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Cultural Polarities in Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost*

Abstract

Culture is an important feature in attributing identity to man. It determines his place in the social order. It is represented, presented and re-presented by all the literary figures to document the role of culture in their life and history. Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost* deals with cultural disparities between African- American bride and the native African family to which she goes. Cultural identities of Eulalie keep on changing as identity is not static but a process.

Key Words: culture, identity, representation, polarities, cultural identity

Culture is an important feature in attributing identity to man. It determines his place in the social order. It is represented, presented and re-presented by all the literary figures to document the role of culture in their life and history. Cultural identity, as Stuart Hall says is "a .production', which is never complete, always in process and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (222). Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost* deals with cultural disparities between African- American bride and the native African family to which she goes. She is born and brought up in America and adapts the culture and tradition of America. When she moves to Africa, she suffers a lot because of the culture and tradition of

Africans. Her culture and the African culture are like two different poles which can never come together.

The culture of Africa is varied and manifold, consisting of a mixture of countries with various tribes that each have their own unique characteristics. Ama Ata Aidoo was born into the Fante people of south central Ghana in 1942. She has written her first play, *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965), during her days as an undergraduate, and it has been performed by the Students' Theatre of the University of Ghana. Ten years after its creation, she says, "I myself haven't had the courage today to confront this whole question of Africa and black America in those stark terms" (James 89).

The Dilemma of a Ghost portrays the changes in an African student Ato, who returns home from America with an African - American wife, Eulalie. The play exposes the cultural issues like traditional practices, languages and educational background that stand between the native African traditions and the alien western culture. Its central theme is the struggle Eulalie has in coming to terms with her cultural past and with her new home.

Aidoo's experience as a woman has helped her to present the cultural issues from a woman's perspective. The play is all about the dilemma individuals experience due to their multiple identities offered by both their root culture and the host culture. Aidoo describes the marriage between Ato Yawson, a native Ghanaian and Eulalie, an African- American. Ato has been in the United States for higher education, has an exposure to the western culture and marries the African American Eulalie without the knowledge of his family. The rift in relationship between Eulalie and her husband's native African family is due to the cross-cultural conflicts. But the broadmindedness of the natives helps her to understand the importance of familial relationships and gives her the hope of adapting the indigenous culture.

Marriage is an important celebration of the natural continuity of life in every tradition. As Sanga et. al. say, "Marriage is an important aspect of the way of life of Africans. In most African societies, marriage is not an option but an obligation in every adult's life" (91). The Ghana marriage is a traditional function, where the groom accompanied by his family members, goes to the bride's house and officially asks for the bride's hand in marriage in the presence of family and well-wishers. This traditional Ghanaian marriage function is a necessary common ritual to all Ghanaian couples. During knocking function or marriage function, the groom's family members bring along some money and the material goods to present to the bride's family. It forms a part of the collective consciousness of the traditional society and the oscillation between the couple as they belong to two varied traditions reveals extreme cultural polarities.

African style of cooking mainly consists of local influences and colonial additions and includes vegetables, fruits, and meat and dairy products. Grains, Cassava and Yams form the basis for many meals. Stews of vegetables and meat are quite popular. Modernity is defeated by tradition not only in the case of marriage between Ato and Eulalie, but in other social matters as well. For example, Esi Kom cooks for her son Ato and daughter-in-law Eulalie and even sends food for them. This is exemplified in the conflict that arises when Eulalie, unaccustomed to the local food, throws away the snails which Esi Kom gives her to cook. However, Eulalie cannot accept some food items like snails, because of different traditions and cultural background. But she also tries to relate well with her in-laws but unfortunately she fails due to her inability to assimilate with the African culture. Linguistic barrier also has its role to make it difficult for the cultural gap to meet.

ESI. Tell her I am glad she likes them... now, I think I will go and

prepare the evening meal. Monka will cook you and your wife some rice and stew. If you need anything, you come and tell us or just shout for any of the children.

ATO. What's all this?

EULALIE. Those horrid creatures of course!

ATO. Where are you taking them?

EULALIE. Throwing them away, of course. (3.32)

Eulalie's ignorance towards her in-laws language and customs, and her assessment of them as lower to her, has deepened the problems. She finds it difficult to accustom herself to African traditions and life. At the same time, they see her as someone who does not respect traditions. They cannot understand her habit of drinking and smoking and declining to attend traditional rituals. She never bothers to learn their language and never seeks to understand African traditions. She never displays the friendliness or affection towards her in-laws. Tradition is really cherished despite the fact that Europeanization has eaten into their tradition. When the family tries to communicate with Ato's wife, they find it complicated to pronounce her name, Eulalie.

ATO. I said 'Eulalie'.

MONKA. Hurere!

ESI. Petu! Akyere! What does he say?

MONKA. Hurere! (1.16).

The Africans, see education, as a journey into cultural slavery. They are made to believe that every black man on earth, regardless of his true country, is conscious of his sense of home, of root. Ato's family, represented by his mother, are antagonistic towards their new daughter-in-law and all she represents as an African-American, "Are there trees which never have any roots" (17) is a reminder of the slave trade.

NANA. She has no tribe? The story you are telling us is too sweet, my grand- child....Have not heard of a human being born out of the womb of a woman who has no tribe.(1.17)

A typical family pattern of traditional cultures is the extended family and modern culture develops the nuclear family, smaller structures, and individualism. With this point, Aidoo seems to aver that, even marriage is not capable of proffering a satisfactory answer to the question of clash of culture. The conflict between Eulalie and Ato's family is constructed throughout the play primarily as one between traditional African culture and western or American culture.

For Ato's family Eulalie's race seems to be less important than her cultural background although her status as an African- American and thus, a descendent of slaves is certainly an important factor in their rejection of her at the beginning. Eulalie, however, clearly identifies race as an important factor in her identity and thus is somewhat disillusioned as it becomes apparent that a common racial heritage does not guarantee her acceptance in this society where increasingly she is made to realize the cultural divide between herself and traditional African society as represented by Ato's family.

NANA. And so, my grand- child, all you want to tell is that your wife is slave?

ATO. But she is not slave. It was her grandfathers and her grandmothers who were slaves.

NANA. : Ato, do not talk with the foolishness of your generation. (1.18)

Eulalie does not quite fit into the African life style. She comes to Africa with romanticized visions of African society. Eulalie, despite being a foreigner, is aware of the cultural differences which could hinder her ability to fit into the new cultural setup. Parry

opines “identity is now perceived as multi-located and polysemic- a situation ...” (40). As a foreigner, Eulalie could hardly be expected to understand the customs of this society without someone explaining them to her. She has inherited a tradition of womanhood that is strong and supportive.

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