” and who promised “never to desert me” and to come “once in my life when I needed him most”? (81) She respects what the Mallam prescribed, but should we understand her obeisance as an embrace of tradition and a rejection of modernity?

It should be recalled here that Mami Fanti, although a villager and although constrained on the margins by the nation-state, is however – like all the previous village women of the episode- an integral part of the independent nation. The inscription of her story in writing is a forceful reminder of this fact. Her presence grows when her voice takes hold of the narration inscribing the first person in the story. When the story begins, it is the airy voice of the Bird-of-the-Wayside which enters the Mallam’s and Mami Fanti’s thoughts but this voice, in the latter part of the narrative, generously surrenders to that of Mami Fanti’s. And Mami Fanti’s is a voice deeply rooted in the independent nation. She sticks to the Mallam’s prescriptions up to a certain point: she was told that when Kweku turned ten years old, the fasting prohibitions she had to endure



should be passed on to the son, something she has no intention to abide. In a display of common sense, she states,

How can a schoolboy, and who knows, one day he may become a real scholar, how can he go through life dragging this type of taboo along with him? I have never heard of any scholar doing it, and my son is not going to be first to do it. (83)

As in the previous story, education stands in the middle of modernity and tradition. Kweku goes to school and his mother projects expectations of a better future in him as the former subjugated subjects project their desires of improvement on the independent nation. Education is a key element in the making of the independent nation but, as Mami Fanti's sound attitude shows us, education should not be interpreted as the victory of modernity over tradition. As she wisely admits, "this strange world always has something to surprise us with ... " (81) In "No Sweetness Here," Kwesi's totally unexpected death makes the dreams of a blissful future gone astray, whereas in "A Gift from Somewhere," Kweku's totally unexpected recovery makes those dreams see the possibility of fulfillment. Life's failure, in the former story, was utterly incomprehensible, life's success in the latter's is likewise incomprehensible. In short, the meaning of life seems to escape both modernity and tradition.

The native bourgeoisie *produced* the nation-state. The margins of the nation-state, as the four stories just analyzed point out, *reproduce* the nation-space. Production implies the creation of economic value, of goods and services whereas in the concept of reproduction there lies the sense of producing individuals. I believe worth noting that the four stories involve women in an act of reproduction. Hence, in "The

Message,” the family line is secured by Esi Amfoa’s granddaughter’s successful deliverance of twins, in “Some Winds from the South,” M’ma Asana’s future is outlined by first, the birth of her daughter and later by her grandson, in “No Sweetness Here,” we are forced to witness the tragedy of the loss of a child and yet the following story, “A Gift from Somewhere,” grants us the “gift” of recovery of the lost child. The future of the nation-space is en-gendered in the fruitful experiences of these women.

#### **Phase 4. Contrappunto: Nation, Society, Women.**

A “contrappunto” is a musical term which designates a composition which consists of adding related but independent melodies to a basic melody in accordance with the fixed rules of harmony. The fourth phase of the performance configures a melody in which nation, society and women are contrapuntally interrelated. One layer of this melodic performance harmonizes nation-society-women whereas another layer balances the two tales –“Two Sisters” and “The Late Bud”- that conform this episode. The result is a melody, “Two Sisters” that accompanies another melody “The Late Bud” note for note, displaying the contrapuntal essence of the relationship established among the terms “nation,” “society” and “women.”

As Géorg Lukács indicated in *The Theory of the Novel*, the conflict between the individual and society is the basis of first, the emergence, and later the proliferation of the European novel (Lukács, 1971). According to Lukács, the European novel is constructed upon the

experience of a changing society, in which its heroes or heroines strive to build a new world which seeks alternative paths to the ones fixed by the old world. Values are, as a consequence, reassessed. The crisis in personal development takes place when the individual is caught in the socializing process that will inscribe him/her definitively as a member of society. When identity refuses to be met by the societal code, the personal crisis is thus unleashed, and the novel as literary genre can exist.

In the case of female protagonists, the jump from childhood to adulthood, the changing estate from “little girl” to “grown up woman” is effected through their experience of sex, which if accomplished within societal codes –marriage- guarantees their successful entrance to society, but which if falling outside societal confines, sends them straight to the margins. What the process of growing up ultimately delineates is the passage from innocence to experience. Both Mercy in “Two Sisters” and Yaaba in “The Late Bud” are trapped in this complex and contradictory passage, their stories being explored in the milieu of the changing society that the independent nation promises, their socializing process contested on the grounds of their own femininities.

Mercy, although twenty-three years old, is still a child. Following the precepts of the European novel’s heroine, she is desperate to be part of society and sees in marriage the entrance way. She despises her job as a typist, abhors her lower middle-class life which condemns her to mix with “the common passengers and impudent conductors”(87) of the municipal buses, and dreams of the rich and handsome man who will take her away from all this. In view of the impossibility for such a man to appear in her life, she decides to take the path that her beauty grants her: to become the mistress of a “big man.” And so she becomes Mensar- Arthur’s, a member of Parliament, mistress.

Mensar-Arthur is a rich and powerful man, much older than Mercy; he is the embodiment of success but he is also the embodiment of the figure of the Father, the master signifier in a patriarchal society. Theirs is a relationship marked by Mensar-Arthur's role as a patriarch. Thus, Mercy notices how he often uses with her the "I-am-more-than-old-enough-to-be-your-father-tone" (94) and he himself is aware of both his role as patriarch and the power that his position as such grants him, "Dear little child came back from the playground with her toe bruised. Shall we just blow cold air from our mouth on it or put on a salve? Nothing matters really. Just see that she does not feel unattended." (95) The vocabulary that describes their relationship is embedded in a father-daughter symbolism which exhumes insanity for its very incestuous foundation.<sup>25</sup> Mensar-Arthur is a lover-father who is husband to other women and father to other children and whose power is configured and supported by the institutional strength of the nation-state. Mensar-Arthur represents Mercy's link with the ruling class, with this society she wants to be a part of, this society that defines the parameters of the independent nation with its inclusions and exclusions. As the story reveals, it is a nation geared towards ruthless mercantilism, brute capitalism, in short, bold neocolonialism. Mercy is bought and she lends herself easily to that, her independence as individual cornered by the material rewards she is being offered by the independent nation.

There is an "other" in the story whose presence measures *contrapuntally* Mercy's actions: Connie, Mercy's sister. Connie is the elder sister, married to James, mother of one child and at the time of the story, she is pregnant. As a *contrappunto* to Mercy's identity as "mistress," she is defined by wifeness and motherhood. Connie is a "good" woman, she complies with her assigned roles as wife and mother, whereas Mercy is a "bad" woman, embracing a role that stigmatizes her

as the eternal “other,” the mistress. We might be tempted to add the adjective “happy” to her status as wife and mother, but this is a fact we are to dismiss from the outset for we know that Connie is haunted by her husband’s affairs with other women and happiness eludes her marriage. She acts as a moral sanction to her sister’s behavior but no remorse assaults her mind when she accepts Mensar-Arthur’s gift, a sewing machine. She just lets herself be bought, just like her sister. Her initial “goodness” is hence put to the test. They are both caught in the neocolonial swamp of the independent nation and this is an aspect of the game that Mensar-Arthur, the patriarch, knows very well and uses to his advantage. Hence, in an attempt to win Connie’s silence and alliance, he tells Mercy to “find out something she wants very much but cannot get in this country because of the import restrictions.” (95) He obviously has the power to divert the restrictions and get the imported goods.

Both sisters, Mercy and Connie, are trapped in a patriarchal society which will forever deny them any agency to develop as free subjects. Connie’s subjectivity is maimed by her identity as wife and mother and Mercy is helplessly and hopelessly enmeshed in a perpetual childhood. When she is being reprimanded by Connie, Mercy responds by attacking her identity as sacrificed wife who unquestionably takes her husband’s infidelity upon her shoulders. She resolutely admonishes her for, in her view, women are responsible for their own enslavement since they are the ones who allow men “to behave the way they do instead of seizing some freedom themselves.” (90) Mercy’s rightness is indisputable and yet she does not realize that her path is just as enslaving. As the compassionate and penetrating voice of *The-Bird-of-the-Wayside* defines her, she is “a twenty-three-year-old child who chooses a silly way to conquer unconquerable problems.” (96)

An unexpected turn of events takes place with the advent of the coup d'état, a historical episode which entangles Mercy, Connie, James and Mensar Arthur.<sup>26</sup> Nkrumah's overthrow can be, at least theoretically, read as a willingness to change the materialistic and corrupted route that the independent nation has taken. The radicalism - violent and undemocratic- that permeated Major A.A. Afrifa's and Colonel E.K. Kotoka's coup d'état was geared by the promise to lead the way towards a new definition of the independent nation. Aidoo does not shy away from denouncing the corruption enveloping the Ghanaian nation -the first African independent nation- in "Two Sisters," but, with the same assertiveness, she refuses to condone the coup. The unflinching irony of the-Bird-of-the-Wayside summarizes the consequences that the coup had on our protagonists,

Then, a couple of weeks later, the *coup*. Mercy left her new place before anyone could evict her ... Connie's new baby was born ... the one who greeted the new order with undisguised relief was Connie. (...) As far as she was concerned, the old order as symbolized by Mensar-Arthur was a threat to her sister and therefore to her own peace of mind. With it gone, things could return to normal. (99)

Connie's uncritical -and stubbornly selfish- support of the coup is just superficial. Things never return to normal, at least not the normalcy she embraces, "Mercy would move back to the house, perhaps start to date someone more -ordinary, let's say. Eventually, she would get married." (99) Mercy returns but as mistress of another "big man," Captain Ashey, whose picture, apropos his daughter's wedding appeared in the papers. In the picture one could also see "his wife and children and grandchildren." (101) In an ironic way, Connie proves to be right, things do indeed return to normal: Mercy has found a new powerful boyfriend

and as for her, she has resumed her unhappy life with James. The irony that sears Connie's words is provided by the sagacious eyes of The-Bird-of-the-Wayside for irony is a tool that escapes the likes of Connie and Mercy.

The independent nation that Aidoo is writing in "Two Sisters" is essentially male and bourgeois. Women's participation in the nation-state is confined to their roles as wives, mothers and mistresses, always at the service of the patriarch. What changed has the coup brought about? None. The melody we hear at the end is the one composed by Mercy's high heel shoes stamping on the ground, playing the same song over and over again,

*Count, Mercy, count your blessings*

*Count, Mercy, count your blessings*

*Count, count, count your blessings. (88)*

These are the shoes which "are more realistic than their owner," (88) the shoes which instead of walking their owner, Mercy, towards freedom, enslave her further in a permanent mistaken innocence.<sup>27</sup> Little does it matter whether the shoes were bought by Mensar-Arthur or by Captain Ashe - "Are those shoes the old pair which were new a couple of months ago? Or are they the newest pair?" - (101); their meaning, like that of the nation-state, remains unchanged.

Behind the realistic portrait of the independent nation that "Two Sisters" proposes, there lurks a tenuous fairy tale quality - Mercy's shoes do bear a resemblance with the enslaving red shoes of Andersen's tale - which is reinforced in the following story, "The Late Bud." As Odamtten points out, "The Late Bud" is "akin to traditional folktales" (Odamtten, 1994: 107) and, as a matter of fact, we do encounter

elements which approach the story to this genre. Folktales –and fairy tales- are indebted with a moralizing function whose purpose is to introduce individuals in society. Henceforth, traditional tales resemble the novel in their depiction of the socializing process that an individual goes through in his/her search of identity. However, whereas a traditional tale is developed along a fixed set of unchanging values, the novel's aim is to unsettle the fixity of these very values. How are we to read Yaaba, the protagonist of "The Late Bud"? As a protagonist of a fairy tale? Or as a more complex novelistic protagonist? The emergence and proliferation of the novel that Lukács describes in *The Theory of the Novel*, is linked with the development of urban settings, captured in the figure of the city. With "The Late Bud," we leave the city and meet an urban environment which is more in tune with the setting of folktales.

Just like Mercy, Yaaba is caught in a socializing process. She is ten years old, time by Ghanaian rural standards to become a woman. To become a woman means doing household chores, helping mothers with errands and sacrifice playing time. Yaaba knows very well where she stands: she will not sacrifice her time outdoors playing with friends to do household chores. She refuses to enter the "good" girl – "bad" girl dichotomy by which society rules its subjects. If Mercy's contrappunto was her sister Connie, Yaaba's is her sister, Adwoa. Yaaba shows an unbending resilience towards society. She knows where she stands and what she wants:

Every mother might call her a bad girl. She enjoyed playing by the Big Trunk, for instance. Since to be a good girl, one had to stay by the hearth and not by the Big Trunk throwing pebbles, but with one's hand folded quietly on one's lap, waiting to be sent everywhere by all the



mothers, Yaaba let people like Adwoa who wanted to be called 'good' be good. Thank you, she was not interested. (104)

And yet Yaaba harbours inside herself a desire to belong, a desire which is not moulded by societal rules of behavior –the good/bad girl dichotomy- but a desire whose impetus is emotional. The belonging she aspires to is a bondage with the mother, and this link she lacks,

But there was something which disturbed Yaaba. No one knew it did, but it did. She used to wonder why, every time Maami called Adwoa, she called her 'My child Adwoa', while she was always merely called 'Yaaba'. (...) Am I not Maami's daughter? Who was my mother? (105)

The time comes for Yaaba to change the course of her life and recover the mother who will cure her uprootedness. It is the day before Christmas Sunday and Yaaba overhears her mother's complaining about the lack of red earth to polish the floor of the compound. Yaaba decides to wake up in the early morning and fetch red clay for her mother. She does so but on her way back home, she falls and is severely injured, leaving her unconscious. Yaaba's accident is met with genuine preoccupation by her mother who does not hesitate to nurse her all through the night, in a generous display of love and care. Later on, the mother realizes that there is red clay in the house, a discovery which permits her to weave the unconnected fragments concerning Yaaba's accident. The truth is easily revealed to her; she understands what really happened,

So Maami went into the apartment and closed the door. She knelt by the sleeping Yaaba and put her left hand on her bound chest. 'My child, I say thank you. You were getting ready to go and fetch me red earth? Is that

why you were holding the hoe? My child, my child, my child, I thank you.’  
(113)

The turn of events that Yaaba’s accident unleashes, unlike the coup in Mercy’s case, produces a change. She finally hears her mother calling her “my child” (113). The contrapuntal relationship between “Two Sisters” and “The Late Bud” renders this fourth phase with its melodic structure: city and country, Mercy and Yaaba, Connie and Adwoa, novel and fairy tale, father (Mensar-Arthur, Captain Ashey, James) and mother (Yaaba’s mother), societal identity and emotional subjectivity. We should not fall into the temptation to read this melody in terms of dichotomies; actually, this melody resists such a reading. What started as a novel-centered analysis of the development of individuals in a changing society led us to detect a fairy tale quality in the narration which undermined its very intention to unsettle values. This was the case of “Two Sisters.” With “The Late Bud,” the situation varies, what started as a traditional folktale turned into a more complex narration which questioned and opened the way to alternative values. Is there any hope for individuals to flourish in the independent nation? The nation-state, created for the aggrandizement of patriarchy and all that this entails, may not be the answer, but in the motherland that “The Late Bud” seems to shape, there is a site for hope. After all, a bud designates a partly opened flower and it also refers to an immature person. If Mercy embodies immaturity, could we take Yaaba as her contrapuntal partly opened flower, that is to say, the blossoming of a mature, independent woman? Could a late bud conflate with the promise of a nascent independent new nation? A space that harmonizes with a motherland rather than a state? A space where women are given the chance to explore their female subjectivities? The-Bird-of-the-

Wayside's melodic narration ploughs the ground for the fifth and last phase of the performance.

### Phase 5. Mothering the Nation-Space

The word "mother," with its reverberations of affection and nurturance, has inhabited the iconography of women's writing by mapping an alternative space to the symbolic order perpetrated by the figure of the Father. However, and as we have pointed out in previous chapters, the "mother" as nurturing symbol has been appropriated by male African writers as an attempt to fill and beautify a land which had been unremittingly emptied, demonized and vilified by colonial eyes. I am referring, once again, to the Mother Africa Trope whose empowering effects had already been contested and challenged on the grounds of its inherent essentialist Western drive, on the one hand, and its embedded maleness, on the other.

I read this fifth and last phase of the performance as Aidoo's definitive inscription of the mother figure in the making of the independent nation. It is my contention that she has been sketching the "mother" figure throughout the performance as if laboriously weaving the texture which will eventually render it a face in a final, smoothly accomplished climax. "Something To Talk About on the Way to the Funeral" and "Other Versions" demand a reassessment of the "mother" signifier when this is being engraved in the space of the independent African nation.

"Mothering" is a polemical concept. The work of feminist theorists like Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan has disclosed the patriarchal forces working in the shaping of the conception of motherhood. I would like to refer specifically to the groundbreaking text by Chodorow, *The*

*Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, where she perspicaciously contends that motherhood is the culmination of women's identity in a patriarchal-oriented society and, what is more, in the patriarchal jargon of this society, motherhood should be understood as a legacy handed down to women exclusively (Chodorow, 1978). Through the title of the first chapter, "Why Women Mother," Chodorow dismantles the conception that women naturally mother through her analysis of the institutional maneuvers that make of motherhood a site restricted to women. According to Chodorow, the social context that places and foments mothering as part of the female sphere is characterized by an organization that "includes male dominance, a particular family system, and women's dependence on men's income" (ibid: 21). Chodorow's words reveal the institutionalized nature of motherhood, a fact that elicits mothering as a means to perpetuate the patriarchal soil which frames contemporary society. However, and this is the innovative contribution of Chodorow, she rejects both the biological theory that affirms that women naturally mother and the socio-anthropological theory which interprets the mothering role of women as a consequence of the process of social learning that teaches them to mother. Chodorow refutes both theories on the grounds of their impossibility to give an account of the full implications of mothering in women in our contemporary society and argues instead that the key to "why women mother" is to be found in the particular relationship established between mother and daughter in the earlier stages of childhood, a relationship which differs from the one that links mother and son. Hence, Chodorow affirms that, whereas female identity is developed and matured by a *connection with* the mother –a connection that continues through adulthood-, male identity is marked by a *separation from* the mother. What follows is the creation

of a female paradigm which is characterized by their relationship with others and thus propagates female identity as relational by nature, defined and sustained by a network of care and responsibility.

This is indeed what we encounter in the character of Auntie Araba, the protagonist of “Something to Talk About on the Way to the Funeral.” The funeral of the story is none other than that of Auntie Araba herself, a woman who is regarded as a model for the community to follow. Her story is conceived as a conversation between two neighbours who recollect Auntie Araba’s life and so, as is habitual in this collection, the audience eavesdrops the tale of a woman whose bravery and sense of responsibility made her an exemplary woman figure.

Auntie Araba’s did not enjoy an easy life. As a young village girl, she was sent to the city to work as a housemaid for well-to-do people. Her beauty, “a come-and-have-a-look type,” (116) propelled her demise for the master of the house could not ignore the “plaits that hung at the back of her neck like the branches of a giant tree” and the “skin of her arms” that “shone like charcoal from good wood” (116) and so he unleashed his seduction tricks. The result was Auntie Araba’s pregnancy and banishment from the house, forcing her to return to the village. Auntie Araba’s seduction, nevertheless, is not tainted by despair and tragedy for her mother welcomes her back and together they raise her son, Ato. Instead of a life of penury and loneliness, Auntie Araba manages to settle a business and marry a good man, Egya Nyaako, who is not deterred by the existence of Ato, an illegitimate child. Life, as always, procures some unexpected turn of events. In the case of Auntie Araba’s story, the seed of discontent is her own son, Ato, who, in an ironic narrative twist, follows in the steps of his biological father and impregnates Mansa, a young girl and refuses to marry her. Repudiated by her own family, Mansa finds solace in Auntie Araba who generously takes

her in. There develops a special relationship between the two, impossible to describe through conventional terms,

And from that moment, people did not even know how to describe the relationship between the two. Some people said they were like mother and daughter. Others that they were like sisters. Still more others even said they were like friends. (121)

What is the nature of this relationship? It is a relationship that strongly echoes Chodorow's development of female identity as one enacted via connection with the mother. The interesting aspect in this story is that the mother is not the biological mother, thus reinforcing, in a way, the powerful symbolism that surrounds the mother signifier. And yet, where Chodorow's theory works at its best is when we try to describe the relationship between Auntie Araba and Ato. According to Chodorow, the relationship between mother and son, unlike that between mother and daughter, is defined by separation. In other words, male identity is shaped by its separation from the mother. The development of "Something to Talk About on the Way to the Funeral" leads us towards this denouement: we learn how Ato's biological father appears again in the story claiming his right to fatherhood which, in his case, is translated as his providing Ato with the means to get an education. Ato becomes a scholar, a fact that distances him even further from his mother, geographically –he never comes back to the village– and, most significantly, on a human level. Auntie Araba harboured the hope that, once Ato's education was over, he would return to the village and marry Mansa. This remains an unfulfilled dream for Ato sends word to his mother that he has plans to marry another woman. The truth of the matter is that he has just repeated the behavior pattern he initiated

towards Mansa and seduced another young girl, only this time, the girl's parents, powerful and influential people, have forced him to marry her. Auntie Araba's unwavering determination to never meet this other woman is the definitive step that marks the rupture with his son.

What makes Auntie Araba so special and, at the same time, so ordinary? We cannot forget that, as audience-readers, we are witnessing a whole performance and that the previous episode is still fresh in our minds. Not in vain, the story of Auntie Araba is encapsulated by a song, the bread song which the tellers' expect to be performed in *her* funeral as a celebration of *her* life and which ties her with the song that demarcated Mercy's story in "Two Sisters." The two songs could not be more different. The chant produced by the clicking of Mercy's shoes on the pavement displayed an enslaving song which relegated her to a perpetual state of immaturity. Auntie Araba's bread song, on the contrary, is liberating. It represents her link with her job, the baking of bread, whose symbolic representation as source of nurturance cannot be evaded. We are even told how Auntie Araba's first attempts at the baking business were aimed at more sophisticated pastry which she learned to cook while in the city but which did not satisfy the simplicity of village tastes. She discarded sophistication in favour of simplicity and concentrated on her bread which she enhanced to a perfection so that "the moment the aroma burst out of the oven, children began tugging at their parents' clothes for pennies and threepences." (115).

Auntie Araba's bread song, sung throughout the years of her life, bears a testimony to her development and growth, in short, her maturity and this is captured by the evolving innuendoes of her voice, powerfully female and deeply rooted in African soil,

Yes, it was a familiar song in those days. Indeed it had been heard around here for over twenty years. First in Auntie Araba's own voice with its delicate thin sweetness that clung like asawa berry on the tongue: which later, much later, had roughened a little. Then all of a sudden, it changed again, completely. Yes, it still was a woman's voice. But it was deeper and this time, like good honey, was rough and heavy, its sweetness within itself. (115)

A song that clings like "asawa berry on the tongue" tastes African and its changing quality over the years empowers it. This is an antidote to the song fabricated by the shoes that click on the pavement eternally releasing the same immature tune. Auntie Araba could have sold her beauty "to our big men in the towns," (115) as the narrators perceptively point out, but she followed a different path to the one chosen by Mercy. The alternative is therefore there.

The episode, however, has not come to an end and Chodorow's theory does not bend so placidly to the other story, "Other Versions." What I am trying to convey here is that the theoretical framework used in the previous story to explain the development of female identity demands a re-evaluation when applied to the second story of the episode. "Other Versions" resists being encapsulated in the mother-son paradigm provided by Chodorow for what Aidoo is offering her audience in this tale is an experience where male identity is conformed by its close relationship with the mother.

The individual experience of the protagonist takes on a universalizing vigour: his name is never revealed to us and his parents are referred to as "Mother" and "Father" capitalizing the first letter. His is a story of endurance and evolution coloured by his attachment to his mother. It is also, up to a certain extent, a story of success since the narrator at the moment of the telling is in the United States studying in



an American university because he managed to get a scholarship. He measures his success in terms of his capability to help his mother economically in an attempt to reward her for the sacrifices she had to make on his behalf. A crucial moment of his development as individual comes when he offers his mother money for the first time. Still in Ghana but getting ready for the examinations that will eventually take him to the States, he visits his mother in the village and gives her the money he has been painfully saving for her. Her son's gesture fills her with joy but after her first outburst of happiness, she resolutely refuses the money and insists on him giving the money to his father, whom he regards as someone distant and not particularly generous. He grudgingly accepts but upon returning to the city he could not avoid "a dazed feeling for the rest of the journey and the whole day." (130) And he adds,

I just could not figure it out. To begin with, whose child was I? Why should I have to pay my father for sending me to school? And calling that 'college' did not help me either. Besides he only paid half the fees, since the Cocoa Brokers' Union, of which he is a member, had given me a scholarship to cover the other half. And anyway, Father. He is the kind of parent who checks out lists so thoroughly you would think his life depends upon them. And he doesn't mind which kind either. Textbook lists? 'Hei, didn't I buy you a dictionary last year? (131)

It is "the idea of Father getting" the money (131) which infuriates him, but nonetheless, he obeys his mother and "sent four pounds to Father at the end of the remaining months and each time just about burst up. 'Why not Mother? Why not Mother' I kept asking myself. It drove me wild." (131)

Little did he know at this time that he would be confronted with an even yet more excruciating experience while in the United States, an

experience which would link him definitely with the mother figure. As a foreign student, he is invited to dinner at the home of one of his professors. The evening unfolds pleasantly enough until an insignificant incident takes place: Mr. Merrows, his host-professor, offers him and his cook a ride home. A strange feeling overwhelms him when he realizes that the cook “turned out to be a black woman,” (133)

You know what sometimes your heart does? Mine did that just then. Kind of turned itself round in a funny way. Mr. Merrows opened the back seat for her and said,

‘Kofi, Mrs. Hye helps us with the cooking sometimes and since I am taking you back anyway, I thought I could take her at least half her way. Mrs. Hye, Kofi is from Africa.’

In the car she and I smiled nervously at each other ... I tried not to feel agitated.

(133)

Why does the sight of a black woman disturb him so much, for although he *tried* to disguised it, he was indeed *agitated*? The answer appeared to him on the face of “another black woman” (133) he meets shortly after the incident at Mr. Merrows’ at the subway “sitting to the left end of the opposite seat,” (133) late at night. The connection of this woman with the cook at Mr. Merrows’ flows seamlessly in the narrator’s mind,

I got to thinking of what a woman her age would be wanting in a subway car that time of night. I don’t know why but immediately I remembered the other one who had been in the Merrows’ kitchen while they ate and I ate. Then I started getting confused. (...) Anyway, I don’t know what made me. But I drew out my wallet. I had received money from my scholarship. So I took some dollar bills, crumpled them in my hand and jumped like one goaded with a firebrand. (134)

He hands the money to the woman, telling her, as if reassuring her, that he “come(s) from Africa” (134), expecting her to take the money, which she refuses to do. At this point the “dazed feeling” he experienced at home in Africa when handing the money he earned to his mother, the “funny way” his heart “turned itself round” when realizing the cook at the Merrows’ was a black woman and, finally, the confusion that fills him when seeing this black woman in the subway, conflate with one single face, one single reality, that of his Mother. It is a disenchanting, painfully realistic, moment of recognition and understanding,

(...) Of course, she was Mother. And so there was no need to see. But now I could openly look at her beautiful face. I got out at the stop. She waved to me and smiled. I stood there on the platform until the engine had wheezed and raged out of sight. I looked at the money which was still in my hand. I felt like opening them out; I did. There was one ten-dollar bill and two single ones. Twelve dollars. Then it occurred to me that that was as near to four pounds as you could get. It was not a constriction in the throat. Rather, the dazed feeling I had had that Sunday afternoon on the high road to town came back. And as I stumbled through the exit, and up the stairs, I heard myself mutter, ‘O Mother.’ (134)

What other versions is Aidoo offering us? The narrator’s experience is another version to Chodorow’s mother-son paradigm. As a matter of fact, Chodorow’s arguments are solidly rooted in Western soil, her theory constructed upon Western familial relationships, her mother-daughter and mother-son paradigms, however enlightening in many aspects, are, in the end, constricted by an acute sense of one single-sided perspective, and therefore, incapable of enclosing this one version

that Aidoo is proposing. And yet, “Other Versions” spins a network of possibilities for other versions to exist. The son’s recognition of his mother in the faces of those two black women bears witness to a familial bondage which persuasively contrasts with the mother-son relationship of the previous story of this episode thus, providing the audience with another version. It is also another version to “No Sweetness Here,” the tragic story of Maami Aba and her son Kwesi which we encountered in the third phase of the performance, and, taking into account that the title of the collection is precisely *No Sweetness Here*, “Other Versions” bequeaths us the possibility for another national version to emerge from the neocolonial quicksand that the independent nation has become.

Neither a *fefewo* nor a novel, Aidoo’s *No Sweetness Here* stems from both. Its indebtedness to this African oral performance grants us readers the opportunity to digest the collection of short stories as a single novelistic unity which infuses the text with an extraordinarily rich variety of voices, oral and African in essence, but written down in English. The Bird-of-the-Wayside -this most elusive and, at the same time, substantial presence- that hovers around the narration, translates a web of subaltern experiences which weave the terrain for another version of the independent bourgeois nation-state to blossom. The postcolonial arena painted in *No Sweetness Here* leads the way towards a nation-space femininely construed where mothers, grandmothers and daughters - biological or otherwise- en-gender a national consciousness which embraces fathers and sons. It is a step towards inclusion and not exclusion. Realistically apprehended, *No Sweetness Here* urges the audience to realize that there is indeed no sweetness here, and yet, without stepping out of reality, it grants readers the possibility for hope. The *No Sweetness Here* of the title of the book is to be read against the

painting on the cover: a mother smiling at her son's attempts at reading, the African landscape looming behind them. Another version on the horizon.

# *Five*

## *The White Hole: Our Sister Killjoy or Reflections from a Black-eyed Squint*

(...) the word is not a material thing but rather the eternally mobile, eternally fickle medium of dialogic interaction. It never gravitates toward a single consciousness or a single voice. The life of the word is contained in its transfer from one mouth to

another, from one context to another context, from one social collective to another, from one generation to another generation. In this process the word does not forget its own path and cannot completely free itself from the power of those concrete contexts into which it has entered.<sup>1</sup>

M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*

(...) and I thought of the organ booming in the chapel and of the shut doors of the library; and I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in; and, thinking of the safety and prosperity of the one sex and of the poverty and insecurity of the other and of the effect of tradition and of the lack of tradition upon the mind of a writer, I thought at last that it was time to roll up the crumpled skin of the day, with its arguments and its impressions and its anger and its laughter, and cast it into the hedge.<sup>2</sup>

“A Room of One’s Own,” Virginia Woolf

(...) women from Africa have not been swallowed by history, ... they too know how to swallow history. Their writing may best reveal how desperately Africa has erred in its memory. The women, without power to govern, often have no platform for expressing disapproval ... Like pods, some of these women merely explode. Words become weapons.<sup>3</sup>

Yvonne Vera, Preface to *Opening  
Spaces*

The search for one's voice surrounds the literary endeavour of writers. Whether this search is marked by an enthusiastic thrill to leave one's imprint on the world of letters or whether it is tainted by the disheartening and awe-inspiring burden to overcome the "anxiety of influence" which, according to Harold Bloom, affects all writers, the truth remains that an author has to confront and conform to a textual tradition that s/he tries to mould to his/her own imagination and experience (Bloom, 1973).

The concept of "tradition" is, in itself, a controversial term. What constitutes a literary tradition? Should a literary tradition be placed next to a particular nation, or rather, a language? Should we endow "tradition" with a somehow more universalizing aim and locate it beyond the constraints of "nation" and "language," terms which are themselves contentious? As early as 1919, T.S. Eliot addressed the issue of the intricate and very often ambivalent relationship between tradition and the artist in his groundbreaking essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (Eliot, 1919: 71-76). Eliot encircles tradition in an aura of both inevitability and longing. The poet, the individual talent, aspires to belong to a tradition and yet this circumscription is not a given but something he must toil hard to obtain since, as he resolutely affirms, "it cannot be inherited" (ibid: 71). What talent must the individual be equipped with in order to be inscribed within this tradition which escapes inheritance? According to Eliot, it is historical sense that grants the individual the seeds of tradition, a sense which "involves a perception,



not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence” (ibid: 72), and he adds,

(...) the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity (ibid: 72).

Two aspects of Eliot’s stance on tradition as indicated in the above quotation should be highlighted here: first, a recognition of the existence of a “literature of Europe from Homer,” -to which English literature, Eliot’s main concern in his essay, unproblematically belongs- thus clearly defining a Western literary tradition and, second, the conflation of the temporal with the timeless which conforms and secures the writer’s own contemporaneity *in* tradition. If we translate Eliot’s conception of “contemporaneity” to one specific text, does it follow that we can envisage a specific piece of work as a timeless and profoundly temporal manifestation of tradition?

I believe that *Our Sister Killjoy or Reflections from a Black-eyed Squint* represents Ama Ata Aidoo’s definitive inscription of her voice as a writer, as a woman, as an African.<sup>4</sup> It is, using Eliot’s nomenclature, a terribly temporal and profoundly timeless textual imprint on a tradition. And here comes the problem for, whose tradition is this? How are we to define this tradition which, in Eliot’s case, presented itself as clearly and unashamedly Western? What is more, Eliot’s tradition is weighed

alongside an “ideal order,” an entity endowed with a capacity to adapt to the new while retaining an unquestionable indebtedness to the old. Put in another way, this order establishes the very Eliotesque premise that “Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future / And time future contained in time past” (Eliot, 1935: 189).

Albeit Eliot admits the “great difficulties and responsibilities” assailing the artist, he never foresees this relationship that keeps “the pastness of the past in the present” (Eliot, 1919: 71) as essentially problematical. A pervasive sense of fluidity holds the past and the present together, the new seamlessly blending with the old,

The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art towards the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. Whoever has approved this idea of order, of the form of European, of English literature will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past (ibid: 72).

I recall Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” not so much because of the answers he provides but because of the questions that his analysis discloses when placed in the context of postcolonial writing. I situate *Our Sister Killjoy* at the crux of Ama Ata Aidoo’s literary development, but I also view it as a crucial text in the larger context of Anglophone African literature and, even more ambitiously, in the context of postcolonial writing. In this postcolonial environment, tradition and the individual talent are not conjoined by a straightforward, however difficult at times, mutual dependence, but rather by a convoluted set of

relationships which defy the very concept of “tradition” and which divert Eliot’s linear path into a complicated –and fascinating- entanglement.

Henceforth, I tackle the analysis of *Our Sister Killjoy* from its significance in terms of (1) Ama Ata Aidoo’s development as a writer, (2) its irrefutable presence in the larger context of an-Other tradition - that of African literature in English- a tradition which, I will argue, disturbs the English tradition to the extent that it can no longer be apprehended as indisputably European and (3) its experimental quality which has haunted –and is still haunting- literary critics for it resists being circumscribed in a specific literary genre and therefore pungently objects to any *traditional* classification. In short, I will argue that *Our Sister Killjoy* challenges the very notion of “tradition” envisaged as, on the one hand, a historical correlation of texts, and, on the other, as a good per se, that is to say, as a longed for ideal of belonging on the part of the writer.

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*Good Night Africa, Good Morning  
Europe:  
The Limits of Writing Back and the  
Call for a Postcolonial Readership*

*Our Sister Killjoy* is a journey, the journey of Sissie, a young Ghanaian woman. Sissie embarks on a journey to Europe, which takes her first to Germany and then to England in the years following the independence of her country, Ghana, thus her wanderings on Western soil can be dated, approximately, as the late 60's, beginnings of the 70's. The text is divided up into four parts: "Into a Bad Dream," "The Plums," "From Our Sister Killjoy," and, finally, "A Love Letter." The first section, "Into a Bad Dream," captures the moment in which Sissie is told the news about her imminent journey to Europe, followed by the party the authorities throw in her honour, her plane journey and her landing in Germany. Her European adventure begins in the second section, "The Plums," where her experience in Bavaria, and specifically her friendship with Marija, a German woman, is recollected. The departure from Germany leads us to Sissie's second destination, England, which marks the protagonist's face-to-face encounter with "the colonial home." Finally, the closing stage of her journey is recalled in "A Love Letter," which takes place on the plane that will carry her back home, that is to say, Africa.

If we were to apprehend *Our Sister Killjoy* generically, we would find ourselves at a loss. Is it a novel? Are the four parts to be viewed as

four short stories? What about the last section, “A Love Letter,” which, as the title indicates, is indeed a letter, thus transporting the text to the epistolary terrain? Does the journey depicted *unproblematically* inscribe *Our Sister Killjoy* in the travel writing tradition? Should *Our Sister Killjoy* be classified as eminently a prose text with some poetic incursions, or rather, should we pay more attention to the fact that prose and poetry coalesce endowing its structure with an unclassifiable flavour?<sup>5</sup>

It is understanding to perceive in the unclassifiable nature of *Our Sister Killjoy* an attempt on the part of the author to experiment, to engage in a discursive examination of a literary-cultural tradition delineated by colonialism and yet I believe that the label “experimental” which has been attached to *Our Sister Killjoy* deserves consideration. To start with, it inevitably raises one question: what does Aidoo experiment with?, or, to put it another way, what is the nature of her experimentation? Unfortunately, Aidoo’s experimentation has been reduced to a comment on the impossibility to grasp the ultimate meaning of a work which excels in posing questions rather than offering answers (Hoeller, 2004: 130-147; Cooper, 1985: 21-51; Korang, 1992: 51-61; Wilentz, 1991: 159-173). This resistance to answering unsettles the critical stance and so, “experimental” is used in a dismissive way to stress the limits of a work and accentuate its impossibilities, thus *foreclosing* any attempt at *disclosing* its possibilities.

One way to approach the reading of *Our Sister Killjoy* has been on the grounds of its being a re-writing of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. The journey to Europe that Sissie, the protagonist of *Our Sister Killjoy*, embarks on induces the reader familiar with Conrad’s novella to draw a parallel with Marlow’s journey to Africa and, as a consequence, discover analogies that align the two works in a linear relationship (Korang, 1992; Morgan, 1991; Willey, 1997). By painting

the re-writing in postcolonial colours, *Our Sister Killjoy* is taken as an example of writing back to *Heart of Darkness*, and yet the implications of the act of “writing back” require further explanations.

“Writing back” echoes the vernacular act of “talking back” to someone, that is to say, of answering impertinently to someone’s unwelcomed remark. In this light, to write back can be understood as an answer, impertinent in nature, to a former text. This is the basis of a key work in postcolonial criticism whose very title reveals its indebtedness to the writing back approach, *The Empire Writes Back*, and which has undeniably contributed to the development of a postcolonial critical perspective (Ashcroft et al., 1989). The structure that holds the book together is founded on the belief that, in the event of independence, the former colonies that constituted the British Empire engage in an impertinent diatribe with the tenets that foreground colonial thought.

However fruitful the writing back approach might be in a first responsive instant –we cannot deny *The Empire Writes Back’s* status as a prominent work in postcolonial criticism-, we realize that a more profound analysis of the oppositional nature that characterizes this critical position will reveal inherent limitations in the methodology which imperil a fully-fledged development of the discipline. In other words, the critical scope of the writing back approach is always constrained by its unique objective, namely, as Caminero-Santangelo affirms, “to establish an anticolonial stance by countering the European classic and the colonial vision it represents”.<sup>6</sup>

It is for this reason that I have sought alternatives to the writing back approach in my reading of *Our Sister Killjoy* since I believe that the complexity and richness of this text demand a somehow more malleable critical stance. Kristeva’s work on intertextuality provides me with methodological tools to challenge the one-directional movement of the

writing back approach, and henceforth open up the way for other texts to enter the dialogical ground that *Our Sister Killjoy* conforms. The position I am taking does not deny *Heart of Darkness*'s detectable presence in *Our Sister Killjoy*, but rather, I contend that Conrad's novella –with its Eurocentric weight- is *not the only* text which is being called forth.

Using Bakhtin's study on the literary text, Kristeva elaborates her own theory of "intertextuality" which she summarizes with the following sentence "any text is a construction as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (Kristeva, 1980: 66). What are the implications of Kristeva's position as regards the nature of a text? According to Kristeva, Bakhtin's insertion of the text in history and society results in (1) the writer's *reading* history and society as texts and (2) the writer's *natural* re-writing of history and society by inserting himself in the texts. As a consequence, a *textual space* is created in which "diachrony is transformed into synchrony, and in light of this transformation, *linear* history appears as abstraction"(ibid: 65). In short, another approach to the analysis of a text is required, one which will allow us to account for readers that are synchronically related to the writer, on the one hand, and texts which are bounded synchronically to the text under scrutiny. Kristeva's proposal is that, instead of focusing on the *structure* of a text, we should study its *structuration*, that is to say, how the *structure came into being*. And this is what I would like to focus on right now, I would like to display how *Our Sister Killjoy* came into being.

Kristeva's textual space is conformed by two axes: a horizontal axis which connects author and reader plus a vertical axis which connects texts with other texts. How do these connections, horizontally and vertically defined, function in a text like *Our Sister Killjoy*?

It is indeed very tempting –and, I may add, understanding- to read *Our Sister Killjoy* as a *Heart of Darkness* in reverse, to see in Sissie a character that talks back to the West. As a matter of fact, the European-African dichotomy is established from the very beginning. “Into a Bad Dream” and “The Plums” are linked by three words which are granted one single, whole page: **Where, When and How**. Hence, the chronotopic value of the text is visibly enacted. In order to re-place Africa in the common past, in the shared history of the world, a reverse journey to that of *Heart of Darkness* is necessary. As we argued in previous chapters, Europe-the West-Eurocentric discourse needs to be analysed, looked into, dissected from an African perspective. **How** the chronotope zero of Africa will be filled up is contingent upon **where** and **when** this chronotope has been created. This is what sets *Our Sister Killjoy*, the text, and Our Sister Killjoy, the protagonist, in motion. And yet to read *Our Sister Killjoy* as uniquely a re-writing of *Heart of Darkness*, is, I claim, one of the reasons why Aidoo has been criticized as falling into the same kind of stereotyping that Conrad had been so severely criticized for (Korang, 1992; Morgan, 1991; Willey, 1997).

Aidoo’s alleged stereotyping is particularly pungent in the first and second part of Sissie’s journey. The very title of the first part, “Into a Bad Dream,” echoes Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, where Marlow’s journey is symbolically captured as a nightmare. As for the second part, “The Plums,” which centers on Sissie’s friendship with Marija, a German housewife, Germany is symbolically apprehended by Hitler and the Holocaust. The fact that Marija is described as “Aryan-looking,” married to a man called Adolf and mother to a son called Adolf, after the father, should not be rendered gratuitous.<sup>7</sup> The atrocities of the Holocaust – Europe’s ruthless savagery- hits the reader in the face, it is there all the time, behind the name “Adolf,” behind the pastoral reconstruction of the



darkened castle where Sissie is staying, behind the utter loneliness that envelops the white walls, flowery curtains of Marija's immaculate home, München-Munich, "The Original Adolf of the pub-brawls / and mobsters who were looking for / a / Führer." (81) "Munich," she goes on,

is  
 Prime Minister Chamberlain  
 Hurrying from his island home to  
 Appease,  
 While freshly widowed  
 Yiddisher Mamas wondered  
 What Kosher pots and pans  
 Could be saved or not. (81)

The unfathomable truth lurks menacingly while plodding the ground to cultivate pine trees for

They wonder if, should they  
 stop cultivating the little pine trees, would  
 Something else,  
 Sown there,  
 Many, many years ago,  
 In  
 Those Bavarian woods  
 SPROUT?<sup>8</sup> (37)

Of all criticism I have consulted as regards the study of *Our Sister Killjoy* as a re-writing of *Heart of Darkness*, I would like to stress Hildegard Hoeller's "Ama Ata Aidoo's *Heart of Darkness*" (Korang, 1992; Morgan, 1991; Willey, 1997; Cooper, 1985; Wilentz, 1991; Haiping, 2002: 245-262). Although Hoeller's analysis of *Our Sister Killjoy* is, as

her title indicates, based on the premise that Aidoo's text is a re-writing of *Heart of Darkness*, - a position, as I have mentioned earlier on, I find limiting- I believe she provides us with an extremely valuable insight when she detects that the text exerts on the reader the need to re-position him/herself. In other words, when confronted with the passages that concern Germany, Hoeller, a German, asks herself, following Achebe, whether the reading of *Our Sister Killjoy* exposed her to the same kind of debasing experience as the one endured by African readers of *Heart of Darkness* (Achebe, 1977). Her answer should be quoted word by word, "my reading of Aidoo's text did not expose me to a *typical* but somewhat *unusual* instance of misrepresentation of my culture and race" (Hoeller, 2004: 142; italics mine). What is enlightening about Hoeller's answer is the juxtaposition she lays between "typical" and "unusual," that is to say, misrepresentations of Africa are "typical," whereas misrepresentations of Europe (Germany) are "unusual." The re-positioning of the reader that a text like *Our Sister Killjoy* unleashes, when approached with the analytical tools of Kristeva's horizontal axis, discloses a connection between reader and author essentially different to the one established in *Heart of Darkness*. What Hoeller's "typical versus unusual" misrepresentation indicates is the impossibility to read *Our Sister Killjoy* as a mere reversal of roles.

An African audience was not behind Conrad's writing enterprise. No matter how resolute he was in his intention to denounce Imperialism, he did not foresee an African readership for *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad's textual space, the history and society he, following Kristeva, reads and writes by inserting himself in the story, is conformed by a colonial perspective. Aidoo, unlike Conrad, shapes a textual space determined by a history and a society markedly postcolonial and when, once again

following Kristeva, she inserts herself in the text she is writing, she does so from the perspective of a postcolonial author.

The author of *Our Sister Killjoy* is very much aware of the fact that her readership is constituted by non-Western and Western readers alike. And what is more, her text *demand*s a re-positioning of the reader but - and here I dissent from Hoeller's postulation- both Western and non-Western readers are re-positioned. Both readers, Western and non-Western, are forced to face the "other" side of Europe's light; in the case of Western readers, and as Hoeller's experience exhibits, they are made to confront an "unusual" representation of their culture and race, and in the case of non-Western readers, they are urged to see the terrible consequences of the neocolonialism that assaults former colonies and which makes them still dependent on European powers. At the core of this dependence there lies an ingrained feeling of inferiority, an unacknowledged desire for a self which is white and which relegates non-whites to a perpetual status as other (Fanon, 1952 & 1961). Aidoo's compelling words do not allow room for questioning,

How can a  
Nigger rule well  
Unless his  
Balls and purse are  
Clutched in  
Expert White Hands?  
(...)  
In the capitals,  
Ex-convicts from European  
Prisons drive the city buses, and  
Black construction workers  
Sweat under the tropical sun, making  
Ice-skating rinks for

The Beautiful People ...  
 While other Niggers sit  
 With vacant stares  
     Or  
 Busy, spitting their lungs out.

JUST LIKE THE GOOD OLD DAYS  
 BEFORE INDEPENDENCE

Except –  
 The present is  
 S-o-o-o much  
 Better! (56)

Showing an acute awareness of the postcolonial configuration of her audience, Aidoo launches a critical re-assessment of négritude and Pan-Africanism. And this is the moment that to encode *Our Sister Killjoy* as a re-writing of *Heart of Darkness* fails for négritude and Pan-Africanism open the way to another literary tradition that participates in the intertextual connection that Aidoo's text deploys. Influenced by Nkrumah's vigorous belief in the unity of the black world, inspired by the first Ghanaian president's desire to build a United States of Africa, Aidoo, nonetheless, at the time of writing *Our Sister Killjoy* is besieged by questions that cast serious doubts on the viability of the Pan-African Ideal. Her text unveils the impossibility of the task of uniting a world which grounds its existence in color for, the color line, as Anyidoho cautions us is a slippery one<sup>9</sup>. Is it possible to maintain the equation "African = black"? Is the dream of the unity of the African continent attainable? Will a search for origins perhaps reveal that Africa, as the cradle of mankind is a vessel where *all* races abode, at least originally?<sup>10</sup>

To what extent are négritude and Pan-Africanism liberating ideologies? Are we to detect in their very conception an enslaving attitude towards the all-encompassing presence of black as master signifier? Does Aidoo's postcolonial perspective urge her readership to look for answers in realms other than négritude and Pan-Africanism?

The textual space Aidoo creates in *Our Sister Killjoy* calls forth a readership whose postcolonial existence, whether acknowledged or not, claims a continuing re-positioning as subjects, and more conspicuously, as *racial* subjects. Western supremacy, négritude and Pan-Africanism are contested on a horizontal axis that connects a writer, Ama Ata Aidoo, with a readership, which, although classified as "Western" or "non-Western," if the truth be told, in the end, resists this classification. Nowhere do I find my persistent use of the terms "Western" and "non-Western" to be more faulty than in my analysis of *Our Sister Killjoy*, for, albeit they serve as a valuable starting point, the text under discussion questions them even when they are persistently being used. This uncomfortable use of these terms reveals an association, still prevalent in postcolonial times, of whiteness with Westernness and blackness (and other shades of skin colour) with the non-Western world. And these terms provoke instability because they were engendered in the racial conception of the world which we have inherited from the racial -and racist- discourses of the nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> The linking of race and geography, Nkrumah's often quoted maxim of "Africa for blacks," is challenged by Aidoo's insidious remark that "Humans, / Not Places, / Make memories." (80-81) Aidoo's reliance on human beings as instigators of history, her deliberate, gradual and conscientious erasure of the word "race" from her textual space, endows her discourse with a humanistic streak which defies racial discourses. She leaves room for an alternative discursive practice whose power and *raison d'être*, unlike

racial discourses, are defined in humanistic terms. In other words, racial discourses are replaced by an incipient postcolonial humanistic discourse.

Contemporaneity is painted in postcolonial colours and *Our Sister Killjoy* provides a meeting point where Western and non-Western readers are textually connected, and where their very positions as Western and non-Western are racially, culturally and, as we shall discover, sexually challenged. When Kristeva's vertical axis is set at work, when the other texts to which *Our Sister Killjoy* is related make their presence felt, the complexity enhances, the intertextual network is made visible. I will proceed by analysing each section taking into account that intertextual game that conforms the postcolonial experimentation that Aidoo plunges into with the writing of *Our Sister Killjoy*.

## II

### *Ja, Das Schwartze Mädchen. The Challenge of Tradition and the Female African Voice*

Journeys swarm on the pages of literature. Odysseus's ten-year sailing on the Mediterranean, Leopold Bloom's one-day wanderings in the streets of Dublin, Marlow's delving into the heart of darkness, they all depict journeys joined by a common thirst for knowledge, a desire that weaves a quest which in its individuality –the individual quest of the protagonist- breeds the universal human longing for truth. Journey, therefore, conflates with desire and knowledge. The three words form an entity which preclude and conclude *Our Sister Killjoy*, the journey of this young Ghanaian woman called Sissie. What kind of journey is Sissie's? What is the knowledge gained? What desire is being fulfilled?

Sissie's journey is demarcated by her plunging into a hole. A hole is a hollow place, a cavity, which, in Sissie's case, is painted as Europe, first Germany, then England, the European continent as home of what we address as *the West*. A hole is also associated with darkness, with the underground, with the other side of light, so what is there in Sissie's journey that makes her experience her journey to the West as akin to plunging into a hole?

I would like to recover the idea of the black (w)hole which I introduced in chapter two apropos my analysis of négritude poetry and, more specifically, Aimé Césaire's poem, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*.<sup>12</sup> Then I mentioned how the trope of the black (w)hole – written with (w)- revealed an ambivalence which found its resolution in the realm of paradox. On the one hand, the artist's falling into a hole represented the ultimate negation of subjectivity, the embracing of darkness, literally being devoured by nothingness. However, and as Houston J. Baker Jr. copiously elaborates, this hole is only a first step towards the final (w)hole that the artist experiences precisely as a

consequence of this retreat of the self underground (Baker, 1984). For in this reclusion in darkness he forges the strength which will permit him to emerge to the outside world with the power of knowledge, the knowledge he has harboured and nourished inside the hole. This knowledge is the weapon he needs in order to survive and develop in a world which antagonizes him simply because of his skin colour. According to Houston J. Baker Jr. the trope of the black (w)hole is what defines the African-American literary tradition, a literature marked by the strivings of a black individual to *be* in a white dominated society.

I draw on Baker's study when I define Sissie's journey as her plunging into a hole and yet there is, I believe, a significant difference between the two holes, a difference which I mark by branding Sissie's hole as white. Baker's theory is based on the black individual's search of subjectivity which will eventually lead him towards the acquisition and acknowledgement of a public identity within the white-dominated society of America. What follows is an inclusion of his presence in America and hence American society demands a re-examination, its whiteness re-assessed. In the case of Sissie what we are confronting is an African individual in search of a subjectivity in a postcolonial world. And, to make matters more interesting, this individual is a woman. The game of colours that such a white hole elicits is of a slightly different nature. The time has come for an explanation of how I understand and use the trope of the "white hole."

The field of physics defines the "black hole" as that area of space which appears absolutely black because the gravitation there is so intense that not even light can escape into the surrounding areas. As posited by the general theory of relativity, what fills that unimaginably dense area is the remains of stars and that area -the one marked by the black hole- is dark because an initially luminescent star has, in its



burning, converted energy into mass (ibid: 144). The underworld area created by the black individual is read as a black hole in Baker's theory and once the process of empowerment he goes through -a process that is necessarily enacted amid complete darkness- comes to an end, he emerges out of the hole, into the light, his blackness, which before precluded utter negativity, now turned into a (w)hole. Baker's reading, however, does not help us to elucidate the intricacies of Sissie's white hole. Sissie's retreat, unlike that of the black American individual is not ordained by a solitary, hermitic isolation from the world, but by an irrepressible and unavoidable coming into contact with people who inhabit the white hole.<sup>13</sup> This sociable thrust will plunge her into the overwhelming whiteness of the Eurocentric discourse that moulds the colonial world and that her postcolonial perspective will detect and deconstruct. Another way of reading the black (w)hole is here required so that we can finally understand the change of colour I claim for the hole. I will resort to Evelyn Hammonds' reading of the black (w)hole since she approaches the trope from what I call a relational perspective, that is to say, instead of revering the absolute isolation of the individual's reclusion inside the hole, she opts for focusing on the set of relationships with other individuals that the *subjected* subject inside the hole traces and which, eventually, will uncover in order to ascertain the submerged Eurocentric discourse that frames society on a transnational purview.

Hammonds' re-reading of the black (w)hole stems from her preoccupation to seek a fair representation of black female sexuality when this sexuality is the result of same sex desire. Her article, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," is included in the book edited by Elizabeth Weed and Naomi Schor revealingly entitled *Feminism Meets Queer Theory* (Hammonds, 1997). Feeling herself

placed at the perilous junction of what she calls “the juxtaposed images of “white” (read normal) and “black” (read not white and abnormal),” and sensing her perpetual enslavement at this junction unless she traces a feasible way to represent a fully developed black female sexuality, she undertakes an investigative journey through different theories of sexuality which will permit her to discover in the figure of the black (w)hole a tremendously useful tool to explain the invisibility of black *female* creativity. Her invocation of the idea of the trope of the black hole, unlike Baker, is infused with gender. In other words, Baker demonstrated how the trope of the black hole could be used to describe the invisibility of black creativity in general, and what Hammonds’ exegesis grants us is an explication of how the trope can also serve as a tool to account for the invisibility of specifically black female creativity.

How does the game of visibility work in the black hole? The hole is not unjustifiably called black by physicists; its colour is black because the observer of the hole sees it as a void, an empty place in space. However, we know that this space is not empty but dense and full. At this point, Hammonds poses two questions which, interestingly enough, Baker in his analysis never tackles: (1) how can we deduce the presence of the black hole? –we should remember that we, as observers, cannot see it- and (2) what is it like inside of a black hole?

Physics provides us with the answer to the first question. Hence, we are informed that the presence of a black hole can be detected by its effects on the region of space where it is located. By observing binary star systems, physicists are able to study the effects of the black hole on the region of space where it is located. Physicists define a binary star system as a structure constituted by two bodies which orbit around each other under mutual gravitational attraction. What follows is an explanation allotted to us in the field of physics but which, if read from

the perspective of invisibility and creativity, takes on a monumental significance for our reading of *Our Sister Killjoy*. So, physics reports that in these binary star systems, it is typical to find a **visible**, apparently “normal” star in close orbit with another body such as a black hole which is not seen optically. Thus, the existence of the black hole, as Hammonds concludes,

is inferred from the fact that the visible star is in orbit and its shape is distorted in some way or it is detected by the energy emanating from the region in space around the visible star that could not be produced by *the visible star alone*. (ibid: 149; italics mine)

Transposing this game of visibility onto *Our Sister Killjoy*, one reaches an engrossing revelation for, who is the visible star in the space demarcated by European soil? Sissie, the black girl –das Schwartze Mädchen easily detected in the railway station when she first arrives in Germany- is the visible star in orbit with another body which is not apprehended optically, the white hole of Eurocentric discourse. Sissie’s wanderings are to be envisaged as those of a star in orbit with the West, a star whose presence makes another presence felt, that of the white hole. Obviously, and as Hammonds urges us to consider, the identification of a black hole is not a simple matter. Such an identification requires “the use of sensitive detectors of energy and distortion” and here is when Aidoo’s squinting mechanism of dissection –and distortion- comes into play.

Sissie’s orbit is perfectly orchestrated by the four sections which configure the text and which bring the white hole to the foreground, blatantly and without appease. In the first section, “Into A Bad Dream,” *Heart of Darkness* creeps in as an uncanny remembrance of an imperialist view of Africa which, despite the theoretical postcolonial reality which surrounds Aidoo’s text, is still sustained. As regards the second section

and third section - "The Plums" and "From Our Sister Killjoy"- Aidoo moulds the text around the relationships established by Sissie first with a white German woman, Marija, and second with Kunle, an African man whom she meets while visiting her boyfriend in England.

But the second question posed by Hammonds remains yet unanswered. This is the question that asks what it is like to be inside the black hole and which, in our case, would be translated as what it is like to be inside the white hole. Hammonds' answer calls for thinking in terms of a different geometry. We should not forget that her concern is with creating a space for black female sexualities, a space which is not structured "along an axis of normal and perverse paralleling that of white women" (ibid: 143) but a space where black female sexualities are a visible reality in themselves. According to Hammonds, this will only be possible if we assume that for black women a different geometry operates, and by geometry she means the set of mutual relations that the orbits of stars create in space. Since our concern here is the orbit of Sissie, what I am interested in discovering is how Aidoo delineates this geometry and I will argue that this comes to fruition in the last part of the text, "A Love Letter," where the issue of creativity takes centre stage. Desire, knowledge and subjectivity are explored in writing -the letter Sissie writes to her lover- on her journey back home. This letter is *created* while she is significantly *in space*, in transit, neither in the West nor in Africa. This being *in space* renders her precisely the *space* to reflect upon the reflections -redundancy intentioned- of her Black-eyed squint. Sissie's orbit is here delineated by her movement around her own creator, Aidoo, disclosing a voice which connects their Africanness and femaleness with a re-imagined Mother Africa.

## 1. Darkness and Light, Nightmares and Dreams, *Heart of Darkness* and *Speculum of the Other Woman*

In chapter one I presented *Heart of Darkness* as a ghostly presence in the minds of African writers, a presence that haunts the African imagination. Whether African writers grasp Conrad's text and face it *consciously* or whether Conrad's novella is called *unconsciously*, as a presence which is remembered but not reminisced, is, I believe, impossible to affirm. Conrad's text, though, is a presence which resists being kept at bay. Trying to convey this resistance to vanish in a concept, I will draw on Freudian terminology and call *Heart of Darkness* a "textual Other." The uncanny presence of *Heart of Darkness* in *Our Sister Killjoy*, turns the protagonist's journey -which, theoretically, should be a source for joy- into, literally, as the title of this first part indicates, a bad dream.

To line up Conrad's text alongside the realm of the "uncanny" allows us to discern its pervasive presence from a new perspective. The term "uncanny" is, to say the least, polemical. As a matter of fact, in the first and second part of Freud's essay, we are transported on a semantic journey through the varied meanings that the word "uncanny" perilously unveils. Henceforth, the original "unheimlich," positioned next to its opposite "heimlich," in the end results in a conflation of terms

which tantalizingly guides us towards the realization that in the realm of the familiar and comfortable –*Das Heimliche*– there is to be found what is concealed and kept hidden –*Das Unheimliche*–,

(...) among the various shades of meaning that are recorded for the word *heimlich* there is one in which it merges with its formal antonym, *unheimlich*, so that what is called *heimlich* becomes *unheimlich*. (...) This reminds us that this word *heimlich* is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which are not mutually contradictory, but very different from each other- the one relating to what is familiar and comfortable, the other to what is concealed and kept hidden. (...) Our attention is seized by Schelling’s remark, which says something quite new –something we certainly did not expect- about the meaning of *unheimlich*, namely, that the term ‘uncanny’ (*unheimlich*) applies to everything that was intended to remain secret, hidden away, and has come into the open. (Freud, 1919: 132)

*Heart of Darkness* is, using Freud’s own words, that which on the pages of *Our Sister Killjoy* “has come into the open,” its uncanny familiarity inhabiting the nooks and crannies of a textual space –*Our Sister Killjoy*– which enfolds the protagonist in a frightening disquietude, confronting her with that knowledge she simultaneously fears and covets and which Aidoo assembles in a phrase which will be repeated throughout the second part –“The Plums”- “knowledge gained since.” (27, 36, 51, 67, 69) Sissie’s journey, a source of joy and happiness, an award that singles her out from the rest, arouses the “feelings of repulsion and distress” (ibid: 123) that Freud associates with the uncanny, the unfamiliar and the new which, in the end, turns out to be too familiar and too old, like the vision of Africa embedded in *Heart of Darkness*.

Ominously pervasive, *Heart of Darkness* makes its way through from the very instant Sissie is notified she has been the recipient of the scholarship to go to Germany. The journey bears the weight of history and geography, “a cruel past, a funny present, a major desert or two, a sea, an ocean, several different languages, aeroplanes bridge the skies.”(8) The attention she receives is perceived with uneasiness; she senses her own insignificance, even when the cocktail party is organised in her honour. Both cocktail party and dinner presage the immersion in strangeness embedded in the journey she is about to venture onto, and the consequent search of subjectivity this will precipitate,

Later, as time shrank for her to leave, the ambassador himself had invited her to his home. The first time to a cocktail party at which it was fairly clear that she was the only insignificant guest, and then to a small dinner in her own honour. (...) The food, which she instinctively knew was first class in spite of its foreignness, was served from steaming pots.

There was European wine. Her first encounter with that drink.

Who did they think she was? (8)

It is also in the farewell party she is given before her departure where she is confronted with the character of “Sammy,” a black man who has already been to the West and whose sole function in the party is to praise Europe’s essential and unquestionable goodness. As Sissie declares,

he was very anxious to get her to realize one big fact. That she was unbelievably lucky to have been chosen for the trip. And that, somehow, going to Europe was altogether more like a dress rehearsal for a journey to paradise. (9)

Sammy's paradisiacal appreciation clearly opposes the nightmarish quality of the title, "Into a Bad Dream." And yet, who is "Sammy"? The connotations of the name cannot be left unnoticed for Aidoo clearly wants us to detect in this character a Western creation, that of the African who "obeys" his white master and who lavishes on the higher culture of Europe. The uncanny remembrance of the Manager's boy, whose "insolent black head in the doorway" (HD, 68) announces Kurtz's death with the inauspicious phrase "Mistah Kurtz - he dead" (HD, 69) slips through the figure of Sammy.

*Heart of Darkness* creeps into Aidoo's text once again when, while on the plane which will take her to Europe, Sissie is forced to confront the stewardess's Western conception of her blackness. Because there are two other passengers who happen to be black, the stewardess takes it for granted that they must be Sissie's friends, oblivious of the fact that they have never met before and that they come from different countries, Sissie being Ghanaian, the other two passengers being Nigerian. Sissie agrees to join them because,

(...) to have refused to join them would have created an awkward situation, wouldn't it? Considering too that apart from the air hostess's obviously civilized upbringing, she had been trained to see to the comfort of all her passengers. Naturally, she was only giving Sissie a piece of disinterested advice to make her feel at ease enough to enjoy her flight. (10)

The stewardess's white gaze cannot apprehend black differentiated individuals but only the black mass that Marlow's eyes perceived as "a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping." (HD, 37) For in *Heart of Darkness*, the "white men" (HD, 42) and the "black



fellows,”(HD, 42) are clearly kept apart from each other. Despite the fact that they travel together, that they sail along the same river, that they share the same space, that they are devoured by a similar sense of strangeness, Conrad’s text is adamant in maintaining them as separate entities.

Where *Heart of Darkness* creeps most menacingly through is upon Sissie’s immediate arrival in Germany. From the airport she is taken by taxi to a railway station to catch the train which will lead her to her final destination, a little town in Bavaria, but since the train is not due for another hour, she has time to roam the station at her own leisure. A black girl amid white people is easily spotted and so when she hears the words “Das Schwartzte Mädchen,”<sup>14</sup> she is made to see “that all that crowd of people going and coming in all sorts of directions had the colour of pickled pig parts that used to come from foreign places to the markets at home.” (12) And just as soon as she realizes this, she also feels an anguish inside of herself which makes her want to vomit, “ashamed of her reaction.” (12) Another shame slithers through Sissie’s own shame, that of Marlow when he recognizes in different complexions and “slightly flatter noses,” (HD, 10) the reason that sustains Imperialism, “the conquest of the earth,” (HD, 10), which in Sissie’s words becomes the reason “to get land, land, more land.” (13) The ugliness that Sissie’s thoughts let loose, recalls the ugliness that Marlow disclosed in his apprehension of the imperialist enterprise. If we could divide our brain into two parallel compartments, I would suggest that we place the passage below on one side and the famous passage in *Heart of Darkness* beginning “the conquest of the earth ...” on the other. Sissie’s perception uncannily recalls Marlow’s words:<sup>15</sup>

For the rest of her life, she was to regret this moment when she was made to notice differences in human colouring.

No matter where she went, what anyone said, what they did. She knew it never mattered.

But what she also came to know was that someone somewhere would always see in any kind of difference, an excuse to be mean.

A way to get land, land, more land.

Valleys where green corn would sway in the wind.

A grazing ground for highland cattle.

A stream to guggle the bonnie bairns to sleep.

Gold and silver mines,

Oil

Uranium

Plutonium

Any number of ums-

Clothes to cover skins,

Jewels to adorn,

Houses for shelter, to lie down and sleep.

A harsher edge to a voice.

A sharper ring to commands.

Power, Child, Power.

For this is all anything is about.

Power to decide

Who is to live,

Who is to die, (12-13)

This is a crucial moment for both Sissie and Marlow, for both *Heart of Darkness* and *Our Sister Killjoy*, it is the realization that colour matters and this instant of lucidity that befalls on the protagonists takes place on the first pages of their respective texts, hence marking “colour” as the substance that defines, classifies and evaluates individuals. And the

sense used to detect colour is none other than sight, hence *visibility*, once again, tenaciously intrudes in the fabrication of knowledge. Visibility is the thread that sews *Our Sister Killjoy* with another text, to which, I contend, it is synchronically related, and which has already been a solid presence in this dissertation, Luce Irigaray's *Speculum of the Other Woman*.

The connection I am drawing between Irigaray's and Aidoo's text might be labeled, in a first moment, as far-fetched, inconsistent and disparaging. After all, we are talking about a text concocted in the field of literature by a Ghanaian author, on the one hand, and a text constructed in the area of philosophy by a French author, on the other. And yet, reading the two texts side by side, one discovers how they spin a web that brings them close to each other. So, rather than highlighting the differences, what I propose here, is to dig out those aspects of the texts that enrich Kristeva's vertical axis. The questions I would like to pose are the following: what common experience can link an African writer with a French philosopher? What tones resonate in the voices of these two texts, separated by geography and academic discipline, which make them sing a suspiciously similar tune?

Published in 1974, *Speculum of the Other Woman* has ever since established itself as a pioneering and decisive reference for feminist criticism. Irigaray's dismantling of patriarchy is grounded in the persistent use of the specular trope which demarcates the architecture of the whole book. A "speculum" is, following the Oxford Dictionary's definition, "a metal instrument that is used to dilate an orifice or canal in the body to allow inspection" and a speculum is indeed the tool used by gynecologists to examine the female sexual organ, what Irigaray terms the *hystera*. In Irigaray's hands, the speculum becomes the weapon which allows her to fight patriarchal thought by dilating the passage of

the history of Western philosophy for easier examination, revealing, in this case, the highly patriarchal nature of Western thought. This close examination of Western discourse which Irigaray's *speculum* carries out is verbally enacted by her continuous, persistent and incisive questions.<sup>16</sup>

The year of publication of *Our Sister Killjoy* is auspiciously close to that of *Speculum*, 1977. The texts were created around the same time and, although geographically distant, their architectural device is nourished by the same specular mechanism. The full title of Aidoo's text needs close examination, *Our Sister Killjoy or Reflections from a Black-eyedSquint*. There are two parts to be distinguished in the title: "Our Sister Killjoy" and "Reflections of a Black-eyedSquint" joined by the copula "or." The second part, usually dismissed, is to my mind essential to understand the narrative unfolding before us. For, this "Black-eyedsquint" is pointing towards a specular imagery that reveals the inquisitive nature of Aidoo's narrative technique and which persuasively collocates with Irigaray's. To "squint" means "to look closely as if trying to see more clearly," it means "to peer with the eyes partly closed, as in too strong light," it means "to look sidelong or askance, obliquely with suspicion, disapproval." And this is exactly what Aidoo –through Sissie– skillfully performs; just like Irigaray dismantles patriarchal discourse through her specular dissection of Western philosophy, so does Aidoo dissect Eurocentric discourse through her insidious and persistent squinting at Europe. Where Irigaray's narrative deviated into perfectly controlled questions, ironic turns and re-statements aimed at Western philosophical texts, Aidoo's spurts into superbly calculated poetic digressions that spring from the analysis of the "Black-eyedsquint" in her observation of the *supposedly postcolonial* West. Both reflections – Irigaray's and Aidoo's- are impregnated by the meanings of producing an

image and thinking seriously. Contemplation as image-making and reasoning, the seeds of empowerment are thus planted in the very action of “reflecting.”

And now the vital difference that distinguishes Irigaray’s and Aidoo’s specularization process, a difference which, paradoxically, connects most purposefully the two texts: colour. Irigaray’s specular technique reveals –makes visible– the blindnesses of a discourse built upon “maleness.” In other words, loaded with “gender,” the supremacy of maleness is severely contested. Unlike Irigaray’s *speculum*, Aidoo’s –through Sissie’s *Black-eyedsquint*– is loaded with “gender” and “race.” Patriarchy is not only male but also white. If Eurocentric discourse is to be dismantled at all, its foundations have to be destabilized and in order to be destabilized their maleness and whiteness have to be identified. This is the core of Aidoo’s postcolonial experimentation, her –and her protagonist’s– plunging into the white hole. And nowhere is whiteness most ferociously reflected than in the cradle of the Aryan racial discourses that developed in the beginning of the twentieth-century, that is to say, Germany.

## **2. Marija’s Garden: Of Female Seductions.**

“Into a Bad Dream” brands Sissie’s journey to the West as a nightmare and yet her nightmarish wanderings on Bavarian soil seem to be soothed by the presence of this German housewife, Marija, whom she meets in the second part, and whose existence is metaphorically embodied by the plums that configure the title. We readers perceive Sissie’s relationship with Marija as one drawn by a longing for friendship which is

felt by Marija as something irrepressible and fulfilling but which, on the part of Sissie, is received with unemotional acquiescence and supercilious consent. Marija showers Sissie with the goods she knows the Ghanaian girl craves, namely, plums. Her African eyes imbibe plums, together with pears and apricots and other Mediterranean fruits, with exoticism, and to her, because of their strangeness and succulence, these fruits are desirable,

Like pears, apricots and other fruits of the Mediterranean and temperate zones, Sissie had seen plums for the first time in her life only in Frankfurt. (...) It was midsummer and the fruit stalls were overflowing. She had decided that being fruits, she liked them all, although her two loves were going to be pears and plums. And on those she gorged herself. So she had good reason to feel fascinated by the character of Marija's plums. They were of a size, sheen and succulence she had not encountered anywhere else in those foreign lands. (40)

However, what Sissie does not understand at this moment but which we readers are made to grasp by the narrative voice is the fact that behind the succulence of Marija's plums there resides the succulence of the young African girl that she represents. Just as the plums are desirable and exotic to her African eyes, so is she desirable and exotic to Marija's German-European eyes:

What she (Sissie) was ... not aware of, though, was that those Bavarian plums owed their glory in her eyes and on her tongue not only to that beautiful and black Bavarian soil, but also to other qualities that she herself possessed at that material time:

Youthfulness  
 Peace of mind  
 Feeling free:  
 Knowing you are a rare article,  
 Being  
 Loved. (40)

It is not by chance that Sissie, while her tongue caresses the plumps, realizes that their colour is almost like her own skin colour and it is not by chance that the narrator tells us, at precisely this instant that “Marija told her how she had selected them specially for her, off the single tree in the garden.” (40)

Another garden intrudes our imagination, another single tree, another seduction -for a seduction is indeed what we are facing- comes to mind, that of the Garden of Eden, the seduction where the object of exchange, the object of desire was embodied by a piece of fruit that stemmed from a tree, curiously called “the tree of knowledge.”<sup>17</sup> I am *tempted* to interpret Marija’s seduction under the rubric of this first seduction in the Garden of Eden, I find the allegory irresistible.<sup>18</sup>

Who is seduced by whom in the Garden of Eden? Is Adam seduced by Eve? Is Eve seduced by the devil? Or, is there another possibility, that of Eve being seduced by the object of desire that stems from that one single tree in the garden and that so challengingly epitomizes knowledge? Seduction unleashes a set of relationships which orchestrate a geometry which revolves around desire, knowledge and gender. But this geometry is firmly rooted in one single presence which hovers powerfully above the Garden, whose existence, immaterial and ghostly though it might be, is never –can never- be questioned, and this presence is none other than the presence of God, the patriarch. Not in vain, representations of God share a common thread: he is always a man,

with a white beard and white hair, his skin undoubtedly white. And still, in the Bible, his presence is felt as a voice, the voice that judges and orders, a voice which is irrefutably and unabashedly white and male and which cogently enfolded Eurocentric discourse.<sup>19</sup>

Behind the image of the “rather / Nice / Old / European / Gentleman with a flowing white beard” (27), there looms the history of the ruthless colonization of Africa. Europe’s colonizing zeal implanted Christianity in the people of Africa by erasing their African names, thus stealing their African identities. “For,” as Aidoo through Sissie recalls, “a child to grow up / To be a / Heaven-worthy individual, / He had / To have / Above all, a / Christian name.” (25) And so we are informed that Sissie’s Christian name is none other than Mary. Marija immediately links Sissie’s Christian name, Mary, with her own, Marija, but Sissie insists on being called by her African name, “Sissie,” which is

(...) just a beautiful way they call “Sister” by people who like you very much. Especially if there are not many girl babies in the family ... one of the very few ways where an original concept from our old ways has been given expression successfully in English. (28)

Mary is relegated to “school and work,” to Irigaray’s Law of the Father. The Christian name “Mary” carries with it the seeds of Christianity, the mother of Christ, the ultimate Mother but, in Sissie’s choice of names, “mother” is being replaced by “sister.”

Why is Aidoo calling forth this biblical seduction in *Our Sister Killjoy*? And, how does Aidoo manipulate this biblical seduction in order to suit her aim, the dismantling of Eurocentric discourse? To desire, knowledge and gender she adds race and by adding “race,” she compels us to recover, once again, the racial discourses which were coined



during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Europe as a consequence of Imperialism and which pertinaciously claimed scientific status. These discourses are of vital importance to understand how in *Our Sister Killjoy* gender and race are inextricably linked, indissolubly entangled. And this is why in Marija's particular Garden of Eden the desiring fruit is dark and both seductress and seduced are women. But first, let us recover the racial discourses that permeated the Imperialistic enterprise.

In *Colonial Desire. Hybridity, Culture and Race*, Robert Young offers a clear, effective and satisfactorily concluding explanation as to what the racial discourses developed in the cradle of Imperialistic expansion amounted to. Race, he affirms,

was defined through the criterion of civilization, with the cultivated white Western European male at the top, and everyone else on a hierarchical scale either in a chain of being, from mollusc to God, or, in the later model, on an evolutionary scale of development from a feminized state of childhood (savagery) up to full (European) manly adulthood (Young, 1995: 94).

The analogies he draws are by no means new to us. We have already encountered the triad constituted by childhood-female-savage on the one hand and the triad formed by adulthood-male-civilized, on the other. Race informs that the first triad is non-white (black, yellow, brown) whereas the second is necessarily white. And yet what these analogies, embedded as they are in racial discourses, perilously entail is an irrepressible desirability towards the racial other. The white male, the transmitter of civilization is likewise repulsed and attracted towards this racial other whom he acknowledges as inferior, savage and, in most cases, also ugly. It is, as Young remarks, "in this ambivalent movement

of attraction and repulsion” where “we encounter the sexual economy of desire in fantasies of race, and of race in fantasies of desire” (ibid: 90).

This sexual economy of desire which is formulated on the premise that whiteness and maleness stand at the top of the evolutionary scale is, at the same time, predicated around knowledge and sex. Definitions of “civilization” fuse with the concept of knowledge. Civilization is regarded as a social organization of high order which gathers in its bosom the countries and people who have reached a high stage of social and cultural development. Intellectual and cultural refinement is also allotted to civilization, thus positioning those who are supposedly uncivilized at the level of utter primitiveness. When the white male encounters the primitive, savage, infantile other, a process of colonial feminization of the land and its people takes place to the extent that even the male other is femininely apprehended. In other words, and as Young’s dissection of racial discourses point out, “the white male becomes instinctively attracted to both sexes,” and he concludes, “as so often in the colonial arena, civilization thus begins to merge with an inter-racial homo-eroticism” (ibid: 109). Notwithstanding, this homo-eroticism, this peculiar fusion of knowledge and sex as exemplified by the civilizing thrust of the white European male is obviously enacted between men, not between women, as is the case in “The Plums.” When the civilizing game is thus en-gendered, the consequences are strikingly different.

Marija’s seduction culminates with her inviting Sissie to her home. Knowing how Sissie relished plums, she has baked a plum cake for her, thus eliciting once more her wish to seduce her. This time, though, Sissie refuses the cake she is offering her because she says “I am not hungry,” (62) and, besides she feels it is very late and wants to go back to the youth hostel where she is lodged. But Marija wants Sissie to stay and so

suggests she sees her son, little Adolf, who is sleeping upstairs in her parents' room. Marija Sommers, German housewife, displays her civilized house to Sissie, but "the images of twentieth century modernia" totally escape Sissie's gaze. The journey upstairs, on the contrary, is felt, from Sissie's part as "a moving, not up, but down into some primeval cave." (62) And a cave she indeed encounters upon her entrance to Marija's bedroom, a cave whose "funereal elegance" (63) exhumes whiteness from every corner:

The room indeed looked as if it was cut out of a giant rock that must have existed in the architect's mind. All triangles and disappearing corners. White walls. A giant white bed, laid out smooth, waiting to be used.

Speak softly  
Tread lightly  
It is a holy place  
A sanctuary for shrouded dreams. (63)

And it is there, in the holy place of her own bedroom where Marija lets loose her shrouded dreams and with one hand she touches "the skin of Sissie's breasts," (64) while with the other she "groped round and round Sissie's midriff, searching for something to hold on to." (64) Marija's warm tears on her neck together with the feeling of her hot lips against hers, wake Sissie up "as one does from a bad dream" (64) and "unintentionally" (64) hits "Marija on the right cheek with the back of her right hand." (64) How are we to interpret Sissie's reaction? As her condemnation of the desire Marija is experiencing towards her? After all, and as the lines that follow the scene avow, "it all happened within a second. Two people staring at one another. Two mouths wide open with disbelief." (64)

This scene of rejection is immediately followed by Sissie's remembrance of home, and more significantly of her mother when, on rainy days, "completely wrapped up in one of her mother's akatado-cloths," she used to sleep in the bedchamber while her mother was "pounding fufu in the anteroom." (64) The connection between her mother and Marija cannot be left unnoticed; after all, Marija fulfills, up to a certain extent, the role of nurturing mother for she feeds Sissie. The plums could be arguably considered poisoned food for their seductive potential, but, in spite of this, the fact that Marija *nurtures* Sissie remains. Sissie's remembrance of home, consequently, complicates an interpretation of Sissie's rejection of Marija as her postulation against same-sex desire. To make matters even more challenging, Chantal Zabus notes how this "scene of apparent rejection is followed by Sissie remembering a British schoolmistress's homophobic chastisement" (Zabus, 2008: 96) of two Ghanaian girls for sleeping together. The way the scene is recalled testifies to the fact that Aidoo does not condemn the girls at all, the condemnation is geared towards the British schoolmistress whose educating zeal was meant to straighten up African girls. Devoid of all nurturing capacity, the schoolmistress is cruelly described as "a panting tigress whose huge bosoms never suckled a cub." (66) "C-r-i-m-e / A Sin / S-o-d-o-m-y" (67) are European interpretations of the scene, or so does the African consciousness of the narrator seem to insinuate.

What is then Aidoo's aim at painting this seduction? Their mutual disbelief is followed by instinctual crying which in the case of Sissie is repressed, and in the case of Marija takes the shape of an unusual tear that falls from the left eye while she surprisingly manages to keep the right eye completely dry. The disbelief they share is none other than this flimsy moment of recognition in each other's eyes. If seduction is

imbued with knowledge, if the civilized European is allegedly pouring knowledge on the seduced African, we can affirm that Marija's seduction has not been in vain. For Sissie, by looking at Marija "suddenly knew."  
 (65) Knowledge she gains which she will never forget,

She saw it once and was never to forget it. She saw against the background of the thick smoke that was like a rain cloud over the chimneys of Europe,

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Forever falling like a tear out of a woman's eye.

And so this was it?

Bullying slavers and slave-traders.

Solitary discoverers.

Swamp-crossers and lion hunters.

Missionaries who risked the cannibal's pot to

bring the world to the heathen hordes.

Speculators in gold in diamond uranium and

Copper

Oil you do not even mention –

Preachers of apartheid and zealous educators.

Keepers of Imperial Peace and homicidal  
Plantation owners.

Monsieur Commandant and Madame the  
Commandant's wife.

Miserable rascals and wretched whores whose only  
distinction

in life was that at least they were better than the Natives ... (65-66)

It is the tear “forever falling from a woman’s eye” that unleashes the whole anti-colonial palaver, recognizing in imperialistic fervor a profound feeling of loneliness which, nonetheless, exhibits its civilizing power in ruthless savagery. Nothing new in this denunciation; Conrad already unveiled the savagery of the civilizing enterprise, one might concede. And yet, I believe not enough attention has been paid to the fact that it is the tear falling from a woman’s eye that stirs the knowledge. Sissie is perfectly aware of the game of power that is being elicited and she acknowledges her own power in the game. Touched by Marija’s lonely tear, she has to refrain from crying herself but she manages to do so for “stronger in her was the desire to ask somebody why the entire world has had to pay so much and is still paying so much for some folks’ unhappiness.” (66)

The roles have been reversed, at least apparently so. It is Marija, the European, the civilized who is the victim and Sissie, the African, the savage, the one who inflicts pain on her. And she finds a strange pleasure in inflicting pain, so much so that days after the incident when Marija invites her once again to her home to have lunch -this time the presence of Big Adolf is expected- Sissie takes advantage of the situation and uses it as a weapon to deliberately hurt Marija for a second time. Sissie’s cruelty is launched towards Marija irremissibly: she knew beforehand that she could not possibly attend for her departure

was imminent and yet she let Marija believe that it would be possible. Upon hearing that this lunch she organised will never take place, Marija's pain so *disorganizes* her that all she can do is stand there, bite her lips and grip at the handle of her baby's pram. Marija's distress and pain provokes in Sissie a "pleasurable heat" (76) which draws her closer to that knowledge she is experiencing through joy, but which her female Black-eyedsquint immediately acknowledges as male,

Clearly, she was enjoying herself to see that woman hurt. It was nothing she had desired. Nor did it seem as if she could control it, this inhuman sweet sensation to see another human being squirming. It hit her like a stone, the knowledge that there is pleasure in hurting. A strong three-dimensional pleasure, an exclusive masculine delight that is exhilarating beyond all measure. And this too is God's gift to man? She wondered. (76)

The transient nature of the pleasure experienced by the perpetrator of pain –Sissie- renders this exercise of power as futile, inhuman and profoundly "masculine." She is a woman inflicting pain on the woman who tried to seduce her. Is there any interpretation for this *knowledge gained since?* It is worth remembering at this point that Sissie is not innocently drawn towards Marija's seduction scene since she was aware of the latter's "red blood"(61) rushing into her face while she observed her. She herself admitted that everything would have been different, had she been a man,

She had imagined and savoured the tears, their anguish at knowing that their love was doomed. But they would make promises to each other which of course would not stand a chance of getting fulfilled. She could see Marija's tears ... That was a game. A game in which one day, she

became so absorbed, she forgot who she was, and the fact that she was a woman. (61)

But she is a woman and Marija did not live their relationship as a game. This masculinisation of her identity is brutally articulated in the cruelty she deliberately exerts on Marija and which culminates in her encoding of the term “bastard” to refer to herself, “Sissie felt like a bastard. Not a bitch. A bastard.” (75). A further incision into the word “bastard” unleashes a set of meanings which combine dubious parental origin with spuriousness, inferiority, uncertainty and an incessant reverberation of masculinity, especially when placed next to “bitch,” the definition of which leaves no room for questioning the femininity ingrained in the word. Thus, a “bitch” is defined as a bad-tempered, malicious or/and promiscuous woman.

What makes the masculine bastard different from the feminine bitch? It is interesting how Irigaray’s *Speculum* intentionally calls “bastard” the offspring that stems from the Father, this primal Origin which *must* reside outside the cave, which *must* cut off any relationship with the hystera, that “amorphous extension“ which defines the maternal and reproduces shadows, fantasies, fakes. Only education will allow him to reach the paternal Truth. We already identified the Father-Idea-Truth as Eurocentric discourse, so we could detect in Sissie’s naming herself “bastard” an unwelcomed alliance with this maleness and whiteness which her racial otherness can only, at best, grant her, as Irigaray states, the status of “hybrid.”<sup>20</sup>

I would like to recover the moment of seduction, the instant in which Marija’s lonely tear falls from one of her eyes. Marija’s tear is but a reflection of the loneliness of the colonial thirst; this is the discovery, the knowledge that envelops Sissie when she sees *behind* the tear and



spots the origin, the ultimate source and yet, I will argue, this is just a phase of her learning quest for the seduction scene is not resolved at this moment. Sissie's first reaction mimics the Hegelian master-slave dialectic by disguising herself behind the cloak of Eurocentric discourse. But this is a dialectic doomed to failure; the cloak soon slips from her shoulders and she is left with her blackness and femaleness. It is from her blackness and femaleness that she looks at Marija and discovers a woman whose Aryan whiteness does not save her from the loneliness of a discourse grounded in maleness. "Who was Marija Sommer?," (48) asks the narrative voice. Marija Sommer is the right eye that does not cry, the "daughter of mankind's / Self-appointed most royal line, / the House of Aryan -," (48) the "heiress to some / Legacy that would make you / Bow / Down / Your head in / Shame and / Cry." (48) Marija Sommer is also the tear that falls from her left eye, the white loneliness of her white house, her white husband and her little white son. And who is "Our Sister" (48)? "A Little / Black / Woman" (48) who regales her hope, the hope of escape from loneliness, the hope of realizing, in the dual meaning of noticing and fulfilling, desire, in short, the fleeting possibility to flee from the cold of the white hole. The coldness of the white hole embraces all, even the food that Marija generously lavishes on Sissie, "cheese, sausages, fruit," and some "cold flesh." (38)

Critical interpretations have stressed the failure of the relationship between Sissie and Marija. Taken from the perspective of same-sex desire and measuring fulfillment sexually, it naturally follows to interpret their relationship as a failure. Sissie is no vessel into which Marija can pour her desire, a desire which, borrowing Boehmer's term, unfolds a, I would add, desperate "yearning for love" (Boehmer, 2005: 183). Their feelings for each other are conditioned by conflicting desires. However, I will contend that those conflicting desires meet in the end, finding a

resolution that alleviates them both, a conciliation which is metaphorically encoded in the figure of the plums. Marija sees Sissie off at the station and hands her a brown paper bag with food inside which Sissie thrusts “into her [own] hands” (78) While on the train and once the town has disappeared from sight, Sissie opens the paper bag knowing beforehand that among the liver sandwiches, the pastries and the cheese -the cold food-, there will lie, big, succulent and purple, “some plums.” (82) The nourishing link that drew them together is thus reestablished, recovered, their nurturing desire, in a strange way, fulfilled. As Audre Lorde asserts,

For women, the need and desire to nurture each other is not pathological but redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real power is rediscovered. It is this real connection, which is so feared by a patriarchal world (Lorde, 1981: 99).

*Aidoo's black female* protagonist has been confronted with a *white woman* –Aryan-looking, we should not forget- , and so one side of Eurocentric discourse has been disclosed and challenged. To secure the gender and racial axes of Sissie's orbit, a confrontation with a *black man* is required. This confrontation she faces in the next section.

### 3.The Colour Question: Hearts, Darkness and Transplants

The last paragraph of “The Plums” begins with the sentence “The train was determined to return Our Sister to her origins.” (81) But the

promise to return to these origins is suspended since first, there is another phase on her journey that she has to go through to complete her quest of knowledge and which will plunge her deeper into the white hole. Taking into account the trip that moulds the narrative, it is understanding that origins should be lined up with home. And given the fact that Sissie is, after all, the illegitimate offspring of colonialism, a visit to her “colonial home” appears as inevitable and, incidentally, unhomely. It is the time to face this illegitimate home which opens the doors to the uncanny from the very opening lines, “if anyone had told her that she would want to pass through England because it was her colonial home, she would have laughed.” (85)

The uncanny nature of the link between “home” and “colonial home,” is felt in Sissie’s confession about the special status of England among her own people at home. As she affirms, “the only way to get people at home to understand where she had been,” (85) is to go to England, the only solid reference they possess that relates them directly to the West. And yet England fills Sissie with unease since she is unable to grasp its true significance. “Germany is overseas,” she concedes, “The United States is overseas,” “but England is another thing.” (85) As regards “what this other thing is,” she cannot say, at least not at this incipient moment of her stay, and although “this other thing” about England “has never been clear to anyone” (85), what she delineates clearly from the very beginning is the colonial ties that unite her to this other “home.”

The game of opposites that Freud’s uncanny exerts finds a perfect setting in Sissie’s perception of England. Strangeness and familiarity mingle with fear and confidence, the hidden merges with the visible, in short, and reversing Freud’s original proposition, the *unheimlich* becomes the *heimlich*. The passage below, which captures Sissie’s first

impressions of England, exemplifies this apparently contradictory and ambivalent apprehensions that feed Freud's uncanny:

She had had no idea of what to expect of England. But what no one had prepared her for, was finding so many Black people there.

Men, women, children.

The place seemed full of them but they appeared to be so wretched, she wondered why they stayed.

There were mothers pushing their babies in second-hand carriages while their men toiled the long day through as bus drivers, porters, construction workers, scavengers. Mostly scavengers. (85)

The familiar sight of black people blends with the distressing wretchedness that envelops blackness in this white country, relegating black people to the level of "scavengers," people who gather the things that have been discarded by others. Sissie's Black-eyed squint swallows the scene displayed before her with the unsettling mixture of terror and relief that fills knowledge, this time not "the knowledge gained since" from "The Plums," but "the gift of knowledge acquired later" (89) which makes her *see* that "in a cold land, poverty shows as nowhere else." (89) The sentence "Sissie bled as she tried to take the scene in," (85) expresses in an excruciatingly clear manner the crudeness and pain of the reality of the colonial home.

I would like to insist on the fact that what Sissie first perceives in England shows a reverse process to the one put forward by Freud. Sissie expects to find the *unheimlich*; she has been dutifully prepared for whiteness during her stay in Germany and yet, what she encounters is the familiar sight of black people dressed as they are at home but enveloped by the strangeness of the awkward backdrop of the English

landscape. As Sissie's voice despondently recollects, cold turns their blackness into ridicule,

(...) She saw women who at home would have been dignified matrons as well as young, attractive girls looking ridiculous in a motley of fabrics and colours. Unused to the cold and thoroughly inefficient at dealing with it, they smothered their bodies in raiments of diverse lengths, hues and quality –in a desperate effort to keep warm. (88)

Notwithstanding, Sissie's *Black-eyedsquint* performs its most incisive dissection when it meets “the recipients of the leftovers of imperial handouts,” (86) a rotund and abrasive description of those Third World students who go West to get an education. Knowledge, once again, makes its presence most forcefully felt. What is the knowledge being gained? Sissie makes no concessions in underpinning the enslaving quality of the educational exchange. She discloses the economic transaction that lies at the core of this quest of knowledge and by upturning the roles of recipients and donors, she unashamedly asserts how Third World people comply with selling their minds, and their hearts, as we shall see later, to the West.

For a few pennies now and a  
 Doctoral degree later,  
 Tell us about  
 Your people  
 Your history  
 Your mind (86)

If Sissie's orbit illuminated and consequently unveiled the source of Marija's thwarted seduction, now in England, the geometry which her

rotation demarcates takes us to Kunle, a Nigerian student, “practically a Londoner, having lived in that city for seven years” (95) who, from his privileged position as recipient of imperial leftovers articulates what, to my mind, constitutes the core of this part “From Our Sister Killjoy” -and to some extent, also the core of the whole text-, namely, the theory of the Heart Transplant.<sup>21</sup>

Nowhere do theories of race and scientific discourse meet a firmer ground than in the history of the Heart Transplant. The frightening side of the encounter, as I will try to show, is that it cannot be dated from the nineteenth century, the peak of Imperial expansion, but in the incipient postcolonial era. It is to be located amid the effervescence of humanistic scientific progress which culminated in the performance of the famous first heart transplant by the South African doctor, Christian Barnard. What is the connection between this first heart transplant and what I call Kunle’s racial theory of the Heart Transplant?

The official history of the first heart transplant takes us to Cape Town, on the third of December, 1967, when, we are informed, Doctor Christian Barnard successfully took the heart of Denise Darvall, a twenty-five-year-old woman who had died in a car accident, and placed it in the chest of Louis Washkansky, a fifty-five-year-old man who suffered from a heart disease. This surgical procedure known as heart transplant, as one can easily infer, revolutionized the world of science in its dual path as technical knowledge and humanistic enterprise. A lot of human lives could be saved as an aftermath of Dr. Barnard’s success. However, Mr. Washkansky died eighteen days later because of further complications as a result of the complex surgical intervention. Dr. Barnard was not undaunted by this first incomplete success and so, a month later, on the second of January, 1968, he performed a second heart transplant, this time the receiver was Philip Blaiberg and the donor was Clive Haupt, a

twenty-four- year old man who collapsed on a Cape Town beach a day before the operation. Nothing extraordinary except for the fact that Clive Haupt was black and thus clandestinely, race entered the discourse.<sup>22</sup>

Medical accounts of the history of the heart transplant are reluctant to touch upon the issue of the race of the donor.<sup>23</sup> The truth is that the issue of Clive Haupt's "black" heart stirred the apparent calmness of South African society, immersed as it was in apartheid. What consequences would the placing of a black heart in a white man's chest bring about? This is the moment when Kunle enters the scene, since for Kunle the Heart Transplant is the solution to the colour problem. Kunle's scientific logic is terrifyingly exact: if hearts can be exchanged, no matter their racial source, then what follows is equality. According to him, this scientific progress is precisely

The type of development that can  
solve the question of apartheid  
and rid us, 'African negroes  
and all other negroes' of the  
Colour Problem. The whole of the  
Colour Problem. (96)

Scientific discourse does not necessarily meet the needs of the humanistic enterprise.<sup>24</sup> The blackness of Sissie's squint discloses first, the rampaging anonymity surrounding the second black donor's name and the first female donor's name, -"poor ghostly female whose / Identity has / Faded, / Already, / So completely" (97)- and, second, she dares to ascertain the ruthless experimentation from the "Christian Doctor" (100) that such intervention involves. For she does not believe,

as Kunle insists on affirming, that he first experimented “on the hearts of dogs and cats,” (97) since the “Christian Doctor” himself said that

in his glorious country, niggerhearts are so easy to come by, because of the violence those happy and contented Bantus perpetrate against one another, in their drunken ecstasies and childlike gambols. (100)

What difference is there between the scientific discourse of nineteenth-century race theories and that of the “Christian Doctor”? Civilization and progress lie behind the official history of the Heart Transplant, and ironically, behind the doctor’s first name, “Christian,” an opportunity Aidoo’s wit seizes immediately by baptizing him the “Christian Doctor.” What Aidoo’s text pokes into is the unofficial history. Through Sissie’s eyes, Aidoo wants her audience to read the history of the Heart Transplant from a very different perspective, one which highlights, once again, the terrifyingly pervasive presence of colonialism in the supposedly postcolonial reality of the recent independent African nations.

Multifarious meanings merge in the word “heart.” Science defines heart as a vital organ, but the humane ramification of the word leads us to an understanding of heart as essence, core, a centre of emotions, a vessel for our inmost thoughts and feelings, a cradle made of love, sympathy and affection. The heart encompasses one’s life in its whole dimension. A heart “transplantation,”(96) as Aidoo wickedly transforms the word, can only be effected under the auspices of death. Aidoo urges us to see the heart transplant as a transaction of life and death: the possibility of the heart transplant is contingent upon, at least, one death. The interesting aspect of this death is that the body of the donor cannot be sufficiently dead, otherwise the organ is of no use to



the receiver and yet, the irony of it all is that the removal, precise and exact, will certainly mean the donor's irretrievable death.

As a trope, the Heart Transplant is imbued with the capacity to condense the whole of the Imperialistic enterprise, the de-humanising strain of colonial desire and its indefatigable endurance in postcolonial times. The Heart Transplant is the heart of darkness. For, whose heart is taken out of its chest if not the heart of Africa? Those recipients of "Post-graduate awards" (86) aimed at "Giving away / Not only themselves, but," as Aidoo claims "All of us-" (87) are the hearts of Africa transplanted into white Western chests. The knowledge promised is a plunge into a hole whose heart is ominously white and which enslaves Africans to a perpetual dependence on their colonial homes. Kunle is but one of the many examples. Entire families drown in debts to have their sons educated in the West in the hope that this education will eventually save them from poverty. Blindness obfuscates Kunle's African eyes which, submerged in Western ecstasy, failed to see what Sissie's impatiently and angrily devour. By using intentionally politically incorrect vocabulary, she questions that

... cleaning the Baas's chest of its rotten  
heart and plugging in a brand-new palpitatingly  
warm kaffirheart, is the surest way to usher in  
the Kaffirmillennium. (101)

Her interrogation is aimed at the alleged humanity underlying the whole Heart Transplant enterprise and, in its turn, at the scientific grounds of racial -de-humanising- discourses.

At the end of this story, mimicking the official historical plot, Kunle significantly dies in a car accident on one of his visits to his family

in Nigeria. As befits a been-to, he came to Africa with his British car and “a very reliable, ... Foreign, British” (108) insurance policy. Obviously, and as is expected from a been-to, he was not supposed to drive the car himself, and so he hired a chauffeur. Bad African roads together with the inexperience of the African driver resulted in this most unfortunate accident which the “very reliable” British insurance policy did not cover. In one of her most sadly ironic statements, Aidoo imagines Kunle’s heart, “Still pumping under the / Sizzling chest,” (107) meeting “the hands of the Cristian Doctor” (108) in what was naturally and scientifically meant to be “A thoroughly civilized / Meeting.” (108)

The worst about the thoroughly civilized meeting, Aidoo seems to infer via Sissie, is not the meeting itself but the satisfaction with which Kunle, African, would throw his heart into the hands of the Christian Doctor for the sake of a very European conception of science and progress. The heart of darkness is the willingness of those assimilated Africans to sacrifice themselves, their African essence, at the hands of the West. In short, the heart of darkness is the Heart Transplant.

#### **4. Notebook of a Return to the Native Land: Re- Imagining Mother Africa**

“A Love Letter” is the alluring title with which Aidoo finalises Sissie’s journey. Readers are expected, together with the protagonist, to be taken to Africa but the hand that is writing the letter has not yet reached the soil of the native land. It is in the space granted by the airplane that the writing is being performed but this *physical* space discloses another space, ethereal and terrain-less, which reinforces the feeling of being suspended in the air. This feeling of suspension infuses

the narrative with a powerful perspective of reflection, an observance which is elicited from above and which resists being circumscribed by an earthly enclave. The eyes of Sissie *reflect* upon her experience in the West, the knowledge she gained in her plunging into the white hole. However, *this knowledge gained since* debases her as a human being and impairs her development as subject. What needs to be done now is to turn this *knowledge gained since* into *transformative knowledge*, the kind of knowledge which will allow her subjectivity as African and woman to flourish.

If in the previous parts Eurocentric discourse with its all-encompassing whiteness and maleness was called to the fore, in this last section the discourse to be dissected is the one forged as an aftermath of Eurocentric thought: I am referring to *négritude* and Pan-Africanism. The nothingness that enveloped the Africa of *Heart of Darkness* was transformed into the nurturing Mother Africa of *négritude* and yet, as we realized, this involved an objectification of African women which crippled their growth as truly independent subjects. I would like to demonstrate how in this last section Aidoo re-imagines Mother Africa by writing this letter, a confession of a love which is addressed not only to a specific lover, the boyfriend she has left in England, but also to those *négritude* sons of Africa.

That the discourse of *négritude* and Pan-Africanism is the objective of Aidoo's dissection is made clear by the scene that introduces "A Love Letter" and which deserves close attention. Let us turn our eyes to this passage since in those lines Aidoo's acerbic irony predicates her most astringent criticism on the racial discourses that originated in the nineteenth and early twentieth century and which, as we shall see, remain at the core of Pan-Africanist discourses. The passage reads as follows:

Said an anxious Afro-American student to a visiting African professor, 'Sir, please, tell me: is Egypt in Africa?'

'Certainly,' replied the professor.

'I mean Sir, I don't mean to kind of harass you or anything,' pressed the student, 'but did the Egyptians who built the Pyramids, you know, the Pharaohs and all, were they African?'

'My dear young man,' said the visiting professor, 'to give you the decent answer your anxiety demands, I would have to tell you a detailed history of the African continent. And to do that, I shall have to speak every day, twenty-four hours a day, for at least three thousand years. And I don't mean to be rude to you or anything, but who has that kind of time? (111)

The situation described revolves around two characters whom we assume straight away to be blacks, an Afro-American student and a visiting African Professor, united by a Pan-African thread, a shared colour and a shared history of subjugation, so to speak. Interestingly enough, the key of their conversation is a country, Egypt, but more so the historical significance of this country in terms of its civilizing import. Not in vain, Egyptian civilization, together with the subsequent Greek and Roman civilizations, constitutes the bedrock of Western development and, as we shall see, Western racial superiority. And yet geography distances Egypt from Europe; Egypt is indeed located in Africa. And the Egyptians, the ones who built the Pyramids, the mighty Pharaohs, were African. A question slips through, the question of whether they were also black.

The theories of race that emanated in the nineteenth century and that are to be connected with Imperialism, promulgated the indisputable superiority of the white, Caucasian race. Nevertheless, two tendencies

and, therefore, two theories are to be distinguished: the monogenetic theory of race and the polygenetic theory of race. Monogenesis, following the Biblical account, propounded that all human races descended from a single source, a pure origin of man which was unsurprisingly white and male. Racial difference was thus explored via a thesis of degeneration. The white male was the ideal and the deterioration of this ideal was a result of gender or geography or both. The other argument, polygenesis, supported the belief that different races were actually different species and had remained different all along, a position which allowed their defenders to claim the separation of the races. Those who cherished this idea were understandably to be found in the American South among the apologists for slavery and, as Young observes, also in their English advocates, the London Anthropological Society.<sup>25</sup>

The Imperialist enterprise, as postcolonial criticism has demonstrated, was actually upheld by an act of faith which proclaimed the unquestionable superiority of Western culture. This act of faith was strategically and persuasively expressed through scientific discourse which provided definitions of Western culture based entirely on racial differentiation. Civilisation was, as Young tenaciously points out, “the cause of whiteness,” and so, the equation of the white race with civilization was a necessary requirement to preserve the moral dimension of Empire. A sine-qua-non condition of science is the sustenance of its truths through evidence, and so the question as to what evidence proves the superiority of the white, Caucasian race, filters through. At the centre of racial theory which blended monogenesis and polygenesis in a single racist approach resided hybridity and black civilizations, the two aspects which served as evidence to proclaim scientifically the superiority of the white race.

Hybridity, the offspring of mixed races –in the American South this was embodied by the figure of the mulatto, the mixture of white and black- were closely analysed by racial theorists for their physical and mental characteristics offered evidence as to their being inferior to the whites. What is more, given that one of the signs of Darwinian evolution was marked by the power of species to procreate, fertility posed an invaluable source of experimentation. Were the sexual unions between different races fertile?

If Imperialism shelters civilization and whiteness under the same cloak, then the possibility of a black civilization in the past adumbrates the inviolable purity of the Empire, and the only civilization that might jeopardize this otherwise compact connection is none other than Egyptian civilization. The idea that Egyptians might have been black had to be erased altogether, and above everything else, it had to be scientifically proved. Martin Bernal captures this phenomenon with a cogent phrase, “the whitening of Egypt.” I would like to recover a quote that Young inscribes in his text, *Colonial Desire*, which posits very clearly Bernal’s theory of the whitening of Egypt (Young, 1995: 126-133; Bernal, 1987). The quote comes from one of the maximum exponents of polygenesis and indefatigable apologist of slavery, the American Josiah Nott, and I request that this quote be read alongside Aidoo’s former cited passage:

Before entering upon the Natural History of the human race, it is indispensably necessary, as a preliminary step, to examine some points in chronology, and to take a glance at the early history of Egypt. I must show that the Caucasian or white, and the Negro races were distinct at a very remote date, and *that the Egyptians were Caucasians*. Unless this point can be established the contest must be abandoned.<sup>26</sup> (italics in original)

The Afro-American student's question to the African Professor is a concealed plea to blacken Egypt. Aidoo's passage should be read alongside the racial discourses that invented a white Egypt and which forced the forthcoming African professors to a perpetual investigation to prove scientifically that Egypt was indeed black and therefore, civilization did not escape blackness. This was indeed the case of Cheik Anta Diop whose entire life was devoted to digging up evidence to submit proof that the origin of mankind, of all races, was to be located in Africa (Diop, 1974 & 1987 & 1991). The African Professor's remark is irremissibly imbued with his creator's irony and deliberate ambivalence, and both irony and ambivalence are thrown at a readership *postcolonially* contextualized. On the one hand, his answer is elusive, we can even detect a certain dismissive, patronizing tone, labeling the task proposed by the student as an impossible one. On the other hand, his very elusiveness opens up another possibility, the questioning of the viability of racial discourses, and in that sense, Pan-Africanism is viewed as a direct aftermath of nineteenth century racial discourses. Pan-Africanism is read as a racial discourse that replaces white by black, and hence the whitening of Egypt gives way to the blackening of Egypt, a substitution of terms which does not weaken but, on the contrary, reinforces the omniscient presence of "race." What Aidoo introduces us to through this passage is the enslaving quality of this discourse which shackles Africans to perpetually prove their humanity to the West.

Sissie's lover, the alleged addressee of the letter, embodies this Pan-Africanist discourse. He is one of those recipients of the imperial leftovers who, unlike her, decides to stay in England to continue his interminable education. The racial conception of the world that nurtures Pan-Africanism is the same that substantiates Eurocentric discourse and

it is not by chance that the introductory scene we have analysed is immediately followed by the protagonist's identification of this discourse as the site of struggle: "My Precious Something, / First of all, there is this language. This language." (112) This is a language that does not allow her "to give voice to" her "soul" (112), a language that "enslaved" (112) her and therefore "the messengers of" her "mind always come shackled" (112) Eurocentric discourse is here grasped by the protagonist in its most verbal manifestation, the English language, a dubious inheritance. To identify the English language as the culprit of Sissie's linguistic slavery and to leave it at that would result in an inconclusive analysis of the implications that the use of English causes in a woman like Sissie, and by extension, a writer like Aidoo. It is not the linguistic nuances of the English that are at stake here but what English carries along, culture-wise. English enslaves Sissie's thoughts, renders her voiceless, deprives her of a soul, *in its quality of* Eurocentric discourse. Embedded in this language there is the patriarchal configuration of the world with its corresponding substantiation of the master signifiers of maleness and whiteness. Négritude poets faced the dubious inheritance of European languages and defeated whiteness by revalorizing blackness, by endowing black with a sustaining, favourable meaning. What Sissie's linguistic diatribe shows, though, is precisely the impossibility to separate gender and race, and, as she blatantly states, love does have a political dimension, and therefore demands to be articulated through language. Sissie's appellation, as shown in the passage below, opposes the traditional view that insists on presenting love as some ethereal entity that envelops human beings in an aura of unreality and takes it down to the political, to the realm of discourse, to words,



Of course, the language of love does not have to be audible. It is beyond Akan or Ewe, English or French. Therefore if I was not articulate enough in that area, then the fault must lie somewhere else.

But there are some matters which must be discussed with words. Definitely. (113)

And in their case, an African man and an African woman, the expression of love is further complicated by a language that is but it is not their own, a language transplanted to their minds and which they are forced to adapt to their feelings, their thoughts, their beings, a language that resonates with a colonial past that enslaves them both. This is what Sissie is trying to explain to her lover:

So you see, My Precious Something, all that I was saying about language is that I wish you and I could share our hopes, our fears and our fantasies, without feeling inhibited because we suspect that someone is listening. As it is, we cannot write to one another, or speak across the talking cables or converse as we travel on a bus or train or anywhere, but we are sure they are listening, listening, listening. (115)

Is there any way out of this discourse, is there any possibility to create a language that liberates Sissie's soul instead of enslaving her? Is it feasible for Aidoo to write in English and claim an African and female identity? Is it viable to make the English language sound African?

A heart can be transplanted surgically; the transplant can be translated into a cultural theft, into a loss of identity, an erasure of one's essence, in short, the banishment of one's heart. But the word "heart" is creatively cultivated in a very special artistic space, the one allotted to love. And it is out of love for Mother Africa that négritude poets –and Pan-Africanists– sang to their land. The surgical-cum-cultural

transplant of the previous part becomes in “A Love Letter” an emotional one. Love enters the scene, implacably and decisively and it does so through writing but the writer in this case, and unlike the *négritude* poets, is a woman. Space, writing, love and woman takes us to the beginning of Kristeva’s “Stabat Mater”:

Words (...) are always too distant, too abstract for this underground swarming of seconds, folding in unimaginable spaces. Writing them down is an ordeal of discourse, like love. What is loving, for a woman, the same thing as writing (Kristeva, 1983: 235).

Aidoo, in a tremendously generous act of love, takes this ordeal of discourse on her shoulders and writes down, her own hand in Sissie’s hand, the testimony of her ghost, her own heart of darkness dissected and offered to a readership by now, albeit confusedly, re-positioned.

Knowledge stands at the core of the lovers’ dispute. Sissie’s boyfriend believes he can help his country by persistently feeding on Western thought, a position Sissie resists being accommodated to. Her decision to leave him is measured against her femaleness and not against her capacity as human being to evaluate a situation that she deems enslaving. This is what she resents,

They say that any female in my position would have thrown away everything to be with you, and remain with you: first her opinions, and then her own plans. But oh deliciously naïve me. What did I rather do but daily and loudly criticize you and your friends for wanting to stay forever in alien places? (115)

Her subjectivity as African female is therefore put at stake, “sometimes when they are hotly debating the virtues of the African female, I ask

myself: ‘But who am I? Wher did I come from?’ (117) In the end, she decides to leave her “lost heart” (119) in the un-homeliness of the colonial home and come to terms with herself, and this, she knows for all the knowledge she has gathered on her journey, can only be effected at home, Africa. Writing will allow her to recover her heart, her self, her subjectivity as African female.

Readings of *Our Sister Killjoy* tend to focus on the negativism that the Black-eyed squint of the protagonist deploys on her surroundings. It is undeniable that Our Sister literally kills joy, but whose joy is she killing and why? Her denunciation of Eurocentric discourse is geared towards the accomplices of such discourse, the Africans who willingly acquiesce to European / Western assimilation and the Europeans / Westerners whose colour and gender blindness perpetuate a system that empowers maleness and whiteness, and, using Irigaray’s nomenclature, discards difference for the sake of a repressive sameness. Readers are confronted, sometimes brutally, sometimes tenderly, with a postcolonial world which, far from promising equality and hope in terrains other than the Western ones, tightens and reinforces colonial ties. The meaning of independence does not conflate with the dictionary definition of freedom from the control of another.

However, in a deliberate attempt to oppose negativism and to prove that *Our Sister Killjoy* entrusts readers with hope, I will recur to the end and, more specifically, to the final image, Aidoo’s source of empowerment which she transposes onto her protagonist, Sissie. The journey comes to an end. The stewardess announces the imminent landing. It is the end of the journey, the end of Sissie’s writing the letter and the end of Aidoo’s own writing of the text, *Our Sister Killjoy*. The pronoun “she” embraces Sissie as well as Aidoo and I would like to read

the following passage with this conflation of character and author in mind:

She sat quietly in her seat and stared at the land unfolding before her. Dry land, trees, a swamp, more dry land, green, green, lots of green. She had to check herself from laughing aloud. Suddenly, she knew what she was not going to do. She was never going to post the letter. Once written, it was written. She had taken some of the pain away and she was glad. There was no need to mail it. It was not necessary. She was going to let things lie where they had fallen. Besides, she was back in Africa. And that felt like fresh honey on the tongue: a mixture of complete sweetness and smoky roughage. Below was home with its unavoidable warmth and even after these thousands of years, its uncertainties.

‘Oh, Africa. Crazy old continent ...’ (133)

It is the image of Africa, that crazy old continent, that soothes her mind, liberates her enslaved self, for she recognizes in the outline of the African continent, her home, all signs of the uncanny disappear before the sight of the “dry land” with “trees” and “swamp” and “green, green, lots of green” *unfolding*, easily displaying its warmth, as if opening its arms to welcome her in her cradle. The whole tradition of Africa as nothingness is turned upside down. And yet this dismantling does not carry the signs of *négritude*. Before us stands the notebook of a daughter of Africa and in order to asseverate its significance, I will turn to, for the second time in this chapter, to Kristeva and, more specifically, to her theory of development of self.

Grounded in Lacanian psychoanalysis, Kristeva acknowledges two stages in the development of self in children. The first stage she calls semiotic and is characterized by an imagery relationship to the world.

The second stage she calls symbolic and, unlike the previous stage, is characterized by a linguistic relationship to the world. She goes on to suggest that the symbolic stage dominated by language is directly related to the image of the father and, more specifically, to the Law the father stands for. The semiotic stage, on the contrary, is directly linked with the maternal, with that pre-linguistic world of images that stands in opposition to the Law. According to Kristeva, human existence is marked by a constant struggle between the semiotic and the symbolic, between the unconscious and the conscious, between desire and the law, for human beings never totally abandon the semiotic stage on their entrance to the symbolic.<sup>27</sup>

The text that conforms Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy* captures this struggle, its poetic digressions pointing out this movement towards the semiotic, the unconscious, desire; its impossibility to be classified generically as a resistance to fall into either the white and male discourse of Eurocentrism or the black and male discourse of *négritude*. Kristeva labels a discourse "revolutionary," oppositional to the law, depending on its amount of semiotic ingredients, which give birth to poetic language, the language of art. Hence, art is, from a Kristevan perspective, a site for revolution, for change, a domain where resistance to the controlling, normative forces of societal, so symbolic, discourse is enacted.

Deprived of the abstractness and ready-made catalogue of meanings of the symbolic phase, which we should not forget is purposely white and male, Sissie's language is felt on the tongue like honey. Hers is a tactile experience tightly linked with the image of Africa, the vision of the African continent from the plane. Hers –Sissie's and Aidoo's– is, in a way, a return to origins, to Kristeva's pre-linguistic phase, a firm acknowledgement of herself as African and woman.

This return to origins should also be read in terms of Irigaray's call to reassess Plato's hystera. The cave is re-visited, and once the maleness and whiteness of the Platonic Ideal have been exposed, Mother Africa surges powerfully in the voice of Aidoo and all her characters –the Sissie of *Our Sister Killjoy* and the Sissie of “Everything Counts”, Setu, Mansa, Esi Amfoa, M'ma Asana, Maami Ama, Mami Fanti, Chicha, Maami Aba, Mercy, Connie, Yaaba, Auntie Araba, the narrator's mother in “Other Versions,” Anowa, Esi Kom-. This Mother Africa becomes a mother tongue that feels like “fresh honey,” sweet, warm and uncertain, that insistently intrudes in the narrative of *Our Sister Killjoy*, literally kills the joy of Eurocentric discourse and its black offspring –négritude and Pan-Africanism- by overtly unfolding its rational irrationalities. This Mother Africa does not in the least resemble the complacent dark beauty of négritude poetry, nor does it abide the bad/good dichotomy that ensued. It is not a meek voice we hear, this Mother Africa has a mouth of its own and a “foul temper,” a most dangerous combination, as Aidoo via Sissie recalls:

My Dear, you teased me once that with a mouth like mine, I don't need a foul temper. Seriously, that's exactly what I have. Both. And a most dangerous combination to live with, in any place at any time ... (122)

Sissie's plunge into the white hole of the West forces her to confront her own strangeness as woman and African. Her blackness and her femaleness attract Marija, Kunle and her nameless lover; she is made to re-assess her subjectivity under those terms. But this re-assessment is loaded with knowledge, the knowledge that her subjectivity is linked with home and this home is not nationally apprehended for the sight that nurtures her thought is that of the continent, Africa.

Ambivalence rests at the core of *Our Sister Killjoy*. Sissie's Black-eyed squint performs an implacable incision into Eurocentric discourse and discerns the Eurocentric foundation of Pan-Africanism. However, Sissie's encompassing view of the whole of the African continent which marks the end of the text, shows a reluctance on the part of Aidoo to let go of the Pan-African Ideal. In this respect, we could affirm that she favours a continental position in detriment of a more national-oriented one. Ambivalent is also her linguistic reconciliation with English. Her eyes are turned towards Mother Africa; the source of knowledge, she infers, has always been there and yet the language she writes with is English which is not her mother tongue. It is my belief that the uncertainty and craziness that, according to Aidoo, envelops Africa is part of a legacy that *ambivalently* links her as a writer with an "English" tradition that both enslaves and liberates. At the core of the enslavement-liberation junction, there resides a ghost, a heart of darkness (Eurocentric discourse) which, when confronted, allows African writers to experience language as a source of empowerment. But, *Our Sister Killjoy* painfully implies, Africa is part of this "English" tradition, and the voice of Aidoo, contrary to that of Eliot's artist, is not interested in the struggle to be part of the "whole of the literature of Europe from Homer," but rather, finds itself at pains to mould –and finally accept– an inheritance it does not crave. I contend that *Our Sister Killjoy* or *Reflections of a Black-eyed Squint* be read as a beginning, a beginning for its author, Ama Ata Aidoo, and also a beginning for African writing in English. Out of her blackness and femaleness, Aidoo re-imagines a Mother Africa which in its quality as beginning is, using Said's words, "the intentional production of meaning" (Said, 1975: 4).





# *Conclusions*

## *My Dear Sister, the Original Phoenix Must Have Been a Woman*

right of her is she  
of the squeaky laughter by the lagoon  
where  
the muddied waters of  
old African confidence and  
the modern sea of  
America's ethnic bewilderments  
meet;

facing those two is  
she who  
along with her generation of  
our continent's  
multi – origin-ed  
multi – loco-ed  
children,  
struggles grimly but cheerfully,  
today as yesterday to  
keep her head, and her voice (!) above  
so many waters;

finally, look at their *nuabanyin*  
an original Atlas  
a giant of warm  
smooth blackness  
laughing outside while  
wailing inside against  
history's most paradoxical  
invisibility.<sup>1</sup>

“Two Letters,” Ama Ata Aidoo

I would like to start these conclusions with the last image of a film, Rachid Bouchareb's *Little Senegal*. In this last scene, our eyes blend with the eyes of Alloune Yiré, the protagonist, when from the Senegalese coast, he contemplates the sight through the hole left by the Door of No Return. This door opened the way to the middle passage, to the journey Africans were forced to embark on when captured as slaves in their homeland, a journey which took them to the American continent and to the Caribbean, a journey which marked a fundamental transition in their lives, the transition from freedom to slavery.

Melancholy envelops Alloune's look, as if the contemplation of the Door of No Return left him in a state of pure, crystal sadness, as if the rift he is contemplating unearthed another rift located in the heart which centuries later still resists being healed. This last scene takes us to the very beginning of the film when, once again, through Alloune's eyes we welcome the dismaying sight of the Door of No Return while our ears meet the powerful moaning tunes of a spiritual. Both scenes preclude and conclude Alloune's journey, an African who travels to the United States to recover the lost branch of his genealogical tree, the branch that corresponds to the descendants of those relatives who, centuries ago, were taken as slaves. His journey is successful to the extent that he does find his relatives, a distant cousin by the name of Ida and her granddaughter, Eileen, in Harlem, in the neighbourhood called "Little Senegal" which bears this name because of the great number of Senegalese immigrants that inhabit this area. Alloune and Ida become lovers and their relationship is surrounded by powerful symbolism since their union exposes the emblematic meeting of Africa and Afro-America, the possibility for the Pan-African Ideal to be realized.

Their happiness is, however, very brief and, in the end, tragedy takes hold of the story. An unfortunate chain of events perpetrated by Eileen's immature behaviour, results in Hassan's, Alloune's nephew's, death. It is then when Alloune decides to go back to Africa and take his dead nephew home, with him. His mournful look alerts viewers that the rift left by the middle passage, visualized as "The Door of No Return," cannot be bridged, that fulfillment seems to escape the Pan-African Ideal.

However, I believe that the strength of the Pan-African Ideal does not reside in its being feasibly real, but in its being an ideal, that is to say, something to aspire to, to fight for. It is with this idealistic thrust that African writers turn their eyes towards the conception of a world that unites black people on a transgeographical and translinguistic level. They are imbued by a sense of belonging to a larger entity which embraces the whole of the black world; a common history of suffering and subjugation links them to an Ideal which, contested notwithstanding, is still very much of a presence in their minds.

Ama Ata Aidoo's literary adventure is a realization of the unfeasibility of the Pan-African Ideal, and yet, paradoxically, the recurrence of the Ideal as a pervasive presence in her writings shows an indebtedness to the, however challenged, *reality* of the black world. If we were to capture this writing perspective visually, I would recur to Alloune's contemplation of the Door of No Return in the last scene, his acknowledgement of the rift that separates diasporic blacks from continental blacks and, at the same time, his determination to bring them together as the traces of his journey testify to. In the poem "Two Letters" that features in the opening quote, the poet's eyes are stranded between the "vulnerable golden nymph, / fighting against engulfing disillusionment / silent, suspicious, watchful; /" (67) and "the

modern sea of / America's ethnic bewilderments." (67) Africa, on one side, America, on the other. The people of Africa flow, once again, towards America, but this time the "Non-Immigrants / dragged ... in chains" (66) give way to the "New immigrants / pulled ... by / the economics of / The New (est) World Order!" (66) The old category of *slaves* gives way to the category of *new immigrants*. The enslaving tie remains and, as the events of *Little Senegal* prove, black Americans do not greet the arrival of their presumed "African brethren" with open arms.

Aidoo's literary journey calls the Pan-African Ideal in order for it to be ferociously questioned against the reality of the African nation-states that emerged after colonialism. The configuration of her voice, the nuances and imbrications that mould her writing self can only be envisaged if placed alongside the history of Ghana and the history of Africa. Her allegiance is with the postcolonial nation that Ghana came to be after gaining independence from Britain and yet her adherence to the continent of Africa conforms an indissoluble tie. It is into Africa, the continent, where she delves to carve out her distinctively black and female voice.

## ***A.D. 1957***

There is a monument in Accra, Ghana's capital, that presides Independence Square. The monument bears a resemblance to the triumphal arches of European capitals which were destined to commemorate a nation's victory. In the case of Ghana the victory is its independence from British rule: the British Gold Coast becomes African Ghana. The year 1957, marked as "Anno Domini," unashamedly

proclaims the beginning of the history of Ghana and, taking into account that Ghana holds the disputable title of being the first African country to gain independence, there lurks behind this nation the promise of independence for the whole continent of Africa.<sup>2</sup> Emblazoned by the colours –green, red and yellow- of the Ghanaian flag with its black star in the middle, Ghana triumphantly enters history. The future looms on the horizon of this jubilant present, but can the past be so rampantly erased?

There was a history before A.D. 1957 for Ghana and for Africa, but this was a history brandished by colonialism and the absolute and irrevocable reign of Eurocentric discourse which resulted in: (1) the development of racial discourses, (2) the invention of Africa and (3) the division of the African territory into nation-states.

The racial theories of the nineteenth and early-twentieth century *scientifically* proved how whiteness and maleness, ideally embodied by the Aryan race, stood at the top of the evolutionary ladder, whereas blackness and femaleness were relegated to the very bottom. As Robert Young demonstrates in his study of the work by Gobineau, one of the leading figures in developing nineteenth-century theories of race, civilization is identified with the Aryan race; Africa, distant geographically and racially from this all-empowering whiteness was definitively thrown into a state of perpetual savagery (Young, 1995). As a consequence, the colonizing enterprise was infused with a forceful recognition of rightness, of “doing good,” for civilizing the natives was indeed a just cause.

This resulted in Europe looking at Africa as a father to a son and therefore, as an offspring to be taken care of. In an attempt to approach Africa –and its people- a cultural interest in their customs, traditions, languages arose among Europeans who began to study the continent

and publish books on the topic in the hope that their *civilized* and *civilizing* knowledge would dispel the darkness of the continent. The invention of Africa thus commenced. Rather than observing Africa and Africans with the supposedly objective eyes of science, they launched a deeply subjective survey which was monitored by their own imperialistic aims. Edward W. Said and *Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the West* comes to mind (Said: 1978). As Said proves in the aforementioned book, the Orient was *invented* by the West to safeguard the power of European culture and, as he contends, the science that perpetuated this invention, Orientalism, is therefore to be treated as a discourse that managed to manufacture an Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and, last but not least, *imaginatively*. An analogy between the Orient and Africa can be drawn here for Africa was also likewise invented to the extent that the territory was measured and classified through the European lens of nation-states. The division of the African continent into European-made nation-states was a ruthless manifestation of Western political, military, ideological, scientific and *imaginative* hegemony (Reader, 1998; Davidson, 1972 & 1989).

As a powerful and ambivalent record of how the Western imaginary depicted Africa there stands Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (Conrad: 1898). To my mind, the fascination of this novella resides in its impossibility to denounce that which it attacks, Imperialism, in both its local manifestation in the Belgian Congo and in its more universal disclosure throughout the African continent. Chapter one, **Unveiling the Ghost: Heart of Darkness or Africa- Chronotope Zero**, as the title indicates, unveils the ghost and gives it a name, Eurocentric discourse. Foucault's discursive trap, the acknowledgement of discourse as both practice and way of speaking, as nature and criteria feeding each other, launches Conrad –and its protagonist, Marlow,- in a

linguistic diatribe that leaves them both verbally exhausted, incapacitated to tell the tale of horror in a narrative other than the one circumscribed by Eurocentric discourse. The whole of the African continent is condensed in a black hole, a heart of darkness, a space with no temporal coordinates, a expanse of land frozen in pre-historical times.

Therefore, it is understanding that the goal of African writers was, first and foremost, to bring history back to the continent. Here the Pan-African Ideal with its claims on the humanness and existence of black people came to their rescue. The négritude movement ensured black writers around the world with a sense of belonging to a race that, contrary to nineteenth-century racial discourses, was apprehended as either enjoying the same status as the white race or, in some instances, even superior. As a valuable source of empowerment and as an original display of what négritude entailed, Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* demands recognition. When viewed against the backdrop of the utter negativism that enveloped Africa when recreated by the Western imaginary, the work of négritude poets should be welcomed as a first attempt to infuse Africa with dignity and humanity. The eyes of the sons of Africa read the epitaph written on the stone where their people are buried and, enveloped by a Wordsworthian romantic spirit, bring them to life. The transnational and transcontinental scope of the poetry of négritude aligns with immaculate precision with the Pan-African Ideal which, in the imagination of their poets, turns into a possibility.

Criticism on négritude stems from two main sources: (1) its foundation on Western dichotomies –white vs black; world of ideas vs world of the senses; science vs myth; reason vs intuition- and (2) the masculinist view on the conception of Africa. Wole Soyinka in *Myth, Literature and the African World* offers a conscientious critique of

négritude on the grounds that what it really purports is an inversion of values: if black and its correlatives –sensual, mythical, intuitive- were placed at the bottom of the evolutionary ladder by the Western imaginary, négritudinists elevate them to the top (Soyinka, 1976). This reversal, though, is contingent upon the dichotomies dictated by the West, so there is no real conceptual change as far as thought frameworks are concerned. It is the second line of criticism which will be most determining for the location of the work of Ama Ata Aidoo for it raises the question of négritude's ingrained maleness in its disputed use of the Mother Africa trope. Confronted with the dark, ugly, savage Africa of Western eyes, the black eyes of the négritude poets painted the continent with new colours and turned its darkness, ugliness and savagery into the beautiful and nurturing face of a black mother. Thus, the Mother Africa Trope was coined (Stratton, 1994). The use of the Mother Africa Trope transcended négritude poetry and landed in the imagination of African male writers striving to capture the ravages and stupor that invaded the independent nations. The outcome was an encoding of the nation –and the continent- in the figure of a woman: if the nation remained faithful to its dreams of independence and Africanness, the woman was a powerful Mother Africa, but, on the contrary, if the nation yielded to the temptations of corruption heralded by neocolonialism, the woman was turned into a prostitute. Either as pure Mother Africa or as Western-polluted prostitute, women characters resulting from such fictional work are enslaved in a good/bad dichotomy whose possibility of existence is grounded in an objectification process. At this objectifying enclave we should place the work of Ama Ata Aidoo. Hers is an attempt to turn female characters into subjects that function freely in the fiction created in Africa, from an African perspective. An alternative Mother Africa needs to be re-imagined if the daughters of



Africa are to be represented and recognised in the milieu of postcolonial Africa. The liberating force behind Pan-Africanism and *négritude*, together with the criticism launched on its black essentialism and embedded masculinism, are given centre stage in chapter two, **(Auto)Biographical Fiction: The Facing and De-Facing of Africa.**

John Reader embodied the history of Africa in what he named a “biography of the continent.” (Reader: 1998) To approach Africa as a living entity allowed him to transcend the limits imposed by a factual understanding of history and thus, liberated from chronological ties, his study offers a dynamic, invigorating and humanistic reading of the once dark continent. However, Reader’s most productive contribution is his insistence on Africa’s *historical* being which his reading preserves throughout his description of both pre-colonial and colonial times. In other words, and opposing both imperialists and African nationalists, Africa does not enter history because of colonialism or because of independence from colonial powers, but rather, Africa has always been *in* history, and actively contributed to the *making* of history.

In a similar way, I wanted to embody Aidoo’s literary quest in a trope that propelled a reading of her work from a dynamic perspective which in its subject-formation process there lay a conflation of writer, characters and continent. The figure of reading which allowed for Aidoo, her female characters and Africa to merge was *(auto)biography*. Her search of a voice is determined by *postcoloniality* or, to put it in another way, the condition of being postcolonial. But this postcolonial condition is, in its turn, firmly set in gender. Henceforth, and drawing an analogy with Reader’s adventure as a historian, in Aidoo’s fiction African women are subjects *before* colonial times, *during* colonial times and *after* independence. Opposing the Western imaginary, on the one hand, and

the African male imaginary, on the other, she opens up a space where the subjectification of women is reinforced and, because it stems from living experiences and because it is relational by nature, subject-formation is in a state of perpetual reconfiguration. Chapter three, **Without Cracks? Fissures in the Cave: The Middle passage**, chapter four, **The Postcolonial Arena: *No Sweetness Here* or The Travails of Africans after Independence** and, finally, chapter five, **The White Hole. Our Sister Killjoy or Reflections from a Black-eyed Squint**, engage in an analysis of how Aidoo's subject-formation is being realized in what I consider to be the first –and, I would add, significant- phase of her literary development.

Postcoloniality, as evinced in the work of Aidoo, revolves around three themes: **strangeness, nation and tradition**. Her (auto)biography is a journey into the strangeness that builds the independent nation and that challenges Western tradition. As Kristeva states, it is not possible to conceive of a society without strangers (Kristeva, 1991), and so, Aidoo's postcolonial territory creates and feeds its own strangers. Strangeness, like subject-formation, resists being codified by fixed entities; it is woven into the texts in different guises and languages. Hence, Ato Yawson, the been-to of *The Dilemma of a Ghost* is estranged from his family and his land on his return to Ghana; his return to the native land unlike that of Césaire's narrator, is filled with unease and confusion. His strangeness is reinforced by that of his African-American wife, Eulalie, who, as the diasporic black she represents, is clothed in strangeness from the outset. The fissures of the Pan-African Ideal are explored in Aidoo's first literary incursion. Strangeness overwhelms Anowa, the popular heroine of Ghanaian mythical lore who Aidoo turns into an ordinary –and brave- woman. Her wise, instinctual opposition to slavery, her resolute determination to

govern her own life leads her finally to commit suicide. And yet, behind her death, there remains the testimony of a powerful woman whose Ghanaian essence encompasses Africa as a whole.

The episodes that conform the performance of *No Sweetness Here* are geared towards an unfolding of the strangeness that is poured onto the arena of the independent nation. Thus, Sissie, the protagonist of "Everything Counts," must face that ominous object, the wig, which threatens African womanhood in its determination to erase traits of blackness. The city emerges as a stranger that swallows up young girls in search of a better life, away from their villages and their family. Mothers lose their progeny in an agonizing strife for survival which drives their husbands to the strange confines of the city. And what is more, the city speaks another language, the white man's language, English, whose power to estrange Africans is irrefutably stated in one of Aidoo's most moving stories, "The Message," the instant when old Esi Amfoa cannot understand what the nurse is telling her because she does not speak any English. The old woman believes her granddaughter is dead and travels all the way from the village to the city to recover her body and give her proper burial. The nurse is impervious to the despair of the old woman which is reflected in her cold refusal to speak Fanti.

The most definitive plunge into strangeness is experienced by Sissie on her journey to Europe as depicted in *Our Sister Killjoy*. Her stay in Germany should be read as a direct, resolute immersion in Eurocentric discourse. Aryan-looking Marija introduces her to the heart of Europe's darkness, that is to say, profound disillusionment and frustration and, we cannot forget, the perennial cruelty of the holocaust that lurks behind the name, Adolf, of both Marija's husband and son, and also behind the castle-youth hostel where she is staying, and which was used as crematory by the Nazis. It is in England, however, where Sissie's

strangeness is encapsulated by Kristeva's notion of the stranger in oneself (Kristeva: 1991). According to Kristeva, Freud's greatest contribution to the quest of the stranger was that he was able to go beyond the concept of the other and locate otherness in one's own self. The uncanny, this most fretful adjective is made even more eerie by Freud's formulation that the word "uncanny" welcomes the strange as well as the familiar (Freud: 1919). Sissie is possessed by strangeness when her eyes meet the familiar sight of black people, away from their native lands, condemned to a life of foreigners in their once colonial home. The Pan-African Ideal is vilified by the experiences of uprooted Africans who are most than willing to sell their hearts to Western *Christian* doctors. Another story of Dr. Christian Barnard's heart transplant –undoubtedly one of the most groundbreaking scientific achievements of the twentieth century- is offered to the reader. In this other story, Conrad's horror comes, once again, to the fore but this time the eyes that face and denounce the horror are indisputably African.

However, in Aidoo's cultivation of strangeness, there is an element whose abstract presence notwithstanding, is called forth: the reader. Aidoo's texts display a strangeness that covers the readers and invites them to participate in this game of otherness. A postcolonial uncanny is thus being shaped; the boundaries that separate what is familiar from what is strange are no longer clear-cut colonial entities. Postcolonial chaos is preferable to imperialistic order because a chaotic space offers the potential for movement and dialogue whereas the fixity and inflexibility of order produces a compartmentalized space which precludes communication. This is, I believe, what distances Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy* from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

In *Stories of Women*, Elleke Boehmer, following and expanding the research initiated by Stratton, unearths the still predominant

embodiment of the nation as a woman in African writings (Boehmer, 2005; Stratton, 1994). This sometimes persuasive, sometimes blunt, objectification of women in fiction leads her to an exploration of works by male and female writers alike in an attempt to discern a way out of the en-gendering process that seems to permeate nation-building. Boehmer's book is both compelling and challenging, and it is not my intention to undervalue its worth, and yet I believe she misses an incredible opportunity to detect an alternative path to the en-gendered nation by not analyzing the work of Aidoo.<sup>3</sup>

Aidoo's nation-writing strategy is sustained by its dual footing in both the nation and the continent. In other words, to contest the pervading masculinity of the nation-state, Aidoo turns her eyes towards Africa, or, to be more precise, the trope that nurtures Africa as woman, the Mother Africa Trope. Hence, in *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, when all hopes of intimacy between Ato and Eulalie are discarded, when tragedy takes centre stage, spectators are granted a moment of hope in the holding of hands between Esi, Ato's mother, and her daughter-in-law, Afro-American Eulalie. The nightmare that allows Anowa to foresee the demise of her people is none other than Mother Africa exploding; the continent, Africa, asserting itself against the nation, Ghana. It is not surprising then, that the image that welcomes Sissie back to Ghana is the profile of Africa she observes from the plane. "Oh, Africa. Crazy, old continent," (Aidoo, 1977: 133) are the words that placate the anger, disillusionment and sexism she gathered in her plunging into the white hole of the West. However, Aidoo's Mother Africa unlocks the signifying chain and rather than conscripting "Africa" in a closed, fixed signified, it secures its entity as signifier. The metaphor is thus opened up, ready to be re-configured *ad infinitum*; its multiple and varied subjects are therefore granted the possibility to emerge.

In *No Sweetness Here*, Aidoo devises a narrative strategy which transforms the *nation-state* into the *nation-space*. Using Doreen Massey's work in the field of geography as theoretical framework, I view space as a four-dimensional entity in which space and time are indissolubly linked by a dynamics that infuses both with movement and which, when transported to the narration of *No Sweetness Here*, results in a conglomeration of voices dialogically interrelated and powerfully imbricated in gender. This time, I contend, Spivak's subaltern manages to speak through the female voices that spin the web that delineates the nation-space whose foundational flexibility endows it with the potential to excel the locality of Ghana to encompass the whole of the African continent (Spivak, 1988).

Anxiety expresses an eager but often uneasy desire which when placed alongside tradition uncovers the unsteady ground that nurtures the literary imagination. Writers' longing for a unique, distinctive voice has to be measured against the textual bulk of tradition which, according to Harold Bloom haunts their literary wanderings (Bloom, 1974). T.S. Eliot in his pioneering essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," viewed tradition as an inheritance which is not freely allotted to writers, but for which writers must toil hard, their inclusion in -or exclusion from- tradition being the key to their genius -or lack of it.- When we tread upon postcoloniality, the writers' allegiance with tradition is, to say the least, problematized. In the specific case of Ama Ata Aidoo, tradition is experienced as a conflictive inheritance which must harmonize Westernness with Africanness. Her choice of the English language hurls her into the textual tradition of the West. Her being Ghanaian and her articulated belonging to Africa envelop her in the oral tradition of the mother tongue, which, in her case is Fanti. And to Westernness and Africanness, we should add gender. Imposed or coveted, desired or

despised, the truth is that writers are sensitized towards an awareness of tradition. Aidoo, as the writer that she is, professes a preoccupation, not necessarily admitted, towards her implication in tradition. When asked about her use of the English language as her means of creation, she very reluctantly admits that this worried her in her youth but that she has now accepted because “English is the language I learnt to socialize with.”<sup>4</sup> However, *Our Sister Killjoy* unveils her unease with this issue when Sissie, before *writing* her letter, helplessly admits that “First of all, there is this language. This language” (OSK, 1977: 112). In her previous works she embellishes English with Africanness, blending the African oral tradition with the English language and henceforth produces a play like *The Dilemma of a Ghost* based on the dilemma tales of African heritage, or she recovers a character from the African mythical lore, Anowa, the heroine that gives the play its title, *Anowa* (DG: 1965; A: 1970). Where, I contend, she masterfully merges the African oral tradition with English is in her recreation of a *fefewo*, this total dramatic narrative performance which she engages with in *No Sweetness Here* (NSH: 1970).

*Our Sister Killjoy* means Aidoo’s direct confrontation with a legacy that destabilizes her voice as woman and as African. Eurocentric discourse and the Pan-Africanist discourses that shape *négritude* are in this text dissected and revealed as constraining forces that stifle her growth as an African writer and a woman writer. In *Our Sister Killjoy*, Aidoo mimics the journey into the cave realized by Plato’s escaped prisoner who is eager to inform the still captive brethren about his knowledge. Thus, via Sissie, she must come to terms with a seduction she fails to foresee, endure the harsh criticism launched against her by her male colleagues, cradle strangeness in herself. She knows the neocolonial condition that makes prisoners of the likes of her and she

denounces it. However, there is a fundamental difference between Plato's escaped prisoner and Aidoo: whereas in Plato's text the cave – the hystera- remains an undifferentiated mass of ignorance, in Aidoo, the cave -the hystera- is re-visited and re-discovered through the Black-eyed squint of this daughter of Africa. Knowledge, she finds out, resides inside the “warmth and uncertainties” (OSK, 133) of the cave, the African continent she beholds from the plane on her return to the native land.

“My Dear Sister, / the original phoenix / must have been a woman,” Aidoo states in a poem entitled “July 19, 1991” (ALJ, 97: 1992) and whose lines I have used to introduce the concluding remarks to this dissertation, **An African (Auto) Biography. Ama Ata Aidoo's Literary Quest.** After writing *Our Sister Killjoy or Reflections from a Black-eyed Squint* in 1977, Ama Ata Aidoo's literary career came to a standstill. She felt creatively exhausted and needed a rest. In 1981 she became Minister of Education of Ghana but, one year later, she resigned and left the country in a sort of self-imposed exile in Zimbabwe. A veil of silence surrounds this period of her life; she does not deny her resignation from her post as Minister of Education and consequent move to Zimbabwe but she does not delve into the reasons that stirred her actions. Her poetry, however, articulates her silences; both collections of poetry, *Someone to Talk to Sometime* and *An Angry Letter in January*, hover around exile, home and deception and, once again, the Pan-African Ideal is called forth, both in its dual meaning of enlightening force and constraining desire.

*Our Sister Killjoy* unveils the postcolonial uncanny; the ghosts created by and during colonialism are contested, challenged and



denounced. It is an unsettling text, annoying in its constant questioning, exhausting in its unremitting dissection of Eurocentric discourse, disturbing in its ambivalence and yet, I believe, it is unique in its perception that, in order for Africa to be *faced* -in the sense of conferring a face to the continent and confronting the colonial past-gender cannot be a mere appendage to race. And, we cannot forget, this text was written as early as 1977. I have entitled my last chapter “The White Hole,” in an attempt to capture tropologically Aidoo’s discursive plunge into Eurocentrism. Despite the hope that the sight of Africa grants Sissie-Aidoo, the truth is that resolution is suspended in the air, the readers left with a bittersweet taste on their tongues, waiting for something that they have not *yet* been offered. It is as if Aidoo gave readers the promise that something else would follow but which she herself, at that moment, could not produce. Her voice remained in suspension for a long time, but it was not silenced. And so, in 1991, sixteen years after *Our Sister Killjoy*, rising out of the ashes of forgetfulness and deceit, *Changes. A Love Story* comes to light. She was awarded the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize for this novel; her voice, like Africa, preserved “above / so many waters” (ALJ, 66).





Ama Ata Aidoo

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## NOTES

### Introduction. As Always ... a Painful Declaration of Independence

<sup>1</sup> Ama Ata Aidoo, *An Angry Letter in January* (Coventry: Dangaroo Press, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> So far *Changes. A Love Story* has been translated into the following languages: French, German, Swedish, Norwegian, Dutch and Finnish. I am

currently working on the Catalan translation of *Changes* which, hopefully, will open the way for the Spanish version.

<sup>3</sup> Ama Ata Aidoo, *Changes. A Love Story* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1991). In the original text, page number one coincides with the beginning of the novel. Therefore, this foreword by Aidoo is not allotted any page number.

<sup>4</sup> Obviously, I am not discovering anything new by stating the correlation between modernity and the novel, or to put it in another way, the emergence of the novelistic genre as an outcome of modernity. A thorough and explicit analysis of how the modern novel came into existence is offered by Bakhtin in *The Dialogic Imagination*. Other bibliographical sources which propose a similar approach as regards the modern origin of the novel are Lukács' *The Theory of the Novel*, Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* and, for a more contemporary perspective, Kundera's *The Art of the Novel*.

See M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), Géorg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1971), Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1957) and Milan Kundera, 1986, *The Art of the Novel*, trans. David Bellos (London: Faber and Faber, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> See J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello. Eight Lessons* (London: Vintage, 2003). Elizabeth Costello, the protagonist of Coetzee's novel –also considered by many critics to be Coetzee's "alter ego"– manifests her belief in the national character of the novelistic genre in the second chapter-lesson, entitled "The Novel in Africa." Her conception of the novel as a genre imbued with a clearly national essence aligns with her understanding of the novel as eminently a European literary manifestation. Elizabeth Costello's position is contrasted to – and complemented by– Emmanuel Egudu, the fictional African writer Coetzee creates. A further analysis of the intricacies of the African novel and, by extension, African literature, as appears in *Elizabeth Costello*, will be further analysed in chapter 3 of the present dissertation.

<sup>6</sup> In a lecture delivered on October 14, 2009 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie denounces what she calls "The Danger of the Single Story," a story of Africa which, she states, is always enveloped by poverty and ignorance. She defends the right of African writers to move beyond the constraints of a plot still too dependent on a pre-independent history. Ngozi Adichie's words should be taken as testimony to what currently is happening in the terrain of African literature, namely that a new generation of African writers is emerging carrying with them experiences other than the ones lived by their predecessors.

See

[http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html)

<last accessed, 20 March, 2010>.

<sup>7</sup> When confronted with the question about the generic conception of *Our Sister Killjoy*, Aidoo offers a somewhat perfunctory response by first, disclaiming the critics' insistence on capturing the work as a "novel," and second, disavowing a clear connection with short stories. She ends up by

obliquely stating that it *seems* that we are facing four stories which share the same protagonist. I perceived her inconclusiveness as her own reluctance to circumscribe *Our Sister Killjoy* in any specific generic definition. However, I must stress her inveterate stance as regards the significance and definitiveness of this work in her oeuvre. (private communication)

<sup>8</sup> Ama Ata Aidoo, "Unwelcome Pals and Decorative Slaves or Glimpses of Women as Writers and Characters in Contemporary African Literature" in Ada Uzoamaka Azodo and Gay Wilentz, eds., *Emerging Perspectives on Ama Ata Aidoo* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1999), p.17.

In one of the verbal exchanges that we have maintained, Ama Ata Aidoo has confirmed and reiterated the significance of *Our Sister Killjoy* in her literary development. She believes that *Our Sister Killjoy* is her best –and definitive– work so far.

### Part I. The Cave: Colonialism in Black and White

<sup>1</sup> Edward W. Said, *Beginnings, Intention & Method* (London: Granta Books, 1975), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Leila Aboulela, "The Museum" in *Coloured Lights* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2001), pp. 99-119.

"The Museum" was awarded the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2000. All further references to this text are indicated by page number.

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford U.P.), 1993.

<sup>4</sup> I must admit at this point my indebtedness to the work of two critics, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, whose deconstructive readings of Western thought – the former in the field of philosophy and the latter in the fields of semiotics and literature–, have led to my postulation of colonialism as both white and male. I contend that the building of the Empire –and therefore, the rise of Imperialism– confirmed whiteness and maleness as the two master signifiers that defined Westernness. In this sense, I believe that Leila Aboulela's "The Museum" is very effective in its depiction of the African Museum of Aberdeen as a display of Imperialism as embodied by the Scottish explorers whose contributions to the Empire are commemorated rather than criticized. As a matter of fact, it is the name of the museum –"The African Museum of Aberdeen"– which is deceptive for, taking into account what it contains, could it not be more appropriate to call it "the Imperialist Museum of Aberdeen"?

<sup>5</sup> Once again, I would like to point out here the need to delimit those African writers I am alluding to, to a first generation of African writers, whose experiences are embedded in their first hand experience of colonialism and in their Pan-African concerns. As I shall reveal in my last chapter, this presence of *Heart of Darkness* should not be apprehended as a conscious and deliberate response to Conrad's text; its haunting quality stems precisely from its ghostly nature, its sometimes unwanted presence. It is the objective of chapter one to detect the ambivalences of a text which opens up, to my mind, a new phase in the discussion of colonialism. Africa may be projected as nothingness and yet

the text is also adamant to display a crude and incisive critique of European Imperialism. Conrad's eyes saw but they failed to articulate what they saw.

To reflect the difference in attitude that *Heart of Darkness* provokes in writers from a first as opposed to a second generation of postcolonial experience, Caryl Phillips' article "Out of Africa," an interview with Chinua Achebe, provides us with a valuable example. Prompted by his admiration for both writers, Joseph Conrad and Chinua Achebe, he approaches the interview with an uneasy feeling. He is determined to discuss and contradict Achebe's view of *Heart of Darkness*, but once the interview comes to an end, he must conclude that Achebe is, after all, right about Conrad's text. In his own words,

Achebe is right; to the African reader the price of Conrad's eloquent denunciation of colonisation is the recycling of racist notions of the "dark" continent and her people. Those of us who are not from Africa may be prepared to pay this price, but this price is far too high for Achebe. However lofty Conrad's mission, he has, in keeping with times past and present, compromised African humanity in order to examine the European psyche.

Although Caryl Phillips is not African –he is from St.Kitts- and he has been raised in England, his argument rightly acknowledges the relevance of a text like *Heart of Darkness* in the shaping of the imaginary of those who, like Achebe, have lived during colonial times. A second generation of writers might encounter *Heart of Darkness* racist, but because of their experiences in an already independent nation, they can afford, so to speak, to look beyond the void of *Heart of Darkness*.

See Caryl Phillips, "Out of Africa" in *The Guardian*, Saturday 22, February 2003.

### **Chapter One. Unveiling the Ghost: *Heart of Darkness* or Africa- Chronotope Zero**

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 1899, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988), p.10. Further references to this book are indicated as HD plus page number.

<sup>2</sup>Joseph Conrad, "Geography and Some Explorers" in *Heart of Darkness*, 1899, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988), p. 145.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient* (London: Picador, 1992), p. 321.

<sup>4</sup> The bulk of literary criticism that *Heart of Darkness* has produced is so immense that a complete list of the critical works on Conrad's text would imply an editorial exercise which is not the objective of this chapter. What follows should be taken as examples of some literary critics' endeavours to shed light on the interpretation of Conrad's novella. Thus, see Robert F. Haugh, *Joseph Conrad: Discovery in Design* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957), Albert J. Guerard, 1958, *Conrad the Novelist* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1987), Edward W. Said, *Joseph*

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*Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1966), Frances B. Singh, "The Colonialistic Bias of *Heart of Darkness*" in *Conradiana* 10 (1978): 41-54, Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1979), Mike Wilmington, "Worth the Wait: *Apocalypse Now*" in *Madison Press Connection*, October 19, 1979, Robert LaBrasca, "Two Visions of 'The Horror!'" in *Madison Press Connection*, November 17, 1979, E.N. Dorall, "Conrad and Coppola: Different Centres of Darkness" in *Southeast Asian Review of English* 1 (1980): 19-27, Garrett Stewart, "Lying as Dying in *Heart of Darkness*" in *PLMA* 95 (1980): 319-31, Wilson Harris, "The Frontier on Which *Heart of Darkness* Stands," in *Research on African Literatures* 12 (1981): 86-92, Juliet McLauchlan, "The 'Value' and 'Significance' of *Heart of Darkness* in *Conradiana* 15 (1983): 3-21 and Edward W. Said, "Two Visions in *Heart of Darkness*" in *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 1958, (Oxford: Heinemann African Writers Series, 1986). According to C.L. Innes, Achebe may be deemed "the father of the African novel in English." See C.L. Innes, *Chinua Achebe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> The personal story of Okonkwo which the novel depicts is closely linked with the communal history of the Igbo in Nigeria. Thus, Achebe's novel is an attempt to fill up the gap of nothingness that the European approach to Africa has perpetuated. It is not surprising then that the preface of Barbara Harlow's *Resistance Literature*, a critical work on the resisting and struggling potential of literature, begins with a reference to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Thus, Harlow's book starts as follows:

In Chinua Achebe's first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, written in Nigeria in 1958, a story or folktale is told by the Igbo villagers, passed on from mother to daughter, which explains how the tortoise came to have a cracked shell.

See Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1987), xiv.

<sup>7</sup> Bloom's thesis on the anxiety that befalls poets who struggle to find their own voice amidst the many voices of the tradition has become a hallmark in the history of literary criticism with his well-known division between "strong poets" and "weak poets"; the "strong poets" being those who symbolically defeat the influence of the ancestral poetic voices and thus manage to shape their own and "the weak poets" being, by analogy, those who never succeed and resort to mimicking the voices of the former poets. However, we need to point out that Bloom restricts his analysis to the Romantic period and that the social dimension of the poet's struggle is subservient to his individual necessities. In other words, the resistance site of literature is, according to Bloom, restricted to the personal endeavours of the poet as individual and not so much his alliance with a community. The social responsibility that envelops the creative force of African writers is not an issue for Bloom's critical theories.



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See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 1973, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Foucault defines discourse as the combination of a practice and a way of speaking and gives as a revelatory example the case of modern scientific discourse. According to Foucault, the undeniable breakthrough in medicine that the West has experienced with the emergence of a rational way of approaching the world is the result of viewing the human body exclusively as an object for being objective about. In other words, to understand the human body as part of a wider world, as participant of a wider notion of existence, as possessor of a spiritual dimension is discarded as not “scientific” and thus, not valuable, in the language of modern science. The successful results of modern medicine notwithstanding, what Foucault incisively signals out as the sine-qua-non condition for the measure of this “success” is the need to have this “success” articulated within the domains of scientific discourse. Hence, outside the domains of scientific discourse, that is to say, in the realm of another type of discourse, this “success” might be granted a very different value.

See Michel Foucault, 1971, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1972).

<sup>9</sup> The Faust-theme is a hallmark of the literary tradition in the West. Thomas Mann’s *Dr. Faustus*, Goethe’s *Faust*, Marlow’s *Faustus*, Bulgakov’s *Master and Margarita*, Wilde’s *Portrait of Dorian Gray* are but a few examples. The man who surpasses his own humanity and thus immortality by making a pact with the forces of darkness is a common character not only in the field of the Belles Lettres, but also in the oral tradition. Yet it is interesting to point out here Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s acknowledgement of this theme in the oral African tradition itself. In an attempt to find a topic for a novel which helped him to depict the corruption that assaulted his country, Kenya, Ngugi wa Thiong’o found in the Faust-theme the perfect blend that somehow combined and reconciled his Western formal education with his African background. The outcome of such allegiance was *Devil on the Cross*. Published in 1982, *Devil on the Cross* was first written in Gikuyu, Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s mother tongue and later the author himself translated it into English.

See James Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind. The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Heinemann: London, 1986), pp.80-2, and also see by the same author *Devil on the Cross* (Heinemann. African Writers Series: Oxford, 1982).

<sup>10</sup> See Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 1974, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 243-353. Further references to this book are indicated as SOW plus page number.

<sup>11</sup> See M.M. Bakhtin, 1938, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin, Texas: The University of Texas Press, 1981). Further references to this book are indicated as DI plus page number.

<sup>12</sup> I write “time-less/time-lessness” with a hyphen to differentiate it from the dictionary entry that defines it as “eternal” or “immortal” in order to stress the

meaning of time as “zero,” as simply “inexistent,” the meaning with which I want to infuse the term.

<sup>13</sup> In the unremitting questioning to which Irigaray subjects the texts that conform the Western philosophical tradition and which, as we have pointed out, lay the ground for *Speculum of the Other Woman*, there is a continuous display of the different –and differing– meanings that a word can exert. Thus, the word “project” can be either a noun whose meaning is that of plan or proposal, or it can be a verb in which case the meaning is geared towards the action of causing to jut out, of sending forth in one’s imagination. The hyphen in “project” urges the reader to take into account both meanings for the representational scheme Irigaray is dismantling –Western philosophical thought– is indeed a plan, a proposal to send forth certain images with their corresponding attached values.

<sup>14</sup> Given the central role allotted to *Heart of Darkness*, the number of literary works that re-write Conrad’s tale from a non-white and/or non-male standpoint, abound in the world of literature in English. At this point, though, I would like to single out a relatively recent re-writing of Conrad’s tale entitled *The Heart of Redness*, by the South-African writer Zakes Mda. The significance of Mda’s novel resides, to my mind, in the dialogical dimension of the world he depicts. Set in contemporary South Africa, more specifically in the village of Qolorha-by-sea in the Eastern Cape of the country, and framed by the incidents that occurred in the area in the nineteenth century which caused the killing of cattle by some Xhosa people who followed the prophecies of a young prophetess, Mda’s story is a display of voices that collide, intertwine and, above all, dialogue among one another, which powerfully counteracts the one-voice discourse that envelops *Heart of Darkness*.

See Zakes Mda, *The Heart of Redness* (Picador: New York, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> My intention in using the term “Eurocentric discourse” is twofold: on one level, I borrow the adjective “Eurocentric” from the work that stems from the criticism on Western thought that critics who work in different fields of literature, sociology, philosophy and history have exerted upon what they consider to be an exclusively “white and male” world; on the other level, in a Foucauldian fashion, and as I have mentioned on page 32 of the present chapter, I understand “discourse” as the combination of practice and way of speaking whose very nature furnishes the very criteria by which its results are judged successful. Thus, by qualifying “discourse” as “Eurocentric” I am emphasizing the fact that the two coordinates that feed the nature and so furnish the criteria by which this particular combination of practice and way of speaking is rendered successful are “whiteness” and “maleness.”

See Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1971), Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harvest Book, 1983), bell hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1981), Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981), Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Black and Literary Theory* (New York: Methuen, 1984), Susan Willis, *Specifying: Black*

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*Women Writing the American Experience* (London: Routledge, 1987), bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990), bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990), Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990), bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1991), and Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (London: Abacus, 1997).

<sup>16</sup> In the first chapter of *Culture and Imperialism*, Said devotes an entire passage to the analysis of *Heart of Darkness* which he entitles “Two Visions in *Heart of Darkness*.” The two visions he alludes to in the title correspond to the two interpretations –or two tendencies– that Conrad’s novel has been subjected to. Vision number one would group those studies that, following Achebe, consider the novel to be an exercise on racism, full stop. The second vision, endorsed by Said himself, stems from the positioning of Marlow’s narrative “at the very juncture of this world with another, unspecified but different” and indulges Conrad by temporalising Marlow and Kurtz and defines them as “creatures of their time” that “cannot take the next step”; in other words, they simply cannot see because it is not yet their time to see. It is worth echoing Said’s own words,

(...) They –Kurtz and Marlow– (and of course Conrad) are ahead of their time in understanding that what they call “darkness” has an autonomy of *its own*. But Marlow and Kurtz are also creatures of their time and cannot take the next step, which would be to recognize that what they saw, disablingly and disparagingly, as a non-European “darkness” was in fact a non-European world *resisting* imperialism so as one day to regain sovereignty and independence, and not, as Conrad reductively says, to reestablish darkness. (CI, 33)

My analysis of *Heart of Darkness* aligns with Said’s stance and I would like to argue that the utter chronotopic void that the narrative exhibits marks a textual crisis that finds its unsatisfying resolution in the inconclusive experience of the main narrator. The fact that Marlow is determined to keep the book written by Kurtz with him, I believe to be significant. Knowing himself enslaved in the back of the cave he cannot leave but, at the same time, acknowledging Kurtz’s discourse as totally and absolutely futile to escape from darkness –from the back of the cave, so to speak–. Marlow’s action is ambiguous in itself for two differing paths are opened up: either we take Kurtz’s legacy to be a repetition of the farce displayed by Eurocentric discourse and thus interpret Marlow’s keeping of the book as his own refraining from contributing to the repetition of the farce, or, granting Kurtz’s madness the quality of “otherness” –an(other) alternative discourse to Eurocentrism– we can read into Marlow’s holding onto the book his own enslaving conservative strain that prevents him from going any further. In either case, though, Marlow’s –and Conrad’s– diatribe is displayed: they are able to spot the problem but do not have the tools to

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solve it. Not in vain did Said choose as opening quote for *Culture and Imperialism* one of the most revealing passages from *Heart of Darkness*,

(...) The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea –something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to ...

Said's choice of opening quote reinforces the dilemma-quality of those, who like Conrad, saw but were unable to change.

See Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (Vintage: London, 1994), pp. 20-35.

## Chapter 2. (Auto)Biographical Fiction: The Facing and De-Facing of Africa

<sup>1</sup> Ama Ata Aidoo, "Unwelcome Pals and Decorative Slaves or Glimpses of Women as Writers and Characters in Contemporary African Literature" in Ada Uzoamaka Azodo and Gay Wilentz, eds., *Emerging Perspectives on Ama Ata Aidoo* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1999), p.18.

<sup>2</sup> See Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 1974, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), p.280.

<sup>3</sup> De Man, Paul, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984). Further references to this text are indicated by page number.

I am perfectly aware of the fact that any research claiming to originate from a postcolonial view resists being married to a theoretical work which is likely to be more in tune with Imperialism than Postcolonialism. However, de Man's insightful and creative approach to the polemics inherent in autobiographical discourse, offers a ground upon which the writing task that enwraps African authors can be tropologically comprehended.

<sup>4</sup> Literary critics who have conscientiously engaged in the study of autobiographical discourse display a tendency to place autobiography near the major literary genres. In other words, the debate of *autobiography versus fiction* that any literary-grounded discussion on autobiography raises becomes entangled with a wish from the critic who launches the analysis to have autobiography inscribed in –and hence elevated to– the category of major genre.

See Phillipe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), Elizabeth Bruss, *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre* (Baltimore, Md: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), George Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography" (original French version 1956), trans. James Olney, in James Olney, (ed.), *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), James Olney, *Located Lives: Place and Idea*

in *Southern Autobiography* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1990) and by the same author *Studies in Autobiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (eds.), *De-Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> William Wordsworth, "Essays Upon Epitaphs" in *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth* (Oxford: Henry Frowde, 1904). Further references to this text are indicated by page number.

<sup>6</sup> I would like to indicate that although de Man systematically and methodologically grounds his study of autobiography in "Essays Upon Epitaphs," *The Prelude* is not erased from his analysis. As a matter of fact, *The Prelude* is referred to in certain instances in the essay yet its presence is always subordinated to the prevalence of "Essays Upon Epitaphs." References to *The Prelude* serve to reinforce some aspect that de Man points out when working on "Essays Upon Epitaphs."

<sup>7</sup> The passage quoted in this page is part of a longer paragraph which starts as follows:

"I could here pause with pleasure, and invite the Reader to indulge with me in contemplation of the advantages which must have attended such a practice. We might ruminare upon the beauty which the monuments, thus placed, must have borrowed from the surrounding images of nature –from the trees, the wild flowers, from a stream running perhaps within sight or hearing, from the beaten road stretching its weary length hard by. Many tender similitudes must these objects have presented to the mind of the traveller leaning upon one of the tombs, or reposing in coolness of its shade, whether he had halted from weariness or in compliance with the invitation, "Pause, Traveller!" so often found upon the monuments."

<sup>8</sup> Not only must African writers face the terrible void of the unlettered stone of Heart of Darkness-Africa, but they are also forced to confront the horrifying emptiness of a (literary) tradition deemed inexistent. A significant unsurmountable bridge divides Wordsworth's European traveller from the African traveller: the tradition of great names. Let me develop this further: according to Wordsworth, the names of outstanding public figures, whom he refers to as "the mighty benefactors of mankind," do not require any epitaph, that is to say, any "biographic sketch" in order to be remembered for their work alone withstands mortality. As Wordsworth affirms, "the mighty benefactors of mankind, as they are not only known by the immediate survivors, but will continue to stand in need of biographic sketches, in such a place; nor of delineations of character to individualise them. This is already done by their Works, in the memories of men."

See Wordsworth, "Essays Upon Epitaphs," pp.932-33.

<sup>9</sup> Chinua Achebe, "Africa Is People" in

<http://w.w.w.africaresource.com/scholar/achebe.htm>. [last accessed, 10 April 2010]

<sup>10</sup> I do not intend to undermine the great contribution of scholars such as Basil Davidson whose devotedness to digging out the "real" Africa from the

imperialistic imaginary cannot be left unnoticed. What I claim here is that Reader's biographical approach to Africa opens up the possibility to read the continent in a different way. The chronological drive functioning in the works by Davidson follows a more traditional form, which does not mean that their contents are traditional –read conservative-; the adjective “traditional” applies here to methodology.

See Basil Davidson, *Africa: A History of the Continent* (New York: Spring Books, 1972) and by the same author *Modern Africa: A Social and Political History* (London: Longman Publishing Group, 1989). See also John Reader, *Africa: A Biography of the Continent* (London: Penguin Books, 1998).

To talk about the history of Africa and not to mention the work by Cheik Anta Diop would result in an act of deliberate and unforgiving omission. Diop devoted his entire life to filling up the nothingness to which Africa had been relegated by Western history by a process of reconstruction which entailed the recognition of Africa's contribution to the foundations of Western civilization. His most outstanding challenge –and achievement- was his claim that Egyptian civilization was a black civilization which the Eurocentric eyes of nineteenth-century scholarship *whitened* to fulfill their imperialistic and racist drives.

See Cheik Anta Diop, *The African Origins of Civilization: Myth or Reality* 1974 trans. Harold Salemson (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1984), and by the same author, *Pre-Colonial Black Africa* trans. Harold Salemson (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987) and *Civilization or Barbarism. An Authentic Anthropology* 1981 trans. Yaa-Lengi Meema Ngemi (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1991).

<sup>11</sup> I would like to mention that in the aforementioned article by Ngugi wa' Thiong'o, “The Allegory of the Cave,” he underscores the relevance of the work of Leo Africanus, an Arab-speaking adventurer –his real name was El-Hassan ben Mohammed el-Wazzan ez-Zayyati- whose learning saved him from being sold into slavery. Captured by Italian sea-robbers, he was given to Pope Leo X who changed his name and language and religion, and thus became Latin-speaking, Christian Johannes Leo Africanus. Born in North Africa, his wide knowledge of the continent far exceeded those of his European contemporaries so, his book, *A Geographical History of Africa*, published in Latin in 1550, can be considered his first attempt at “humanizing” an area of the world still conscripted by a mythological arena of “one-eyed humans or beings without noses or faces; others with dogs for their kings; others with bodies of panthers and lions or heads of dogs.”

See James Ngugi wa' Thiong'o, “The Allegory of the Cave. Language, Democracy and the New World Order.” *Black Renaissance*. 1.3: 1998, p 8.

The historical figure of Leo Africanus has captured the imagination of at least one contemporary writer, Lebanese-born Amin Malouf, who has made him the protagonist of his novel, *Leo the African*. In his novel, Malouf traces back the life of this trader, fighter, adventurer of sorts to Granada –Al-Andalus- where he was born and later banished in 1492 –the year of the conquest of the only remaining Arab dominion in Spain- by the edict issued by King Ferdinand of Aragon and Queen Isabella of Castille which prohibited the cult of any religion

but Catholicism and, consequently, propelled the diaspora of Muslims and Jews. The expulsion from the once Arab Kingdom of Granada is what marks the future experience of roaming the world that captures the protagonist and thus shapes the narrative flow of the novel.

See Amin Malouf, *Leo the African* 1986 trans. Peter Slugett (London: Abacus, 1995).

<sup>12</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* 1974 trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 320.

Further references to this book are indicated by page number.

<sup>13</sup> The use of autobiographical material to shed light on the fictional work of authors is an acknowledged practice of literary criticism. I would like to emphasize one such work, Edward W. Said's *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography*, where Conrad's letters and some of his shorter fiction – including *Heart of Darkness* – serve as the basis for the establishment of a dialogical ground between fiction and autobiography. I do not intend to mimic Said's systematic study of the relationship between autobiography and fiction in the work of Joseph Conrad in my analysis of Ama Ata Aidoo's work, among other things because, unlike Conrad's letters, there is no body of work by Ama Ata Aidoo published as yet which can be labelled "autobiographical." There are interviews and articles where Aidoo's autobiographical essence is purported and which I will use. However, the term (auto)biography is meant to draw a figure-of-reading approach where the trope of prosopopeia delineates strategies wherein the work of this African woman writer can be understood and analysed. See Edward W. Said, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1966).

<sup>14</sup> Aimé Césaire 1934 trans. and eds. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), p.18.

Further references to this book are indicated by page number.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>16</sup> Alioune Diop, "Discours d'overture" in *Présence Africaine* 8-10 (1956): 9-20.

<sup>17</sup> Reader, *Africa: A Biography of the Continent*, 607.

As Reader further expands,

(...) During that same period, Germany had sponsored ten ethnographic expeditions which visited most parts of tropical Africa. The Belgians had sponsored a study of the Zande (in the south-Western Sudan), and Belgian sociologists had devised a questionnaire to elicit a series of ethnographies from missionaries and others. The British had also been active. The Sudan government had commissioned ethnographic surveys from C.G. Seligman (who subsequently became professor of ethnology in London) in 1909-12, and the Colonial Office had appointed Northcote Thomas to make a series of ethnographic studies in southern Nigeria and Sierra Leone. An expedition to the Congo by the Hungarian Emil Torday in 1907-9 had been made at the behest of the British Museum). In French West Africa a number of officials had made a speciality of ethnographic studies, and in 1917 a committee for historical and scientific studies in the French territories was established in Dakar.

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<sup>18</sup> Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 130.

The worst case of tribalism that forcefully enters our minds and which overtly exemplifies the fatal consequences that the European division of Africa entailed, is the Tutsis and the Hutus in Rwanda and Burundi. In Europe's perfectly delimited tribal categories there lies a process which, apart from delimiting, qualifies each tribe and determines the relationship among each. In the case of Rwanda and Burundi, the Tutsis, the tall, handsome, slender pastoralists, were viewed favourably by the Europeans who compared them to the stocky and shorter agriculturalist Hutus and concluded that the aristocratic demeanour with which the Tutsis were endowed placed them above the Hutus. When educational facilities were granted, the recipients were the Tutsis. Primary and –exceptionally– secondary education was within the scope of the Hutus' ambition but higher education remained within the reach of Tutsis only. Needless to say, this hierarchical approach gave birth to an antagonism and hatred that did not previously exist between the two ethnic groups. The truth is that the Tutsis, who arrived later, occupied the territory through a slow and peaceful process and even adopted the Bantu language of the Hutus. Inter-marriage took place so much so that the striking physical differences that European records noted down were neither so striking nor so sharply defined.

I use the term "European" in an attempt to synthesise and facilitate the understanding of the horrendous consequences that the process of tribalism brought about. However, I am well aware of the overt simplification of the use of "European" and should clarify that the territory comprised by what presently is acknowledged as Rwanda and Burundi has been under the colonial tutelage of Germany, Belgium, France and Britain.

For a sound, straightforward and clear-cut analysis of the catastrophic consequences of Europe's tribalism of Africa in the Rwandan genocide, see Ryszard Kapuscinski, *The Shadow of the Sun: My African Life*, trans. Klara Glowczewska, (London: Penguin), 2002.

<sup>19</sup> For a thorough and extensive study of Pan-Africanism as envisaged by Blyden, Du Bois and Garvey, see Edward W. Blyden 1887 *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1967), W.E.B. du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* 1903 (New York: W.W. Bantam, 1989) and Robert A. Hill, ed., *Marcus Garvey, Life and Lessons: A Centennial Companion to the Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987).

<sup>20</sup> See James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* 1912 (London: Penguin Classics, 1990). It should be pointed out that the novel was published anonymously in 1912 and that not until two years later, in 1914, did Johnson acknowledge his authorship.

The topic of the light-skinned black who passes for white is indeed present in the American imagination of white and black writers alike. A very popular novel, Fannie Hurst's *Imitation of Life*– which became the basis for two very successful Hollywood movies, which bear the same title as the book, John Stahl's 1934 black and white version and Douglas Sirk's 1959 colour version–



feature the drama of Sarah Jane, a black girl whose very light skin allows her to pass for white although this implies the rejection of her black mother. Hurst, a white American writer, does not make Sarah Jane the central character of the novel, whereas in the novel *Passing*, Afro-American Nella Larsen does place her light-skinned character, Irene Redfield, centre stage.

See Fannie Hurst, *Imitation of Life* (New York: P.F. Collier, 1933) and Nella Larsen, *Passing* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1929). For a contemporary view on the topic, see Phillip Roth, *The Human Stain* (New York: Vintage, 2001) and Edward P. Jones, *The Known World* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004). In Roth's novel, the main protagonist, Prof. Coleman Silk, a distinguished scholar, passes for many years as white, whereas in Jones', Fern Elston, a very light-skinned lady who could perfectly pass for white, decides to stick to the black race and, unlike her relatives' move to the North of the country, she adamantly stays in the segregated South. What is interesting about all these novels is that the psychological strain on the characters who "pass for whites" or, as in the case of Fern Elston, decide not to pass for whites, is encoded in an examination of the whole American caste and class system.

<sup>21</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House. Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 5.

The opening chapter of Appiah's book, "The Invention of Africa" is focused on the figure of Alexander Crummell and, more specifically, to a speech he delivered to celebrate the thirteenth anniversary of the independence of Liberia and which bore the title "The English Language in Liberia." African-American by birth, he moved to Liberia, on the West African coast, together with other freed American slaves, determined to set the bases for a future African nation. However, and this is the starting point of Appiah's criticism on his speech, Crummell clearly and unashamedly excels in praising the "Anglo-Saxon tongue" above the "various tongues and dialects" of the indigenous African populations, to the extent that he calls an act of divine providence the fact that Africans "exiled" to the New World and as a consequence of slavery were endowed with the great gift of the English language.

See chapter 1, pp. 3-27.

Pan-Africanism is henceforth subjected to criticism, its polemics ingrained in its very inception, and yet its presence was and still is strongly felt.

<sup>22</sup> *Mama Africa: The Very Best of Miriam Makeba*. Paris, September, 1977.

<sup>23</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* 1939 trans. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2001). Further references to this book are indicated by page number.

I would like to emphasize here that Césaire's poem renders the term "négritude" its first artistic naming, however, it should be noted that the neologism is the by-product of the discussions that Césaire held with –at that time (1930s)- fellow students Leopold Sédar Senghor from Senegal and Leon Gontram-Damas from French Guyana. In other words, my intention is to underline the contribution of these other writers to Césaire's coinage of the term.

<sup>24</sup> The figure of Toussaint L'Ouverture was an inspirational source even in his own lifetime. Hence, William Wordsworth praised L'Ouverture's valiance and courage in his fight for freedom in a poem entitled "To Toussaint L'Ouverture". The poem is reproduced below:

Toussaint, the most unhappy Man of Men!  
 Whether the rural Milk-maid by her Cow  
 Sing in thy hearing, or thou liest now  
 Alone in some deep dungeon's earless den,  
 O miserable chieftain! Where and when  
 Wilt thou find patience? Yet die not; do thou  
 Wear rather in thy bonds a cheerful brow:  
 Though fallen Thyself, never to rise again,  
 Live, and take comfort. Thou hast left behind  
 Powers that will work for thee; air, earth, and skies;  
 There's not a breathing of the common wind  
 That will forget thee; thou hast great allies;  
 Thy friends are exultations, agonies,  
 And love, and Man's unconquerable mind.

Haiti stands as a powerful example of the ironic twists of history. Considering Haiti's past –it was the first black nation formed entirely by former slaves- it is disheartening to have to acknowledge that this nation, once an emblem of freedom and human dignity, is nowadays inundated by extreme poverty, a situation severely worsened by the earthquake. It is hard to see in the debris of present Haiti the greatness of a nation which resisted white supremacy and which infused black people around the world with a sense of pride and worthiness.

<sup>25</sup> James Ngugi wa' Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind. The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: Heinemann, 1986), p. 5.

One of Ngugi wa' Thiong'o's contentions in the book is to unseal and dig in the polemics facing African writers when making a choice of language for their literary works: should they appropriate the colonial languages or should they stick to their African languages? Can linguistic appropriation be fully and successfully enacted? As his development as writer shows –he started writing in English and he ended up turning to Gikuyu- he avows the theory that African literatures should align with African languages.

<sup>26</sup> The hypoglossal nerves are to be found at the base of the tongue.

<sup>27</sup> See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993).

The work of Paul Gilroy will be further develop in the following pages.

<sup>28</sup> A Portuguese leather slave ship.

<sup>29</sup> For the meaning of "veerition," I will resort to the explanation that the translators of the text I am using give:

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“According to Césaire, his “verrition” was coined off the Latin verb “verri,” meaning “to sweep, to scrape a surface, to scan.” Our version attempts to preserve the “veer” or turning motion (set against its oxymoronic modifier “motionless”) as well as the Latin sound of the original.”

See Césaire, *Notebook of a Return*, p.63.

<sup>30</sup>J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello. Eight Lessons* (London: Vintage, 2003), p.43.

Further references to this book are indicated by page number.

<sup>31</sup> Florence Stratton, *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994). Further references to this book are indicated by page number.

<sup>32</sup> It is necessary to stress that whenever the “African male literary tradition” is mentioned, I am referring mainly to the works produced by male authors in the period comprised between the mid 1940s until the end of the 1970s. From the 1980s onwards, there have been attempts by African male authors to write beyond the constraints posed by the embodiment of Africa in the figure of a woman in their portrayal of female characters, as Stratton points out in the last chapter of her book entitled “Gender on the Agenda. Novels of the 1980s by Ngugi and Achebe.” Nevertheless, for the purpose of the present project, I would like to emphasize that, given the time when the main body of Ama Ata Aidoo’s work was created, the tradition she had to confront and live with is the African male literary tradition conformed by the works written between the 1940s and 1970s.

See Florence Stratton, *Contemporary African Literature*.

<sup>33</sup> The works by Grace Ogot, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emechetta and Mariama Bâ are chosen by Stratton to illustrate the African female literary tradition.

See Florence Stratton, *Contemporary African Literature*.

<sup>34</sup> In order to highlight the power, supremacy and uniqueness of the paternal, Irigaray deliberately uses the capital letter in “Father” as opposed to “mother,” which remains forever subservient to the Law of the Father. Since I take Irigaray’s argument as the main source of my argument, I follow her guidelines and thus the first letter of “Father” stays a capital letter.

<sup>35</sup> “Hystera” is the Greek name for womb/uterus.

<sup>36</sup> I need to specify here that, in Irigaray’s original text, the adjective that relates to the world of the senses as opposed to the world of the ideas, is “sensible” and not sensuous. I have decided to opt for the adjective “sensuous” to avoid misunderstandings with the other prevalent meaning of “sensible,” the one which defines someone or something as showing good judgment. The quote below shows Irigaray’s use of “sensible” to refer to the world of the senses:

Such thoughts on divine truth are available to man only when he has left *behind* everything that still linked him to this sensible world that the earth, the mother, represents.

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See Irigaray, *Speculum*, p. 339.

<sup>37</sup> Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp.97-139.

Further references to this book are indicated by page number.

<sup>38</sup> Frantz Fanon also held a very critical stance on Négritude. He dismissed the alleged unity of the black world propounding as an example the breach occasioned in the African Cultural Society. American Negroes, as Fanon called African-Americans, realized that their experiences, preoccupations and visions of the future did not equate those of Africans and therefore, they decided to create instead an American society for people of black cultures. It is interesting to note here how Fanon encloses his arguments in the concept of “nation,” affirming that “Negro and African-Negro culture broke up into different entities because the men who wished to incarnate these cultures realized that every culture is first and foremost national” and that “the problems that kept Richard Wright or Langston Hughes on the alert were fundamentally different from those which might confront Leopold Senghor or Jomo Kenyatta.”

See Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* 1963 (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 174.

<sup>39</sup> It is interesting to remark that, except for the name of Zora Zeljan, an African-Brazilian woman writer, no other woman is mentioned. Zora Zeljan’s play, *Story of Oxala* is used by Soyinka to illustrate the common thread that binds diasporic African writers with continental African writers in their search into the African tradition to extract topics for their work in their attempt to shape a distinctive African world. However, it is precisely this play on the story of this African God, Oxala, by Zeljan and Soyinka- by comparing it to the work of a continental playwright, Ijiwere’s *The Imprisonment of Obatala*- that delineates the first lines of his argument about the different apprehension of the black experience by Africans in the Diaspora and Africans in the continent. Soyinka realises how Zeljan’s play, unlike Ijimere’s, is moulded by Western influences, the most salient one being, in this particular case, the Christian mystery plays with their “transcendental emanations” in detriment of the African “flesh-and-blood creations.” (MLAW, 23).

Hence, with the sole exception of Zora Zeljan, the remaining writers that people Soyinka’s book are all male: J.P. Clark, William Conton, Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Chinua Achebe, Yambo Oulougum, Ayi Kwei Armah, Camara Laye, Birago Diop, Mogo Beti and James Baldwin.

See Wole Soyinka, *Myth, literature and the African World*.

<sup>40</sup> In Irigaray’s own words, “Who (is) the father? Where (is) the father? The Father is (...) that which is never simply represented.” (SOW, 315)

<sup>41</sup> “Mentula” means “penis” and the word also alludes to a stick which when agitated produced fire.

<sup>42</sup> At the end of this daybreak, my virile prayer: / grant me pirogue muscles on this raging sea / and the irresistible gaiety of the conch of good tidings!

Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, p. 39.

<sup>43</sup> This short story by Armah is actually a pre-text for a more ambitious work which came to light as the novel *Two Thousand Seasons*. This novel is Armah’s

attempt to fill the suppressed history of the Europeanized version of Africa with the “real” history that shaped the continent, a history which is articulated by the communal voices of Africa which conflate with the unique –and yet plural- voice of the narrator. Hence, the different invasions that fell upon the continent are lyrically examined and recalled in the chapters which bear the revealing names of “The Predators” and “The Destroyers,” and the hope and promise of recovery are captured in the title of the last chapters, “The Return” and “The Voice.” However, and for the purpose of my argument, I would like to stress that the very embodiment of Africa as woman which the short story prefigures, prevails in the novel.

See Ayi Kwei Armah 1973 *Two Thousand Seasons* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1979).

<sup>44</sup> The embodiment of a nation (country, continent) in the figure of a woman is a tropological phenomenon that is not restricted to Africa. Thus, although the present research is not aimed at an analysis of the various instances of nation-womanisation that occur in literature on a worldwide scale, the case of Ireland, should be mentioned, for Ireland is conceived reiteratively as a woman by male Irish poets. In “Ocean’s Love to Ireland,” Seamus Heaney captures the conquest of Ireland by the English in the recurrent analogy he draws between Raleigh and the ocean, on the one hand, and an Irish maid and Ireland, on the other. Raleigh-the ocean- England rapes the Irish maid-island-Ireland, its ground “possessed and re-possessed:”

Speaking broad Devonshire,  
Raleigh has backed the maid to a tree  
As Ireland is backed to England

And drives inland  
Till all her strands are breathless:  
‘Sweesir, Swatter! Sweesir, Swatter!’

He is water, he is ocean, lifting  
Her farthingale like a scarf of weed lifting  
In the front of a wave.

*North*, the book of poems to which “Ocean’s Love to Ireland” belongs represents Heaney’s delving into the joint mythical and historical dimension of Ireland. The discovery of corpses in the bog area of Northern Ireland, preserved after thousands of years because of the conservation qualities of the nutrients that constitute the soil, revealed a history of Ireland where violence, cruelty and oppression took centre stage for the bodies discovered were the result of communal sacrifices. What I am interested in pointing out here is Heaney’s recurrent use of an image of a woman –a young woman, a virgin, to be more precise- to symbolise Ireland and its conquest by Scandinavian and English invasions. Whether the workings of the womanisation of Ireland and the womanisation of Africa can be rendered the same is, as far as this dissertation is concerned, speculation, yet the fact that both Ireland and Africa can be

aligned with a common pattern of invasions and conquests with their subsequent history of pain and suffering and the fact that this history has been apprehended by their poets in the embodiment of the conquered nation in the figure of a woman, still remains.

We should not forget that W.B. Yeats' "Leda and the Swan" has also been interpreted as an allegory of England's invasion of Ireland. Here, the Swan –God, Zeus, the Father, England- rapes Leda –a mortal woman, the mother, Ireland- who, helpless before the glory of God/Zeus, accepts his attack and surrenders to his might. The question in the last two verses of the poem, "Did he put on his knowledge with his power / before the indifferent beak would let her drop?" poses Yeats' own ambivalence towards his stance as Irish writer who uses the language of the invader –English- to create. Differences notwithstanding –it could always be argued that Yeats did not have a choice in his use of the English language, Britain's linguistic dominion over Ireland having been definitively established- this is a reality which African writers, as Ngugi wa' Thiong'o rightly exposes in *Decolonising the Mind*, also must face.

See Seamus Heaney, *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 25 W.B. Yeats, "Leda and the Swan" in *The Tower 1928* (London: Penguin Classics, 1999), p. 34 and Ngugi wa' Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind. The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: Heinemann, 1986), pp. 4-32.

<sup>45</sup> Ama Ata Aidoo's critique of the women characters that inhabit the novels by Soyinka and Armah is firm, unrelenting and transparent:

Women people the world of Soyinka. Nimble-footed, wicked-witted women whose rules are only to serve men:

Sadiku pathetically dancing to the fictional loss of her male's manhood after a lifetime's slavery (Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*);

Amope, whose vitality is employed solely in demonstrating what a fraud the great Jero is (Soyinka's *Brother Jero*);

And Sidi. Our lovely, tragic Sidi. A sunbeam created and condemned between chaos and hell. Sidi thinks she is too smart for the clown that is Lakunle? Well baby, there just ain't no other dudes around, but th' dirty ole feudal bully they call Baroka ... (Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*)

And you wait to rage, rage.

And who says Soyinka is the only one who creates great women to service men, or worse just to frustrate?

Armah is the expert here. Oyo is a whiner, unreasonable, plain unreasonable. Her mother is an ageing bitch and Estella (Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*), your perfumed indolent whore. But it's the fate of Araba Jesiwa which sends you stark raving mad (Armah's *The Healers*). She is a wonderful human being. Introspective, philosophical, articulate. But all that was in the past. Learned through flashbacks for the unfolding of the main story. Armah willfully puts her out of circulation. "... supine her limbs gave an impression of heaviness. Each hand was covered tightly in a massive clay cast wrapped round

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with thick cloth. Each leg was similarly sheathed only the leg casts were heavier ...!" Preposterous, no? Maybe we are being unfair. But some of us suspect that encasing her so ridiculously was the only way the author could make sure she would not steal the limelight from Densu, the good man who is the hero. Therefore, Jesiwa is kept down until the very end of the story, when she is released and produced, a veritable *deus ex machina* to come and set our hero free.

And still, they query why a woman writer would want to create women characters whose lives are valid, however tragic, on their own terms? Women must not be main characters.

"Unwelcome Pals and Decorative Slaves or Glimpses of Women as Writers and Characters in Contemporary African Literature" in *Emerging Perspectives on Ama Ata Aidoo*, Ada Uzoama Azodo and Gay Wilentz, eds., (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press Inc., 1999), pp. 20-1.

<sup>46</sup> This mother-prostitute dichotomy should not be limited to the African space for, although it lies outside the scope of this dissertation to launch a study on the manifestations of the dichotomy in other literary traditions, I would like to point out one case where the workings of the dichotomy are remarkably similar to the one experienced in the Mother Africa trope: I am referring to the Chicano literary tradition. In the Chicano cultural background –firmly developed from its Mexican roots- the mother-prostitute dichotomy is perfectly fleshed out in the images of the two female figures that conform the "mothers" of Mexico: The Virgin of Guadalupe and La Malinche.

When faced with the history of conquest of their land by the Spaniards, Mexicans encountered the figure of La Malinche, an Aztec princess who became Hernán Cortés' mistress and who bore him three children. La Malinche is considered to be the "mother" of Mexicans, the creator of the mestizo race which, as Américo Paredes indicates, stands at the very core of Mexican national identity. However, la Malinche is tainted by the stigma of betrayer of the real, true, Indian-Aztec race of Mexico, for she let herself be drawn to the arms of the powerful conqueror. She is the cursed mother of "métissage," an ancestry that cannot be banished for her presence cannot be denied or erased from the history of Mexico, present as it is on the faces of Mexicans. And yet Mexicans have to be liberated from the earthy, chaotic mass of the maternal and hence, the Virgin of Guadalupe, the dark-skinned lady made her appearance. Confronted with a heritage of betrayal and murder, the sense of Mexican national identity was left stranded on the shores of the Spanish Empire. The story of the apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe to the recently converted Indian, Juan Diego, came to the rescue of Mexicans who sought a positive mother figure who would confront and defeat the treacherous Malinche. What better figure than the quintessential Mother, that is to say, the Virgin? Yet, who is liberated by the creation of the Virgin of Guadalupe? Once again, the *sons* of Mexico, for the *daughters* are forever conscripted within the mother-prostitute dichotomy: they either fall into the goodness of the Virgin of Guadalupe or slip in the depths of the treacherous Malinche. This is the fate

awaiting women characters. Just like the *sons of Africa recovered* –or created– a beautiful, dark mother, the *sons of Mexico create* a dark-skinned lady –thus retaining Indian features– a virgin mother properly christianized and civilised who will save her Mexican *sons* from the tyranny of their rapist Spanish fathers. This is the legacy left to Chicano women writers, a legacy they confront, contest and manipulate in order to flesh out the “true” women of their culture. The work by Sandra Cisneros, Gloria Anzaldúa and Chérrie Moraga, to mention but a few, reflects this struggle to overcome the mother-prostitute dichotomy. I believe the work by African women writers can be aligned with this vein of contestation in their re-imagining of the Mother Africa trope.

See Américo Paredes, ed., *Folktales of Mexico* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), Eric Wolf, “The Virgin of Guadalupe: A Mexican National Symbol,” in *Journal of American Folklore*, 71 (1958), pp. 34-39 and Carlos Fuentes, *New York Review of Books*, 12:4 (1969), p.5. For an analysis of the struggle undertaken by Chicano women writers in their attempt to write beyond the mother-prostitute dichotomy, see Chérrie Moraga, *Loving in the War Years. Lo que nunca pasó por sus labios* and Gloria Anzaldúa and Chérrie Moraga, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back. Writings of Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table, 1981).

## Part II. The Cave Revisited: Towards a Subjectification of Africa and African Women

<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf, 1929, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Penguin Classics, 1993), p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> Ryszard Kapuscinski, *The Other* (London and New York: Verso, 2008), p. 70.

<sup>3</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Trans. Gillian C. Gill, 1974 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 255.

### Chapter 3. Without Cracks? Fissures in the Cave: The Middle passage

<sup>1</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 1974, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 278.

<sup>2</sup> Ama Ata Aidoo, *The Dilemma of a Ghost and Anowa* (1965, 1970; reprint, Harlow, U.K.: Longman, 1985). Further references to these texts are indicated by page number.

<sup>3</sup> See David Dabydeen, *Turner: New and Selected Poems* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995).

It is worth noting here how Dabydeen in the Preface to the poem affirms that Ruskin regarded Turner's “Slave Ship” as among the painter's most remarkable works. However, Dabydeen regrets, the subject matter of the painting remained oblivious to him, “relegated to a brief footnote in Ruskin's essay” (7). As I have pointed out earlier on, Vaughan's *British Painting*, published in 1999,



four years later than Dabydeen's poem, does not share the same perspective. In other words, Vaughn maintains that Ruskin was indeed aware of the subject matter, hence opposing Dabydeen's position.

<sup>4</sup> For a thorough, conscientious and enlightening account of African-Americans' journeys to Africa, see James T. Campbell, *Middle passages. African-American Journeys to Africa, 1787-2005* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> One of the texts –if not “the”text– that mould American identity is *The Declaration of Independence as Adopted by Congress, July 4, 1776*. To this emblematic text belong the following words: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” When these words are read in the context of the black civil rights movement, taking into account that almost two hundred years separate them, we cannot but commiserate and sympathise with so many black American citizens who sought moral refuge in an imagined African homeland.

<sup>6</sup> See Maya Angelou, *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986) and for an expanded version of Du Bois' middle passage, see James Campbell, *Middle passages*, Chapter Six: The Spell of Africa, pp. 226-267. See also W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: Toward an Autobiography of the Race Concept* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1940) and “Back to Africa” in *Century Magazine*, February 1923, pp. 537-554.

I would like to stress the contemporary interest in the Black Atlantic as shown through the work of the British writer, Caryl Phillips, on the one hand, and Algerian film director, Rachid Bouchareb, on the other.

Phillips tackles the issue of the Black Atlantic in a fictional work, the novel *Crossing the River*, which features Nash Williams, a former American slave who settles in Liberia, on the West Coast of Africa. We should remember here how in 1822, the American Colonization Society decided to set up Liberia as the place to send black Americans who had been freed in an attempt to symbolically return them to their “homeland,” oblivious of the fact that Liberian soil was not empty but inhabited by people. *Crossing the River* accounts for the difficulties that Nash Williams encountered when trying to start a new life there, the most outstanding adversity being precisely to establish a relationship with the native people of Liberia. Caryl Phillips also makes the Black Atlantic his field of study in a non-fictional work revealingly entitled, *The Atlantic Sound*. There, he explores the middle passage mingling real journeys from the past with his own present journey. Phillips' middle passage starts in Liverpool where he follows the tracks of John Emmanuel Ocansey, a young man from West Africa who travels to England on business matters. Phillips' next destination is Ghana, Elmina –where he visits the slave fort– and Accra, the Ghanaian capital, and re-enacting the trajectory of the middle passage, he ends up on the Southern coast of the United States of America, in the city of Charleston, South Carolina. Henceforth, Phillips re-constructs, from a contemporary perspective, the middle passage as embodied by these three emblematic cities: Liverpool, Accra and Charleston.

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See Caryl Phillips, *Crossing the River* (London: Vintage, 1993) and by the same author, *The Atlantic Sound* (New York: Vintage International, 2000).

Rachid Bouchareb's *Little Senegal* relates Alloune Yiré's "peculiar" middle passage for he, an African –Senegalese- embarks on an odyssey to recover the lost traces of his family tree and which he finds in Little Senegal, an African community in the American neighbourhood of Harlem, New York. The meeting of Africa as represented by Alloune, on the one hand, and Afro-America as depicted by Ida, the American cousin, on the other, takes on a mythical dimension for what Bouchareb lets us witness is a re-enactment of the Black Atlantic, the middle passage recovered in present day America.

See *Little Senegal*, dir. Rachid Bouchareb, perf. Sotigui Kouyaté and Sharon Hope, 3B Productions (France), 2002.

<sup>7</sup> It could be argued whether Bertolt Brecht knew about the similarities between his theory and the African dilemma tale. I believe he was not familiar with the African dilemma tale for in formulating his theory, he specifically sets his "episches Theater" as a counterpoint to Aristotelian theatre, hence introducing his plays as a new modality of theatre. Nowhere in his theoretical work do we find a reference to the African dilemma tale.

See Bertolt Brecht, 1950 *The Development of an Aesthetic*, John Willet, trans. (London: Methuen, 1964).

<sup>8</sup> The act of naming is a crucial chapter in the history of African-Americans. To fairly reflect this, I should write a vast list of books which, in the field of literature alone, would risk inaccuracy and exhaustion. Therefore, I will limit my choice to two novels –of a somewhat autobiographical nature- which stand at the core of the African-American literary tradition: James Baldwin's *Nobody Knows My Name* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. In a sort of lighter tone, I would also like to mention the lyrics of "Miss Celie's Blues," a song sung by Shug Avery to Celie, the protagonist of *The Color Purple*, in the screen version which bears the same title. This is a song of resistance and reassurance which captures the story of friendship and love that binds the two women, Celie and Shug. In this song, Shug Avery tells Celie, whom she calls "sistah," to "remember your name."

See James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name. More Notes of a Native Son* (New York: Delta Books, 1962) and Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 1952 (New York: Penguin Books, 1965), and *The Color Purple*, dir. Steven Spielberg, Amblin Entertainment, 1985.

<sup>9</sup> On 2 March, 1966, Kwame Nkrumah's presidency came to a halt. Continuing accusations of corruption against him and his associates ended with a military coup. Whether the accusations had been right or not, this is still nowadays a matter of debate. David Birmingham, Nkrumah's biographer, is inclined to believe that history ventured into a discrediting discourse towards the figure of Kwame Nkrumah and, although some of the accusations might have been rightfully launched, others were totally unfair.

See David Birmingham, *Kwame Nkrumah* and the chapter entitled "Black Star" from James T. Campbell, *Middle passages*.

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<sup>10</sup> “The Pain of Being Black,” Interview with Toni Morrison by Bonnie Angelo in *Time*, May 22, 1989.

<sup>11</sup> The Pain of Being Black,” Interview with Toni Morrison by Bonnie Angelo in *Time*, May 22, 1989.

<sup>12</sup> I would like to draw attention to the fact that in the Southern American states, during slavery times, the house where the white owner and his family lived was referred to as “the Big House,” in contrast with the “chattels,” the cabins allotted to slaves. For an analysis of how life in the plantation developed, see Elizabeth Fox-Genovese’s study, *Within the Plantation Household: Black Women and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

<sup>13</sup> My statement that the nineteenth century consolidated the power of reason requires a clarification. When viewed from the point of view of the artistic world, the nineteenth century is marked by a movement whose origins are to be located in Germany and which has come to be known as “Romanticism.” Romanticism, with its emphasis on art for art’s sake, its defence of nature as source of inspiration, its reliance on the individuality of the artist, does not seem to harmonise with the realm of reason. If we add to this the fact that the period comprised between 1790 and 1830 witnessed the emergence of the Gothic novel, my former statement as regards the consolidation of reason as the primordial element to configure knowledge, is weakened. However, together with Romanticism, I want to point out that the nineteenth century witnessed the rise and development of racial discourses, firmly sustained on reason. The evolutionary ladder that placed the white race at the top and the black race at the bottom was founded entirely on reason. We cannot forget that Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* was published in 1859. Chapter 5 of the present dissertation will analyse nineteenth –and early twentieth-century racial discourses, focusing on their influence on the development of the African imaginary.

<sup>14</sup> The following sources have helped me to frame the historical dimension of *Anowa*: A. Adu Boahen, *Ghana: Evolution and Change in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Accra: Sankofa Educational Publishers, 2000), K. Y. Daaku, *Trade and Politics on the West Coast* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), Basil Davidson, F.K. Buah and J.F.A. Ajayi, *A History of West Africa –To the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), and David Kimble, *A Political History of Ghana: 1850-1928* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963).

<sup>15</sup> The relevance of the Ashanti Empire is to be felt still nowadays in contemporary Ghana with its once capital city, Kumasi, being the second largest and most important city in the country, the first being Accra, the capital.

<sup>16</sup> Ghana gained its independence from Britain on 6 March 1957. It is a remarkable coincidence that the Bond of 1844, which formally acknowledged Ghana as a British colony, was also signed on 6 March. The same date marks Ghana’s bondage and independence.

<sup>17</sup> This extract from the Bond of 1844 is quoted in A. Adu Boahen, *Ghana: Evolution and Change*, p. 41.

Boahen's position in relationship of the Bond of 1844 is worth mentioning for he, contrary to most historians, plays down the role and significance of the Bond: "This bond is certainly not as important as estimated by some historians. It cannot be said to be the Magna Carta of Ghana or the legal basis for British rule in Ghana. In the first place, the bond was not even a treaty between the British and the Fante and their allies, but a mere declaration on the part of the latter, and the British who prepared it never considered themselves bound by it." (41)

<sup>18</sup> Once again, Boahen, distancing himself from the sustained belief that the Bond of 1844 and the 1874 British annexation of the Gold Coast are interrelated, one being the consequence of the other, affirms that "the circumstances leading to British annexation of the area in 1874 had really nothing to do with the bond which had become obsolete by the 1850s." (41) However, as far as *Anowa* is concerned, Aidoo does not share Boahen's perspective and both the importance and correlation of the Bond of 1844 with the British annexation of the Gold Coast are stressed.

<sup>19</sup> See Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), "Family Bonds/Conceptual Binds: African Notes on Feminist Epistemologies" in *Signs*, Vol. 25, No.4, "Feminisms at a Millennium" (Summer, 2000), 1093-1098, and "Conceptualizing Gender: The Eurocentric Foundations of Feminist Concepts and the Challenge of African Epistemologies" in *Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies*, <http://www.Jendajournal.com/vol.2.1/oyewumi.html> [last accessed, 24 April, 2010]

<sup>20</sup> As Oyewumi firmly asserts, "In a gendered, male-headed two-parent household, the male head is conceived as the breadwinner and the female is associated with home and nurture." See Oyewumi, "Conceptualizing Gender ...," p.4.

<sup>21</sup> I need to specify here that the term "Akan" gathers the people of the West Coast of Africa and that the "Fanti" are one group within the Akan people. See Kofi Antubam, *Ghana's Heritage of Culture* (Leipzig: Kehler and Amelang, 1963).

#### **Chapter 4. The Postcolonial Arena: *No Sweetness Here Or the Travails of Africans after Independence***

<sup>1</sup> Peter Hitchcock, *Dialogics of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Ama Ata Aidoo, *No Sweetness Here* (Harlow, Essex: Longman African Writers, 1970). Further references to this book will be indicated by page number.

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<sup>4</sup> Foucault and Deleuze argue that the “oppressed,” given the right critical frame –in their case Marxist-oriented- can indeed speak. In Spivak’s own words:

According to Foucault and Deleuze (in the First World, under the standardization and regimentation of socialized capital, though they do not seem to recognize this) the oppressed, if given the chance (the problem of representation cannot be bypassed here), and on the way to solidarity through alliance politics (a Marxist thematic is at work here), *can speak and know their conditions*.

See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. “Can the Subaltern ‘Speak’?,” p. 74.

<sup>5</sup> See A. Adu Boahen, *Ghana: Evolution and Ghange in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Accra: Sankofa Educational Publishers, 2000). Although the reference is to the whole book, for the writing of this chapter, I will focus specifically on Chapter 19 (The attainment of independence), Chapter 20 (Ghana under Kwame Nkrumah) and Chapter 21 (Osagyefo and the coup).

With the event of independence, African historians took it as part of their responsibility towards their countries to write a history of the nation from an African perspective, thus liberating the history of their countries from the constraints of the Grand History of Imperialism. In this respect, Boahen’s book is a significant move towards a decolonization of the history of Ghana.

<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 3, p. 141 Ghana was not the *first* African nation to step into the postcolonial arena but the *second*, the first being Sudan in 1956, as Campbell dutifully amends in *Middle passages. African-American Journeys to Africa 1787-2005*.

<sup>7</sup> This “third narrative space” I delineate here should not be taken as Bhabha’s “third space.” Bhabha’s “third space” refers to the site occupied by individuals whose migrant nature places them irremediably in a terrain marked by ambivalence, their dreams of belonging forever escaping them. Their subjectivity is defined by an insurmountable uprootedness. My use of the term “third narrative space” alludes to an area explored by Ama Ata Aidoo in *No Sweetness Here*, whose nature is enmeshed in both History and story, whose linguistic status is configured by an indebtedness to both science –the systematic recording of past events- and fiction and which I capture by the term “histories.” However, and having mentioned Bhabha’s third space, I would also like to add that his “third space” can surely be empowering.

See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>8</sup> But, can Boahen, as a historian –an intellectual- render an alternative narrative? Spivak’s own position on the matter of postcolonial intellectuals is, to a certain extent, an ambiguous one. On the one hand, she is adamant in her stance to urge postcolonial critics to shape a methodology where the subaltern can speak but, on the other, she falls into a fatalistic position when she brands postcolonial intellectuals as “the paradigm of intellectuals” for they inevitably must “learn that their privilege is their loss.” In other words, the transformation

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of “insurgency” into “text for knowledge” invariably presupposes a suspension of their own consciousness “as operated by disciplinary training.”

See Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” p. 82.

<sup>9</sup> The resonances between Boehmer’s postulation on the en-gendered nation and Florence Stratton’s Mother Africa Trope need to be pointed out here. Both critics share a common belief in the objectifying process that the representation of women undergo in the writing of the nation. However, whereas Stratton’s text focuses entirely on African literature, Boehmer’s stretches beyond the confines of the African continent and welcomes examples from Indian literature as well. The latter’s text expounds a more universalizing trend in the en-gendering of the postcolonial nation and, most significantly, in *Stories of Women*, the concept of “nation” –with its enslaving but also liberating capacities- is central to the argument of the book. Stratton’s text, on the contrary, does not tackle the “nation” as an issue to be discussed in itself; hers could be defined as a strategic use of “nation,” devoid of the ambivalences and ambiguities that Bhaba and Boehmer infuse it with, and, as a consequence, its potential as a liberating site for women is dismissed.

<sup>10</sup> See Kofi Anyidoho, *The Pan-African Ideal in Literatures of the Black World* (Accra: Ghana University Press, 1989) and also see chapter 2 of the present dissertation.

<sup>11</sup> Whenever I refer to the specificity of writing the nation in *No Sweetness Here*, I will use the term “independent nation.” However, when the general exercise of writing the nation in the postcolonial context is under scrutiny, I use the term “postcolonial nation.” I have earlier on in this chapter alluded to the specificity of context that a reading of *No Sweetness Here* demands and therefore I justify the use of “independent nation” as an attempt to apprehend the very instant when the colonial nation becomes independent.

See page 14 of the present chapter.

<sup>12</sup> The inseparability between time and space that Massey propounds in the field of geography in the 1990s vividly echoes Bakhtin’s chronotope, a term which he coined in the 1930s. Bakhtin clearly distinguished between “artistic thought,” which he linked with the realms of literature and art and “abstract thought,” which he related to science. Massey’s formulation, unlike Bakhtin’s, is founded on the discoveries from the field of science but we should remember here that scientific discourse took an unprecedented turn with Einstein’s theory of relativity and henceforth the way “time” was apprehended and experienced. What I believe should be emphasized here is the fact that Bakhtin via literature reached the same conclusion, namely, that time and space configure an inseparable entity. As a way of remembrance, Bakhtin’s words could be recalled:

In literature and art itself, temporal and spatial determinations are inseparable from one another, and always colored by emotions and values. Abstract thought can, of course, think time and space as separate entities and conceive them as things apart from the emotions and values that attach to them. But living artistic perception (which also

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of course involves thought, but not abstract thought) makes no such divisions and permits no such segmentation.

See M.M. Bakhtin, 1938, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin, Texas: The University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 243.

<sup>13</sup> I am indebted to Vincent Odamtten for the discovery and, consequently future treatment, of *No Sweetness Here* as a *fefewo*. In his study on the work of Ama Ata Aidoo, he discloses the nature of the book under discussion as a *fefewo*. To my mind, though, he does not really delve into the implications that such information evinces when tackling the complex set of interactions that such a text as *No Sweetness Here* unfolds. It does affect the way the reader approaches the stories and, what is more, it provides the text with a richness in meanings that otherwise are missed.

See Vincent O. Odamtten, *The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo. Polylectics and Reading Against Neocolonialism* (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 1994), p. 16.

To reaffirm my contention that the text is really a *fefewo*, I have the word of the author, Ama Ata Aidoo, who, when asked her view, dutifully confirmed Odamtten's rightness in classifying the text as a *fefewo*.

<sup>14</sup> See M.M. Bakhtin, 1938, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin, Texas: The University of Texas Press, 1981), especially Chapter 4, "Discourse in the Novel," pp. 259-422.

<sup>15</sup> A similar position is defended by Peter Hitchcock in *Dialogics of the Oppressed*. He contends that in order for dialogism to work as a means for the oppressed to challenge their irredeemable silence is by placing texts in a specific time and space. According to Hitchcock, contextualizing is primordial for the voices of the oppressed to be both articulated and heard.

See Peter Hitchcock, *Dialogics of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

<sup>16</sup> The text was first published by a Ghanaian local publishing house Ghana Books which no longer exists and in this case the blank pages to indicate the five phases of the performance appeared. I could see a copy of this first publication of *No Sweetness Here* at the S.O.A.S (School of Oriental and African Studies) library and, just to prove the uniqueness of the text, a special permission is required in order to consult it.

<sup>17</sup> See Frantz Fanon, 1963, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin Books), 1990, p. 166. Further references to this book are indicated by page number.

<sup>18</sup> Fanon's "fighting phase" is only obliquely alluded to because I believe that the phase epitomised by the protagonists of "Everything Counts" and "For Whom Things Did Not Change," is actually the second phase, which, although Fanon refrains from calling it "fighting", it nonetheless reflects a fight, an insidious inner fight that tears up the individual's subjectivity.

See Frantz Fanon, 1963, *The Wretched of the Earth*, pp. 179-189.

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<sup>19</sup> See Kwesi K. Prah, *Essays on African Society and History* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1976). The differences between the North and the South are amply demonstrated in Prah's book. He underlies the hierarchical nature of the relationship, the Northern part of Ghana being subordinated to the Southern part in economic and political terms. Colonialism played a decisive part in promoting the differences between North and South by recruiting people from the North –ex-slaves mainly- to be part of the Gold Coast Corps, a local mercenary military force, which helped the British to maintain their control over the South. Henceforth, the existence of a tension between North and South takes a historical dimension and should not be interpreted as a consequence of independence. It would be more adequate to view such tension as inherited –and , it could be argued preserved- rather than created.

<sup>20</sup> Ghana is obviously not the only example where a considerable number of African languages shape the complex linguistic reality of the nation which, ironically, finds cohesion in the form of the language of the colonizers, in this particular case, English. This is the same situation we encounter in India, and yet to claim that English has a unitary role is dangerous for not all Indians and not all Ghanaians have access to English. Depending on the degree of education, will Ghanaians –and Indians- be proficient in English, so, once again, communication among the various people that conform the national space cannot be taken for granted.

<sup>21</sup> Ahmad, Aijaz, “Languages of Class, Ideologies of Immigration” in *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London and New York: Verso, 1992), pp. 73-94. As a matter of fact, Ahmad is not the only Indian critic to challenge Anderson's theory. Chatterjee, for example, questions Anderson's postulation that print capitalism is to be found as the primary source of the nation as community. See Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World. A Derivative Discourse* (London: Zed Books, 1986)

<sup>22</sup> Aidoo's concern with names and naming is a recurrent theme in her writing. There is a short story included in the collection *The Girl Who Can*, which bears the title “Male-ing Names in the Sun.” However, originally, “Male-ing Names in the Sun” was a short story especially commissioned to be part of a collection edited by Shirley Chew and Anna Rutherford which, under the revealing title, *Unbecoming Daughters of the Empire*, gathered the experiences of women who had grown up in different parts of the British Empire. Aidoo's story captures the changing of names that an African family undergoes: it all started with a fisherman, Kojo Kuma Srako, who with the proper colonial education becomes G.K. Shillingson. The story, as is usual in Aidoo's prose, meets a final twist in the end when G.K. Shillingson's son, Dr. Kwesi Shillingson, decides to marry a young architect, who resolutely proclaims her intention to keep her very African name, Achinba. It is worth emphasizing here how the decolonizing task is undertaken by a woman.

See Ama Ata Aidoo, “Male-ing Names in the Sun” in *Unbecoming Daughters of the Empire* (Sidney: Dangaroo Press, 1993), pp. 29-36 and Ama Ata Aidoo, *The Girl Who Can & Other Stories* Legon, Accra: Subsaharan Publishers, 1997), pp. 106-119.



<sup>23</sup> Ato Quayson defines “interdiscursive” writing as the African writer’s “strategic recourse to transformation of the indigenous conceptual resource-base in individual instances.”

See Ato Quayson, *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing: Rev. Samuel Johnson, Amos Tutuola, Wole Soyinka, Ben Okri*. (Oxford, James Currey; Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), p. 17.

<sup>24</sup> The ambivalent role of education in the independent African nation is a recurrent topic in Aidoo’s fiction. We have mentioned Ato Yawson’s “in-between” position in *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, and yet Aidoo’s most forceful statement on the disruptive role education can exert on individuals is minutely dissected in *Our Sister Killjoy* and *Changes. A Love Story*. It is in *Changes. A Love Story*, the novel published in 1991 and recipient of the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize (see Introduction), where Aidoo provides us with the most incisive and painful manifestation of education as estrangement through the experience of her protagonist, Esi Kondey, a successful educated Ghanaian woman. The passage I would like to reproduce here captures the moment in which Esi, on one of her visits to the village, realizes how her education has irremediably distanced her from her own mother and grandmother:

“Why had they sent her to school?  
 What had they hoped to gain from it?  
 What had they hoped she would gain from it?  
 Who had designed the educational system that had produced her sort?  
 What had that person or those people hoped to gain from it?  
 For surely, taking a ten-year-old child away from her mother, and away from her first language –which is surely one of life’s most powerful working tools –for what would turn out to be forever, then transferring her into a boarding school for two years, to a higher boarding school for seven years, then to an even higher boarding school for three or four years, from where she was only equipped to go and roam in strange and foreign lands with no hope of ever meaningfully re-entering her mother’s world ... all this was too high a price to pay to achieve the dangerous confusion she was now in and the country was now in.”

See *Changes. A Love Story* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1991), p. 114.

We should also mention that Ama Ata Aidoo was appointed Minister of Education in 1981, a post she left just one year later.

<sup>25</sup> Tempting though it may be, I will refrain from falling into a Freudian interpretation of the Oedipus complex, where the little girl falls in love with the father. I believe Aidoo’s approach at this point in this story obeys to a down-to-earth drive whose purpose is to unravel the unsound and corrupted foundation of the relationship between Mensah-Arthur and Mercy. After all, the narration leaves no room for the thought of Mercy actually being in love with Mensah-Arthur. In any case, Mercy is more attuned with the figure of the chichidodo that Ayi Kwei Armah introduced in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. The chichidodo is a bird which feeds on worms that grow fat in the feces.

So does Mercy feed on the riches that big men offer her even though the price she has to pay is to swim in the corrupted waters of the nation-state.

See Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (London: Longman African Writers, 1968).

<sup>26</sup> The coup d'état took place on 24 February 1966. Most history books describe the coup d'état as a welcome overthrow of Nkrumah's government, pointing out how members of Nkrumah's own cabinet were relieved when they received the news. I believe it would be wrong to interpret "Two Sisters" as Aidoo's own condemnation of Nkrumah's government. As a matter of fact, in "Two Sisters" she makes it very clear that the coup did not bring any change and, therefore, and especially as far as women are concerned, no relief.

See Adu Boahen, *Ghana: Evolution and Change*, pp. 206-222. See also W.E.F. Ward, *A History of Ghana*. 1948. London: Allen and Unwin, 1958 and C.L.R. James, *Nkrumah and the Ghana Revolution* (Westport, Connecticut: Lawrence Hill, 1977).

<sup>27</sup> Echoes of another pair of famous shoes come to mind here. I am referring to Andersen's fairy tale, "The Red Shoes." It is surprising and, I would add, revealing, the fact that in both cases, Mercy in "Two Sisters" and Karen, the protagonist of Andersen's tale, are metaphorically trapped in a pair of shoes which entice them with promises of freedom but which, in reality, enslave them forever. In the case of Andersen's tale, the enslavement is painfully expressed in the little girl's impossibility to stop the dancing to which the red shoes condemn her. Desperate to stop this torture, she cuts off her feet and bleeds to death. The underlying message in Andersen's tale is preoccupying for, should we take Karen's death as the ultimate ending for little girls who long to roam the world and discover new possibilities rather than sticking to society rules? Mercy's shoes unveil another meaning. It is not Mercy's desire to be free which Aidoo sanctions but her erroneous way to look for this freedom. In other words, her shoes are just another instantiation of patriarchal power, another way to mould her into societal meanings of womanhood.

### **Chapter Five. The White Hole: Our Sister Killjoy or Reflections from a Black-eyed Squint**

<sup>1</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. *The Dialogic Imagination*. 1938. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin (TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 86.

<sup>2</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*. 1929. (London: Penguin Books, 1993), pp.21-22.

<sup>3</sup> Yvonne Vera, ed., *Opening Spaces* (Oxford: Heinemann African Writers Series, 1999), p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Ama Ata Aidoo, *Our Sister Killjoy or Reflections from a Black-eyed Squint* (Harlow, England: Longman African Classics, 1977).

Further references to this book are indicated by page number.

<sup>5</sup> When I asked Ama Ata Aidoo whether she viewed *Our Sister Killjoy* as a novel, she was very dismissive and affirmed that this was the way publishers wanted to see this text. She refused to infuse *Our Sister Killjoy* with a genre and

declared that what held the four stories together *seemed* to be her protagonist (italics mine). But, once again, I must say she did not find it important for her book to be inscribed in any particular genre. I would like to add at this point that “The Plums” is part of a collection edited by Angela Carter and entitled *Wayward Girls, Wicked Women*, and so this fact provides us with proof that the different parts *could* be treated as independent from each other.

See Angela Carter, (ed.), *Wayward Girls, Wicked Women* (New York:Virago Press, 1986), pp. 73-90.

<sup>6</sup> See Byron Caminero-Santangelo, *African Fiction and Joseph Conrad. Reading Postcolonial Intertextuality* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of N.Y. Press, 2005). Built on the premise that Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is a presence – uncanny and ghostly- in African fiction, Caminero-Santangelo’s book offers an alternative reading to the writing back approach by presenting the African texts in the light of the more complex terrain of intertextuality. The texts which are the basis of his study are the following: Chinua Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease*, Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *A Grain of Wheat*, Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North*, Nadine Gordimer’s *July’s People* and, finally, Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy*.

Although I share Caminero-Santangelo’s refusal to examine *Our Sister Killjoy* “in terms of an effort to parody or reverse a European colonial vision,” (27) I consider his focusing on Aidoo’s discernment of “new forms of colonial control in a supposedly decolonized world” (27) somehow limiting. It is my belief that Caminero-Santangelo’s reading discloses just one aspect of a text that surpasses mere criticism of a neocolonial world. Rather than positing the critique of neocolonialism at the centre of my analysis, my approach to *Our Sister Killjoy* is focused on Aidoo’s instinctive search of a voice which will allow her to develop as a writer and have her name definitely inscribed in the world of letters. Needless to say, her critique of neocolonialism is a primordial aspect of her literary quest, but it is not the *only* element to define her identity as a writer.

<sup>7</sup> Although Germany plays a prominent role in Aidoo’s “attacks” on the West, she is also adamant to bring to the forefront other dark sides one might find in Europe. Hence, she poetically articulates Spain’s lack of freedom due to Franco’s regime through the following words “Spain - / Where an old man / Sits on a people’s dreams” (80). I stress this passage for two reasons: the first one, and as I have already mentioned, to show how Aidoo digs out dark sides in places other than Germany, and secondly, to highlight the fact that although the publication of *Our Sister Killjoy* is dated in 1977, the conception of the work could probably be dated earlier. Franco died in 1975, two years before the publication of *Our Sister Killjoy*, so, this reference to Franco still being alive makes us consider the fact that, at least “The Plums” was written before 1977.

<sup>8</sup> Another text comes to the fore of this intertextual game that *Our Sister Killjoy* elicits. This time T.S. Eliot’s famous lines from “The Waste Land”: “Has the corpse you planted last year began to sprout?”

See T.S. Eliot, “The Wasteland” in *T.S. Eliot. Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 73.

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<sup>9</sup> See Kofi Anyidoho, Anyidoho, Kofi. *The Pan-African Ideal in Literatures of the Black World* (Accra: Ghana University Press, 1989).

Despite his acknowledgement of the slipperiness of the colour line and therefore of the danger of instituting “black” as the master signifier that defines the black world, Anyidoho’s perception of Pan-Africanism is still imbricated by an idealized sense of the unifying power of such a signifier. Unlike Anyidoho, Kwame Appiah has no qualms about denouncing the link between race and Pan-Africanism as a “burdensome legacy.” According to Appiah, the conception of the African in racial terms is part of an inheritance which deemed Africa and the Negro as inferior to Europe and the white race and so, this insistence on blending Pan-Africanism with race perpetuates a racial discourse whose tenets are essentially Western.

See Chapters one and two, entitled respectively, “The Invention of Africa,” and “Illusions of Race” in Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father’s House. Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 3-46.

<sup>10</sup> The belief that Africa constitutes the cradle of mankind is the basis for Reader’s biography of the African continent. Cheik Anta Diop also defended the idea that the origins of the human race were to be located in Africa. He devoted his entire life to demonstrate that Africa, this most dehumanized continent, was actually the harbinger of humanity.

See John Reader, *Africa: A Biography of the Continent* (London: Penguin Books, 1998) and Cheik Anta Diop, *The African Origins of Civilization: Myth or Reality*. 1974. Trans. Harold Salemson (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987).

<sup>11</sup> A further analysis of these racial discourses will be elicited later on.

<sup>12</sup> See chapter two of the present dissertation.

<sup>13</sup> It is interesting how nineteenth-century theories of race declared the irrepressible desire experienced by the white male to mix with the exotic other as the seeds of racial deterioration. This flaw detected in the otherwise perfect combination of whiteness and maleness is what fomented the decline of the human race. It could be argued whether the devotion that Marija –the German woman who Sissie befriends- lavishes on Sissie should be interpreted as Aidoo’s deliberate mimicking of these racial discourses.

<sup>14</sup> The correct spelling of the German adjective “black” as in the phrase “black girl,” should be “das Schwarze Mädchen.” However, in Aidoo’s text, it appears as “das Schwartzte Mädchen.” Due to the fact that Aidoo’s work is the basis for this present dissertation, I have opted for keeping Aidoo’s misspelled adjective throughout my analysis.

<sup>15</sup> The text below is indeed one of the most quoted passages in *Heart of Darkness*. It has already been quoted in this dissertation in chapter one, p. 51. Notwithstanding, I would like to reproduce it once again:

The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. The idea at the back of it, not a sentimental

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pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea –something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to ...

See Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 10.

<sup>16</sup> Questions and ironic turns define the writing style of Irigaray's *Speculum*. To choose the instance that *best* exemplifies her style would be an impossible task. Therefore, I have picked up one passage which hopefully reflects my point clearly enough. The passage below captures the moment in which Irigaray deconstructs the solar imagery that sustains Plato's philosophy by questioning its foundational tenets,

Is nature herself becoming a mirror? Reflect on (or in) that! There's no wizardry in it, or so they say. Providing that the object of reflection is directed by the Father's Good. Or by the Sun here. The double will then be "authentic." Appropriate. *The fact that semblance has passed into the definition of the proper will have gone unnoticed.* It wasn't seen. And yet it is there.

See Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Trans. Gillian C. Gill., 1974 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 297.

<sup>17</sup> In the original biblical source, the nature of the fruit that stems from the tree of knowledge is not specified. Translations of the Bible have likened the fruit to an apple and this is indeed the correlation that comes to mind when the passage from the Garden of Eden is recollected. Notwithstanding, I want to emphasize the elusiveness the biblical text exudes as regards the nature of the fruit:

And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened.

See *The Bible. Authorized Version*, John Sterling, ed. (London: The British & Foreign Bible Society, 1954), p.3.

<sup>18</sup> I am indebted to Chantal Zabus for pointing out the Edenic significance of Marija's plums. See Chantal Zabus, "Of Female Husbands and Boarding School Girls: Gender Bending in Unoma Azuah's Fiction" in *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 39, No.2 (Summer 2008): 93-107 and "Out in Africa: Queer Desire in Some Anthropological and Literary Texts" in *Comparative Critical Studies*, Vol.6 (June 2009): 251-270.

<sup>19</sup> Once again, I will resort to the original biblical text to highlight how God, referred to as the "Lord God" is discursively felt; his presence is sensed and identified as a voice. So, after eating the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge and after covering their now acknowledged nakedness with fig leaves, Adam and Woman –the name "Eve" was a late appendage-

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(...) heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden. And the Lord God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou? And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked.

See Sterling, John ed. *The Bible. Authorized Version*. London: The British & Foreign Bible Society, 1954, p.3.

The power and omnipresence that defined the Lord God's voice was pictorially captured by the figure of a commanding man, often with furious eyes, decked in a long, white robe that perfectly matched his white hair, white beard and white skin. Numerous paintings exemplify this representation of God as a white patriarch. If I were to choose one, I would like to single out the scenes from Genesis that populate the ceiling of St. Peter's Basilica.

<sup>20</sup> Irigaray's labeling the offspring of the Father as "bastards" is one more instance of her analytical maneuvering, that is to say, her turning Plato's theory upside down. What is striking though and what needs to be highlighted is the coincidence between the terms used in *Speculum* and those that appear in the racial discourses formed during the imperialistic expansion. Irigaray points out the procreative force behind Plato's text, its game of production and reproduction, and reads it from her female perspective. What is curious is how the game of production and re-production, as Young perceptively indicates in *Colonial Desire*, is also enacted in the texts by Gobineau, Nott and Gliddon, where the figure of the hybrid emerges as threatening but inevitable. I will reproduce Irigaray's text below and I will suggest reading it with the racial discourses of the nineteenth century at the back of our minds:

Degenerate shadows of Truth, fakes, fantasies occur once man meddles in the process of reproduction and representation. *The offspring of Truth become bastards*. No one knows what origin, what origination being to attribute them to. Orphans of a simple, pure –and Ideal- origin. At best, hybrids. Engendered in a matrix that is still empirical, by the relation of man to a beginning that remains diachronic, and by the "fire" that in that cave is a figure of a more legitimate ancestry.

Needless to say, Irigaray's text, unlike those by Gobineau, Nott and Gliddon, endows "bastard" and "hybrid" with favourable meanings. In the same line, I would like to add that her problematizing the origin was not an issue in racial discourses where it was clearly stated –from biblical and scientific sources alike- that the source of mankind was a white male.

See Irigaray, *Speculum*, p. 293.

<sup>21</sup> Caroline Rooney's reading of *Our Sister Killjoy* places the heart transplant at the core of the text. Her own words reflect the centrality of the heart transplant when she affirms that "what is at the 'heart' of this text is the story

of a heart transplant, that of an African coloured man's heart into the body of a white man's."

See Caroline Rooney, " 'Dangerous Knowledge' and the Politics of Survival: A Reading of *Our Sister Killjoy* and *A Question of Power* in Susheila Nasta, ed., *Motherlands. Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia* (London: The Women's Press, 1991), p. 103.

<sup>22</sup> An article published in *Time* on January 12, 1968, apropos the second heart transplant, captures the ambivalence that the black skin of the donor, Clive Haupt, provoked. Below, I reproduce the two paragraphs, which, to my mind, reflect this ambiguity:

*Color & Consent.* It was a hot New Year's Day when Clive Haupt and his bride of three months went with friends to Fish Hoek Beach. Haupt played pickup rugby, then lay down to rest. Suddenly a friend called that Haupt was ill, with frothy blood coming from his mouth. From a local hospital, he was shuttled fast to the better-equipped Victoria Hospital, where doctors concluded that he had suffered a stroke—a massive brain hemorrhage. They saw little hope that he could survive. But since Haupt had apparently been fit, his heart was probably in good condition, so they telephoned the surgeons at Groote Schuur, who did not hesitate to say "Bring him in."

*Dr. Barnard now had a delicate problem.* Haupt was of a complicated racial mixture (part white, part Bantu, part Malay, perhaps even part Hottentot) that is classified as "Colored" under South Africa's race laws. Dr. Barnard asked Blaiberg whether he would object to receiving a Colored man's heart. No, replied the desperate patient—who, like Washkansky, happened to be Jewish. Then the surgeons had to get consent from Haupt's next of kin. His wife Dorothy collapsed when she was told he could not survive. To protect themselves, the doctors asked Haupt's mother. Widowed three years ago (her husband died of a stroke), she agreed to donate her son's heart. (italics mine)

See "Surgery: Cape Town's Second" in *Time*, Friday, January 12, 1968.

<sup>23</sup> A safeguard for science is to relate facts in a matter-of-fact way, extricating words from any emotional purport, endowing the report with a sense of reliability. Therefore, the medical reports aimed at explaining the history of the first heart transplant either totally obviate the race of the second donor or if they mention it, they do so tangentially. In any case, the uproar that Clive Haupt's race provoked in South Africa is averted in the annals of the history of Medicine.

<sup>24</sup> Foucault, whose definition of discourse is one of the theoretical cornerstones of this dissertation (see chapters one and two), demands being mentioned once again at this point. His criticism on scientific discourse veers around the incapacity of modern science to view the human body as a part of a universal

whole and, as I mentioned in chapter one, as participant of a wider notion of existence, as possessor of a spiritual dimension. The humanistic, and necessarily subjective, approach is replaced by a scientific, and necessarily objective, methodology. The way Aidoo's text appropriates the history *turned* theory of the Heart Transplant proves the futility of scientific discourse by pointing out its very subjective, and in this case, colonialist roots. As a matter of fact, science and colonialism perfectly coalesce in the history of the Heart Transplant.

See Michel Foucault, 1971, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1972).

<sup>25</sup> Robert C. Young's *White Mythologies*, and especially, *Colonial Desire*, have offered me an invaluable source to delve into the extensive literature of racial discourses which was created during the aegis of the imperialistic enterprise. Thus, Young's work has opened up the way towards the works of Gobineau, Knox, Nott, Gliddon and Bernal.

See Robert C. Young, *White Mythologies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990) and

*Colonial Desire. Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995). See also Joseph Arthur comte de Gobineau 1853-55 *The Inequality of Human Races*. Vol. 1. Trans. Adrian Collins (London: Heinemann, 1915), Robert Knox, *The Races of Men: A Philosophical Enquiry into the Influence of Race over the Destinies of Nations*. 2nd Ed. (London: Renshaw, 1862), Josiah C. Nott, *Two Lectures on the Natural History of the Caucasian and Negro Races*. (Mobile: 1844), Josiah C. Nott and George R. Gliddon, *Types of Mankind: or, Ethnological Researches, Based upon the Ancient Monuments, Paintings, Sculptures, and Crania of Races, and upon their Natural, Geographical, Philological, and Biblical History: illustrated by Selections from the unedited papers of Samuel George Morton, M.D., and by additional contributions from Prof. L. Agassiz, L.L.D., W. Usher, M.D.; and Prof. H.S. Patterson, M.D.* (London: Trübner, 1854), George R. Gliddon, *Ancient Egypt. A Series of Chapters on Early Egyptian History, Archaeology, and Other Subjects, Connected with Hieroglyphical Literature*. 1843. 12th Ed. (Philadelphia: Peterson, 1848), Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization. Volume I. The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985* (London: Free Association Books, 1987).

<sup>26</sup> See Young, *Colonial Desire*, p. 127 or as appears in the original text by Nott, see Nott, *Two Lectures*, p.8.

<sup>27</sup> Kristeva's connection between the maternal and the semiotic could be criticized on the grounds of the essentialism it purports. In other words, to define the semiotic as the maternal might lead to the conclusion that men are biologically excluded from the semiotic and relegated to the symbolic, and the same, but in reverse, applies to women. However, as Kristeva insistently remarks, both men and women are shaped by semiotic/unconscious and symbolic/conscious forces. In other words, men can be as maternal, in the semiotic sense, as women. She finds evidence for her theory in the works of



two male poets, Mallarmé and Lautrémont. According to Kristeva, what makes a specific discourse revolutionary, oppositional to the Law, is its amount of semiotic ingredients, which give birth to poetic language, and which in turn stand in opposition to societal language, or the Language of the Law. Hence, art is, from a Kristevan perspective, a site for revolution, for change, a domain where resistance to the controlling, normative forces of society is enacted. And she never defines art as an essentially female space.

See Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 1974, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), especially part 1 “The Semiotic and the Symbolic,” pp. 10-106. See also *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

### **Conclusions. My Dear Sister, the Original Phoenix Must Have Been a Woman.**

<sup>1</sup>Aidoo, Ama Ata, “Two Letters” in *An Angry Letter in January* (Coventry, Sidney, Aarhus: Dangaroo Press, 1992), p.67.

<sup>2</sup> Contrary to a generalized belief in Ghana being the first African nation to gain independence, Campbell proves how this statement is wrong. The first African nation to gain independence was actually Sudan in 1956. However, Ghana’s influential and charismatic leader, and incontestable Pan-Africanist, Nkwame Nkrumah, undoubtedly contributed to this historical misunderstanding.

See James T. Campbell, *Middle passages. African-American Journeys to Africa, 1787-2005* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2006) and chapter 3 of this dissertation.

<sup>3</sup> Boehmer only devotes a few lines to Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy* when she analyses the work of Yvonne Vera and Tsitsi Damgarembga in the chapter entitled “Tropes of Yearning and dissent: the Inflection of Desire in Yvonne Vera and Tsitsi Damgarembga.”

See Elleke Boehmer, *Stories of Women. Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), pp. 172-186.

<sup>4</sup> The quote I use in the text is the exact reproduction of the words uttered by Ama Ata Aidoo in an interview held in Accra. I could detect a certain degree of uneasiness on her part when confronted with the fact that she wrote in English and I understood that her sentence was to be taken as her final say on the issue. (private communication)

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