

**THEMATIC CONCERNS AND LINGUISTIC STRATEGIES:  
POST COLONIAL SUBVERSIONS OF VERBAL HUMOUR  
IN AIDOO**

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The creation of post-colonial literature is one way in which the post-colonial Mind looks back upon itself. In both literature and politics the postcolonial drive towards identity centers around language. For the postcolonial to speak or write in the imperial tongues is to call forth a problem of identity, to be thrown in mimickery and ambivalenc. Consequently the postcolonial view of language is diachronic, pluralistic and dynamic.

The postcolonial realist fiction had capitalized on the principles of low mimetic as romanticizing, assimilation and integration, the post realist fiction reverses these and presents detachment, alienation and disintegration. Such artistic approaches make the postcolonial writings particularly challenging. Satire, irony, incongruity, mimickery, parody and grotesque distortions serve as effective modifiers of language in Ama Ata Aidoo's fiction and drama. The availability of a wide stock of indigenous linguistic structures as well as the English verbal strategies enable the writer to regard creative language as an important postcolonial signifier and a serviceable instrument for the presentation of her thematic concerns.

For the postcolonial writer the question of language is invariably connected to the Identity issue - so vital a concern in all postcolonial writings:

"Language is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture.... It (carries) the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world.... Language is thus inseparable

from ourselves as a community or human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relation to the world.<sup>1</sup>

In Aidoo's work language explores the institutions of patriarchy, Christianity, fascism, hetero sexuality, miscegenation, feminism, homosexuality and many others through a deliberate, deft twist and subversion of language. The objectification of the colonised and of the woman, for example, by colonial/patriarchal agencies has been signified through a twist of terminology pairing consumption with sexual and colonial objectification. In 'OTHER VERSIONS' Kofi the young African student realizes suddenly that the European guests present at the party are gorging their curiosity upon him...The food was delicious but the main course was me'.<sup>2</sup> Such reductive strategy denying the colonised/ woman self hood is even more strongly perceived and resisted by the women in Aidoo since they are objectified by both the whites, and by their own menfolk. Sissie in OUR SISTER KILLJOY and Esi Sekyi (in CHANGES: A Love Story) resist it by standing up to male gaze. The IMAGE OF Sissie's dark, plum-like breasts and Marija's white hand reaching for them effectively brackets patriarchal and colonial agencies together. Sissie's resentment at being objectified by a white woman is triggered off by a deeper memory of the colonised self focusing the prohibition of inter racial / intercultural heterosexuality:

First Law

The Guest Shall Not Eat Palm-Nut-Soup.

Too intimate, too heavy <sup>3</sup>

Here too gustatory language blankets the violent possibility involved in the miscegenation. For a moment, Sissie is tempted to dream romantically of a patriarchal love scene, in which she herself will play the male and Marija, the groveling woman will be at her feet. But her daring, heterosexual dream is rudely broken. The Protean Speaker's own language lets loose all the violence and horror encoded in such a relationship, conjuring up the vision of beautiful black bodies:

Changed into elephant grey corpses  
Littered all over the western world,  
Thrown across railway tracks for  
midnight express to mangle just a little bit more  
offered to cold flowing water  
Buried in thickets and snow  
Their penises cut.<sup>4</sup>

Freud's identification of the phallus as the universal signifier on a physical level and Lacan's location of the phallus in the linguistic sphere may help us sort some of the absurdities of language in Aidoo and elsewhere in the postcolonial writings. The taunt of Esi's female in-laws about the relationship between Oko her husband and herself and their question as to who is the man of the house, she or Oko introduces interesting African cultural concepts couched in language. <sup>5</sup> In Igbo and certain other African communities gender relations are not determined by sex. Dominating wives can be addressed as 'husbands' while meek, submissive men often get called 'wives' or women.<sup>6</sup> The ironic womanizing of Okonkwo's artistic father Unoka and his pliant son Nwoye is in keeping with the same tradition. Catherine Obianuju Acholonu's short story 'MOTHER WAS A GREAT MAN'<sup>7</sup> explicitly presents the relationship of language with gender hierarchization and the use of subversive technique. Aidoo's fiction records the reversal of gender roles through subversive language.

When a black man is with his wife who  
cooks and chores for him, he is a man.  
When he is with white folks 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? <sup>8</sup>

The passage not only hints at the African cultural and linguistic practices but also lashes out at the absurdity and chaos bred by colonial and neocolonial power politics in the Ghanaian society.

The theoretical discourse of Africans is manifested in Aidoo's novels and plays. These indigenous forms of theorizing differ from western use of abstract logic and manifest themselves in narrative forms, in the oral stories, riddles, proverbs and in the play with language. Particularly noteworthy is the African women's contribution to the African Theoretical discourse.

African women continuously speculated about the nature of life through pithy language that unmasked the power relations of the world. 9

This female African theoretical discourse is characterized by caustic irony, rich lyricism and incorporation of local sayings / proverbs. Esi Kom's sarcastic remarks to her son Ato on the subject of his ignorance of his wife's behavior illustrate this point:

ESI: But do you never know anything?  
I thought those who go to school know every thing.....  
so your wife says we have no understanding and we are uncivilized... we thank her, we thank you too. But it would have been well if you know why she said this....  
Yes and I know  
.....  
Before the Stranger would dip his finger into the thick palm-nut soup,  
it is a townsman  
Must have told him to. 10

Nana's words as she philosophizes upon the nature of female status in patriarchal relationships are deceptively simple. One could easily be misled by them into taking her as an advocate and supporter of the patriarchal system of polygamous relations. There is double-edged irony underlying her words: My young lady, today you came here asking me a question. I shall try as hard as possible to give you an answer. I shall also try to make it my truth, not anybody else's.

Who is a good man if not the one who eats his wife completely, and pushes her down with a good gulp of alcohol? In our time, the best citizen was the man who swallowed more than one woman, and the more, the better. So our warriors and our kings married more women than other men in their communities.

. . . . . A good woman was she who quickened the pace of her own destruction. To refuse, as a woman, to be destroyed, was a crime that society spotted very quickly and punished swiftly and severely. 11

It is important to note how consistently Aidoo relates gustatory imagery to heterosexuality and power relations in *CHANGES*, *KILLJOY*, *THE DILEMMA* and the short stories like 'OTHER VESIONS'. This imagery continues in Nana's theoretical discourse as she goes on commenting on Men, 'the first gods in the Universe' as 'the devouring gods' happy with 'bloodier sacrifices'. The subtlety of irony and equivocation of language gives way to bitter humour as Nana draws the analogy between the 'girl on her wedding day' and 'people who were condemned to death (being) granted any wish on the eve of their execution'.<sup>12</sup> For Nana, marriage in the patriarchal society amounts to a 'funeral of the self that could have been'. Beyond Esi Kom and Nana, the theorizing female characters, the Protean Speaker/ omniscient narrator in Aidoo's work also identifies herself as a female and maintains the general characteristics of the Female Theoretical discourse in her narration. In describing Oko's phallogocentric comparison of Esi Sekyi and the young woman dumped at his doorstep at the break up of his marriage, she traces the now familiar pattern of consumption, appetite and taste:

[Oko] soon found himself comparing the two women to beverages, and concluding that if Esi had been liquor this young woman was

definitely going to be fruit juice. Being with  
Esi was being forever drunk. 13

The Play with language serves to demythologize many false beliefs and fabrications in Aidoo's fiction. A narrative interjection for example questions homosexuality /lesbianism as a western import. The pun upon the slang expression 'bush' allows for a double reading of the term as a marker of African rural space and female anatomy. The shock and anger of the white missionary Head mistress at finding two of her native girls in bed together, erupts out of her in cold masculinist language while the girls' giggling exploitation of the double meanings of 'bush' symbolises African woman's ability to jeer at the coloniser's masculinist language.

.... The young African girls.... Mimic their  
white missionary head mistress  
by saying that  
they understand  
that lesbianism is not just b-u-s-h  
But a c-r-i-m-e  
A Sin  
S-o-d-o-m-y  
From knowledge gained since.  
Their mimickery deconstructs the imperial  
project of criminalizing a simple act like  
being in bed together by revealing that it is  
only through language previously imposed  
that the action can be condemned. 14

There is a deliberate subversion and ironic implementation of references in Aidoo's language seeking to dislocate relations, and dismantle myths and Eurocentric institutions. In *OUR SISTER KILLJOY* and the short stories like 'No Sweetness Here', 'Cutting of a Drink' and 'The Late Bud' Aidoo sets out to parodying and debunking of the Christian myths. In the said novel, Sissie launches upon a trip to Europe equaled with "a dress rehearsal for a journey to paradise" 15 by Sammy, cast in the unenviable role of the dog of the master by Aidoo's sarcasm. The ironic image of Europe

as paradise is maintained for a while: the fairy tale castle, the mystery of black forests brooding seemingly in a state of primitive virginity, Marija's little garden producing vegetables and fruit to paradise perfection mock the Elysian landscape. Finally, the rich colour, sheen and succulence of the dark plums picked "off the single tree in the garden" <sup>16</sup> with which Marija sets out to woo Sissie into a trap of sexuality makes the reader realize with a start that here is the forbidden fruit and here is Eve in the garden of Eden, busy about her business of seduction once again. Sissie's rejection of Marija's sexual overtures constitutes the overthrow of the white woman constructed as the ultimate cultural icon of desirability. Marija's name, a saxon version of Virgin Mary's aligns her with the western icon of the archetypal virgin – an image ironically reinforced by the non appearance of her husband on the scene and the pristine, virginal whiteness of her cold, nuptial chamber. Sissie's rejection of Marija offer is a re-affirmation of her resistance to being renamed Mary, years ago. Both attempts made on the part of the whites are to be seen as an effort to impose a European identity upon the African woman.

Christmas and crucifixion myths too are employed in inverted order by Aidoo. 'In The Cutting of a Drink' the journey of the brother parodies the journey of the Magi traveling to strange land in search of a Loved One. What he finds at the end of his quest, however, is that his sister is irretrievably lost for she has grown in to a woman. Her promise to come home at Christmas, uttered through lips red 'like the clotted blood'<sup>17</sup> is a sinister twist to Christ's nativity and the promise of rebirth carried by the Christmas myth. 'No Sweetness Here' established an implied parallel between Christ, the crucified Christian Saviour and old Ahor - the African counterpart who offered 'himself as a sacrifice to the gods to save his people from a pestilence'. <sup>18</sup> The death of Kwesi ironically places him in contiguity with the Christian and African sacrificial victims. By parodying the mythical sacrifices, Aidoo points out the cruelty and selfishness of gerontocracy where the child must suffer/die to make life easier for the adults. "The Late Bud" too uses Christmas time as the temporal setting, with Yaaba substituting the Christ figure. Her mission to procure red earth to varnish the floor

for her mother and her midnight preparation for the journey to the pit echo Christ's call, albeit with a more appropriate alteration: "Dear *Mother!* T' is thy business I go about". Yaaba's injury, suffering and nearly fatal accident are narrated in language strongly reminiscent of the night of crucifixion. Yaaba (Christ-figure) being mistaken for 'Thief' and the second and the third 'cock-crow' are highly suggestive details with recognizable Christian associations. The story deftly turns the myth upside down by pointing out the need to realize the evils of gerontocracy and to cultivate generosity on the part of the elders.

'Certain Winds From The South' focuses on a journey with no return and challenges the patriotic reverence which has built the 'Mother land' image of Good Old England over the centuries. M'ama Asana's husband, recruited in the army, came to say good-bye before embarking on the journey abroad. The colonized were cannon-fodder since they were under the Anglis-people's rule and they were fighting with the German people..." Evading his wife's question as to 'what has all that got to do with you and me?

Why can I not come South with you' he answers  
Because I have to travel to the lands beyond the sea and fight..... .19  
The native soldier's words are a twisted version of Wordsworth's patriotic homage to the home land:-

I traveled among the unknown men  
In lands beyond the sea  
Nor England did I know till then  
What love I bore to thee.<sup>20</sup>

It is by no accident that Aidoo puts Wordsworth's words in the African soldier's mouth; the subverted echo of the English poet's words points out a few bitter truths. The Poet's triumphant return to his homeland is implicit in his expressing love and gratitude for England. By contrast, there is no coming back destined for the black soldier, whose tale must be told by another. The cruel fact that at the end of the journey the soldier would not get any self realization and that it is the 'Anglis people', have made him lose his



life in other people's war forms a silent question: Is England the only country to be loved, and protected and eulogized in songs?

In the postcolonial context linguistic heterogeneity is an ethnic fact and a political issue. It refers to competing semiotic spheres which correlate to some extent with different cultural formations in the colonized society. The artistic and literary reflection of such linguistic strategies is particularly complex in the dramatic form. Language on the stage is not restricted to the printed/ articulated word. Polylingual dramatists like Aidoo rely on simultaneous use of Europhone and indigenous languages, pidgin/creolized forms code switching and translations. Deciphering such multilayered linguistic code is no easy task:

Theatre translation is never where one expects it to be: not in words, but in the gestures, and in 'the social body', not in the letter, but in the spirit of a culture, ineffable but omnipresent.<sup>21</sup>

Eulalie's drunken episode at the beginning of Act Five (THE DILEMMA OF A GHOST) forms an illustration. Refusing to attend the thanks giving service of a cousin, fourth removed, who had died the previous year and who had never met Ato or Eulalie, she announces with drunk giggles

.....I repeat I ain't, coming eh. Or you are too  
British you canna hear me Yankee lingo'<sup>22</sup>

Eulalie's giggling, her breaking into American slang - the running tap drawl-her breaking of religious and social taboos prohibiting a woman from cutting a drink like a man and that too, on a Sunday morning, her ironic humming of 'My Lord what a Morning', and above all her agitated movements up and down the stage constitute a text far more dense than any words. In fact Eulalie's carrying a glass of whiskey, a packet of cigarettes and a lighter on to the stage translate the ideological, cultural and linguistic clash between the American-African and the native community. The drunkard episode

mimics various speech acts belonging to the two opposite cultures as well as parodying comic, drunk episodes in popular movies and soap opera. What Aidoo intends to achieve, however, is no cheap comedy. Eulalie's drunk language brings to the surface the serious moral and social crises the diasporan Negro must face on returning to Africa. Here the translation processes are not just interlingual but include non-verbal signs. The actor's body serves as the vehicle for transmission of the nonverbal text. Very often in Aidoo we find the use of Europhone vocabulary in combination with indigenous structures and rhythms. Such linguistic strategy termed 'relexification' is a wide spread practice in postcolonial societies.

While the language remains recognizably English or French, it is changed, often substantially, in its rhythm, Grammar, and idioms by the presence of an indigenous language, which is present as a kind of palimpsest beneath the European language'<sup>23</sup>

In *THE DILEMMA*, Esi Kom's outburst at the end of Act Three employs the technique of relaxification. Her speech though rendered in English, is strongly coloured by the Fanti cultural association; it also marks the induction of indigenous proverbs, and phonetic distortion of English nouns, in addition to a change in grammatical rules.

ESI: No, my Son, I shall speak  
you have been back a long time  
yet the vulture right from the beginning  
wallows in the soup he will eat. Has your  
Hurari got all her machines now?  
Hurari must have a sutof  
Hurari must have something in which to put  
her water to cool.  
Hurari, Hurari Oh. The name keeps buzzing  
in my head like the sting of a witch bee.<sup>24</sup>

Here Aidoo uses relexification as a postcolonial literary device tied closely to the ideological questions and calculated to subvert and deconstruct the colonial power structures inherent in the colonial

language. Zabuz confirms the subversive intention of relexification in the postcolonial texts, observing that on the strategical level relexification seeks to subvert the linguistically codified, 'to decolonize the language of early colonial literature and to affirm a revised, non-ativistic orality via the imposed medium'.<sup>25</sup> A comic, subversive indigenization of the western form of address is embodied in Monka's cheeky cry:

Maami, Maami, Ato' s Morning Sunshine has  
thrown away the snails you gave them.

Perhaps Monka's words could be read simply as sarcastic, but the sarcasm itself stems out of a desire to ridicule the culturally unfamiliar form of address her brother has been using for his wife. Aidoo supplies sufficient evidence that in the native African community, where forms of address are simple and direct (My Wife.....My Husband), Ato's romantic endearments are out of place. Beneath the surface incongruity and humour of the sentence, there is the active desire to put westernized forms of speech to ridicule. The little, mocking sentence then, has its own full postcolonial code and agenda.

Aidoo's Play THE DILEMMA OF A GHOST is celebrated in the critical circles as an early example of dramatic relexification. On one hand it stays close to theatrical realism, on the other its use of language is exceedingly complex. Dapo Adelugba ascertained six different linguistic levels in the play:

Besides socio-linguistic categories such as 'American English' or educated African English, and familiar dramatic conventions such as stylized verse in the Prologue, there are also transcriptions from an African language - Fanti into English, where the characters are still recognizable as Fanti speakers.<sup>27</sup>

There is hardly a moment in the dialogue between Fanti characters free of proverbial expressions drawn from Fanti idiom. In fact this linguistic dominant shift in the scenes in which the indigenous culture predominates redefines conventional notions of dialogue and creates a new kind of linguistic code. The exchange between THE FIRST AND SECOND WOMAN, and the talk of THE MOUTH - THAT EATS - SALT - AND - PEPPER is carried on with a quaint turn of phrase. The verse-like language of such exchanges is linked mainly to the referential system of Fanti Proverbial culture. On the metrical and lexical level, this language may be comprehensible but metaphors and tropes derived from a cultural world beyond the traditions of English Poetry. The artistry of the indigenous proverbs depends on its laconicism. This means that the remaining of the saying can not be derived directly from the text itself but is contained in a commentary, the knowledge of which is assumed. Overhearing the Slave Boy and Girl gossiping about Kofi Ako's loss of sexual potency, Anowa says:

You said it right, my child. But the elders  
gave the ruling before you and I even came.  
The string of orphan beads might look better  
on the wrist of the leopard but it is the  
antelope who has lost his mother.<sup>28</sup>

The understanding of such quaint proverbs is a challenge for the non-native reader/audience brought up outside the indigenous proverbial culture and in ignorance of it.

Indigenous structures and techniques determine the linguistic features of Aidoo's plays; the title or the first words of the play signal the indigenized structure of the story. THE DILEMMA OF A GHOST: the title is a cultural signal to the audience to expect a story featuring oral and performative elements, audience participation, and moral debate - essential characteristics of a dilemma tradition. By alluding to an existing cultural form, Aidoo can establish connections to genres familiar to African audience and by citing a single verbal sign she can conjure up the expectations of a whole performative context. As a postcolonial writer Aidoo tries

to preserve the cultural integrity of the proverbs and other oral expressions of Fanti, which have to be incorporated in the dialogic text. The literal translation of indigenous proverbs/phrases may appear strange or even comic:

Now Maami, I myself say, you yourself,  
You must listen.<sup>29</sup>

But through expressions like these, Aidoo captures the rhythm of the native language and claims authenticity for her characters.

The contrast she draws between the educated 'been tos' refined standard English, spoken with received pronunciation and the comically indigenized broken English spoken in the local accent by the rural Ghanaians is an important factor in the postcolonial writer laughing back at the empire. Massa Kabina struggling hard to prove to Zirigu, his black servant that despite his education in medicine and surgery and his civil service post, he is still part of the material life of Ghana; that his culinary taste is still in keeping with the local traditions:

I'm mad but I think I 'm sane enough not to drink pressed, homogenized, dehydrated, re-crystallized, thawed, diluted and heaven - knows what else orange juice imported from countries where oranges do not grow, when I can eat oranges. <sup>30</sup>

But he does not realize that contact with the homogenizing colonial powers has turned him into a manufactured product. He is diverted and stripped clean of all indigenous qualities of behaviour - including speech. The satirical contrast between him and zirigu's use of language shows that his formal, comically pedantic, impeccable speech in the colonial tongue is in itself, a homogenized, dehydrated, recrystallized.... linguistic process. Kobina's automatic production of perfectly finished but impersonal language is ironically in agreement with the summation of the

colonizing process as spirit theft, leading to zombification. Aidoo need not say anything beyond that.

Notes

1. Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature (London: James Curry, 1986), p.97.
2. Ama Ata Aidoo, Other Versions: No Sweetness Here (New York: The Feminist Press, 1970), p.132.
3. Ama Ata Aidoo, Our Sister Killjoy or Reflections from a Black-eyed Squint (New York: Longman Publishers, 1995), p.61.
4. Ibid., p.62.
5. Freud explains that patriarchal hierarchical relationship can be attributed to the male's possession of a phallus and the female's lack of the same. While the male is empowered, the female is disemboweled through castration.  
Sigmund Freud, Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality (New York: Avon Books, 1965), p.92.  
Jacque Lacan disagrees in 'Female Sexuality', maintaining that the 'hierarchical relationship plays itself out in language more readily accessible to the male since the symbolic order of language is closely associated with the law of the Father'.  
M. Keith Booker, A Practical Introduction to Literary Theory and Criticism (New York: Longman Publishers, 1996), p.36.
6. Ifi Amadiume, Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society (London: Zed press, 1987), p.281.
7. Catherine Obianuju Acholalu, "Mother was a Great Man", in Charlotte H. Bruner, ed., The Heinemann Book of African Women's Writings (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1993), p.7.
8. Aidoo. 'For Whom Things Did Not Change' in No Sweetness Here, p.17.
9. Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory", in Gloria Anzaldna, ed., Making Face, Making Soul (San Francisco: Aunt Lute books, 1990), p.336.

10. Aidoo, Two Plays: The Dilemma of a Ghost and Anowa (New York: Longman Publishers, 1989), p.50-52.
11. Aidoo, Changes: A Love Story (New York: The Feminist Press, 1993), p. 109-110.
12. Ibid., p.110.
13. Ibid., p.71.
14. Sally McWilliams, "Strange as it May Seem: African Feminism in two Novels by Ama Ata Aidoo" in Ada. U. Azodo and Gay Wilentz, ed., Emerging Perspectives on Ama Ata Aidoo (Trenton: African World Press, 1999), p.343.
15. Aidoo, Killjoy, p.9.
16. Ibid., p40.
17. Aidoo, "In the Cutting of a Drink" in No Sweetness Here, p.3 7.
18. Aidoo, "No Sweetness Here", p.59.
19. Aidoo, "Certain Winds from the South" in No Sweetness Here, p.54.
20. William Wordsworth, Short Poems: The Magic of Imagination (Toronto: Princeton Press, 2001), p.13 7.
21. Patrick Pavis, Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture (London: Routledge, 1992), p.136.
22. Aidoo, The Dilemma, p46.
23. Loreto Todd, "The English Language in West Africa" in R.W. Bailey & M. Gorch, ed., English as a World Language (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1982), p.303.
24. Aidoo, The Dilemma, p.36.
25. Chantal Zabus, The African Palimpsest: Indigenization of Language in the West African Europhone Novel (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1991), p.107.
26. Aidoo, The Dilemma, p.32.
27. Dapo Adelugba, "Language and Drama: Ama Ata Aidoo", African Literature Today, 8 (1976), 76.
28. Aidoo, Anowa, p. 111
29. Aidoo, "A Gift from Somewhere" in No Sweetness Here, p.
30. Aidoo, "For Whom Things Did Not Change" in No Sweetness Here, p.15.